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Editorial

We are living in a troubled and troubling world: globally, locally and, increasingly, personally. A world of violence, insecurity and fear. Palestinian author Isabella Hammad's concern that 'violence can make art-making seem futile and feeble, easily crushed' (2023) must resonate for many of those who work with people experiencing increasingly harsh living conditions. Her conclusion, however, is instructive: 'It's easy to feel useless, and from there it's a short leap to despair. But I don't believe we can afford to despair, nor do I think despair is ethical'. This sense of a duty to resist despair is a striking reminder of the critical task of educators and activists, and of the role that arts and culture can play in sustaining energy, determination and defiance in the face of despair. In this special issue of *Concept*, authors draw attention to some of the ways that people collectively make sense of, re-imagine or seek to change, the conditions of their lives by using the arts as a means and space of engagement.

The worlds of art and culture can offer important sites of pleasure, inquiry, struggle, experimentation, fun, solace, sanctuary, community and human agency, providing 'abstract touchstones ... that form a connective tissue' between ourselves and the real world (Malik, 2023). And in troubling times, human agency is vital. Advocating hope without agency can amount to nothing more than corporate spin, implicitly urging submission to the inevitability of market relations. But neither should agency be mistaken for power. Film-maker Ken Loach (2023) maintains that 'hope has to be in people's determination to resist, and in our instinct ... for solidarity'. In the same spirit, Raymond Williams (1983) famously argued that people needed 'resources for a journey of hope'. His view was that 'it is not in staring at these blocks that there is any chance of movement past them. ... The dynamic moment is elsewhere, in the difficult business of gaining confidence in *our own* energies and capacities'. The ability to imagine a different reality - prefiguring and creating more equitable worlds - is the first, but crucial, step towards developing strategies for challenging power. It is also an educational challenge.

Booker prize-winner George Saunders (2022) contends that the capacity to challenge, subvert or disturb our own 'default settings' - what we have come to accept as normal - is nowhere more enabled than by 'immersion in art'. Art has the capacity both to take us out of and into ourselves, to engage our emotions and our intellect, to help us celebrate and interrogate, to jolt us out of complacency. And, as Leon Rosselson (2021) reminds us in relation to song 'as a shared

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experience .... a community of the converted', this can act as an 'antidote to despair'. He quotes Brecht:

> In the days of Darkness
>
> Will there be singing then too?
>
> There will be singing then too. About the days of Darkness.

We hope the articles in this Special Issue offer some resources of hope in these days of darkness.

As well as opening up the world, engagement with arts and culture can challenge or extend our own sense of ourselves, our identity and, indeed, our ontology. Current preoccupation with 'lived experience', for example, may obscure unanticipated consequences. At its best, it offers those previously excluded from decision-making the opportunity to ensure that they are heard and taken seriously. However, some worry that 'lived experience' may be 'on its way to becoming ... a peculiar orthodoxy that essentially denies the possibility of imaginative engagement with anyone outside your little circle' (Malik, 2017). The importance, and joy, of imagination is that it can help to avoid this identarian trap; take ourselves, instead, beyond our own experience to enter into other people's worlds. The wonder of libraries, museums, galleries and archives, for example, is that we can relate to others, perhaps stretching back hundreds or thousands of years and across thousands of miles. This is one of the many ways, as Michael Rosen (2013) points out, in which 'we can discover the history and shape of humanity and where or how we fit into it'. Our scope is inevitably broadened. Such imaginative engagement may also shock or shame us into action and may even lead to the development of a 'democratic imagination' that demands greater public and political recognition of the multiple crises we are facing. As Terry Eagleton (2016) puts it, 'culture, properly understood .... [can] provide the impetus to transform civil society'. It is also important to recognise, however, that 'cultural democracy exists [only] when people have the substantive social freedom to make versions of culture' for themselves (Wilson et al, 2017). Concern with resourcing the democratic imagination and pursuing cultural democracy is implicit in many of the articles in this Special Issue.

Darlene Clover's article 'Chains of interruption: Political pedagogies of representation in women's and gender museums' highlights the way in which 'practices of representation consist

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of language and symbols as well as visuals and objects'. She chooses to curate her article as a mini-exhibition of images and stories drawn from museums across the world which challenge dominant, gendered practices of representation. Drawing upon philosophical dialogues in his work with male community leaders in Dublin, Robert Grant similarly engages in critical reflection, on the meanings of masculinity. He sees his work as being at the intersection of education, community engagement and participatory democracy. The focus of Lydia Markham and Derek Suttie's article 'Guid fer a laugh' is a community project which offers a challenge to what they see as 'the dominant hegemony, the monologue of culture'. They describe their work as 'meeting in dialogue' around humour and alternative cultural landmarks to open up the world, to discover 'new discourse, new knowledge and truth'. Stuart Eydmann's photographic essay also offers alternative cultural landmarks. Drawing on his own archive, 'Folk - Music' is presented as a 'reflective gallery space' that presents musical subjects within their own context, often in their own words.

Who gets to tell what stories, and which ones matter to whom, is the focus of 'Storytelling for each weaves a blanket for all' by Beth Cross, Jennifer Markides and Donald Smith. They emphasise the necessity of authentic storytelling in an era in which powerful interests too often seek to 'weaponise' genuine concerns and worries, and where social media can simply 'reduce stories to gestures'. Genuine communication, exploring how 'dignity, respect, equality and compassion are carried within stories' is at the heart of the work they describe.

The power of music is central to a couple of articles. In 'A personal experience of political song', Eileen Penman recounts her life as performer, activist and teacher. She regards song as an integral part of public protest: to uplift, inspire and 'enrich our culture', particularly when performed collectively. The connection between music and politics is also the focus of Stuart Moir's article 'Learning for democracy: the transformative power of music'. Based on interviews with political activists, he discovers how music can help build critical consciousness.

The importance of access is of both personal and political interest to Allan Hosey. In 'Understanding the world through accessible cultural resources', he documents personal 'inflection points' which have influenced, and continue to enrich, his political and cultural life. The contribution by Karen Byrne, who received a Green Referral after a devastating personal bereavement, is a testament to the need for accessible and responsive cultural resources in times

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of distress. Paul Hudson's account from the frontline of public libraries shows how they can uniquely provide just such resources in a whole range of ways, and why they need to be vigorously defended. Finally, Tom Steele in his provocative article 'To hell with culture' usefully reminds us that the purpose of art should be to provoke critical thinking as well as to evoke pleasure. Drawing on a rich history of cultural studies, he encourages us to reclaim culture as 'universally available for reflection and understanding .... properly funded, free and accessible'.

In conclusion, arts and culture are vital resources for people both as individuals and as members of communities. Whether enjoying a visit to a museum or art gallery, making art from grief, singing purposefully with others, feeding a hunger for knowledge, sharing insights, stories and humour, or resurrecting critiques of culture, this is a vital part of what invigorates the spirit: resources for a journey of hope, you might say. *Concept* is itself both a product and an instrument of the democratisation of knowledge and culture: available free through an Open Journal System, enabling authors to write in ways which do not have to conform to strict academic requirements, administered through collaboration between academics, practitioners and librarians. Indeed, contributing to it - or even reading it - might be seen as a political and cultural act in itself!

Note: This Special Issue makes no claim to be representative, but we regret the absence of particular viewpoints and practices which would have further strengthened the collection. However, we are all too aware that pressures of work and life in the current context can make it difficult for potential contributors to respond to our invitation.

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