The Agonistic Politics of Invitation: Narrating Moments of Cultural Policy Interventions in Berlin, New York and Vancouver

Die agonistische Politik der Einladung: Narrative Momente kulturpolitischer Interventionen in Berlin, New York und Vancouver

FRIEDERIKE LANDAU-DONNELLY[A*], ALISON L. BAIN[B**]

[A]Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

[B]York University, Toronto, Canada

Abstract

This paper offers the framework of an agonistic politics of invitation to nuance the political implications of contextually- and temporally-specific cultural policy invites that bring to light a range of conflicts. Invitations are conceptualized with respect to their rationale, form, role expectations, and responses in three empirical vignettes: (1) the collectivized articulation of Berlin's trans-disciplinary Koalition der Freien Szene as future invitee in local cultural governance; (2) the counter-invitation formulated by New York City's People's Cultural Plan to tackle ongoing racial inequities in the municipal Cultural Plan; and (3) uninvited graffiti responses to Vancouver's Chinatown public art call to reconcile century-long discrimination against Chinese Canadians. The paper argues that invitations crucially shape and condition future spaces of possibilities for collaborative urban cultural governance.

Dieser Beitrag bietet den Rahmen einer agonistischen Politik der Einladung, um die politischen Implikationen kontext- und zeitspezifischer kulturpolitischer Einladungen zu nuancieren, die eine Reihe von Konflikten ans Licht bringen. Einladungen werden im Hinblick auf ihre Begründung, Form, Rollenerwartungen und Reaktionen in drei empirischen Vignetten konzeptualisiert: (1) die kollektivierte Artikulation der transdisziplinären Koalition der Freien Szene in Berlin als zukünftiger Eingeladener in der lokalen Kulturpolitik; (2) die Gegeneinladung, die vom People's Cultural Plan in New York City formuliert wurde, um die anhaltenden rassistischen Ungleichheiten im städtischen Kulturplan zu bekämpfen; und (3) uneingeladene Graffiti-Reaktionen auf den Aufruf von Chinatown in Vancouver, die jahrhundertelange Diskriminierung chinesischer Kanadier auszugleichen. In dem Papier wird argumentiert, dass Einladungen künftige Möglichkeitsräume für eine kollaborative städtische Kulturpolitik entscheidend prägen und bedingen.

[*]   friederike.landau@ru.nl

[**]   abain@yorku.ca

Introduction

This paper offers a conceptual exploration of the political implications of inviting artists and cultural workers to participate in cultural policymaking processes. It unpacks how policy narratives are constructed via the use of multiple forms of invitation. Within cultural governance, policy narratives position claims and actors, encompassing explicit and implicit rhetorics, references, images, and symbols used to communicate political priorities. Following Shanahan et al. (2011), this paper treats narratives as "a way of structuring and communicating our understanding of the world" (539). Additionally, in a Mouffean (2005, 2013) tradition, policy narratives can materialize as exchanges amongst *legitimate adversaries* through which rhetoric agreements can serve to mediate existing tensions (thus creating agonistic policy solutions) or aggravate existing conflicts (thus leading to antagonistic confrontations). Hence, the paper focuses on the discursive-temporal moments within cultural governance when invitations are issued because they inform the ensuing locally-specific scope, tone, and rationales of collaborative decision-making. Invitations can establish an open-ended policy frame of participation that may resonate with local artist-led organizations' goals, eliciting new forms of cultural policy networks or advocacy coalitions and also antagonize latent stakeholder tensions (SABATIER 1988). This paper argues that—situated *between* invited and uninvited policy interventions—is an *agonistic politics of invitation* that affects urban cultural policymaking. By tracing the politics of invitation back to the initial moments of invitation issue, and scrutinizing them within an agonistic framework, this paper investigates the complex layers of conflict that condition and inhibit more equitable decision-making arrangements within democratic cultural governance arrangements.

In what follows, a conceptual framework of collaborative governance in urban cultural political settings is established. Against this backdrop, existing theorizations of the politics of invitation are reviewed and brought into dialogue with urban cultural policy and activism. Within these critical reflections on invitations, the paper introduces political theories of agonism to capture the always-already existing conflicts. Subsequently, it unpacks existing scholarly accounts that engage with 'official' policy narratives, and draws them into artists' particular narrative practices often in opposition to neoliberal framings that instrumentalize creativity and artistic labor. These critical reflections are grounded in three urban cultural vignettes, in which artist-led movements or groups

grapple with the agonistic politics of invitation: (1) Berlin's trans-disciplinary organization by the *Koalition der Freien Szene* (Coalition of the Independent Scene; *Koalition*) to counter socio-spatial precarities of cultural workers and engage in policymaking; (2) New York City's *People's Cultural Plan* as the counter-formation to the racial inequities remaining in the municipal *Cultural Plan*; and (3) Vancouver's municipally commissioned Chinatown public art call to reconcile the century-long discrimination of Chinese Canadians. Notably, these conflicts vary in relation to size, resources, degrees of technocracy and ideology, and with regards to historically transmitted norms, specific personalities or cultural leaders that drive and potentially dominate cultural political discourses, narratives and decisions. With a comparative outlook, the paper concludes with its own invitation to cultural policy scholars to further reflect upon the formative role of invitations in urban cultural policymaking. By unpacking the claims-making practices of new political stakeholders, the paper sheds light on the changing parameters of fragile multi-stakeholder policy collaborations emerging from invitations. Ultimately, invitations' legacies linger in the futures of cultural policymaking, narrating the liminal spaces that cultural policy spans between promise and possibility.

