



ARTSEQUAL 2015–2021: THE CHALLENGES OF A LARGE-SCALE RESEARCH INITIATIVE IN FINLAND

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ABSTRACT

THE ARTICLE PRESENTS THE ARTSEQUAL INITIATIVE, WHICH IS FUNDED BY THE STRATEGIC RESEARCH COUNCIL OF THE ACADEMY OF FINLAND. THE SIX-YEAR PROJECT, FUNDED FROM A SUB-PROGRAMME AIMING TO INCREASE EQUALITY IN SOCIETY, IS CONSTRUCTED ON THE VISIONARY QUESTION: WHAT IF THE ARTS WERE UNDERSTOOD TO BE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF PUBLIC SERVICES? THE PROJECT SETS OUT TO IDENTIFY MECHANISMS AND REMOVE BARRIERS THAT HINDER EQUALITY FROM BEING ESTABLISHED BOTH WITHIN THE ARTS AND THROUGH THEM IN SOCIETY AT LARGE. THE PROJECT IS MULTIDISCIPLINARY AND DRAWS LARGELY UPON PARTICIPATORY, PRACTICE-LED METHODOLOGIES. IT IS CARRIED OUT IN SIX RESEARCH TEAMS AND IN TWO PHASES, THE FIRST OF WHICH CONSISTED OF NUMEROUS ARTS INTERVENTIONS COMBINED WITH RESEARCH. THE CONCLUSIVE PHASE THAT LINKS THE FINDINGS AND EXPERIENCES FROM THE CASE STUDIES TOGETHER VIA QUALITATIVE SYSTEM ANALYSIS STARTED IN THE BEGINNING OF 2018. THE AUTHORS ARE LEADERS OF TWO OF THE RESEARCH TEAMS, AND HERE THEY PRESENT THE ENTIRE RESEARCH INITIATIVE AS WELL AS EXEMPLARY SUB-STUDIES FROM THEIR OWN TEAMS. THEY DISCUSS THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND THE PRELIMINARY FINDINGS IN VIEW OF THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE ARTIST IN SOCIETY, A SHARED PROBLEMATIC BETWEEN THEIR TEAMS. THEY ALSO REFLECT ON THE ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES THAT PROGRAMMATIC FUNDING MAY BRING TO ARTISTIC PRACTICES AND RESEARCH.

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Operational context: Strategic research funding enhancing equality and boosting effectiveness

The article introduces the Finnish ArtsEqual research initiative that urges to make radical changes in the function of art in society, taking equality as its starting point, as the name suggests.¹ The project asks, what effects would it have on well-being and equality if the arts were truly accessible to anyone. The full name of ArtsEqual reads as “Arts as Public Service: Strategic Steps towards Equality”. The project is financed by the Academy of Finland’s Strategic Research Council (SRC) from a sub-programme targeted at increasing equality in society.² It is a question of a newly established policy instrument specifically designed to boost the societal effectiveness of research. ArtsEqual received SRC funding from the first call of applications in 2015. It was awarded 3.9 million euro for the period between May 2015 and December 2017, and passing the mid-term evaluation in the autumn of 2017, further 2.6 million euro until April 2021. This makes it the largest single research project grant ever granted in the field of art and art education in Finland.

The SRC funds high-quality research aimed at tackling grand societal challenges that require multidisciplinary approaches and seek to find concrete solutions. It includes active interaction and collaboration with stakeholders that may utilise or be affected by the research work, and the funded projects are encouraged to engage in networking activities as well as spreading out. Accordingly, the ArtsEqual project collaborates with several ministries, government agencies and municipalities as well as NGOs, such as professional art and health care organisations. The network also consists of numerous art and research institutions, both in Finland and abroad. Currently, the number of “interaction partners” with a signed agreement is close to 60.

