

Creating under pressure

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Introduction

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Dutch Council for Culture has received increasing indications that the artistic freedom of artists and institutions, in the Netherlands and internationally, is coming under growing pressure. A series of conversations with Dutch youth performing arts organisations in 2023 painted a picture of a cultural sector increasingly at odds with its young audiences. These young audiences, as well as parents and schools, appeared to be having increasing difficulty with certain subjects that institutions sought to address through their performances, such as racism, homosexuality and gender-related issues.

During the same period, there was also a growing number of examples of friction between society and the arts. Incidents arose around writers, artworks in public spaces, theatre productions, pop concerts, film festivals, lectures and debates at debate centres, and activities in libraries. The wars in Gaza and Ukraine regularly lead to debates about whether Israeli or Russian artists should be programmed, possible boycotts, and political statements made by musicians during performances. Dutch politicians even intervened in artists' decisions about whether to perform somewhere.

These developments are not unique to the Netherlands, but forms part of a broader international trend. Freemuse, an independent international NGO that defends artistic freedom and cultural diversity worldwide, conducts annual research into artistic freedom in an international context, and its reports give considerable cause for concern. Increasingly, governments are interfering with artistic freedom and with the presentation of art. In 2023, the Hungarian Minister of Culture dismissed the director of the Hungarian National Museum for exhibiting photographs depicting LGBTQI+ individuals. The museum was accused of violating a controversial anti-LGBTQI+ law that prohibits educational materials and advertisements deemed to 'promote' same-sex relationships among minors, portray homosexuality, or affirm a person's non-conforming gender identity.

In Slovakia, the Minister of Culture dismissed the director of the National Theatre over alleged 'political activism'. A few days later, the director of the National Art Museum was also dismissed, causing major upheaval within the Slovak cultural sector. In a speech, former theatre director Matej Drlička called for vigilance: "This is not just a local fire. This will continue, and it will continue in other countries. We have to stand up, we must speak freely, and we have to prevent this fire from spreading to other countries." Earlier, this incident and similar cases had already prompted various institutions and artists to call on the European Parliament to provide stronger protection for artistic freedom. In a recent policy vision, the European Commission also expressly reminded Member States of the importance of this freedom.

Since the war in Gaza, Germany in particular has seen a large number of incidents connected with the country's sensitivity around real or perceived antisemitism. In 2022, for example, a controversy arose around Documenta in Kassel, where the Indonesian artists' collective Taring Padi was accused of antisemitism by, among others, several politicians. The organisers hastily covered the artwork in question and later removed it.

In spring 2025, actor Shehab Fatoum was suspended by the management of Theater Aachen following the intervention of a state minister from North Rhine-Westphalia, after the actor was said to have made pro-Palestinian statements during the theatre's anniversary celebrations. It later emerged that the statements had been taken out of context, and the suspension was lifted.

Developments surrounding the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC – the national performing arts centre of the United States – also fall into this category. President Trump has described the centre as 'too woke' and has set out to change it. Shortly after his inauguration as President of the United States, he dismissed the head of the centre and appointed himself chair of the board of trustees. For similar reasons, in spring 2025, President Trump terminated the employment of Carla Hayden, director of the Library of Congress, one of the world's largest libraries.

These developments prompted the Dutch Council for Culture to investigate the causes of this trend and possible lines of action. The Council considers it essential to maintain a vigilant watch over artistic freedom. In doing so, it is aware that the arts sector is not alone in experiencing this pressure. Similar developments are also taking place in journalism, academia, the judiciary and other domains in which different opinions, interests, perspectives and ideas must be able to be expressed freely, to clash, and to be weighed against one another in the public interest. It is, of course, no coincidence that pressure is increasingly being exerted in all these areas.

The Council also concludes that these are not isolated incidents involving artistic freedom, but part of an emerging pattern. The international incidents mentioned above also fit this pattern. In almost all cases involving violations of artistic freedom, there is an attempt to prevent an artist or cultural institution from creating or presenting an artistic expression because that expression does not align with the opinions, beliefs or norms of those objecting to it. The number of incidents is increasing, and the incidents themselves are becoming more severe. Much of this takes place, at least partly, on social media. That is where many discussions take place, but also where threats and intimidation are voiced. Social media also plays a role in spreading misinformation and disinformation about certain artists or artistic expressions.

The Council considers this increasing pressure problematic because it puts an essential function of the arts under strain. Art and culture form an important cornerstone of the democratic society, just like parliament, the judiciary, journalism and academia. These are domains with a specific function that together uphold the structure of the rule of law.

Art can act as both a mirror and a window. It can offer recognition, but it can also offer a new perspective. Art keeps society 'open' by offering, through an aesthetic reworking of reality, new ways of thinking, experiencing, articulating and giving voice to reality. This may produce a sense of beauty or wonder, a confrontation with a new perspective or idea, or, for example, a sense of connection, because a work of art expresses what we feel or experience as individuals, or what we share as a society; we recognise ourselves in it. Encountering art can be a pleasurable experience, but it can also create friction, because an artistic expression may present thoughts or perspectives that an individual or society is not yet ready for. This can provoke resistance or irritation, but ideally also discussion and dialogue.

The arts exist only in relation to an audience. They often occupy public space, both physically and online. This matters because, in doing so, they show different ideas, images and perspectives alongside one another in relative openness, sometimes allowing them to collide or create friction. It is precisely because of this openness and confrontation of perspectives that autocracies tend to distrust the arts. They are an antidote to what the American historian Timothy Snyder calls ‘the politics of inevitability’: a politics that suggests its way of thinking is the only realistic one and therefore leaves no room for other viable political views: ‘There is no alternative.’ Snyder and other thinkers therefore point out that a society open to different views is more flexible, more resilient and stronger, especially in uncertain times. The arts help us to embrace the unexpected. In a pluralistic society and a democracy, it is important that all voices have the space to be heard. The arts have a role to play in this, but they can only fulfil that role if they are not obstructed in expressing themselves freely.

