

Why True Democracy Needs Everyone?

Keynote speech by Ceyda Berk-Söderblom

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Good morning, everyone.

It is a profound privilege to be in this space, surrounded by familiar faces and new ones I hope to get to know. We are united here not just as colleagues, but as a community of concerned souls, bound by an idealistic commitment: we are dedicated guardians of humanistic values, the passionate defenders of the “arts and culture” as an essential public good.

Thank you, Sadjad, for setting the ground for my intervention. I also extend my sincere thanks to the organisers for providing this forum to reflect critically on how we are positioning ourselves today in relation to diversity in arts and culture. I want to expand on the context in which we live, and on the essential representation and agency of each individual.

In light of what Sadjad has shared, and the reality we wake up to every day where basic human rights, human dignity, and the values we cultural workers uphold are being systematically eroded, I found myself gripped by a question:

How do we even begin to articulate the fundamental role of diversity work?

Diversity is not a peripheral asset; it is the core operating system. It is not a decorative layer on top of arts and culture; it is the vital, evolving ecosystem itself. It is, quite simply, the architecture of the society we live in. Diversity is about ensuring that everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from, has the unquestionable right to participate, belong, and shape the future. Without this, our democracy is dangerously undermined, our culture is narrow, and our social fabric is tragically weakened.

When I reflected on my experiences, my work, and the tireless efforts of so many - you, individually and collectively put - I felt, for the first time, a deep despair at the enormity of the challenges we face. I felt the pain of knowing that my capabilities are not enough: not enough to stop the genocide in Gaza, not enough to reverse enormous budget cuts, not enough to uproot the racism ingrained in Finland’s highest political seats, and not enough to dismantle the far-right narratives poisoning our democracies.

And yet, at the bottom of that despair, when my voice felt like a whisper against the storm, I found the light. Not in an individual answer, but within the deep wisdom and courageous energy of the collective. That courage is in this room today, and I've believed in it for 25 years as a cultural worker.

So today, with this conviction and dedication, I want to speak about why true democracy needs everyone.

For me, diversity work, the orchestrated efforts we put into dismantling discriminatory structures, is, as Sara Ahmed so sharply puts it, the work we do when we *attempt to transform* an institution. It is the work we do when we fundamentally refuse to fully inhabit the norms of that institution. Today, diversity work is nothing less than defending the very foundations of democracy.

This work has never been more urgent as the current structures fail. They fail to provide equal opportunities to underrepresented minorities, particularly foreign-born artists and cultural workers in employment, funding, and professional growth. People are still marginalized, discriminated against, and targeted for the color of their skin, their ethnic background, nationality, abilities, gender identity, sexual orientation, or beliefs. Every detail

of our identities, the very ornaments that make us human, is being weaponized as a tool of exclusion, a justification for racism, ethnic profiling, and dehumanization.

When we speak of democracy, we often speak of elections, institutions, and laws. Yet, democracy means much more than that alone. At its core, democracy is the living promise that every voice matters, that no one is invisible, and no one is left behind.

The year 2025 marks Finland and Åland's co-presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, a term committed to a strong and united Nordic region. The Nordic Council of Ministers has articulated a bold vision: to become the world's most sustainable and integrated region by 2030. We must acknowledge without hesitation; this vision will remain merely an aspiration until we place the full spectrum of diverse voices at the undisputed foundation of our democratic life.

Diversity is not about ticking boxes; it is about real power, representation, and belonging, it is about fundamentally re-engineering who holds the power. It is about building societies where different cultures, backgrounds, ages, abilities, and experiences are leveraged as our most potent resource. It means ensuring our youth has a voice in shaping their own future, ensuring equal power across all genders, enabling potential of newcomers, and making certain that every resident feels an unconditional sense of belonging where they choose to live.

Diversity is a mandate for intersectional sustainability. We must remember that it is not only the environment that needs protection, but also the social fabric that binds us together. That fabric is strongest when woven from threads as diverse as the communities it unites.

Diversity is the key to an egalitarian system, and it is the only thing that safeguards democratic resilience. We live in a time of disinformation, and growing mistrust in institutions. A society that values and protects diversity is stronger, more cohesive, and better prepared to resist division.

Furthermore, freedom of expression and cultural diversity are non-negotiable democratic rights. When artists, journalists, and civil society speak with many voices, democracy thrives. When their voices are silenced or narrowed to just one narrative, democracy fails. Protecting diversity means protecting pluralism - the very lifeblood of our democratic system.

Diversity deepens and enriches our collective identities and values. Arts and culture as public good embody the essence of Europe and the spirit of its democracy. When people see themselves reflected in the cultural and political life of their communities, they experience a true sense of belonging - and it is this sense of belonging that builds the trust on which democracy itself depends.

Crucially, diversity is the engine of imagination and innovation. The greatest threat to democracy today is not only external pressures, but the shrinking of our collective political imagination. It is the bold presence of diverse voices, especially in the arts and culture, that dares us to envision new futures, sparks inventive solutions, and keeps democracy alive and dynamic.

So, let us be clear: democracy without diversity is fragile, exclusive, and uninspired. But democracy through diversity is strong, inclusive, and full of possibility. Protecting diversity is not just cultural policy, it is the very essence of defending democracy itself through the

actions. This principle becomes clear when we look at how diversity informs our commitments across society.

When we speak of gender equality, we declare that true democracy cannot exist where the world is confined to binary divisions or where individuals are denied the freedom to define and live their own gender identities.

When we listen to children and young people and let them thrive in an inclusive environment, we secure the future of our democracy.

When we stand for human rights, rights of people with disabilities, and the rule of law, we defend the principle that diversity is not a challenge, but greatest guarantee of democracy.

