

M A R E K
K R A J E W S K I

Why

Do We
Need
Cultural
Institutions?

A BROCHURE
to STIMULATE
THE MIND

MAREK KRAJEWSKI

Why Do We Need Cultural Institutions?

TRANSLATED BY SØREN GAUGER

Introduction

JOANNA ORLIK

A BROCHURE
to STIMULATE
THE MIND

Introduction

JOANNA ORLIK

We need to talk about institutions. This may even be an urgent need. In *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, Timothy Snyder makes this appeal: “Defend institutions. It is institutions that help us to preserve decency. They need our help as well. [...] Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one after the other unless each is defended from the beginning. So choose an institution you care about [...] and take its side.”

How do I understand the notion that institutions help us preserve decency?

We know the word “institutionalize.” The associations are less than favourable, right? It brings to mind something that once was free, unimpeded, and flexible, now caged by restrictions; made cumbersome; brought crashing down to earth. But is this not indeed the process of gaining strength? If we

accept that meaning carries weight; that there is a burden to significance, then institutionalization means giving weight to activities that otherwise might not have survived. This makes institutionalization a social decision to let a phenomenon live; to ground it in the world; to ensure its continuity and duration. This brings about a mutual strengthening: society grants a phenomenon significance through its institutionalization, and the strengthened phenomenon begins to affect the society with redoubled force, becoming a point of reference, an azimuth in decision-making, a context for posing questions, and ultimately – a model.

We look at the institution, but the institution also looks at us. And we submit to the power of its gaze, making choices which would be less laudable without this challenging presence. The weight of significance of society's collective wisdom holds us firm, not allowing us to shift under the pressure of our individual doubts. And thus the process continues. Until it is less an institutionalized phenomenon than simply a long-running institution that no longer corresponds to the hopes we invest in it. This occurs when the original significance has faded, and all that remains is an empty scaffolding whose weight has now become unbearable.

How do I understand the idea that we have to “take an institution's side”?

Taking an institution's side means getting to the heart of a phenomenon, reaching the original strength that inspired the institutionalization, seeing what makes up the living core of such unique value that it requires preservation. For the institution is like a cocoon. It protects, but also drops a veil. It forbids entry while facilitating survival and development. It provides time for the transformation from one stage to another to occur.

Taking an institution's side requires two things: realizing that an institution cannot cease to be an institution – that its cocoon; its scaffolding are immanently inscribed in its essence. And realizing why the cocoon and scaffolding were created. What were they meant to protect? And do they do this still?

MAREK
KRAJEWSKI

Why

Do We
Need
Cultural
Institutions?

**WHY SHOULD
WE TALK ABOUT
CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS?**

People are a special kind of animal – they less adapt to the world than adapt to the reality they themselves create. This reality is culture. It is not only beautiful, sublime, and potentially moving, it also makes us the mightiest species on Earth, towering above all others (and often rather too pleased with ourselves). Human power largely comes from the ability to cooperate, sometimes with those we do not know personally; whom we have never seen; those far from us in space or in time.

The vast human networks of cooperation enveloping the entire globe exist through institutions – through fixed methods of getting things done. They seem evident to us, self-imposed, eternal – and for this reason, they influence us; they restrict our freedom to act. These institutions are not just language, religion, law, customs, habits, and normative

systems, but also organizational institutions, such as schools, hospitals, culture centres, and philharmonics.

The basic role of the institution – regulating human behaviour to ensure trust, solidarity, and cooperation – does, of course, have its flip side, the price we must pay to be together. This price is constraint, heeding conventions, and the need to meet others' expectations and to compromise in order to function.

This is the first reason why it is so important and essential that we talk about cultural institutions. The stakes are defining who we want to be, the form to be taken by the community in which we participate, and which is to be the foundation for our mutual relations.

