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CONFERENCES

Forces and Tensions in Cultural Policy – IX Finnish Conference on Cultural Policy Research, Rovaniemi, Finland, 20-21 April 2023

Sanna Karimäki-Nuutinen

The IX Finnish Conference on Cultural Policy Research was held in Rovaniemi on 20–21 April 2023. Organised by the Society for Cultural Policy Research in Finland in collaboration with the Faculty of Arts at the University of Lapland, the conference took place on the university's main campus. During the two conference days, the participants could enjoy three inspiring keynotes and were able to attend a wide range of working groups that featured topical research in the field of cultural policy and related disciplines. For me, this conference was particularly exciting and memorable – I presented a paper of my own for the first time as a doctoral researcher in one of the parallel working groups.

The theme of the conference was the forces and tensions affecting current cultural policy. In the field of cultural policy, culture can be discussed both on the basis of art and ways of living, revealing prominent underlying tensions in the concept itself. In either case, culture is a strong force that is inseparable from our lives and society. At the same time, the position of culture as part of social policy is limited to narrow sectoral boundaries. Given the numerous possible starting points for a discussion of culture and cultural policy, the thought-provoking central theme of the conference inspired scholars from many universities and research institutes and participants from various culture organisations to discuss their research and network with one another – and to build a stronger and more sustainable field of cultural policy research and policymaking.

Tensions surrounding Arctic art

After the opening words, the programme began with a keynote lecture by Professor of Art Education Timo Jokela from the University of Lapland. Jokela is also chairperson of the Arctic Sustainable Arts and Design Network at the University of the Arctic, a cooperative network of higher education organisations in the Arctic region. Jokela's lecture provided background information on various ways of defining the concept of the Arctic, highlighting both some of the key forces at play in the conference location and the tensions related to Arctic art and cultural policy. The keynote, entitled 'Arctic art as a cultural policy statement' (originally 'Arktinen taide kulttuuripoliittisena kannanotto-



Image 1. Keynote Timo Jokela started the conference. Photo: Sanna Karimäki-Nuutinen.

na' in Finnish), stressed that Arctic art contains an inherent political tension. The Arctic can be seen as a natural resources frontier, as a wilderness to be preserved and as a laboratory for scientific endeavours and sustainable innovations. It is also as the homeland of 4 to 9 million people, depending on its geographical definition, and approximately 40 indigenous cultures. Potential understandings of the Arctic are, in any case, currently being discussed in the multinational community of the circumpolar North. From the notion that the Arctic can be defined in many possible ways arises ongoing negotiations over who is entitled to represent the Arctic – together with discussions of neocolonialism and natural resources. Jokela suggested, through reference to five relevant tensions and forces, that the Arctic as a site of multidisciplinary artistic work and research could also serve as a laboratory of sustainable policy making. Almost as proof of this argument, he ended the keynote by pointing out that the conference was being held at the University of Lapland's the Faculty of Arts, in Rovaniemi, which is in fact a culture political act in itself.

Work and politics in the working groups

I attended three working groups during the two days. In the first session, entitled 'Politics I', associate professor Maria Huhmarniemi from the University of Lapland deepened the message of Jokela's lecture by presenting concrete examples of and perspectives on how contemporary art can contribute

to cultural policy debates in the Arctic context. Huhmarniemi also contributed an interesting view to the debate on just who can represent indigenous, here Sámi, people by introducing the idea of transculturalism. Is it possible, through transcultural identity, for a Finnish person to gain agency in Sámi culture by living around members of the culture?

Another paper by researchers Vappu Renko and Olli Jakonen, from Cupore, tackled a hot topic from the parliamentary elections this past spring concerning the cultural policy programmes of the Finnish political parties. The presenters made the observation that the themes of cultural policy alignments are contingent on the ideological backgrounds of the parties. Interestingly, the majority of parties are committed to the prevailing system and only advocate making fine adjustments to it in their policy making. Indeed, Renko and Jakonen asked if the True Finns Party is the only party that ‘does politics with culture’. Controversial as the idea may be that art which promotes national identity should be prioritized, the True Finns Party is the only political party to concretely promote views on artistic content or genres, whereas the other parties talk about art and culture at a more general level. In summary, the paper proposed that more research is needed on the formulation of party programmes and how cultural issues are politicised in such programmes.