Given this major public interest, the Council decided to conduct research based on the following question:

To what extent is artistic freedom in the Netherlands under pressure, what are the possible causes, and what lines of action are available to government, the cultural sector and education to protect that freedom?

This international summary follows the broad lines of the original advisory report, but seeks to place it in a more international context. Unlike the original report, it will examine the Dutch legal aspects of the issue in less depth and focus more on the societal analysis. In this summary, the Council also seeks to avoid highly specific Dutch examples.

In Chapter 2, the Council discusses the theoretical framework for this advisory report. Chapter 3 describes the key societal developments in society and the arts, which the Council believes are also relevant in an international context. In Chapter 4, it draws its conclusions.

**Incidents
or a pattern?**

2. Incidents or a pattern?

2.1 Introduction

As noted above, in almost all cases where artistic freedom comes under pressure, the issue concerns people or groups seeking to prevent an artist or cultural institution from creating or presenting an artistic expression, or, conversely, to compel an artist or institution to say, make or show something. They usually justify this on the basis of a conviction that, from a moral, religious or political perspective, an artistic expression should not be shared publicly. The pressure exerted on artists often differs from that on the intermediary institutions or presenting institutions where they present or sell their work, such as theatres, libraries, concert halls, museums, galleries, cinemas, publishing houses and bookshops.

2.2 The vertical and horizontal axes

When considering artistic freedom, it is helpful to distinguish between two different axes along which this pressure operates: a 'vertical' and a 'horizontal' axis. The vertical axis refers to the relationship between the arts and government; the horizontal axis refers to the relationship between art and society.

On the vertical axis, the first issue is the laws and treaties that protect artists and institutions when creating and presenting artistic expressions. It is also about the relationship between government and the arts, and the extent to which government and policymakers may express a view on, or even seek to intervene in, the content of artistic expressions or the place or manner in which artists present their work. National and local politicians, for example, sometimes call into question the provision of subsidies to a cultural institution if that institution shows work they, and their supporters, find objectionable.

Elected representatives are a complicated category in this respect, as their role requires them to be able to respond critically to developments in society. After all, they represent certain societal values and, in that capacity, may have specific views about what is and is not socially acceptable. At the same time, they form part of a wider democratic structure and should, from that position, exercise restraint when making statements about the content of artistic expressions.

The horizontal axis describes the relationship between art and society. On the one hand, artists are legally free to create and present their work; on the other, citizens, whether organised or not, are equally free to form opinions about those artistic expressions and express these. The research made clear that perceived violations of artistic freedom are found mainly on this horizontal axis. Whether intentional or not, these violations have an effect: artists and presenting institutions are experiencing growing pressure from different parts of society not to address or show certain things, which in turn can lead to self-censorship.

An important distinction to be made on this axis is whether the pressure exerted constitutes a criminal offence. Both artists and presenting institutions are confronted

with criminal offences such as threats, intimidation and defamation, both online and offline.

However, a large part of the pressure experienced by artists and presenting institutions is less clearly defined and not criminal. Demonstrations outside presenting institutions are permitted, and people make use of that right. People demonstrate to prevent an artistic expression from being presented or to prevent an artist from being given a platform. Demonstrators usually have political or religious motives. Staff who interact directly with the public are most exposed on the front line during demonstrations or protests; this includes bar staff, reception and office staff, and front-of-house staff.

Societal pressure can also come from within. Staff at cultural institutions may, for example, no longer wish to programme a particular artist or artistic expression because they disagree with the content of that expression or with the artist's political stance. This becomes complicated when different camps emerge among staff. Similar pressure may come from stakeholders, such as their most loyal audiences, donors, or a board of trustees, who want to avoid controversy or fear reputational damage. One interesting and complex case in this regard was the call for a boycott of Israel in autumn 2025, which some Dutch cultural institutions signed and others did not. Institutions that did not sign said they did not wish to take a political position, but wanted to express their social engagement through art. They then faced pressure from activists who felt they were adopting a passive stance on the issue. Institutions that did sign subsequently clashed with parts of their audience, including members of the Jewish community, who felt excluded. Institutions report that, in such a situation, it becomes almost impossible to do the 'right' thing.

