

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Art Institutions and Creative Industries

Marita Muukkonen

"In our late teens, sometimes in the beginning of the 70s, me and a friend of mine decided to resign from the Nation of Finland, and from all other nations while we were at it. To make it official, we went to the registration office, where an official explained to us in a friendly manner that we did not meet the qualifications for receiving an alien passport. You don't just go around resigning from nations. What is their purpose?"

This is the question posed by artist Roi Vaara in a publication based on the *Amorph!* performance art biennale, which hosted the first *Summit of Micronations* in Helsinki, 2003.¹ For three days, the Principality of Seeland, NSK State in Time, Ladonia, Elgaland and Vargaland, TransNationalRepublic and the State of Sabotage met, talked, and worked from temporary Embassies – raising questions on individual and community, nation and nationality, movements and restrictions, boundaries and those who draw them, among other things. So, what is the purpose of nations and where does nationalism derive its strength?

There is no such thing as a nation. Society and nation must never exist, yet they must always be in the process of formation. In simpler terms, the direction in art as well as in society and politics should be away from a nostalgic yearning for a primordial community or the historical origins of community. It is obvious that nothing but catastrophes has ever come from it so far. It is all the more important to realise this at a time when universal human rights seem to have become an ideological clown suit for nationalism.²

Changeable like a chameleon, nationalism has contributed to a sense of togetherness at different times and in different situations, regardless of recurring predictions of its imminent death. It has shown itself to be a tenacious mode of thinking, feeling and appealing to emotions. As a consequence, nationalism is an inexhaustible ideological source of social organisation and political action. Over the past two hundred years, nationalism has been a central social and cultural phenomenon on all the world's continents. It still serves as a kind of civic religion, recurring in everyday practices, figures of speech, rituals, ceremonies and symbols. Nationalism is not only a civic religion that replaces religion, as Benedict Andersson defined the function of nationalism, nationalism is actually strengthened by religious institutions and movements, as shown by recent events in global politics.

Most current states and nationalist movements have been in existence less than a hundred years. Most of them have emerged outside of Europe, even though it was the ideological heritage of European enlightenment, romanticism and liberalism that created the idea of a nation state and its ideology in the first place. On the other hand, nationalism can also be considered an irrational and sentimental failure of universal enlightenment: the world warred itself into nation states, and still does. This idea is diametrically opposite to the tradition of the liberalist school, wherein nationalism is seen as a triumph of the values of the enlightenment.³ Liberalist idealism; a one-sided view of modernisation; economically biased systems theory of the world; neo-Marxist interpretation of things: all these leave many key questions unanswered, such as why does nationalism remain a widespread, universal

¹ Vaara, Roi (2003). "Victory over Horseshit" in *Documents / Asiakirjoja, Amorph!03, Summit of Micronations* edited by Kochta, Oliver & Kalleinen, Tellervo, Art-Print Oy, Helsinki, 60.

² Kurki, Janne (2005). *Yhteisötoimien yhteisö*, Apeiron Kirjat, Vantaa, 47.

³ Pakkasvirta, Jussi (2005). "Kuvittele kansakunta" in *Nationalismit* edited by Pakkasvirta, Jussi & Saukkonen, Pasi, WSOY, Porvoo, 72-73.

political value supported by culture? What are the preconditions and forces required for different forms of nationalism to emerge in different social situations, and how can they be questioned and deconstructed?

In the Anderssonian view, ever since the 19th century, phenomena such as systems of education, the press, books, museums, maps, population and other statistics have constituted methods for the production of nationalism. Museums were used to deposit things national that had previously not been perceived as national. Archaeology, for instance, could become national; the duration of the national expanded from the present national to the past, pre-historical or archaic national. National myths acquired their physical embodiment in museums, too.⁴ After Andersson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), cultural/ideological phenomena can no longer be analysed without taking into account politics and the economy. Nationalism can, according to Andersson, be defined as the construction of a world and a worldview within the process of modernisation, and the nation as an imagined community. Currently the most influential ideological apparatuses of power are the various media with all their ramifications. Nationalism emerging in an age of mass communications involves a discursive package of new modes of speech, or recipes for political communities. In media rhetoric as well as in everyday life, nationalist expressions range from xenophobia in the streets to talk about strengthening national competitiveness.

Globalisation

Ours is a nomadic capitalism. Models of regulation are extended along multinational lines, and regulation passes mostly through monetary dimensions which cover the world market seamlessly. Yet it seems that being bound to a particular territory or the national becomes a haven against the nightmare scenarios of de-regionalisation in the network-based society. Industrial society worked in terms of fixed points or positions, whereas the (neo-liberalist) network society should operate in terms of mobility, speed, flexibility, yet both liberal-democratic and social-democratic politics articulate the filter function of the nation state. To put it simply, the freedom that the liberal-democrats want for capital and goods is not extended to people; divided we move, whether we like it or not. The true horror of the liberal-democrats is for the global territory to be organised politically as a liberal democracy, with every citizen formally enjoying political equality.⁵ To a large extent, a competitive state therefore maintains and develops a national competitive community. In a policy-making discourse dominated by economy, the concept of globalisation is often merely a pawn in nationalist struggles, or an ideological statement clothed in the mantle of free trade in a struggle for nationalistic and individualistic benefits.

