

Natasha Marie Llorens

# At Arm's Length: Political Capture of the Arts in Sweden

Sweden is that reasonable cousin at Christmas dinner who, when someone starts talking about climate collapse and the rise of fascism, brings the tone of the conversation back within an acceptable emotional range. Around the time the Netherlands was brutally gutting its cultural funding in the early 2010s, Sweden was rearticulating its commitment to a strong, state-supported cultural sector. According to Ann Demeester, the Dutch government justified its financial butchery by painting “artists as elitist, parasitic, sophisticated beggars, living off state subsidies, basically procrastinating.”<sup>1</sup> Sweden, by contrast, passed a cultural policy plan in 2009 declaring that “[state-supported] Culture is to be a dynamic, challenging and independent force based on the freedom of expression ... Creativity, diversity, and artistic quality are to be integral parts of society’s development.”<sup>2</sup>

The idea that art and culture should be accessible to all as a basic building block of a resilient society has long been coupled with the idea that art should be free from political influence. The reverse is also true: the triumph of the far right depends on its control of the social narrative, which is why, according to Hannah Arendt, “propaganda ... is one, and possibly the most important, instrument of totalitarianism for dealing with the nontotalitarian world.”<sup>3</sup> When Donald Trump fired the director of Washington DC’s illustrious Kennedy Center earlier this year, then appointed himself its president, dismissing a number of board members and replacing them with Lee Greenwood (a country music signer famous for “God Bless the USA”) and a couple of Fox News pundits, the point of the power grab was clear.<sup>4</sup> Out with the liberal-swampish hands-off arts policy, in with Trumpism-as-reality. Although there is, incredibly, still some shock that Trump’s autocratic ambitions extend to the art world, it shouldn’t surprise anyone.

The fact that the space between the government and the arts is collapsing in the US feels predictable, given its long history of the political instrumentalization of the arts. The same could be said for Germany. When all the members of the Finding Committee for Documenta 16 (2027) resigned in protest in November 2023, their justification was as precise as it was damning: “In the current circumstances we do not believe that there is a space in Germany for an open exchange of ideas and the development of complex and nuanced artistic approaches that documenta artists and curators deserve.”<sup>5</sup> Again, it is alarming that an institution like Documenta—founded in the wake of World War II with an “awareness of the unimaginable horrors that ideological blindness makes possible”—is unable to maintain its independence from political forces. But it is not unexpected.

What is remarkable is that Sweden, too, is in the midst of dismantling the independence of its major national arts infrastructure. An example of the tone of this policy shift: Parisa Liljestrand, Sweden’s minister of culture for Moderaterna, the liberal-conservative party that



Moderna Museet

constitutes the largest part of the current governing coalition, gave a speech at the inauguration of the Gothenburg Film Festival that was widely considered hostile. “I know that many culture ministers before me have wanted to present themselves as the best friends and main representatives of the various industries in the government,” she said. “You might get a lot of appreciation for it, not least at galas and festivals like this one. What do I know? But at least I know that it is not the task of politics.”<sup>6</sup> The message is that the political mission of the minister of culture is not to do or say things that would garner appreciation from those who attend well-respected international film festivals, though of course she does not make it a habit of attending such events and so is not well-placed to comment.

Liljestrand’s dismissiveness is part of a broader liberal-conservative ideological stance that has accompanied the rise of the far right in Sweden. Moderaterna’s policy is characterized by a strong focus on personal responsibility, skepticism toward increased government spending, and an emphasis on the interests of Sweden’s business community. Jimmie Åkesson, leader of the misleadingly named Sweden Democratic party,

several of whose members have direct ties to postwar Nazi organizations, made the stakes of its 2022 political victory clear: “Now we will get order in Sweden. It is time to start rebuilding security, prosperity and cohesion. It’s time to put Sweden first.” Linnea Lindsköld, director for the Center for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Borås, was equally forthright about what the defeat of the center-left party means for art. “Sweden first” entails protecting an essentialist understanding of Swedish-ness that justifies having “a hand in defining what cultural expressions and art [are] acceptable.”<sup>7</sup>

