

How do you discuss the power of participatory art practices for a society in transition, without getting caught up in typical contrasts such as artistic versus social, public versus private, instrumentalisation versus autonomy?

How do you develop a language that allows artists, social organisations, policy-makers and art organisations to enter into a constructive dialogue?

These were the questions that Dēmos (BE) and CAL-XL (NL) took to the Scheldemond region. Sandra Trienekens and Wouter Hillaert translated the discussion into this manifesto.

ART IN TRANSITION MANIFESTO FOR PARTICIPATORY ART PRACTICES

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Commissioned by: Dēmos & CAL-XL

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1

SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

Is everything about to change? Our West-European society is in a period of transition: that at least is true. Optimists see a shift from a hierarchical to a network society focused on local connections and collaboration. Pessimists see an accelerating polarisation, with impalpable concentrations of power on a global scale. Pragmatists mainly see old wine in new bottles. Where are things heading? Where are we now? Economic growth seems to be over, cities are becoming ever more diverse, social inequality is increasing. Everyone is searching feverishly for new answers. The transition, however, is faltering and sometimes contradicts itself. Robots are replacing people, but how is that affecting the human dimension in, for example, the care sector? Governments are trying to address the economic crisis, but negative representations mean that young people with a background of migration find it harder to find work. The aim of greater participation in society is coupled with severe budget cuts. What does that mean on balance for the relationship between the government, citizens and social organisations, and for the ability to innovate? Urban regeneration results in the relocation of the original inhabitants, although it is their voices that could actually help to shape a worthwhile transition.

At the root of these complex social issues and dilemmas are two deeper knots: the decline in democratic discussion and the inability to think and act in an inclusive way.

1A *Democracy under threat*

'There is no alternative': this seems to be the motto adopted throughout Europe. Thanks to market infiltration into daily life, efficiency interventions in the welfare system and shifting relationships between the government and citizens, society is no longer seen as a fundamentally open project with no fixed outcome, where everyone can contribute their ideas. The policy-makers are at a loss as to what to do: they want to get people more committed to take their fate in their own hands in the 'participation society' (Big Society), but they are coming up against a democratic deficit. There are no truly public debates. Today's society is a complex system of laws, procedures and logic that are understood only by a group of specialists. While their proposals are not called into question, other parties remain on the sidelines as 'laymen' or irrational opponents of social progress. And there is not just one sideline. We have inherited many different sub-areas from the continuous striving for specialisation and economic growth, each with its own 'professionalised' laws and logic. This means that democracy sometimes rather resembles a splintered group

of islands. 'Decomartmentalisation' – the stimulating of intersectoral collaboration – is intended to build bridges but is still faltering, certainly at the level of policy. However it is precisely at those crossroads of networks, where the arts and e.g. education, care or youth work come together, that innovation can happen.

1B *Dealing with difference*

Dealing with difference is an essential component of a constructive dialogue. And it demands more work than ever. Recent policy changes threaten to push the elderly or people with disabilities back into a box. Political incidents such as the attacks on Charlie Hebdo are increasing the pressure on ethnic, cultural and religious relationships in our society. Many of the debates suffer from a limited understanding of the term 'difference'. They reduce people to a single aspect of their identity: retired, the multi-problem family, the Moroccan, the Jew. Some people emphasise the problems; others play down the differences. Policy and practice are finding it difficult to introduce more complex concepts of difference or identity. Target group thinking seems to be deeply embedded in the daily routine of policy-makers, funds, welfare and care organisations. How can 'the open society' truly be achieved?

2

SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Where there are no bridges, the materials to build them need to be

found. One possible approach is to see complex social issues not simply as matters of fact, but also as matters of concern, because people's involvement – be it their care, interest, conviction, indignation – helps to define the debates on, say, poverty or ecology. This involvement is what is needed to enable bridges to be built. It is the cement that allows separate realities to share and re-connect.