The second reason is the changing status and hazy definition of the roles that cultural institutions can and want to play. The best evidence of this lack of clarity is how our tongue gets tied when we try to describe why cultural institutions are vital. When we attempt to justify their existence (and recently this happens more and more often), we succumb to pathos, or utterly instrumentalize them, or resort to languages alien to institutions – the language of politics or economics, for instance – in which we have trouble finding our feet.

This murkiness when it comes to the contemporary

role of the cultural institution (in spite of the fact that each has its own statute, clearly outlining why it was created) comes from the fact that culture is a sphere of life in which the symptoms of the radical social, technological, and political changes are most evident at present.

This does not happen by accident, for culture is a highly ambivalent part of reality. On the one hand, it is central, for it defines who we are, how we live and think, and what commands our attention; on the other, for many it is dispensable, seen as a frill, a fifth wheel, an excess, and an extravagance.

Because culture seems marginal, it is also the best space for experimentation. It allows us to see tomorrow today. In culture we see most clearly what is coming, it carves out new forms of individual and collective identity.

That is why in culture we most often ask right now: Why do we need institutions? For the time being, just about no one is asking if school is necessary, or if the law or health services are necessary. And if they do, it is in the sphere of culture – as an artist or an animator. Meanwhile, just about everyone asks: Why do we need culture? Why do we need cultural institutions?

The third and final reason why we are speaking about cultural institutions and the roles they should play is the fact that they are also special places of employment. They are special because they offer their employees an amorphous status.

Working in culture is not lucrative, but it helps you find yourself, it gives you the chance to work with what you love, and it is said to give you a sense of purpose. It is not only a profession, it is also a calling. Almost anyone can do this work, but not everyone can do it well – you need to have heart, patience, to find yourself in assisting others and in the conviction that what you are doing matters. Work in cultural institutions often involves a sense of helplessness; powerlessness; always starting over, but just as often, it is a source of satisfaction, joy, and fulfilment.

We cannot forget when we speak of cultural institutions that we are not only talking about abstract organizations, tools of cultural politics, but also about the people who work in them. I get the feeling that when we think about culture, this perspective often eludes us, though it is quite vital, for culture is people – without them, it is no more than a stale prop whose purpose no one recalls. Institutions are for people as well – for those they employ and for those they serve, for whom they operate.

Reflecting on our leading question, “why do we need cultural institutions?”, should not be left up to decision-makers or those who direct cultural institutions. On the contrary – we should all try to respond to it. Only then, joining forces to create cultural institutions together, will we have a sense that they are not external structures offering us something, but extensions of us ourselves, as participants in particular collectives. Only in this way can we make institutions necessary to people once more.

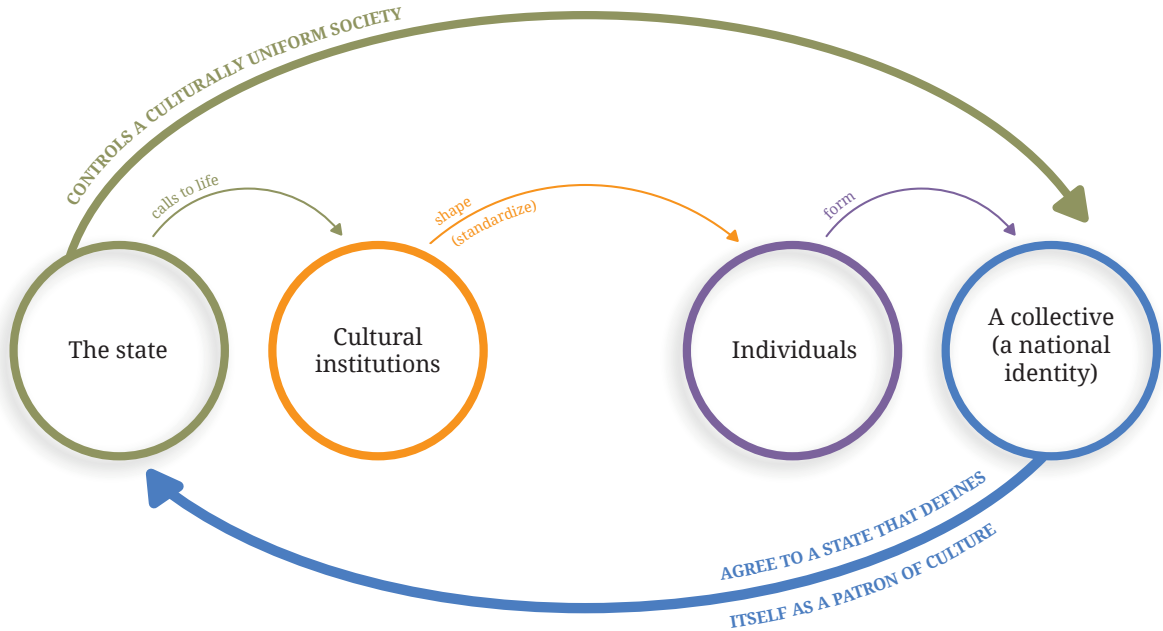
**WHY HAVE
CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS
BECOME
DISPENSABLE?**

