

## **"MARE ARTICUM"**

### **ART AND POLITICS IN NORWAY. (see page 5)**

#### **An uncomplete introduction.**

**Evelyn Holm**

Once art was pure. The whole idea of modernism was the strict conviction that art had to be autonomous to survive with any quality, especially in our modern world where technologically enhanced mass culture, kitsch and propaganda reign supreme. In the sense of aesthetic modernism as we know it from Adorno and Greenberg, the autonomy of art dominates all the way from the top down to the single, independent work of art. As informed readers of this magazine will know, aesthetic modernism, although dominant, has never been the only way of understanding art and art's function. From the beginning of the last century Avant-garde movements, with the prominent example of Marcel Duchamp, have continuously struggled to find a way of providing art its appropriate place within the influential forces of society. Generally speaking two things resulted from this struggle; the shattering of the autonomy of any specific art medium, and the institutional autonomy of art becoming a reality. All experimentation on crossing the line between art and life resulted in either oblivion or a secure place within the art institution. But although institutional, art is no longer pure, if indeed it ever was. In the present situation of art being permitted to concern itself with any aspect of reality, the question of art and politics is revealed as urgent and unavoidable.

If not before, this year's Documenta has proved that the connection between art and politics not only works on what used to be called an international level, which in the art world for some time meant western society, but is in fact something even more relevant on what is normally termed a global level, and includes regions outside of traditional centres. The events of September 11th have had their after effects on the world as we once knew it, and for a while it seemed expected that art would change accordingly. This has yet to be seen, although certain aspects can already be observed, even in the relatively calm society of Norway. One example is a debate that the magazine 'UKS Forum for Contemporary Art'(1) initiated on its website over a period of 10 days in November and December 2001. This magazine is published by 'The Young Artists' Society'(2), an organization that since 1921 has worked for the social and artistic rights of young Norwegian artists. Over approximately the last ten years, the magazine has extended its view to focus more and more on the struggle for recognition of new forms of artistic expression, and has recently engaged in questions of art being political. This debate worked as an open e-mail discussion, and dealt with some interesting points of view from young, and obviously politically radical, Norwegian artists. The editor of the magazine, the artist Bjørn Bjarre, initiated the discussion by raising some questions significant to his personal reaction to the tragic events, which at the time still frequently appeared in the media. Bjørn Bjarre, like many of us, cried at the sight of an airplane flying into and destroying a building he had himself stood on top of. While the bombing of Afghanistan, or any other place unfamiliar to his western mind, came nowhere near as close to causing the same emotional

reaction. With regard to the composer Stockhausen, who at the time had been misquoted as claiming that the attack was the world's best artwork, Bjørn Bjarre asked if the utopian idea of art's ability to change the world had now applied its final stroke? Or if on the contrary, it would inspire new engagement: is art powerless against the ultra-violence of terrorism and mass media, until the meaningless Warholian repetition of the event? Must art be ambiguous in its treatment of incomprehensible reality, or is it possible that we can express something important and take a stand? (3)

The discussion, or rather conversation, that followed Bjarre's initiative, did not introduce much in the way of anything new to the relationship between art and society, or to the possibility that art could have any influence, or even be subversive. Nor could it possibly surprise anyone that already confirmed positions present within art remained steadfast along the line extended between the well known diametrical opposites; artists that proclaimed art as a more or less autonomous field, incapable of making any remarkable political difference, and artists that had decided to change their projects completely after September 11th, referring to their responsibilities as producers of meanings.

But let's not yet turn our backs on Stockhausen's alleged statement. Is it at all possible, at any level, to compare art and terrorism? As Bjørn Bjarre put it, after clearly stating that what Stockhausen had actually said was that the tragedy in NY was a work of Lucifer: "Even if the quote was fabricated, it is still worthwhile contemplating the parallels between terrorism and art. Both can have the same goal: shock, change, revolution, criticism – although the methods are completely different. The case of Hitler can very well stand as an interesting parallel. He was an inquisitive young man – an unsuccessful artist – who became a terrorist. (Ö) Perhaps the worst danger with people wanting to "change the world", is that it almost invariably turns out wrong, either aesthetically or ethically." (4) The artist Tommy Olsson replied that: "(Ö) The connection between terrorism and art has been recorded terrain for a long time, and this newly arisen situation has consequently rendered this topic very relevant. Personally, I have never diverged from the thesis that my work is highly destructive, and that my professional role implies an attitude close to terrorism. I believe, but of course could never be absolutely certain, that many of us act on an impulse closely related to that which drove those men to steer those airplanes straight into that wall." (5)

