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Viewing a Crash Site or Jumping the Broom

Artists are facilitators of change who seek strategies to influence society through art, arouse individuals to be active and capable of taking a stand, of making a difference. Art nourishes imagined futurities. Given the current situation for culture and art in Europe, the concept of art is changing.

In the wake of the rapidly shifting political situation, the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and now in Israel, we can identify the rise of fear and discomfort. Uncertainty is everywhere, triggered by confusion, terror, and various crisis. This in turn trigger a change in the understanding of common welfare as a key for access and inclusion. Access to art and our sense of cultural belonging are highly influenced by these factors, as is freedom of speech. To whom are we listening? With whom are we talking? What language are we using?

The concept of language is manifested in words. Beyond what is said there is nothing. Or is there? Words are used to manifest power. We live in a society where words are the given, where words legitimize our actions, and we simply must use them to reveal the hidden stories that otherwise risk drowning in nationalist, populist, and reactionary political ideologies.

You observe and read your surroundings, shifts in the terrain or in events, and you respond with movement. You hear and react by moving. The body expresses experiences through movement. Attentiveness to movement is a prerequisite for the development of our linguistic abilities. You have to both look and listen. Listening is an exercise in sensitivity, also to what the body expresses beyond words, complementary to words or instead of words. And you must think. Thoughts give the

appearance of some kind of control of the mind, of that which is required to avoid collapse, chaos, insanity. The body as the thoughts abode.

Art relies on a broad definition of the concepts of language, identity, and culture. It constitutes a field in which our need for both emotional and intellectual stimulus can be given a free rein. A way of re-thinking the present. Artistic work can push us towards a widening of cultural norms and the formal set of rules employed in our society. We all know that humans become humans by being with other humans. We depend on meeting to formulate our perceptions and give shape to our thoughts. Art as a meeting place. Politics shapes the conditions. Today's political development towards a right-wing populism, counteracts innovative arts and its potential power.

To put up a fight, we must be able to talk about culture as our common foundation and about art as a notion in our culture, just as we must master a variety of narratives. This can only be done by a search for common values, a widened dialogue and knowledge transfer. How we express ourselves matters. Politicians often refer to the art as a field dependent on subsidies and thus to circle a consuming area. This distorts people's image of art. Instead of considering art as dross, we should focus on a beautiful, philosophical, intellectual, and physical sharp formulation of what otherwise would not be said, what would otherwise be kept hidden. We must assume the right of interpretation and responsibility over issues for which art may hold the answer.

Objects are moved around their translations, transposed into transgressing boundaries. To develop the knowledge needed for relevant artistic activity, artists build networks and fora where we can share, provoke, stimulate, and perform. In different corners of Europe there are examples of fora aiming at offering artists a chance to develop and enable art that is topical, engaging, and reflective. New models for organizing, producing, and presenting create new markets. This in turn is linked to the type of trail-blazing activism that pioneers a disruptive approach, using the creative power of art to explore paths towards norm critical innovation, a practice of change.

The climate crisis has actualized the issues of sustainability that currently dominate Europe's contemporary art scene along with the exploration of interactive formats. Artists stage cities and public environments together with their inhabitants. Activist networks engage people in artistic actions to influence politics. Documentary projects are developed around socio-political issues. New meeting places are created. Artists pave the way.

There is a talk about institutional crisis. Many arts institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to attract people to fill their salons. Many artists do not want, or do not get the opportunity to, produce for the big stage and all that is required to keep a thousand people paying attention from a great distance. Instead, more and more are choosing small-scale productions with close contact and/or interaction with the audience. What does this do to the notion of art?

According to the latest Freemuse reports, the violation of artistic freedom continues – also in Europe. We know of cases for example in Poland, Hungary, Croatia and Turkey but also documented violations in France, UK and Spain. What does this do to our view on the arts?

Another trend is artists forming organisations and fora to jointly learn and create. These fora have a decisive role in society but are rarely noticed in a political-cultural context. Artists develop knowledge and methods that open-mindedly bring all of us forward, push the development and nourish hope. We use our experience on uncertainty as a distortion of reality and we address uncertainty as a falsity, a state that hinders us from embracing beautiful moments of serendipity. Art stimulates to new insights that make us capable of dealing with all this fuzziness we cannot escape. Artists are facilitators of change. The innovative power of artists should never be underestimated.

So, how can we avoid getting stuck in comfort and adaptation to non-functional systems? How can we act to find alternatives that support the needs of those who are investigative, experimenting and innovating?

We must challenge the status quo. We must practice thinking, questioning, and rephrasing the commonplace with integrity and individuality. We must work to bring spatial as well as conceptual sites into dialogue with the contemporary, to seek enhanced living in movement. That is how our attention is sharpened. That is how alternative expressions are created. That is how systems are changed.

All of this takes a measure of individual and institutional disobedience. To do this, you must keep in shape and be on the move, physically and intellectually. That is how we can stimulate ourselves to insights that make us capable of dealing with the inescapable uncertainty of the future. Attentiveness to movement is a prerequisite for the development of our abilities. We have to both think, talk, act, and enjoy. We live and work in a context, in a reality we can influence with what we do and say, how we live and act. We are all active in the creation of our futures, of futurities to be approached as consequences of practice. So - are we viewing a crash site or working to jump the broom?

I finish by a quote from Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the rights to freedom of opinion and expression:

“Without freedom to create, we cannot ensure that diverse expressions are heard, seen, enjoyed, and appreciated by all. Creativity nurtures diversity. It is the essence of freedom, not only of the individual but also of democratic, inclusive societies.”