

IN ART WE TRUST

Art, impact & artistic freedom

The American philosopher and political scientist *Marshall Berman* wrote in 1982 that “change is the core of any given society”. That it is the basic element in all cultures, communities and societies. That it is not only the production of goods, services and what we consume that develops and changes, but also the values, traditions and norms we embrace and appreciate.

Among thinkers he was neither the first nor particularly unique; He had borrowed the title of his book - All That Is Solid Melts Into Air - from *Karl Marx*, who wrote “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned” back in 1848. Societies not only create values, but also destroy them. And the good Marx was not the first either. The Greek philosopher *Heraclitus* said: “Panta Rei: You cannot step into the same river twice...”. meaning that everything is constantly changing and transforming.

So what is it, then, that creates change in society? Politics? Technological advances? Social evolution? Class struggle? Reason? Economic growth?

Naturally, it's many things working together, but in the end, real change will not happen without shifts in values and perceptions of reality. Major and groundbreaking societal shifts almost always involve a paradigm shift. And this is where, throughout history, we have seen how cultural expressions and provocations have influenced and shifted our attitudes and values.

Profound ideas like human rights, gender equality, and democracy were all born out of resistance and, with the help of culture, have been ushered into people's value systems. Civil rights, feminism, and climate awareness may have originated in academic or political thought, but they were brought to life in books, films, and music in order to become part of a shared perspective.

Make a film about two cowboys heading out onto the prairie to be silent, weather-beaten, and eat beans by a campfire, and you have made a... pastiche, at best. Add that they are gay, and you have changed the boundaries of what is considered possible or legitimate.

CAN ART PLAY A ROLE IN TRANSFORMATION?

Culture and art has the ability to reach people, provoke emotions and create deep reflections. And this is why artistic projects can be valuable to start the complicated process of behavior change. As a catalyst or to present new, untested perspectives and ways of looking at things.

Art and culture CAN play an important role in transformation but it is of utmost importance that this is done with great respect for the artistic freedom, the cultural sectors specific logic and driving forces. In a process where we - as funders and/or intermediaries - engage cultural creatives it is essential to understand and respect the primary role of art and culture to be able to harvest the outcome without losing the unique character of a cultural expression. It is a question of respect. Both for the artist and the role of free artistic expression as a vital part of democracy.

Art can function as a tool on a meta-level: to reason and test thoughts and ideas, to research and challenge concepts and perspectives, to seek beyond reason and facts, to provoke and stimulate our thoughts and values. We need to trust the intrinsic value of culture. There is really no need to assign it any additional mission to grant culture and art legitimacy. But still we do. For a couple of decades, that added mission has been formulated as “the cultural and creative industries” (in recent years rephrased and softened to “the cultural and creative sectors”). The idea behind this is that the cultural sector is a large industry among others — a sector that generates enormous revenue, is in constant growth, and provides a labor market as traditional jobs become automated or digitised. All of this is in some aspects true, but this is not the point.

NOT AN INDUSTRY

Culture is not an industry. There is for sure an industry surrounding parts of cultural life (especially those parts that focus on entertainment), but culture itself is not an industry or a business. Just as healthcare’s primary purpose is not to create jobs in the pharmaceutical industry, or education’s purpose is not to build profitable school companies, culture’s mission or purpose is not to feed a surrounding industry or to run someone’s commercial or political errands.

Healthcare exists to alleviate suffering, education to develop the human mind, and culture to make our lives rich, enjoyable, complex, and interesting. Culture is a commons. It belongs to all of us. Euros and jobs are merely bonuses.

Today, new and different demands are being placed on culture and its creators. Can culture fill empty shopping malls with activities? Can culture help bridge social inequalities? Can culture teach children to sort their waste? How can culture contribute to the green transition or digitalisation? Can culture foster cohesion, trust, and understanding? Can culture save democracy?

Society faces major challenges and to meet these challenges, everyone must do what they can. Businesses must contribute. Social institutions need to take responsibility. Politicians, of course, and us, as citizens, must act. This applies to cultural creators as well. And art has many tools. The art itself, but also things like material awareness, the DIY culture, local production and circular production, the strengths of small-scale operations, informal learning, self-organisation, the love for the unexpected, diversity, practical skills. The list goes on.

Art, music, dance, and crafts have intrinsic value, and the artists must protect that when they offer their knowledge, experience, and practices to the societal challenges of today.

“Engage artists or work with open artistic processes to generate unexpected results and new perspectives. This requires a willingness to let go of control and embrace what cannot be fully planned in advance. By inviting artistic competence or exploratory approaches into your work, you open up to alternative ways of seeing, thinking, and understanding—perspectives that often go beyond the expected or already established.

Our experience and advice is to consciously step into uncertainty—to allow yourself to move outside your comfort zone. That’s where creativity, innovation, and true transformation can emerge. It takes courage to let go of predefined solutions and instead stay open to what is still unknown. But it is precisely in this space of not-knowing that the potential lies to take your challenge, context, or question to a completely new level—somewhere you couldn’t have predicted from the outset.

