



Profile

Jean Digne

*1 region

After World War II there was a change in the French government system from a three-level system of nation, province and city (commune) to a five-level system of Europe, nation, region, province and city, and in the process there was a major shift from centralized government decision-making to a decentralization and divestment of power to the regional and local governments. The regional government system was newly created after the War and a law officially defining the division of power was passed in 1982.

*2 Hors les Murs

Hors les Murs is an organization established by the Ministry of Culture as an information center for the promotion of circus and acrobatic performance arts. In addition to gathering information about circus and acrobatic performance groups, educational institutions and support programs and supplying it to related parties, the organization edits and publishes a magazine and conducts surveys about the social and economic status of circus and acrobatic performance arts.

*3 centering on circus performances

In the 1970s, the audience for circuses was declining rapidly and several circus companies with long traditions were going bankrupt. Then in the 80s there were major efforts to support circus and acrobatic performance arts beginning with the establishment of the National Center for Circus Arts by the Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, thus forming the foundation for what now is called the Nouveau Cirque. At the same time, the new circus succeeded in winning an audience that didn't follow the elite arts of theater, opera and ballet. The fact that a festival like this was established in 1973 is proof of a clear vision of the future.

Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー

Looking at French policy in culture and the arts through the activities of the front-line administrator, Jean Digne

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実務家として常に第一線をリード
ジャン・ディーニュ氏の歩みで辿るフランスの文化政策

Since the 1970s, Jean Digne (born 1951) has held important posts at the local, regional and national levels, in the city government of Aix en Provence, the Provence-Alps-Cote d'Azur region (*1), the French Ministry of Culture, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Education and the Association Française d'Action Artistique (AFAA). In this interview we look at the achievements of Jean Digne as top-level administrator generating ideas that have shaped French culture and arts policy and his expertise as an authority in the "creative city" field that is the focus of much attention in Japan today as well. We spoke to him on his recent visit to Japan to survey the arts and culture programs and policies of regional governments around Japan.

(Interviewed and edited by Shintaro Fujii, associate professor of Waseda University; interviewed May 21, 2007)

You are presently teaching at a university while serving as director of the Musée du Montparnasse and president of Hors les Murs (*2) and up until now you have served in the AFAA and a variety of other positions in the field of arts and culture. Can you tell us some more detail about your career up until now?

I grew up in Marseilles in southern France. Even now as I live in Paris, I still think of it only as a transit point. That is how deep my affinity for my native city is. I received my university education in Aix en Provence in southern France. I studied economics and architecture and literature there, but it was largely studying on my own.

After finishing my military service I did civil service at the French Embassy in the Moroccan capital of al Rabat. Learning about the Moroccan cultural traditions and the warm-heartedness and sensitivity of the Moroccan people at that time really opened my eyes to the world.

The image that most French have of other countries turns out to be surprisingly different from the realities they see when they actually visit those countries. I got a strong feeling at that time that I wanted to use cultural and arts exchange to break down the preconceptions people have concerning foreign cultures. I want to stress the value of traveling and acquiring new points of view by moving around and the richness that comes from seeing things through other people's eyes. When I think about it, Marseilles and other cities of the Mediterranean coast could not have prospered as they did without trade and culture exchange.

Later I received a scholarship from the French Ministry of Culture to participate in a culture policy seminar that traveled around France for one year. After that I was asked to take a position as the artistic director of a theater in Aix en Provence and I worked there from 1970 to '76. During that time I initiated a festival called "Aix en Provence, a Saltinbanco City" that centered on circus performances. (*3) In the 1970s when there was still a lot of instability in the political, social, philosophical and artistic arenas after France's May 1968 month of social upheaval, there was

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*4 regional culture office

In the process of institutional reforms, it has now been changed from a non-profit organization to a public facility. While working closely in line with regional culture policy, the office aim to support the growth of arts and culture by creating opportunities for a wider portion of the population to have exposure to arts and culture and to grow audiences while also providing grants, professional advice and technical support for the creation of art.

*5 DRAC

Created in the various regions since 1970, there are now 26 DRAC organizations around France and the budgeting and decision-making rights have gradually shifted from the main ministry in Paris to the regional DRAC. However, although the DRAC are under the supervision of the regional governments, they remain strongly related to the Ministry of Culture (national) in their budgets and decision-making functions and are thus often said to represent a division of power rather than a transfer of power to the regions.

*6 Villa Kujoyama

Operated by the French government, it is a residence facility for artists with several artists from different genre who have received government scholarships in residence there for stays several months at a time.

*7 Biarritz Photo Festival

A large-scale photography exhibition titled "Festival Photo et vidéo de Biarritz" that sought to connect photography and travel.

also a lot of dynamism as a result. Looking back, it was a time when almost anything was possible if your desire to do it. I had become the artistic director of theater, but we wanted to do theater in places outside the conventional theater. We wanted to do plays in places where they had not been performed before: in squares, on the streets, in schools.

