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Think Tank for Art and Policies (2021-2023)

SOCIETY'S COURAGE TO USE ART

In this very first interview about cultural policy seen in a future perspective, we have interviewed professor of literature Frederik Tygstrup and assistant professor Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt. We have asked them how cultural policy can be understood within their field of research and how (or why) Cultural Policy constantly should evolve to stay relevant for our time and future.

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF HAVING A CULTURAL POLICY WHEN IT WAS ORIGINALLY FORMULATED IN OUR NORDIC SOCIETY?

The Social Democratic welfare states vision for a cultural policy was formulated alongside the welfare states uprising. This meant that social as well as economic safety was less or more a guarantee for all. When everyone was guaranteed welfare, the question for the national communities then became: what is the purpose of the economy? It had to be something uneconomical – an enriching life? An enriching life which did not conform to the growth of the economy, technology or production industry.

The cultural policy of the welfare state was to democratize art and make it accessible for all. The opportunity to become an artist and the opportunity to experience art should be a common privilege – and not only, as prior to the establishment of the Ministries of Culture – be determined and consumed by princes and patrons. The conditions of art had to be ensured so that it could continue to contribute to society through the experiential and aesthetic qualities. And it should be available to as many people as possible. This is the overall political motivation for the support of arts as it has existed throughout the history of the modern welfare state.

The Nordic cultural policies were formulated in the *heyday* of the welfare and national states. They were aimed towards a national and relatively homogeneous cultural community. When it argues that art must “reach everyone”, it is an imperative that includes age distribution and a fair distribution of funds between country and city. The conception of a community, and the view on demographic “diversity” that lies in cultural policy is today challenged by a reality which is affected by the dynamics of migration and the many intersections existing in modern society which within people identify themselves. Furthermore, cultural policy has been increasingly challenged by the competition state during the recent decades. This deals with the idea of art and culture as a common value seen through the lens of the individual consumer, and in relation to the expectation from the artist: they must be entrepreneurial and self-driving constantly creating art that can be consumed, sold, and distributed, rather than raising the question of what we want out of life and what makes life worthy beyond economic growth and productivity.

HOW HAS CULTURAL POLICY INFLUENCED THE VIEW OF THE ARTIST AND THE FRAMEWORK OF ART?

It has primarily had an impact on the conditions of *the existence of art*. The art support systems have focused particularly on two dimensions: on the one hand, with scholarships and production support, they have made it possible to establish growth from art that is not applied for survival on market terms. It has created room for experimenting and innovating to secure the most vulnerable parts of art life. And on the other hand, with decorating programs they have helped make art a part of everyday life by decorating the welfare state's institutions and common spaces just as the prince once adorned his palaces.



©Stine Marie Jacobsen, *Law Shifters* (2017), Kunsthalle Mulhouse, France.
"A World Not Ours" curated by Katharine Gregos

For the artist such initiatives have meant a larger freedom to produce and experiment with art. With the art support as a safety net, the artists have been given the opportunity to operate at a distance from the requirements of the art market. But conversely, many artists have probably also noticed some other demands coming from the new "patron". Throughout the history of art support, it has been a well-established dogma that there should be an arm's length distance between the politically elected grant donors and their art advisors. But at the same time, there has also been a widespread notion that when the production of art was publicly supported, demands could also be made for this production. Seen from the art producer's perspective, it is important to maintain that there is a crucial difference between the political premises for the art support and the politically motivated judgment of the work, i.e. what political thinkers and decision-makers think about the actual "work of art". One concerns the conditions for art support, which by their very nature cannot avoid becoming political as they are part of the management of a democratic society, and the other concerns the result, the specific art practice, which must be judged professionally and not politically.

As for the view of the framework of art more generally, the cultural policy of the welfare state has constantly had to maneuver between a desire for dissemination and a desire for involvement. A large part of art and culture policy has focused on making it accessible, ie on the one hand to ensure that art is actually produced, ie. that the artists can work, that there are relevant art educations, that the right resources are available and so on, and on the other hand that the art is present where people live. However, the large-scale idea of spreading art and cultural life to as many people as possible has also led to a heightened awareness of the role and function of art and culture in society. This has meant, among other things, that the desire to spread art and culture has also increasingly been accompanied by a desire to also *contribute* to a "democratic culture" directly - not only sharing cultural values, but also to share agendas for- and processes in the creation, circulation, and reproduction of culturally valuable experiences.

HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND THE ROLE AND WORTH OF ART IN RELATION TO ITS ABILITY TO CREATE AND CONNECT WITH COMMUNITIES IN SOCIETY?

