

Community Arts in The Netherlands

Community arts seems to be booming business in The Netherlands. In a few weeks a large community art festival will take place in Utrecht. Last year the Dutch centre of expertise for arts education, Cultuurnetwerk, started a data base on community arts and in little time it has collected more than 100 projects that were carried out the last two years.¹

Problems concerning social cohesion, citizenship and identity keep appearing in papers on cultural policy and community arts inevitably is mentioned as a possible contribution to the solution of these problems.

And the continuing attention for community arts is also mirrored in some of the curricula of Dutch art academies and conservatoires as well as in the research at these institutions. In Rotterdam and in Arnhem lecturers specialized in community arts have been appointed (Peter van den Hurk for theatre and Merlijn Twaalfhoven for music) and of course Peter den Ouden has made his contributions on this topic here in Amsterdam

All this does not mean however that community arts is an accepted art form in the Dutch art world. Community arts has not one home base so to speak: sometimes it belongs to the professional arts, sometimes to the amateur art and arts education and sometimes to welfare. Therefore its status remains somewhat uncertain.

In my contribution I first want to present some information on community arts projects in The Netherlands. This information is based on the data base of Cultuurnetwerk Nederland I mentioned before and the analysis that Sandra Trienekens, a researcher at the Rotterdam Erasmus University, did on this data base and on interviews she and some colleagues held with community artists involved in these projects.²

Secondly I want to go deeper into some issues concerning the definition and status of community arts and finally say something about consequences for training of community artists.

Community arts does not have a widely shared and accepted definition and some authors have argued against trying to define such a complex phenomenon. Nevertheless I think we should be striving towards a description of community arts and some of the following general characteristics are often mentioned:

First of all it is group oriented and demand oriented. It is a site specific art form that takes place outside the traditional and formal educational or art contexts. One can think of disadvantaged urban areas, homes for elderly, hospitals, prisons etc. It reaches out to people who generally have little affinity with or access to standard cultural facilities and it engages these people in artistic activities (theatre, music, visual arts). The community artist should not act as a professional artist who solely uses participants for his or her artistic aims (passing on a personal aesthetic), nor as a directive teacher giving instructions but as a facilitator and collaborator who treats participants on an equal basis.

¹ http://www.cultuurenschool.net/projectloket/projectloket_cultuurcoh.asp

² 'Kunst en sociaal engagement' (Cultuur + Educatie 17, Cultuurnetwerk Nederland) will be published december 2006

The community arts projects that Cultuurnetwerk collected and selected all have several of these characteristics, but only few of them possess all characteristics. Therefore it is quite possible to disagree about the inclusion or exclusion of some of the projects.

Art Projects with prisoners such as 'Beyond bars' by Jos Zandvliet and Peter den Ouden are exemplary. But there are less obvious examples, for instance small-scale projects in which an artist cooks meals for a group, holds conversations with visitors of an exhibition or wakes at night in the bedrooms of participants. Of course sensible musicians don't do these things, but some visual artists do and these so-called 'social sculptures' or 'relational aesthetics' certainly are forms of critical art where participants play an important role, but whether they belong to the category of community arts has to be decided.

It is telling that only about 20% of the people who were involved in the projects collected by Cultuurnetwerk called them community arts projects themselves. Many other terms were used such as social cultural projects, art projects, youth projects, neighbourhood projects etc.

When asked what the main focus of the project was: artistic quality, personal development of participants or social improvement, personal development came first (about 40%), social improvement second (about 35%) and artistic quality third (about 25%). But many objected to this forced choice and said that all three were part of the project.

And an open question about the major intentions of the projects resulted in a long list, ranging from community development, social cohesion, empowerment, awareness, personal growth to cultural participation, social inclusion and artistic development and artistic innovation.

When we look at the art disciplines involved, music comes first, followed by theatre, visual arts and new media, dance and literature. But more important: the majority of the projects has a multidisciplinary approach and involves three art disciplines or more.

The participants sometimes form a geographically bound group (and live in an apartment building, a street, a neighbourhood, a village, etc.). Sometimes they form a cultural or ethnic group and sometimes a social group (unemployed, homeless etc.) and sometimes an age group (elderly, youth). Secondary is that some groups of participants are primarily connected because of their interest in an art form (say music or theatre) whereas other groups are formed because they share a concern for a social problem or issue.

These differences in motivation and characteristics in participant groups call for different approaches and methods by the community artists. In about 60% of the projects there is no selection of the participants, but in about 40% there is. For instance one can think of youth projects aimed at discovering and development of talents, projects such as Culture Shock, Battle of Amsterdam and Roots and Routes.

In somewhat less than 70% of the cases the ideas and materials of the participants form the starting points of the projects, in about 15% projects are based on existing compositions or plays and in 15% there is a mixture.