To what end? A strong society. A society that enables citizens to carefully reflect on their situation without withdrawing from society or resorting to violence. A society that is not afraid of difference but can use it to its advantage. A society in which citizens recognise their shared socio-economic, ecological or other interests rather than being divided by separate identities. A strong society is formed around places of critical dialogue and the shared acquisition of knowledge, achieved via the collective efforts of a colourful collection of people and (institutional) structures centred around shared matters of concern.

But how do you encourage interconnections between citizens who will not spontaneously seek each other out? Where is the scope for new visions and opportunities for development? That is not easy to achieve. Dynamic networks of citizens, governments, businesses, social organisations and other stakeholders require new relationships between the 'system-world' of government and institutions and the 'life-world' of individual citizens. How can this system-world open itself to a content-driven dialogue with the public? Can today's

citizen-led initiatives engage, and change, the system-world? Who will encourage these worlds to unite their efforts?

3

ART IN TRANSITION

The stimulus could come from many places, but it could certainly come from the arts. An investment in arts and culture is an investment in strengthening society's superstructure and substructure. From connecting socio-cultural initiatives to confrontational art, together they show that a different perspective is always possible.

But what effect will this capacity for change have upon our society itself? Both within and outside of the arts, this question is increasingly being asked. The arts have insufficient connections with the growing ethnic/cultural diversity in the cities. The modernist assertion that 'all art is political' is brushing up against the declining significance that politicians and the media attach to the arts. Artistic expressions that are considered by others within that same field to be high quality are becoming increasingly difficult to disseminate to a wider audience. Furthermore, neo-liberal tendencies such as pernicious competition, blunt management thinking and increased pressure of work seem to short-circuit the artistic domain. How can the arts

support that wholesale transition in society, when they themselves are being limited in their development? The arts world needs to address new 'matters of concern' if it wants to remain one itself. Which artists and artistic practices are able to open the ventilation grille and bring in a breath of fresh air?

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PARTICIPATORY ART

One approach with plenty of potential is the practice of participatory art. This art form is certainly nothing new but has seen an upsurge in recent years in several different areas within the world of art. Participatory art is a form of artistic research, in which artists together with citizens seek the right artistic format that allows alternative voices and interpretations to be heard. The artists understand their artistic work as the driving force behind wider processes, rather than simply as the creation of a preconceived artistic product. Their participatory way of working aims to make mechanisms of power and exclusion transparent, and to make people aware of the real conflicts. They load the 'matters of fact' with 'matters of concern' and create the foundation for vital alliances between different forms of knowledge and expertise. Thus the added value of this participatory art practice is in the creation of new connections.

'But is it still art?' Of course it is. It

certainly possesses all the characteristics of art: craftsmanship, aesthetics, imagination, innovation, to name just a few. Hence there are two consequences. Firstly: like every form of art, participatory art does not serve to solve problems. Excessive instrumentalisation (and economisation) would sound the death knell for this art form. And secondly: participatory art practice is no 'better' or 'worse' than other art forms. Every artistic expression relates to social issues. Every artistic statement can make a social contribution. Only the way in which it contributes differs. Some art forms remain rather abstract and detached; others are more engaged and participatory. There is no need for ranking. Participatory art practices may express themselves differently but they sing from the same hymn sheet.

It is precisely this difference in expression that equips participatory art practices to address the challenges of a society in transition. Because they penetrate more deeply into the social fabric than many other art forms, they are able to bring the system-world and the life-world closer together. This human contact-improvisation aims at 'remediation': a key function in the art of participatory art. Artistic collaboration can provide social, care or welfare organisations with greater insight into the personal experiences of their 'clients' or make governments re-evaluate their fixed approach to refugees or the unemployed. Urban planners can come into contact with the individual stories of otherwise anonymous residents and the poor reputation of a social housing block

can be nuanced among the local community. This is what 'remediation' does: it massages loose deeply ingrained routines. The artists engage with what the participants determine to be urgent matters to address in their life-world. And by making the system-world a mandatory part of this, this world changes automatically, perhaps without it being aware of it. At the same time, participatory art practices challenge all sorts of art conventions. They question dominant interpretations of concepts such as autonomy, engagement, cultural participation and the role of the audience in the arts. This makes it a particularly exciting art form that keeps the arts dynamic.