Locating collaborative governance in arts and culture

Invitations to participate in governance processes are by default collaborations. Collaborative governance scholarship elucidates interactions between legislative and administrative stakeholders on the one hand, and non-elected groups such as workers' unions, business networks, lobby organizations, and civic or grassroots movements on the other in their shared efforts to collectively identify and discuss political problems, and co-designed solutions (ANSELL/GASH 2007; EMERSON/NABATCHI/BALOGH 2012; KESTNER 2011; LEVI-FAUR 2012). Within a governance framework, civic and non-state stakeholders are said to gain increasing importance as co-facilitators of decisions which speak to matters of public concern (LO 2017). Considering the multiplicity of informal or institutionalized networks and other types of hybrid governance collectivities (SØRENSEN/TORFING 2007), such approaches lend themselves to investigate encounters between social and political groups (with varying degrees of organization, different capacities and uneven powers to articulate political claims, set them on the agenda, and

fight for their implementation). Theorizations of governance provide symbolic and material spaces in which rules and responsibilities of decision-making can be discussed, problematized, and potentially re-distributed amongst stakeholders (ANSELL/GASH 2007).

Theoretical concepts on governance can also be applied to the relationships between artists, cultural workers, and state representatives. *Cultural* governance commonly refers to the interrelations between multiple state and civic arts and culture sector stakeholders in a collective process of problem identification, definition, discussion, and policy response (ANHEIER 2012; SCHMITT 2011). Notably, empirical case studies as well as efforts to conceptualize cultural governance practices are, as of yet, limited. There are some scholarly accounts of urban governments' cultural governance initiatives from Antwerp to Brazzaville, Berlin to Istanbul and Mumbai that offer insight into the locally-specific dynamics of how policymakers and artists interact, exchange information, and co-develop policy solutions (ANHEIER/ISAR 2012; BAIN/ LANDAU 2021; GUGU/DAL MOLIN 2016; LANDAU 2019). However, these few examples seldom draw out the significance of invitations to cultural governance processes; instead, they focus more substantially on policy processes and outcomes. To nuance these existing accounts, this paper theorizes the conflictual invitational moments within cultural governance collaborations.

Theorizing the politics of invitation

Within the cultural sector, different stakeholders are increasingly invited to give critical input on, and reform existing policies, co-develop new ones, and co-facilitate the implementation of new political measures that condition processes of creative production, presentation, and mediation. These invitations may manifest as informal in-person hallway chats, text messages, social media exchanges, or telephone conversations. More formally, invitations come as official letters, requests to function as jury members, experts, moderators, or remunerated consultants. It is the breadth of the latter category of official invitations that this paper critically reflects upon, scrutinizing how formalized politics of invitation structure the conditions of possibility for substantial multi-stakeholder cultural policy collaboration.

In the context of performance arts, and more specifically playwrights, Woddis (2022) has conceptualized their policy engagement in an invited/

uninvited binary. The former occurs via formal channels of civic consultation and engagement, however, "practitioners' bodies [may] push consultations further than funders had planned" (WODDIS 2022: 210). Invited artist advocates may self-initiate interventions in ways that either parallel or diverge from the important work of those who are uninvited. Woddis (2022: 209-210) details how the uninvited instigate their "own initiatives to create and open up arenas in which they might influence policymaking and implementation." The schematic differentiation between invited or uninvited reinforces the executive power of the local state to initiate and follow through on the invitation. Meanwhile, the spectrum of invitations can help to identify those stakeholders who are considered sufficiently legitimate or relevant enough to collaborate in the narration of cultural policy.

Those who *are* invited, and accept the invitation, proceed to gain greater visibility and amplified voice, potentially also benefiting from access to state resources, services, and future opportunities to make public appearances and co-narrate policy. In contrast, those who are *not* invited, find themselves in various states of exclusion, ranging from not even knowing about not having been invited, to the painfully public secret that you are *not* considered significant enough to be included in the decision-making circuit. Various emotional responses arise, oriented either outwards (for example, anger, outrage, and protest) or inwards (for example, frustration, humiliation, resignation, and self-doubt). These invitation-related emotions may also result in some self-organized actors politically organizing to independently intervene (MÉNDEZ 2017). As Bóren et al. (2021) document in their multi-scalar analysis of the uneven relational topologies of cultural policy power in the cities of Stockholm, Gdańsk, and Manchester, emotions shape the lives, practices, and actions of policymakers in collaborative settings "producing a heightened 'affective urbanism'" that comprises "emotional regimes". For Bóren et al. (2021), "emotional connections to culture and between organisations are an important element of how networks actually function and this strength is… vital" to the design and implementation of cultural policy. These regimes, then, are material-affective expressions of those hegemonic norms of power, meaning, and cultural value that determine—at least for the time being—the priorities and possibilities of concrete cultural funding instruments and programs. These irregularly distributed and felt emotional consequences in cultural policymaking depend on, and differ, according to respective policy objectives. Hence, different positionalities within collaborative cultural policymaking can entail and

elicit largely varying, and even contradictory, emotional responses to the same decision, policy, or collaborative process.

While Bóren et al.'s focus lies on the emotionally charged dynamics of urban cultural policymaking in European countries experiencing a rise of right-leaning authoritarian neoliberal regimes, this paper focuses on the politics of invitation in the metropolitan contexts of Berlin, New York City, and Vancouver, that face systemic challenges such as gentrification displacements and institutional racism. Hence, while local historical and socio-political contexts matter in mobilizing certain political 'hot' topics (or not), there is an inherent ambiguity in the emotional geographies of urban cultural policy. As Anderson and Holden (2008) specify, "affect and emotions emerge 'in between, within, and alongside the other distantiated flows and events that make up cities'". Accordingly, beyond the binary depiction of invited and uninvited stakeholders, this paper attends to those invitations extended to artist-activists that are actively refused, suspended, or rejected after a conscious process of weighing their option to decline. While Woddis acknowledges the interrelatedness of being invited and uninvited, the paper re-positions this conceptual pairing as constitutively unfinished and deeply embedded in conflictual political processes—the *agonistic politics of invitation.*

This conflictual constellation *between* invitations brought forth by formal and legitimized stakeholders from the realm of 'politics' and self-organized or uninvited stakeholders, arising from the more excessive realm of 'the political', broadens the analytical vocabulary of cultural political research to understand the complexities and built-in ambiguities of both inviting parties and invitees. Both practices of accepting and rejecting an invitation point to the complicated and conditional governance stakeholders' agency. In sum, an agonistic cultural policy lens captures the interventionist character within pre-designed collaborative cultural policy settings as well as the manifold unexpected events and interruptions that can follow from *any* invitation—or even, to consider the invitation *as* intervention. Policy interventions, then, are not rare occurrences, or problems to be suppressed, but rather a constitutive component of any local state exercise to strike a collaboratively-produced policy outcome.

