



On artists, public debate and cultural spaces

We believe in the critical role of artists and cultural workers in society. Culture can and does tackle difficult social problems, culture brings people together and creates dialogue. Especially where politics have failed to provide alternative solutions. We try to understand the public debate mechanisms at the heart of issues like these, and learn from them. This is of fundamental value for an organization that supports cultural changemakers.

Earlier this year we announced that writer and cultural activist Ahdaf Soueif is one of our 2019 Princess Margriet Award for Culture laureates. This met with a lot of support from people who know Soueif's literary work and societal engagement. But the nomination also angered certain voices in Germany and in the Netherlands. The main reason for this was Soueif's support of a cultural boycott against the state of Israel. Although we recognize the sentiments, we regret the way she was portrayed in certain articles, disqualifying her from the debate. Rather than shying away from the controversy, we think it offers an opportunity for an honest debate.

Stakeholder discussions

We decided to organize two stakeholder discussions to address the underlying questions, in Berlin and in Amsterdam. We invited a dozen artists, academics, cultural workers and representatives of interest groups. The conversations addressed the role of the individual 'activist artist', the mechanisms of the public debate that these artists enter and the responsibilities of cultural institutions such as the ECF. We are very grateful to the attendees who came together and offered their time, thoughtful input and personal perspectives to the issues presented. The followings are some of the outputs from those meetings.

The role of artists

All participants acknowledged that freedom of expression means that artists are free to involve themselves in any cause of their choosing - as long as they respect human rights and the rules of an open, pluralist society. Artists can play an important role, their work can create a space for (controversial) debate.

Furthermore, artists have the right to champion a boycott - as long as it's a means and not an end. It can be a legitimate non-violent measure endorsed by civil society to break through a power imbalance. Sometimes it serves as a last resort, after all other options have been exhausted. Opinions about the effectivity of a cultural boycott differ. It can serve as a last resort to force a dialogue or start a debate. However, boycotts shouldn't result in artists being pressured to distance themselves from their own conscience.

The mechanism of the public debate

Many of the participants voiced concerns about the mechanism of the present day public debate and media. Participants perceived a growing culture of fear, in which fabricated scandals are misused as a strategy. There are ways for artists to take a stand on divisive issues while remaining in dialogue with the opposite side. They should support each other in this. In general, artists speaking out are often associated with everything that comes with it and come under attack - not seldom from both sides at the same time. Social media seem to have enhanced these often destructive mechanisms. Some artists consciously log off from them to protect themselves.

Sometimes, polarization can be necessary to challenge unbalanced power relations. It can have an emancipatory effect. However, where polarization is simplifying differences and controversies, art more often has the opposite effect. It complicates views, is inherently ambiguous and leaves the viewer confused rather than convinced. At the end of the day, most

participants agree that in an open democratic society, it is preferable for people to keep listening to each other - even if they agree to disagree.

The role of cultural foundations

A clear conclusion from the stakeholder debates is that there is a large demand for spaces for open debate and exchange, especially for artists that are in danger. Cultural spaces where participants don't have to choose sides, but can engage in an honest debate.

Cultural institutions, like ECF, have a responsibility in creating these spaces, help bring about a democratic dialogue, and broaden the scope for social possibilities. They should be aware of and reflective on unconscious self-censorship in their decisions. Choices of cultural institutions or figureheads should not be influenced by (fear of) critical media. They should rather try to find support in the media, cultural community and public debate.

Keeping open the space for artists

The discussions in Amsterdam and Berlin showed the relevance and need for our work and values, and that of other cultural foundations. Listening to these stakeholders, their views and concerns, strengthened our belief in the power of culture: that offers a space to meet, discuss and celebrate our differences. We, as a foundation, will continue to stimulate discussion and reflection on these matters.