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Speech by Sigrid Kaag, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, at the Prince Claus Awards Ceremony in Amsterdam on 4 December 2019.

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses – Prince Constantijn in particular, Your Excellences, Mr Kaseem, Ms Ishag, Laureates, Ladies and gentlemen,

Art is dangerous. It's always been dangerous – at least for leaders and societies that fear hearing and feeling certain truths. Even today, in some states, plays like Hamlet and Macbeth offend censors, because their 400-year-old-storylines of informers, palace coups, and political murders seem so dangerously relevant.

I can't imagine a greater tribute to the enduring power of art.

Because art is about everything around us. About life - including the ways in which we are ruled or misruled.

Creating art can therefore also be an act of bravery.

Of hope. As we've seen and heard by our laureates.

Of daring to see a future that others cannot or will not.

Art is also about defying skepticism. About ignoring those who say 'it's always been this way. We can't do anything to change that.'

Because we can.

The Nobel Prize winning author Czesław Miłosz wrote that sceptics often get it wrong, because “our natural tendency is to place the possible in the past”. We look backwards. But some of us – and our laureates certainly- dare to “defy the presumably unmovable order of things”, and achieve what was thought to be impossible.

Often, these people are artists. They stand at the forefront of radical changes in society. Because art stirs us and moves us. It makes us reconsider the reality of today, and, as such, allows us to see things in a different light. Change is not possible without this.

I'm reminded of Poland in the 1980s, when protests against the government reached a fever pitch. Anti-government slogans were sprayed on the sides of buildings, and were continuously painted over, leaving white spaces on countless walls. This back-and-forth continued until a group called Orange Alternative, led by artists from the city of Wrocław, began painting pictures of dwarfs on the blank spaces. The government, feeling it was mocked, ridiculed, banned the dwarfs. This started the “revolution of the dwarfs”, where protesters shouted that “there's no freedom without dwarfs!” and the government issued orders – uniquely in world history – to “arrest all dwarfs”. These protests inspired people all throughout Poland to continue their resistance.

Art had created a new reality.

That ability to rework reality, is why artists still stand at the forefront of peaceful resistance and demands for meaningful change.

To achieve what was thought impossible is the work of artists. Of people who can envision that which previously didn't exist. Who dare to create it. And who inspire others to follow their lead.

I am very honored and humbled to be in the company of this celebration to mark your achievements and of course the brilliant artists and thought leaders who created these movements.

I'm also delighted that all this year's laureates are women. Not because any effort was made to select them, but because a growing number of women are finding success not only in the world of culture, but they're breaking the barrier of silence and exclusion, of being forgotten and silenced and they raised their voice. Many, countless and more shall come. So there's a growing number - 50 % of the world's population after all - this year - some are artists, some are politicians, some of them are business leaders – but all are standing up and making their voices heard.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year, the Prince Claus Fund has conferred an award on a woman who has devoted her whole life to culture and art. Who has always been a champion of women's rights, as women's rights are human rights , even at times when this was difficult and dangerous: Kamala Ishag from Sudan.

During the revolution she supported young women creating murals in Khartoum. And she continues to coach and support young female artists in their work.

Kamala's life runs parallel to her country's post-colonial history: she has lived through Anglo-Egyptian rule, the celebration of independence in 1956, more military coups than one would like to count and a devastating civil war. And she has always let her brushes do the talking, sharing her knowledge and her wisdom through art and culture.

Her compatriot, political cartoonist Khalid Albaih, said in his Freedom Lecture here in Amsterdam last month: 'Art is all about disturbing the comfortable.'

And that is precisely what you have managed to do all these years Kamala: you have brought back the fallen heroes and heroines of the Sudanese revolution, you've brought them back to life in oil, you've commemorated them. They stare out from the canvas both as accusers condemning the injustice done to them and your country, but also as the guardians of hope, of dignity and pride.

By creating art and culture, Kamala, you and the other laureates - inspired us and you also give us hope in our shared humanity and our duty to always do more towards that goal.

You have also shown that art not only has an intrinsic value, but a social value too. That art is about that what makes us human. It's a universal language – because each of us can recognize beauty, even when we're not able or permitted to speak it.



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Ladies and gentlemen,

I'd like to express my gratitude to the Prince Claus Fund for all it has done in the last twenty years for culture and art. I'm delighted that the Fund enjoys such broad support and that we can continue to cherish the work it does in memory of Prince Claus, in whose honour it was established, and for the greater good, for our shared humanity.

Thank you.