Cultural institutions are a product of modernization processes that sprouted in the eighteenth century and matured after World War Two. By this model, cultural institutions are brought to life by the state, endeavouring to build the conviction that culture occurs only in those spheres of life which those institutions oversee. Their basic tasks include not only creating, spreading, and protecting culture, but also homogenizing and unifying it, in order to turn individuals into a collective, and make national value systems, symbols, languages, and canons out of the local diversity found in a traditional collective.

As Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalism*) and Eric Hobsbawm (*Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*) have aptly observed, the basic role of the cultural institution at

this stage was to change Mazurians, Silesians, Galicians, or Kashubians into Poles. Institutions thus moved in two directions – they stripped people of their old identities and uprooted them, and they put a new national identity in the gaps left behind. This process was essential to create consent to the state as the protector of culture as such. The state thus defined itself as a patron of culture, which it produced itself, giving it control over its citizens – for it is simpler to oversee those who are culturally unified; who speak the same language; have similar culinary preferences and authorities.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT MODEL
FOR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS
(shaped from the 18th to the mid-20th century)



This Enlightenment model of culture and cultural institutions began to erode in the 1960s (in Poland, somewhat later), though even earlier it had been powerfully contested in progressive art movements' attacks on art institutions. In its contemporary form, this model still exists in the system of public cultural institutions: with the institutionally distinct cultural sector financed and supported by the state and the local governments. Their support is still viewed as the responsibility of those who run them – yet this duty is mostly ritualistic, as maintaining cultural institutions is seen as a cost, and not a form of carrying out important social aims. In recent years, there have been growing efforts to justify this obligation: some have pointed to social capital, potential economic profit, development, and, more recently, rebuilding and strengthening a national identity. The state is not entirely sure why it supports cultural institutions, and this uncertainty engenders the changing roles and status of institutions, and makes them operate in an atmosphere of uncertainty and peril.

At the same time, the bonds between cultural institutions and audiences and participants in culture are coming undone. Cultural institutions have ceased to be necessary as intermediaries in accessing culture and as places to find it, or even as entities creating value hierarchies of cultural products and their creators, thus defining what ought to be seen, read, or watched.

This new situation is what I would call the dispensability of the cultural institution. The point is not that people have stopped going to theatres, cinemas, libraries, and concerts. It is rather that cultural institutions are no longer needed to participate in culture. Nor are they needed as filters, whose authority sifts the outstanding works from the second-rate cultural products. They have become dispensable as entities that oblige us to participate in various forms of culture – in our day, being versed in high culture and graced with status and respect does not necessarily mean keeping up with the programs of cultural institutions.

