

Values of culture and creativity

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Short intro

I have been working in several EU-projects, within Creative Europe and its predecessors. Now I am in an Interreg project on ICT and arts, called RegionArts on how to set up regional policies that stimulate the use of art or artists within ICT. And in a project called CreativeFLIP, a pilot project for the European Commission, where I contribute to the development of the model of an ecosystem for financing the Cultural and Creative Sector. In another part of the same CreativeFLIP project the European Creative Hubs Network work at strengthening creative hubs as bottom up networks of artists and creatives. Just to give a short context of my experience.

I will not talk immediately about the high values according to which Europe should behave or on the hope providing values of commons and cocreation of art and culture in the cities and beyond.

I want to look first at some mechanisms I see working when trying to combine high values and working with institutions ruled by regulations, protocols and political (im)balance.

Art vs systems

For example, at the moment I work with a cultural community center in the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands who have artists working with people within the community on health and wellbeing through art. They try to cooperate with the local wellbeing and health institutions.

And they always run into the same kind of problems: some health and wellbeing professionals believe in what they do as an artist-run community center, but the institutions in which these professionals work do not know how to connect with art and the way artists work.

There is a clash between the world of art where intuition, improvisation, taking the time to listen and through slow or participative processes are important and the world of health and wellbeing institutions in the neighbourhood where protocols, evidence-based ways of working and financing rules determine what gets done.

Where artists look at the whole human being and look at somebody's strengths, institutional systems focus on what is wrong and which remedy fits which problem. Where artists look at the community and the network of people, most health and wellbeing institutions only look at the individual and maybe the next of kin.

It is the professional artists versus the professional health or wellbeing worker. Also here is the question how can working with the principles of commons or bottom-up participation and co-creation find a common place with institutional logic and rules?

Where can these professionals from the arts and from health and wellbeing find each other?

Working with the EU

To me it is the same mechanism when thinking about working with the EU on co-creating more inclusive cultural policies in cities. It is a clash between the arts and systems. The EU is known for working slowly (but not in an artists way), trying to keep all the political stakeholders satisfied within a very complicated system of a parliament, a commission, commissioners and a council of ministers. That leads too often to vague compromises and texts.

For the EU to work, it depends so much on people working within the bureaucracy who understand the arts, who are courageous enough to look for experiments and are willing to make a bridge between art and the system. Which is a parallel with the professionals within health and wellbeing who try to make the bridge between art and health and wellbeing.

The system wants control, specified targets, clear paths and work packages etc. That is a complete contrast with working with co-creation and bottom-up, where the results are not known yet and the path to those results will certainly not be a straight line from start to finish. Room is needed for detours and improvisation.

To make it work

What we need to make this work are three things: warriors, bridging people/translators and common values.

1. Common values.

When I look at the people working in Utrecht within the health and wellbeing sector, their values are not really that different from the artists in the community center when it comes to the people in the neighborhood. They want them to be healthy and feeling well within their community. They just do not know the artist way and how to work together, how to cooperate from an institutional logic.

The same applies at the EU: the people working within the department of culture within the EU do want culture and art to play an important role in the lives of people. They are usually intrinsically motivated to do what is good. (At least most of them.)

But they are caught within a system with pressures coming from many sides in which they have to navigate to keep those happy that put on the pressure, to survive.

So let's help them. Let them know you have the same values, but other means to reach those values. And that those means might even be better to reach their goals than through the programs and controls that are already in place. Those people are not the real enemy.

2. Warriors.

This is not an easy process. Pressures from the system will always try to stifle new initiatives that they cannot control, try to put it into a box they already know. We need warriors who keep fighting the boxes and the rules. Warriors who keep shouting the values that we should adhere to those who make up the rules and who stick to them.

3. Bridging people and translators.

Values and warriors are not enough. Of course, we need to keep fighting. But we also need those who are able to translate common values into a working space where institutional logic and co-creation or bottom up working can meet. And find a way to create space for bottom-up working and co-creation. What will this space look like? It will be different every time.

So we need common values, warriors and bridging people. The question is: what will be your role?

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