The specific funding prerequisites are also reflected in the number of participating researchers, which, in the case of ArtsEqual, has tripled from the original 30. Not all of them receive SRC funding, but they benefit from their collaboration with the project and gain visibility for their work through it. ArtsEqual unites people from a wide range of disciplines, such as art education, art history, theatre studies, musicology, cultural studies, gender studies, indigenous studies, pedagogics, psychology, philosophy, jurisprudence, sociology, theology, anthropology, economics and political science. Many of the researchers are also artists themselves and carry out practice-based artistic research, representing the fields of dance, music, theatre, visual and performance art.

In return for government funding, the SRC expects the recipients to make research-based policy recommendations. In addition to peer-reviewed academic publications, the researchers are supposed to present their findings to stakeholder audiences via popularised articles and speeches, and, given the chance, through functioning as policy advisers to the government. By July 2017, the ArtsEqual project had produced more than 250 academic and some 120 popular publications. Among them were a number of policy briefs, e.g., *School as Finland’s largest cultural centre* (2017), *Art prevents loneliness* (2016) and *Art in social and health care services* (2016).

Aims and bases of the ArtsEqual project

In its action plan, ArtsEqual positions the arts as a form of public service and sets out to explore how the arts could contribute to meeting the societal challenges of the 2020s. The project objectives (see Figure 1) combine the researchers’ interests in enhancing social justice and wellbeing and the specific programmatic call for applications. Strategic research is a new type of mixture of academic and applied research and practice. The task is not only to provide a knowledge-base for decision-makers but also to devise new models of action to be adopted widely in society. ArtsEqual, in particular, develops collaborative models of working across sectoral and professional borders to enhance inclusion through the arts. The project launches new kinds of participatory artistic and educational interventions at schools, in basic art education, eldercare, multicultural youth work, disability services and penitentiaries. At the same time, it assesses the effects of these interventions on equality and well-being and develops the approaches further with the stakeholders themselves.

Conceptually, there is not one exact framework uniting the ArtsEqual project but rather an assortment of similarly oriented theoretical, philosophical, ethical and social-political building blocks. Methodologically, the project is characterised by a

1 <http://www.artsequal.fi>

2 <http://www.aka.fi/en/strategic-research-funding/>

grounded and practice-led approach. Not even equality, the key concept in the Strategic Research Council funding call, was strictly defined in the research plan presented in 2015.³ The idea is rather to develop a more shared conception via joint interventions, collaborative research, collective writing and colloquia. Thus, one projected result of the project is to achieve a renewed notion of societal equality that acknowledges the potential of the arts. In everyday Finnish, equality most commonly refers to gender equality, but ArtsEqual approaches the term from many different and intersecting points of view. Instead of formal equality, the project focuses on *de facto* equality and equality of results. The researchers also share the idea that promoting equality is a political process that obliges us to challenge oppressive power structures and give support to those occupying weaker positions.

The objective of the ArtsEqual research is to reveal both direct discrimination and hidden societal structures and mechanisms that lead to an unequal status between people when it comes to their access to art and the benefits it may confer. The United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) notes everyone's right to freely "participate in the cultural life of the community, [and] to enjoy the arts". ArtsEqual researchers ask if cultural rights are truly enforced in present day Finland: On what conditions is a person allowed to enjoy the arts, either as a member of the audience or a maker of art. We also investigate the further benefits of art, besides enjoyment, and whether these benefits are equally recognisable and available to all classes and sections of society.

Figure 1: Main goals of ArtsEqual Project

- Changes perspective radically on the function of art and artists in society.
- Examines arts and art education as equal basic public service from a new, holistic and systemic perspective.
- Examines how art as a public service could advance equality and well-being in society.
- Analyses new kinds of art and art educational interventions implemented at schools, in basic art education, in eldercare, in multicultural youth work, in disability services and in prisons, and their effects on equality and well-being.
- Makes new art and art education based social innovations visible and examines the expanded roles of art and art education, as well as their social impact.
- Encourages us to cross institutional borders (between art, education, social and health care, etc.).

³ A recent seminar disclosed that when conceptualising equality, the ArtsEqual researchers most often draw upon such writers as Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Martin Buber, Paulo Freire, Chantal Mouffe, Martha Nussbaum, Jacques Rancière, John Rawls and Amartya Sen.

