

REPORT:
FROM CULTURAL INFLUENCES AND EXPORTS TO DIALOGUE AND NETWORKING

ABSTRACT

The survey provides an overview of Finnish contemporary art in an international context. It maps key concepts as well as actors and forms of activity. In addition, it reflects on the kind of tools that can be used to monitor the long-term effects of international activity and make them visible.

The methods used in the survey include a literature review, an online questionnaire sent to the professionals working in the field of art, as well as interviews with experts. The survey uses the concept of ecosystem to interpret the material. This concept is used in international literature to describe the field of art as a system that consists of several interdependent functions and sectors.

The definition of contemporary art rests on the way Frame Visual Art Finland understands its own field of operation. In addition to fine art, it covers the fields of photographic art, media art, art handicraft, comic art, performance art and sound art. In the survey, internationality is understood broadly from the formal relationships between institutions to the interaction and cooperation between individuals.

The nature of international activity in contemporary art has changed substantially. Instead of state-led projects, the survey material highlights cross-border activity in peer networks. In many sectors of contemporary art, the ecosystem crosses national borders. Direct contacts across borders have become increasingly common, and the cooperation and -production methods are manifold. Each actor cultivates their own unique partnerships. Successful international projects are built on a foundation of content-based, actor-led cooperation. International projects require trust, perseverance and a systematic approach.

The survey proposes a limited number of core indicators as tools of monitoring international activity in contemporary art. These indicators should be developed together with the actors in the field.

The survey has been conducted at the Foundation for Cultural Policy Research Cupore on a commission from Frame Visual Art Finland. The study serves the actors in the domestic field and their needs when planning and developing international activity. The results can also be utilised by other actors in cultural policy and the media.

1 THE BACKGROUND, GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REPORT

1.1 Background, goals and survey questions

This survey provides an overview of international activity in the field of Finnish contemporary art and outlines tools for monitoring its development. The survey maps the forms and actors of international activity within contemporary art in Finland and the concepts relating to these. In addition, it provides an overview of similar previous research and surveys both in Finland and abroad. The survey has been conducted at the Foundation for Cultural Policy Research Cupore on a commission from Frame Visual Art Finland.

There is no universal definition for the concept of contemporary art. It can simply mean new art created in the moment or art by contemporaries. According to the periodisation of art history, it refers to an era that started ca. 1960. This is the division of labour between the Ateneum Art Museum and Kiasma Museum of the Contemporary Art operating within the Finnish National Gallery. However, not all art created today is necessarily seen as contemporary art. The distinction is often made in relation to modernism based on artistic strategies or aesthetic goals. At the same time, contemporary art is considered to avoid categorisation; and instead seen as a melting pot of all artistic forms of expression and genres stretching out in several directions. Not all contemporary art involves fine art or even visual art. In many countries, the concept of contemporary art extends to areas such as modern dance and circus.

In this report, the definition of contemporary art largely rests on the way Frame Visual Art Finland understands its own field of operations, which includes fine art, photographic art, media art, art handicraft, comics art, performance art and sound art. This definition is not unambiguous or permanent. It is in constant change and an object of negotiations. However, it provides a wider perspective to the field of art than the concepts of fine art or visual art.

International activity is also a multidimensional phenomenon and concept. It might be approached geographically or structurally. It can also refer to a mindset or worldview. Similarly, it is possible to study the meanings of international activity in relation to the development of globalisation. In the study at hand it is understood in a broad context. It refers to things such as the international mobility and visibility of artists and other contemporary art professionals, cultural interaction or art export. International activity is also multidirectional: it takes place both abroad as well as in Finland. It can be a general orientation or it can be linked to concrete actions, such as cooperation projects, networking and fund-raising.

Finnish contemporary art has been increasingly linked to the international art field since the 1990s. Joining the European Union in the mid-1990s increased Finnish visibility in the world. The EU has specifically promoted the mobility of both art students and teachers as well as artists and other actors in the field of art. The Finnish field of art has become more professional as a result of the development in the international world of art. Changes in the role of museum and gallery organisations, the birth of curators as a profession, the strengthening of the art fair institution and changes in art education have all played an important role in this process. At the same time, international activity and collaboration have expanded from cultural exchange between states into increasingly multifaceted networks between actors. Personal contacts are emphasized and national borders may seem to disappear. The development of digital technology has substantially influenced the nature of international activities by making communication between actors easier and making it possible to move works in digital format across borders.

