

Between a Rock and a Hard Place – The Possibilities for Contemporary Art Institutions to Function as Critical Political Spaces

Marita Muukkonen

I have worked for FRAME - Finnish Fund for Art Exchange since 2005 and for the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Arts (NIFCA), which was based in Helsinki, for four and a half years – I 'm using the past tense as it was closed down six weeks ago, so it doesn't exist any longer. When I took the ferry to Tallinn this morning with the Finnish artist Anu Pennanen I said, "Alright, I will go publicly back to those times only once more and then it's over, from then on I'm just looking to the future and concentrating on something else." Let's see how it goes, going back to those memories and reflections on what happened with NIFCA.

I was asked to talk about the instrumentalisation of contemporary arts. The two key concepts in my speech, to put it really simply, is dealing with nation, nationalism and instrumentalisation and how it relates to the everyday practice of art institutions; especially state funded institutions. I will take examples from the practice of NIFCA and FRAME. I'll start by quoting Finnish artist Roi Vaara: "In our late teens, some time in the beginning of the 1970s, 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?"^{T1}

Roi poses this question in the publication based on the *7th Amorph!* performance art biennale which hosted the first *Summit of Micronations* ^{P1} in Helsinki in 2003. It was curated by artists Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen and NIFCA collaborated in the process. During the three days the Principality of Sealand, NSK-State, Ladonia, Kingdoms of Elgaland & Vargaland, TransNationalRepublic and State of Sabotage met, talked and worked from the temporary embassies, raising questions on the individual and community, nation and nationality, movements and restrictions, boundaries and those who draw them. But where does nationalism derive its strength?

As it has been stated by many postmodern anti-essentialist theorists, especially in the 1990s, and also in the art world: There is no such thing as a nation. These discussions have been much around. Society and nation must never exist, yet they must always be in the process of formation. In simple terms, the direction in art as well as in society and politics should be distanced from a nostalgic yearning for a primordial community or the historical origins of community. It is obvious that nothing but a catastrophe has ever come from it so far. It is important to realise this in the time when universal human rights seem to have become an ideological clown-suit for nationalism, as we have unfortunately witnessed lately in the world of politics.

Still, changeable like a chameleon, nationalism has contributed to a sense of togetherness in different ages and situations regardless of the re-occurring predictions of its immanent death. It still serves as a kind of civic relic re-occurring in everyday practices, figures of speech, ritual ceremonies and symbols. In Benedict Anderson's ^{T2} often quoted view, he says that ever since the 19th century, phenomena such as systems of education, the press, books, museums, maps, population, etc have constituted methods for the production of nationalism. For example, museums were used to deposit national things that had previously not been perceived as such –

national myths acquired physical embodiment in the museums. As we know, currently the most influential ideological apparatuses of power are the various mass media with all their ramifications. In media rhetoric as well as everyday life, nationalist expressions range from xenophobia on the street to talk about strengthening national competitiveness – something which is clearly reflected in the arts and cultural policies in the European level currently.

A nationalism determined by systemic level, for example by the economy, finds a foothold in people's life world. All sorts of areas of activity are being commodified with sign value: brands are being created for states, cities and towns, as well as for the biennials and the museums. The search for tradition is increasing rapidly on the local, national as well as European level. This brings to mind the situation in the early 19th century when national traditions were not only discovered but also constructed from all sorts of materials. National 'imagined' communities are still connected to the way people ascribe meaning to their everyday experiences. It is this aspect which underlines the importance of individual experiences in both the strengthening and construction of nationalism. Art institutions are the meeting places for art and other practices, the mediators and translators between the practitioners and their public. They are a part of constructing and thus also deconstructing our life world. This also opens up possibilities for art institutions to actually be part of this deconstruction and questioning process.

Looking at recent policy and political developments in arts and culture in Finland and the EU it becomes clear that cultural-political instrumentalisation and economisation is infused with nationalist and protectionist tendencies, and that is a growing concern. To highlight this tendency I quote former minister of culture Kaarina Dromberg from the conservative party in Finland who sent her summer greetings 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 the immigrants what Finnishness essentially is."³

What seems to be her point is that Finnishness is a particular cultural position that is increasingly threatened by the transnational environment. Indeed, such rhetoric that relies 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. It is not a question of small talk either, as the Nordic example of the right-wing tendencies in Danish cultural politics demonstrates. The kind of canon which was proposed in Finland already exists in Denmark. Experts appointed by the Minister of Culture selected works of art for the canon which was defined as a body of historically enduring best works. It was also emphasised that it was not a list of topics that could be altered at will. We must remember that lists that assess and evaluate art and culture have always been a stable feature of totalitarian systems. It is only seven decades ago when all experimental and avant-garde art was classified as *entartete Kunst* in Germany in 1937.

