

Professional match-making

Interview by **Gill Crabbe**

The Ateneum Art Museum Director **Susanna Pettersson** has a close relationship with the Nordic Committee for Art History. Here she explains the vital role played by this innovative organisation

The Director of Helsinki's Ateneum Art Museum, Susanna Pettersson, has been a guiding influence in the recent history of the Nordic Committee for Art History (NORDIK). When the Committee was first set up in Helsinki in 1984 to promote research networks between Nordic art historians, it identified its main task as organising a triennial NORDIK conference. Nine conferences and almost 30 years on, that task was entrusted to Pettersson when, as chair of the Board from 2010–12, she presided over the organisation of the 10th NORDIK conference, which took place in Stockholm in 2012.

One of the key features of NORDIK is its commitment to bring together scholars from both university and museum contexts, as historically these have been separate organisational strands in the field of art history. As Pettersson explains: 'If you take the example of the history of the Ateneum, the key people who were Board members of the Finnish Art Society – one of the predecessors of the FNG – were art historians working at the university, so at that time they had feet in both camps. That was the situation until the Second World War.

'However, after the War people working in the museums formed one team and those at the universities formed another, and they didn't really communicate too much. This situation continued until the early 1980s – it was very much the case in Finland but it was also the case in other European countries, so setting up the Nordic Committee for Art History as a network brought together people from both camps.

Pettersson firmly believes that the NORDIK conference is a game-changer in bringing art historians together in this way. Among the many benefits of the conference, she identifies three key advantages. First, it is a forum for a wide variety of professionals to meet, from doctoral students to professors working in many different kinds of positions. As Pettersson notes: 'From the perspective of a student, it offers a fantastic showcase of potential career opportunities'. Secondly, and, as she puts it, 'crucially important', is the fact that you can find people with shared similar interests and art-historical topics. And thirdly it offers the chance to disseminate one's work through, for example, publishing opportunities, and communicating in a wider field, visiting different venues and universities to speak about one's research.

While the primary commitment of the Nordic Committee is to bring together art historians from the Nordic countries, its remit extends to the worldwide community of art historians too. This is reflected in the use of English as the *lingua franca* for the conferences, while Scandinaviska is used where possible for Committee business. And for the 2012 NORDIK conference, the Committee decided for the first time in its history not to choose the theme and topics in advance with a call for papers, but instead to put out a call to chair sessions.

'That was really a turning point in terms of the worldwide network,' says Pettersson, 'because it meant the wider international community responded to the call. A call for a

session is a very appealing thing because then you can actually contribute to the wider research community in a completely different manner than would be possible if you were just contributing your own paper. And the response was fantastic, with suggestions coming in not only from the Nordic countries and mainland Europe, but also from overseas.'

The result in the case of NORDIK 2012 was a lively list of around 30 sessions on topics ranging from 'Embodiment and Method in Art History' and 'Iconography Revisited' to 'Reconsidering the Carpet Paradigm' and 'Rethinking the Object of Contemporary Art'.

What kind of collaborative initiatives result from the networking at these conferences? 'It is not easy to say what directly results from NORDIK in this way,' says Pettersson, 'but, for example, if someone is presenting research on a highly innovative topic, the conference might be a booster for a process that might lead later on to an exhibition. Or it might be that certain participants are looking for experts who can contribute as specialists in a particular field or project.'

So with the world shrinking rapidly as new technology conquers an ever expanding field of communications, where does that leave the original remit of the Nordic Committee as a network? For Pettersson it is very clear. 'It's called I.R.L. – In real Life – that is something you can never beat – it's a key driver here because the human encounter is unbeatable.'

'Once you meet someone like-minded who challenges your way of thinking, asks the right questions at the right time, you feel eternally grateful for the conversation if that helps you further. Also you can connect different people, you can offer work opportunities, and you can make sure interesting people get a chance to talk in conferences in the future – you could say it's all about professional match-making.'