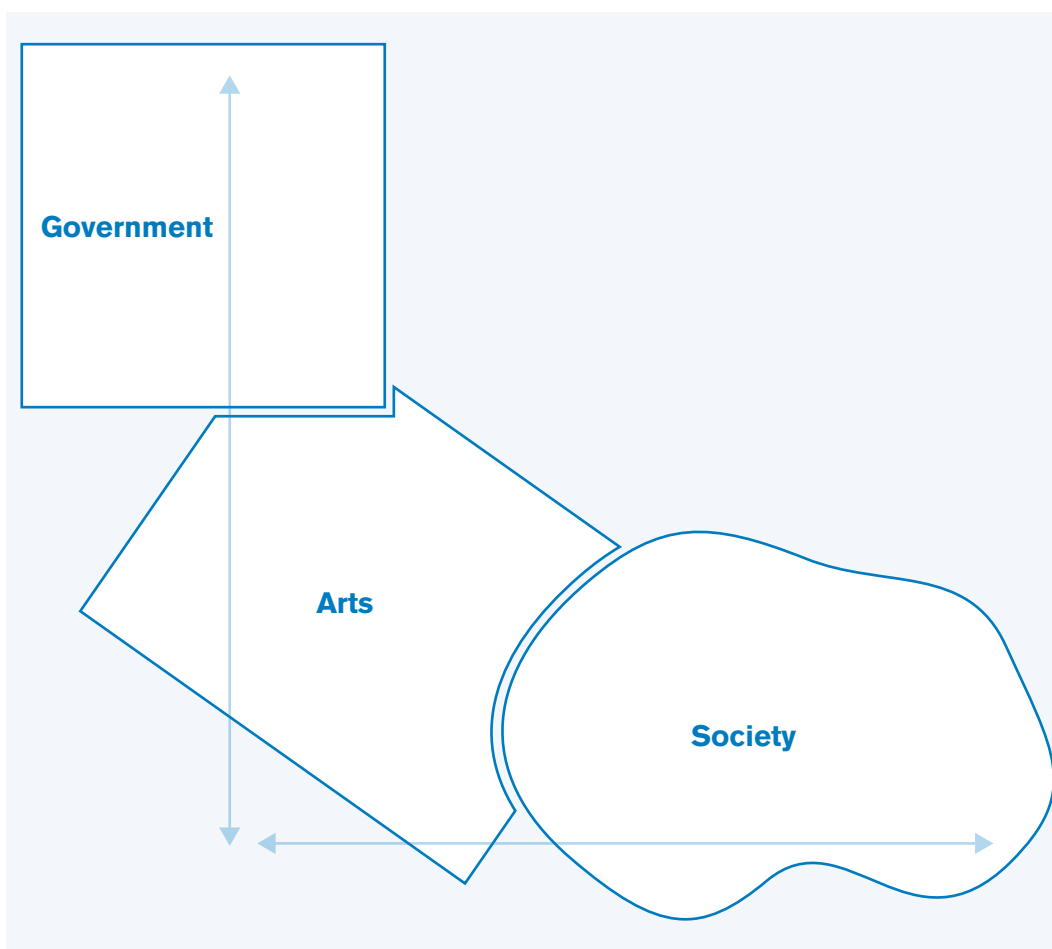
Although this dilemma mainly affects presenting institutions, there are also known cases in which individual artists feel pressured by the very circles with which they feel most closely aligned ideologically. On social media, for example, they experience pressure to speak out on political issues, even though they primarily use those platforms to draw attention to their work. Or, as writers, they may struggle with sensitivities around the use of certain words or perspectives, because they understand those sensitivities but at the same time feel constrained in their artistic means of expression.

When analysing critical responses to artistic expressions, the Council considers it important to distinguish between inclusive and exclusive ideas about identity. Inclusive identity-based thinking refers to an emancipatory movement in which certain groups demand social recognition of their identity. Although this is a positive development for diversity in the arts sector, it can sometimes restrict the freedom of representatives of the established order; in extreme cases, for example, artists may be criticised for foregrounding a perspective other than their own. In the Council's discussions, for example, a case was raised involving a writer who received fierce criticism because, as a white man, he had chosen a Black protagonist.

Exclusive identity-based thinking, by contrast, involves a movement that aims to exclude certain identities based on a sense of superiority, denying others the right to speak or express themselves. This runs counter to the principle of equality under Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution. Actors frequently encounter racist or homophobic remarks during school performances for example.

A considerable amount of pressure on the horizontal axis takes place within education. The Council heard that young audiences are increasingly responding to books or performances with homophobic and racist reactions, and that parents and teachers sometimes walk out of performances with pupils because they object to the content. Parents put pressure on school leadership not to attend performances, particularly where gender or identity is the subject. Several library directors said that parents sometimes remove books from school libraries because they consider certain books unsuitable for their children, or pressure school management or the school board to do so. This occurs most often at schools with a particular religious or philosophical foundation: Reformed or Islamic schools, for example, but also Waldorf schools. Here, artistic freedom clashes with another fundamental freedom: freedom of education. Schools and parents enjoy broad freedom to determine what is and is not suitable for the children in their care.

Figure 1 The government and society each influence art in their own way. The horizontal and vertical axes describe the relationships between art and society and art and government.



**The axes
explored in
more detail**

3. The axes explored in more detail

3.1 The vertical axis

The vertical axis describes the relationship between government and the arts. It therefore concerns the ways in which government influences artistic freedom and how artistic freedom is protected in law.

In most countries, there is a relationship between the arts and the law. Art can provoke such strong reactions in society that a court may need to be involved to assess whether an artistic expression falls within the legal framework and whether, for example, any criminal law limits have been crossed.

The protection of artistic freedom is enshrined at both national and international level. In principle, artists in the Netherlands enjoy broad artistic freedom. In the Dutch Constitution, this freedom is provided for in Article 7, which protects freedom of expression. The first paragraph concerns expressions of opinion through ‘the press’, while the third concerns expressions of opinion conveyed through other means. Artistic freedom in the Netherlands is rooted in these provisions. In both cases, prior government intervention on the basis of content is not permitted: this is the prohibition of censorship. This freedom is therefore enforceable in court, but it is not absolute: an artist may not commit criminal offences or act unlawfully under the guise of artistic freedom. In the event of complaints from members of the public or a formal complaint, a court assesses this after the fact.

In addition to national legislation, the protection of artistic freedom is also enshrined in European law and international treaties – often through freedom of expression, but also as a provision in its own right. As early as 1948, the United Nations included freedom of expression and participation in cultural life in the legally non-binding Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

At present, artistic freedom in the Netherlands is legally safeguarded in terms of the relationship between the arts, the law, politics and government. It does not appear to be under threat from a government seeking to prohibit certain forms of expression; there is no censorship, and the Dutch government also recognises the importance of refraining from making substantive judgements about art. Nevertheless, through the allocation of public subsidies, the government does influence which art receives more or less financial support, and under what conditions. On paper, this freedom therefore appears to be well protected, but that does not mean it is guaranteed. International examples show what the consequences can be when politicians politicise the arts, for example, by forcing cultural institutions to present only societal positions endorsed by the government.

3.2 The horizontal axis

The societal freedom of art

It is not new for society to regard certain artistic ideas or perspectives as undesirable and therefore seek to exclude them from the public sphere. A well-known international historical example is the threats made against Salman Rushdie in relation to his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988).