Organisation of the project

In terms of its organisation, ArtsEqual is a consortium coordinated by the University of the Arts (Uniarts) Helsinki and directed by professor Heidi Westerlund based at the Sibelius Academy. The other consortium partners include the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, the Foundation for Cultural Policy Research (that runs the research centre CUPORE), the Lappeenranta University of Technology and the University of Turku. The actual research work is carried out in six sub groups that are based at the Uniarts, CUPORE and the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. Based on arts interventions and empirical work, the first five groups concentrate on thematic areas distinguished in the research plan, while the last one is dedicated to meta-analysis, generalisation and policy recommendation. Each group has its own action plan serving the overall objectives of the project; the groups also co-operate on shared interests.

- 1) Arts@School (Eeva Anttila, Uniarts' Theatre Academy⁴)
- 2) Arts Education for All (Uniarts Sibelius Academy⁵)
- 3) Arts in Health, Welfare and Care (Kai Lehtikoinen, Uniarts' CERADA research centre⁶)
- 4) Socially Responsible Arts Institutions and Artists (Sari Karttunen, CUPORE⁷)
- 5) Impacts of the Arts on Equality and Well-being (Pia Houni, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health⁸)
- 6) Systems Analysis and Policy Recommendations (Heidi Westerlund, Uniarts' Sibelius Academy⁹)

The project started in 2015 with emphasis on practice-led research work carried out by groups 1–5. Additionally, literature reviews were conducted on research on the effects of art interventions and community art projects. Towards the latter part of the project the focus is shifting to meta-analysis and generalisation of the findings in the numerous individual studies. The perspective will also change from equality at the level of personal encounters to a structural, societal level. To capture the effects of the suggested expanded arts and art education services, ArtsEqual makes use of a holistic and systemic perspective. To accomplish this aim, the project, in particular group number six, which includes all the team leaders and a couple of policy experts, works together with the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, based in Vienna.

Research Group 4: Socially responsible arts institutions and artists

The ArtsEqual research group (or team) number four (AE4) is entitled "Socially responsible arts institutions and artists". The team focuses on socially engaged artistic activities that may be carried out under varying rubrics, such as community art, community theatre, social choreography, social practice and dialogic art. The AE4 team consists mostly of artist-researchers who are keen on developing artistic practices that enhance equality, inclusiveness, interaction and respect in society. The key forms of practice include theatre projects with prisoners and ex-offenders, community art and community museum projects with indigenous people and marginalized groups as well as actions in open urban spaces. The team members are also devising teaching methods for art universities, such as "audience contact courses", to make future artists more receptive to embedded work and to equip them with the required working skills and morals.

4 <http://www.uniarts.fi/en/teak>

5 <http://www.uniarts.fi/en/siba>

6 <http://www.uniarts.fi/en/cerada>

7 <https://www.cupore.fi/en/>

8 <https://www.ttl.fi/en/>

9 <http://www.uniarts.fi/en/siba>

Rejecting the current jargon of Finnish cultural policies, the AE4 members claim to make art together with people, not “apply” art or “artistic methods” in non-artistic settings. The group is united by a deep interest in the artists, professional ethics related to social practice (see e.g. Törmi, 2016). According to their cherished principles, artists do not, for instance, utilise people to make a name for themselves; neither do they teach nor guide people from above but encounter them as equals. They may facilitate social change, but the need, direction and content of change are defined by the participating people. Their approach is influenced by radical democracy and radical pedagogics (cf. Rancière, 1987; Freire, 1979/2005).