When we commit to inclusion, equality and equity, we declare that democracy does not belong to the majority alone, but to all of us, on equitable terms, without compromise.

When we pursue cooperation and nurture belonging for everyone, we demonstrate that our strength lies not in sameness, but in unity across difference.

And when we do all this, we prove that diversity is the only viable blueprint for democracy's survival.

Let's anchor this in our reality. At the end of 2024, more than one in ten people in Finland spoke a native language other than Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi. In Sweden, that number is one in five. And yet, when we look at the leadership, the funding decisions, and the power positions in our cultural institutions, we confront a systemic inequity that cannot be ignored. True democratic participation is impossible when the very people who make up our societies are not represented in the spaces that define our shared identity.

The gaps in representation, the persistent inequalities, and the discriminatory structures are not abstract problems. They are lived realities for countless individuals, for artists, cultural workers, and people whose voices are sidelined every day. This is not abstract theory, it is the lived reality that I, along with countless colleagues, face every day as we work to create, participate in, and shape the cultural landscape of the Nordics.

Therefore, I stand before you to confront one of the most pressing obstacles to progress in our societies: the declining belief in democracy. The only way to overcome this, I believe, is to unlearn, to challenge the unconscious biases, mindsets, and attitudes that maintain structural discrimination and hold us back from becoming true agents of transformation. We must place diverse voices at the heart of securing democracy, the cornerstone of Nordic societies, ensuring that they guide every choice we make.

Today, in a world that is polarizing, closing in, and contaminated by far-right narratives and border violence, we find ourselves in a situation not unlike that of 100 years ago. A universal enemy is being declared: the immigrants. Highly skilled individuals, with multiple degrees, languages, and the desire to build a better society, are framed as a threat.

I am a transborder cultural professional, rooted in Mediterranean heritage, shaped by multiple migration stories. I am committed to post-national knowledge, power, and the pursuit of social, environmental, and democratic justice. An immigrant in two countries: Finland and Sweden. I am a child of a cosmopolitan family where four cultures converge. I speak not only for myself, but on behalf of every colleague whose migration story shapes

their work, knowledge, and perspective, bringing a unique outlook to the world around us. Together with those whose tireless efforts are shaping the future of art in the Nordics, across the EU, and beyond, let me say this with absolute clarity:

We are not enemy!

The immigrants are not the enemy!

The real enemy of society, common good, and democracy is racism, hate speech, normalization of political narratives that politicize immigration, and the systems and structures that allow and spread these narratives.

If we are to confront this real enemy, we must not only reject what divides us but also envision what unites us. We need a language and a practice that goes beyond actions - a language of hope, justice, and radical transformation.

Let us, then, turn to the language of radical transformation. I wish to conclude my words by sharing a passage from the Manifesto of Change, co-written by the brilliant artists and agents of change of the Cultural Transformation Movement: *Dounia, Mira, Elie, Emanuele, Ksenia, Farila, and Laura*. Together with my partners in Austria, Belgium, Italy, Ukraine, and Sweden we are working to reshape cultural institutions so that they reflect the full spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives present in our societies today. Our work requires moving beyond questions of artistic output and audience diversity, towards ensuring that leadership, governance structures, and staffing within arts and cultural organisations mirror the communities they serve.

I would like to share this co-written poetry with you now, not because poetry is one of the most powerful ways of meaning-making, not because it offers refuge when we are surrounded by empty words.

Because it is an enchanting act of resistance we must embody:

*"We dream of a world where silenced stories are heard and valued,
vulnerabilities become strengths,
and love, not success, defines our lives.*

*We refuse to conform with injustice.
We refuse to accept lies.
We will repair, restore, rebuild.*

*We demand
stop the violence, start the rooting,
dismantling of oppressive systems,
a planet-first approach: care for all beings, slow down to protect"*

This is a manifesto for those who dream of a better world. For anyone seeking to transform injustice into care in the cultural sector, disconnection into solidarity, and stagnation into creativity. If you've felt the urge to act but didn't know where to begin, let this be your invitation."

Take this invitation. Take this call to repair, restore, and rebuild. The courage we need is already here, in this room, in this collective, and in this vision.

Let us begin our discussion today by showing that diversity is the heartbeat of democracy and true democracy needs everyone.

This is the only meaningful future we must invest in.

Thank you.

About the Author

[Ceyda Berk-Söderblom](#) is a highly experienced arts manager, curator, festival programmer and cultural entrepreneur with over twenty years of experience bridging artistic practice, cultural policy, and social transformation across Europe. Currently, she serves as a Senior Project Manager and Researcher at Trans Europe Halles and leads the Cultural Transformation Movement, which advances diversity, equity, inclusion, and democratic participation across artistic and organisational practices. She also coordinates the EU project Co-PED (Community-Based Cultural and Social Centres as Incubators for Positive Energy Districts), which positions social and cultural centres as essential incubators for energy transition. With an MA in cultural diversity and social inclusion and background in communication, business administration, and arts leadership, her advocacy is dedicated to reshaping policies, practices, and institutions to foster more just, democratic, and pluralistic cultural ecosystems. Her expertise includes contributing to cultural policy development as a member of a working group at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture that produced the Art, Culture, and Diverse Finland report. Additionally, she is the Chair of the Board of Culture for All, a key Finnish organisation dedicated to providing cultural operators with guidance on accessibility and diversity.

References

1. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Duke University Press, 2012.
2. [Manifesto of Change](#), written by Dounia Mahammed and Mira Bryssinck, Elie Laucher and Emanuele Arturo Miceli, Ksenia Ulianova, Farila Neshat and facilitated by Laura Camacho Salgado. [Cultural Transformation Movement](#) (CTM), 2025.

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