



Report

Perspectives on political approaches to the economics of the arts in Europe

from the IETM Berlin Plenary Meeting 2025

By Tina Hofman



IETM Report

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From the IETM Berlin Plenary Meeting, 15-17 May 2025

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Perspectives on political approaches to the economics of the arts in Europe

Expanding political turmoil, rising authoritarianism and continuing economic austerity are pushing the arts and culture sectors across the Western world into an area of devaluation, heightened threats and overall marginalisation.

The IETM Berlin Plenary Meeting 2025 took place in Berlin, Germany - a city with an immensely developed cultural and artistic ecology which has been under threat with the recent political changes in Germany. This highlighted the urgency for the proposed discussion in Perspectives on Political Approaches to the Economics of the Arts in Europe, held at Ufa Fabrik's Theatre space on **17 May 2025 at 11:45 CEST**.

Speakers:

Emma Holten, writer and researcher, author of the book *Deficit* (REF) - Denmark/Sweden

Janina Benduski, Programme Director of Berlin's Performing Arts Programme - Germany

Julie Ward, former MEP and member of the Culture and Education Committee of the European Parliament - United Kingdom

Uroš Veber, president of the Slovenian advocacy NGO *Asociacija*, which supports cultural non-profit organisations and artists - Slovenia

Moderator:

Elena Polivtseva, Independent Researcher - Belgium

Their contributions were drawn from their professional practice, national contexts, and experiences from international collaborations in which they operate. The dialogue focused on the dominant economic narratives and political agendas, where these meet and how this keeps affecting the perspective on the arts and wellbeing in each of the national contexts. The conversation also underpinned the need to think collaboratively and intersectionally around the sectors which uphold and protect wellbeing. It highlighted the need to redefine the value of culture and how we portray it and argue for it.

This report offers a summary of and reflections on the workshop's keynote and discussions. The end of the report will summarise the proposals of actionable strategies which emerged from the workshop.

Note from the author: *As a reporter, I offer reflections from my position as an IETM member, a theatre-maker working across borders, a researcher and producer mainly based in the UK, but of a non-UK origin.*



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Setting the scene for the conversation

Freedom of expression and political involvement within the arts and culture sector was a crucial departure point for the conversation. The workshop was moderated by Elena Polivtseva (an independent researcher, founder of the Culture Policy Room and former Head of Policy and Research at IETM). IETM proposed this session to discuss the urgent challenges visible within the arts and culture domain both in Europe and globally:

- Protection of authentic value of the arts within the political climate which focuses exclusively on economics or national identity
- Discussing politically motivated budget cuts which restrict artistic freedom
- The threat that international collaborations in the arts are under, intensified by the domestic funding cuts in countries which have frequently provided co-funding for international partnerships
- Organisation and formats of international alliances that defend the value of arts and culture

The workshop commenced by acknowledging a particular concern amongst arts and culture workers, and proposed to deal head-on with the two existential factors concerning the arts - economy and politics - and the dynamic between these two. The discussion held space for reflection on the intersecting challenges, discussing how value is imagined in political systems and how the mainstream economic structures influenced the arts. Emma Holten (a feminist activist, gender policy consultant and an author of the book *DEFICIT* - on the value of care) was introduced to share the deeper thinking around the notions of value and the influences through which the economy operates within the political schema. It was both helpful and inspiring to convene at a point of mutual understanding around the history of economy as a science, which paved the path to understanding its current role in our political systems.

The Background

Emma Holten's upbeat and inspiring keynote explored the historical and philosophical background of modern economics. This revealed its dominance in both everyday news and political decisions, where it has embedded an understanding that value can only be measured and portrayed through an actual quantity, or price. Beyond this it is difficult to advocate for value. Holten drew on Enlightenment figures such as Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith, and explained how the economic subject was created in line with the Enlightenment philosophy: constructed as rational, and set up to both produce and deliver profit for the progress of society. Within this, care, co- and inter-dependence, and emotional labour remain entirely ignored.

Modern economics, Holten argues, still greatly relies on the Enlightenment foundations. Holten highlights GDP, as a post World War II invention used to represent national economic health: within the calculation of GDP everything that cannot be priced is excluded. To illustrate the exclusions, Holten compares breastfeeding and beer-drinking as equally (in) visible within GDP. Both are labelled as 'leisure', with the caveat that 'beer drinking' might hold greater value as it (at least) brings money towards the public taxes. Along these lines, the labour of artists, caregivers, and educators is misvalued and solely seen as a 'cost' within national spending.