Why is this? There are four main reasons:

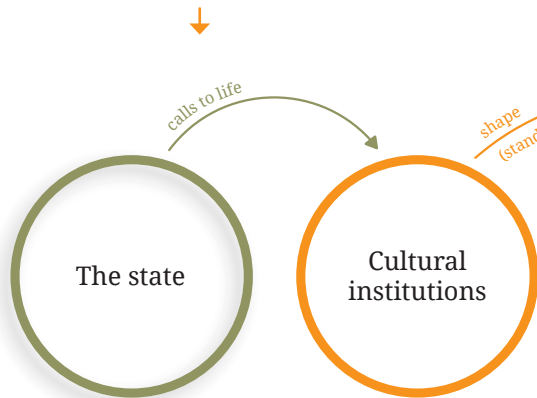
Democratization. With the (ongoing) progress of democratization, *i.e.*, minority groups claiming their right to an identity that an imposed homogeneous culture has attempted to uproot, it turned out that what might have seemed a uniform culture was not only highly diverse from within, it was also a power struggle: it was a space of conflict, not agreement. This, in turn, means that cultural institutions take sides in this conflict – and thus, by definition, they cease to serve one and all.

Counterculture. Through alternative cultures, subcultures, and, today, mainly through the highly developed culture online, we have discovered that culture is not strictly a product of the cultural

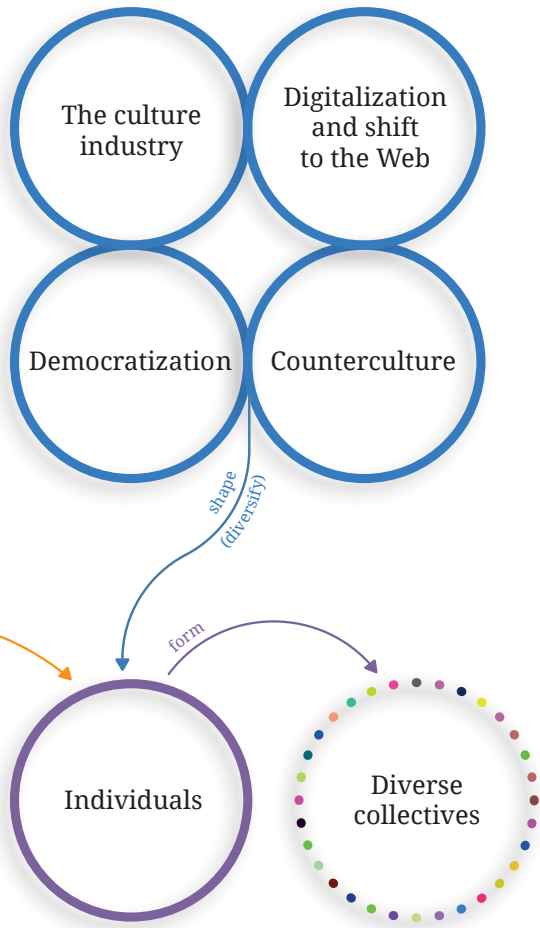
sector; it does not come down to what regulations call “cultural activities.” Moreover, a great many forms of activity aim to challenge the culture institutions create, making separate streams, systems of evaluation, and hierarchies. The institutional structure is seen as restricting free movement, mainly serving the prevailing social groups – this makes it not only dispensable, but also a threat.

The Culture Industry. The disposability of cultural institutions, and especially public ones, is produced by a highly expansive global culture industry. This not only transforms culture into commodities, it validates individuals in thinking that an interest in culture is just like any other kind of consumption, requiring no special preparation, knowledge, or effort. It also yields the conviction that everything is available, equivalent, and equally valuable, and thus that nothing is of special significance.

PRESENT MODEL
FOR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS
(shaped since the 1960s)



The Digitalization of Culture and Its Online Availability. Stripping cultural goods of their physical media and cutting back accessibility of tools for creating and disseminating them means that the cultural institution’s monopoly on providing the conditions to create, spread, and manage culture has been thoroughly decimated.