The "national gaze", as Ulrich Beck (2002) describes the subject of his criticism, is a powerful and influential way of approaching globalisation, one consequence of which is the recently much strengthened competitive nationalism. The perception of globalisation as a national challenge is not only a consequence of orchestration by political national elites. National imagined communities are still connected to the way people ascribe meaning to their everyday experiences and pass them on in everyday life. This underlines the importance of individual experiences in both the strengthening and the deconstruction of nationalism.

⁴ Ibid., 71-72.

⁵ Diken, Bülent (2001). "The Aesthetic Critique of Capitalism and Transpolitics of Immigration" in *Under (de)Construction. Perspectives on Cultural Diversity in Visual and Performing Arts* edited by Muukkonen, Marita, Art-print Oy, Helsinki, 77-80.

A competitive nationalism determined by the systemic level, by the economy, can find a foothold in people's life world. All sorts of areas of activity are being commodified, with sign values and brands being created for states, cities and towns, as well as for biennales and museums that determine people's everyday life world. The search for traditions is increasing rapidly on the local, regional, national as well as European, etc., levels. This recalls the situation in the early 1800s when national traditions were not only discovered, but also constructed from all sorts of materials.⁶

In contemporary racism, the fantasy of national identity serves as a desperate attempt to re-stage society, which should increasingly be becoming meaningless as it is traversed by global flows of capital, goods and information. As society changes, so do fears. When society no longer promises salvation, it is performed and staged as a spectacle. According to Michel Billings (1995), in an age of the competitive state, banal nationalism has become a central perspective of the life world. Global capitalism contains systemic requirements for competition, in particular between locations of performance, satisfying that which gives this everyday nationalism of the life world a new dimension of meaning in the creation of a nationalistic sense of togetherness.⁷ This is what the wide support enjoyed by the Finnish innovation system as a national goal is in part based on, as well as the increasingly prevalent talk about culture industries in European cultural and art policy: the idea of the arts and culture as a competition factor of national economic growth, which became an integral part of cultural policy discourse in the EU and its Member States in the 1990s, as well as in supra-governmental organisations, such as UNESCO.

Culture Industry as Part of the Political Spectacle

Nationalism constitutes one perspective whence the aesthetisation of politics – or the transformation of politics into spectacle – and thus also the culture industry should be regarded. Is the aesthetisation of politics in modernity only a totalitarian phenomenon? Have not western democracies created similar spectacles? As to the aesthetisation of politics in democratic states, it is based on the same phenomenon as national socialism – that is, on nationalism. Considering the terms "state", "people" and "nation", it seems obvious that in the world after the early 19th century, "nation" is the term that carries the greatest symbolic weight. In the west, only "nation" has been able to serve as a reference to the political spectacle – has there ever been a parade that would not have celebrated the existence of the population? Or might we be mistaken? Perhaps we should, like Theodor Adorno, also think about the capitalist culture industry, the American entertainment industry in particular, which according to Adorno aspires to create an overwhelming simulation that disintegrates the autonomous subject, just as national socialist aesthetics did? This is certainly the case – at least in part. On the other hand, we must also remember that, unlike the national socialists in Germany, the entertainment industry does not have a single, explicit programme or publicly stated aim to which all its products would be subject. The culture industry is not a monolith. It does have an aim, but that aim is primarily to earn money privately – which from the perspective of traditional political thinking means that it is not part of the sphere of political practice: "The word 'finance' is the word of a slave," as Jean-Jacques Rousseau remarked. Herein lies the weakness of traditional political thinking, which was not corrected until Marx came along. In a bourgeois society, nothing is as political as the economy, and the capitalist culture industry must be considered from the political perspective for that very reason.⁸

⁶ Kettunen, Pauli (2005). "Nationalismien tulevaisuus" in *Nationalismit*. Edited by Pakkasvirta, Jussi & Saukkonen, Pasi, WSOY, Porvoo, 450.

⁷ Ibid, 450.

⁸ Ojakangas, Mika (2003). *Politiikka ja estetiikka*. Unpublished lecture.

A Historical Detour

Meaning-intensive production, creative capital, creative economy, value chain, profit expectations, conceptualising, cross-branding, performance measurement, benchmarking. These are overtly familiar examples of the market-driven mantra of creativity increasingly employed by policy makers in the EU Member States to celebrate the hegemony of the exchange principle – the transformation of cultural politics into cultural economics. This is based on the reciprocal movement of commodifying culture and culturalising industry. The latter implies that creativity, communication, innovation and aesthetic design are all at the core of economic production. How do competitive nationalism and the related, growing discourse on culture and/or the creative industry in the politics of art and culture, affect conditions in the art field in the Nordic countries in the present situation with welfare state nationalism crumbling?

