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Cultural Catch-up: the Brussels Conversations 2012 Discusses the Cultural Coalition for a Citizens' Europe

The *European House for Culture* together with its co-organizers the [Marcel Hicter Association](#), the [Access to Culture Platform](#), "[A Soul for Europe](#)" and the Philosophy Festival, as well as its partners, organised the [Brussels Conversations 2012](#) on 16/17 November 2012. It was the second of three events held in November to launch the initiative *A Cultural Coalition for a Citizens' Europe*. Over 100 participants and 25 contributors from 28 countries around Europe and abroad were hosted by the *Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Françaises de Belgique* at the *Palais des Académies*. The conversations set the key action points to be developed during the European Year of Citizens 2013, discussing such topics as arts and culture bringing "added value" to citizenship, fear and resentment, and the state of democracy in Europe.

The participants and contributors discussed the role of culture in developing citizenship in Europe. The *Brussels Conversations 2012* kicked off with a keynote speech by **Luuk van Middelaar** (Historian, Political Philosopher, Author and Press and Communication Collaborator with the European Council President Herman Van Rompuy) and was followed by further lectures by **Patrice Meyer-Bisch** (Coordinator of the Interdisciplinary Institute for Ethics and Human Rights and UNESCO Chair for Human Rights and Democracy) and **Alicja Gescinska** (Philosopher and Writer). Concluding the event was a discussion between **Paul Scheffer** (Writer, Professor of European Studies, Tilburg School of Humanities), **Volker Hassemer** (President of the Board, "A Soul for Europe"), **Anna Luyten** (Essayist, Guest Professor of Philosophy, School of Arts, Ghent) and **Peter Vermeersch** (Initiator G1000 Citizens' Summit).

Throughout the event the diversity of participants from various regions, professional, and cultural backgrounds allowed for stimulating conversations and establishing of goals for the future of citizenship in Europe. The aim of the *Brussels Conversations 2012* was to continue the progress of the *Cultural Coalition for a Citizen's Europe* made at the *Berlin Conference 2012* (10 November) and to look forward to the *Amsterdam Conversations 2012* (30 November) in setting the programme and content streams of the Coalition.

The consensus called for the creation of a new culture of politics, economics, and social life for the whole European sphere, and a new and inventive relationship between citizens and politicians stressing the need to move beyond a simple concept of citizen participation towards one of global responsibility.

How can the Cultural Coalition for a Citizen's Europe increase the inventiveness of its themes, structures, formats, and how can this impact the relationship between Europe's citizens, its politicians, and its institutions?

As Luuk Van Middelaar stated: "a common identity is always about *self*-identification with a group: you cannot force people to feel European." People have to discover that shared identity in their shared history and shared culture. It is the moment to change behaviour and support citizens to act as the owners of Europe, since we - the citizens - are the owners of Europe. Luuk van Middelaar assessed the role of globalisation and the financial crisis in shaping discussions of Europeanness. "Because of the crisis," he

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argued, “people are now more aware that what happens elsewhere in Europe affects their daily life economically, politically, and culturally.”

How can the cultural sector engage more deeply with the non-converted? Is the Euro-crisis actually a blessing in disguise, a moment for coming together to overcome hardship? Are the citizens the unacknowledged new legislators of Europe?

An over-arching theme of the discussion was the responsibility of cultural actors, revealing that it is not only politicians that carry responsibility – artists must also play their part. The crisis is an opportunity to put artists back in the spotlight, allowing them to create new and alternative narratives for our ways of life. These narratives are not just about “us” as Europeans, but also the construction of Europeanness in multi-cultural and transnational contexts.

How can we harness the individual catalyzing effect of culture within the wider frameworks of the Cultural Coalition? How can artists become acknowledged legislators of the world?

Paul Scheffer argued that the visibility of Europe’s history is remarkably ill-defined, considering its cultural significance. The cultural memory of Europe is thus far too vague and fragmented. The key themes that ran through the *Brussels Conversations 2012* and will be carried forward throughout the Coalitions activities throughout the European Year of Citizens 2013:

- There is a need for new narratives which help us (re)imagine Europe;
- We need to involve “ordinary” citizens on wide scale in more “outside the box” thinking;
- We need to empower ourselves - the citizens - to shape a true democratic system in which WE are co-creators. Let’s be creative and experimental!
- We need to brainstorm across borders with new online techniques;
- We need to trigger the co-responsibility and cooperation of politicians, business leaders, and artists (creative sector, cultural actors?) in working towards a common future. We must all tap into our creative potential, moving away from short-term thinking towards a long term vision that allows and fosters innovation and collaboration between all parts of society.

How can we create new narratives for the (re)imagination of Europe? Above all else – how can we finish with the discussion process and start the working process? If crisis is the best moment to change behaviour, then our moment as the Cultural Coalition has come. We must move decisively forward to help citizens act as the owners of Europe!

The [Brussels Conversations 2012](#) confirmed the need for more civic involvement across Europe and the willingness of the cultural sector to play a pivotal role in its development. The event was made possible thanks to the partnerships between the *European House for Culture* and its co-producers: the [Marcel Hicter Association](#), the [Access to Culture Platform](#), “[A Soul for Europe](#)” and the [Philosophy Festival](#), as well as its partners: [European Festivals Association \(EFA\)](#), [ENCATC](#), the [European Union National Institutes for Culture \(EUNIC\)](#), and its media partner [euro|topics](#) and technical partner [ART2Work](#).

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- Read the [in-depth report](#) here by the “A Soul for Europe” observers Andreas Bock and Benedict Schofield
- See the *Brussels Conversations 2012* [photos](#) online
- See the *Brussels Conversations 2012* video footage (coming soon)
- See the *Brussels Conversations 2012* [interviews](#)
- See the *Brussels Conversations 2012* conference [texts](#)
- See the *Brussels Conversations 2012* [participants list](#)
- Read more quotes on [twitter](#)
- See the *Brussels Conversations 2012* [media coverage](#)
- Check the [ART2Work](#) project responsible for the sound of the Brussels Conferences 2012
- Check Paul Hoßfeld's project [WARRIORS-GENERATION-EUROPE](#) presented at the Berlin Conference 2012
- Berlin Conference 2012 [report](#)
- Amsterdam Conversations 2012 Report (coming soon)



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