



Mandate Event: The Social Theory, Politics and the Arts (STPA) conference

Hosted By: University of Manchester

Date: 1-3 November 2018

SCAN Mandate Attendees: Ben Callaghan

The Social Theory, Politics and the Arts (STPA) conference is ‘an interdisciplinary gathering of researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and students that explores key trends, practices and policy issues affecting the arts around the world.’

The discussion

The event covered a broad range of topics relating to cultural production, policy and the arts sector. However, recurrent and core themes addressed across multiple sessions and keynote addresses were the many contested approaches to developing culturally democratic policy and programmes and the reproduction of inequity within the field.

5 ‘Take Aways’ from the discussions were:

1. **Dave O’Brien - How Discourses by Senior Men Reinforce Exclusions from Creative Occupations.** O’Brien explains how, while there is greater awareness of debates concerning systemic inequality in the arts and cultural industries at an upper management level (which remains predominantly cis, white, heterosexual and male), this awareness rarely turns to self-reflection. Respondents were aware of systemic exclusion but viewed themselves as ‘lucky’ in achieving their success. O’Brien also outlined a potentially corollary between inequality monitoring practices and lack of concrete organisational change, indicating a counterintuitive effect whereby awareness of systemic problems negates potential efforts to solve them.

2. **Brea Heidelberg - Promoting Equity in Cultural Organizations Through the Recruitment, Selection, and Onboarding Processes.** Heidelberg gave a complex account of the various ways in which people of colour are marginalised, often unconsciously, within the CCIs. Noted in this talk and at other events during the conference, programmes aimed at diversifying hiring practices have seen some success, however, this has resulted in a high degree of 'plateauing' or 'middle-out' career paths for POC within the CCIs, where POC encounter a lack of career progression at mid-level positions, or become burnt out because of being required to perform at a level equal to or above their more privileged peers. A solution that was raised multiple times, across the conference, was to elevate POC and those subject to other forms of systemic oppression to the board level.

3. **Roundtable on Models and Practices for Cultural Democracy.** Due to many competing claims to the practice of cultural democracy, the term is in danger of losing its meaning as a distinct conceptual framework for the democratisation of cultural production. Panellists were concerned that the term is being stretched and over applied to programmes that would have been previously described as 'participation' or 'outreach' without any meaningful change occurring within these programmes. Panellists were also concerned that programmes mounted under the banner of cultural democracy but only adhering loosely to the radical ethos behind its conceptual underpinnings would further serve the diminution of second level art education and other social goods provided at a state level that are currently under threat. Panellists pointed to three resources to triangulate a meaningful, though still contested, conception of cultural democracy:
 - **Towards cultural democracy: promoting cultural capabilities for everyone**
King's College London, final report from King's fourth Cultural Enquiry
 - **Cultural Democracy in Practice**
64 Million Artists, commissioned by Arts Council England
 - **Manifesto: The Movement for Cultural Democracy**
The Movement for Cultural Democracy

4. **Jen Budney - The Imbecile Institution and the Limits of Public Engagement:** On the Public Value Failures of Art Museums. It was noted in this talk that organisations that are most often doing the most progressive and responsive work within their communities are small scale arts organisations in rural locations, and that these organisations should be looked to form models for organisations in urban environments.

5. **Deliberative Roundtable on governance, government, expertise and cultural democracy in local policy making.** There is a largely undiscussed and widespread disconnect between drives toward cultural democracy (and associated forms of devolved cultural production and participation) and pre-existing and proliferate notions of value and excellence within the CCIs. This disconnect is especially visible and vibrant in sectors that rely most heavily on state-subsidy. Though modes of participation and collaboration are widespread in these sectors, there are core tenets of various cultural practices, supported at a state level and seen as valuable to society, that are inherently anti-democratic.

The information above was summarised by SCAN from an event report provided by attendee Ben Callaghan.