To highlight policy developments in art and culture in the Nordic region, we need to make a short historical detour. I use Finland as an example, even though one needs to take into consideration that there are differences in the development of policies in art and culture between the Nordic countries. To resort to rough simplification, one can divide the history of Finnish cultural policy into three overlapping phases. The first involves the ideology of nation building – from around the late 19th century until as late as the 1960s. By supporting high culture and certain professional artists, the state promoted the idea of a coherent, unique and self-sufficient nation. At this stage it was customary to drop names, such as Jean Sibelius and Alvar Aalto, and then resort to long recitations about our mythical relation to nature and its reflections on the national identity dichotomised between winter/summer, darkness/light, sorrow/happiness, and so on.⁹

The second phase can be identified with the social democratic welfare state ideology between the 1960s and 1990s. Throughout the Nordic region, the philosophical principle of cultural policy was grounded in the idea of enlightenment and aesthetic education. This period of cultural policy was concerned largely with building state-supported networks of cultural services throughout the country and supporting democratic citizen participation in cultural activities. These aspirations were still founded on a romantic basis: the dream of a national culture of unity and one-sidedness (*enhetskultur* in Swedish).¹⁰

Since the mid-1990s, cultural policy in Finland, as in the other EU countries, has been increasingly marked by the pervasive presence of economics, as implied by the recent key areas in cultural policy: culture and creative industry, content production, and most recently, cultural export. In practice, this has led to an increasing dominance of economic reasoning over questions of substance.¹¹ In the EU policies the central function of the arts and culture is still the formation of identities, especially national identities, which is one of the main pillars in cultural policy both in the EU and in the Council of Europe. But it is no longer a "logic of the market" versus "broad access to culture", but instead "the market provides broad access to cultural goods"; no longer a "logic of competitiveness" versus "cultural diversity," but instead "competition policy basically supports cultural diversity, because it aims to prevent the emergence of monopolies."¹²

⁹ Karo, Marko & Muukkonen, Marita (2007). "Titorelli's Cage: Confined Spaces at Work" in *Framework – Finnish Art Review*, Issue 5 / Jan'07, Finepress Oy, Turku, 64-67.

¹⁰ Ibid.,64-67.

¹¹ Ibid.,64-67.

¹² Minichbauer, Raimund (2007). (2007): "Chanting the Creative Mantra. The Accelerating Economisation of EU Cultural Policy" in *Framework - The Finnish Art Review*, Issue 6 / Jan'07, Helsinki, Frame Finnish Fund for Art Exchange, 48-49.

In light of this short account, one can distinguish three particular strands in Finnish cultural policy to use it as an example: 1) nationalism 2) dualism (we/they, export/import) and 3) instrumentalism. These are of course universal themes shared by most nations and political spaces at different times, and as such, their prevalence and appearance also fluctuate in the different historical stages of Finnish politics. Yet, it seems that with the ongoing economisation of cultural policy coupled with globalisation there is a risk of a new and intensified entanglement of these long-standing problematic strands.¹³

A Postcard from Finland

Looking at political developments in arts and culture in Finland during the past decade, it becomes clear that cultural political instrumentalisation and economisation infused with nationalist and protectionist tendencies is a growing concern. The Government's strategic programme of cultural exportation serves as an illuminating case for current problems in the cultural political landscape of Finland and the EU, with direct links to the strengthening of competitive nationalism. In Finland, policy makers no longer talk about "subsidies" or "aid", but of "investments" that entail requests for profits and returns. What is also at issue here is something that has been referred to as "policy attachment", a strategy which allows a "weak" policy sector, such as the arts and culture, to attract increased attention by attaching itself to other policy concerns that appear more worthy, such as technology and science.¹⁴ This underlines the need for the transnationalisation of arts and cultural policies, so that the arts and culture would not just be diminished to an instrument for economic growth.

A new institutional flagship was established within the Finnish Ministry of Culture: matters that are considered to relate to cultural exportation are now under a new division of Cultural Export, which was established in September 2005 to promote business know-how in the fields of culture and the arts. Rather than being a mere exercise in organisational readjustment, the change signifies a profound political redirection from art to cultural economy, a move in which visual art has acquired new neighbours, such as cultural tourism, design, the music industry, and the game industry. These are neighbours that function on the basis of a very different logic.¹⁵ One of the problems in the new administrative reforms, both on the Nordic level and recently in Finland, is that no differentiation is made between culture and the arts, or between institutions involved in artistic and cultural co-operation. The two dimensions of cultural policy may well be peas in a pod, but ought to be dealt with according to different paradigms because of different rationales associated with arts and culture. All is culture, but at its best, contemporary art opens spaces and thus a possibility to question culture itself, as Branimir Stojanovic has put it. It does not exist, as Lacan said about women, it does not exist and yet it is there. In other words, it insists, but does not exist. It has no existence whatsoever, because every attempt to put it in the context of culture, museums, fails, culturalises it in a way and puts it in the virtualisation of collecting, gathering. And in fact, maybe the only thing that is not culture is – contemporary art.¹⁶

Another problematic strand in the Finnish Government's cultural export programme is the bipolar manner in which it views cultural internationalisation. As the very term cultural exportation indicates,

¹³ Karo, Marko & Muukkonen, Marita (2007). "Titorelli's Cage: Confined Spaces at Work" in *Framework – Finnish Art Review*, Issue 5 / Jan'07, Finepress Oy, Turku, 64-67.

¹⁴ Ibid., 64-67.

¹⁵ Ibid., 64-67.

