



RE:IMAGINING
CULTURAL SPACE
17 -19 November, Stockholm

The Nordic Lab - Report

The third day of the conference Re:Imagining Cultural Space 17-19 November 2010 at Orienteatern took the form of a Nordic Lab, focusing on the specific conditions of the Nordic and Baltic regions and what the cultural sector sees as crucial issues. The Lab was a follow-up discussion to the prior two days, providing a more intimate possibility to share experiences and develop ideas.

Five themes were moderated by a chosen host. As guests participants from innovative initiatives and institutions in Nordic and Baltic countries were invited. Each participant could choose two lab themes, one for the morning and another for the afternoon.

See a list of participating organizations at the end of the report.

Mapping public space

What is the potential of the urban landscape? How can space be recycled? What is a "new" audience? What is the follow up? What relationships can be built?

Independent cultural organisations providing content for institutions

Public institutions tend to commission independents to create projects, within the institution's infrastructure, instead of employing its own staff. What possibilities are released? Can a diverse cultural ecology be maintained?

Developing artist-run initiatives and cooperative projects

How to organize a gallery or company collectively? What management models are developed? How do you share and grow? On what grounds do you develop an artistic identity and a (shared) brand?

Building culture into the community

Different approaches, different strategies? Where does art meet audience? How do we build sustainable relations between artists and community? Who leads, the artists or the community?

Changes in society and new cultural policies

Is today's dynamic and mobile cultural landscape an effect of the financial crisis and increasing costs? Modern cultural policy supports flexible initiatives: what is our motivation? How has this affected the "repertory"? How have established venues adapted to the new demands?

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Nordic Lab 1: Mapping Public Space

The discussions of the morning and afternoon lab spanned examples and challenges of small to large scale art projects in urban spaces and issues that art organizations in urban spaces deal with.

Examples of art projects

In Malmö, 10 years ago experimental group Laika asked: how can we invite people to share the space, making it undefined rather than defined? They put two loud speakers on wheels in a parking lot, paid for a parking ticket and turned on a tennis game amongst the white lined parking slots.

In Täby a densely populated suburb of Stockholm, Mats Bruckert asked the director of the huge shopping mall to get 3 days access for artistic events in the gallery. There were a lot of activities. Amongst others the logo of Täby Centrum was redesigned, 80 people walked around with photos instead of hanging them, a singer performed walking and to hear her the shoppers/audience had to follow her. "We were allowed to do it. It is very hard to work in a shopping mall, very hard."

In Vilnius, the Culture Capital organization arranged a competition of art in unusual spaces three years in a row. 20-30 projects were presented each year, a city map was printed in the biggest newspaper, and the citizens were invited to decorate their semi-public spaces: balcony, court yards etc. Spaces, organizations, new collaborations was mapped in the city.

Challenges of working in public space

Developing forms of audience interaction outside the predefined structures of a theatre house. Sara Erlingsdotter (Himlabacken, Skåne) creates outdoor opera/multi arts performances and collaborates with other areas of expertise, a landscape architect, to find ways of working with the audience.

When Christina Molander worked with a two year c/o programme in Stockholm for Moderna Dansteatern she had to fight to get institutions/partners to look up from their own work for five minutes and often had to stand alone when there were problems while institutions were happy to share the credit when it went well.

"How do we make positive traces in the space?" Mathias Holmberg (Full Pull, Malmö) reported a survey made by the Malmö Summer festival where the audience said "we shared something, we found joy and a place with new eyes".

Challenges of collaborating or negotiating with real estate owners and authorities

Despite a successful competition in Vilnius (see above) the financial crises has made its continuation into a political issue. Art projects in unusual spaces can be cheap to produce and the politicians use this as an argument to withdraw financial support.

In Copenhagen Danses Hus have a low fee in their 7 year contract with Carlsberg who are developing a formerly closed area of Copenhagen. A great opportunity that also raises the question of integrity and when it may become crucial.

In Stockholm the international touring company Cullberg balletten are looking for ways of sustaining their large scale establishment in the rebuilt gasholder area in Stockholm. How to argue for the city's long term engagement and investment?