This political meddling flies in the face of a well-established allegiance to the arm’s-length principle, a “support, but don’t control” ethos defining the relationship between politicians and the arts that—like Documenta—dates to the end of World War II in Europe. The current paradigm shift not only affects the amount of funding for the arts but also, and more importantly, enables direct oversight by politicians. The first mark of this shift was the proposal in 2022 to establish a mandatory Swedish cultural canon in the spirit of the one proposed in Denmark in 2004, to be taught at every level of the state educational system. Anna Troberg, chair of the

Union for Culture, Communication, and the Creative Sector (DIK), responded thusly to the proposal in draft form: “They [leading conservative thinkers, notably Lars Tradgardh] are in effect amputating this arm. Politicians are suddenly deciding what culture people should have access to.”<sup>8</sup>

Less imaginative but no less chilling is the recent proposal to merge Moderna Museet, the national modern and contemporary art museum, with ArkDes, Sweden’s national center for architecture and design, and the Swedish Public Art Agency, which manages the national art collection and commissions public art throughout the country. The proposed name for this new conglomerated government agency is “Moderna—the Authority for Modern Art, Architecture, and Design.” The main justification provided is cost efficiency in the long term, and the redundancy of IT and HR departments across three state cultural institutions that are located on the same small island in the middle of Stockholm. At first glance, the proposal is depressing in a predictable way: Of course it’s possible to save money by subsuming three specialized institutions into a highly recognizable mega-institution, but is it good news for people who work with art, design, and architecture, or those who care about the depth and independence of artistic practice? Probably not.

Despite the procedural nature of the merger, it is no less consequential than Trump’s takeover of the Kennedy Center. With roughly 10.5 million inhabitants, Sweden is a small country. The three institutions proposed for merger are the main public ones in the country dedicated to modern art, architecture, design, and public art. There isn’t any alternative infrastructure, which means that consolidation will suffocate the discursive ecosystems of smaller initiatives that depend on the space each institution currently holds in the national imagination. This is more than a rushed centralization of resources by an efficiency-driven conservative government. It is a move to weaken both the independence and the forcefulness of Sweden’s cultural imagination.

Further still, with the creation of a new state institution, it becomes possible to introduce extensive government control over cultural operations. The merger allows the government to create and appoint a board with direct responsibility for all three institutions at once, while simultaneously producing a great deal of organizational noise so that the impact of this power grab is muted.

The report on the merger argues that the leadership model currently in use—a government-appointed director for each institution—does not provide the “broad leadership” and expertise required, whereas a government-appointed board would have both the “responsibility and mandate to steer the authority in the direction the board deems appropriate, based on the government’s governance and the Riksdag’s objectives.”

What are the objectives of the Riksdag, Sweden’s parliament? The answer given in the report represents a stark departure from the role of culture according to long-established social-democratic principles: “Cultural and creative businesses should be able to contribute to creating attractive and sustainable living environments and a diversified and competitive business community throughout the country.” There is no mention of equitable access to the arts, nor of art’s role in education or its value to society on its own terms. The priority is attractive living conditions for the business community. And to be sure the reader understands the justification for both the merger and the proposed leadership structure, the report is very clear on what is at stake for the government: “The committee’s assessment is that the government may need to direct the way in which the new authority is expected to contribute to how the government’s strategy for businesses in the creative and cultural industries can be achieved.”

On the surface, again, this reads as a depressing admission that neoliberalism has triumphed in Sweden like in many other Western European cultural contexts in the last three decades. I want to suggest that government control over such key national infrastructure at a moment when the far right just won 30 percent of the vote is an early sign of something much more alarming. It should be read on a spectrum with the capture of Documenta and Trump’s takeover of the Kennedy Center as the intentional dismantling of an infrastructure for political dissent. It should be read together with the fact that Sweden joined NATO on March 7, 2024 after having maintained military neutrality since the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15). That such a geographically strategic, economically stable country is rapidly dismantling the independence of its arts infrastructure now, rather than, for example, trying to talk sense to Germany about the systematic way freedom of expression is being foreclosed in that country, is yet another alarming high-water mark in the rising tide of war.

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