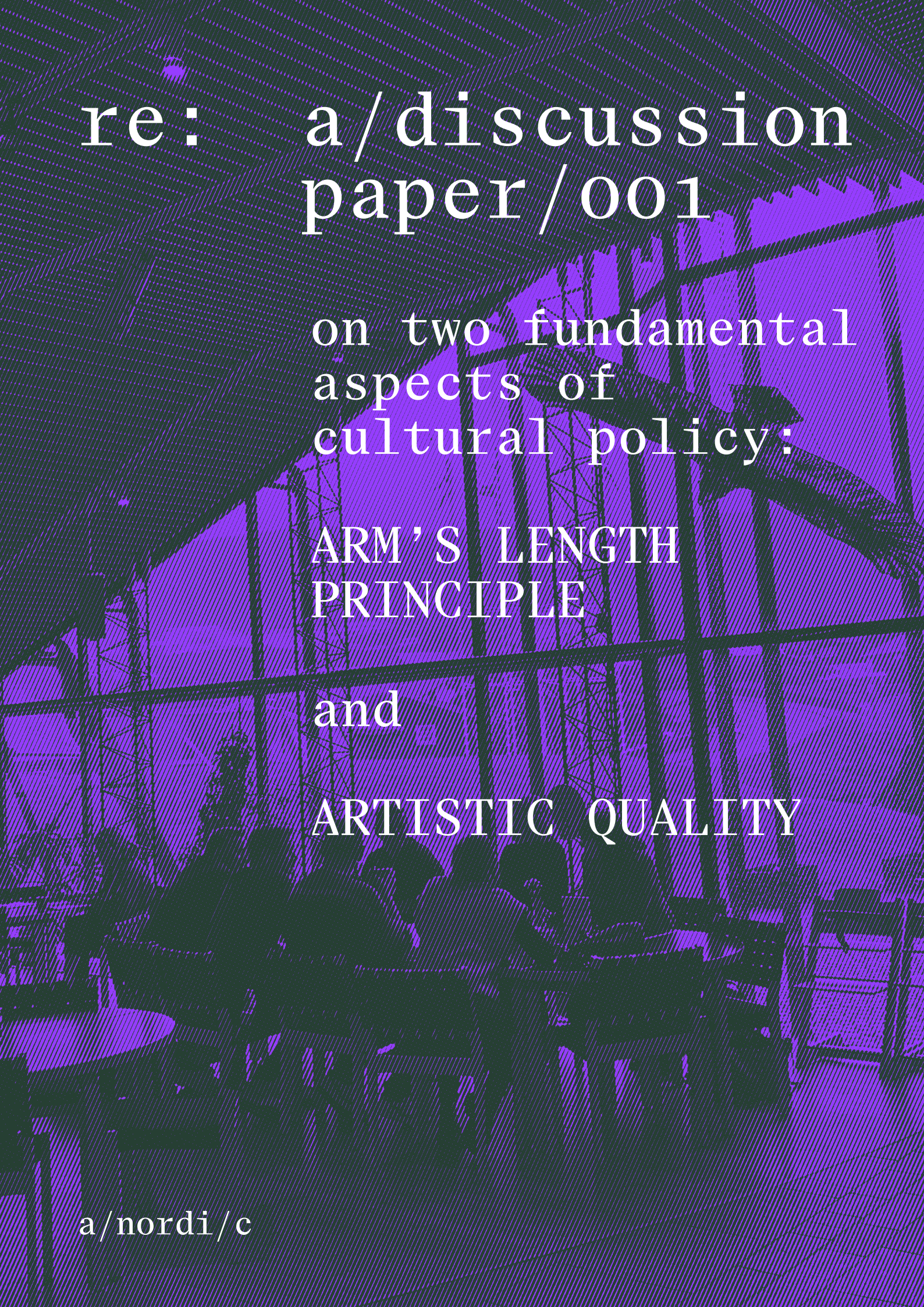




re: a/discussion
paper/001

on two fundamental
aspects of
cultural policy:

ARM'S LENGTH
PRINCIPLE

and

ARTISTIC QUALITY

a/nordi/c

FOREWORD

This Discussion Paper connects to a/nordi/c's *Curated Conversations* from June 2022

At the meeting, 40 people from 6 Nordic countries were gathered at the Faroe Islands. The participants were curated to come from vastly different backgrounds and experiences from the arts sector. We wanted to bring their different perspectives into play to discuss the current state and challenges in the policy field of arts and culture by discussing two complex themes: arm's length principle and artistic quality.

