



Summary

Nordic institutions for cultural co-operation in Suomenlinna since 1978

Since the summer of 2019, I've been working on a short history of the Nordic institutions that have been located on the Finnish island of Suomenlinna, in Helsinki, since 1978. It has been rather difficult to find any organised material or documentation on the institutions, and therefore my text relies on bits and pieces that I have found, as well as on interviews with those who have worked at the institutions. In addition, I've drawn on my own experience from Nordic cultural co-operation – in the 1980s I was active in the theatre committee, in the 1990s I was a board member at the Nordic Film and TV Fund, and from 1998 to 2006 I worked as a senior advisor at the Secretariat to the Nordic Council of Ministers in Copenhagen.

This brief history is not about the visual arts in the Nordic countries. Rather, it is an overview of earlier Nordic institutions – what they worked with, how, and why? – and of what's happening in Suomenlinna now – it should be something Nordic, but what exactly?

The Nordic Arts Centre – 1978 to 1996

The first Nordic art institution – Nordiskt konstcentrum/The Nordic Arts Centre (NKC) – was established in 1978 by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Finnish state provided facilities on the island fortress of Suomenlinna, outside Helsinki. The NKC's primary objectives were to work with contemporary art in the Nordic countries; enhance contacts between artists, practitioners, museums, and galleries; and inspire them to exhibit contemporary art from neighbouring countries. The NKC established an extensive network of residencies at Suomenlinna, and some 20 artists from across the Nordic Region came to work at Suomenlinna each year. This network was soon enlarged and artists were invited to take part in residency programmes right across the Nordic Region, and then in several European capitals. The artists, along with the opportunities for them to meet, engage in discussion, and work together, formed a solid foundation for further Nordic co-operation in the field of contemporary art.

During its early years, the NKC also started to produce exhibitions featuring contemporary art. These exhibitions were first presented at Suomenlinna before going on tour around the Nordic Region. These exhibitions often toured for several years. The NKC had the capacity to produce up to eight new exhibitions each year and then to keep them touring for several years thereafter.

In the late 1980s the NKC produced large exhibitions that looked at art history in the Nordic countries. These were produced in co-operation with national museums and institutions and, later, the NKC produced further extensive exhibitions in co-operation with Nordic, European, and international museums which toured the US and Europe.

SIKSI – The Nordic Art Review was established in 1986. *SIKSI* disseminated information on the Nordic art scene to an international audience.

In the late 1980s, the purse strings started to be tightened and the Nordic Council of Ministers began scrutinising all its institutions, committees, and working groups that were funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers under the umbrella of Nordic cultural co-operation. The NKC was considered too large and had been unable to tailor its working methods so as to overcome the challenges it faced due to wider global changes. The NKC was shut down and, in 1996 a new and more svelte institution was founded in its place – the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art (NIFCA).

Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art/ NIFCA – 1997–2006

NIFCA continued to work with residency programmes and enlarged the network to include new residencies in Europe and elsewhere around the world. The biggest change was that these programmes were opened up to curators and researchers, not just artists. NIFCA engaged three part-time curators who could invite artists and curators for residency visits with the aim of producing small exhibitions, critiques, seminars, articles, and discussions of contemporary art and its prerequisites.

Although NIFCA initiated the exhibitions, they were always produced in co-operation with museums and institutions. The Nordic Council of Ministers had one clear request – that all activities be anchored one way or another in the Nordic Region. NIFCA pro-

duced some 20 smaller exhibitions focusing on contemporary issues in society and in the arts, such as the hierarchical system of museums and galleries. NIFCA also introduced video art and new forms of exhibiting and disseminating art in new ways and with new expressions.

Many important changes were happening in the wider world that had an impact on Nordic co-operation in every corner of society. The Baltic countries gained independence in the early 1990s, the Soviet Union had collapsed, and Finland and Sweden became member states of the European Union in 1995. The Nordic Council of Ministers began working with its Baltic neighbours, and artists from the Baltic countries and Northwest Russia were able to take part in projects and mobility schemes.

Nordic Culture Point – Programmes in lieu of art-specific institutions – 2007 onwards

As the eyes of the world were increasingly drawn northwards, so Nordic budgets for cultural co-operation continued to decrease. Once again the Nordic Council of Ministers scrutinised its operations in the culture sector and realised that most of its financial resources were being spent on administration, rent, and travel, and with very little left for grants for projects and initiatives in the field. Indeed, there was just no margin for new cultural co-operation initiatives.

What's more, everyday life had changed. The internet had made it easy for almost anyone to communicate, no matter where in the world they were, and to search for information about the art and culture of other countries and cultures, while cheap flights made travel easy and affordable. Was there still a need for such institutions?

In 2005 the Nordic ministers for culture decided to reform the structures for cultural co-operation. Most of the earlier institutions, committees, and working groups were shut down, and, in 2007, two new programmes were launched in their place – the Nordic Mobility Programme, offering grants to individuals, networks, and residency centres, and the Art and Culture Programme, offering support for projects with partners from at least three Nordic countries or autonomous regions. The programmes had access to a budget of around EUR 20 million, which was released from the expenses of the earlier institutions for art, music, theatre and dance, and several other short- or long-term projects.

Nordic Culture Point's secretariat was located at Suomenlinna, in the building which had earlier housed NKC and NIFCA. The programmes work with a secretariat that has several advisors who can inform applicants about the criteria and procedures of the programmes. Nordic and Baltic experts then assess the applications according to the arm's-length principle.

The sheer number of applications since 2007 shows that there was and still is a huge need for artists and practitioners to establish and implement projects that they have initiated themselves. They are capable of mastering their projects and finding ways to connect with potential partners in the Nordic countries and worldwide.

For more information on Nordic Culture Point and its programmes, please visit <https://www.nordiskkulturkontakt.org/en/>

The evolution from the establishment of the NKC in 1978 to the art and culture programmes of 2007 and beyond shows that practical forms of Nordic cultural co-operation have always been relevant.

The period from 1978 to 1996 saw a need for contacts and information. The NKC produced information, established contacts, provided residencies, and created exhibitions that first toured the Nordic Region before going global, resulting in international interest in the arts of the Nordic countries. The word that characterises the NKC is "producer".

NIFCA followed, from 1997 to 2006, with an evolution from "producer" to "curator", curating exhibitions that would demonstrate issues relevant to curators and artists, as well as discussions and critique.

In 2007, new programmes were launched that enabled artists and practitioners to initiate projects, find partners, and seek basic funding and resources. Only then were they eligible for grants from the programmes, and as such the keyword has now shifted once again from "curator" to "facilitator".

We've now come full circle and are back where everything started. In 1945 the association Nordiska konstförbundet (Nordic Artists Association) wanted to create a Nordic network of contacts and a Nordic community of the arts. The association evolved into the Nordic Art Centre, which came into being in 1978 at Suomenlinna. We have reached the point where the artists and practitioners are the ones who take the initiative to connect with Nordic and global partners, develop their projects further, and make day-to-day life a little better for us all, making it more interesting, surprising, and upsetting, and awakening our curiosity about new phenomena and new ways of looking at the world.