After that I applied for a UNESCO position as specialist to help establish a center for training professionals in the arts and culture field in Africa. Under that program I was sent to Togo in Sub-Saharan Africa for two years, from 1976 to '78, to work with African specialists.

After returning to France, I was asked by the Chairman of the Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur regional assembly to participate in a project to create a unique regional cultural policy and I became the head of regional culture office in charge of policy from 1978 to '82. (*4) At a time when Paris still monopolized the arts and culture scene in France, this project was also the start of the decentralization of cultural activities with an increasing role for the regional governments. We participated in the planning of cultural policy for the future of about 800 local government offices. It was an era when there were no precedents for such policy-making.

That is quite a lot of history. Seeing the way you were able to work in a number of different government agencies at such a young age and undertake such large-scale projects is somewhat hard for us to perceive living in a country like Japan where young people are seldom chosen for important pots and changing jobs is still quite rare.

That may be true. But my story goes on from there (laughs).

My next change of jobs came in 1981, when Mitterrand's socialist party government came to power and I began working for the national government under the new Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, in the area of transferring jurisdiction in cultural affairs to the regional and local governments. I worked as a liaison between the central government and the people sent by the Ministry of Culture to head the local culture and arts agencies. My role there was to help with the formulation and adjustment of arts and culture programs and policies of the local agencies. At that time a system of regional arts and culture bureaus (DRAC) (*5) was already in place but their main concern was management policies regarding cultural assets and they had no programs or policies concerning contemporary arts. That is the area where working systems had to be created.

After that I went to work for the Foreign Ministry. My job with the Foreign Ministry from 1983 to '89 was as director of the French Academy in Naples, where we were involved in exchanges between French and southern Italian artists. It was at that time that a world forum was held for the directors of French culture and arts facilities around the world. The theme of the forum was establishing viable overseas artist residence facilities and it was at that forum that discussion was held about plans for the improvement of the Villa Kujoyama (*6) facility in Kyoto. As a result I guess that I played an indirect part in that project.

After that I was asked by the Assistant Foreign Minister to take the position of director of AFAA, which I did from 1990 to '99. The Cultural attach? at the French Embassy in Japan, Brigitte Proucelle worked with me at AFAA at that time. During my tenure at AFAA we were involved in helping to strengthen the relationship between the Japanese and European music industries and with regard to that effort I was invited by the Japan Foundation to Japan and spent about a month there. During my time at AFAA I also worked to strengthen cultural exchange with Africa and I got AFAA to actively support the circus and acrobatic performance fields that were undergoing a big revival in France at the time.

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*7 Biarritz Photo Festival

A large-scale photography exhibition titled "Festival Photo et vidéo de Biarritz" that sought to connect photography and travel.

After leaving the AFAA directorship in 1999, I took off some time to recharge myself and got involved in starting a photography festival in Biarritz (*7) near the Spanish border and I also began teaching at the Université de Paris 8 (Saint-Denis). That is when I first met you, isn't it?

Exactly. I was studying arts management at the Université de Paris 8 and I took your course in arts environment.

When the new multiparty government was formed under President Chirac and Prime Minister Jospin and Jacques Chirac was appointed the Minister of Education, I was given a post on the Minister's staff. My role was to head a survey/research mission (a new area of the arts) concerning the "alternative arts spaces" that are being seen increasingly in France and other parts of Europe in recent years that the arts policy concerning them. These art spaces are historical buildings or old industrial buildings like factories and warehouses no longer in use that have been renovated for use as creative spaces for the arts.

Since 2004, I have been involved in a number of these projects simultaneously. My working time is divided between four fields. The first is the traditional field of international cultural exchange, the next is my job as director of Musée du Montparnasse with its collection Ecole de Paris paintings, the third is my work as president of Hors les Murs, which promotes the arts of the circus and acrobatics. The fourth is my university teaching. Offering specialized instruction for young people interested in working the field of culture and the arts and helping them find employment is something I have been very interested in for a long time.

I love the freedom of not being confined to one job. I have been asked to work for the Foreign Ministry full-time but I refused the offer. As with this current request I received from the French Embassy in Japan to do a survey of Japan's urban culture programs, I do work for the Foreign Ministry as a specialist on a project-by-project basis. I have recently gone to St. Petersburg and Marrakech on the same type of mission. Working for a number of organizations and working on a number of different projects at the same time gives me the opportunity to see things from a number of different perspectives.

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Hors les Murs is unique among the arts organizations of the world in that it is dedicated to promoting the arts of the circus and acrobatics.