Societal criticism of works of art can also change over time, for example because the social context changes and an older work of art effectively becomes ‘out of step with its time’. Following the Black Lives Matter (2013/2020) and Me Too (2017) movements, there has been greater awareness of how stories and societal narratives contribute to the discrimination of women and minorities, and of how colonial artworks remain prominently visible in public space. These movements contributed to the removal of some of those artworks, but also to a more critical view of how women and minorities were and are represented in books, films, plays and visual art. This also leads to a reassessment of the canon.

Taking a case to court, critically examining an older work of art, or even critically examining the canon are democratic and legitimate ways to reduce or de-escalate societal pressure on a work of art. In effect, this involves societal mediation between art and society. The conversation about what is and is not possible at a particular moment contributes to public debate.

In recent years, however, something fundamental seems to have changed in this area. The Council observes that society’s ability to conduct this public debate is diminishing. Many protests against artistic expressions or against the way they are presented do not appear to be intended to expose differences of opinion in order to stimulate public debate. Rather, they seem to aim for the opposite: excluding certain ideas or images from the public sphere and, with them, from public debate. At that point, the scope for mediation is not enlarged but narrowed; after all, the number of voices in the public sphere is reduced. The question is: why is tolerance for a diversity of voices decreasing?

3.3 Changes in society

Political-cultural polarisation

One frequently cited cause is increased polarisation in society. There is a perception that societal divisions are increasingly pushed to extremes, with ever less understanding or patience for dissenting voices. Views on religion, migration, racism, gender and climate, in particular, quickly lead to sharp divisions.

The ongoing *Burgerperspectieven* (Citizens’ perspectives) research by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) shows that most people do not, in fact, hold such extreme views, but instead occupy the middle ground in their thinking on many issues. There is therefore no real evidence to support the widely held perception that society is polarising in terms of views, attitudes and feelings on political issues. The fact that many people nevertheless experience public debate as deteriorating and hardening, especially in the media, on social media, and in politics, appears to stem from the impression that extreme voices on the fringes sound louder than those from the more moderate centre.

Affective polarisation

Although positions may not be polarised, the way people think about others is. This is known as ‘affective polarisation’: people think negatively about others because of their societal views, while also reducing those people to those views. Polarisation begins with political differences, but can escalate into hostility. Here, apparently irreconcilable positions stand in the way of any possible debate.

Such affective polarisation is difficult to reconcile with democracy. In a democratic society, many societal perspectives coexist and may conflict. How to deal with this is a political-philosophical question. Conflict, as the philosopher Chantal Mouffe argues, is characteristic of democracy. Problems arise only when differences in opinion escalate into hostility, when views become fixed and harden into entrenched social positions. It becomes even more dangerous when these fixed views and thinking in terms of enemies are politically mobilised. It then becomes impossible to accept other viewpoints – and, by extension, to recognise the importance of the arts in introducing new perspectives or showing conflicting views. This is despite the fact that the public sphere, which for Mouffe also includes the arts, should be precisely the place where people encounter views other than their own.

One cause of this hardening is the growing tendency to think in terms of opposing identities, which also affects the horizontal axis of artistic freedom. The Council’s conversations with the sector show that the extreme political and social fringes, in particular, have no interest in debate or discussion, but mainly want to express their own positions and use or misuse artistic expressions to do so. Fuelled by disinformation, misinformation and influencers on social media, increasingly hostile and extreme views are filtering through to the centre of the spectrum. This leads, for example, to parents worrying whether a performance or exhibition is suitable or safe for their children, without knowing its content.

Also important for this advisory report is that affective polarisation, like political-cultural polarisation, involves a ‘silent middle’: a group that adopts a nuanced position but is therefore heard less. Experts in this context distinguish between a small group of pushers on the fringes who drive affective polarisation, a somewhat larger group of joiners who support one side, for example by retweeting posts, but are less vocal themselves, and the largest group: the silent middle, which resists the pressure to choose a camp.

The role of the digital sphere

It goes without saying that the digital sphere is ever-present. Everyone can exchange information with others at any time via their phone. As a result, no artistic expression is still 100 percent live or functions solely in the ‘here and now’; every artistic expression is, in a sense, hybrid.

Digital platforms do not play a neutral role here. First, these platforms influence people’s behaviour towards others and their views. Various studies show that social media algorithms spread extreme views more readily than moderate views, because the former generate more engagement. The algorithms of platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are designed to hold users’ attention, which is psychologically most effective when users interact with negative or extreme content. This is reinforced by actors who benefit from polarisation and flood social media with disinformation and extreme views. Algorithms

learn from users what they do and do not want to see, meaning that, over time, it becomes less likely that something uncomfortable or surprising will appear in a user's feed, while the content itself becomes increasingly extreme. If something does slip in from outside their own bubble, the user can simply click it away. This reinforces the online bubble in which people feel at home, while narrowing the space for other perspectives in public debate and strengthening affective polarisation: the other person is not like me. Moreover, this click-away behaviour also appears to translate into offline life, as one of the Council's interviewees observed. We would rather not confront what we dislike. Real life, however, cannot simply be clicked away or cancelled.

Another aspect of the digital sphere that affects artistic freedom is that every artistic expression ultimately appears on the internet in some form. Before the smartphone, a theatre performance, exhibition or pop concert was available only to those who were there in person. Now, people who were not physically present can also access these previously self-contained forms of expression through photographs, videos and streams. As a result, these expressions are removed from their original context. This has consequences for artistic freedom because the artist has no control over what happens to their work online. In the past, a punk concert at which two hundred anarchists sang along to controversial lyrics would hardly have been noticed by others, because of its relatively closed setting. Today, fragments of such a concert can quickly find their way online and more easily cause public controversy, especially if politicians also become involved. Another example is exhibitions – including photography exhibitions – in which, within an exhibition space and an artistic context, images may provoke resistance. If such images take on a life of their own online, this can be extremely unpleasant, and sometimes even threatening, for the artists, but also for anyone portrayed.