In other words: when artistic exploration meets complex societal challenges, something truly new can take shape. But for that to happen, you need to be willing to listen, let go, and step forward with curiosity and bravery. “

ARM'S LENGTH DISTANCE

The concept of "Arm's Length Distance" is central to the relationship between artists, creators, and performers on one side, and political bodies and authorities on the other. The term was coined by the British economist *John Maynard Keynes* when, after World War II, a model was developed in the UK for how the state could support the development of cultural life without influencing its content. It was a time when people had fresh memories of how state demanded ideology plus culture had been a toxic mix, close to pushing humanity's collapse.

A model was created based on the British public service company BBC—state-funded, but with a completely independent board and organisation. Keynes himself became chairman of the first model organisation; the British Arts Council.

The first steps toward the "arm's length principles" were not uncontroversial. The grants that were distributed were heavily London-centric, and favoritism and nepotism were more the rule than the exception. Nevertheless, the idea spread rapidly—first to France, and then to all Western democracies.

A regulated market economy, where the state "intervenes" via monetary policy, taxes, tariffs, and laws to guide society in the direction outlined by democratic elections, is hardly controversial today—at least not on paper. Under the radar, a stream of anti-democratic tendencies is emerging in country after country.

Until now, politics has primarily sought to guide culture in areas such as increasing participation and access to the arts, creating an inclusive cultural life where no group is disadvantaged, and ensuring that all artistic disciplines have space. This kind of cultural policy has generally been designed to protect artistic freedom as much as possible.

But when we seek the power of culture and art to address specific societal issues or to work operationally toward given goals, the question becomes more pressing. Leaving assignments entirely without parameters or frameworks will likely yield weak results and lead to disputes over whether the (limited) public resources were used appropriately. On the other hand, micromanaging the assignment risks neutering the project. The strength of art lies in its ability to push boundaries, explore new territories, and allow us to see through different (and others') perspectives.

Therefore, it is absolutely essential that both commissioners and the creators are aware of the rules of the game, and that these rules are established with artistic freedom as a guiding principle. Here, an important role also exists for an intermediary — in the dialogue and agreement between the local authority and the creators, the intermediary can act as a

representative of the artist's independence and provide commissioner with tools to formulate frameworks and agreements that do not threaten it.

The intermediary's role can also be to support the cultural creatives in gaining insight into the cultural policy landscape, understanding how copyright protection works, and knowing what laws and frameworks apply when undertaking a commission, etc.

To make a collaboration easier, with respect for the importance of artistic freedom, we have put together a list of core principles - a guide if you will, or a starting point for discussion. Because the important thing is to not enter projects and collaborations with the wrong expectations, beliefs and values. If you and your partner from the cultural sector agree on this, you will probably agree on most things.

Advice for Authorities Hiring Artists for Impact Projects

Link to the toolkit in Miro

https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVlr95l1s/?share_link_id=570898401399

1. Respect Artistic Freedom as a Core Principle

- Do not over instrumentalize art for policy goals. Art's power lies in its independence, ambiguity, and freedom to provoke, not in predictable outcomes.
- Avoid over-defining success through narrow KPIs or expected messages. Transformation happens in unexpected ways.

2. Acknowledge the Unique Logic of Culture

- Culture is a commons - not an industry. Do not treat it like a service delivery model or commercial tool.
- Artistic processes are often non-linear, emotional, and experimental — that is their strength, not a weakness.

3. Involve Artists Early and Authentically

- Bring artists into the early planning stages of the project. Let them help shape the goals and formats.
- Let them be a co-thinker, a critic, a mirror, or even a wild card.

4. Create Space for the Unexpected

- Allow for failure, experimentation, and critique - even of the institutions funding the work.
- Embrace the unexpected - be prepared to look beyond your expectations and notions.
- Trust the process. Impact in art can be fast and explosive but also slow-burning and subtle.

5. Protect Copyright and Intellectual Ownership

- Ensure artists retain rights over their work and are given proper credit, even in publicly funded projects.
- Involve the creatives in drafting contracts and agreements. Understanding is crucial, as is the law. Consult with the legal department before signing.
- Avoid clauses that commodify or restrict artistic expression post-project.

6. Pay Artists Fairly and Transparently

- Compensate not just the product (a mural, a show, a workshop) but the time, thinking, and relational labor involved.
- Include budgets for research, community engagement, and the invisible parts of the process.

7. Recognize Art's Meta-Level Power

- Art is not just communication — it is a space for meaning-making, empathy, and uncertainty.
- Do not overload it with assignments. Let it ask the hard questions and dwell in complexity.

And since we are in the mood of giving advice. These are some things creatives should keep in mind before taking on an assignment from an authority to protect, not only their own rights, but the general idea of the Art and Culture as a pillar in Democracy alongside branches like Journalism, Academia or the Civil Sector.

Advice for Artists Entering These Projects

1. **Defend your autonomy:** Politely but firmly define your role and boundaries.
2. **Educate your collaborators on how art “works”** — not just as content, but as a practice, a space, and a method.
3. **Be clear about ownership** and use of your work from the outset.
4. **Build alliances** with other artists to share experience and strengthen your collective position.
5. **Stay open, but stay rooted** in your values and vision — social transformation happens best through authenticity, not appeasement.
6. **Gain process understanding.** Public funds and practice follow certain rules and laws. And they may not be perfect, but they are not negotiable either.
7. **Learn to see the difference** between grants and assignments. And what is expected of you depending on whether it is one or the other.

***“Transformation happens not through control,
but through trust in culture’s unique power
to connect, question, and imagine.”***

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