

The status of artistic freedom

Reflections on World Art Day and the launch of Freemuse's report

We all know the power of free cultural expressions. We know that it broadens our perspectives and allows us to reflect on the world within us and around us. This is of course why art is constantly being made and has been made since the beginning of time. This is also of course why those who wish to control us target the arts the first thing they do.

When we debate this in Sweden, I often hear arguments like we are fighting a silly battle. The examples of politicians wanting to take down a painting because it doesn't appeal to their taste is looked upon as just human errors and a misinterpretation of what you can and cannot do as a public official.

But we have to see it in a much bigger perspective, as we do today listening to the presentation of Freemuse's report. We have too see it in a similar way as how the #metoo movement successfully could describe how all levels are enabling the violations at the top of the pyramid. If we don't react to even the smallest infractions of freedom of expression it will allow the boundaries to move and it will change our societies into more and more oppressive ones.

The global crisis we are now all facing presents a never before seen chance to reflect and think about what kind of world we really want. We see a shift in hierarchies. Suddenly it is clear what kind of jobs are vital and lifesaving. The doctors and nurses and everybody else that is providing safety and basic functions for us are of course amongst those. But as we can see people also become very aware that we cannot live without art and culture. It is not some luxury thing we add like a cherry on the cake if there is any money left in good times.

These are also very dangerous times when governments of all kinds of ideologies are using Corona to stifle our civil rights. Sometimes with good intentions, and sometimes of course with bad. They take the opportunity to inflict restrictions that go far beyond anything that has to do with protecting the lives and health of their citizens.

We have to be fully aware that we have politicians who know exactly what they are doing. We must see through their rhetoric and make them answer to their policies. And for that we need free expressions and a free press.

For a long time now we have seen how the free press are under heavy pressure for economic reasons. There is simply not enough value to be made by doing investigative and complicated news stories when the media companies need klick baits to survive. And we see how public service media are being targeted for ideological reasons by those who claim the private market will secure a fair and balanced media by itself.

Many of us get our information through social media, and we can see how the upholding of laws against hate speech is failing when large companies act with little or none accountability for what is posted. It is also clear that images and texts are being censored for reasons we as citizens don't have any insight to.

We are talking about artistic freedom today, but it all goes hand in hand. As the report shows, restrictions of artistic freedom is always linked to restrictions of free speech and free press, it is always linked to

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suppressing the lgbtq community and to misogyny, always linked to the fear of the other and finding some outer enemy to blame for whatever goes wrong.

We hear about all these examples of censorship and extreme restrictions and consequences for people who go against oppressive authorities. It is heartbreaking and devastating to know people lose their lives and their freedom for speaking their mind or just being who they are.

It is vital that the vast majority of people understand that this is a fight that concerns all of us. We are not just artists that whine about not being able to do whatever we want.

I feel like that woman holding up a sign that says “I can’t believe I still have to protest this shit”.

In order to properly speak up and advocate the right and necessity of artistic freedom (and all that comes with it in terms of other human rights) we need to really fight for it. It is sad to see that it is a global fight, albeit on different levels and under different kinds of oppression.

A reason why it is so extra hard to work strongly together as a global art collective is that we have so many fights to take on an everyday basis.

The corona crisis shows in devastating clearness that artists are constantly living in an economically very challenging infrastructure. The effects are for one thing that the artist organisations are too weak and under staffed to be able to properly find the time or money to build more long lasting bonds of solidarity and knowledge sharing between us across the borders. In democratic countries like Sweden we can work with these questions on a more governmental level, but to be able to support artists in countries with an authoritarian, oppressive, nationalist, populist government it is essential to collaborate with the free art scene and support groups who stand up for democracy and free speech.

What we need is to find many more allies. Politicians and people outside the art scene who speak up for the artists rights and the utter importance of artistic freedom. If we in Sweden want to learn from countries that have experienced a situation of increasing restrictions and talk about what is going on in Hungary for example, we are seen as being too alarmistic. That something like that won’t ever happen in our country.

As one of the world’s most secular countries in the world we don’t think that we will ever criminalise blasphemy and insults to religion or ban something who might hurt someone’s religious feelings. But still we see how artistic expressions are being censored, mostly with other excuses than religious, but still with an exaggerated concern about not offending anyone.

If we look at the status of the artists in our societies we can fit into any kind of image one likes to project on us. We are being seen as anything from an elite who mingles in the fancy art scene and makes millions of dollars from selling diamond plated skulls to the poor starving artist drinking cheap red wine in some small scruffy studio.

No matter where you put us on that scale we are always seen as quite difficult people. Disrupting the status quo and tackling issues people might want to keep hidden. Both as individuals and as a society.

But that is of course what keeps a society prosperous and progressive. To breath new oxygen into public discussions and into people's hearts and minds.

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