

ECA annual conference 5-6 November 2010 in Zagreb

Funding principles & criteria and their effect on art

Dear Friends,

Across the cultural spectrum, artistic freedom is under threat. Historically the assault has been linked to moral issues. Lawmakers and self-appointed guardians of morality and taste have used their influence in order to suppress certain ideas in art in order to make the world a better place. Still we know in retrospect that a lot of these condemned ideas have been important for mankind. It is easy to find examples; the liberation of women, human attitudes towards homosexuality, abstraction in art, and so on.

And yet there is a fundamental problem. The artist is unfortunately a human being of flesh and blood who has to eat every day and sleep in a sheltered place. This costs money. Almost every artist is at some stage of her or his career in need of funding. In previous days funding was largely offered by private patrons of the arts. In the democratic era funding is handled by well organized private foundations or by the state itself. In both cases funding is guided by principles set up by the foundations or by authorities. And behind principles there are always values.

Even if there have been attempts by intellectuals to formulate alternatives, the fact is that we live in a world almost completely dominated by market economy. This has been the case since the collapse of socialism in Europe. From the point of view of the artist this is an important fact of life. In concrete words this means that artists in Europe are depending on principles for funding derived from the underlying values of market economy. So let us dive into the theory of market economy and look at what kind of values it is based on.

A statement you often hear is that there actually are no guiding values in market economy – but money itself. Market economy - it is said- is a perfect tool for handling our material needs of goods. Nothing else. This is of course not true. When you give it a closer look, dismantling the system you will find one basic idea so obvious that you perhaps do not recognize it. This value is the idea of “pleasing”. Market economy derives historically from the ancient bazaar-culture. In order to establish yourself on the market you have to please the customer. *Only by pleasing you will sell*, which is what it is all about.

From the artist’s point of view this is interesting because creating art is definitively something more than just pleasing. Art is also about intuition of something that lies deeper than pleasing for the moment. One might say that art when it is at its best has something to do with truth. And truth is unfortunately not always nice to hear, it might be far from pleasing. As I see it this is what create a fundamental conflict between art and market economy.

In many European countries all kind of committee-based reports have been made in order to set principles and criteria for art funding. In Finland one of the key-words for describing the ideal relationship between art and society has been “creative economy”. The attempt is to integrate art in the strive for an even more prosperous future. It sounds perhaps nice, but it isn’t. When you define art as the creative engine in a “pleasing” economy you are actually cutting the branch you are sitting on. The creativity you reach is actually the creativity of the previous generation of artists. Real new creativity needs artistic freedom. It needs the right to make mistakes. Even terrible mistakes. It needs the right to be insane and sometimes even stupid. This is how the creative process works.

Dear Friends,

I hope I have made my point clear. Artistic freedom is not just a romantic concept favored by wine-loving lazy artists. It is a MUST for the painful process of challenging existing values and the attempt of finding new pathways for mankind. The principles set for funding art have to accept this. This does sometimes amount to a certain waste of money. Some

projects funded might come out as dead-ends. Yet this is how it should be. It is the only way to secure real creativity.

Accepting this has severe consequences for the formulation of principles and criteria for funding. Art cannot be classified as "projects" among others. To ask an artist to produce a concrete and definite plan for "the artistic project" is contradictory. The artist cannot know exactly what will come out of his work. There must be space for the unexpected, for artistic freedom. If this is denied by the funding principles, the result will be that art only produces superficial entertainment or meaningless copies of yesterday's creative insights.