This new situation totally reconfigures the collective. Instead of culturally uniform collectives – even in a society as monoethnic, monoreligious, and mononational as Poland – we are dealing with a multiplicity of individuals, antagonized and unable to mutually identify, who prefer to live in small, closed communities. They are joined by dependency, but also rivalry. Moreover, participating in many internally varied and overlapping collectives – they only belong in part. In sociology this phenomenon is called intersectionality: people belonging to the same social categories (class, place of residence, age, and gender) differ from one another because each of these groups are intersected by other divisions. Today's social life is remarkably complex, as are we ourselves – each and every one of us. Two schoolteachers, of whom one is a man and the other a woman, one who lives in the country and the other in the big city, one who is young and the other mature, will be significantly dissimilar. These categories often come in conflict; struggle for the upper hand; have competing interests, which makes cooperation quite difficult. This often precludes solidarity, making us doubt whether institutions serve one and all, and prompting the question: Who are they for?

The process reconstructed here, bringing about a situation where individuals have no need of cultural institutions, would be quite easy to misinterpret, by proving that emancipation is bought by the

prevalence of competitive individualism, democratization leads to the disintegration of social bonds, and egalitarianism is created to break down value hierarchies. Pointing to this process, it would be easy to justify the spread of xenophobia, nationalism, disdain for others, and the concerted efforts to reconstitute a uniform national culture.

Yet the direction in which the state navigates the culture is not necessarily the sole option, with no alternatives. I will propose a model which could make cultural institutions something people need, and yet without destroying what has been achieved over the past decades – cultural diversity, the right to self-fulfilment, acceptance of what is different, and freedom. I see the presentation of this (provisional and perhaps utopian) model as a response to our main question: Why do we need cultural institutions?

**HOW DO WE
MAKE CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS
NECESSARY?**

Cultural institutions presently operate amid collectives that are highly diversified from within, composed of dozens of groups, often conflicting and competing with each other, and with millions of individuals, each of which is part of several communities of this sort at the same time. These collectives tend to have a lack of consensus in terms of values and cooperate through mutual contract-based dependencies – these are the basis for the existence of the whole. Yet it would be hard to build tolerance; trust; love; friendship – in short, the indispensable parts of every society – strictly based on these dependencies.

Upending the Perspective

Our point of departure for the solutions here is the observation that cultural institutions are part of

highly differentiated collectives, whom they are meant to serve. They are not autonomous organizations carrying out separate aims, they are not a “cost,” nor are they abstract bureaucratic structures; they always belong to *someone*. They belong to a certain community, for whom they work. Similarly, we ought to note that neither the state nor the local government authorities are autonomous agents or a totalizing framework within which culture and collective life play out, but only two of many actors that combine to make up a collective, be it national or local.

I mention these evident points because I would very much like to reverse our perspective on the cultural institution, state, and local government – to begin to see them as entities that serve collectives, and not the reverse. All too often, we forget that cultural institutions and the state and local governments are structures which the collective has delegated to carry out certain roles and functions. More commonly, we see this dependency in a reverse manner, in terms of the state calling to life cultural institutions to carry out its aims, and the institutions seeing their local collective as failing to come up to their expectations – as failing to participate; being unprepared, passive, flawed, or insufficient.

Another basic issue is the necessity of building more symmetrical relations between the state and the local government and cultural institutions. I be-

