



# Hilsen til konferansen fra Martha Nussbaum

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## Om forfatteren

Martha Nussbaum er amerikansk filosof og professor ved University of Chicago. Nussbaums arbeider spenner over et stort antall emner, som etikk, politisk filosofi, litteraturens filosofi, feminisme og følelsenes filosofi. Hun har i flere år vært på tidsskriftet Foreign Policys liste over verdens 100 viktigste intellektuelle. I 2021 ble hun tildelt Holbergprisen for sin banebrytende forskning innen filosofi og rettsvitenskap.

I boka «The Monarchy of Fear» beskriver Nussbaum hvordan frykt og uro har blitt utbredte følelser blant mange amerikanere, noe vi også opplever i Europa. Hun viser også hvordan slike følelser forårsaker sinne og avsky mot det som er fremmed og annerledes og undergraver demokratiet. Men hun lanserer også en håpets politikk, og hun snakker om kunst som en av «håpets praksiser». Vi inviterte Nussbaum til å snakke under konferansen. Det hadde hun ikke mulighet til, men hun ville gjerne bidra med denne teksten, der hun utdyper hvorfor håp er viktig for samfunnsutviklingen og demokratiet, og hvilke roller kunsten kan ha i denne sammenhengen.

Under konferansen har vi fått med oss musiker og skuespiller Numa Edema til å lese Martha Nussbaus tekst i en norsk oversettelse.

*Forsideillustrasjon: The Onset of Vertigo - Fadlabi (2020)*

*Verket er et monumentalt gulvmaleri av den norsk-sudanske kunstneren Fadlabi, laget for Kunstnernes Hus i anledning deres 90-årsdag. Fadlabi har latt seg inspirere av nitti år med kunsthistorie idet han går inn i en invertert dialog med Per Krohgs takmaleri over Kunstnernes Hus' ikoniske trappeløp.*

In these dark and divided times, we need hope. But what is hope? It is a puzzling emotion. Hope does not depend on our assessment of probabilities. If your relative is ill, you can hope for a good outcome even when the prognosis is grim. And you can have hope's opposite, fear, even when the prognosis is good. The difference is made by a way of seeing: in hope you see the glass as half full, in fear as half empty. The same glass, a different focus of vision. And you are energized toward action in a different way. Fear immobilizes. Hope gets you involved in trying to produce the good outcome.

Why on earth should we hope? The world does not give us reasons for that attitude. And I've already said that hope is not a matter of probability calculation.

Immanuel Kant argued that we have a duty, during our lives, to engage in actions that produce valuable social goals... But Kant also understood, and plainly felt in his heart, that when we look around us it is difficult to sustain our own efforts: we see so much bad behavior, so much hatred, human beings everywhere falling so far short of what we might wish human beings to be and do. (Among the evils Kant attacked are arbitrary monarchy, the slave trade, self-aggrandizing nationalism, the absence of religious freedom and the freedom of speech, and, above all, the absence of world peace.)

But if we ought to be pursuing valuable social goals, then we ought to motivate ourselves to pursue them – and this means embracing hope. So, Kant concludes that we should choose hope as what he calls a “practical postulate,” an attitude that we take on without sufficient reasons, for the sake of the good action it may enable. Hope really is a choice, and a practical habit. Any human situation, any marriage, any job, any government, is always a mixture of good and bad. How we engage with it often depends on our emotional focus. Facing the future, you can say, “This is likely to be a mess,” and face the future with fear. Or you can say, “This can be really wonderful.” And then you embrace hope for the future. This matters for the success of democracy. The arts, I believe, are practices of hope, helping us see the world in a way conducive to hope and constructive action.

The poet Walt Whitman said that nations need artists, because the artist is “the arbiter of the diverse,” “the equalizer of his age and land”. What Whitman meant is that artists have a professional habit of love: that is, they see whatever they see as full real and infinitely complex, and as separate from the ego. Love in this

sense is anti-narcissistic, determined to cede an area of mystery and infinite complexity to each “other” and determined to let each speak, act, and be. The artist “sees eternity in men and women, he does not see men and women as dreams or dots,” says Whitman, implicitly contrasting his poems of America with discourses that do not see infinite complexity in men and women. A runaway slave is fully present as a real and complex feeling person. A woman's desire for freedom is present too, and the gay man's longing for fulfillment. Other discourses useful to politics, Whitman suggests, lack this sense of boundless richness. Without the arts we risk losing something precious about the humanity of human beings.

Artists may of course have a blinkered or mistaken political vision. Some have been sexist, some anti-Semitic, some racist. Whitman is not saying that art is unerring. He is saying, instead, that insofar as the artist does engage poetically with a human being, exploring those mysterious insides and inviting us to do so, thus far the artist offer a practice for democratic citizenship.

Art is not just something we read or contemplate. We also need experiences of art in which we are kinetic and active, engaged in making something together. When people come together to sing or dance, or to act a play together, they share breath and bodily contact with one another, promoting a sense of common work and joy. And public works of sculpture and visual art can also involve us in making beauty together or sharing a sense of the comic vulnerability of bodies. People who visit Chicago's Millennium Park wade in the pool between the two large screens of Jaume Plensa's Crown Fountain, seeing on the screens those huge faces of Chicagoans of different ages and races, moving in comic slow motion – and eagerly awaiting the moment when, as if out of the mouth of each face, a jet of cool water sprays out, wetting the waders. Water is a potent metaphor in our divided racial history. The invitation to have fun being sprayed on “by” a face of a different race or gender includes us all in interracial mingling, creating images of how our bitter racial divisions might possibly be overcome.

Some nations come together through a sense of ethnic homogeneity, a perilous way to connect in an era of migration. Modern nations, I believe, must follow Whitman, imagining themselves as peopled by many different groups. But overcoming fear and suspicion in the direction of real cooperation has never been easy, and the arts offer bridges to seeing human diversity as joyful, funny, tragic, delightful, not as a horrible fate to be shunned. They cultivate our capacity for love.

*Martha C. Nussbaum*