Scaling up to the nation state, international relations (IR) scholarship has theorized invitations within the context of post-World War II formal government invitations as requests to other nation state actors that are perceived as legitimate and relevant in foreign policy debates and interventions (MÉNDEZ 2017). In American politics, Schier (2000)

asserts that "citizens do not receive inclusive invitations to participate" but rather "an exclusive, invitation-only sort of targeting dominates", which results in "a more educated public that participates less, and the rise of popular alienation". Such an understanding of invitations reveals them as always-already foreclosed. The exclusivity of such focused invitations demonstrates the political power at play to "determine who gets to invite whom to participate", namely, to communicate, facilitate dialogue, and have input on policy development (WALKER et al. 2007: 438). An official invitation—and the state's "prerogative to withhold it" (MÉNDEZ 2017: 69)—communicates a narrowed set of institutional preferences to position individuals and organizations as "partner[s] of choice" in a context of "state incapacity" (MÉNDEZ 2017). This strategic selection underscores the state's recognition of stakeholders as valid, relevant, and legitimate. Yet, as Méndez (2017: 190) asserts, "the mere existence of an invitation (or opportunity) and a reason to accept (or exploit) it do not necessarily motivate actual acceptance". Within the internal layers of civil society, stakeholders may end up inviting themselves to intervene in their own affairs, with people with similar mindsets, policy preferences or goals, hence reproducing hegemonic notions or narratives of policy, or "emotional regimes" (BÓREN et al. 2021 : 6). In replying to an invitation, invitees leverage their emotional reactions by deploying various tactics of response, refusal, or subversion.

Inspired by Black feminist and Indigenous scholarship, this paper attends to the "politics of refusal" with respect to invitations (SIMPSON 2014; WOOD 2016). Refusal highlights the power of stakeholders' "intentional agency" (KARERA 2021: 3) to articulate their own legitimating practices (LANDAU 2019). For Karera (2021: 2), a Black feminist philosophical "politics of refusal" speaks to the conscious opposition to the "seductive lure" of "institutionally imposed intellectual trajectories". Such "calls to order" interlink with a narrowly defined realm of political "agential authority" with all of its linearity, assumed rationality, and processual rigidity, conditioning how conflicts manifest and can be moderated. Nevertheless, it remains possible to accept an invitation even if the premises upon which the invitation is built are opposed—with the purpose precisely to contest it. Hence, while invitations can be understood as a conditional "activation strategy" (SCHIER 2000 : 2) to cultivate more formalized entanglements, the oppressive implications of this conditionality can be questioned. In agonistic terms, they can be re-articulated both procedurally and substantively to change the actual distribution of power and meaning. With regards to the underlying

imperatives inscribed in conditional activation, scholars such as Bishop (2012) caution that participation is not always open-ended and in that sense democratic, but can bring about its own built-in limitations and reproductions of inequities in the cultural field.

To unpack the multiple tensions lingering in the politics of invitation, the paper leverages political difference as an analytical framework to study conflict (BISHOP 2004; MARCHART 2018; MOUFFE 2013). Simply, 'political difference' distinguishes between 'politics' and 'the political'. Politics revolve around the routinized, normalized, and institutionalized practices of decision- and meaning-making. Their aim is to provide order, stability, and predictability. The political, in contrast, stems from, and points to, the irreducible conflictuality of political life (MOUFFE 2005). It is a constantly challenging force that does not limit political agency to bureaucratic protocols. While politics often proceed with the goal to control, master or suppress conflict, the political constantly dislocates politics, and calls the radically contingent foundations of any socio-spatial or political formation of hegemony in question (LANDAU et al. 2021).

Applying the framework of political difference to urban cultural policy means that invitations become visible as political and conflictual processes of inclusion and exclusion. Invariably, histories of involvement with, and inclusions and exclusions from state institutions and bureaucratic processes, need to be taken into account when studying the conflictual constellations of urban cultural governance (BROOK et al. 2020). The politics of invitation teleologically assume or expect to produce a *specific* outcome (or *any* outcome, for that matter) as a result of a seemingly unambiguous invitation. Thus, the politics of invitation can appear as a conditional or pragmatic vehicle to accelerate, legitimize, monitor, or soothe contentious policy issues. By means of invitation, heterogeneous voices are 'being heard', which does not, however, necessarily translate into substantial equity in decision-making. In contrast, the logic of the political of invitations intentionally withdraws from this straight-forward logic. It is not inclined to RSVP! The political of invitations is constitutively prone to distract; it confuses the politics of invitations. To destabilize the status quo, invitations might be turned down, responses delayed, or refused altogether precisely because the inviting party originates from the realm of politics. The political questions the degree of openness of collaborative invitations; it denounces tokenism—the political refuses to sign off on an already-existing policy plan which only seeks legitimation after-the-fact. In that sense, the political can mobilize

ossified structures and practices of power, and requests a radical re-distribution of agency and decision-making to leverage new alternatives.

In sum, the paper attends to the contextually-sensitive temporality of invitations, considering the motivations and capacities of artists to accept, decline or reconfigure them within cultural policy narratives. In what follows, questions of where policy narratives are narrated, by whom, when, and how, are empirically addressed. Such questions are particularly relevant in cities with a high density of cultural infrastructures, an international reputation as capitals of contemporary art worlds, and competitive real estate markets that displace artists from gentrifying central city neighbourhoods.