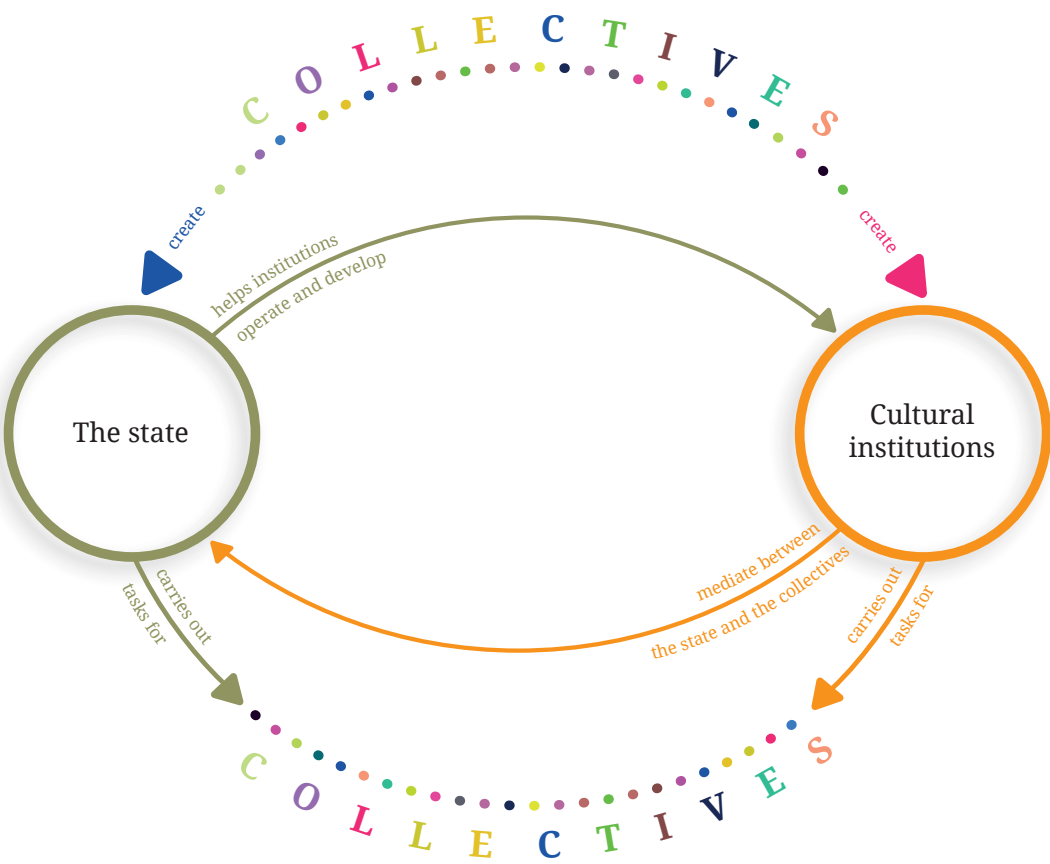
lieve the state should create legal, financial, and organizational frameworks for institutions, but that the shape of these frameworks should be negotiated by the entities that fall within their scope. The state should try to serve the institutions, to establish the best possible working conditions for them, and to aid their development. The institutions, in turn, should supply knowledge to the state and local governments on how their collectives are faring, their needs, their potential, and the problems they face. In this model, cultural institutions serve as mediators between the state/local government and the collectives of which they are a part.

This is why the basic role of the state, the local government, and the cultural institution should be as a middleman and mediator – between the collective and the state, but also between the individuals that make up a given society. I would primarily see the cultural institution as a platform where people in a certain collective can meet, see one another, come to terms with their diversity, draw up fields of cooperation, and establish how to work together; to be productive in solidarity and trust.

If a cultural institution is to serve these functions, it needs to be open to the collective and its new roles: taking shared responsibility for culture, and thus for the local society’s way of life. This requires seeing various individuals as complete, as having something to offer, as (potentially) active and interested

in public life. Yet because these same individuals are often unaware of the fact that they possess these attributes, it is necessary to create occasions and pretexts for them to be discovered. It is necessary to prompt collaboration and get it started.

A POSSIBLE MODEL
FOR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS
↓



Switching the Language

We also need to change our narrative about culture, because we have no good, effective language for speaking about it and for communicating how important it is. When we do speak about it, we resort to the old-school habit of making culture into a thing of remarkable sublimity, created by superhumans, part of a structure where value is decided by academics and public institutions, with a clear division between high and low culture, between those who are cultured and those who are not.

