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Background paper

Why democracy needs the arts and culture

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Historical context

Is democracy in retreat? And if so, what should we do about it?¹ We see the rise of authoritarian regimes and the success of populist parties in Europe. There is also a growing inequality and ethnic intolerance—trends that diminish social cohesion and undermine democratic governance.² These recent trends seem to respond to global changes that impact states, regions and even local communities. How can democratic governance be made more resilient? Can the arts and culture help to sustain the spirit of democracy and possibly to expand its scope and workings by harnessing digital technology?

In order to understand these questions better, we have to see current developments in a broader historical context of modernity. They manifest its ongoing transformations, namely changes in its three institutional pillars—market economy, democratic governance, and the public sphere.³ Based on beliefs in progress, individualism, freedom and equality, these modern inventions started to undergo transformations decades ago. The end of the Cold War and the fall of Communism ushered the triumphalism of the West and the massive advances in the neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatisation. These policies unleashed the forces of global capital, empowering the private sector and supranational corporations. As a result, globalisation has brought about the weakening of the autonomy of the nation-state. Global modernisation has also resulted in increasing inequality and accelerated climate change, the depletion of natural resources, and the massive extinction of species.

While deregulation and privatisation diminished the public sphere, the Internet and digitisation have created a new virtual public space and empowered individuals to produce and distribute their work without traditional gatekeepers. People have seen digital technology as powerful tools of democratisation. This idea seemed to be confirmed by the role of social media and mobile communications played in the Arab Spring. However, the subsequent suppression of the democratic advances in the Arab countries demonstrated that the traditional power structures wouldn't give up easily. Edward Snowden's and other whistle blowers' revelations of unprecedented government surveillance suggest that digitisation can also serve efforts that run counter to democracy.

The changing position of the arts and culture

What role could or should the arts and culture play in facing the present challenges to democracy? For the pre-1989, i.e. mostly pre-digital age, Central and Eastern European countries provide inspiring examples. Artists were in the forefront of the democratisation process that culminated in the fall of the Communist regime. The life of the playwright Václav Havel and the story of the civic initiative Charter 77 are cases in point. But it was not only artists' opposition to and an explicit critique of the authoritarian system that was important. Art practices and works of art were also instrumental in conserving and transmitting the ethos of democracy and the spirit of freedom. They thus safeguarded the continuity of polity against the totalising ideology that occupied the public sphere. They also created an imaginary space that enabled people to participate in constructing their self-image. Like in other historical periods, the arts reproduced cultural codes and also modified and updated them, i.e. created new ones. In other words, the arts served two basic social functions, social production and reproduction.

This generalisation doesn't do art justice as it does not explain how art enriches our lives in many different ways: art helps us to understand the world. It is universal in the manner it captures the human condition and connects ideas to feelings and emotions. It creates order out of chaos, it gives a new meaning to our experience, it reaches beyond instrumental and material. It opens new perspectives, it questions prejudices and preconceptions, it transcends the mundane, it challenges conformity and complacency, it allows for diversity and multiple views, it resists stereotyping and homogenising. It expresses ideals and wishes as well as sorrows and pain, it is both therapeutic and transformative, it regenerates. It engages senses and mind, it advances creativity and boosts the development of the whole personality. It shapes identity of places and people, it fosters empathy, it makes us feel at home in the world by connecting us to other human beings and the rest of the world.⁴

The benefits that art brings make us fuller human beings—more active and engaged—and, consequently, better citizens. The latest research shows that people who participate in cultural life are also more active citizens.⁵ Similarly, some studies demonstrate the benefits art delivers to education.⁶ And the role of education in sustaining democracy is critical, as the American philosopher and educator John Dewey pointed out in his book *Democracy and Education* as early as 1916.

However, the position of the arts, culture, and education in modern society have been changing, reflecting socio-political developments. In the 1970s, the sociologist Daniel Bell claimed that modernist culture was the most dynamic component of civilisations thanks to its impulse towards the new.⁷ That might have been the case until postmodernism brought a sceptical view of the central ideas of modernism such as originality, innovation, and progress in the late 1970s and 1980s.⁸ The arts and culture subsequently lost their exclusive position in society as described by Bell. Technology, especially digital technology, became the driver of change instead. The mass marketing of the personal computer (1977-1978) and the development of the Internet in the 1980s accelerated the stream of innovations and revolutionised scientific research.

The spread of postmodernism coincided with the rise of neoliberalism in the last decade of the Cold War. Both trends shared the emphasis on individualism at the expense of the community. There is also a certain parallel between the negative view of the state and its regulatory role held by neoliberalism and the rejection of grand narratives by postmodernism.

