

# CITIZENS COMMISSIONING ART: AN INNOVATIVE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL POLICY PRACTICE

The New Patrons program has initiated an unprecedented social practice. In the past three decades, this practice has renewed civic collaboration and responsibility throughout Europe and beyond. It has suggested to society a new methodology to respond to the cultural needs of various communities in a wide range of settings and in broadly diverse artistic and scientific formats.

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Art and democracy have one thing in common: their modes of action and representation need to be conceived and practiced afresh every day. Nothing about them can be taken for granted, and only society itself can be the legitimate protagonist of this process of continual historic creation. And yet there is a vitally important sector in which society, as a community of individuals, has very limited say: the commissioning of common cultural goods. Thirty years ago, the New Patrons program proposed to change this, and since then it has realized its ambitions in over five hundred projects commissioned by thousands of citizens who took action and claimed ownership to shape their corner of the world, setting examples for others as responsible stakeholders of social reality.

## SOCIAL INNOVATION AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Social innovation and contemporary art are two domains of social and political practice as well as subjects of research whose manifold intersections merit closer scrutiny. They share aims and methods, terrains and debates, and sometimes they arrive at similar results. In many parts of the world, contemporary art contributes to social innovation. In fact, it may fairly be regarded as a kind of social innovation in its own right.

Efforts to remold social relations and practices have a long and ramified history in art. A dedicated study of this history would show how art has time and again changed how we perceive and shape the social world, opening up horizons of active involvement that allowed for the emergence of new forms of collective practice, with cultural, but also economic and political implications. Many of today's progressive social

aspirations have counterparts in the field of contemporary art or partly overlap with it. To harness the potential of contemporary art, we must conceive of it as a social practice rather than the accumulated output of living artists. What is more, the concept has come to comprise a wide spectrum of creative engagements beyond conventional art forms, from architecture and urban planning to cutting-edge digital technologies and participatory processes in the public sphere.

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## A NEW CULTURAL TECHNIQUE

The New Patrons disrupt contemporary art practice with a fundamental innovation – a new cultural technique: citizens from all walks of life and regardless of where they live commission works of art and creative projects that respond to local needs and challenges. They are assisted in their endeavors by mediators: individuals who contribute expertise in art and familiarity with the prerequisites and techniques of aesthetic production. Most importantly – and this is where the mediator's role differs from that of the curator or cultural manager – they put their skills and knowledge in the service of the citizens, helping them commission and implement ambitious projects.

Anyone who engages an artist to make a new work – be it a building, a work of public sculpture, a documentary film, or a piece of music – intervenes into the cultural process, manifesting his or her own position and posture in the public sphere, weaving a distinctive new strand into the fabric of the social discourse, and leaving a mark on society's self-conception. Yet for centuries, the privilege of ordering an important work of art to be made was the prerogative of a small elite, and that has been slow to change: to commission a work of art, one must command social, cultural, and financial capital of a kind that few people have access to.

## A NEW PLAYER ON THE STAGE: THE CITIZEN-PATRON

There is no reason why we should accept that large parts of the public in democratic societies – and non-democratic societies certainly do no better – are generally excluded from active involvement in the cultural production of their time and reduced to the role of consumers. The institutionalized cultural sector generates a variety of offerings; some prove to meet popular demand, while others do not. Many of these offerings perpetuate social distinctions, and it is uncertain whether they respond to actual needs that exist in the community. As it is, the *citoyens*, as the true sovereigns in the democratic process, have few opportunities to participate proactively in the genesis of cultural goods that form part of their meaningful world and inform the life of society.

As part of the New Patrons program, the practice of the mediators is crucial to helping people, whatever their backgrounds, to join forces with influential contemporary artists. As patrons, they express the desire – indeed the deeply felt need – for new cultural goods and in doing so also articulate their interests, concerns, and positions as active members of their communities. Many New Patrons projects prompt the formation of new temporary alliances and the emergence of local networks as patrons rally support from or cooperate with public administrations, businesses in their region, private foundations, the press, their neighbors, and other citizens.