At other times, our language turns culture into a tool that for a variety of tasks, especially those in which the state and the local governments are ineffectual: building social capital, promoting ideas and products, indoctrination, levelling opportunities in life, increasing national production, and educating. This language communicates that culture can carry out important social aims, yet also introduces a general division into what is useful and what is not. This division is tantamount to saying that certain ways of life are worth supporting, while others are not – that certain forms of existence in culture are better, others are worse.

The last kind of language we use to speak about culture is that of ratios and numbers, which decision-making bureaucrats use to view activity in culture, in selecting what to support and if public

money has been properly “distributed.” This quantifiable essence of culture-makers, events, and works makes some things utterly invisible – not just because they cannot be counted and they will not fall into any statistical report category, but because they are not made by any entities that could apply for state or local government funding.

Meanwhile, if we would like to make cultural institutions a more integral part of local collectives, we should more seldom use the concept of “culture,” which is highly problematic and exclusive, and turn to other terms pertaining to the components of culture. It will be easier for us to speak of ties and relationships; of experiences, of knowledge and abilities; of doing something together; of language, art, values, and customs.

Taking On New Roles

My suggestion to place the cultural institution “in-between,” giving it a mediator function, should be made more precise. The cultural institution could play several basic roles (and some of them it surely does). What are they?

The Mediator.

An intermediary in relations between individuals that make up a collective, facilitating meetings, conversations, creating pretexts for us to listen each

other, for clearly defining what sets us apart and what unites us. At present we have a great need for a mechanism that would allow us to take the perspective and viewpoint of others; to see what is important to them; what makes my world different from others'. This is a role that fundamentally tries to create opportunities to confront another person's difference, and thus to rethink who we are ourselves.

The Substantiator.

Cultural institutions have a huge advantage over online forms of social contact. They let us experience another person in a direct and multidimensional way, as a concrete person and body, situated in a particular context. The task of the cultural institution is therefore to restore the first-hand experience of another person and to create the bases for future cooperation and enjoying its products. Before we build any kind of a bond with someone, we have to see them as complete, like ourselves. This kind of multidimensional contact is socializing in itself.

The Whistleblower.

This involves institutions taking the role of agents for individuals and collectives who have no opportunity or ability to articulate their needs and ways of seeing reality. This is not only about those who are excluded for various reasons, but also about social categories that set some people apart as self-

-sufficient and distance them from the rest because of their high status. We often forget that both marginalization and privilege divide people from the collective.

The Invisible Hand.

By this we do not mean the invisible hand of the market, but a helping hand, which is invisible because it gives individuals new skills and competencies – a chance for agency and influence – but does not display its part in this process, giving individuals a sense of strength and the opportunity to act. It educates, but not from a high horse, taking the position of an animator rather than an instructor.

Turning Episodes into the Rules

It strikes me as sensible that cultural institutions enter these new roles and take up an intermediary position because it brings advantages to the local collectives and gives meaning and significance to how institutions work. At the same time, by introducing this kind of operating model, institutions will encounter several obstacles, such as the fact that the state will return to its old Enlightenment and nationalist model of cultural politics, in which the culture institution is reduced to being a medium that spreads the state monoculture.

The other problem is in the very strength of institutions – their solidity – which, on the one hand, allows them to regulate and coordinate social life, but on the other, makes them conservative and resistant to change – and means that change comes slowly.

In introducing the institutional model of operation here, another stumbling block is the individual rivalry that constitutes the norm, and a system that supports working *against*, not with others. We experience this every step of the way, beginning with how we make sports the most important field of recreation, through systems for certifying and quantifying talents and achievements with ranking charts, and ending with the brutal struggle for visibility.