Digital platforms themselves also play a curating, or even censoring, role and thereby influence artistic freedom. The strict rules on Facebook and Instagram regarding images containing nudity are well known, meaning that paintings, posters and artistic photographs can also end up being digitally censored, leaving audiences and artists less free to share art. The rules on depicting nudity applied by digital platforms stem in part from the EU's rightly strict legislation and regulations aimed at preventing the spread of child sexual abuse material. The way the platforms apply those rules, however, means that even paintings by Rubens risk being censored. Erotic and LGBTQI+ content is also increasingly being blocked or removed. As a result, several artists and institutions have lost access to their accounts.

Another form of censorship is so-called shadow banning. In this practice, a platform user is not banned outright; their posts simply do not appear, or appear much less frequently, in other users' timelines. Social media platforms use this method to suppress content they consider undesirable. This also happens to artists whose work is regarded as controversial by a platform.

Finally, social media also shape public debate in traditional media. Talk-show producers regularly base their topic choices on controversies in the digital sphere. That controversy is then amplified further in offline discussions. It does not help that experts are often not invited to provide context for the controversy; instead, commentators are invited who are not always well-informed.

Mobilising hostility as a political and social weapon

Politicians, too, may have an interest in creating controversy or attacking perspectives that are sensitive among their electorate. They often politicise the arts to do so: they fuel affective polarisation and mobilise hostility towards the arts sector in general and individual artists in particular. This was the case, for example, in the international examples mentioned earlier. It also affects how society views this freedom; here, the horizontal and vertical axes reinforce one another negatively. This makes art vulnerable and undermines public support, ultimately narrowing the space for the exchange of ideas. Such attacks fuel social unrest and reduce public support for artistic freedom.

It is not only elected representatives, but also other actors in public debate, who use these methods to create affective polarisation and thereby narrow the space available within the public sphere for views they find objectionable. One example is Civitas Christiana, an orthodox Christian foundation funded by international sources, which in the Netherlands sought to steer public debate aggressively on sex education and the work of a well-known children's writer on the basis of lies and disinformation. The court ruled against the foundation. Such attempts to influence public debate through disinformation and defamation are criminal offences, but it is difficult for an individual to defend themselves against them. Civitas Christiana is a well-funded foundation, and it is difficult for an individual artist to fight back against an organisation of this kind. In the Council's view, artists should be protected against such actors in public debate.

The same applies to so-called SLAPP lawsuits (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), in which journalists, commentators or artists are sued by powerful companies for alleged defamation and threatened with claims for substantial damages. In this way, these companies try to discourage individuals from expressing their opinions freely or from pursuing artistic or journalistic investigation. This indirectly restricts artistic freedom, freedom of the press and freedom of expression, ultimately undermining trust in the democratic rule of law and therefore its functioning.

Avoiding conflict

In an affectively polarised society, social discussions become a zero-sum game: only one side can be right, which means the other side is by definition wrong. This is also connected to the desire of some people to exclude words, ideas, topics or individuals from public debate. Affective polarisation then becomes a form of avoidance behaviour: people do not want to be confronted with things with which they may disagree. They look for ways to distance 'the other' from themselves to such an extent that they no longer have to reflect on that person's views. As described above, it seems that cancelling or clicking away from something in online culture is finding its way into offline culture.

In relation to the arts, this can lead to criticism, or worse, of institutions that give certain voices or individuals a platform. Sometimes artists also become more cautious about what they make or write in order to pre-empt criticism, or worse. This flattens public debate and sometimes silences it before it has even begun.

This is connected to the ideas of Chantal Mouffe mentioned earlier, who advocates an agonistic democracy. By this she means a political model that sees conflict and struggle – agonism – as a positive part of democracy, provided that the conversation around conflict is conducted respectfully and focuses on substance rather than the person.

Within this view, ‘the other’ is always treated as a free and equal fellow citizen, making it possible to accept and channel friction and disagreement without undermining democratic society. Mouffe shows that people in a democracy inevitably disagree, and that democracy can function only if the importance of that disagreement is generally recognised. This also means that difficult public discussions must be held. Being open to friction between standpoints ideally creates openness to another person’s pain and joy.

This societal function can readily be extended to the domain of the arts. Artists offer their audiences a broad spectrum of experiences. These experiences do not always have to be pleasant and may also cause discomfort for audiences. That is often the intention, but in a conflict-avoidant society, this discomfort may be experienced as a personal attack on the audience member’s well-being or personal views.

Changing attitudes to authority

Affective polarisation leaves little room for voices that do not fit within one’s own worldview. This is especially true when those voices come from authorities or experts. Much has already been written about society’s changing attitude towards authority. Far-reaching individualisation, the erosion of traditional power structures, and the fact that information is always available online have undermined the authority of traditional institutions such as the press, art criticism, academia, politics, healthcare and education. This also affects the arts. What constitutes ‘good art’, or the idea that art can contribute to society in ways other than by providing entertainment, is no longer readily accepted. Art that does not immediately entertain is then quickly labelled ‘difficult’.

The arts encompass a broad spectrum of artistic expressions. Some art is easily accessible; other forms are more abstract or complex. In the latter cases, some prior knowledge, training or experience is needed to be able to ‘read’ it; the meaning is not immediately apparent and may therefore seem unclear or ambiguous. The idea that an ‘expert’ is needed to explain why something is good art can provoke resistance. At the same time, in public debate, art is too often reduced to more abstract forms and, by extension, labelled ‘elitist’. This does not do justice to the broad spectrum of artistic expressions in the Netherlands.