The Oslo based company the Nordic Black Theatre were thrown out of their centrally placed venue, a boat, while a private company was developing the area into a cluster of national arts institutions. Their experience was that even if you make friends with a majority of the key people it is difficult to win because a politician rarely takes a fight publicly.

Several Swedish participants had experience of it being easier to work with urban planners than cultural departments of municipalities.

Karin Willén of KRO (The Swedish Artists' National Organization), pointed out the need of sharing challenges and expertise. Joining forces to afford the hire consultants or campaign together. Instead of each organization or artist finds their own way in negotiating with the city or a private company it could be made easier by sharing resources.

A battle already won – the right people in key positions

Lone Jensen of Kulturhuset Aarhus has a great experience of city authorities engaging in the arts communities needs via open-source methods that led to investing in a building devoted to the arts accommodating production and presentation, opening up to professionals and citizens. The arts community shared this need, visual artists discussed what to do in the house, but the overall aim was a shared one. With key people in the city's administration and amongst the politicians this could be done.

Facilitator: Christina Molander, SITE
Rapporteur: Vanessa Ware, Intercult

Nordic Lab 2: Independent Cultural Organisations providing content for institutions

(one session only)

Some broader questions we discussed and shared:

- Is the main justification for supporting independents that they provide content for institutions?
- Are we too eager to produce and be affirmed by the institutional structures?
- Independent sector as an entrepreneur sector?
- Differences between theatre branch and visual arts branch?
- What is the difference between and "institution" and "independent"?:
 - Board make-up
 - Stability of economic support

National comparisons and some examples:

1. Sweden:

The artists working in the independent sector have most often CHOSEN to be independents, not because they cannot "get into" the institutions. But the myth is that the free groups are "marginalized" and "less competent" and function as stepping stones into the institutional production systems.

Good case studies:

Collaboration between The Royal Opera and the childrens theatre company Tittut. They needed each others expertise. Mutual benefit. Excellent result. Opening the Opera to new audiences and communication. Offering the independent company a platform and production resources which would normally be beyond their capacity.

Dramalabbet (Stockholm) which is often seen to be an "incubator" for institutional development (although without access to their resources) and not seen as a cultural platform itself, with its own competence and focus.

2. Finland:

Here the independent sector is more generally recognized and not so stigmatized. Long tradition of amateur culture which engages larger parts of the population. Can take initiatives and meet the institutions without being "beggars".

3. Latvia:

Politics have taken over the landscape. Money big problems. Kultur Kapital, the only serious funder for the independent sector, is cut by 70%.

4. Norway:

The big difference is that Norway does NOT have an economic crisis in the cultural sector.

The difference b/w institutions and independents is very small - same people in both areas.

It is a question of INTEGRITY.

The independent sector is closely connected internationally and therefore travels. This makes the institutions jealous.

Good case study:

The festival in North Norway which animates a geographic area where the competition with the institutions is not so great, as there are few and they need all the collaboration they can get.

Challenge #1:

Media attention for the institutions is a given. For the independent sector it is a struggle. This is of major importance. No obvious interest from the media for less populist or more challenging work.

How to bring a sharper analysis of the work that independents do into our communication strategies? How to use alternative methods of communication (social networks, etc)?

Challenge #2:

Pre-determined results are required to work within the institutions. Process is the endeavor of the independent sector. How can we translate some of this process/curiosity to the institutions? What new production models can be imagined that make it easier for the institutions to benefit from the creativity of the independents?

How to transfer the knowledge/competence/"freedom of thinking" from the independent sector to the institutional?

Finally:

The same people work in both sectors - it is not a question of people but of structure.

Facilitator: Tine Eriksson Fredriksson, Made/Norrlands Operan

Rapporteur: Chris Torch, Intercult

The Nordic Lab 3: Developing artist/run initiatives and cooperative projects

The lab focused mainly on mapping the sector through presentations done by all participants, introducing a project, network or platform which is artists-driven and/or which functions through collaborative methods. Following the presentations, the discussions concentrated on how to ensure the artistic intention, create accessible spaces and resources for artists to push initiatives and create frameworks.

