

Let us be brave! - Towards a political contextualisation of arts education

Contribution of Michael Wimmer for the Year Book of Arts Education Research II 2014

During these days we are confronted with disturbing reports mainly from Southern European countries making clear the extent of the decline of the living and working conditions of broad sections of the population. Is it the increase of unemployment rates among young people up to an incredible 60%, is it the lowering of the purchasing power of ordinary people, the increase in suicide rates or in drug consumption or is it the rise of radical political movements: The message is clear: This part of Europe is facing a relapse of social achievements and with it the continent as a whole is entering a period of growing social fractures. After the unification of the East and the West it may even re-fall apart and this time the fracture lines run from North to South as well as from the rich to the poor or those who are (still) visible in the public arena and those who aren't any more.

The hazard of the European welfare states has also consequences for the cultural and educational sector when it is confronted with massive cuts of public and private support. A recent report on the decline in bookshops in the heart of Athens brought it – at least for me – to the point: Because of the disastrous economic situation Greeks can less and less afford to buy books. The result is a mass extinction of bookstores who can no longer survive without customers. Here so we find just one evidence that the conditions of the cultural infrastructure correlate with the cultural behaviour of the people affected by the economic and political circumstances.

At the last World Summit on Arts Education in Wildbad Kreuth “Polylogue II”¹, Susanne Keuchel presented a first draft on possible correlations between the provision of arts education and the quality of social life demonstrated in indices like peace and anti-corruption.

Following Keuchel's considerations against the background of the worsening of living and working conditions of a broad range of Europeans two consequences could be taken into account. One is about a possible negative correlation when an increasing number of people is going to lose their future perspectives at the same time as arts education is celebrated as a cultural and education policy priority. And the other is about the reflection of how these economically and socially excluded cohorts of people can be reached by new methods of arts education provision which are appropriate in their current situation. Anyway we can assume that they have meanwhile withdrawn in their own “cultural spaces” far away from what traditional arts education provision is about.

The issue that I want to raise in these remarks is about the changing political, social and economic context in which arts education provision takes place and how the political implications of arts education be taken into account in the further development of the sector.

Fragile relationships between arts and civic (political) education

There is quite a long controversy on the relationship between civic education and arts education. In a first reaction both sectors seem to be quite separated with their own tradition, expert language, objectives and institutions. Following the interpretation of Max Fuchs², politics has to do with power whereas culture with the communication of questions of meaning. Policy should quickly come to decisions whereas dealing with arts and culture would take its time to check arguments over and

¹ <http://worldsummit2013.bkj.de/speakers/keuchel-susanne.html>

² <http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/kultur/kulturelle-bildung/59942/kulturelle-und-politische-bildung> (7.1.2014)

over again. Especially when dealing with the arts the concept of autonomy is often referred to prevent the arts from any social (and thus political) use.

Looking into diverse practices it becomes evident that the outlined demarcation for categorical separation does not really work. Of course there are manifold arts projects which deal with existential problems that have something to do with the state of our society: unemployment, environmental degradation, violence, loneliness, poverty. Reflecting this kind of problems, Fuchs argues for a broader understanding of "politics" which finds its correlation in the history of the Avant-garde of the 20th century and their attempt to reconcile the arts with the living conditions of the people.

Another commonality lies in the ability to judge, is it politically or is it aesthetically. In both cases we are not taking spontaneous decisions but decide based on critical reflection, taking into account not only the issue that has to be decided but also the context in which the issue takes place.

State of European developments

It seems remarkable that the sector of arts education so far – if at all – has made only modest efforts to find new relationships with civic education. Quite contrarily, it has developed only low interest for the (socio-) political context in which arts education activities are taking place³. This can be observed particularly in Europe, when even mentioning the fundamental crisis phenomena to which the national societies are exposed for five years commonly regarded as negligible.

Perhaps this form of denial of reality is due to a specific disinterest in the priority setting of the sector which instead of critically reflecting on the changing working and living realities of their addressees mainly relies on the perpetuation of emphatic recommendations. As a consequence, its proponents – formulated polemically – have to limit themselves to stereotypical questions, such as whether dancing in school produces better results in mathematics, while in Europe the cultural fabric is in a process of dramatic alteration (and with it the individual and collective perspectives particularly in the most dynamic age groups).