¹⁶ Stojanovic, Branimir (2007). "Pristina is Europe's Center of Contemporary Art" in *Framework – Finnish Art Review*, Issue 5 / Jan'07, Finepress Oy, Turku, 109.

the emphasis is exclusively on a cultural monologue, a one-way street from a periphery to a centre, which in this ideology is seen to mould popular opinion and bring economic gains. Accordingly, the planned system for cultural export seems to reinforce the prevailing system of public funding already in place that almost categorically excludes aspects of cultural dialogue and possibilities for collaborative networks and multilateral, transitional processes, be they located in Finland or elsewhere. Looking at the manner of resonating strong dichotomies, such as export/import, home/abroad, us/them, it is tempting to see parallels between the exclusively export-oriented policy definitions and bipolarised policies that sublimate order as an absolute value and associate politics with the politics of security, as elaborated by Slavoj Žižek in the context of 9/11.¹⁷

Furthermore, during the summer months of 2006, cultural political debate centred on the notion of a national cultural canon in Finland – a theme borrowed directly from the cultural discussions in neighbouring Denmark and Sweden. Kaarina Dromberg, MP and former Minister of Culture (representing the conservative party Kokoomus), sent her greetings on this issue in the following form:

The purpose of the list [of canonical Finnish literature] is to reinforce and strengthen Finnish culture against other cultures, so that we can maintain our own identity. A canon would minimise contradictions, and could be used in schools and in teaching immigrants what Finnishness essentially is.

What seems to be her point is that Finnishness is a particular cultural position that is increasingly threatened by the transitional environment. Indeed, such rhetoric relying on both a curious combination of cultural vulnerability and self-sufficiency and a dystopian projection of fear for the foreign implies a transformation of cultural politics into identity politics entangled with increasing defensive nationalism. It is not a question of small talk either, as the Nordic example of the right-wing tendencies in Danish cultural politics demonstrates. Moreover, considering the still prevailing monoculturality of Finland – with only two percent of the population being recent immigrants – this kind of rhetoric seems equally disquieting and absurd.¹⁸

Measuring the Unmeasurable

Given the export-related aims of the cultural export programme, it is no surprise that the officially celebrated international successes of Finnish visual culture seem to correspond with a certain representational passivity – a mere visibility or presence at biennales and other such spectacles of the art jet set – and tend to focus on easily reproducible mediums, such as video and photography. In the ever more popular marketing discourse or success-talk of policy makers, works of art are equated with commodities, demand with success and success with quality. In this line of thinking, cultural transnationalism is reduced to one-dimensional export strategies in which the value of art is based solely on sales and public exposure at the international capitols of visual art. Similarly, the role of policy in arts and culture is effectively reduced to a post-political tinkering in managing and marketing the affairs of the star artists.¹⁹

¹⁷ Karo, Marko & Muukkonen, Marita (2007). "Titorelli's Cage: Confined Spaces at Work" in *Framework – Finnish Art Review*, Issue 5 / Jan'07, Finepress Oy, Turku, 66.

¹⁸ Ibid., 66 & Sheikh, Simon (2006). "Battle Lines Are Being Drawn – The Cultural Politics of Identity in Denmark" in *Framework – Finnish Art Review*, Issue 4 / July '06, Finepress Oy, Turku, 104-105.

¹⁹ Karo, Marko & Muukkonen, Marita (2007). "Titorelli's Cage: Confined Spaces at Work" in *Framework – Finnish Art Review*, Issue 5 / Jan'07, Finepress Oy, Turku, 66-67.

The hierarchies and evaluations in the art world have increasingly come to resemble the world of sports. Artistic success is often measured in the international market of contemporary art in terms of the artist's participation in major established shows, solo exhibitions held in major museums, prominent prizes of the art world received, representation by high-profile galleries and visibility on the pages of art journals and ranking lists. A rhetoric that focuses solely on the outward manifestations of the art world ultimately turns against art. It is about location of performance competition associated with banal nationalism, something that diverts our attention, blankets out the artworks and their experiential dimension, conceals the artist's persistence and artistic goals, and pushes below the horizon all art that does not correspond to the outward determinants of success. It also marginalises those artists who produce works or use media that do not reflect the current preferences in the art world, or who work far away from the centres of the biennale circuit. At the same time, the talk of success gives us to understand that the internationality of artists has more to do with their passive visibility in the events of the art world than active doing and participation. Thus, this clearly underlines the (modern) *aporia* between culture and economy – the incongruity between the market-based goals of efficiency, productivity and utility, and art's direction towards communality, dialogism, immateriality and transnationality. Research conducted by FRAME – the Finnish Fund for Art Exchange (2006) indicates that the views of art practitioners on the nature of internationalisation differ greatly from the focal points in the Government's agenda. Just to name some conclusions, visual art is today seen primarily as a horizontal, inter-local and inter-actor relationship, rather than as a vertical structure based on governmental mediation. Secondly, the practice of visual art in Finland is characterised by innovative personal and collective pursuits, voluntary work, and financial risk taking.²⁰

What all this seems to indicate is a tendency towards a sharpening dichotomy between two discourses on "internationalisation" (as it is called by policy makers), namely the grand meta-narrative repeated by policy makers and the contrasting everyday descriptions given by art practitioners. Two highly different stories about internationalisation, or rather, transnational collaboration of art and culture. These contrasting narratives can be described with such contrasting concepts as instrumentalism vs. intrinsic value, export vs. exchange, showroom dummies vs. the precariat.²¹

It is apparent that social reality cannot be divided conventionally into different levels (local, national, international, global), and that all action is increasingly channelled along transnational as well as sub-national networks. Increasingly, the question is of open and collaborative networks in spheres which Maurizio Lazzarato calls "co-operation between brains". "The co-operation between brains differs from collaboration at a Smithian or Marxian factory in that it produces common goods: knowledge, languages, science, art, services, information, etc." In Lazzarato's view, the question is of non-governmental forms of "public" collaboration, of patchworks and networks.²²

The building of national competitive communities in the cultural policy rhetoric shows that challenging the concept of society has not obliterated the holistic idea of national communities, even though global issues are simultaneously located in local and national environments and transgress their boundaries. Perceiving globalisation as a national challenge is clearly an old and fairly obvious alternative, even though there was a distinct turn in the globalisation discourse in the 1990s, when globalisation was

²⁰ Ibid.,67.