When we talk about identity politics, the crucial question is who is asking about identity and to what purpose. For example, in Denmark the discussions regarding Danishness became stronger in the 1990s through the interest of majority culture to maintain their dominant identity position, which is the case in Finland as well. So it's no longer minorities posing these questions for mainstream policy making, it's the other way around. And also identity is now mainly referring to ethnic identity, so it doesn't even

recognise the constantly recreated multilayered nature of identities. This is currently one evident tendency in the arts and cultural policy at the European level.

The other strengthening tendency is the transformation of cultural politics into cultural economics. This is based on the reciprocal movement of commodifying culture and culturalising industry. I think the first one is clear and the latter implies that creativity, communication, innovation and aesthetic design are all at the core of economic production nowadays. This relates to global capitalism which contains systemic requirements for competition, especially between different locations of performance. This is what the wide support enjoyed by the Finnish innovation system is based on, as well as the increasingly prevalent talk about cultural industries in European culture and arts policy – the idea of the arts and culture as a competition factor of national economic growth. This mantra of creativity became an integral part of the cultural policy discourse in the EU and its member states in the 1990s, as well as in supra-governmental organisations, such as UNESCO.

We have elections in Finland in March 2007, so let's see what happens. Our current Government has been very strongly creating and implementing a strategic program for cultural export. This serves as an illuminating case for the current problems in the cultural-political landscape of Finland and in the EU. It directly aims at strengthening competitive nationalism. In Finland policy makers no longer talk about 'subsidy' or 'aid' but of 'investments' that entail requests for profits and returns.

A new institutional flagship, a division of Cultural Export, was established within the Finnish Ministry of Culture in September 2005 to promote business know-how in the field of culture and arts. FRAME is also under this new division, no longer part of the Arts division, and we are obligated to take part in the business know-how program, such as courses, etc, even though we are a foundation and we cannot make profit. Rather than being a mere exercise in organisation, this readjustment 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- and games-industry. These are neighbours that function on the basis of a very different logic. One of the problems with the new administrative reforms both on the Nordic as well as European level, which also resulted with NIFCA being closed in Finland, is that no differentiation is made between culture and arts. All is culture: sport is culture, food is culture, everything is basically culture. Maybe the only thing that is not culture is contemporary art. I am not going to elaborate on that further in this context but it just highlights the different rationales which are linked with arts and culture.

Within 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 both in the cultural policy in the EU and in the Council of Europe. Yet it is no longer the logic of the market *versus* broad access to culture, but instead the market provides broad access to cultural goods; no longer the logic of competitiveness *versus* cultural diversity, but instead competition basically supporting cultural diversity because it aims to prevent the emergence of monopolies. Just to briefly give some examples, cultural policies are increasingly drawn up to serve policy purposes other than the traditional artistic and cultural causes. What is also at issue here is something that has been referred to as 'policy attachment' – a strategy that 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. And this underlies the need for the transnationalisation of arts and cultural policies, so that arts and culture would not

just be diminished to instruments for economic growth, but these policies don't really exist and there are only a few programs in the EU that are really dealing with culture. So this is the simplified picture about the current cultural-political climate and tendencies in the EU and my perspective is especially coming from Finland, the landscape I know best.

I'm now working for FRAME and previously worked at NIFCA. When you are working in a state funded institution, it is clear that the starting point is the location of the institution in the apparent vicinity of the state. It means that a state funded art institution *is* a part of the hegemonic structure, it *is* part of the nation state. It has always got a double function, one part of it we could call the 'police function' but there is also a possibility for an attempt to work as a critical political space or public sphere. Since art institutions are clearly at the interface between art and politics, art and policy making, art and economics, art and society, there is therefore at least the potentiality for conflict and therefore politics – here I'd rather use the term 'critical political space', since the notion of 'public sphere' is complex nowadays in terms of the definition.