On the one hand, both themes have been part of the self-evident grammar of Nordic cultural policy, reflecting structural decisions made for decades ago. On the other hand, recent developments have highlighted the importance of renegotiating the legitimacy of the concepts to promote a stronger re-engagement of art and culture at the heart of current societies.

Drawing from the variety of competences and experience in the group we wanted to understand how the arm's length principle and the notion of quality have been shaping the arts and culture field and cultural policy landscape in the Nordic countries. Therefore, we wanted to explore how these themes could be redefined or renegotiated in a future which consist of a lot of countervailing trends.

This paper builds on insights gained from recent research, a/nordi/c's ongoing research work (2021-2022) and the different perspectives that were highlighted at the meeting. We hope these 8 suggestions for the future will be developed and discussed in cultural and policy organisations throughout the Nordic region:

1. It is necessary to move away from the original framework of arm's length and politics in order to include the position of market mechanisms in a new framework for arts funding and arm's length principle
2. The role of politicians in the arm's length principle is important and should be developed
3. Appointing to decision-making in arts councils etc. is political and calls for transparency
4. The strategic role of administrators/civil servants should be recognized and activated
5. A shared knowledge ground in the Nordic region could gain future development of state administration systems
6. It is necessary to reject the universal notion of quality and replace it with a more reflexive view
7. Representation is important and difficult
8. We need to expand the notion of authorship and artistic practises in society

INTRO- DUCTION TO ARM'S LENGTH PRINCIPLE AND ARTISTIC QUALITY

When the Nordic welfare societies were developed in the 1950s and 1960s, societies were trying to abandon old notions of mankind and society. For ages, bible study had been fundamental to values and lifestyles, to the administration of justice, to discipline and sanctions. After the war, the emerging welfare society was based on a new contract between state and individual: the state's purpose was to not indoctrinate or discipline, but to give people the potential to choose their own life. The welfare society should contribute to the individual's understanding of society, and to the understanding of life. Here, creating a policy for culture became essential. Culture became linked to education to contribute to the individual's deeper insights and own choices (Ove Kaj Pedersen in Kindstrand and Sigfusson 2021).

This was also when the arm's length principle was introduced. The state should support and not control. Art should not be exploited as propaganda as had happened in Nazi Germany and the Communist USSR (Ibid.).

Art and culture should remain autonomous and be an owner of a special independence. This ideal was to be achieved through the process of institutional differentiation; separating art from other social institutions and maintaining its freedom from political interference (Hauser 1951/77).

At this time, the arm's length principle and notion of artistic quality became closely connected and linked to the ideal of freedom and autonomy of arts and culture. Here, the arm's length principle has aimed at maintaining this autonomy and at creating the conditions for cultural activities and institutions to act as independently as possible. Moreover, the assessment of artistic quality by the arm's length bodies has helped to ensure that art is assessed based on its aesthetic value, and not on its utility or function in relation to other areas.

In recent years, the broader consensus regarding arm's length distance and the concept of quality have been challenged and questioned in many ways. Discussions on art's autonomy has expanded and gained new topicality as different cultural, societal, and economic changes have contributed to put established views of art, culture, and quality under pressure.

It seems that the dilemmas around the two central aspects of cultural policy are linked to more fundamental questions on the role and position of art in society and the need for cultural policies to rethink their functions and structures accordingly.