This view of ‘difficult art’ is not new in itself, but increasing affective polarisation means that part of the potential audience feels more explicitly excluded from, and unrepresented in, the arts than before. One possible solution would be to broaden the concept of art: what do we, as a society, consider to be ‘art’?

Public interest

Another cause of the increasing restriction of artistic freedom is a growing lack of understanding of the role art plays in society. Many people are unfamiliar with the public value of a museum or library, the workings of a theatre performance, or the way a book uses literary language to lead the imagination beyond the familiar. Combined with misinformation, polarisation and increasingly conservative views on nudity, sexuality, gender and ethnicity, this lack of knowledge is generating growing problems in concert halls, museums and theatres.

Because art in some cases critically challenges the status quo, it is often seen as left-wing or progressive. Among some parts of society, this makes art suspect from the outset or, to put it more mildly, ‘not for people like us’. This gives rise to a difficult paradox.

Because art often seeks out the new and the unknown, it more naturally aligns with a broadly progressive outlook. As a result, more conservative voices are less likely to be heard in the arts. This, in turn, may mean that more conservative groups feel less represented in contemporary art. Institutions and artists have a responsibility here: to make room for broader perspectives and sometimes also more traditional views.

In connection with all of the above, society is shifting from the ‘public interest’ towards the ‘individual interest’. In a fragmented society affected by affective polarisation and a shortage of shared public space, the idea that art has a value beyond the individual is becoming diluted. Other domains within the democratic institutions of civil society are also suffering as a result. Court rulings are reduced to the presumed political preference of the judge; the objectivity of journalists is undermined in all kinds of ways. Art is reduced to the product of an individual using it simply to express a personal opinion, rather than being seen as an attempt to open up a conversation with a wider public. The broader importance of art – introducing ideas, feelings, sounds and images into the public sphere – is then lost from view.

In summary, all this means that the ‘public interest’, the public sphere and the plurality of voices and opinions within it are being eroded. As noted, this has repercussions for journalism, the judiciary, academia and the arts. This broader public interest – in this case, the public interest of the arts – is increasingly overlooked. The arts, too, have become subject to the zero-sum game in which there is little room for doubt or for withholding judgement. And yet a society that is open to more perspectives becomes more flexible and resilient.

3.4 Changes in art

It is not only society that is constantly changing; art is too. The same applies to the relationship between the two. Art has always had to position itself in relation to society. After all, it emerges from society and responds to it, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly. At the same time, a certain distance between art and society is needed to allow art to respond to or reflect freely on society. It is difficult, for example, to be critical of society’s norms and values without being able to take some distance from them. The idea based on this – that of the autonomous artist who withdraws from society’s norms and values – is not, however, a universal principle, but a development in Western thinking about art that dates back to Romanticism, as described by Rüdiger Safranski, among others, in his book *Romanticism*. The Romantics sought the ‘aestheticisation of the real’: in other words, they wanted to turn the ‘real’ into art in such a way that distance was created between art and reality. Art can play with reality, revealing the playful nature of human beings and showing that liberation from social norms is possible.

This Romantic, autonomous position also contained a paradox. Art could reshape reality by being critical of it precisely because art could exist as a somewhat separate domain within society. In art, things could and can be said, made or done that were or are not yet socially acceptable. In this way, art contributed to various social movements. For example, in the play *Nora – or A Doll’s House* – by the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, written in 1879, the title character leaves her husband at the end. In the real world, this was unthinkable. It was fiction and, in that sense, harmless. At the same time, the play

sparked fierce debate and contributed to the public debate on the position of women in European society.

At the same time, art – autonomously seeking new forms and ideas – also became increasingly abstract and therefore more distant from society. Various artistic movements then sought to bring art closer to society, but this was often followed by a more abstract response. Western art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has thus swung back and forth between greater and lesser distance from society, as artists continually seek new ways to escape this paradox: how can you reduce the distance from society while still preserving your artistic freedom?

Movement towards greater societal engagement

Over the past two decades, a clear movement has emerged in the Dutch arts towards greater social engagement and a desire to respond more directly to society or involve society more directly in the making of art. Previously, this happened in the margins of the arts and in community arts, but the desire for social engagement has become more mainstream. One reason for this is the increased unease, particularly among younger generations of artists, about the ‘overextended autonomy’ of art at the beginning of this century, which in their eyes had caused art to move ever further away from society. In the Netherlands, large-scale cuts to national arts subsidies also contributed to this unease. This was especially due to the populist tone in which the cuts were introduced and the ease with which society accepted them; if such a large part of society is indifferent to what happens in the arts, then the connection with that society must be restored.

Another factor contributing to this movement closer to society was the fact that the Western conception of art, long regarded as universal, lost its primacy. Since the 1950s, various groups in society have undergone major emancipatory advances, for example in relation to cultural background, gender or sexuality. Although there are concerns in the arts about society’s growing conservatism, and the emancipation of various groups is far from complete, many subjects are now far more open to discussion in art than they were several decades ago. The arts sector is becoming increasingly able to engage with society and is gradually working towards becoming a fuller reflection of that society – a society which, after all, contains more perspectives than the male, white, heteronormative perspective that long served as the norm. This also means that traditional gatekeepers at institutions are disappearing or that their position is changing; fewer and fewer decisions about what constitutes ‘good’ art and how it should be made are being determined by a select group of people. The gatekeepers in the arts – directors, critics, publishers, members of advisory committees, jury members and curators – are becoming increasingly diverse. This can have a positive emancipatory effect, because it makes a broader concept of art possible and allows other ways of working. As a result, the canon is becoming less rigid.

By holding more loosely to the canon, through the influence of other art forms and the influx of artists from different cultural backgrounds, new ideas are emerging about how art is made. The relationship between artist and society can take shape in many ways, resulting in entirely different working practices. In the Netherlands, for example, there has been a visible increase in socially engaged artistic work, in which members of society are directly involved or actively contribute to the creation of an exhibition, performance or event.