In order to reimagine value, Holten proposes a Feminist Economics perspective, which sets out to challenge present thinking rooted in Enlightenment. In Holten's words, Feminist Economics focuses on 'reproduction' as 'everything we do – paid or unpaid - to keep people happy, healthy and alive' (Holten, 17 May 2025). Holten finds that nurses and artists are similarly undervalued: their work relies on process and transformation and therefore does not comply with the ways we measure value, which prioritises product, transaction and profit. Holten stresses that every politician will prioritise a financial advisor over a cultural or care advisor. Furthermore Holten argues that whether a conservative or progressive government in power, the economic models remain the same. Within these models the sectors of arts, culture and care remain seen as a continual expense.

Holten concludes that the current prevailing economic model comes with an inherent conservatism and a nihilism towards change and transformation. Everything that is conceived as 'strange' or 'transformative' is chaotic and not seen as a priority. Thinking based in economics bears deep fear of the unpredictable, corporeal, chaos and emotions. There is a yearning to control everything, which means 'we get a society with very few things that lead us in places we never expected.' (Holten, 17 May 2025)

A very long and affirmative applause and cheers followed Emma Holten's keynote. After this the panel speakers were introduced and offered their perspectives and experiences.



Photo credit: Karam Ghossein

Viewpoints from Germany, Slovenia and the UK

Germany's complex funding structure was introduced, specifically Berlin's unique positioning as a 'city-state'. This structure enables significant local investment, but it is also unpredictable: it exposes the sector to the volatility of political shifts. In the immediate aftermath of COVID-19, culture was presented as a tool for economic recovery, and funding was aimed to stimulate the sector, instead of recognising its intrinsic value. The political change of 2024 saw a decrease in Berlin's cultural budget of 13%, moving from any previous commitments by the government to preserve and develop the resilience of the cultural sector. This was a result of 'the absence within the planning of culture strategy in the global realisation of the budget cuts.' There was no foreseeing that budget decisions would be led mainly by the finance ministries which were not versed in executing a cultural strategy. This crisis, however, identified a new pathway for cultural leaders going forwards – the need for conversation with both economic and financial policymakers if the cultural sector was to avoid future decimation.

Slovenia is currently governed by a centre-left government. Nevertheless, the country is still grappling with the aftershocks of the last right-wing government, which had negative consequences on cultural infrastructure. The learning outcomes from the immediate past and the current situation include an awareness of ongoing preparedness, as political volatility remains a constant occurrence. Building cross-sectoral networks with the politicians and policymakers needs to become an embedded practice of cultural leaders – the time of current political calm (for culture) only further invites the need for building a strong infrastructure at a time when the firefighting for culture is minimal. Slovenia is described more as a community than a society: this therefore allows for quicker and easier connections between the different levels of cultural workers, policymakers and politicians. Whilst this closeness provides for fast and responsive action, it also exposes the cultural sector to be personality-dominated within erratic decision-making and politics dynamics. This therefore shows the need for strategic planning, an ongoing creation of cross and inter-sectoral coalitions and alliances, and adaptation of the used language and vocabulary into one commonly understood by both the policymakers and politicians. Most of all, a transparent and transient leadership within the cultural sector was called for, to ensure the continuous exchange of voices and strategies, and preserve wellbeing within the advocacy sector.

The UK's cultural decline since 2010 was succinctly summarised and portrayed within 4 minutes of the presentation. This set the scene for the current landscape of an ongoing national struggle to defend the value of culture and arts alongside persistent austerity. The results of a 14 year-long Conservative leadership decimated arts institutions, particularly outside London, as well as a significant decrease in the takeup of creative subjects in schools and universities. The concept of Creative Industries once promoted by the New Labour government of the late 1990s has been re-imagined by the Conservative government to promote British export and tourism, without the originally embedded social focus and emphasis on transformation. One such example was given in relation to the shift in the way the British Council has been collaborating in the last 10 years: emphasising the British national and cultural product as an export, rather than seeking common grounds for international and inter-cultural collaborations. Brexit was mentioned as another severe set-back, preventing the UK from accessing EU funds and reducing existing and future international collaboration. In terms of artistic freedom of speech, a significant event in 2023 was highlighted, where Arts Council England issued a guidance to its National Portfolio Organisations warning against engaging in 'overtly political or activist' activities. This guidance was updated in January 2024, and re-phrased as 'beliefs including about matters of current political debate' and 'overtly political or activist' activity as potential breaches of funding terms. Within the arts and culture sector it was understood that this specifically referred to support for Palestine, presenting censorship pressures for those organisations who expressed their views openly. In July 2024 the UK elected a Labour (left) government. However, culture has not been on the agenda for a funding increase.