It is an organization that operates on funding from the Ministry of Culture and its own revenue and its mission is to promote the arts of the circus and acrobatics both in France and abroad. I have been deeply involved with the circus and acrobatics for a long time, so personally I am very happy to be able to work in this field.

You have always been involved in work at or for government agencies, and France is a country with a large bureaucracy. There must be a lot of confinement and resistance at times. How have you been able to initiate so many ideas and projects one after another?

I think that in the end it is a matter of curiosity. It is the desire to see new things, and when you see something new you will find yourself getting new ideas one after another. And I find that the more I am limited by the confines of bureaucratic systems, the more my imagination is stimulated. And, in my case, I had no other choice.

In 2006, AFAA underwent organizational reforms and the name was changed to Culturesfrance. Looking at the organization from the outside, however, it is hard to see what has changed, other than the name.

It is true, since there has not been any change in the organization's basic mission. But in France there has been a feeling, perhaps a complex that we have to do something like the British Council. But AFAA is an organization that was created in 1920, and although it is old in many ways, it has also had the appeal of being at once government-supervised but also a nonprofit organization created in line with France's 1901 law on association. It continued to maintain a certain degree of distance from the government and did not necessarily serve as a full proponent of the government's foreign policies at any given time in its history. However, I think it was considered a problem that its lack of continuity in policies (which I think this is a necessary evil in the case of the arts where change and action are always necessary) and insufficient coordination between the organizations did not make it an ideal body for selling the French brand image abroad.

It seems to me that the name "France" plays too heavily in the new name Culturesfrance. (*8) I also wonder about the fact that the "Cultures" is plural as well. It may emphasize a consciousness of the fact that culture is everywhere and it is something that everyone is involved with, but I also feel that things can get out of hand if everything is called culture and everyone has a say in it. There may also be a danger in it becoming a centralized monolithic organization that loses the unique tradition the AFAA has built up as an organization where government officials and intellectuals, artists and business people have worked side by side. Of course I think about the interests of France, but artists are able to move people in unique ways, and in my work I have always believed the important thing is not to have the artists serve as ambassadors but to have the them be artists. But, since it is an organization that I used to be in charge of, I would like to refrain from making any more comments about it.

In May, France elected a new President in Nicolas Sarkozy and a new Prime Minister and new Ministers were appointed. What are your thoughts on these developments? There were rumors about big cuts in budgets for arts and culture and a merging of the Ministries of Culture and Education but for now the Ministry of

*8 the name was changed from AFAA to Culturesfrance

Referring to the fact that in the case of AFAA, the "F" refers to France in a less conspicuous way.

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Culture and Communications has remained in tact with its two-pillar organization of culture and the media. How do you think cultural policies will change under the new Minister of Culture, Christine Albanel?

It has not been long since the new government was formed and it is probably too early yet to say what will happen. But I don't think you can say that the appointment of a new Minister of Culture will necessarily lead to new culture policies. One thing that you can say about French culture policy is that the president has traditionally had a large say in culture policy as seen by the fact that such big cultural institutions as the Pompidou Centre, the Musee Orsay, the Opera Bastille and the Musée du Quai Branly were all created through initiatives of former French presidents. And the one who appointed me as director of AFAA was not the Minister of Culture but the President. What's more, President Sarkozy is the kind who is certain to make his voice heard in all aspects of the French government's internal affairs more than any president in the past. I believe that it is safe to say that the influence of the Minister of Culture will decrease in proportion to the growth in influence of the regional governments' culture policies and the mass media. Also, concerning the talk about a merging of the Ministries of Education and Culture, just as the former Minister of Culture Jack Lang later served as the Minister of Education, there have always been politicians who are experienced in both culture and education and I don't think that it will necessarily be all bad if a strong politician becomes the Minister [of both]. However, the barriers are high between the bureaucracies and it would probably be very difficult for you to expect the bureaucrats from Ministries of Culture and Education to suddenly begin working together on projects.

More than that, however, I am worried about the fact that France is becoming so obsessed with security and social stability, as seen in the limits on foreign visas, that we are in danger of becoming a closed society. France has always absorbed much in the way of riches from other people. In the development of French arts, the contributions of foreign artists have always been an important element. The Musée du Montparnasse where I serve as director is known for its collection of Ecole de Paris art from the first half of the 20th century, and 90% of the painters of the Ecole de Paris were foreigners like Modigliani, Chagall and Fujita.

Images of foreign countries often tend to be simplified and caricatured. In that sense, the experiences of my period in Morocco were very important in removing my stereotypes. I believe that people working in international cultural exchange have to be very careful to avoid easy understanding stereotypical forms of culture. Because the meeting of different cultures, even the collision of cultures can lead to very rich fruition.

