

# Editorial

# Can a Globally Integrated Cultural and Artistic Perspective

*Help Hold Together a Dissolving World?*

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As editor of this volume of JUCR and on behalf of his former colleagues, I would like to extend my most sincere thanks to previous editor Kjell Skyllstad who worked on the journal from its inception. Kjell encouraged scholarship from a range of intersecting disciplines and ensured that JUCR supported authors whose first language was not English. His commitment to ensuring global input and readership was a step towards unpicking the axiomatic notion that the best intellectual activity emerges from and is concentrated in certain geographical regions and developed in languages associated with the global north. The small steps taken by this journal may prove prophetic as the scholarly world moves inexorably toward the theoretical and practical acknowledgement that the fullest account of human experience and knowledge requires a pivot towards an appreciation of a range of intellectual traditions. In this spirit, it is hoped that JUCR can continue to support the contributions of researchers whose work originates outside the historically dominant centers of knowledge.

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There is no more urgent time to reflect upon epistemological dependencies. As the third decade of the century/millennium approaches, there are challenges which transcend geographical regions and disciplinary interests. We are occupants of a world collectively struggling to navigate a way through changes we have ourselves wrought.

The decade began with Great Britain's David Cameron, Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Nicolas Sarkozy declaring multiculturalism a failed project. After years of hand wringing about the fragmentation of the political spectrum, the shift to the right, the shift to the left, climate degradation, imbalances in wealth distribution, social injustice and human rights infringements, war, fake news, alternative facts and other ills, the decade closes with the strident calls of isolationism, nationalism and unyielding partisanship reverberating in the echo chambers of social media, and more ominously in mainstream political discourse. The current malaise breeds a debilitating loss of confidence in politics (and politicians) of all stripes. This is sharpened by the political and legislative indifference of 'first world' leaders in Australia and the USA to the existential threat of climate change and their deafness towards domestic inequality and global suffering. Out of the decay of political accountability emerges a collective loss of faith in the very political structures, values and institutions that politicians proclaim they defend for us.

Although not an official theme at the 45th International Council for Traditional Music World Conference which was held at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand recently, a persistent point of discussion among participants was the threat the current political and social climate poses to the intellectual vitality of the social sciences and humanities. There was dismay at increasing political and social disinterest in forms of knowledge concerned with social, cultural and artistic matters. The decline in prestige of this type of knowledge work was thought to be the result of the determination by political leaders to disparage it; thus undermining public goodwill towards it and clearing the path to strip its funding. This erosion matters and its effects are exemplified in the very recent case in Australia where a reshuffle of government departments resulted in the former Department of Arts being absorbed into a new Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications. There is no longer a portfolio with the term 'arts' in the title and the interests of artists and the arts must now compete for funding and attention alongside advocates for multi-billion dollar industrial interests.

Ambivalence towards the natural sciences is dispiriting enough in today's climate, but there is a perception that the humanities are especially under threat. This may be because the disparate collection of disciplines living under this umbrella are the only ones with an explicit disciplinary motivation towards discussing social cohesion and exposing abuses of power.

A loss of faith is also seeping into 'first-world' academic institutions. The logic of neo-liberalism and its discourses are causing the systematic hollowing out of the

values that underpin the study of the humanities and a loss of confidence in the positive contributions they make to individuals and societies. The powerful political and institutional forces which push universities towards models of industrial corporatization may sit above the universities, but the downstream effect is one of diminishing the value that was previously accorded to our type of knowledge. Not least of the harmful outcomes is the casualization of knowledge work. There is now a new sector in what is called the 'gig' economy made up of non-salaried university lecturers to whom universities outsource core teaching and assessing tasks but fail to provide job security.

These trends are harmful to societies because what is known broadly as the humanities do not simply help understand societies and cultures and their histories, trends and dependencies, they have a hand in shaping them. The various disciplinary outlooks within the humanities may result in an absence of consensus over how to define key orienting concepts such as, for example, the 'culture' concept, but their core interests and energies are directed towards social and cultural problems, often with an eye to proposing solutions as well as diagnosis.

So what can arts and forms of expressive practices say about social life? What contributions can they, and scholars whose work intersects with forms of creative practice, contribute to societies? Who do they speak to, who is listening and do they care?

Can art be of any practical use in, for example, helping achieve the 17 Global Sustainable Development Goals (and 169 targets) laid out by United Nations in 2015?

How art intersects with culture depends on how we think these about primary terms. The massive investment in subjectivity which shaped ideas about art in the 'West' from the mid nineteenth century created a schism between art and society. This resulted in a particular aesthetic disposition that saw artists become increasingly ambivalent and even hostile towards their audiences. While the romantic originating idea that art is purely disinterested and exists solely for its own sake has been in retreat in the Western academy for nearly a generation, it is important to point out that those understandings of the 'arts' that originated in European thought are the product of but one intellectual tradition. Ideas about art may vary from place to place and genre to genre but the notion that art could somehow be independent of social life that was a sustaining axiom in European thought was never taken up in places where creative and expressive practices are thought integral to social life rather than alien to it. When art is seen as the product of inherently social processes, focus can be shifted from an appreciation of its formal properties to an engagement with its culturally defined ontological status and social functions, which is where, in many cases, its primary symbolic meanings lie.

As with 'art', there are also challenges in framing understandings of culture in late modernity (regardless of whether one thinks about this concept from a Tylorian, Arnoldian or 'cultural studies' perspective). Not least, is understanding how 'culture' intersects with artistic practices and culture's role in shaping the concepts we use to discuss these practices. This relationship requires ongoing

reflection as the three terms of the discussion (culture, artistic practice and deliberation) are in a continual state of flux. In late modernity, a comprehensive understanding of this dynamic requires an openness to new forms of methodological pluralism; especially those that capable of engaging with ideas originating and circulating outside of the orthodoxies of Western thought as well as within.

At the beginning of a new decade, artists and academics face challenges and uncertainties that demand a response. In this light, can artists and scholars be ambivalent about the societies in which they are embedded and which have played a fundamental role in shaping their outlook? It may be that the explicit recognition that art is anchored in its engagement with its own social realities and through its capacity to talk to and about society is an acknowledgement of its most important social attributes. Art, allied to its particular political, geographical and global concerns can be seen as a social conscience. Likewise, writing about art may explore a comprehensive range of interpretative and analytical processes that emphasize the importance of art in its specific cultural context while simultaneously embracing its overarching expressive and communicative telos.