

Trouble on the horizon?

Meryem Saadi

Should artist-run initiatives in Sweden be worried by the current socio-political climate and what it means for their public funding? Absolutely. When I moved to the country in 2017, I was struck by the number of exciting artist-run spaces active in urban centres, suburban and rural areas. Coming from the Moroccan art world concentrated in the main cities, where artists can't get direct financial support from the state and where there are more commercial galleries than independent art spaces, Sweden seemed to be a utopian land of infinite possibilities for artists. Compared to most countries, Sweden (and its Nordic neighbours) has indeed a generous cultural policy that has been, since 1974, as important as welfare policies, educational policies and other social planning programmes. There is also the existence of the arm's length principle which ensures that artists who receive public funding can express themselves freely without worrying about the reactions of politicians.

But I quickly became aware that there was lingering anxiety among many artists and curators in Sweden, especially those involved in self-organised initiatives. In 2018, the general elections saw the Swedish Democrats party (SD) become the third political force in the country for the second time consecutively. The conservative views of this nationalist and right-wing party gained even more seats in the parliament than in the 2014 elections. The political landscape and the cultural debates were rapidly changing. Some politicians (not always from SD but mainly from the right) had been publicly challenging the existing cultural policy and questioning the 'value' and 'usefulness' of contemporary art, something that had never happened before. There were cases of municipalities that were even in conflict with the staff of their own konsthalls. In Gästrikland, for example, Gävle Konstcentrum was fighting for its survival after years of drastic cuts in its budget and tensions with the municipality.¹ Växjö Konsthall was also in conflict with its local politicians. Filippa de Vos, the director, declared in the media that she was worried "about this trend in society where politicians want to influence what type of art should be presented – and where it should be presented".² She also referred to the municipality of Sölvesborg, led by SD politicians, who announced in September 2019 to stop supporting "challenging contemporary art" to promote "classical and timeless public art" instead.³ The same month they also decided to stop flying the rainbow flag outside the municipality's building, a decision that some artists saw as a

¹ See <https://www.svt.se/kultur/konst/gavle-konstcentrums-chef-kan-sparkas>

² See <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/smaland/vaxjo-konsthall-annu-i-ovishet>

³ See <https://www.svt.se/kultur/solvesborgs-styrande-rostar-om-kontroversiellt-forslag-pa-kulturomradet>

“violation of the arm-length principle” and politicians from other parties as an “insult to everyone working with LGBTQ issues as well as the whole movement”.⁴

One election later, it is clear that all the concerns that artists and curators had were valid. Today, Sweden is run by a centre-right coalition (between the Moderates, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals), with the support of the Swedish Democrats, the country's second largest political force. In October 2022, the government announced they wanted to develop a cultural canon, a list of the most "valuable" cultural works the country has created over the centuries that should serve as a "common cultural frame of reference".⁵ This announcement sent waves of shock through the cultural field, and many see it as a direct threat to the arm's length principle. Because of the influence of this party, there is also fear that artists whose work reflect Sweden's cultural diversity or deal with LGBTQ+ communities might be excluded. In the case of visual arts, who will decide what works will be included in this canon? The ideological consequences of this canon could be game-changing if some politicians in regions or municipalities decide to use it as a framework to assess which artistic expressions or forms 'deserve' public funding and which do not.

Since artist-run spaces are heavily dependent on grants and subventions distributed by central or local government bodies, their existence would be threatened if the current government decides that public funding for the cultural field should be reduced. On the website of the Moderates, the party who oversees the Ministry of Culture, one can read that they want to review the cultural funding to reduce dependence on grants and thereby reduce political control.⁶ An intriguing formulation that is in total contradiction with what was one of the basic principles of the Swedish cultural policies when it was created in 1974. At that time, the parliament wanted to "combat the negative effects of commercialism in the cultural sector" and stressed that profitability should not be the deciding factor for cultural activities.⁷ The Moderate party has historically been a significant actor in the privatisation of the Swedish public sector, so their position on this topic is not that surprising. But the main issue is that the Moderates are opening a Pandora's box of painful public debates about the 'value' of contemporary art. Looking at the value of art organisations through neo-liberal criteria is not new. In *Agencies of art: a report on the situation of small and medium-sized art centres in Denmark, Norway and Sweden*, curators Nina Möntmann and Jonatan Habib Engqvist wrote already in 2018 that "the normalisation of neoliberal ideology, strategies and