The participants at the lab, in both sessions (morning and after lunch), came from diverse artistic and geographic background, from the Nordic and Balkan region, which enhanced a broad specter of experiences to be shared.

Examples

One of the first points brought to the table was the reason for artists to start up their own initiatives. Most of the times these collectives are initiated as a response to the existing conditions of research, education and production offered by the established institutions or system.

First example came from Gothenburg, Sweden. Dansbyrå started as a collective group allowing freelancers to develop shared resources. Over the years the group also developed a network of power stations, helping to connect similar initiatives in Sweden and the Nordic region. Dansbyrå has its own resident choreographers, which do not collaborate artistically within this production structure. Dansbyrå functions more as a platform for them to strengthen their position locally and internationally, empowers them, offers access to resources and networking.

The Croatian Dance community was facing a reality with no existing institution and no funding structure for contemporary dance. The solution was to build a community formed by the independent sector, a coalition around the common goal of obtaining a space for research and production and funding resources and by creating a parallel infra-structure sustaining its growth. After 5 years, in 2009, the Center for contemporary dance in Zagreb was opened, a space shared by several dance companies.

Supermarket, Stockholm is an artist initiative in the field of visual arts, which started as a protest towards the visual arts commercial fair, Market. Supermarket gathers every year in Stockholm over a hundred artists/run galleries from Sweden and Europe. The initiative is very well supported by the artistic community, since it has become clear that it can be powerful and new connections are made during the meeting.

Challenges

An issue that artists/run initiatives face, is the long/term possibility of existence and to keep the artistic vision, when the financial sustainability question becomes a pressure. The Danish theater group Cantabile pointed out that their organization and similar ones, such as Odin Theater, also from Denmark, have been built at a time when public funding could have been given to such initiatives, which were active in experimental artistic forms. In order to pursue the artistic vision and be able to develop new methods and formats, a stable platform is required, said Cantabile.

With the overall topic of the conference in mind, the first session identified the need of creating accessible spaces, to allow artistic processes to develop, enhance debate and critique within the arts sector, as well as resources for production for the middle sector, in between grass/rooted and established.

The second session opened up with a presentation by the collective aktör&vänner from Gothenburg, who define themselves not as artist-driven, but as art-driven, as a resource for the community, inviting professionals from different fields to have residencies, e.g, engineers. The organization is driven on the principles of creativity, chaos and participation.

Several artist collectives present at the session expressed the concern of finding solutions of managing collectives driven by artists in a democratic horizontal structure over the years. A challenge faced by collectives is to find an organization formula balancing active involvement and equal decision making. The Finnish network Su-Frau decided that instead of developing a structure which does not fit all members, to change the structure according to the new needs expressed by the members.

The Swedish collective Arena Bilbao, another organization initiated by several artists and lead by all of them, encounters difficulties in finding producers who want to work with them. The question is what role can a new producer have in a similar structure. The response came from a Danish organization active in the field of electronic art, organizing a festival and several exchange programs in Denmark, the region of Skåne and Europe. They see their role as a catalyst, administrator, stimulating processes and encounters for members and partners.

Yvonne Rock, former coordinator of Swedish year of Diversity 2008, pointed out the need for finding sustainable strategies, identifying possibilities for financial support within the system, without compromising on the artistic side. One example is her own initiative of creating a social company, which gives back the profit to the society, including to culture organizations.

BADco. from Croatia underlined the fact that the system can not be changed as a whole and the solution is to create alternative supporting structures for resources, space and funding (see above the example of the Croatian dance community).

The final point of the session was given by aktör&vänner from Gothenburg, mentioning that a healthy sector should encourage also temporary structures, which can have a shorter period of existence, based on the need and the context.

Facilitator: Niels Righolt, CKI/Moriska Pavljongen
Rapporteur: Corina Oprea, Intercult

Nordic Lab 4: Building culture into the community

What different approaches and strategies are there? Where does art meet its audience? How does one build sustainable relations between artists and community? Who is in charge, the culture or the community?

Good examples

Sara Gebran; Project Plant a garden - community work in Palestine

Timeframe: one month

Team: 3 international artists, 15 students and a group of volunteers from Palestine.

The artistic actions where: the social meetings, the planning of where to plant the garden and then follow-up to care for the garden.