²¹ Ibid.,64-67.

²² Lazzarato, Maurizio (2006). *Kapitalismin vallankumoukset*, Tutkijaliitto, Helsinki, 112. A Finnish translation of *Les Révolutions du Capitalisme* (2004). Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond, Paris.

politicised, subordinated into a theme for conflicting interests and alternative visions, transnational and radical democracy, as well as the democratisation of the constitutionalisation process on the global level. In the contemporary art world, this was reflected, for example, as an increased interest in the intertwining of civic activism and art as well as a revival in the intertwining of social and social-political projects, which were also closely linked and influenced by the last two documentas, X and XI.

Paradoxically, nor does market-driven cultural policy-making rhetoric function according to the neo-liberal logic of the network society. In other words, it does not follow the de-territorialised logic of the flows of capital and information. As Terry Eagleton has formulated it, these days, centrality is distinctly uncool, the centre has been marginalised and margins is the place to be. "I'm just a nomad, I'm just a tramp," said Anita Roddick, the owner of Body Shop. In the project regime, aesthetic creativity, industrial productivity and market grandeur are no longer an exclusive world. The activity of mediating, establishing and expanding networks irrespectively of goals is a value itself.²³ The project regime operates under the terms of mobility, speed and flexibility, yet it seems that policy practice still follows the logic of the industrial society. The goal is to optimise the financial bases of the arts and increase political control – regardless of whether the principle of arm's length control of Nordic art institutions is being upheld. Paradoxically, financial accountability increases control and restraint, in other words precisely those "Brezhnevian" features of the dreaded culture of production and control that financial competition/accountability was supposed to do away with. In terms of the state apparatus, the competitive state therefore maintains and develops a *national* competitive community at the policy making level.

The Position of Art Institutions

What are the possibilities for mainly state-funded contemporary art institutions to function in this position as a public arena committed to a constant redefining of its role and function in communication with other actors, in order to function as a non-nationalistic, non-unitary and contradictory, in other words as a political, arena, in conditions where competitive nationalism is on the increase? As Boris Buden has aptly formulated it, "by means of today's theoretical reflection we can radically deconstruct almost every possible identity and easily disclose its essentialism as being simply imagined, constructed, etc. However, politics proper still works with these essentialist identities – such as nation for instance – as if we wouldn't know they are only our illusions."²⁴ I shall use as an example the impacts of recent developments in cultural policy on NIFCA, the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Arts, starting with its location in the apparent vicinity of the state – notwithstanding whether we regard art institutions in terms of Antonio Gramsci's category of civil society (*società civile*) or Louis Althusser's category of ideological state apparatus (*appareil idéologique d'état*).

To put it briefly, Nordic co-operation consists of co-operation between five nation states, especially in the cultural sphere. NIFCA, which was based in Helsinki, functioned as an expert body in the field of the visual arts under the Nordic Council of Ministers from 1995 to 2006. Nordic cultural co-operation, whose roots go back to the 1970s, was still in the 1990s legitimised by referring to a unified Nordic culture in an anthropological sense. Or as it was formulated by Nordic prime ministers: "Cultural co-

²³ Diken, Bülent (2001). "The Aesthetic Critique of Capitalism and Transpolitics of Immigration" in *Under (de)Construction. Perspectives on Cultural Diversity in Visual and Performing Arts* edited by Muukkonen, Marita, Art-print Oy, Helsinki, 74.

²⁴ Buden, Boris (2006). "Cultural Translation: Why it is important and where to start with it" in <http://translate.eicpcp.net/transversal/0606/buden/en>

operation has to strengthen Nordic identity, to protect and refine it and to present it to the rest of Europe."²⁵

In 2001, during the Finnish chairmanship of the Nordic Council of Ministers, NIFCA took an initiative to organise a conference in an attempt to take an active role in the Nordic policy-making level and make a stand to the effect that "culture" or the arts should not be instrumentalised in an attempt to construct and cement a mythical Nordic identity and a unity of Nordicness. In the Nordic region, as well as everywhere else in Europe, the evident and recurring problem is the issue of defensive nationalism. The crucial question is: Who is asking about identity and to what purpose? For example in Denmark, discussions regarding Danishness became stronger in the 1990s, due to the interest of majority cultures in maintaining their dominant identity position. The starting point on the policy-making level was the celebration of multiculturalism, thus the outcome was a result of many compromises. NIFCA tried to carry out the process by acknowledging that the real challenge for art institutions is not only how to deal with cultural diversity, but also how to face presently a world based on global financial capitalism, set alongside a liberal democracy.