5

CORE QUALITIES

What precisely are we talking about? It is true that despite the many debates concerning the social importance of art, a lot of things are being lumped together and that lump is all too easily pushed aside. Participatory art practices are neither a *passé-partout*, nor a specific genre in a particular area. They can be found in both the established arts and cultural institutions as well as in socio-cultural work or community art. The art form, genre and artistic discipline may vary, but there are at least four recognisable characteristics that are required for art to be regarded as participatory art, as specified in this manifesto:

One possible approach is to see complex social issues not simply as matters of fact, but also as matters of concern, because people's involvement – be it their care, interest, conviction, indignation – helps to define the debates on, say, poverty or ecology. This involvement is what is needed to enable bridges to be built.

Contextual *artists conduct artistic research into a social (political) issue and engage with a – possibly latent – urgency that citizens indicate they want to get a grip on.*

Artistic *artists retain the artistic direction. They are personally committed and are placing a professional focus on the powers of imagination, collaboration, creation and aesthetics.*

Participatory *the creative process engages citizens and other stakeholders around a social (political) issue and creates scope for (experimental) remediation of existing relations, representations and views.*

Transformative *the intended outcome is a challenging artistic production for a wide audience. Such productions offer critical reflection and form the basis for new perspectives (for action).*

Not every art project that citizens participate in is, by definition, participatory art. Participatory art practices also distinguish themselves from other artistic expressions through the type of artistic research they conduct, i.e. the process.

Processes in participatory art practices are **slow** and take **time** to progress. From a strong **anchorage in the context**, artists identify, explore and differentiate between the different kinds of available expertise. They then create a '**fictitious space**' in which roles and insights can be played with. They offer participants the space – at a safe distance from reality – to explore assumptions and give shape

to new perspectives or identities.

Anyone can get involved in participatory art projects, but the artists retain the **artistic direction and responsibility**. The artists know how to **move with** what the process yields and view their artistic plan solely as an aspiration. At the same time, they willfully **demand independence** in order to let the artistic process thrive. With one foot in the group and one foot outside of it, they maintain a reflective (critical) approach. The artists are both the outboard motor and the captain of this entire process. But you sail together.

Participants are **co-owners or co-authors** in the process. The artists strengthen their input by **questioning** day-to-day practices. What happens? Why? What does it mean for an individual or community? As a result, the **human dimension** becomes visible: 'the story behind the story in the newspaper'. The artists also take **feeling as a compass**. Not addressing participants (solely) on an intellectual level yields deeper insight and it brings a different understanding ('concern') to the forefront than research, statistics or newspaper articles tend to do. Carrying out honest, ethical research enables the artists to rise above exoticism. They are able to **rise above any limitation or stigmatisation**: the practices will not result in putting the participants 'on display' or in putting across simplistic messages.

Unlike many other parts of society, participatory art allows people to be **empowered** in the work of art.

The conversations throughout the process, as well as the end result, allow the **fear of change** to come out. People identify what is happening (with themselves) in current social developments. Allowing them to relive their own story makes them understand that they are the directors of their own lives, that they are always free to make their own choices and do not have to surrender to anonymous developments. In this way, these art practices support **empowerment**. The shared artistic exploration allows people to do things that they would not have done by themselves – a result that care, welfare or other professionals rarely manage to achieve. Yes, art has something to offer that you can't buy anywhere. Just ask teachers, prison wardens or social workers, once an artist has been at work with their group. Their positive surprise at the new, unknown sides of individual group members, revealed in the process, says more than an entire manifesto.