Now I 'm not saying arts education could – at least in its current constitution – make a significant contribution to solving the crisis. I confine myself at this point to argue that the changes in the social conditions in the professional discourse are noted at all. That would be the prerequisite to see the arts educators not just fully dependent of what is going on around them but as co-actors, which co-decide which function the sector can or in a more normative way should play in the further societal development. I am referring to a statement of the legendary German cultural politician Hilmar Hoffmann, who in the 1970ies described the content of what is at stake in arts and cultural education as: "culture as the system that justifies a distinctive shape and material value of society. The arts are then the aesthetic forms of expression precisely of this culture"⁴.

If we are able to agree with this statement even today, we cannot avoid accepting that what we call the society has changed considerably and with it its cultural values. However, this has not yet led to a reorientation of arts education (England seems to be one of the exceptions, when it tried with

³ As a result not only in the research which became the major source of Anne Bamford's „Wow-Factor“ arts education practices in totalitarian regimes are compared with those in democratic ones as if the fact of different political constitutions can be neglected.

⁴ Hofmann, Hilmar (1979): Kultur für alle Frankfurt S 126

projects such as Creative Partnerships to make use of arts education for further market liberalization hoping that the opportunities for young people in the emerging markets of cultural and creative industries would improve – an experiment that meanwhile was concluded by the liberal-conservative government).

On the way to post-democracy

A number of social scientists are analysing the current crisis developments. Most of them come to rather sobering findings in stating that a devaluation of democratic values leads to post-democratic constitutions of the national societies and thus questioning current forms of (political) participation⁵.

Besides Wolfgang Streeck who describes in his book "Die gekaufte Zeit"⁶ the decline of democratic capitalism as a constitutive of the post war order, I found the contribution of Claus Offe "Two and a half theories of democratic capitalism"⁷ helpful to analyse the current status quo and link it to our topic of interest, arts education.

Offe starts his historical outline with the idea of a social-democratic theory of democratic capitalism of the 1970ies. Its quality lay in a strict decoupling of (unevenly distributed) socio-economic resources and (equal) political rights. The constitutional intention was to avoid the conversion of ownership of assets into political power. This should counteract the increasing inequality caused by market forces and be oriented towards the prevailing conceptions of social justice, when it came to politically influence the design of the market dynamics and the distribution of economic goods.

About the loss of political hegemony

When since 1989 a market-liberal theory became dominant, Offe analyses a new phase characterized by the attempt to carry out a strictly symmetrical separation of the rules of the market and public policy. At this stage the market forces should be allowed to develop freed from government influence, while the political system should be restricted to the provision of a public infrastructure and services (including educational and cultural provisions). The basis for this concept of social transformation was a "post-ideological" political culture that brought the citizens to be distanced and indifferent to most political issues in order to guarantee the necessary stability. The (large) rest would be managed by the dynamics of the markets.

The increasing dominance of the financial industry ushered a third phase. Offe describes the current crises and their logic of social organization as a betting game characterized first and foremost as an end of previous social theories. Its dynamics – at least so far – does not any more require any normative theory or justification based on traditional European (cultural) values. Instead, the beneficiary owners of financial resources have – almost like a coup without democratic legitimacy – taken over the agenda of policy-making. In a reversal of the asymmetry of the 1970ies now the "imperatives of markets" dominate public action (and not vice versa). By that politics is less and less able to counteract the predominance of accumulation, profit, efficiency, competitiveness, austerity or commodification as the only remaining guiding principles debasing traditional values such as social rights, political redistribution or sustainability.

⁵ Fe Crouch, Colin (2004): Post-democracy Oxford

⁶ Streeck, Wolfgang (2013): Die gekaufte Zeit Frankfurt

⁷ Published in German in: Transit – Europäische Revue (2013): Zukunft der Demokratie. Nr. 44 Frankfurt

The exceptionality of the current situation lies in the sheer facticity of the goals of economic decision-makers who have struggled to achieve a largely unchallenged position to enforce their new brutal realities without any legitimizing promise as "progress", "justice", "freedom" or "stability" and by that make democratically elected politicians looking increasingly weak. The only remaining "chance of survival" of the state seems to be its transformation from the "tax state" to the "debt state". This means to negate the interests and demands of stakeholders on the "demand side" and to reduce the provision of services and infrastructure. The results can be observed not only in Greece.