How and where to trace cultural policy invitations: On methods and case studies

In light of the increasingly precarious socio-spatial conditions of artistic urban survival, the locale of cultural politics matters. In the three case study cities of Berlin, New York City, and Vancouver, cultural governance has prioritized a mix of place-based policy measures to map, protect, and maintain spaces for cultural production and presentation. Such urban geographically-specific political engagements have contested the bureaucratic policy parameters that govern creativity, bringing about new political collectivities or alliances.

With a volatile cultural history and notoriety as an experimental creative ecosystem, Berlin is globally renowned as a metropolis for international cultural producers (GRÉSILLON 2009). Since the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the German capital has faced significant spatial challenges after decades of land vacancy, cheap rents, and temporary use (*Zwischennutzung*), leading to contemporary gentrification displacements. While there are public policies to subsidize artist studio space, and cultural production facilities (printrooms and artist-run project spaces), the scarcity of affordable workspace for artists persists. Both genre-specific (contemporary dance, visual arts, jazz music and similar forms) and trans-disciplinary (*Rat für die Künste* or *Koalition der Freien Szene*) artist-led advocacy bodies have long entertained conversations with cultural politicians and administrators, who, in return, claim to make artists' voices heard in cultural policymaking and more equitably distribute cultural funds (LANDAU 2019).

Across the Atlantic, New York City has a world-famous art scene that stretches beyond Manhattan to include the boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island. Equity considerations remain on the cultural political agenda given the long-standing prioritization of flagship cultural institutions to the neglect of community-based spaces and initiatives. The inspiration for a global trend of converting abandoned factories and warehouses into live-work loft spaces, New York City epitomizes the struggles of avant-garde artists against gentrification (ZUKIN 1989). This is a city that, like many global and globalizing cities, continues to face an urban housing affordability crisis (WETZSTEIN 2017). When the City's *Department of Cultural Affairs* (DCLA) issued the first *Cultural Plan* in 2017, it specifically considered the long-term maintenance of community arts infrastructures and borough-specific cultural venues.

Demand for luxury real estate creates similar disparities between renters and buyers, local and international property owners, artists and other workers in one of Canada's largest cities, Vancouver. Located in the Western province of British Columbia, Vancouver stretches across the unceded territories of the hә'nq̓әmiṅәm̓ and Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, the xʷmәθkʷәy̓әm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and sәlilwәtaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Following the federal government's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* report (2015), the City of Vancouver launched initiatives to address and alleviate historical discrimination and exploitation of Indigenous and other racialized peoples (*City of Reconciliation* in 2014, *Chinatown Artist Call* in 2019, *Indigenous Mural Artist Calls* since 2017). Within a broad notion of culture, including both contemporary art production and the conservation of intangible cultural heritage, advocates of Vancouver's cultural diversity have partially allied in struggles against displacement, marginalization, and racial discrimination.

In sum, what unites these three case study cities are, on the one hand, pressing crises of scarce space for artistic production, presentation, and consumption. On the other, all three urban areas have experimented with participatory arrangements between cultural administrators, politicians, and artist advocates who differently narrate whose city, whose creativity, and whose cultural spaces matter to policy and planning. To trace the often emotionally-charged rationales, forms, role expectations, and responses of local governments' invitations to artist-led advocacy bodies, this paper draws on a variety of data sources to detect the origins and implications of such invitations.

From 2013 to 2021, more than 50 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with artist activists, cultural policy administrators, urban planners, and local community organizers. These were recorded, fully transcribed, and coded using the sensitizing concepts of conflict and consensus (BOWEN 2006). Within these conversations, both appreciative and frustrated emotional reactions to policy invitations were systematized. In tandem, desktop research was used to collect and analyze publicly available policy documents (written electronic invitations addressed to local advocacy bodies to participate in the writing of policies, cultural plans or strategies, local cultural budgets, urban planning documents, circulation of open artist and funding calls etc.) to identify gaps between policymakers and artist advocates' priorities for funding and programming. A critical policy document analysis of budgetary allocations, for example, revealed how invitees' policy requests and recommendations were not monetarily implemented, or only partially so. Local analogue and digital newspaper articles were collected for Berlin (2013 to present), New York City (2017 to 2020), and Vancouver (2018 to present), and read critically for traces of discontent and/or approval with the 'official' invitations in the public record. Across these same city-specific time periods, artist advocates' self-directed communication on social media channels was tracked. The Facebook group of the *Koalition der Freien Szene* has over 8,000 members along with Instagram and Twitter accounts that went live in 2020 and 2019 respectively. The Twitter account of the *People's Cultural Plan* was established in 2017 and their Facebook page now has over 600 likes. This social media presence is important to consider because it allows invitees to directly express their opinions of reservation or discomfort on easily accessible digital platforms as a means of potentially steering debates alongside the official invitations. Social media, then, is an important means for artists to narrate their own stories, to intervene in public discourse, and to strategically respond to official invitations.

Agonistic cultural policy invitations: Berlin, New York, and Vancouver

The three case studies prioritize the emotionally-charged rationales, forms, role expectations, and responses of artist advocates to local government invitations to participate in cultural policy narration. At the close of each empirical example, consideration is given to the processes

and actually existing policy outcomes that flow from these invitations to illustrate different context-specific cultural governance trajectories. With regards to underlying and possibly contradictory policy rationales, policymakers' motivations for *why* invitations are extended in the first place are contrasted with artists' own narratives and problem assessments as a means of identifying and potentially compensating for state incapacities (MÉNDEZ 2017). The material and discursive forms that invitations take are read in dialogue with the roles that policymakers ascribe to artist advocates to tease out the expectations of how artist stakeholders should perform within collaborative governance settings. The ensuing responses range from enacting a "politics of refusal" (KARERA 2021: 2) to designing "conflictual consensus" on contested policy issues (LANDAU 2020 : 2538). Ultimately, cultural policy processes and outcomes are conditioned by the contextually- and temporally-specific lifespans of invitations.