ARM'S LENGTH PRINCIPLE “THE STRANGE NORDIC BIRD”

BACKGROUND: PAST AND PRESENT

The principle of the arm's length distance is based on the idea that cultural policy should remain separate from other policy areas, and that responsibility for the implementation of cultural policy should be left to independent bodies: the arm's length bodies. Having public funding for culture distributed by expert and independent arts councils has been a way to prevent the misuse of art and culture for specific political purposes, propaganda etc.

The arm's length principle relates both to arts funding systems and to institutions such as theatres, museums, etc., and public service institutions. In relation to funding for art, the arm's length principle consists of three parts:

- ◇ The politicians lay down the financial and legal framework.
- ◇ Councils of experts allocate the funding (The councils are either appointed politically, or by artists' organisations).
- ◇ Members of the councils serve for a limited term.

The arm's length principle was established in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s as part of the state cultural policy, under inspiration from Arts Council England. In 1980, the arm's length distance also became the basis for public cultural policy in Iceland and Åland, and in the 1990s in the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and the Sami cultural co-operation (Duelund 2003.)

The significant difference between the Nordic variant of the arm's length and the British arm's length principle is based on the fact that the UK has neither a Ministry of Culture nor a politically formulated cultural policy. The Nordic countries have, on the contrary, always had relatively strong cultural departments or ministries responsible for a varying degree of targeted cultural policy. State administration of culture in the Nordic countries has in other words been characterised by a special “dual structure”, a combination of departmental governance and relatively powerful arm's-length bodies. This Nordic model is often referred to as the “architect model”, characterised by the fact that cultural policy is an integral part of welfare policy, and therefore encompasses several values or goals in addition to artistic freedom and quality (Myndigheten för Kulturanalys 2021).

Due to the combination of strong cultural ministries and the strong emphasis on artistic autonomy, there has typically been a balancing act between maintaining the arm's length distance and at the same time having the opportunity to make demands towards the production of the arts to promote the positive role of art and culture in the development of welfare societies (Johannisson 2009, Mangset 2009).

This paradox of the arm's length principle emerged as early as the 1970s, when there was a confrontation between the artist's role in the development of the welfare society and the priorities of politicians. This has also meant that an active cultural policy tends to limit the impact of the arm's length principle, which indicates that the arm's length is isolated in an increasingly limited area of the arts funding system.

The relevance of the arm's length principle has been increasingly questioned alongside with the emergence of New Public Management wave since 1980-1990's. This has brought about more demands for performance targets from the public sector – and with it, a political overstepping of the arm's length principle.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE: FIVE CONCLUSIONS FROM A/NORDI/C'S CURATED CONVERSATION

The rise of market forces questions the framework of the arm's length principle in its original construction

The development of a competitive state means that art and culture are assigned with new purposes in society and subject to a new type of international economy with global competition.

New distribution channels and the advent of global digital platform-based content providers have in recent decades also changed the ways in which cultural content is disseminated and consumed. People meet and interact with cultural products in new ways.

It seems that cultural policy has not yet solved, how cultural policies should adapt to these changing production and consumption patterns.

*“We have all been professionalized in the view
of the old days - we still believe that public
funding is the most important, but market forces
are increasingly taking power from politicians.”*

As global market forces and algorithms gain stronger influence both on the production, distribution and access to cultural products and economy, it is relevant to ask how we can move away from the original framework of arm's length and politics to include the position of market mechanisms in a new framework for the arm's length principle. Hereby also working to secure artists a fair remuneration for their work within the different mechanisms.

The role of politicians is important and should be developed

Seeing the arm's length distance as the sole guarantee of artistic freedom and autonomy is not anymore sufficient in current contexts. Recent examples show that artistic work is increasingly affected and steered by economic and social uncertainty and narrow criteria of funding bodies.

While geopolitical tensions and the unstable political environment on the one hand emphasize the importance of preventing any political influence on artistic content, it is highlighted, that the arm's length distance shouldn't prevent politicians from taking a genuine interest in the social and economic conditions of artists, let alone having

“Politicians should be engaged in the cultural sector. I am more worried about having politicians who don’t care about what we do, than risking the arm’s length.”

parliamentary discussions on the value and role of art and culture in society.