In his book *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, Michael Sandel pointed out that the neoliberal rule of economic reason became disconnected from its origins in moral and political philosophy. He argued that market values have harmful effects when they expand into spheres of life where they don't belong, notably to the public sphere.⁹ This development corrupts the values upon which modern society is based, and thus may undermine foundations of modernity as we have known them.¹⁰

Crosscurrents of global art

The development of contemporary art has been part of the general socioeconomic trajectory guided by neoliberal philosophy and led by the Ronald Reagan administration (1981-1989) and the Margaret Thatcher government (1979-1990). The 1980s did see art

being turned primarily into a commodity and entertainment dominated by the market and its cycle boom and bust. New York took a lead in this development and other economic centres soon followed suit: art became part of the global economy. Art practices have been supported by the market throughout modernity. But the totalising effect of the economisation of the arts and culture is a recent phenomenon that reaches far beyond the expansion of the art market.

Arts and culture have been instrumentalised as a branding tool in the competition of cities and regions for global capital. The result has been the proliferation of biennales of art, arts festivals and new centres of contemporary art all over the world, advancing the globalisation of contemporary art.¹¹ The emergence of cultural and creative industries that seek to harness new market opportunities created by digitisation is another significant manifestation of the monetization of the arts and culture. The concepts such as creative class and smart cities belong to the same trend of the commodification of innovation and creativity.¹²

This instrumentalisation of arts and culture takes them out of the public sphere where we need them to do their work. It strips them of their non-material and non-instrumental nature that makes them unique and irreplaceable. It is mainly in the public sphere they can do their subtle work to bring about the sensitivities and capacities we will need to democratise new spaces in the future.¹³

In recent years, grassroots trends have emerged that counter the commodification and monetisation of art while responding to today's civilisational challenges. Called commonly art activism, this movement originated primarily as a response to the world financial crisis. Its roots, however, go back to various traditions of political art as well as to the alter-globalisation movements of the early 1990s.¹⁴ A key moment in the spread of art activism was the Occupy movement in which artists played a leading role. Artists-turned-activists often employ participatory and community-based practices, though their topics vary widely from ecology, education, public space to media, labour, housing, and human rights. However, these practices also run the risk of instrumentalisation by focusing on tactical elements and practical goals, and thus possibly prevent art being seen for what it is.

As the main driver of civilisational change, digitisation is bringing about contradictory trends and impulses. There is the concentration of power on the one hand and economic and political decentralisation on the other. Transparency, openness, and sharing versus surveillance, control, and withholding is another example.¹⁵ Such contradictions relate directly to the underpinnings of democracy and demand our attention and civic engagement. The ever faster development of technology, however, leaves less and less time for critical reflection. Though artists are grappling with the speed of change like everybody else, they deal with digitisation in a non-instrumental way, reflecting on its social, cultural, and aesthetic implications, and contribute thus to its acculturation.¹⁶

Conclusions, questions, and recommendations: why democracy needs the arts and culture

Our future very much depends on how we (the world community in general and the people of Europe in particular) will tackle the unprecedented number of challenges. They are ecological (climate change, the depletion of resources, a mass extinction of species),

social (the increasing inequality), and economic (the fragile world financial system)—to name just a few. Our track record in addressing them is not good. Our leaders and institutions appear to be ill-equipped to deal with the most pressing global challenges because of particular interests that make global governance institutions weak. There is a mismatch between the fragmentation of specialised institutions and the interconnectedness and complexity of today's world.¹⁷

The arts and culture have a direct bearing on our capacity to face today's complex issues and bring multiple benefits to the well-being of democracy. Art safeguards a long-term view: not only does it provide a counterweight to the fast evolving world of technology, but also helps to make sense of it. Art invites participation and so surpasses the division between observing and doing. Art inspires transdisciplinary collaborations as it transgresses boundaries of specialised disciplines more easily than other human activities. Art is the agency of imagination and creativity, capacities that are crucial in its impact on the individual and the community.

By correlating the challenges that we face with the benefits that the arts and culture provide, the following questions, issues, and suggestions emerge.

1. How to foster endeavours that contribute to **restoring the standing of the public sphere**? How to **encourage sharing and cooperation over competition**? **Participatory art practices** that bridge the gap between creators and consumers are one example of such an effort, the **peer to peer (P2P) production and distribution** are another. The field of digital technology, in which P2P originated, provides new tools for civic participation and strengthening the public sphere. How can this development be further promoted and protected by **incentives** and an **appropriate legal framework**?
2. How to **support artists who explore and question the impact of new technologies**, and thus help balance technological innovation with its acculturation and critical reflection?
3. How to **support grass-root activities that tackle both local and global issues**, reaching across different disciplines and institutions? How to **encourage the creation of new alliances within and across different fields by sharing ideas and resources**? Art enables transdisciplinary approaches that connect art with science and technology. It also helps to situate them in public space by bringing out their public dimension in a symbolic and reflexive way.
4. How to **create procedures and mechanisms that would provide positive feedback loops between grass-roots initiatives and government policies**, between bottom-up and top-down approaches? Artists and cultural institutions can act in multiple roles as catalysts, mediators, facilitators, and designers in developing such loops.
5. How to **harness the synergy between the arts and education at government and grass-roots levels** in emphasising imagination, critical thinking and problem solving? Education is critical for the long-term

sustainability of democracy and the arts play a pivotal role in cultivating these capacities.