Accelerating invitations: Berlin's Koalition der Freien Szene

The Berlin-based *Koalition der Freien Szene* (*Koalition*) is a trans-disciplinary artist advocacy platform founded in 2012 to counteract long-standing imbalances in funding between cultural institutions such as opera houses, museums, collections, and theatres, and free-lance cultural producers. It claims to speak for the independent cultural scene, which encompasses

> "[t]he totality of all freely producing, Berlin-based artists, ensembles, facilities and structures in free sponsorship from the realms of architecture, visual arts, dance, drama, performance, new media, music—ranging from baroque, electro, jazz, classical music to new music—musical theater, children and youth theater, literature as well as all other inter- or transdisciplinary forms" (KUCHER 2013: 7).

While it is important for artists to have an opportunity to speak in a unified voice in cultural policy circles, in practice, the complex breadth of disciplines and genres with their respective needs and political demands, in addition to the sheer size of the independent scene (estimated at 30-50,000 artists) can invariably make it challenging to coherently represent. While one of the strategic organizing principles of the *Koalition* was precisely to gather and collectivize different political aspirations, agendas, and claims-making tactics, the heterogeneous collectivity has manifested in internal tensions and power asymmetries (LANDAU 2019). Steered by an elected *Sprecher_innenkreis* (Round of Spokespeople) and thematic working groups, the group remains open to individual

artists' opinions, suggestions, and requests during quarterly plenum meetings, hosted by various independent cultural spaces throughout the city. These meetings are used not only to inform members about policy development meetings between *Koalition* speakers and cultural administrators and politicians but also serve as a platform to discuss responses to formal invitations issued by the local cultural administration. Prior to the foundation of the overarching *Koalition*, collaborative relations between independent cultural producers and administrators were strained by conflict and ambivalence, leading to selective invitations and the articulation of outrage from uninvited cultural stakeholders, ranging from open letters to requests to boycott or disrupt planned meetings (LANDAU 2019). With the advent of the *Koalition* emerged a representative space of possibility that brought together both existing artist advocacy organizations (some of whom are partially supported by local arts funding) and engaged individuals with no prior leverage in local cultural politics, providing an arena to openly discuss conflicts and invitations.

One of the most prominent narratives that the *Koalition* crafted had to do with a new source of funding created by Berlin's City Tax. Framed as fresh money that would not challenge or take away resources already allocated to cultural institutions, the group effectively advocated for more grants-based and easily accessible funding for individual artists and project spaces. The *Koalition* was formally invited to co-design City Tax distributional policies, translating into concrete, however temporary, policy change in the bi-annual cultural budget (LANDAU 2020). In other instances, invitations to the *Koalition* have been perceived by its speakers as arriving too late, being too conditional on pre-existing expectations or leaving too little room for actual political negotiation. Understanding themselves to have professional expertise as consultants on the politics of independent cultural production, that expert knowledge and consultation labour is not always adequately remunerated or paid for at all. Furthermore, there is a common misperception by civic leaders that artists are merely engaged in cultural policy to further their own personal gain, which only serves to re-individualize and tokenize their labour. Notably, this example illustrates deeper-seated conflicts about whether policy collaboration constitutes an open and voluntary invitation or whether it should be legitimized and valued as paid work.

Lingering between the status as representative mouthpiece of the independent scene and invited policy entrepreneur, a cultural administrator relativizes invitations extended to the *Koalition*: "We do not extend a full-on 'invitation' in the sense of: 'You, the *Koalition*, invent something,

and we will implement it in whatever way you want'" (Berlin, October 20, 2015). Instead, cultural administrators see the *Koalition's* role as giving input they can apply to policy negotiations and budget-making processes; the commitment to carry forth claims and narratives articulated by artists themselves thus becomes fragmented, and is ultimately left with policymakers to make the final decision.

The precarious politics of agonistic collaboration derailed in April 2018, long after the initial policy co-design between *Koalition* and cultural administrators (LANDAU 2019). While the group was invited to partake in a strategy-building workshop to institutionalize collaborative governance relations between artists and administrators, the invitees found the request too limited in scope (the invite was addressed to only some of the speakers and not others, laying bare the administration's assessment of who is considered a relevant governance stakeholder). Furthermore, there was disagreement on the terms of collaboration, leaving many members of the *Koalition* feeling tokenized and excluded from substantial policy partnerships or shared responsibility. *Koalition*-internal consensus was that mere non-binding consultation or even less substantially, the passing of information on already-decided policies was simply not enough to accept the invitation (LANDAU 2019). Even though the cultural administration responded to both informally and publicly communicated critiques on these insufficient politics of invitation (for example, by enlarging the scope of the invitation, seemingly making the planned event more democratic and accessible on short-notice), the *Koalition* chose explicitly—and by plenum vote—to enact a politics of refusal, reiterating its "intentional agency" (KARERA 2021: 3).

In sum, the *Koalition* afforded a key opportunity to articulate Berlin's independent cultural voice and to narrate a collectivized desire to engage with cultural governance. The representation of a polyphonic collectivity, then, accelerates invitational possibilities and enables policy collaboration with regards to creating a broadly legitimated base of multi-stakeholder debate. Nevertheless, the politics of invitation in Berlin have brought about some agonistic governance collaborations—they have pushed the self-organized moment of the political of invitations into the logic of the politics of invitation and thus challenged the latter. Accordingly, invitations remain a fickle medium, whose reception and tone are highly sensitive to the actual degree of openness and possibility for substantial policy change promised therein. Invitations have limited lifespans, but their aftertastes and emotional residues linger and inform

the contours of future collaborations as will be seen in the following case study from New York City.