In the book based on the seminar, *Under (de)Construction - Perspectives on Cultural Diversity in Visual and Performing Arts*, sociologist Bülent Diken concludes "We are all immigrants", referring to the thoughts of Slavoj Žižek. Diken raised the issue of current post-modern identity politics, in which the immigrant or the other plays the role of a catalyst, also implying that the aim of the immigrant disappears, and the culturalist definitions of our identity cannot be sustained in their present form. Instead of the political subject, a working class demanding universal rights, we get, on the one hand, the multiplicity of particular social strata or groups, each with its own problems, on the other, the immigrant, more and more prevented from politicising his predicament for exclusion.²⁶

How, then, to deconstruct "Nordicness" or nationalism without falling into the trap of multiculturalist tolerant humanitarianism? This cannot be done simply by chanting the mantra "we must come to face ourselves", as the philosopher Janne Kurki puts it.²⁷ For example, on the practical level, the anthropological concept of a unified Nordic culture, linked to the Herderian notion of language directly conceived as a culture etc., was simply disregarded when people were hired to NIFCA with no regard for either language or nationality as a basis for employment. A clear distance was taken from this linguistic horizon, and the emphasis was shifted to seeking what might be alternative forms of connection, communication and relations, instead of new ways of innovating culture and nation. The Nordic community, if there is any, was merely defined as a constitutional community against the official policy strains. In short, a crucial point in NIFCA's art praxis was not attempting to speak for others, be they refugees, unemployed, precarious workers, or anyone else, but rather to consider how NIFCA as an art institution might function as a mediator, a translator, and a meeting place for practices in art and other disciplines, between the practitioners and their public, thus being part of the process of constructing and (de)constructing the life world. This public sphere which is, or could be, formed by art institutions, is fragmented, often interdisciplinary, consisting of a number of spaces which sometimes connect, sometimes do not, that are in a contradictory relationship with each other. Thus they are or could be on a political stage. One of the aims was also to consider how to carry out interventions on the

²⁵ Duelund, Peter and Pedersen, Gitte (2003). "The Nordic Cultural Cooperation" in *The Nordic Cultural Model* edited by Duelund, Peter, Narayana Press, Gylling, 268.

²⁶ Diken, Bülent (2002). "The Aesthetic Critique of Capitalism and Transpolitics of Immigration" in *Under (de)Construction* edited by Marita Muukkonen. Art-print Oy, Helsinki, 76-80.

²⁷ Kurki, Janne (2005). *Yhteisöittömien yhteisö*, Apeiron Kirjat, Vantaa, 6.

policy level. Institutions for arts and culture are at the interface between art and politics, art and policy making, art and economics, art and society, as NIFCA's former curator Simon Sheikh formulated it.²⁸

Subjective Extracts from One Praxis

In the discussion of the globalisation we should not forget the new problems which have come up: new conflicts in societies, new cultural differences, new ways to be marginalised, new political powers, etc. The only meaningful global discourse is one that not only tracks economic strategies and state policies, but also highlights changes at grassroots levels where the greatest revolutionary potential exists.

Categories, words and concepts are not our destination, merely steps along the journey towards understanding. The multiple world theory seeks to establish a dialogue to provide a dynamic map that can help move us away from our limited global picture, to problematise stable binary models of social constructions (First/Third world, postmodernism/modernism) to find new spaces....

These extracts are from the lecture I gave in Norway in 2000, when I had started working for NIFCA. The vision and strategy of NIFCA formulated in 2000–2001 was to address a whole variety of subjects on several planes at once with many different yet specific propositions, to have different publics and to create a polyphonic place. Hence, it invited both internal and external contradictions, which was by no means an easy "journey".

Many of NIFCA's projects employed an interdisciplinary approach, where contemporary art practice expanded and intervened in several fields such as philosophy, politics, political science, sociology, biology, etc. This was art which made use of several different social models and mechanisms, and did not merely produce objects. The approach was based on the belief that the field of art is and has the potential to be a field for thinking, understanding, questioning between different fields, positions and subjectivities in contemporary society, even though this position is privileged at the same time.²⁹ Because of the practice, there was no dedicated venue for the exhibitions; projects – whether exhibitions, seminars, etc. – were carried out via transnational networks in collaborations; residencies were also partly opened up internationally for artists, critics, curators and researchers outside the Nordic-Baltic region. NIFCA operated partly on the basis of freelance initiatives, and partly on funds that were assigned to self-organised groups alongside NIFCA's curated projects. All in all, NIFCA's practice reflected the social turn in contemporary art. That was nothing new as such; since the early 1990s, the predominance of institutional critique, interventional strategies, post-studio art, site-specific art, contextual art, community art, public, shared, collective, etc., art, or project art in a generic sense, has at least to some extent given way to a preoccupation with various forms of practice which seems to explicitly offer up the social as an arena for artistic activity. There is nothing historically new about this, either; but it is precisely the meaning of "the social" that was the contested core of the debates and projects. The idea was that there is no one approach to artistic work with "the social", there is no one sociality "out there", but incompatible forms of sociality are produced in artistic activity, thus neither notions of the social or of the artistic presuppose each sphere as a given. Thus NIFCA's programming combined both opaque/reflexive and transparent/pragmatic approaches. At one end, there were projects and practitioners oriented towards actionist politics, for example, who also questioned the relevance

²⁸ Sheikh, Simon (2006). "The Trouble with Institutions, or, Art and Its Publics" in *Art and Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations* edited by Nina Möntmann, Black Dog Publishing, London, 148-149.