Participatory art practices connect worlds by involving them in the process from the outset. Here, 'artistic autonomy' becomes a distinctive trait that can strengthen reciprocal dialogue. Not only are the citizens who get involved the co-owners, the system-world too becomes involved. Everyone contributes their expertise and soaks up the expertise of the others. The artists are skilled in multi-disciplinary work: not just in the various artistic disciplines but with the various social sectors too, with the system-world and the life-world. In **casting the audience**, the artists also

consider which parties are important to the art project: the communities that the participants belong to, policy-makers in the relevant policy areas, the cultural sector, art-lovers from the city, the system-world and the life-world... Participatory art practices are completed only in contact with a wider audience that becomes part of the result. They are public in every sense of the word.

This elaborate participatory process allows '**meaningful moments**' to emerge, in which participating citizens may increase their understanding of their personal development, their social and physical environment and the public domain. At such moments, a bridge can be built between the system-world and the life-world, as a result of which the system-world can adopt a different approach to the social challenge at hand.

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AREAS OF TENSION

The key question is therefore not whether art can address and contribute to social challenges – scientific research is increasingly providing evidence along these lines – but how and in what circumstances this contribution can make a difference. It is the 'how' in particular that causes tension.

Sense of urgency

There is no real sense of urgency to turn participatory art practices

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into a genuine strength for society's transition. The notion of remediation between the system-world and the life-world, between 'matters of fact' and 'matters of concern', has not yet gathered sufficient momentum in the various social sectors, from care, welfare and social work to the arts themselves. Even though the number of individual participatory art projects has increased, social and cultural organisations remain anchored in traditional perspectives and methods. Many artists are themselves still predominantly focused on the modernistic value system that rates individual self-fulfilment more highly than the philosophy of collectivity behind artistic research in participatory art. There is clearly a double gap. Many sectors have little insight into the arts' capacity for change, while the arts sector itself feels insufficient responsibility for the social challenges that other sectors are combating. The potential bridge that participatory art could build is still undervalued by both sides.

Dealing with (in)dependence

Participatory art practices are at their most powerful when they are allowed to work freely according to personal insight. This autonomy enables them to respond so much better to unforeseen events in the process. However, this ideal often clashes with the system-world's demand for benefit and usefulness. If commissioning parties are finally prepared to let an artist in as 'necessary irritant', will they then expect that every art intervention will remediate? That participants will always start to

act from new perspectives? That all participatory art practices will be sustainable? Do they want to hold participatory art accountable for these outcomes? Art is not going to resolve world poverty. The exact outcome of art projects can never be guaranteed. Therefore – even for participatory art processes – there is a need to identify precisely what (in)dependence entails. In an ideal situation, all the parties involved leave scope for the unexpected and accept failures as an outcome too.

A sector under pressure

How can the arts intensify their connection with society if cuts are being made into both art and related budgets in the meantime? This question applies equally to individual artists, established art institutions and small participatory art organisations. They are all in the same boat. However: how can they sit comfortably in the boat together in times of austerity? In such a way, that they strengthen each other's qualities and do not feel the need to compete with each other? Addressing alternative sources of funding could open up new possibilities. The intersectoral orientation of the participatory practices is a helpful quality in this regard. However, the quest for the right support at the right time is not harmless. Certainly in the Netherlands, the line between a more self-reliant financial position and bowing to a withdrawing government is sometimes extremely thin. Where does financial emancipation end and ideological prostitution begin?

7

VISION FOR 2025

If we are living in a time of transition, we need to dream of a different future. What is the situation we want to see in ten years? By 2025, there will be a thorough understanding of the achievements and aesthetics of participatory art practices. This practice will have obtained an equal place in the art world and will be collaborating with many other areas of society. Commissioning governments and authorities as well as other stakeholders will have a feel for what this practice can contribute and how they can best facilitate it. At the same time, they will accept that the outcome of these practices may also mean that they will need to take a good look at themselves and change accordingly. By 2025, in short, participatory art practices will be seen as a necessary and valued element of a society in transition and will be deployed widely.

8

DIFFERENT ROLES

To bring this vision to fruition requires a collaborative partnership between four parties – each with its own position and responsibility to strengthen participatory art.

