

February 2012

Thoughts on Cultural Policy

Or

The Art of Going Forward Without Going Past

Un-necessities spread out amongst all the worry and the glitter blinds you. With all the sparkle you become myopic and your existence narrows down to trifles. It's easy to lose yourself in all that is for sale.

We live in a benevolent welfare state that has fallen on hard times. Europe in a financial crisis. In Sweden we are still well off, while large portions of the European population is on the dole, without proper education or in a cultural void. Our cultural policy is in a state of vacuum, with a fuzzy leadership, whose actions are based on a materialistic view, where art is seen as goods and products, and the artist is steered toward usefulness and adaptation to the "creative industry". The dominating political philosophy puts art into the "icing-on-the-cake" box. Is this what we want?

Culture is what we live, the common foundation of our society, our societal contract. Buy more and you will become happy, particularly if you are (or want to be) young, slim and good-looking. Maybe "fit". Crappy norms touted as truths. How do we develop cultural ideals? I understand the forces of the market economy and its guiding mechanisms, but I cannot accept that financial policy is the ultimate ruler. I want to turn the political hierarchy upside down and work for a strong cultural policy integrated into all political areas. I want to see a policy that doesn't just put survival and material wellbeing in focus, but has a good cultural climate as its ultimate goal, not least for a long-term sustainable development. A decent, humane attitude to people with plenty of room for

curiosity, creativity and development makes it possible to support other market forces than those that blind you.

We live in need of change, in need of hope and belief in the future based on curiosity and respect for who we are, whom we will be or long to be. It takes a policy that doesn't just set goals that draw up wide cultural perspectives sprinkled with pastel coloured candy to make art a natural part of the good society. There must also be accessibility to art, credibility and a belief in art as just art. Art must be an integral part of our cultural consciousness at all levels, a force for good and a strong field of knowledge. Artistic expression questions and queries the current state of affairs in a way that generates new thoughts and a creativity that leads to new insights about that which would otherwise remain hidden.

Are you curious? If so, you are one of many who want to go further and know more, one who is triggered and challenged. Without curiosity we die. We die anyway, of course, but we die alive. Losing one's curiosity and attention is to stop living. Sensitivity and a keen ear come from curiosity. And faith. One who starves or freezes, one who is humiliated or locked-up, doesn't stand much of a chance. But the rest of us? Sometimes it is as if reality is just a scream in your ear. It screams, it roars and thunders away without mercy. All the muck just invades your most vulnerable orifices.

The political game played with our lives is for high stakes. Both investments and cut-downs in our cultural wellbeing involve risk when made without a clearly stated goal. What we conceive as arbitrary makes for divisiveness and uncertainty. Uncertainty is dangerous. When we are scared, we easily make mistakes. There's that scream in my ear. What makes us capable of walking past a beggar, a homeless person sleeping on a heap of rubbish, looking at you with

lonely eyes or with hardened eyes that have lost their curiosity? If we want a society with creative, innovative, strong citizens able to apply and utilize their creativity, that demands, besides curiosity, also a belief in our common commitments. It further demands a political leadership that shows possibilities and disarms that which is counter to progress. Life is not self-generating.

An active, radical cultural policy promotes art and makes it accessible as something indispensable to stimulate curiosity and attention, for wellbeing, for the development of culture and society. It welcomes questioning and provocation. It makes it possible to live with the knowledge that we do not know what will come, but we are prepared. Knowledgeable politicians understand and appreciate how art promotes good values in human communication and therefore stay at arm's length from meddling in content, purpose and meaning. They are able to see art as part of society's survival strategy. But where are they? Has anyone seen such a politician in the Swedish landscape?

It is not good enough to focus on policies of grants and money handouts. Development doesn't always translate into national currency or euros. A good strategy for cultural policy must translate into actions as an expression of the mature view of knowledge that means seeing the value of building culture together, seeing the value in everything from cooking, study circles, football and handicraft to the most advanced and experimental in the ground-breaking art-world. Systems for funding can then be reformed in relation to the conclusions drawn from such a policy. It is not enough to focus everything on creative industry and the "adventures and thrills business". The EU Green Paper about creative industry is widely used in political circles as the proof that art is a factor for economic development. Conference after conference is organized for politicians, researchers, industry representatives and think tanks to talk about art and the role of the artist to raise the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). Those who

take the floor rarely talk about the importance of art as art. There is hardly an artist among the speakers.

I am an artist and look upon my audience as fellow humans with integrity, individuality and very specific needs, as well as the ability to interact with art in the same way as in other intra-human communication. Creative processes take place in all our lives. We cook, knit, paint, play, solve union problems or engage ourselves in the housing cooperative— everything that builds a cultural foundation. We build houses. We put walls and roofs around our experiences and activities. We build roads for our need to travel, virtually and in real life. We build physical and mental rooms. We acknowledge each other's work, look at it and get inspired, or get disgusted and distance ourselves from it. We help out with the production, with the plans and sketches that are in constant development and change. Anything else would be unthinkable. Some of us specialize in the creative process and become artists with the object of stimulating and influencing others through art.

We all share everyday life and an individual exclusiveness. We know that living comes with a cost. Cultural policy must explain the function of art and its scope in the society. It must promote art as a productive force and a political power. As observant and creative human beings we are needed for the democratic development.

Often the public discourse becomes reduced to bickering and focusing on shortcomings. Why not turn the perspective around and talk about what we would like to accomplish? Why? For whom? How do we make use of the multiculturalism, the complexity and diversity in our new society? How do we balance the national against the global? A discussion of these questions will clarify our needs. It is these needs that must shape the organizational/practical

development of education, research, the labour market and the cultural policy that will give us new interactive forms of work, new spaces for meetings with all sorts of artistic expressions, highly motivated and knowledgeable organizers, committed politicians and an audience full of curiosity and respect.

Many studies underline the importance of art for the development of society: art as art, as a factor for choosing a location, for economic growth, for new forms of work, for the creative industry, etc. Art is also a significant factor in knowledge development with particular emphasis on the ability of man to communicate with his own species. The artistic sphere contributes greatly to the understanding of how creativity works, how creative environments are developed and increased knowledge about the amazing art of mankind. Artists develop art and push it towards a widening of cultural norms and the formal set of rules that are employed in our society,

A good cultural policy provides the tools for a broader understanding of how new vistas are opened up. It enhances our definition of knowledge to include also the bodily/practical experience as forming meaning, faith in other forms of knowledge and thereby a widened definition of language. A good cultural policy creates possibilities for deeper artistic processes with an outlook that places Sweden not only in Europe, but in a global perspective. A policy that creates both understanding and legitimacy for art's specific power to contribute to a good society where we can all live in awareness, creativity and empathy as seeing humans. We can go, without going past. That simply makes it more fun, more interesting and more challenging to live.

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