Key factors: Legitimacy – a strong local partner that involved the whole community.

Exchange – everybody worked together.

Sustainability – a routine to care for the plants was implemented, the follow-up was secured by chosen people that continued after the project month was over.

Amelie Tham Fisksätra; the local library as hub for cultural projects

Timeframe: ongoing

Key factors: Legitimacy – the library is a well established local meeting place.

Trust – the community know the staff at the library, they even leave their kids there.

Local collaboration – the project reaches both children and parents through the schools.

Anders Olsson Teatermaskinen in Riddarhyttan; theatre in a rural community, both professional high-profiled performances and community theatre

Timeframe: ongoing

Team: the members of the company

Key factors: Legitimacy – the members of the company lives and shares everyday life with their community.

Recognition in the repertoire – the company creates mainly performance/plays based on stories from the community or the neighbourhood area. For ex "The history of Riddarhyttan.

Benefits for the community – the company provides employment and contribute to the growth of the community. The identity of the community is strengthened by the company's presence. They work with children in order to reach the parents

Long term thinking – they have been there 25 years.

Nik Dahlström; Playhouse worlds - storytelling with children and personal stories

Timeframe: ongoing

Key factors: Legitimacy – anchored the project with the headmasters in different schools. Sustainability – mentored the teachers so they could carry on the project as part of their ordinary tasks.

Clear result – Three phases in the project, that lead to development while implementing and a visible result for the participants.

A battle already won

We all underlined the necessity that the project has a legitimacy within the community before it starts. If it is a short term project start with a proper research and find out if the project is wanted.

Challenges

To have enough time and a long-term mandate to work with the project, in order to avoid project fatigue which many target groups in the communities have.

To implement the project and run it, beyond the sensation that community work is charity and that your target group will be stigmatized.

To include interculturalism and the willingness to change, including the people that run the project.

The transversality of culture

Community based culture works naturally with agents of social change, schools, the health sector and other sectors vital for the specific community.

Other conclusions and experiences from working with culture in communities

- Locals should initially be invited to co work on a project in order to establish relationships. In this part of the process it is of importance to research the local needs and interest.
- It is good to be aware of the tension between policymakers often wanting instant result and quick changes when real and sustainable change often take a long time.
- In our time the notion of audience needs to be redefined towards a public and even an interactive public body.
- A cultural space will never function unless filled with individual passion and personal relationships.
- To use fictional stories and characters can be a good tool for promotion and identification.
- A successful project is often 'word of mouth worthy'. Try to associate with positive trigger words. If already burdened with negative trigger words – try changing the perspective to turn them into positive trigger words.
- Make sure to take care of new audiences, use hosts guiding them from the very start to the end.
- It is also of importance to educate people who are in charge; the policy makers, a must if we ever are going to make culture a functional base of our society.

Facilitator: Mogens Holm, Taastrup Teater

Rapporteurs: Ida Burén, Intercult and Nik Dahlström

Nordic Lab 5: Changes in society and new cultural policies

The discussion of the morning and afternoon labs has been structured under 4 main headings, grouping together the strongest arguments and key questions while interspersing them with certain concrete examples that stood out.

1. The transversal nature of culture:

- The culture sector needs to start fulfilling its potential as a transversal player, as a member of the society. There is an interdependence between art and society.
- Culture does gain ground across society. There is money set aside for culture and art in city planning, for instance.

- On the EU level the discourse on the role of culture is more developed in comparison to the policy on national level.
- From a Swedish ministerial perspective the role of culture is seen as more than before. Traditionally cultural policy was the equivalent of art policy. Now it is broadened. It is not possible for a ministry to work on all the aspects at the same time.

Challenges:

- There is a great push from the Western region of Sweden (Västra Götaland) towards the instrumentalisation/categorisation of culture. Instead of bringing that perspective into different sectors, the cultural department is expected to carry it alone. It should be a concern for all sectors and not just up to the culture sector to argue for the value of culture across the board.
- The basic issue is communication and methods of communication. It's a pedagogical challenge, making people understand the role of culture in other areas, for instance external relations. Culture has to work from its own starting point of art/culture. We are the yeast in all possible fields of society. It is difficult to communicate as we are very segregated in our different boxes. Political representatives need to be taught about what culture should do. How to understand culture, instead of how to use culture. Identify influential individuals to communicate with.
- We need translators/mediators to introduce a new language. Policy structures require us to formulate ideas and plans of projects driven by artistic investigation before they have started. This is counterproductive and does not help us formulate our real intentions so that people outside the sector understand.