Now I am stating that art institutions could function as critical political spaces – fragmented and interdisciplinary, consisting of a number of spaces which sometimes connect, sometimes do not, that are in conflictual or contradictory relations to each other. While working at NIFCA and FRAME, the constant question we faced was that of what are the possibilities for state funded art institutions to be committed to a constant redefining of its role and function in communication with other actors, also from other disciplines and fields in order to function as non-nationalistic, non-unitary and contradictory spaces? These questions, which were posed in the book *Art and its Institutions* P2, constituted one of the processes we worked with at NIFCA in trying to reflect the possibilities of an art institution being part of an institutional critique within the institution and outside in society.

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." ^{T4} So it seems that the only possible means of communication between a postmodern anti-essentialist theory and that of a parallel all-essentialist political practice is a kind of translation. There is no direct correspondence between these two languages but the question remains, how could these languages meet? Although opposite views and discourses challenge each other, ultimately that's all they really do. They only challenge each other, but how to move from thinking to action?

When I started to work at NIFCA in 2000, the political emphasises were formulated by the Nordic prime ministers in the following way: "Cultural co-operation has to strengthen Nordic identity, to protect and refine it and to present it to the rest of Europe." ^{T5} Nordic cultural co-operation with roots back to the 1970s was at that time still legitimised by referring to a unified Nordic culture in the anthropological sense, not recognising increasing migration in the region, for example. One of the first questions we started to pose was that of how can we deconstruct this notion of 'Nordicness' without falling into the trap of tolerant multicultural humanitarianism? We started from our own institutional practice with really simple things. There was still this kind of policy in the Nordic collaboration at the time that people were supposed to speak Scandinavian languages when they were employed by an institution. That's something we just gave up –

nationality or language was no longer a base for employment. We didn't really use the notion of 'Nordic community' if we didn't have to; it was just defined as a constitutional community. We faced problems with these decisions in the beginning but employment policy that is based on nationality is against EU legislation, so this practice has changed within the Nordic collaboration.

Basically, we started to think how we would start from our position our own institutional practice, and not from the point of doing thematical exhibitions or other processes dealing with issues like cultural diversity and so on. Neither was our practice based on regional promotion, we were not presenting the region to the rest of Europe as prime ministers were wishing. We moved away from these notions of Nordic visibility or presence; certain representational passivity as it could be called. Just to give some examples or titles of our projects, one of the first bigger ones was called *Fundamentalisms of the New Order* ^{P3}, and then there were processes like *Populism* ^{P4} which followed. We also opened global residency programs so that we could give grants to people from outside of the Nordic and Baltic region.

I was just looking at how we summed up our strategy in 2001. The aim 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 and thus contradictional place. At any rate, many nice words but I don't know how it worked out.

But to move back to the policy making level, we did not neglect parliamentarist struggle – in the way Negri & Hardt were articulating it at the time in *Empire* – it was also on the agenda as a state funded institution. We were directly under five ministries – that means, whether we wanted it or not, in a constant communication with them – and at the same time we had connections to the grass-roots level. For example, in 2001 we organised a conference called *Under Construction* ^{P5}. I made a proposal to the Finnish ministry that instead of the ministry organising the conference NIFCA would do it. After negotiations they agreed and we decided to do something concerning identity politics. The process was complicated since they still had this old school notion of multiculturalism as a static ideology. We tried to move beyond the early days of multiculturalism in the arts, because the discourse was totally somewhere else by that time. We were raising the precarious situation of the museums and institutions and tried to bring along the notion of the 'transnational' and 'global capitalism', to emphasise what kind of impacts it has on democracy, and maybe we ended up somewhere in between. We had a working group with artists, activists as well as people from the ministries, but there were many misunderstandings in the process. The seminar started with the opening speech *What's Wrong with Multiculturalism?* The policy makers didn't know about this critique and that was quite a surprise. There was also a workshop called *Wild in the Streets* dealing with activism. We gained some changes in the policy making agendas but we also had problems because of the things that happened at the seminar later on. We continued the process but in NIFCA we didn't make these kinds of public events after that. We had more closed workshop sessions at the policy making level as well and I think that model actually worked out better, at least for some years.

But maybe to point out here, arts and cultural institutions do have a responsibility and they need to take these initiatives, especially in places like NIFCA. As for FRAME, it's the same – we are directly under the ministries, so we also have a responsibility towards our field.

