

INTRODUCTION: CRITIQUE OF THE FREEDOM OF ART: A COUNTER-REPORT

In Swedish debates it has in recent years often been claimed that Swedish cultural policy has a “left-wing bias”, is “politically correct”, or “woke”, in a way that threatens the freedom of art. Since the 2022 general election, won by a right-wing coalition supported by the far-right Sweden Democrats, claims to this effect have been made with increasing tenacity. They have found validation in a report published by the Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis in 2021, *Så fri är konsten (This Is How Free Art Is)*. In that report, the agency’s experts asserted that “cultural policy governance that has or could have a detrimental influence on artistic freedom does in fact occur.”¹ According to the experts, the most serious indications of such “detrimental influence” could be found in how certain national funding bodies for culture—mainly the Swedish Arts Council and the Film Institute—imposed politically correct demands on the applicants, and on the forms of their artworks and projects.

The three texts in this part of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* together form a counter-report. They show that the Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis, and the many voices in Swedish media that have repeated its argument, lack grounds for the claim that there “does in fact occur” a politically correct homogenization of publicly supported cultural practices, on the part of national policy bodies. What the agency’s report does show, however, is that there are serious, systematic transgressions of the “freedom of art”—and of the principle of “arm’s length distance” that is designed to protect it—on regional and municipal policy levels, in the name of the socially and economically beneficial effects of the “creative industries”. But these results have received minimal attention in the following debates.

The texts were first published in Swedish in December 2022, as a book titled *Kritik av konstens frihet: en motrapport (Critique of the Freedom of Art: A Counter-Report)*, written in the framework of the research project “Autonomy, Culture, Action: On Culture’s Sphere’s of Political Action in the Neoliberal Welfare State” (funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond), and published by the independent publishing house I|21 Press.² For an academic publication at a small-scale, self-organized publishing house, the book has received an unexpected amount of attention, with reviews and

commenting articles in most major Swedish newspapers and cultural publications.³ We, the authors—Gustav Strandberg, Kim West, and Josefine Wikström—have been invited to present and discuss the book at a number of different venues in Sweden and the Nordic countries: research centers and university departments, cultural policy establishments and associations, and cultural institutions and organizations.

It is our impression that the book has provided something that has been experienced as lacking, by contributing with a critical and progressive perspective on a topic that has for too long been monopolized by the “cultural warriors” of the libertarian and nationalist far right. In contemporary debates, the concept of the “freedom of art” has become a right-wing rallying point, around which traditionally diverging forces have been able to align. It has been invoked to support neoliberal ambitions to privatize various cultural policy sectors, by integrating them within the field of the “creative industries”, so as to *free* them from “excessive governance”, establishing a binary opposition between freedom and the state. But it has also been invoked to support the far right’s ambitions to secure a conservative nationalist influence at different levels of cultural policy administration, in order to *free* culture from “leftwing instrumentalization”, and to restore it to its ethnically defined rightful owners.

The present texts reject such understandings of the “freedom of art”—but they do not reject the concept as such. On the contrary, the texts insist on its importance, in order then to ask what the political ramifications would be if it were actually taken seriously, as a critically valid term that still denotes something essential regarding the social logic of contemporary cultural practices. As will be evident, the texts in this section are therefore not exclusively, or even mainly “about” the report from the Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis. Instead, they take their cue from *This Is How Free Art Is*, and from the right-wing discourse in which the report has regularly been invoked as legitimating support, in order to pose a series of more general, critical questions:

- ◇ How should we understand the concept of the “freedom of art” under contemporary conditions? (A question that informs all three texts.)
- ◇ What are the relations between that concept and the field of the “creative industries”? (The specific topic of Gustav Strandberg’s contribution.)

- ◇ What does the metaphor of “arm’s length distance” actually mean? (Discussed in detail in Josefine Wikström’s essay.)
- ◇ And which would be the political implications of a critical understanding of the “autonomy of art”? (A question to which Kim West’s text attempts to outline a response.)

On a fundamental level, the texts in this section want to contribute to opening a discussion about what a long-term, progressive, and anti-racist cultural policy could be in Sweden—and beyond—today, against the background of a political situation characterized by the increasing influence of conservative, xenophobic, and anti-intellectual forces.

For *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, the texts have been peer-reviewed, lightly revised in relation to ongoing discussions and debates, and in some aspects adapted for an international audience perhaps slightly less familiar with the practical and historical details of Swedish cultural policy. We thank Jacob Lund for giving us the opportunity to publish the texts in this context, David Payne for editorial assistance, and the anonymous reviewers for their important comments and remarks.

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- 1 Myndigheten för kulturanalys
(*The Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis*),
*Så fri är konsten: Den kulturpolitiska styrningens
påverkan på den konstnärliga friheten.
Rapport 2021:1*, p. 20. Available here:
<https://kulturanalys.se/publikation/sa-fri-ar-konsten/>
- 2 Gustav Strandberg, Kim West, and Josefine Wikström,
Kritik av konstens frihet: en motrapport (Hägersten: 1|21
Press, 2022).
- 3 See e.g. Ulrika Stahre, “Kulturpolitiken är inte 'woke' utan
nyliberal”, *Aftonbladet*, January 29, 2023;
Sonia Hedstrand, “Sveriges konstnärer ryser över
attackerna mot fri konst”, *Dagens Nyheter*,
February 1, 2023; Gunilla Kindstrand, “Hur mycket
konstnärlig frihet tål Sverige?”, *Svenska Dagbladet*,
March 13, 2023.