Another memorable paper was given in the second, parallel session, entitled ‘Artistry and work’. The presentation, by scholars Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Katri Saarikivi and Milla Tiainen from the University of Turku, introduced the concept of artistic labour (*taidetyö* in Finnish), which in my opinion makes the key features in the work of an artist visible: the creating of art works, the multiplicity of roles and, through an ethnographic method, the artist’s lived experience. The intra-active relations between the socio-economic boundaries and varied features of making art is also a characteristic of artistic labour. In this ongoing study, I felt the ‘double duty’ of cultural policy ideally fulfilled: the scholars stressed that by developing a new concept, their goal was to create new knowledge and, at the same time, to influence political decision-making and practices in the artistic field.

Let us re-politicise cultural policy and make an impact!

After a pleasant evening hosted by the hospitable City of Rovaniemi, in the Arktikum Science Centre, and a sunny morning walk from the hotel to the campus, the keynote by Nanna Kann-Rasmussen, associate professor of cultural policy at the University of Copenhagen, opened the second conference day. Focusing on New Public Governance (NPG) as a cultural policy paradigm, Kann-Rasmussen scrutinised how we can view NPG as a force for cultural policy and how it may change cultural policy. As the global population is dealing



Image 2. Keynote Nanna Kann-Rasmussen on New Public Governance in Cultural Policies. Photo: Sanna Karimäki-Nuutinen.

with ‘non-linear, wicked problems’, such as climate change and moving from one crisis to another, NPG encourages the promotion of trust and relational contracts for governance mechanisms. In terms of cultural policy, in addition to the supporting of artists and devising of development strategies to attract larger audiences, NPG includes collaborative, cross-sectoral efforts to ‘do good’. Whether in terms of participatory decision making, diversity in voices or even activism, cultural institutions want to have an impact on society through their work. With NPG, this kind of work lends additional legitimacy to cultural agencies: not only through high-quality programming, but also through, for instance, participating in projects and other means of ‘going out there and doing good’. Kann-Rasmussen concluded that no field or discipline can avoid taking action to solve societal problems.

The most thought-provoking impulse for me personally came from Nanna Kann-Rasmussen’s view of cultural organizations through NPG theories. The realisation that struck me was epitomised by her mention of ‘activist librarians’ that she has encountered in her research (see, e.g. Kann-Rasmussen 2022). Although not a librarian, I am an art curator besides being a doctoral researcher. Like Kann-Rasmussen’s librarians, I have been working in a publicly funded cultural institution and have been grappling with a desire to include social justice, climate issues or other agendas in the programming of that in-



Image 3. Keynote Justin O'Connor ended with a thought-provoking slide. Photo: Sanna Karimäki-Nuutinen.

stitution. My autoethnographic study of curating an art exhibition that took a stand on such issues and caused heated discussions can be informed by the notion that a cultural institution's legitimacy may be justified by 'doing good'.

As a finale to the conference, the keynote by Professor of Creative Economy Justin O'Connor, from the University of South Australia, delivered just the right amount of provocation. Entitled 'Culture and Sustainable Development after Mondiacult 2022', the lecture began with a journey through 40 years of cultural policies and evolving ways of defining the cultural sector. O'Connor's message was that cultural policy has been depoliticised. By not clearly demarcating what culture or, later, the creative industry is, the cultural sector has limited its operational power. 'The creative industry is a mess', O'Connor stated. One unfortunate example of this fact is that culture is not on the UN's list of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). O'Connor stressed that in order to contribute to global solidarity and governance, and in order to be an operational public policy area, the culture sector needs to have more precise delimitations. Although imposing such restrictions does not necessarily mean renouncing culture's broader claims, by setting limits to the notion of 'culture-as-everything' the culture sector can create a manageable framework



Image 4. Morning walk in beautiful spring weather spurred thoughts for the second day of the conference. Photo: Sanna Karimäki-Nuutinen.

and clearer storyline to present at the (e.g. SDG) negotiation tables. There is a need to re-politicise cultural policy.

In summary, the conference offered a wide variety of topics and reviews of relevant research as well as inspiring encounters with colleagues and new acquaintances. Rovaniemi, and the Arctic as a broader context,

contributed to an understanding of the forces and tensions impacting cultural policy by creating a stimulating environment and inspiring an open mind.

AUTHOR

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