This survey maps the structures of international activity in Finnish contemporary art and provides tools for actors in this field to see their own role. The survey serves the actors in the domestic field and will hopefully help them when planning and developing international activity. This field is extensive, including artists and artist collectives, curators, gallerists, critics, teachers, researchers and other individual actors to art centres, museums and educational institutions in the field.

International activity always exists in relation with national activity. It is connected to various kinds of agreements, funding models and decisions and also defined through them. In Finland, international activity in the sector of cultural policy is funded primarily by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the actors operating under it, such as the Arts Promotion Centre Finland (Taika), as well as foundations that support art and culture. Finland's country image as well as cultural export and exchange abroad are promoted by the Foreign Ministry's network of embassies abroad. Some funders and supporters have influence that makes them actors in the field.

The survey maps the field where international activities are performed and looks at the players it contains. The survey discusses ways of making the long-term effects of international activity visible. The results can be used by actors in contemporary art and cultural policy, the administration and the media. A central goal of the survey is to spark a conversation of Finnish contemporary art and the international activity it contains.

The questions investigated in the survey were as following:

1. What previous research exists on the international activity in contemporary art or its neighbouring fields?
2. What kinds of concepts are used when talking about international activity?
3. What are the central forms of international activity in the field of Finnish contemporary art?
4. What are the key actors in international activity of Finnish contemporary art?
5. What kind of issues should be monitored in international activity so that the development of the activity could be studied on a long-term basis?

In the background of the survey is the task assigned to the Frame Foundation, established in 2011¹, to act as an information centre for Finnish visual art. This remit includes research, statistics, communication & PR. The goal of the survey at hand is to outline a method Frame could use to monitor the development of international activities on a long-term basis. The information produced will also give Frame material when planning its international activities. This report and the discussion concerning it will do their part in influencing how Frame interprets its field of operation and mission.

The research has been conducted by Jutta Virolainen (with Sari Karttunen as the person responsible for the project) in Cupore. The steering group represented contemporary art broadly. It was chaired by Marja Sakari (Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art) and its members included Hanna Maria Anttila (AV-arkki – Distribution Centre for Finnish Media Art), Petra Havu (Ministry of Education and Culture), Juha Huuskonen (HIAP – Helsinki International Artists Programme), Esko Nummelin (Pori Art Museum), Paula Toppila (IHME Contemporary Art Festival) and Ilona Anhava (Galerie Anhava).

¹ The predecessor of Frame Visual Art Finland, the FRAME Finnish Fund for Art Exchange, operated from 1992 to 2011.

8 CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTION

8.1 Conclusion

A summary of the main results of the survey

The aim of the survey was to provide an overview of the international activities of Finnish contemporary art and its key actors. The survey was conducted at Cupore Foundation for Cultural research on a commission from Frame Visual Art Finland.

The questions for the survey were as follows:

1. What kind of previous research exists on the international activity in contemporary art or its neighbouring fields?
2. What kinds of concepts are used when talking about international activity?
3. What are the central forms of international activity in the field of Finnish contemporary art?
4. What are the key actors in international activity in Finnish contemporary art?
5. What kind of issues should be monitored in international activity so that the development of the activity could be studied on a long-term basis?

The methods used in the survey include a review of the previous research, an online questionnaire sent to Finnish organisations and individual actors, and interviews with experts. There were close to 90 responses to the questionnaire study carried out in November–December 2015.

Research data on the international activities in contemporary art and its neighbouring fields

The review showed that certain aspects of the subject matter have been studied widely in recent years both in Finland and abroad. In Finland these include mobility of artists, international activity of organisations and the competences international actions require. The studies cited tend to describe international activity from the point of view of a specific group of actors or a form of activity. The review focused on the studies and surveys that outlined ways of monitoring the international development of contemporary art on a long-term basis. Other examples included research that focused on the visual arts as an ecosystem. This point of view seems fruitful for the study of international activity in Finnish contemporary art. It covers a large number of actors and forms of activity that are linked to each other in many ways and dependent on each other's existence.

The scope of international activities within contemporary art has changed over time

In the last few decades, the nature of international activity in contemporary art has changed significantly. It has moved from the cultural diplomacy between states towards multidirectional and multidimensional activity within networks. For most of the individual actors internationality meant an opportunity to develop in their own work. For many organisations, international activity was natural or self-evident. The responses also expressed a critical attitude towards the idea of international activities as operations between states. These appear old-fashioned to the artists of younger generations. Contemporary activities are seen foremost emerging from meetings between people. Many aspects of international activity still rests on the idea of international promotion and mobility. Funding is also mainly national.