Challenging invitations: New York City's People's Cultural Plan

In 2015, New York City Council unanimously requested an amendment to the City Charter, thus setting in motion the city's first-ever cultural plan entitled *CreateNYC—A Plan for All New Yorkers* (https://creat-enyc.cityofnewyork.us/). Launched in the summer of 2017, the cultural plan is an 180-page glossy document touted as involving almost 200,000 New Yorkers in its making, including residents, artists, policymakers, cultural leaders, government officials, and philanthropists. Spearheaded by the local state agency for arts and culture, the *Department of Cultural Affairs* (DCLA), the intent of this initiative is to ensure that "New York City maintains its position as a global hub of creativity" (CFU 2020: 14). With the biggest annual cultural funding volume in the US (approximately US$200 million), for over 1,400 arts and cultural organizations across the five boroughs, DCLA's funding portfolio includes both cultural institutions and independent projects and spaces. Similar to Berlin's cultural funding landscape, subsidized artistic disciplines range from visual and performing arts to literature, as well as science organizations such as zoos, botanical gardens and heritage sites.

As a comprehensive policy document that envisions the future of culture in this global city, the CreateNYC cultural plan narrates culture as "for everyone" (CreateNYC 2017: 63). The reality, however, is quite different; inequities persist across boroughs, within and between cultural and ethnic communities. Efforts have been made to address some of the disparities in equitable funding, seeking to promote greater inclusivity in the cultural sectors and expand access to arts education as detailed in the 2019 *Action Plan* updates (CreateNYC 2019). As reiterated by the Center for an Urban Future Report *The Changing Face of Creativity in New York—Sustaining NYC's Immigrant Arts Ecosystem Through Crisis and Beyond,* "there is still more to be done to ensure that New York remains a beacon for immigrant arts" (CFU 2020: 22). Currently, almost a third of the city's artist population is from an immigrant background (CFU 2020).

With respect to the politics of invitation, in the making of CreateNYC (2017: 31), in 2016-17, New Yorkers were explicitly "invited to review the proposal and weigh in on what mattered most to them" through over 400 public and semi-public, online and in-person outreach events across all five boroughs that requested they "show up", "speak up", and "step up"

(see Fig. 1). Playful and accessible workshops, focus groups, surveys, and interviews were used to engage artists and audiences to counter their potential continued withdrawal from public participation in mainstream cultural spaces (CFU 2020).
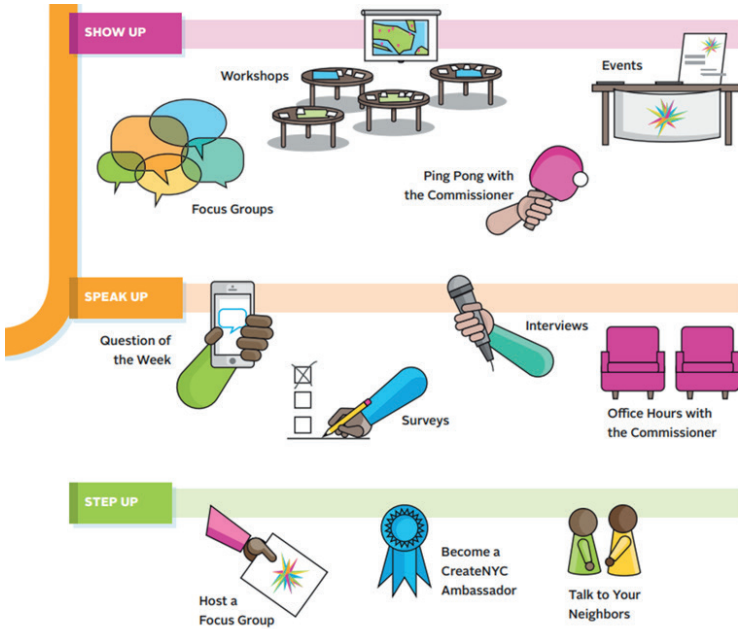

Fig. 1: *Overview of invitational forms of engagement making of (source: CreateNYC, 31)*

CreateNYC (2017: 46) was explicitly situated in the city's "commitment to equity in planning, policymaking, partnerships, and distribution of resources as a guiding principle" Despite this clearly articulated commitment to equity, the plan elicited a substantive counter-response by a group of cultural activists who formulated a *People's Cultural Plan* (PCP), a succinct 17-page document released only a few days before the launch of the official cultural plan, accompanied by various events circulated via Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The activists of PCP asserted that any cultural plan for New York must support the lives and contributions of all queer, transgender, Black, Indigenous People of Colour (QT-BIPOC), including those who identify as Asian, Latinx, and Arab and/or are disabled and elderly. Other initiatives such as *Artists of Color Bloc*, who developed a *Cultural Road Map* presented to DCLA a few months

prior to the launch of both CreateNYC and PCP, have brought forth similar concerns for a more inclusive and intersectional cultural political playing field (Cultural Road Map for Equity [in NYC's Cultural Plan]—artists of color bloc [aocbloc.org]).

PCP made explicit demands for fair pay and employee health care and retirement benefits for cultural workers as well as housing crisis policy and (re)zoning interventions. With regards to arts funding, they requested to redirect public funding across all five boroughs to cultural infrastructure "led by and serving communities of color, to correct for historic undercapitalization of those organizations" (PCP 2017: 3). However, for the PCP activists,

> "[t]he most crucial component of equity is equity in power and in decision-making, and we will accept nothing less… Because we recognize that all communities of color have been disenfranchised and dispossessed through historically unjust policy making at the municipal, state, and federal levels, as well as through the de facto funding priorities of private philanthropy" (2017: 1).

While policymakers from the official CreateNYC had specifically prioritized equity, the PCP's notion thereof was substantially different. Naming their initiative *People's Cultural Plan* was a deliberate political strategy to critique the universal, yet foreclosing interpretation of 'the New Yorker' to show how far from intersectional, precarious, and grassroots lived experiences of cultural producers this disembodied New Yorker is. The tone of the PCP is far less celebratory than CreateNYC, and much more emotionally somber and urgent. It repeatedly calls out systemic class- and race-related injustices, and forms of latent and explicit oppression and exploitation (Landau-Donnelly forthcoming). While historically marginalization is also acknowledged in CreateNYC, the real-life implications and challenges that artists are facing have less space and weight. The word "discrimination", for example, appears only once in CreateNYC, and 10 times in PCP, a document that is one tenth its size yet offering a 11900% increase in usage. Such artists' re-narrations of policy priorities are intended to reframe the cultural governance agenda as "more than lip service in support of 'diversity'" (PCP 2017: 1).