Appointing to decision-making is political and calls for transparency

The arm’s length principle often appears more as a rhetorical tool used by politicians in different contexts to strengthen the legitimacy of national cultural policy rather than an absolute principle implemented in practice.

In arts funding the degree of autonomy in the institutional practices is varying. This raises questions about the appropriate boundary between political intervention and artistic autonomy.

The distinction between political and professionally based decisions within the arts funding systems gets blurred in cases where governments appoint their own representatives or politicians to boards. This is also the case when artist’s organisations appoint representatives in boards to promote certain interests.

The matter is even more complicated on regional and local levels, which have specific roles and varying degrees of influence in cultural policy in the Nordic countries. This calls for more transparency in decision-making and in appointing practises.

The strategic role of administrators/civil servants should be recognized and activated

Discussions on arm’s length principle tend to focus on the separation between politicians who lay down the legal frameworks and overall budget, and the administrative bodies that are responsible for implementing policies and making funding decisions.

We do not pay as much attention to the role of cultural administrators who direct the strategic steering of cultural policy. In political processes the administrative bodies are often seen as neutral players executing decisions made by politicians or arm’s length organs.

However, the role of administrators is often much more impactful due to their years-long experience, expertise, and silent knowledge regarding the system. Acknowledging and operationalizing this strategically important role could maybe offer:

- ◇ a pathway to increased reflexivity in the system
- ◇ bridging the growing gap between policy and practice

Expanding the view of institutions as autonomous and independent systems towards stronger flexibility, promoting risk-taking and allowing a higher degree of uncertainty within the funding structures were all highlighted as desired developments in the conversations. Thus, investments in reskilling and capacity-building training of civil service with a focus on experimentation, governance innovation and agile leadership could be a way forward in developing a more flexible and agile arm's length principle.

A shared knowledge ground in the Nordic region could gain future development of state administration systems

Even though the arm's length principle is considered as a common characteristic across the Nordic region, there are significant differences between countries, especially when it comes to the degree of autonomy delegated to the arts funding bodies. Some bodies or councils have primarily been delegated responsibility for administering statutory funding pools designed and controlled by political authorities, while others have some discretionary funds – although still based on legislation and the annual budget allocations.

Even the term itself seems to enjoy a varying degree of awareness in the different Nordic countries. For example, in Sweden and Denmark the arm's length principle is quite actively discussed in public debates, while in Finland the concept is rarely unknown for the broader field of arts and culture.

“The arm's length principle is rarely used in discussions regarding arts and cultural policy in Finland. We even lack a proper translation of the word.”

The lack of shared knowledge about the different Nordic variations makes it difficult to identify relevant topics and points of contact for development and discussion. Therefore, sharing and learning from these different experiences and institutional practices would be fruitful for future development of state administration systems.

ARTISTIC QUALITY

BACKGROUND: PAST AND PRESENT

The concept of ‘artistic quality’ has become ubiquitous in recent decades, both applied as an ideal in arts education and as a gatekeeper for financial support, as well as an important cultural policy goal. The possibility of carrying out professional assessment of quality in public cultural institutions and arm’s length organisations has traditionally helped to define and ensure the sector’s autonomy and its independence of political and other interests. In institutional contexts, quality has often been seen as a counterweight to purely commercial considerations and instrumental rationales, and as an important part of the argument for the intrinsic value of art.

In an anthology on concepts of quality published by Arts Council Norway (2016) it is pointed out how quality always denotes a relationship – a particular kind of value that is set to create implicitly and explicitly articulated measurements. In other words, quality becomes visible only in relation to the contexts in which it is embedded. In his contribution to this anthology, Frederik Tygstrup points out how modern cultural policy has typically manoeuvred between two different and partly interconnected forms of recognition of quality: market recognition and peer recognition. The former defines quality on the basis of market success, while the latter has been based on the cultural elite’s community of taste and on social distinction.