Originally, the AE4 team consisted of eight people who receive SRC funding. These “consortium researchers” include the team leader, art sociologist Sari Karttunen from CUPORE, visual artist-cum-researcher Lea Kantonen, also a half-time professor of artistic research at UniArts, actor-postdoctoral researcher Anu Koskinen, assisted by director Annukka Valo, actor-postdoctoral researcher Jussi Lehtonen, visual artist-doctoral student, Minna Heikinaho, curator-doctoral student, Katri Hirvonen-Nurmi and research secretary- composer Anne Teikari. At a later point, nine more researchers have become affiliated with the group, most of them artist-researchers as well. The majority of members of the AE4 team have long careers in social art making, but they come from different disciplines and draw upon their own conventions and paradigms, both in terms of artistic research and social practice. The action research approach has risen as a common denominator among the team members, and they are collaboratively developing “artistic action research” by building upon artistic practice-led research, participatory action research, qualitative methodology, ethnographic fieldwork, radical pedagogics as well as social and philosophical theory. The methods and ethics of indigenous studies are also an important ingredient in the AE4 approach (see e.g. Kantonen, 2017). Special emphasis is placed on cross-disciplinary team discussions, where members comment on each other’s work with the aim of expanding reflections on the aims, processes and effects of social practices. Co-research and co-writing have proven to be fruitful means of working towards a more shared framework of artistic practice and analysis in the service of social justice and equality.

Sub-study: The *Other Home* theatre production

The production *Other Home: Facts about Alienation and Acceptance*¹⁰ is a major example of the art-cum-research projects related to the AE4 group. It is a documentary-based theatre performance, devised and directed by the team member Jussi Lehtonen and staged at the National Theatre of Finland. Lehtonen is an actor and director who has been affiliated with the Touring Theatre of the National Theatre for several years. The Touring Theatre specialises in socially engaged, often documentary-based productions that are intended for social and health care institutions and prisons. Its mission is to raise awareness of marginalised sectors of society. In his doctoral thesis, Lehtonen (2015) examined the encounter between actors and nursing home audiences. The National Theatre is one of ArtsEqual’s interaction partners with whom the project also organised a series of discussions about the expanding job of artists in society in 2016.

In celebration of Finland’s centenary as an independent state, *Other Home* brings together Finnish-born artists with those who have entered the country to seek asylum (Figure 2). The script was developed through interviews and joint workshops and draws upon the stories of Iraqi and Iranian artists. The show premiered in November 2017, and given its great success, has been extended to run until February 2018. Both in terms of art and research, the production investigates whether art is a common home for all artists. Drawing upon the concept “expressive community”, which was conceived in his doctoral thesis (2015), Jussi Lehtonen carries out artistic action research in connection to the project. The performance itself may be understood as the first report of his research. Working together with Lehtonen, Professor Sari Pöyhönen from the University of Jyväskylä, a specialist in linguistic ethnography, explores the co-construction of knowledge and expertise among the participants, and the ways in which linguistic practices emerge, are negotiated and interpreted. Drawing upon the interviews with refugee artists and other research material, a policy brief was issued in December 2017 dealing with the situation and protection of persecuted artists.

10 <http://www.kansallisteatteri.fi/briefly-in-english/>



Figure 2: *The Other Home* production at the Finnish National Theatre, Helsinki. Photo: Harith Raad Salih & Krista Mäkinen.

At the time of writing, *Other Home* is still running and receives praise from both peers and critics, so the creative learning and integrative effects of the process seem undeniable to all involved. The benefits to the refugee artists may, however, be short-lived, as the Finnish art world is suspicious of strangers, especially those coming from non-Western cultures (see e.g. Roiha, 2016). It has also become clear that a theatre project cannot escape the major conflicts of real life; art is not a magic place where political or religious differences can be set aside or abolished even. What is more, at a closer look, the theatre group is far from equal. The participating Finnish professionals, however solidary with their colleagues fleeing persecution, enjoy a protected status. The refugee artists themselves are divided into those who have gained a temporary residence permit and those who are in danger of deportation. These issues will be dealt in articles that Lehtonen and Pöyhönen will publish on the generation of expressive communities in 2018-2019.

Research Group 5: Impacts of the arts on equality and well-being

The ArtsEqual group number 5 focuses its research on the *Impacts of the arts on equality and well-being*. The group has carried out and analysed the effects of art interventions in schools (Figure 3). The members of AE5 represent multiple disciplinary backgrounds: Art research, theology, psychology and economics. The team leader, senior researcher *Pia Houni*, and three members of the group, postdoctoral researchers *Piia Seppälä* and *Jarno Turunen* and researcher *Heli Ansio*, work at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. Also, researcher *Sara Lindström* from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and postdoctoral researcher *Patrick Furu* from the University of the Arts Helsinki have worked for the group for a shorter period.