Unlike in Berlin, in New York City, the structured involvement of artists in local cultural policymaking and governance processes is not prioritized by local administrators. Notably, the five policy objectives in the 2019 *Action Plan*, each equipped with up to seven operational sub-strategies, include the following priorities: (1) increase equitable funding and support for culture, especially in historically underserved communities; (2) cultivate inclusive practices in the cultural sector; (3) strengthen

connections between the cultural sector and government; (3) address the affordability crisis for the cultural community; and (5) provide high quality arts education for all New York City public school students. This list highlights the need for more collaboration and inclusion, without specifically referencing artists as active political agents within these cultural governance processes. Within these actionable policy objectives, it is important to note that terms such as "participation", "governance" or "policy" do not appear. Consequently, artists' expertise with juggling space- and funding-related challenges based upon their lived experiences are not solicited by policymakers. Instead, artists are expected to play roles as workshop hosts and moderators of round-table discussions, without directly co-creating policy. By contrast, PCP activists make concrete assertions for the need to establish a democratically-elected *Community Accountability Board* and to support the cooperative management of city-owned land for use "by local organizations, artists, and arts collectives with a track record of serving the neighborhood" (PCP 2017: 15).

The official invitation to co-create CreateNYC did not go far enough with respect to *who* could narrate the cultural plan's ambitions and more importantly, who could co-design the policy objectives and measures that would follow from the invitation. Hence, the logic of the politics of invitation prevailed over the more polyphonic attempts and claims brought forth by PCP, carrying the conflict-attuned spirit of the political of invitations. Self-organized QTBIPOC-led artists movements not only partially refused to participate in the official consultation exercise (although the number of outreach events declined by the co-authors and -organizers of PCP is unknown), they actively initiated their own policy trajectory with the narration, launch, and invitation to participate in a parallel grassroots-led cultural governance mo(ve)ment. The explicit intent of the PCP was to invite *different* voices that have historically not been heard at the cultural policy decision-making table. PCP has responded and re-narrated DCLA's imperative to show up, speak up, and step up—but on their own terms.

Commissioning invitations: Vancouver's Reparative Chinatown Murals

Vancouver has one of the highest density of artists per capita in Canada (HUTTON/MURRAY 2012), with 8,800 artists living in the city (CULTURE|SHIFT 2019: 25). Artistic presence tainted by taking place on stolen Indigenous land is under constant threat in a hyper-exclusive settler real estate market. While the accelerating rents affect all residents

of Vancouver, cultural policymakers acknowledge this challenge; local cultural scenes have become collectivized to counter the very real possibility of a "City without Art" (EASTSIDE CULTURAL CRAWL 2019). Various policy plans such as *Culture|Shift: Blanketing the city in arts and culture* (2020-2029), formerly dubbed *Creative City Strategy*, have laid out policy solutions for maintaining studio space, and increasing overall funding volumes. The metaphor of "blanketing" in the subtitle of the cultural plan was bestowed by a Musqueam weaver and graphic designer as a dedication to the value, strength and presence of the Salish culture, while simultaneously underscoring the necessary importance working collaboratively with "local Nations to address colonial erasure and ensure that their voice and presence are woven throughout Vancouver's cultural ecology" (https://vancouver.ca/parks-recreation-culture/culture-shift.aspx).

With an annual budget of CDN $11 million, jointly supplied by the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Park Board for cultural projects, Culture|Shift seeks to "hardwire culture" into all municipal plans, strategies, processes, and decisions (CULTURE|SHIFT 2019: 22). One initiative to accomplish this cross-cutting, locally emplaced, and integrated approach to cultural production is to leverage public art as a material, emotional, and experiential interface between contemporary culture and difficult histories. Following a mayoral historical apology to Chinese Canadians in April 2018 for "past injustices and their cruel effects on individuals and their families, and commit to ensuring that similar unjust practices are never again allowed to fall on any group or community" (CITY OF VANCOUVER 2018: 1), a tailored invitation was extended in the form of an artist call. The Engineering Services Department in partnership with the newly instituted neighborhood-specific arms-length organization *Chinatown Transformation Team,* sought Chinatown-affiliated artists to submit proposals for temporary mural artworks. The artist call (2019: 1) "seeks to celebrate artists with a relationship to Chinatown and who aim to represent its living heritage" to reconcile and heal the historical marginalization of Chinese Canadians. A secondary policy goal of the invitational call was to use the beautifying potential of public art to increase local residents' and tourists' perceptions of security and cleanliness in the neighborhood, which borders the Downtown Eastside Side, in which deepening poverty and an opioid crisis persist (BURNETT 2014). Out of this ethno-cultural group-specific artist call, four murals by Vancouver-based artists and artist collectives of different artistic backgrounds, generations, and affiliations with Chinatown,

were launched in October 2019. The shortlisted artworks are (1) *Every-day Things* (日常事物), by visual artist Paul Wong, a four-piece rotating installation showing painted everyday objects in a window of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, (2) *Celebrating Spring Festival in Chinatown* by local sculptor Shu Ren Cheng, located on a wall of Chinatown Plaza, a shopping complex on Keefer Street, (3) 聚 *Gathering* by illustrator Dawn Lo, painted on a small shutter door close to the famous Chinese Cultural Center (CCC) on Carrall Street, (4) the long-stretched acrylic latex paint mural *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea* by BAGUA Artist Association, an art collective consisting of Sean Cao, Xingyue Feng, Katharine Meng-Yuan Yi, and Yuan Liu, working from Sun Wah Centre, an arts space on Chinatown's Keefer Street.