About the changing social context of arts education

This three-phase model is also mirrored – so my hypothesis – in the value stock of the arts education sector. After all, arts education provision was originally understood as an eminent contribution to the realization of more social justice ("cultural policy as a continuation of social policy"). Regarding theoretical approaches that are influencing up to today deliberate policies, in trying to justify arts education programs one of the main arguments is still the expected inclusion of socially disadvantaged young people. Of course the original impetus to make use of a changing cultural behaviour to improve political participation possibilities is gone.

Largely unreflected the subsequent market-liberal phase has changed both the form and content of arts education programs sustainably. Dating from this period we are confronted with a language regime of "management", "target-group orientation", "efficiency", "third party funding" or simply "impact" as action-guiding parameter. At the same time, the ability of the sector to claim a "value-oriented market correction" declined the chance to synergize the artistic and political dimension of arts education provision.

Instead of that representatives mutated to co-actors (and confirmers) of a "post-ideological" socio-political constitution, which put forward the compensation of the declining importance of the political with new forms of co-operation with market forces. The preoccupation with the diversity of artistic expression has since then exalted to a better form of togetherness, superior to the lowlands of an ignorant policy.

Nevertheless – and here a possible asynchrony is emerging – arts education obviously still serves as one of the few remaining insurances of the unbroken strength of nation-states, given the increasing helplessness of politicians and administrators in relation to the global financial sector (that would explain the rise of arts education in recent years in some European countries). With this exceptional position an outstanding (socio-)political mission for arts education can be derived.

If this analysis is plausible, the question can be raised: what constitutes the social relevance of arts education in a phase of post-democratic development, in which financial investors have taken over the economic and political regime and the chances for political intervention have fallen dramatically?

Arts education in the current period of transition

In the absence of a theoretical foundation the sector (still) has a choice. The previous lack of a socially critical discourse nourishes the temptation to be content with an ornamental if not veiling function in times of refeudalization of social power relations. In a nutshell: singing and dancing, to escape the frustrations of everyday life for at least a few hours. In the meantime, politics continues to take place increasingly dominated by market interests, while those taking part in arts education programs turn their backs to politics. This is even more true when the cultural elites have taught not

only arts educators in strange alliance with boulevard media (which pursue its own economic interests) to distinguish themselves with their commitment from the political elites, even to despise them.

And yet there is also the option to politically recharge arts education activities and to put them in a relation to what Hofmann was defining as the main objective of arts education. The present social analyses make it clear that Europe does not go through a temporary cyclical crisis of its capitalist economics, but through a fundamental cultural transformation that affects the appreciation of values of the people fundamentally. This is the existential experience of the millions of young people, whose life conditions are currently fully depending on some financial jugglers. They have to find their way in a completely uncertain future "without any spiritual resonance that is able to foster their moral and their civil fantasy"⁸.

From "Talking about people" and "Talking to people" to "Talking with people"

So what's about making young people "experts" of their own situation and to try, instead of talking about them talking with them? As an adult, I do not even like to say it, but we have to be aware in propagating arts education activities, that it is not the young people but the adults who have produced the current state of modern societies in which they find no perspectives. A new dialogue, based on democratic participation rights of all concerned – could be the basis of attempts to reconstruct social life and to produce new trust between generations. Especially when the fundamental achievements which have distinguished the peculiarity of Europe are at stake: not profit and efficiency, but freedom, democracy, solidarity and justice.

On the basis of these discussions, it might be worth trying to implement new models of participation and especially in the field of arts education and its research. Offe's model of a more substantive referral that places the interests and preferences of those to the centre who are the participants of arts education activities could be a guiding principle.

⁸ Sandel, Michael (2013): Solidarität. In: Transit Europäische Revue (2013): Zukunft der Demokratie Nr. 44 S. 114