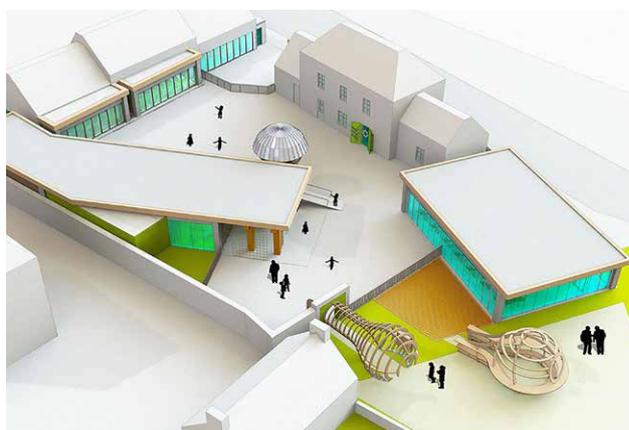
## THE NEW PATRONS PROTOCOL

The foundations for this new cooperation between citizens, mediators, artists, and their partners were laid in 1990, when the artist François Hers in Paris penned the *New Patrons Protocol*: a document that laid out in plain terms the roles of the various parties and their responsibilities in a shared process whose goal is to bring works of art into being. The Protocol was released under an Open Source license, to be appropriated by anyone who respects the rules it sets forth, and has become the founding document of a growing movement, first in France, then across Europe, that is now active in fifteen countries around the world.

This movement is sustained by independent mediators who are affiliated with regional small-to-medium-size nonprofit organizations. The international New Patrons structures have grown from the bottom up; in keeping with the movement's grassroots spirit, they are decentralized and organizationally autonomous, linked by informal networks. There is no headquarters or international leadership structure, nor should there be. In Germany, where around twenty pilot projects have been initiated to date, developing the program is a social mission bringing together a large number of partners from politics, civil society, the private sector, and cultural institutions who work to create the conditions that allow individual patrons' initiatives to put their ideas into practice.

## "WE WANT TO COMMISSION A NEW SCHOOL"

One real-world example from France: By 2007, the number of students enrolled in the school "Le Blé en Herbe" in Trébédan, a village of four hundred people in Brittany, has dwindled to sixty-four. Two teachers want to commission an educational trail through the surrounding landscape, and the designer Matali Crasset is recruited. However, it soon turns out that the school has bigger challenges to face: the building is antiquated. Crasset and the patrons draw up an ambitious design for an architectural and social renewal of the school, bringing it up to contemporary ecological standards and turning it into a venue for the entire community for decades to come. An alliance of parents, senior citizens, and the municipal council supports the project. The school is upgraded to meet the most demanding energy-efficiency standards, and a kindergarten and a dining facility are added. The design is open to nature as well as the village square, includes numerous sculptural elements, and incorporates community spaces for all residents. It serves as an engine that encourages community activities and social exchange, making the school a community center in the true sense. The ensemble is now widely acclaimed as an outstanding example of innovative and integrative school architecture.



The New Patrons of Trébédan, MataliSI Crasset: École le blé en herbe school, 2015

## WHEN THE IMPROBABLE BECOMES FEASIBLE

Some of the most accomplished New Patrons projects are striking illustrations of the extraordinary possibilities that open up when people rally to address an issue and decide to make changes in their corner of the world. A silver monster mobilizes an entire town and is adopted as its new landmark. Farmers give their declining village a thorough makeover and in the process gain a completely new self-image. A pygmy clan living in the rainforest builds its own cultural center and a botanical garden. New life fills the empty storefronts of a town center. And three nurses decide that their hospital ward needs a nondenominational prayer room.



The New Patrons of Marseille, Michelangelo Pistoletto: Place for multiconfessional devotion and prayer, 2000

Time and again, projects like these inspire the imagination of citizens and artists alike, spurring them to take on even the most unusual challenges and have faith that art can bring something into being that will be deeply meaningful to themselves and others.

The New Patrons' active involvement manifests itself in village squares and town halls, in university cafeterias, youth centers, and jobless people's hangouts. New Patrons live in rural areas and urban centers, in single-family homes and public housing projects. And the New Patrons make sure to guard their political independence. Higher authorities and experts support their ambitions – but do not tell them which concerns to address, which goals to pursue. Because who would know better than local individuals what matters to their community? That is why desires and visions are always articulated locally and in a shared process, ensuring that the new work of contemporary art will also be a valuable contribution to democratic solidarity and spark innovative responses to social challenges.

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The New Patrons of Bures-sur-Yvette, Jessica Stockholder: Mathematical playground, 2005