Given the structured form of the invitation, its parameters were bureaucratically fixed with predetermined locations and limited 2-year lifespans for the murals (even though they are still up today in 2022). Furthermore, the call bounded artists' roles in a conventional sense as commissioned creators of artworks rather than as political agents invited into an open-ended governance process (one that could initiate more wide-spread policy change in line with the commitment to historical reconciliation and cultural redress). Notably, while many local artists considered the mural call as a unique opportunity to place more artworks into Chinatown's public spaces that reflect the variety of narratives, lived experiences and generations, but overall, the artist call reduces the very historical weight of the formal apology to a pragmatic and transactional service to be provided by artists. The short-listed artists accepted this invitation in a straight-forward manner, and delivered artworks. Some of them, however, went beyond the production of an artwork, and organized multi-language local community engagement and story-telling sessions. Even though community engagement was requested in the artist call, concrete funds and resources to facilitate such reparative outreach were not provided. Instead, artists and artist organizations were left responsible to address deep-seated feelings of exclusion and dispossession—that have grown over generations—through the creative process of mural-making. In this short-lived, quasi-mediating role and with a limited budget, demanding, and perhaps unrealistic social healing expectations were placed onto the artists.

Ruptures in these invited creative processes also became apparent when uninvited cultural agents intervened, narrating *their* sense of exclusion through graffiti layered atop of the commissioned murals. This process of self-invited narration elicited mixed public responses. In one

instance, the graffiti tag #RefugeesWelcome was synergistically added onto the unfinished mural by the commissioned local artist collective *BA-GUA Artist Association*, which actually set out to narrate a pro-refugee story through the Chinese myth of the eight immortals crossing the sea (LANDAU-DONNELLY 2022). In other instances, red bullet holes were graffitied on to the painted faces of Asian figures, graphically communicating anti-Asian racism sentiments that left artists, local residents, and store owners appalled at this overt aggression. The commissioned, and in that sense invited, murals found themselves in unanticipated, tense conversations with unsolicited, publicly emplaced, anonymous street art. The graffiti, while an articulation of refusal and exclusion from formalized commissioning processes, nevertheless illustrates ongoing unequal access to public space, and the resources needed to narrate and redress the complicated stories in and of Chinatown. The murals served as both magnets and magnifiers of the reparative work still to be done.

In summary, Vancouver's politics of invitation demonstrate how artists used a commissioned invitation to narrate their own relational memories of, and connections to, the unique place of Chinatown. Their visual narrations blended past and contemporary experiences of hardship and celebration, community feeling and marginalization, and thus (re)surfaced the unfinished restorative work against anti-Asian hate that the limited invitation sought to address. However limited the invitation in the form of temporarily commissioned public art was, it did mobilize public awareness for the manifold forms of Chinese Canadian life, culture and heritage, facilitating multi-generational relation-building. The murals drew attention to the multiply contested politics of place in this historically marginalized neighborhood. Notably, this invitation is not a stand-alone initiative. It has segued, for example, into more structural efforts to acknowledge, celebrate, and maintain Chinatown's living heritage (an application to recognize the neighborhood as UNESCO World Heritage Site (https://instrcc.ubc.ca/initiatives/projects/unesco/). Nevertheless, as an instrumental invitation, the artist call still bounded the governance work of artists, limiting it to artistic commentary and visibility in public space rather than leveraging the political of invitations to collaboratively engage artists in wider-reaching policy change.

Conclusion

Invitations constitute the contingent foundations upon which future cultural policies are precariously built. Through a discussion of the often-conflicting rationales, forms, role expectations, and responses of invitations in three case study cities, Berlin, New York City, and Vancouver, this paper has highlighted the political parameters underlying *any* invitation. What the paper has termed, the *agonistic politics of invitation* reveals the conflictual contours of cultural governance. The paper's analysis of three empirical vignettes offers insight into different legacies of conflict that condition cultural governance processes and outcomes.

The *Koalition* in Berlin became a trans-disciplinary action platform by coalescing the dispersed narratives of heterogeneous independent scene actors. It has demonstrated how artist-led institution-building simultaneously opens and diversifies opportunities to be invited to actively participate in local cultural governance processes. Via the collectivization and institutionalization of polyphonic voices, invitations can be extended in the first place and do not evaporate into generalized disembodied discontent without a foothold in political negotiations. In the New York City case, the self-mobilization of discontented artists culminated in a tangible policy response to an official yet partially toothless invitation by policymakers. With this self-empowered policy document-making process, the *People's Cultural Plan* created its own social justice-centric narrative of the city's cultural governance future. The PCP fuses the agency and textuality of a politics of refusal—refusing the tokenistic terms of official policy engagement and instead scripting their own invitation, which still awaits a state response. Lastly, the City of Vancouver—despite its grand promise to weave arts and culture into the fabric of the city as part of a social and racial justice agenda –has only extended piecemeal and conditional invitations to artists. These temporarily constricted invitations prioritize artistic creation to the neglect of more longer-term and structural collaborative involvement in cultural policy development. This is a lost opportunity. Artists' non-Western narratives about aesthetics, heritage, and caring relations with socio-nature and public space have for too long been side-lined when they could make a game-changing intersectional contribution to cultural governance.

Within this spectrum of accepted and refused invitations, the paper has demonstrated how some cultural policy invitations are extended strategically to de-antagonize existing tensions amongst administrators and self-organized artist stakeholders. However, when invitations

are carelessly formulated, they can backfire and fuel discontent, outrage and feelings of distrust, marginalization, and silencing. Pushing invitations further into scholarly debates of access, participation, and equity in cultural policy, the paper raises questions about the longevity and fleetingness of invitations. Moreover, it questions the conditions under which invitations stand, and draws attention to the emotional stakes of invitations that do not keep the promises they made. In the worst case, these careless invitations reinforce inequities of gender, class, and race amongst cultural workers—revealing the violence that is always-already inherent in tokenism (BROOK et al. 2020). By redirecting analytical attention to the politicality of invitations, future-oriented cultural policy conversations might ultimately make more space for invitations coming from the realm of the political.

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