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Cultural programs and cultural diplomacy used to be the exclusive realm of the nation state for much of recent history. With the deepening of the unification of Europe and the accompanying formation of pan-European cultural programs, along with the increasing importance of regional arts and culture programs, it seems that the importance of programs at the national level is diminishing proportionately. What do you think of this trend?

Although France still has a strong tradition of centralized governance, since World War II, we have been consistent in our pursuit of decentralization of power to the regional and local level, both in terms of government and cultural programs. Of course, this is partly a reflection of the fact that previously there was such a disproportionately high concentration of arts and culture in Paris. In recent years, however, you will find that in terms of budget for arts and culture, the combined budgets of the regional and local governments now exceeds that of the Ministry of Culture. We have now reached a stage where almost nothing can be achieved without a 4-way partnership between European, national, regional and local [municipal] parties. And in the area of international cultural exchange as well, we are now in an era where the national organizations can do cultural diplomacy with the assistance of the regional governments.

On the other hand, it seems that the common state of affairs for regional culture facilities in France today is to have them funded jointly with national, regional, provincial and municipal funds. In other words, aren't there very few cases of cultural facilities or programs initiated and funded solely by regional or municipal governments without national level support?

In northern France there is the interesting case of the Région Nord-Pas-de-Calais initiative in the city of Tourcoing that established a school called Le Fresnoy, Studio national des arts contemporains. It is an institution involved primarily in teaching photographic and video art in connection with today's multi-media art and involves students in practical use of the media and creation of works and it is the product of an initiative by the Nord-Pas-de-Calais regional government, not the national government. Of course, once the school is operating and proves to be a success the national government will provide some funding, and in fact the funding is now fairly evenly distributed between national and regional funds. But, if the national government were to announce that it will no longer fund the school, I believe that Nord-Pas-de-Calais would continue to fund it. However, if Nord-Pas-de-Calais said it was withdrawing from the project, I believe that the national government would withdraw its funds too.

In Japan there is a lot of attention focused in recent years on "creative city" [Sozo Toshi] type cultural programs for cities. I would like to ask you to tell us something more about your ideas concerning contemporary municipal culture and arts programs and policies in France today.

In France, it was mainly from the 1970s that we saw the formation of regional and local government culture policies and programs independent of the national policies and programs for the first time. Before that, arts and culture were usually handled by agencies that combined the arts with tourism and sports. With the 1970s as the turning point, however, it became common for cities (in France there is no division between city, town and village governments) to have independent culture departments headed by an arts and culture specialist. When the left-leaning government of Mitterrand came to power in 1981, we saw a big change in the environment surrounding culture and the arts, especially at the municipal level.

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Perhaps with some sense of competing with Paris, it was the cities that were most aggressive in searching for new ideas.

In the case of cities, I believe that it is important to think of culture as culture, but at the same time you have to think about arts and cultural programs in connection with the city planning, the environment, leisure and the improvement of quality of life of the citizens. Culture for the cities does not mean simply high-level arts. It is important to establish a sustainable overall environment for culture.

There are many cities like Nantes and many others that have succeeded in transforming abandoned factories and stations and historical building that are part of their heritage from the past into contemporary cultural facilities. Arts and culture can provide weapons of change in a variety of ways. With regards to these types of cultural programs, I believe that the efforts to take advantage many possible tie-ups and cooperative projects are still lacking and there is much more that can still be done. In the universities as well, there are about 500,000 students in the Greater Paris area, but I don't see enough being done in the field of mediation to bring students and culture and arts together. If I were the mayor of Paris, I would start a program to renovate potential alternative arts spaces that exist in the universities. I believe that the aim of cultural policy and programs in the cities should be to cause change, to achieve new forms of expression, open up new fields and win new audience, and to show the people of the city aspects of its appeal that they were unaware of before. And I also believe that this should be done not by one method, but using a variety of different method, including perhaps some that seem to contradict each other. There are many different sizes of local and regional government entities and they differ greatly in terms of history, traditions and social make-up. To begin with, there is no single kind of urban lifestyle. So, I believe that there is no single type of culture and arts policy or program that suits all cities. And, when you really think about it, there is also no single answer for the question of whether arts facilities should be run by artists or administrators.

Finally, I would like to ask you if you have any proposals for the year 2008, when Japan and France will be celebrating the 150th anniversary of the start of political relations and many official programs are being planned in connection with this celebration.

Former President Chirac was a great lover of Japan and I believe that a special relationship has developed between the two countries, but I believe that this relationship needs to be developed even more. One thing that I feel is necessary is to develop more relationships not just at the national level but also directly between cities in the two countries, with "creative city" programs as a key element. And when this is done, it should not just be in the superficial form of "sister city" relationships. Since France has a slightly longer history in the process of decentralization of divesting power to the regional cities, I would like to see French cities actively sharing their experiences with changes in culture policies and new programs and a spirit of dynamism that doesn't fear mistakes.