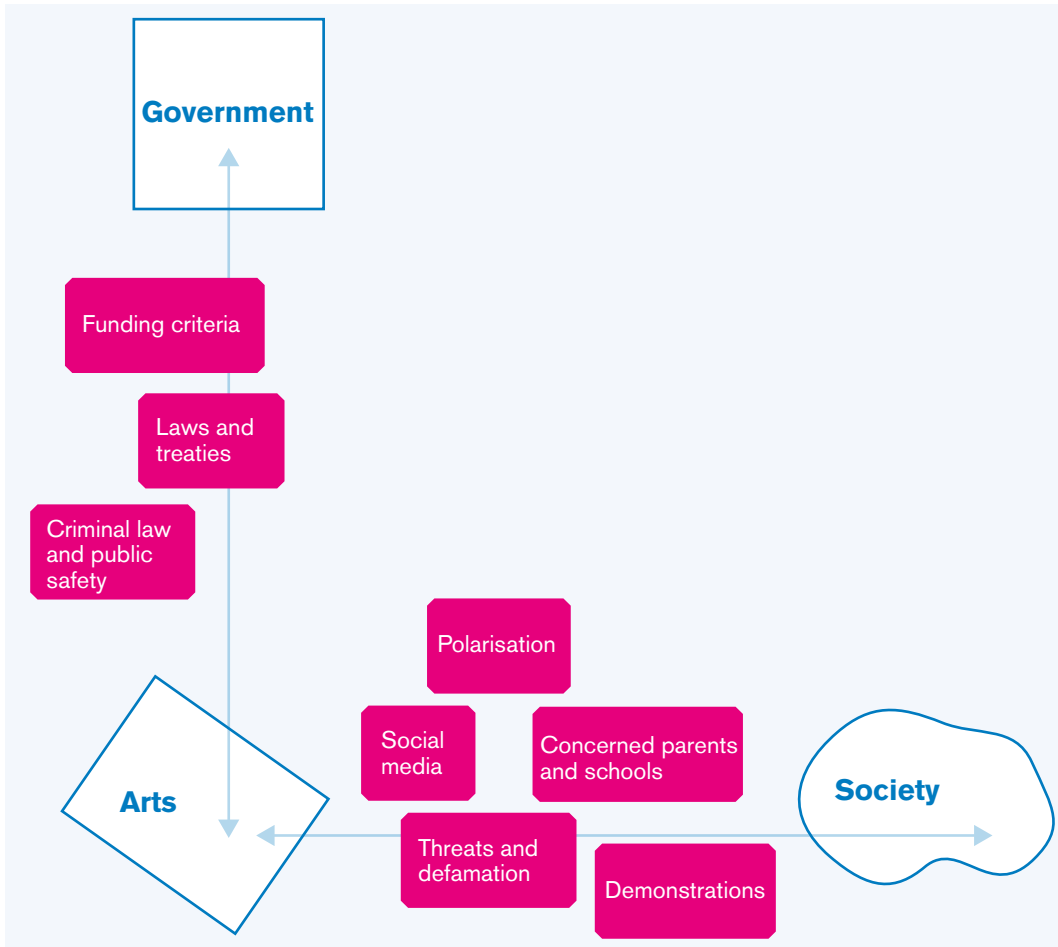
Contentious social issues

One result of the arts' increased awareness of their position in society is that, in recent years, the Dutch arts have paid greater attention to minority groups and to issues relating to emancipation in the areas of religion, gender, sexuality, identity and colour. Artists choose these subjects because they see that they are present in society. The same applies to subjects such as sustainability and migration. As a result, in youth performing arts, for example, there are many performances that explore these subjects from a minority perspective. Institutions working with young people, in particular, consider it important that children are also introduced to perspectives that are not part of everyone's everyday experience. At the same time, these artistic expressions clash with the views of some parents, pupils or school leaders. This creates a clash between artistic freedom, the social and emancipatory function of art encouraged by government, freedom of education, and the freedom of parents to raise their children in accordance with their own worldview.

The social engagement of artists and arts institutions is also reflected in the fact that they are taking clearer and more outspoken positions in public debates, for example on racism, climate or the Israel-Palestine conflict. They are also increasingly taking part in cultural boycotts. Institutions, too, are increasingly drawn into these debates, for example when deciding whether or not to programme a particular group, artist or speaker, or whether to take a public position themselves. Here, too, there is the dilemma that taking an active position in a polarised public debate may mean that an institution excludes sections of its potential audience.

According to the Council, these final examples clearly illustrate the consequences of the movements described in this chapter. On the one hand, art is moving towards society, precisely out of a desire to reduce the distance from society. It does so by examining themes that are alive in society, sometimes in an explicitly activist manner. At the same time, society is experiencing growing affective polarisation, in which opinions that do not fit within one's own bubble are received as hostile. These two movements pull in opposite directions, creating friction and, with it, societal pressure. The question is how to deal with that pressure while preserving space for artistic freedom to show and give voice to as many voices, images and sounds as possible – and, where possible, to expand that space.

Figure 2 Examples of how society and government influence artistic freedom.



Conclusions

4. Conclusions

The arts provide a space where audiences can encounter a wide range of perspectives and new ideas, forms and ways of thinking. The arts can fulfil this function only if artists and institutions are free to create and present their work.

The Council for Culture observes that pressure on artistic freedom is increasing, comparable to the pressure experienced by other societal domains, such as the judiciary, the media, journalism and academia. The common thread is that the perceived space for placing different perspectives and ideas side by side in the public sphere appears to be diminishing. A second movement is that, as a result of various developments, art is in fact moving closer to society. The friction between these two movements can at times create real sparks between art and society.