The key forms of international activity in contemporary art are collegial cooperation and, interaction across national borders

The survey shows that most of the respondents considered international activity to be important. All respondents said that they were involved in such activities. Today, a cross-border peer network is an essential part of art production. It is based on the idea of a deep, substance-based cooperation that originates from the actors themselves. The responses emphasised knowledge of the operating structures and the field in the target country as well as the importance of personal contacts. Technological development does not seem to have reduced the need for real meetings, even though it has doubtlessly made it easier to maintain contacts and build trust. A problem that emerged is the inability of funders and financial instruments to identify the nature of international activity today.

The international actors of the field of contemporary art form an ecosystem

In the survey, the field of Finnish contemporary art was studied as an ecosystem. This means that the field of contemporary art is seen as a system consisting of several interdependent functions and sectors. With regard to international activities, the key actors in the field include, art museums and other art institutions, galleries, art residencies, educational institutions, art and artist organisations, funders, cultural and academic institutes, biennials and festivals. In addition, artists, curators and other individual actors are essential parts of the ecosystem. Based on the questionnaire responses, it is clear that Finnish contemporary art is geographically oriented towards Europe.

Indicators require development with the whole field of contemporary art

It is challenging to demonstrate the effectiveness of international activities and to assess whether the goals set for the activity have been realised. It is also difficult to set unambiguous goals for international activities as the goals of the various actors were not consistent. Also the lack of reference data and statistics in the field of contemporary art makes developing indicators difficult.

Based on previous research and the questionnaire responses, indicators for monitoring the development of international activity could be drawn up around the following themes:

exhibitions and work abroad by artists, curators and other individual actors in contemporary art; export, import and exchange of exhibitions; international cooperation projects of organisations; residency activity; international aspects of art education and educational institutions and funding for international activity in contemporary art. Some of this information is already available but much remains to be done.

8.2 Reflection on the results and needs for further research

The idea of the ecosystem has recently spread in international literature into the study of artistic production and seems a fruitful starting point for the study of international activity in Finnish contemporary art.

This survey names the key actors and forms of activity, but it has not been possible to go deeper into relationships between the actors, their roles or the distribution of power. A methodologically challenging subject of further research is how to study the networks of contemporary art, describe them statistically and assess them in various ways. One key issue today concerns the production

and dissemination of art today. This issue is in constant change and therefore it raises challenges for producing information.

At the moment, we don't know enough about the production structures and networks or the revenue models and fund-raising models of contemporary. This creates problems regarding planning projects and support instruments. The web and network activity in contemporary art also challenges the national methodology: how to describe and take account of the cross-border nature of the ecosystems?

The ecosystem point of view also raises the question of how the participant can make the system more functional and dynamic. In a functioning system, the actors support and need each other, and it emphasises the idea of the whole being more than the sum of its parts. A discussion on the indicators might act as a unifying factor because it helps the participants to consider both their own goals and the common goals as well as their relationship with each other.

The survey revealed that a method of monitoring international activity in contemporary art cannot be proposed until more research data and statistics are available. At the moment, the information is insufficient, fragmentary and partially incommensurable. There question also remains of how to find a smart way to collect statistics and develop indicators to describe this activity where the participants are a large number of networked independent actors. They must participate in producing the information themselves and therefore they need to see the usefulness of the data for their own activities.

The development and monitoring of international activity within contemporary art remains largely a question of Frame's mission. The key questions are:

According to whose goals should international activities be promoted and measured? Does this involve measuring the impact of Frame's activities or more broadly that of all the actors who act across borders or promote Finnish contemporary art?

The literature review and the questionnaire conducted as a part of the survey showed that the choice of concepts concerning the international scope of contemporary art is problematic and controversial. Several open responses included quite harsh criticism of the building of indicators and monitoring of international activity. An open discussion on these issues is essential when starting to build a monitoring system. The more the data collection relies on the field, the stronger the agreement on the common goals should be.

Even though internationality is increasingly focused on networks between people and informal contact, national support measures still guide the direction and forms of international activity. Some of the responses to the survey also included a negative attitude towards commercialism, but from the ecosystem point of view, non-commercialism and commercialism can be seen as different sides of the same coin. No aspect should be ignored in considering and developing international activity in contemporary art. Perhaps it is also a question of how different points of view could meet better? Ecosystem thinking may help us to understand the important role both of the whole system and the parts that it is made of.