In our research, we are interested in gathering a more qualified understanding and better description of the connection between the democratization of art and culture and the development of a democratic culture. The idea of art having a unique way of bringing people together is a realization that has matured in the socially oriented art over the past thirty years where there has been an awareness of community-based art. This tendency counts both art projects that have wanted to let overlooked communities speak up, projects that have wanted to create and mobilize new communities and projects that have valued temporary communities. But it is also a realization that goes beyond this specific art practice and understanding of art.

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Art only exists when it meets the world. This is common for all artistic expression's forms and genres. There is no art that is not an inquiry. And this inquiry is not just an inquiry to individuals individually. As an art consumer, I am part of a "we". A "we" existing of individuals who together have accepted the inquiry that a given work of art constitutes. As an art viewer - or listener, or reader - in other words, I have been part of a community from the very beginning. We simply share a dual attention and a common touch.

In understanding of the role and function of art in society, we argue for broadening the perspective. We must not only be interested in individual works of art and what they symbolize. We must also become wiser about art as a social institution or a social infrastructure that provides opportunities for different social communities. Both communities that are involved in the production of art and those that are established around the use of art.

The value of art must be viewed in a broader perspective. Through our senses we can understand art and gather some of same perceptions of the world around us. That is why through art and in the encounter with art we can share an experimental and unfinished search for insight into the world we as sentient and social bodies participate in. With art we get the opportunity to think – with all our senses – about what that is, to be together in the world. Through sensuous articulations of reality, we can jointly learn to live with and in a changing and challenging reality: art can train us to put words to emotions in a climate-catastrophic time, where seasons have changed with constant rain; art can give us the courage to rethink how we should understand “home” in the light of flight and global migration; art can give us space to imagine and practice hitherto untested communities; art can put sensuality on our unequal experiences of loneliness, longing, anger.

– AND IN RELATION TO THAT – HOW (OR WHY) SHOULD CULTURAL POLICY BE DEVELOPED TO BECOME MORE RELEVANT IN OUR TIME AND FUTURE?

A call for cultural policy in a time of increased global competition, climate and economic inequality must be to take infrastructural care for the artists: to ensure them good production and living conditions. It is a challenge for cultural policy today that it is expected to interact closely with the competitive economy: that artists, as solitary innovation factories, must grow from there, grow into an elite, produce works of art as a kind of pioneering, market-developing goods – and at worst fall, virtually commend themselves in a market of constant performance. We think quite a lot about how artists can have a framework for living a continuously socially rooted – and thus, one could say, and socially sustainable – life. Can they be friends and creative colleagues with other artists without abusing each other’s artistic capital and becoming competitors? Can they be allowed to start a family and not just live a residency-bouncing or *gig*-rhythmic life? Can they create collaborations with colleagues across borders, with funds from our privileged part of the world, but where else do they break with the global asymmetry of power in terms of visibility and knowledge hegemony? In other words, both the privileged construction of nation-states and global asymmetries are factoring that cultural policy must address if the art world is not to become pure *survival of the fittest*.

Thus, as in the art and cultural policy of the old welfare state, it is still about ensuring sustainability in the social and economic relations that enable us as a society to have an art that produces images of the world and that allows us to confront us with our own self-images. But it also requires an insight into the conditions and possibilities of production that today are radically different from the conditions of the latter half of the twentieth century. And it’s still about making art accessible and creating meeting places where our conversation with art and with each other can contribute to our understanding of being a community and not just busy consumers and producers. But this conversation cannot be limited to art. *It must be about all that art is about*. Art is also about war, inequality, discrimination, torture, and fear, to the same extent as our social life in general does. And we must have the courage to use it as a resource to relate to the world and think about whether it can not be changed for the better.

The task of cultural policy is to support artists in setting agendas in a sensuous way. Art and culture policy must reflect a society’s courage to use art. This does not mean that we need to use it to advance one political agenda or another. This means that we must use it for what it really can: namely, to set agendas for how we can understand ourselves and what our challenges are. And that we must support and use its capacity to create conversations about who we are and what we want.

Ultimately, it's about artistic quality. If we look at the individual work of art, we almost never agree on what quality is. There are countless ways to relate to a work of art, and each of these ways will be aware of certain qualities and blind to others. But if we lift our gaze, then we discover that precisely this diverse spectrum of possibilities for relating to an artistic object or event is a crucial quality that we can only ensure by having a broad, viable and unmanageable art life. Artistic quality is less about how good the individual works of art are, and more about the possibilities of art to live in the society of which it is a part of. From a societal perspective, caring for artistic quality is first and foremost a matter of ensuring structural capacity.