In principle, that tension and friction are not a problem; they are part of the relationship between art and society. Moreover, the movement bringing the arts and society closer together also offers opportunities. Research and the conversations conducted for this advisory report show that the greatest societal pressure comes from ‘the fringes’. Most people hold moderate views and are troubled by extreme voices. Most of society also values the democratic society. The main task, therefore, is to keep this group engaged with the democratic institutions of civil society. Art has a role to play in this.

The increased unease between society and art also points to society’s engagement with art. Art plays a role in shaping opinions and identities and, for many people, serves as a reference point against which to define or confirm their own identity or opinions. As a source of meaning, art is worth entering into dialogue with, even when you disagree with it. The fact that audiences talk back implies the possibility of dialogue. Politicians and the arts sector should do much more together to emphasise that this dialogue is an essential function of the arts; that it is precisely the intention that individuals and society form opinions about art, while making clear and respecting the fact that different opinions may coexist in the public sphere.

This is also why arts education is important. A child who, because of their background or upbringing or because of a misconception of what art can be, is confronted with something they do not want to see may conclude that art is not for them. Yet, according to the Council, it is problematic if young people and children no longer come into contact with different ideas, images, perspectives and sounds through the arts, even if these sometimes clash with the views of the child or their parents. Arts education also has an emancipatory function. At school, children can broaden their view of the world beyond what they are taught or exposed to at home, while also developing their creativity. Both active and receptive arts education play an important role in this.

By extension, arts education contributes to citizenship education. It teaches pupils to engage with other views and standpoints, including those with which they disagree. In this way, they are prepared to function in a democratic society in which peaceful conflict forms part of public life. Of course, this also brings children into contact with things they find odd, strange, shocking or boring. What matters is that children learn that this is acceptable, that they may respond respectfully, that they may form their own opinion of the work of art, that their opinion matters, and that a shared conversation about those different views is precisely the point.

To contribute to society, the arts need freedom. Artists or presenting institutions should never feel reluctant to show their work, because this narrows the public conversation. At a time when the free exchange of ideas is already under pressure, the free space that art creates is especially important. This also creates dilemmas and tensions for everyone involved in the field. Government, the arts, audiences and education all have their own responsibility here.

Government

The responsibility for protecting artistic freedom lies primarily with government. First, because this is a matter of public interest: guaranteeing a plurality of voices in the public sphere. Government should actively communicate this interest to society through its words and actions, just as it should when it comes to the democratic rule of law as a whole. Government is also able to take measures in the areas of legal protection and security, and to provide financial and other support when artistic freedom is at risk. Individual artists or institutions do not have these options.

Government already contributes to the protection of artistic freedom in various ways. It refrains from censorship and from making substantive judgements about which artistic expressions are or are not desirable. It also makes a wide range of genres and art forms possible through financial support, while also supporting cultural infrastructure and arts education. Finally, government plays a role in cultural education. However, the Council also notes that all this is not enough to curb the increasing pressure on artistic freedom. In fact, in the roles mentioned above, government contributes to a free arts sector either passively or indirectly. The Council believes that government should also play a more active role in protecting artistic freedom. This could include, for example, actively holding digital platforms to account when they undermine artistic freedom.

Artists and presenting institutions

It is not only artists who must be free to create what they wish. Artistic freedom also means that presenting institutions are free to present whatever they wish to audiences. In that sense, they too enjoy artistic freedom. Precisely because presenting institutions mediate directly between artist and audience, they are also most directly exposed to pressure from those audiences. At the same time, they have greater scope than individual artists to protect themselves against that pressure. As discussed above, government has an important task here, because it has greater scope than the arts sector itself to protect the arts from societal pressure. But the arts can also help to reduce pressure on artistic freedom. They can, for example, be more transparent about the choices they make and offer visitors more context to help audiences interpret what is being shown. It is also important that institutions and artists continue actively to emphasise their public value to audiences and government.

These possible lines of action for the arts sector itself fall into two categories: societal and practical-organisational. The first category centres on the awareness that art serves a public interest and that there is a clear reciprocity between art and society. That relationship has changed in recent years. As a result, there is greater friction between art and society, but this also offers opportunities to involve people more closely in the public value of art. The second category centres on the observation that societal pressure has unfortunately become part of presenting art, and that institutions would therefore do well to prepare for it with practical safety and security measures. Here, it is useful to draw a clear distinction between the individual artist, on the one hand, and

the presenting institutions and publishers that mediate between the artistic expression created by the artist and the audience, on the other. It is precisely because of this mediating function that these institutions have more possible lines of action than the individual artist.

Audiences and intermediaries

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people became aware of what is lost when cultural facilities are closed. In this context, it is striking how quickly visitor numbers in some sectors, such as the performing arts, rose again after the pandemic. The more people feel that art speaks to them, the greater the support for its public value. That is why the Council considers it so important to increase and broaden both audiences and the concept of art itself: whether you sing in a choir, take part in hip hop, enjoy André Rieu or experimental performances, or visit an art-house cinema or the Rijksmuseum, in every case it is about doing things together and experiencing something together through the transmission of beauty, ideas, perspectives and values.

Simply by being present and showing that they are engaged, audiences act as ambassadors for the cultural sector. When artistic freedom comes under pressure, audiences could speak out more forcefully in its defence. This is, of course, a naïve wish, which cannot be actively enforced because ‘the’ audience does not exist. In this regard, the task lies primarily with government and the sector itself, as outlined above. At the same time, audiences are represented by societal intermediaries that could play a role in strengthening artistic freedom. Examples include schools, churches, mosques, trade unions, ministries, and public-sector organisations or institutions, such as healthcare providers or housing associations. If such societal bodies realise that they can increase their own public value through art, they can also help to build support for art and to expand a public sphere in which societal differences can be placed alongside one another and discussed.

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