This understanding of quality has also been central to the educational culture and cultural policy of the welfare state. On the one hand it has been about promoting quality through various forms of arts and cultural support administered by arm’s length bodies. On the other hand it has been about communicating this quality to a wide audience. Research indicates that both of the above-described infrastructures are changing. This is not least as a result of digitisation, the introduction of neo-liberal thinking into cultural policy, and the pluralisation and fragmentation of cultural life and Nordic societies.

a/nordi/c’s own research and insights within the area, point strongly to a changing concept of quality, interweaving with a more diverse set of parameters pertaining to artistic practice. Critical attention has for example been paid to, how quality assessments in arts education and funding bodies continue to be based on a dichotomous distinction between artistic quality and secondary non-artistic qualities and competencies, even though the perception of the artist as a creator of autonomous artworks no longer seems to correspond to the realities of working in today’s art world.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE REGARDING THE NOTION OF ARTISTIC QUALITY: THREE CONCLUSIONS FROM A/NORDI/C'S CURATED CONVERSATION

Reject the universal notion of quality and replace it with a more reflexive view

One of the main dilemmas regarding the use and notion of artistic quality is connected to the culturally and socially constructed ideal of the term. The understanding of quality has traditionally been reflecting majority's experiences and westernized perspectives and professional traditions. This has led to excluding alternative practices and forms of expressions. For instance, Sápmi interdisciplinary and holistic art practices have had difficulties in achieving status, recognition, and relevance in the national support systems.

Many discussions at the meeting highlighted the need for a more holistic approach to professionalism in the arts, and an expanded understanding of the increasingly diverse roles and values of art and artists in society. The understanding of artistic quality in institutional contexts was perceived as being too narrow and too vague in today's cultural landscape.

“What happens, when we do not only assess the artist and the artistic proposals, but start thinking about the framework of cultural policy as co-producing?”

How can we attentively analyze our habit of excluding and separating when it comes to judging artistic quality? What kind of qualities can be recognized, and which artists can then be included in our historical present?”

We need to reject the universal notion of quality and replace it with a more reflexive view, where qualities, value, and excellence can be understood from multiple and different perspectives. We need to ask what artistic quality be in an environment that pays attention to plurality and interdependency between people and infrastructures instead of rationales of distinction and even isolation.

The difficulty and necessity of representation

The notion of representation in decision committees and arts institutions, and their connections to the definition and understanding of quality was addressed widely at the meeting. A better representation combined with a broader public arts debate about

“Representation comes in very late in the process. We only look at it when we have the artist. We need also to look at education and who gets into the schools.”

“Is peer review the right way to judge quality? Is the artist the only expert on art? And how can we understand quality in relation to what we don’t know?”

the implications of quality is important in expanding the notion and understanding of quality and for creating more equal premises for artistic practice, freedom and visibility.

However, the broader diversity in the compilation of selection committees will not alone solve the problem. Wider shifts will also require bringing a stronger awareness of the historical and cultural particularity of the discourses supporting artistic practices and the notion of quality to different parts of the arts system, starting from arts education.

Last but not least, as representation and quality paradoxically can ultimately only relate to things that already exist or are acknowledged, we need to develop more open working models and approaches that would make it possible to anticipate and practice curiosity towards things that are unknown.

Expand the notion authorship and artistic practises in society

Challenging the concept of quality seems to hinge ultimately on fundamental questions about art and authorship: who can create art? (and for whom?), how art is created? and who belongs in art?

Quality assessments have traditionally been presuming an individual artistic practice and a clear division between artist and their artworks. An increased focus on collective and participatory practices and citizen involvement (“participatory art”, “community art”, “dialogical art”, “artistic citizenship”, etc.), has actualised a need to shift the focus from works of art to also include the cultural and social practices that unfold around the individual cultural products.

The same tendency is seen within ecological art practices where non-human players are invited in as active agents in the creative process. In these contexts, the creative potential and creative skills do not belong solely to the individual artists. The intention is rather to shift artistic practice away from the safe confines of institutions and bring it into interaction with different social contexts in an increasingly turbulent and complex reality. Here, artistic quality is less about how good the individual artworks are, and more about art’s possibilities to manoeuvre in the society of which it is a part of.

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