The group has been working with several empirical materials. For instance, we conducted a two-wave quasi-experimental

intervention study with quantitative methods among teachers, school assistants and kindergarten workers regarding the crafting of job resources (skill variety) and work engagement during a visual arts intervention aimed at pupils (Seppälä, Ansio & Houni, 2017). Another case study by the group concerned teachers' and school assistants' experiences and perceptions of a community music project with pupils with disabilities or other special needs. The study was conducted via qualitative methods. The results show that the impacts of the community music project were related to teachers' learning of new skills, positive feelings and increased sense of community within and between the classes of pupils with special needs (Ansio, Seppälä & Houni, 2017).



Figure 3: Drama class. Photo: Juha Metso.

In the near future, the team will examine all the ArtsEqual project's case studies and develop evaluation methods and practices to gauge the manifold impacts of arts. The research assumes that 1) the effects on participants' well-being, social capital and equality are recognised by users and producers of art services; 2) the arts can increase not only cultural, but also social and creative capital; and 3) that the case studies provide operation models that inspire an experimental attitude towards promoting equality in society.

Sub-study: Occupational hybridity and artistic identity

The arts field and artistic professions have undergone profound changes during the recent decades in Finland, which has been due to, first, the construction and, then, the deconstruction of the welfare state, increase in art education, multiplied numbers of artists, and launch of the concept 'applied use of art', to mention a few. This sub-study tackles the question: How does understanding art as a form of public service affect artistic professions? It is very common in Finland, and many other countries, that artists hold multiple jobs, and it has become commonplace in research to classify the working habits of artists into three types of jobs: creative or arts work, arts-related work and non-arts work (see e. g. Rensujeff, 2014; Throsby & Zednik, 2010). The AE5

researchers have asked artists themselves how they feel about having multiple jobs and the new funding and job opportunities opening up in the field of social art and (other) applied uses of art. *How would artists interpret the idea that art is a public service, and what consequences would it have on their job?*

We did interviews with Finnish artists who are working with arts-based methods in various social contexts, for instance, schools, hospitals, youth organisations or nursing homes. The main research question was: *How do arts-based initiatives influence artists and artistic professions?* The interviews (N=39, 33 women, 6 men) were conducted between April and November 2016 (Ansio & Houni). Artists were called to participate in interviews via public invitations that were disseminated on social media (Facebook groups for socially engaged artists) and with the help of regional artists affiliated with the Arts Promotion Centre Finland. In the invitation, we shortly described the kinds of people we hoped to interview. All 39 artists who finally participated in the interviews have artistic educations, and most of them have quite a long professional background. They have practical experiences with connecting artistic talent and social practice. One important finding is that artists need to have this professionalism when they are doing projects on social art; however, the paths to gathering the necessary professional capacities are long and varied. Another research-based observation is that interaction between working life and educational institutions is vitally important for an emerging cross-disciplinary field that constantly meets challenges.

In the interviews, artists talk about their commitment to developing art-based methods in their work. They have a mission – they are doing socially engaged art. A key word for them is *people*, which suggests helping, supporting, giving voice, providing positive experiences etc. (see Ansio, Seppälä & Houni, 2017). When artists refer to art policy, they mention for instance such objectives as promoting accessibility of the arts, developing participatory aesthetics or working methods, impacting communities through art and increasing employment opportunities. Obviously, these topics are related to their identity and their position in the art field. As researchers, we ask if there is now a notable change taking place in artistic identity. Is the grip of the myth loosening? Are artistic careers and identities becoming more hybrid and flexible (see Abbing, 2002; van Winkel, Gielen & Zwaan, 2012)?