²⁹ Jaukkuri, Maaretta (2006). "Tehdä, tutkia, järjestää. Taiteilijuus liikkeessä" in *Taide –magazine* 04/06, Art Print, Helsinki, 27-28.

and necessity of the artistic context or the art-institutional framing of their activity. For instance, the group of Danish artists and activists called V3TO realised a campaign about the rights of demonstrators during the Danish EU presidency. Such initiatives as *Re-Approaching New Media (RAM): the survival kit* (2003) was anchored to NIFCA. In the RAM network, people experimenting with media and technology from a broad range of disciplines, including artists, academics, activists, and technology experts, explored issues such as freedom of speech, digital dives, copyrights and piracy, corporate power, the open-source movement, networks of knowledge production³⁰. The heart of such mediating processes is participation, and thus also the creation of critical, political spaces for acting, thinking, debating and creating; linking different types of actors both for institutional and non-institutional contexts. Hence, it also invites both internal and external conflicts. Instead of showcasing existing projects, RAM draws attention to contemporary visual art itself as a diversified mode of production ranging from artworks created by individuals to collaborations between artists and co-operations with persons from most diverse fields of knowledge. This mode of action bears a resemblance to, for example, the idea of the sociologist Gabriel Tarde of society as a coordinated "group mind" which deconstructs and redefines established ways of understanding concepts like knowledge, copyright and invention. Tarde regarded the social as a kind of circulating fluid which should be examined with new methods, not as a specific type of organism. The social is a principle of connectivity between things that are not social; new innovations or configurations of sociality.³¹

To give another example of the different type of sociality, the *Summit of Micronations, Amorph! Performance art biennale*, mentioned in the beginning, did not designate specific existing social groups. NIFCA collaborated in the *Summit of Micronations*, which was curated by Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta. In August 2003, the kings, presidents and representatives of "self-made" countries met for the first time at the site of the legendary 1975 CSCE conference in Helsinki. *Micronations* can be called the site of the arts' own sociality, which also explores and reinvents the contribution of the arts to Utopian imagination and its complex implication in the social forms deriving from it. The move that declares a microstate usually involves the setting apart of a piece of territory or virtual land, or the creation of system of citizenship rules or structures which stands out from our sense of reality. They become something autonomous, something that operates according to its own rules. In that sense, microstates have a lot in common with other activist or political groups which use the idea of autonomy as a way of building self-valoring, self-sustaining, autonomous communities, while questioning existing knowledge (such as what can we call a commune) and experiments with the tension between people and constituencies and states.³² From the early days of Soviet constructivism to artist-created societies such as the commune of the Wiener Actionists to present-day micronations, there is no commune without a marked ideology of art, an idea of how art plays into the social economy.

Another clear point of departure in NIFCA's work was that art cannot compensate for the lack of active political collectives. The *Wild in the Streets* workshops (take one and two), organised by John Becker, Simon Sheikh, Katya Sander and Valerie Tevere and started in the conference *Under (de)Construction*, examined how to re-forge political and social issues into collective action in order to rethink existing

³⁰ See *Survival Kit. Part One* edited by Haskel Lisa & Riemens, Patrice, Oleno Productions Oy and NIFCA, Helsinki, 2003.

³¹ Lazzarato, Maurizio (2006). *Kapitalismin vallankumoukset*, Tutkijaliitto, Helsinki, 112. Finnish translation of *Les Révolutions du Capitalisme* (2004). *Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond*, Paris, 120-123 & Muukkonen, Marita (2007). Marita Muukkonen on Juha Huuskonen. Democracy : Do It Yourself ! in *Framework – Finnish Art Review*, Issue 5 / Jan'07, Finepress Oy, Turku, 94-95.

³² Kelly, Susan (2003). "Something Happens" in *Documents / Asiakirjoja, Amorph!03, Summit of Micronations* edited by Kochta, Oliver & Kalleinen, Tellervo, Art-Print Oy, Helsinki, 8.

liberal democracy. They were followed by the workshop *Representation and Power*, which focused on such questions as: What is the relationship between artistic practice and political representation? What are the possible positions within the artistic field for political action and representations, and which models are productive and which are counter-productive? NIFCA's collaborative exhibitions drew attention to such "political" issues as populism, fundamentalism, etc., but did not pretend to be a victory for the Benjaminian idea of the politicisation of art. For example *Capital (It Fails Us Now)*, curated by Simon Sheikh – consisting of a workshop, a group exhibition in Tallinn and Oslo and a publication – explored the notion of capital, taking its points of departure along dual lines; on the one hand, location, and on the other, subjectivity; how capitalism affects our daily lives, our very structures of feeling and perception. Capital understood as an economic tool, as a measure of exchange and surplus, and as something at once regulated and regulating (by both state and market), as well as a producer of subjectivity (the commodification of everything)³³. Such processes as *Capital* also challenge us to reflect on contradictions, not on the simplifications, both in terms of aesthetics and ethics.