Then again, a few remarks on NIFCA's institutional practice – of course, it was a different kind of institution, it worked along the network logic, since it didn't have its own exhibition space. All the processes were done in collaboration with other institutions or artist groups. We carried out the process called "NIFCA as a Co-practicing Institution or the Utopian Model of NIFCA" and one outcome was the idea to stop doing bigger exhibitions and create a production residency network which would work in close collaboration with different local actors but that never happened. The institution was closed down before then. It was part of our working policy that we tried to give space for initiatives coming from the artistic community as well as the activist communities. We worked for example with media activists, open source community, demo-scenery and NGOs. I will highlight it with the project called *Re-Approaching New Media: Survival Kit P6* which explored issues including freedom of speech, corporate power, networks of knowledge production, etc. Later on *Pixelache* ^{P7} electronic art festival created by Juha Huuskonen, among others, continued this initiative. I'm giving this example maybe because the participants and part of the audience of the project came from outside of the traditional institutional arts community. I started by quoting the *Summit of Micronations*. This kind of activity goes in different directions in terms of the notion of the 'social' in current contemporary art. There has been a kind of social turn in contemporary art lately, a strong revival and interest both in social as well as social-political projects. We were also thinking about questions of how different social forms need to depart from what is generally experienced as social reality; what is actually socially oriented practice today; what would be the ground for what we called 'non-believers' – i.e. the kind of aesthetic approach which rejects socially oriented work as marginal, misguided, lacking artistic interest of any kind – and for the 'believers' or the activists who reject aesthetic questions as synonymous with cultural hierarchy and capitalistic market. I think in NIFCA we emphasised really different aspects of the notions 'social' and 'social-political', it was one of the dreads we were inflicting in different practices. It is based both on the terms of 'aesthetics' and 'ethics' and I think these are all really relevant questions today, when we think of the different kinds of artistic approaches and the importance of the social-political. Maybe it is also something to be thought of in the context of the biennial, like how do you think about the social-political and aesthetical together? There are no simple answers but I think that's a really interesting question for discussion for all of us working in this field. In NIFCA there were different ways of approaching different aspects of contemporary art practice. It was also possible, since we didn't have any fixed location. We could find different processes and a way to finance or curate them.

So these were examples of how NIFCA tried to impact the policy making processes and how we approached these kinds of social-political processes in regard to institutional practice.

To say something about FRAME. We are now facing this competitive nationalism I stated earlier. The pressure is that we should start to export Finnish art, which is quite paradoxical because it seems that in all EU countries everybody should just export art but no one is receiving or hosting anything. We are now waiting for a cross-sectoral development program for cultural export to be launched at the end of February 2007. Committee members are from four ministries: Education and Culture, Foreign Affairs, Trade and Industry, and Finance. When we in FRAME heard that this kind of committee had been set up and that we are now just to start to export arts and culture, we thought what can we do in this situation, because we can't really function and work in that manner. That's not our point of departure, just to promote national things and start to make and market products. So independently we started to develop our own kind of counter strategy. Last summer we started to organise different discussions with various

actors from the art field, i.e. artists, artist organisations, residencies, art universities, researchers, commercial galleries, artist-run galleries, etc. To this aim we also organised the seminar *A Critique of Creative Industries*^{P8}, since it is always easier in Finland to start a debate when you have international people coming in. Actually one person from the ministry voluntarily came to the seminar and gave some sort of response and it opened up a discussion. It's too early to say what it resulted in but at least Finland is such a small country that it is actually possible to create some sort of dialogue with the policy makers. I think that policy making is a bit like running a marathon, it's a long-term process and you don't get major changes immediately, but, at any rate, I just feel that there is a responsibility from the art field to try to create some kind of a dialogue because the ministry level is not going to do it in our direction. If we don't take the initiative ourselves and start to create a debate, they are not going to do it for us either; they are just creating their own discourse and expecting us to accept it.

To conclude on the discussions we had and the outcome, there is nothing new for you as such. These discussions clearly underline this kind of modern *aporia* between culture and economy that I mentioned earlier. At the policy making level there is now this market based rhetoric of efficiency, productivity and utility. And the concepts which are coming from the arts field are dialogism, immateriality and transnationality. In Finland, the practice of visual art is characterised by innovative personal and collective pursuits, voluntary work and financial risk-taking. There are not so many making profit like the ministry is now emphasising. But it is clear, and this argument is based on those discussions not on official papers from the policy level, that there is a tendency towards sharpening dichotomies as such: nationalism *versus* transnationalism, instrumentalism *versus* intrinsic value of art, export *versus* exchange, showroom dummies *versus* precariat. It wasn't really something so surprising but it's really good that we have a base now, that we have a legitimisation based on those discussions and hearings from the field.