■ **Artists**

Ambitious participatory art practices that deliver quality require artists

who work from personal necessity and authenticity. These artists explore new avenues and look for new content and different ways of producing art. They master the core qualities of the participatory art research as described above and are supported in this by their partners. They are agitators: critical of the existing power relations, focused on the creation of new perspectives and connections, and fully aware of the reason why they have chosen a participative approach.

■ **Government**

Ambitious participatory art practices that deliver quality need the support of (supra-)local governments, which recognise and value this art practice along with other public domains such as housing, employment and education... They understand this practice as a valuable art form, also financially speaking. They promote this practice as a source of present-day culture and a 'common good' that unites and enriches people. Governments are aware that they share interests with participatory art. They both protect social values. They are both seeking new answers to current and future challenges. Governments, as part of the system-world, must however allow participatory art to question everyday practices of this system-world: for example it may put the spotlight on excess bureaucracy and management, or on a lack of care for the most vulnerable in society. Do not therefore entangle participatory art in a network of rules, criteria and procedures. Do not shift public functions on to it that governments themselves must provide. Do not sacrifice its autonomy on the altar of excessive

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instrumentalisation. The power of participatory art lies precisely in the free imagination that policies can seldom deliver. Participatory art is also equipped to re-connect the many sectors that are artificially separated by policy. Decompartmentalisation keeps both policy and these sectors vibrant and is better aligned with social reality and complexity.

■ **Care, welfare and other social organisations**

Ambitious participatory art practices that deliver quality require collaboration with care, welfare and other social organisations that keep the finger on the pulse. They identify and ask interesting questions. These organisations make such questions public and accept contradictory responses. For example schools, NGOs, trade unions, housing corporations, health insurance companies... acquire a broad perspective and manifest themselves as builders of a better society. These organisations rely on their established role and longstanding machinery but do not see them as sacred. They are able to question, and if necessary change them. They seek out artists who are active in their areas of expertise and proactively commission participatory art projects based on a profound understanding of their added value. They share with these artists the conviction that artistic experiments can bring change.

■ **Art organisations**

Ambitious participatory art practices that deliver quality require art organisations that perceive themselves as a hinge between artists and society. Large and medium-sized art organ-

isations interpret participatory art practices as a unique opportunity to strengthen both their public support and their engagement with current social challenges. Participatory art offers them insight and expertise in lasting ways of art production, potential new networks and the actual life-world of their urban environment. Walls are broken down, doors opened and bridges built. Art is fanned out over the city, or becomes more deeply anchored. In addition, art organisations that specialise in participatory art are needed. These – often smaller art organisations – receive additional logistical and financial support, space and time from the larger art organisations. Participatory art organisations thus gain in symbolic capital and have access to a wider audience. Both parties therefore have a lot to offer one another. There is however a number of conditions attached to building new bridges. Any support for participatory art from larger art organisations must be given sufficient continuity and priority. Participatory art is not just instrumental for the audience development of such art organisations. The choice to collaborate with participatory art organisations must stem from their artistic heart. It is a choice for innovation in art forms; for a different kind of interaction with the community; for new repertoire and for a diversity of voices within the programming. After all, participatory art practices are not merely a service to the community. They are an innovation for the arts themselves – just as, say, Dadaism or post-modernism once was.

9

STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

Participatory art practices will not turn complex social issues around on their own, but they can make a major contribution. They are fundamentally democratic and build on a methodology that transcends difference: they do not stigmatise, instead they address people on their strengths and equality. They are by nature focused on making connections rather than on polarisation. They therefore prefer to nestle between groups and sectors, between the system-world and the life-world, where they work on building bridges and new perspectives. Occupational therapy? No, working to strengthen democracy. Even if the outcome of that process will always remain uncertain, the social and artistic responses that are expressed through participatory art mark the start of an on-going dialogue. Let that be the primary reason for offering the extra support. Participatory art practices keep society dynamic. And that is a necessity.

Dēmos and CAL-XL are therefore calling on the parties mentioned to form local, lasting strategic alliances that jointly commission participatory art practices. Alliances that investigate how the number and quality of such practices can be increased and the support for them better developed in the years ahead.

Will you join us?



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