⁴ See <https://www.svt.se/kultur/konstaktion-i-solvesborg> and

<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/blekinge/moderata-prideprofilen-ett-han-mot-hela-rorelsen>

⁵ See <https://www.svt.se/kultur/kulturministern-om-kulturkanon-ska-ena-ett-splittrat-sverige>

⁶ See <https://moderaterna.se/var-politik/kultur/>

⁷ Enquist, Boris, and Lars Olsson. *Cultural Policy in Sweden : An Introduction*. Stockholm: Kulturrådet, 1979.

managerialism has taken over the art field in its entirety, down to the tiniest art initiative".⁸ The current government's position could accelerate this process and make it more common, making it untenable for self-organised initiatives whose practices are experimental or embedded in artistic research.

If there is a silver lining in this situation, it is that many artist-run spaces in Sweden have been thinking about strategies to counter or elude these changes for a while now. During my dissertation fieldwork, where I investigated artist-run initiatives' artistic and curatorial practices in rural Sweden through the lens of productive vulnerability, the topic always came up in conversations.⁹ I had the opportunity to visit Kultivator, Rejmyre Art Lab, Gylleboverket, and Ställbergs Gruva (also known as the Non-Existent Centre). They might have different contexts, practices and interests, still, two things are certain: first, they are all highly aware of the new political landscape's challenges, and second, they have enough resilience, creativity and experience to work around them. Establishing a self-organised artist-run space is never easy – especially in rural or peripheral areas – so many of them have already experienced tensions or disagreements with local politicians. One example is Rejmyre Art Lab's Centre for Peripheral Studies, based in Rejmyre, a small factory town. They were shocked to learn in May 2021 that their municipality was pulling its annual 100.000 SEK contribution to their activities. Officially the reason was that the municipality was in a tough financial situation.¹⁰ However, the following year, the municipality changed its mind and decided to grant them an annual contribution of 200.000 SEK for three years.¹¹ What happened precisely behind the scenes in the municipality is hard to guess. But what is sure is that the determination of Sissi Westerberg and Daniel Peltz (the co-founders of the initiative), as well as their continuous dialogue with some local politicians who believed in the importance of Rejmyre Art Lab, solved the situation.

Artist-run initiatives also discuss questions related to limited financial support or political vulnerability when they meet through the network The Collective Brain ("Den Kollektiva Hjärnan" in Swedish, initiated in 2014 by Art Lab Gnesta), ensuring that they share important knowledge and strategies. Some, like Ställbergs Gruva, also explore the current political climate and position themselves through their artistic production. In 2022, a few weeks before the general elections, they presented *Tal till nationen* ('Speech to the nation' in English), an anti-nationalistic tribute to freedom of expression written by the art group FUL in

⁸ Engqvist, Jonatan Habib, and Nina Möntmann. *Agencies of Art : A Report on the Situation of Small and Medium-Sized Art Centers in Denmark, Norway and Sweden*. Oslo: OK Book, 2018, p.70.

⁹ See <https://www.engagingvulnerability.se/meryem-saadi/>

¹⁰ Johansson, Magnus. "Deras bidrag tas bort - 'Stretat på i över 10 år'", *Folkbladet*, 8 May 2021.

¹¹ Johansson, Magnus. "Efter besvikelsen - de får stöd: 'Betyder jättemycket'", *Folkbladet*, 21 februari 2022.

collaboration with musician Sara Parkman. The performance was a flamboyant and powerful celebration of "freedom of expression and artistic freedom in a time when politicians do not follow arm's length distance and try to stop culture and art that do not follow a nationalist logic".¹² In conclusion, are artist-run initiatives in Sweden anxious? Yes. Do they have valid reasons to be worried? Yes. Are they scared? I don't think so. They are prepared for what the future might hold and are not going down without a fight.

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¹² See <https://fulstaltillnationen.se/>