As a part of the process with working title *Institutional Utopia* in 2004, a new strategy *NIFCA as a Production Unit* was created by Simon Sheikh and Nina Möntmann. Instead of big exhibitions, the institution would focus on the residencies and offer both financial and curatorial support for artistic productions, workshops, and to a new kind of publication policy. *Institutional Utopia*, initiated by NIFCA's Board, started with the seminar *Institutions2*, curated by Jens Hoffman. *Institutional Utopia* was part of a self-critical approach dealing with current debates on the criticism of institutions, questioning the role and function of institutions internally and externally, and not only limited to the institutions of art. The process was also dealing with the question of the possibility of Utopianism in present, in other words, the very possibility of thinking new forms of sociality. Actually, the fictions of art and politics are heterotopias rather than utopias.³⁴ A book called *Art and Its Institutions* and an exhibition entitled *Opacity* (curated by Nina Möntmann, 2005) were also based on this project. So at the other end of NIFCA's praxis, there were art practitioners who saw the need to counter the complexity of contemporary social relations with more opaque, veiled and meandering approaches.

Afterwards, I am more and more reluctant to say that something progressive happened in NIFCA; rather I would say that something happened. Something that also included lots of contradictions, argumentation, both in the productive and counter-productive sense, but the institution was not stagnating. But there are questions which still remain unanswered, such as: What are the possibilities for criticising or even undermining the formal and informal regulatory and value systems of a society? Is it possible to make policy-making interventions in institutions for arts and culture such as NIFCA? This would also mean that (art) institutions would just not maintain a stable social order, but rather function as actors of a certain instability and negotiation, which could also counter the pure managerialism and hegemonic structures from their position within the vicinity of the state.

While working for NIFCA, our legitimacy, functionality and viability were constantly questioned by officials and politicians. The aim of cultural and artistic policy is to guide, and nowadays also to manage, artistic and cultural development especially by allocative means, that is, through enhanced focussed public financing, and also by structural reforms, as in the case of the closing down of NIFCA, which was not a question of reducing Nordic funding for arts and culture. Yet, there is no reason to

³³ See *Capital (It Fails Us Now)* edited by Sheikh, Simon, B_BOOKS, Berlin, 2006.

³⁴ Rancière, Jacques (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Continuum, London, New York. An English translation of *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*. La Fabrique-Éditions, 2000, 40.

assume that cultural policies would reflect enhanced rationality and would somehow improve with the passage of time. This just makes it evident that the art world is not an autonomous system but is regulated, guided and connected with economies, policies and politics, and is also often in contradiction or conflict with these spheres, and that is the way it should be, because contemporary art practice is about risk taking and the location and questioning of limits; they never are where you expect them to be³⁵.

I wrote these extracts from NIFCA fully aware that there is always more than one way in which the story of certain institutions can be told. This text is one such story. Also in this story, whether it makes a point or not depends on whether the story is monotonously repeated or, on the contrary, if thoughts are roaming free in the space free of stories. Afterwards the question that remains most importantly is: Was it something we just went on repeating daily, or was it a story that was formed out of the open mind, healthy scepticism, passion forming the practice?

Scarcity as a Potential for Communities

Yet, the need for the action is apparent. While all democratic Leftists venerate Rosa Luxembour's famous "Freedom is freedom for those who think differently", Alan Badiou provokes us to shift the emphasis from "differently" to "think": "Freedom is freedom for those who just blindly (unthinkingly) act out their opinions."

Although opposite views and discourses challenge each other, ultimately that is all they really do, challenge each other. Individualism has been and is punished – individualism speaking against war, nationalism, the violation of human rights, etc., its representatives singled out as traitors. A hegemony is always characterised by the need to keep the codes of exclusive translation to itself, to restrict all interpretation to a single meaning, if necessary by force (all totalitarianism, all fundamentalism), thus effectively, and violently, putting a stop to communication.³⁶ Thus it is crucial to learn responsibility, to take an initiative in public as well as in private, believing that an individual opinion, an initiative still can/could make a difference, and to not let the individual citizen (or institution) withdraw into an anonymous, safe "us".

It is clear that the direction in art as well as in society and politics should be away from a nostalgic desire for some original community or the historical origin of community. What, then, is the foundation of a community and thereby of society? To paraphrase Maurice Blanchot, a community should be based on insufficiency that cannot be derived from the model of sufficiency. The examples in Blanchot's *Unavowable Community* (1983) refer to a substanceless substance – sacrifice, literature, people, pleasure... – which simultaneously brings people together and keeps them apart, scattering the community. The community happens unknowingly around something that is not only pure negation (pure lack), but implies experientially a non-positively received touch. The demand for absolute universalism always arises as an ethical, unrepresented demand, and – because of its unrepresentedness – as an exception, and can thus never serve the hegemony. The best and possibly the only alternative to ideology is the demand for absolute universalism – not the absolute respect for differences or otherness.³⁷

³⁵ Sheikh, Simon (2006). "The Trouble with Institutions, or, Art and Its Publics" in *Art and Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations* edited by Nina Möntmann, Black Dog Publishing, London, 142-149.

³⁶ Iveković, Rada (2006). "On permanent translation" in <http://translate.eicpc.net/transversal/0606/ivekovic/en>

³⁷ Kurki, Janne (2005). *Yhteisöttömien yhteisö*, Apeiron Kirjat, Vantaa, 49-53.

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