When asked whether the project was more process oriented or more product oriented, about 40% answered that the main focus was the artistic and social process, 20% said the main focus was the product (a concert, a performance whatever) and 40% said that process and product were equally important.

Community art projects are no individual art works: they are the result of cooperation between different persons and institutions. Besides the community artists often involved are

organizations for public welfare and community work, municipalities, arts centres, theatres, and libraries, associations for amateur art etc. In Great Britain the professionalisation of Community Arts is more advanced: municipalities often have special community arts officers and there are so-called Community Arts Development Workers, who bring the different persons and organisations together, take care of fund raising, project management etc. In The Netherlands the majority of projects is ad hoc and the networks still have to grow.

An obvious conclusion from these data is that although community arts projects share some basic characteristics (they are group oriented, issue based and context bound) they are very heterogeneous: they differ in aims, in methods, in the composition of participants and in the role of the artist.

After this description of the Dutch situation I will turn to some problems or dilemmas.

The first is the **status** of community art in the Dutch Artworld. In The Netherlands art that is associated with political activism, welfare, education and amateurs generally has low status. High status art is autonomous professional art that meets the criteria of quality that are shared and protected by the inner circle of art experts and art critics. High art can of course reflect on or comment on social issues, but it loses its aura as soon as it strives for goals beyond art and aesthetics and actively links itself with social action. Some community artists do mind this status problem and want to broaden the criteria by which quality in art is judged. Others are not interested in recognition by the art world. And a third possibility is that artists pursue two or more careers: one as an autonomous artist, performer or musician and one as a community artist. There can be a cross-fertilization between these careers but one learns to cope with the different demands of these art forms.

For the community artist there is also the danger of exchanging the romantic view of an autonomous artist who deliberately put society at a distance in order to be able to create and to play for another romantic vision: the artist who activates and mobilizes the sick and the poor and leads the way to their liberation. This kind of overrating of one's possibilities is sometimes called aesthetic evangelism.

A second issue is the **nature of the pedagogic role** of the community artist. In some publications this role is negatively described as not that of teacher. Teaching is associated with authority, passing on and assessing knowledge and skills and not with creativity and personal and social development. The community artist should act as facilitator, as collaborator or as co-constructor. However most community artists will have some concept of what the project should involve and to achieve their goal and to meet their expectations they will intervene in the process in subtle or less subtle ways. The position of the artist or artists and the other participants is not equal in all respects and in most projects at some stages coaching and teaching is required. That is not the same as relying upon a familiar box of teaching tricks. Contantijn Koopman wrote an article about the educational potential of community music. He stresses that current concepts of teaching and learning such as situated learning and authentic learning accord with the ideals of community arts.

A last issue concerns the **evaluation** of community art projects. In some post modern thinking neither the formulation of definitions nor the positivist notion of measuring effects are called for. But remember all those policy papers that link community arts to social cohesion, good citizenship, creative industries and what not. These goals of community arts are important for its funding and subsidies. Most people (policy makers included) are not so naïve as to expect

immediate and large scale effects, but forms of quantitative and qualitative evaluation will be necessary to substantiate some of these claims and to look critically at what can be achieved and what not.

I now come to my last point: some of the consequences of these data and these dilemmas for the training of the community artists. I limit myself to the situation here at the Amsterdam School of the Arts and then I see that in music the community arts find a place in the bachelor program of the music teacher training, in theatre as well, but there also is a post bachelor program KIS (Art in society). In the field of visual arts I do not see explicit programs for community arts.

Can a bachelor program of teacher training in one of the art disciplines alone cope with this complex field? First problem is the existing overload of the teacher training programs, which have to prepare for the whole range of formal education (from primary school to all levels of secondary education) as well as for teaching introductory courses in music schools, creativity centres etc. This means that the time for preparation in community arts is limited.

Secondly we have seen that community arts is the domain for art educators as well as professional artists. So training in this field should not be the sole responsibility of teacher training!

A third issue is that many community arts projects are multidisciplinary in character. This implies that training in this field should prepare for this. As bachelor programs are discipline specific one should strive for forms of cooperation and exchange between these programs. I know from my own experience in the field of CKV (Arts and Culture) that this is difficult to achieve.

However we have the obligation to prepare students who are interested in working in this field. Community arts is an important and challenging field to work in: important because of its potential role in society and in the arts and challenging because it lacks the framework of the formal education with the school curriculum or the training in the music schools, but it also because it is at odds with many criteria of the professional art world we are so familiar with here at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. More than in any other field one must be able to adapt and to improvise, to collaborate and to organize and one must be able to deal with the ethical and political implications of one's actions.

Lastly I want to thank Peter den Ouden for all his efforts, energy and experience to bring this field in the attention of both education and research at the Amsterdam School of the Arts.

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