Hybridity (see Papastergiadis, 2005) closely describes structures we knew to be part of “identity stories” (Descombes, 2016, pp. 28–34) related to artists’ work and deviations in work paths. We can understand identity as a personal view of self. It can also be conceived as relating to various social communities like work, family, friends and others. Identity is never completed or stable. This also explains why it is so difficult to construct or define professional categories of artists (see Ansio, Houni & Piispa, 2018). The alleged hybridisation of artistic identities should be investigated critically based on empirical data. Many artists who deploy job opportunities in the field of socially embedded art regard them favourably. Previous research has shown that not all artists consider having multiple jobs on the whole as negative, but are satisfied with combining many types of work (Alper & Wassall, 2000). Yet, many artists still oppose this trend, which they see either as market-based or instrumentalising or both, and as reflecting the current cultural policy and economic situation. Some of them may identify with art for art’s sake ideas or are oriented toward working alone. In any case, these issues are not easy for artists and cause lots of debate among them.

Final thoughts: The changing role of art and artists in society and the potential effects of strategic research

The ArtsEqual project is in many ways an exceptional arts research initiative. As a recipient of state strategic research funding, it is expected to establish collaborative networks across disciplines and interact closely with stakeholders. Most importantly, it is supposed to provide evidence for decision-makers and create practices that can boost the societal effectiveness of research. This, in the case of ArtsEqual, extends to include artistic research and the arts themselves. The project was regarded favourably in the interim evaluation, and many of its suggested models and recommendations are already taking root in Finnish society. For instance, many ArtsEqual policy briefs have been acknowledged by respective government agencies, and several of the project’s researchers have become popular speakers and advisers on equality and welfare issues in general. One of them is Tuulikki Laes whose doctoral thesis (2017) dealt with the possibility of inclusive, socially just music education (see also Laes & Schmidt, 2016). On the whole, the chances that ArtsEqual will be able to make changes in the way we understand the arts in Finnish society seem quite promising.

As part of its radical agenda, ArtsEqual also aims to mould artists' professional identities and launch new types of art-based careers. Being specialised in the study of artists, the writers of this article are particularly attentive to the development of these ideas and their reception among artists and wider society. It is too early yet to assess the final results and effects of the project, but during the process certain indications of the instrumentalisation of art (see e.g. Belfiore, 2012; Gray, 2008) have caused debate and worry especially among researcher-cum-artists involved in ArtsEqual. The burden of showing measurable non-artistic value has also been mentioned in many research interviews with social art practitioners (Karttunen, 2017; Ansio, Houni & Piispa, 2018)), and the topic has come up in seminars organised by the initiative for the interaction partners and stakeholders.

The members of the AE4 group, *par excellence*, have been committed to the cause of justice and equality all through their careers, as is illustrated by the *Other Home* project; hence, it was easy for them to accept the agenda behind the SRC 2015 call for applications. However, their self-imposed plans will surely not always coincide with the objectives of the government in power and its funding programmes. Certainly, one of the key questions in social art projects is how and by whom the goals are set; a related problem is devising the criteria of success and quality with regard to embedded work. For many artists these topics are fundamentally ethical (and political) and concern the core of their professional identity. They may turn their art into an instrument to help a good cause, but they need to be given power to negotiate the terms of the job.

The ArtsEqual research findings, and the project process itself, indicate that government-funded socially engaged art presents a double-edged sword to socially and ethically oriented artists and artist-researchers. Social and other embedded art forms provide fascinating job opportunities in unforeseen environments and cross-disciplinary teams. Our research establishes that many artists truly enjoy hybrid job definitions and adjusted identities. Socially embedded art, in particular, promises chances to work with marginal groups and to have real effect on society. By socially embedded art we refer to artistic practices that comprise artists working with people and communities in non-artistic environments and aiming to achieve not only artistic but also extra-artistic objectives, such as social cohesion, activation, tolerance or respect. At the same time, social practice demands changes in working models, attitudes and identities. It also brings in new skills and educational requirements. Moreover, artists need to accept some level of non-artistic objectives that are often determined by the bodies that finance or commission art projects. The ArtsEqual research material permits a policy recommendation suggesting embedded practice as an exciting option available for current and future artists. What we cannot, and should not, propose is, however, that all government funded work should deliver on externally-imposed, non-artistic agendas. The Constitution of Finland refers not only to everyone's right to culture but also guarantees the freedom of the arts.

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