Photo credit: Karam Ghossein

Recommendations and suggestions

In confronting and reflecting on their national circumstances, the participants proposed a series of concrete strategies for action:

- **Rethinking what is the language of ‘value’:** Developing compelling narratives which will be understood by the political elite and economists, grounded in public good rather than mere profit. Transactional language can be reframed to lean into the potential for transformation which culture offers to enrich lives and build resilient societies, (important to highlight here the UK’s adopted practice of ‘social prescribing’ which is benefitting both the creative grassroots/freelance workforce, as well as re-engaging communities and individuals with culture, social cohesion and wellbeing).
- **Cross-sectoral coalitions and alliances:** Forging connections and alliances with healthcare, education, and environmental sectors, as all contribute to happier living but suffer from being misvalued. All these sectors face similar undervaluation, and their convergence can yield powerful coalitions. Importance of networking within sectors that do not have an immediate affiliation with culture. Never bargaining with politicians to spare one segment of culture/one institution at the expense of another. Uniting with the unions and joint development of a clear cultural policy vision.
- **Permanent Advocacy Structures:** Importance of lobbying and developing mechanisms that provide continuity in the landscape of volatile and sudden political changes. Understanding that advocacy is an emotional area, and therefore people who are on the front-line need looking after. Rotating the leadership teams to prevent burnout and ensure transparency, relevance and resilience. Documenting advocacy histories to ensure continuous learning and space for innovation, and building teams and networks that can respond quickly to emerging threats.
- **Solidarity and transformation over scarcity:** Reject narratives that turn different cultural actors against each other. Avoid fighting over limited resources. Reject new definitions of talking about culture. Connect to universities.
- **Considering what the spaces for democracy look like:** Actively supporting grassroots platforms that keep cultural discourse public and participatory. Understanding that fascism arises from visionless politics: this is how the hard right message and agenda develops. The example of the What Next? movement in the UK was offered as a model of a long-term relationship development platform between the arts and culture sector and political and civic stakeholders. Awareness that leaving the democratic space open but empty, and not engaging, is ‘more worrisome than people voting for the far right’.
- **Adapting to the communities and aligning with principles of care:** Foregrounding the value of bringing communities into conversations. Developing the connection to a place - explore placemaking. Looking at care from every different perspective (youth, heritage, climate, mental health). Culture Action Europe | Beyond the Obvious Conference.
- **Tangible advocacy materials and tools:** Provide policymakers with hard-copy accessible, well-researched materials. Manifestos, public value reports, and charters can help strengthen the case for the arts in broader policy and economy debates. Consider both innovation in advocacy methods, as well as the consistency in calling for change and offering solutions. Offer palpable examples of the actions and strategies already in place which work.
- **Audience contributions** included information about the global women’s strike to stress the unpaid and undervalued labour around care planned for 7 March 2026, Emma Holten’s proposal for the formation of an Alliance for Quality of Life, and the call out for the General Assembly for Beautiful Life

To conclude, the arts and culture are not optional, and should not be treated as an afterthought. Arts and culture give tools to societies to reflect and understand themselves, heal, care and imagine different systems. This fundamental contribution is currently devalued and absent from the prevailing economic and political models, and risks seeing arts erased from political and economic agendas.

This session evoked thinking about how our public lives might look if we lean into collaboration, transformation and cooperation, as much as into innovation and profit. Arts reaffirm what makes our living happier. In Holten’s words, ‘Scarcity is bullshit. We are a rich part of the world. It’s about how resources are distributed.’ (Holten, 17 May 2025). Redefining value therefore is both urgently needed and possible, but in leading with that purpose the cultural sector must build alliances.