6. How can we **open and sustain new spaces in which innovation and creativity, art and culture are not commodity—in which we relate to them not as consumers, but as citizens and human beings?** Can art help culture to innovate in ways that are not commodifications? Only then art can become a leader of culture again—a source of future sensibilities and capacities for wholeness.¹⁸

Digitisation redefines the way we live, and indeed the way we are. It creates unforeseen challenges and opportunities for civic engagement and for the arts, and hence for new collaborations across different organisations, disciplines, and scales. This is an important juncture for the Council of Europe to take a leadership role in reinvigorating civic participation when both the ethos of democracy and the unity of Europe are tested.

NOTES

1. See What's gone wrong with democracy and how to revive it (cover story), *The Economist*, 1. 3. 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/essays/21596796-democracy-was-mostsuccessful-political-idea-20th-centurywhy-has-it-run-trouble-and-what-can-bedo>. For a discussion of these questions in the context of contemporary art, see Anděl, Jaroslav, ed. (2014), *Modes of Democracy*, exhibition catalogue, DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague.
2. For a comparative assessment of global political rights and civil liberties, see https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world#.VaUuq_lvDVI.
3. Taylor, Charles (2003), *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC. Taylor, Charles (2004), On Social Imaginary, <http://web.archive.org/web/20041019043656/http://www.nyu.edu/classes/calhoun/Theory/Taylor-on-si.htm>. For additional discussion in relation to contemporary art, see Anděl, Jaroslav (2012), *Cartographies of Hope: Change Narratives*, exhibition catalogue, Dox Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague.
4. For thoughtful reflections on the benefits of art, see Tusa, John (2000), *Art Matters: Reflecting on Culture*, Methuen, London. The paragraph summarizes Tusa's findings and adds several additional benefits to the list.
5. See the Interim Report by the Hertie School of Governance, document CDCPP (2015) 7 add.
6. Winner, Ellen; Vincent-Lancrin, Stéphan; and Goldstein, Thalia (2013), *Art for Art's Sake? The Impact of Arts Education*, OECD, <http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/arts.htm>. For additional discussion, see Winner, Ellen & Vincent-Lancrin, Stéphan, (2013), *The Impact of Arts Education*, in: E. Liebau, E. Wagner & M. Wyman, eds., *International Yearbook for Research in Arts Education*, Vol 1: 71-78.
7. Bell, Daniel (1972), Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 6, No. 1/2, Special Double Issue: Capitalism, Culture, and Education, Jan. - Apr., 1972: 11-38, University of Illinois Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3331409>. Bell, Daniel (1976), *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Books, New York.
8. For a representative presentation of postmodernist ideas, see Lyotard, Jean-Francois (1979), *La Condition postmoderne : Rapport sur le savoir*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris. (In English *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. [Geoffrey Bennington](#) and [Brian Massumi](#), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984.).
9. Sandel, Michael J. (2012), *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.
10. In his Tanner Lectures at Stanford University titled "Modernity and the Rise of the Public Sphere" (1992), Charles Taylor made a similar point when he talked about "the way the development of the market economy and rationalized bureaucracy are at present endangering individualism, consensual politics, and the public sphere." http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/t/Taylor93.pdf.

11. See Hans Belting, Hans; Buddensieg, Andrea; Weibel, Peter (2013), *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe, ZKM, Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe; MIT, Cambridge, Mass. For additional discussion, see Belting, Hans & Buddensieg, Andrea, eds., (2009), *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern. Belting, Hans; Birken, Jakob; Buddensieg, Andrea; Weibel, Peter, eds. (2011), *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern.

12. The concepts of creative class and smart cities are part of a broader trend of place-based practices that have been driving the gentrification of neighbourhoods and entire cities. Their benefit don't usually extend over class lines. Some of the proponents of place-based practices now advance the term "wise city" while arguing for a more democratic engagement.

13. I am indebted to Carly Yuenger for some of the phrases in this paragraph that originated in our discussion and in her response to the first draft of this paper.

14. One of the underpinnings of this trend has been an effort to reconnect ethics and aesthetics, leading to a new interest in the concepts of good and evil, justice and freedom among others. See Anděl, Jaroslav, ed. (2011), *The Lucifer Effect*, exhibition catalog, Dox Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague. Flacke, Monika, ed., (2013), *The Desire for Freedom: Art in Europe since 1945*, 30th Council of Europe exhibition, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Sandstein Verlag, Dresden. Pascal, Gielen & Van Tomme, Niels (2015), *Aesthetic Justice*, Valiz, Amsterdam.

15. For a discussion how these contradictory trends manifest themselves in mass media, see Anděl, Jaroslav, ed. (2014), *The Poster in the Clash of Ideologies*, exhibition catalogue, Dox Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague.

16. There is a need to rethink the allocation of resources that focuses almost exclusively on innovation as commodity. Artists who explore and question the impact of new technologies provide a vital service to society, and should receive support that would reflect the import of their contribution.

17. It is no coincidence that there has been recently a growing interest in the issues of global governance and global constitutionalism among scholars, artists, and activists.

18. See the note 13.