Also in FRAME, we should be developing some new means of measuring efficiency and export, etc. Everybody knows that art is something you can't really measure, it's not like sports, it's the marketing discourse and success-talk that the policy makers are now strongly supporting: works of art are equated with commodities, demand with success, and success with quality. At the same time the role of the political function of art and culture is also reduced to the postpolitical thinking of managing and marketing.

We will see what will happen in FRAME but we received pretty clear messages last year. It also concerns *Framework* magazine – they wanted to cut down the finances because it is not promoting Finnish arts enough. But we are not changing our position. And even though it is now harder to work on a transnational basis, we have initiated a small-scale Nordic/Baltic Curatorial Platform that includes Copenhagen, Helsinki, Reykjavik and Tallinn so that it would be possible to include art practitioners outside of Finland. It just means that we need to find new ways to do things which are against this official policy making.

One paradox I have been thinking about during my research within this project is that the market-driven policy rhetoric is not really functioning according to the supposed logic of a neoliberal network society either. The systems they are creating are not following the deterritorialised logic of flows of capital and information. They are actually creating a centralised model that would act via embassies and Finnish institutes, etc. As Terry Eagleton has formulated it, these days, centrality is distinctly uncool, the centre has been marginalised and the margins is the place to be – which is typical of network-

based project activity whose operating terms are mobility, speed and flexibility, that is capable of establishing, mediating and expanding networks. But it seems that the policy making practice is not following this kind of neoliberal network logic; it still follows the logic of industrial society which functions in terms of fixed points and positions. Neoliberal rhetoric is of course another problem, but the policy making is not even creating a system that would follow that logic; both social democratic and liberal democratic politics are still functioning in terms of strengthening the function of the nation state for the freedom of capital and goods, but not for people. That's the reason why, on the level of the state apparatus, the competitive state maintains and develops the kind of national competitive communities which are still functioning according to the kinds of fixed points described, not on the network logic which they use in the level of their policy making rhetoric. They are still creating Brezhnevian models which are controlling and institutionalising.

T1 Vaara, Roi (2003). "Victory over Horseshit" in *Documents / Asiakirjoja, Amorph!03, Summit of Micronations* edited by Kochta, Oliver & Kalleinen, Tellervo, Art-Print Oy, Helsinki, p. 60.

T2 Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

T3 Helsingin Sanomat newspaper, 31.07.2006.

T4 Buden, Boris (2006). "Cultural Translation: Why it is important and where to start with it" in <http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/0606/buden/en>

T5 Duelund, Peter and Pedersen, Gitte (2003). "The Nordic Cultural Cooperation" in *The Nordic Cultural Model* edited by Duelund, Peter, Narayana Press, Gylling, p. 268.

P1 *Summit of Micronations*. 7th Amorph! performance art biennale. Curated by Tellervo Kalleinen & Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen. Produced by MUU ry / Timo Soppela & Mirva Pulkkinen, Helsinki 2003.

P2 *Art and its Institutions. Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations*. Ed. Nina Möntmann. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006.

P3 *Fundamentalisms of the New Order*. Curated by Charlotte Brandt, Lars Bang Larsen and Cristina Ricupero. Organised by Charlottenborg Udstillingsbygning & NIFCA, Copenhagen 2002.

P4 *Populism*. Curated by Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero and Nicolaus Schafhausen. In cooperation with Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius; National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main & NIFCA 2005.

P5 *Under Construction – Nordic Conference on Cultural Diversity*. Organized by NIFCA in collaboration with the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Finnish Ministry of Education. Helsinki 2001. See also *Under [De]Construction – Perspectives on Cultural Diversity in Visual and Performing Arts*. Ed. Marita Muukkonen. NIFCA, Helsinki 2002.

P6 *Re-Approaching New Media: Survival Kit*. Organised by Olento in collaboration with NIFCA. Helsinki 2003.

P7 *Pixelache*. Festival for Electronic Art and Subcultures. www.pixelache.ac

P8 *A Critique of Creative Industries*. Organized by eipcp in cooperation with FRAME – Finnish Fund for Art Exchange. Helsinki 2006.