The greatest difficulty, as Robert Putnam notes (*Making Democracy Work*), is that someone must begin this process of change. The person who initiates it also bears the costs of the transformation, just like anyone who stands out because they do not want to play everyone's game. It seems more rational, though only from a short-term perspective, to stick to the routines; the well-worn paths; to conform. In introducing these changes, the institutions themselves can be the most resistant, because it is they which are concerned.

These are quite serious obstacles, most difficult to overcome. Are we proposing a losing battle?

Hardly. Although we are slowly losing the conviction that the system will change all by itself, the hope still remains that cultural institutions will be changed from above. We should carefully monitor movement on the ground: we are becoming increasingly certain that change will be brought by consistently working on the lowest level, locally, with concrete people and collectives.

There are many examples of successful undertakings in which a society, with the intermediary assistance of cultural institutions, changes for the better, solves its problems, perceives the value of itself, and begins to believe in its own agency and in the indispensability of a local cultural institution. Years of efforts by educators and animators to make people see culture as something other than entertainment or a supplement to the local academy have not been in vain.

We might also note that the last decade has seen an outpouring of a new type of cultural institution – a hybrid kind, joining the public, social, and private, latched firmly onto the urban and rural organisms, which are concrete, tangible collectives. The cultural institutions themselves are becoming aware of their new predicament and are trying to re-envision themselves.

What we need is to support positive initiatives, to appreciate them, to ensure that they are not mere incidents, to prop them up, and to transform them into institutional rules. This does not mean that we should simply be patient and systematically spread the institutional model I am proposing as a cultural mediator. It is necessary we make the effort to learn general lessons from successful local experiments – to make new legal regulations to organize the work of institutions and local strategies to redefine the place of the cultural institution in the life of the collective.

We need to transform episodes of cooperation into rules of cooperation. We need to work out some small brainwaves and bright ideas to show that collaboration is useful – in knowing how to bring about this collaboration and how to keep it going. We need to rethink individual experiences of local animators and institutions and models of cooperation that can be spread.

Some might dismiss what I have offered here with a single word: utopia. No doubt it is, in part. Yet I will maintain that there is nothing more realistic than a utopia. And although not everything is in our hands, a great many things are.



INSTYTUCJA KULTURY
WOJEWÓDZTWA
MAŁOPOLSKIEGO



Publisher:

Małopolska Institute of Culture in Krakow

30-233 Krakow, ul. 28 Lipca 1943 17C

tel. 12 422 18 84, www.mik.krakow.pl

Director: Joanna Orlik

Editor-in-chief: Elżbieta Kaproń

Proofreader: Steven Hoffman

Graphic design, layout: Kira Pietrek

ISBN 978-83-61406-86-0

This publication is not designed for sale.

It is available on an international Creative Commons license:

Attribution – NonCommercial – ShareAlike 4.0 International

(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Małopolski Instytut Kultury w Krakowie

[Małopolska Institute of Culture in Krakow,

abbr. MIK] is an independent body set up by the Małopolska local government. MIK engages in many activities to study and promote cultural heritage of the Małopolska region. MIK provides workshops and training as well as organizes conferences and seminars for culture sector employees. We also research the evolution of cultural trends and development directions.

Three words describe us in short:

Region, React, Rethink!

MIK is a proud member of three international networks: Culture Action Europe, Interpret Europe, and the European Network of Observatories in the Field of Arts and Cultural Education (ENO).

www.mik.krakow.pl



Marek Krajewski is a sociologist and scholar of contemporary culture and art who has co-created the Invisible City and Archive of Research on Everyday Life projects as well as Very Young Culture, a Polish program for cultural education. He is a professor at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. His books include *Kultury kultury popularnej* [*The Culture of Popular Culture*], *Są w życiu rzeczy... Szkice z socjologii przedmiotów* [*There Are Things in Life... Sketches from the Sociology of Objects*], *Incydentologia* [*Incidentology*], and a dictionary of pop culture, *POPamiętane* [*POPreserved*].