2. Is cultural policy reflecting the needs of the sector? Are there examples of where cultural initiatives have led the development?

Examples:

- In Romania there was a lack of spaces. An empty discoteque was available, a private space now free to use for non-commercial cultural activities in the community. Sometimes you have to cut the picture to fit the frame, meaning if there are no opportunities ready and available, you have to use white lies, create fictional scenarios and exaggerate to get the support you need. But this goes only so far, after that real changes to meet your needs have to be made in the policy to accommodate this type of initiative.
- In Croatia there is an evident failure of cultural policy to be far-reaching. Financing has grown very little since 2000. The institutional sector holds money and resources, blocking a wider access to resources. This does not facilitate cultural development and production. The institutions have to make up with a nationalistic past which has too big an impact on cultural policy. An infrastructure from the ground up was created. A network of independent cultural producers/organisations, reaching out into the country, which is very centralised. It's a content-sharing network. Funded from international programmes for youth, open society funding. To get access to the money, you have to create projects that include at least 3 other Croatian partners.

3. The impact of regionalisation on the future of the culture sector:

- We need administrators that defend art as a research and development area. It should be defended on all levels: local, regional and national. The state needs to take the obligation to educate local and regional politicians.

- Regions are crucial, in a more immediate way if you compare to the national level. Meaning, regional governance and policy-making is closer to the citizens than national governance.
- Cuts are happening on a national level, but the regionalisation process is strengthening the regions. To write regional policy you also need participation from both independents and establishment. It's a problem of efficiency. To have criteria you need participation, play a political role to influence the policy. How do we get people to join the discussion?
- Public institutions' role is to produce policy. How can they reach the people who really need this money? It doesn't matter what sector. From this point of view it is not just about the financial crisis, but it's also a political crisis. It means we haven't got a value production that produces new values for society to grow. If we follow the subsidiarity principle, it's difficult to reach people. The solution is to go through the regions. However the avant-garde don't trust institutions, they don't know the language and it creates a misunderstanding between the behaviour of the institutions and civil society. Communication and moving towards each other is the only way to strengthen the culture sector through the regionalisation process.

4. Main driving force behind changing existing conditions:

- In Croatia (see above) the need and the urgency of doing something made it possible. It's the combination of your own needs with meeting others in the same situation.
- In Stockholm artist-run gallery Candyland started as a shared the space, then reviews came, and slowly it got recognition and some funding. It has grown in its own tempo, organically. Use what you have, what is available to you.
- 20 years ago, European politicians understood they had to think in a visionary way. The failure is that policy today is not made by citizens and people on the ground. Policy is controlled by business and the capitalist market. Capitalism has no values, we have to reinvent the values. Activism must once again be part of culture.

Facilitator: Tomas Bokstad, Till medborgarnas glädje
 Rapporteur: Chrissie Faniadis, Intercult

The invited organisations that were represented at the Nordic lab:

Subtopia, WISP, Rörelsen, Rumänska Kulturinstitutet (Stockholm), Taastrup Teater (Copenhagen), Moriska Paviljongen (Malmö), Kulturhuset (Aarhus), Helsingör Teater, Nordic Black Theater (Oslo), LumparLab (Åland), Blave Frau/SubFrau (Helsinki), MUU Gallery (Helsinki), Culturelab (Riga), NOASS (Riga), BADco. (Zagreb), Kultura Miejeska (Gdansk), aktör&vänner (Göteborg), Söltumatu Tantsu Ühendus/STÜ (Tallinn), MADE/Norrlandsoperan (Umeå), Teatermaskinen (Västmanland), Himlabacken (Österlen), Dansbyrån (Göteborg), Teatercentrum, Till medborgarnas glädje, Orienteatern (Stockholm).