To make such a connection between art and terrorism may seem farfetched, and indeed the parallel regarding the realization of the artwork, and the terrorist attack respectively, is metaphorical. Tommy Olsson's "act of impulse", has, among many other ways, expressed itself in some quite provoking performances, and performance based video works with a sadomasochistic content. If his art is political, and I believe that to a certain extent all art is political when it takes place in public, it is the politics of ecstasy, and as such far from politically correct in this quasi-puritan Scandinavian society. Bjarne Melgaard also, probably the most internationally recognized young Norwegian artist today, is known, among other things, for his sexually provoking and libido-oriented works. In 2000

his video "All Gym Queens Deserve to Die", was reported to the police by a Swedish child welfare organization because of a scene that was interpreted as encouraging pedophilia. The video, that was included in the exhibition "Organizing Freedom" at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, was removed from the show. The scene in question shows a man sucking the arm of a one-year-old baby who, according to some of the complainants, stared with frightened eyes into the camera. My personal interpretation of the child's facial expression, is that she is a little anxious and surprised, perhaps as much at the camera as about what is happening to her arm. This offense feeling has nothing to do with the child herself, since she cannot possibly know anything about the potential associations of the act. Although arguments against the work combined suggestions of child abuse with pedophilia, the true reason for the violent reaction could be that the scene works as a terrorist attack inflicted on our moral senses, and especially because it crosses the line between art and reality, by using a real baby, in an obviously real-time connection.

Half way through the 40 minutes duration of the work, the 20 seconds long section achieves its provocative value mostly due to an associative combination of image, scene, voice-over and text. The section includes a realistic animation of the masturbation of a dog, and a long, warm kiss between a young man and a girl with Down's Syndrome. Although not directly political, works like Melgaard's touch on a vulnerable and unpleasant truth within our society; the structural hypocrisy of protecting a cultural framework of innocence, while simultaneously being invited to participate in the tabloid soup of scandal, sex, violence, private tragedy, and the worship of the teenage body. Therefore quasi and not puritan; we want it all, both the innocence and the tabloid descriptions, and making it function is akin to squaring the circle. As such, Melgaard's provocation follows a long line of radical, cultural criticism in Norwegian art since the 19th century, in literature and playwriting as well the visual arts.

When the work was exhibited in Norway there was no such discussion, or reports to the police. This may well indicate that Norwegian society is perhaps less puritanical than Swedish society, but if we are honest we know it's because art in Norway gets hardly any attention at all. Accepting the slight exaggeration, art reviews, and other articles about art in the Norwegian mass media, still focus mainly on formal qualities, aspects of entertainment, or Norwegian artists making international success. Most critics, with a few honorable exceptions, seem unaware of the connection between current developments in art, art historical changes, artists' leaning towards content and communication, and (for some) their intention to influence society and the production of meanings. The project "Stunt Club" (6), which took place in The Artist's House in Oslo last winter is a paradoxical case in point. The 33 day project proclaimed itself as an autonomous zone of art, and introduced art and some semi-artistic events where the main criteria was to take risks and avoid boredom. Space and electronic equipment was available for events that changed daily. Artists, "pseudo-artists", political activists, individuals, and groups with their own agenda and network were invited to participate. Themes for participation were "the new political fear, the new

social conditions, the new insecurity of daily life, analysis of global crisis and damage control, and the post-digital daily life.<sup>(7)</sup> The entertainment aspect of body artists hanging from hooks or sewing parts of their bodies together, and the designer and stylist Kjell Nordström, who exhibited his drug-addicted friend in a cage, obtained attention from the media, mainly due to the event's character of mild provocation, and its consequent scandal potential. The political and artistic effects were somewhat lousy, and the few critics who mentioned the lack of quality within the project were drowned in the general, and boring, amazement of what funny people like artists are in fact capable of carrying out. Even conservative art critics didn't hesitate to link the aspects of provocation with a misinterpretation of the avant-garde tradition in art. The proclamation of an autonomous space for extreme, border-breaking art practice, is in fact totally opposed to the avant-garde tradition, which wanted to break institutional borders and combine practices of art and life, indeed on terms of art rather than life. A proclamation of an autonomous space, even for the extreme, echoes more of modernist aesthetics than of avant-garde, since the autonomy of what is defined as art, mainly functions as protectionism of the practice itself. The protectionism implied in the modernist notion of autonomy at least served as a guarantee for artistic quality. In the case of 'Stunt Club' it functioned mainly as a justification to do whatever-the-hell-you-want in the name of art.

The notion however, of an autonomous space for border-breaking art practice, remains interesting because it affects the condition of contemporary art today, both in Norway and internationally. According to the director of Bergen Kunsthall, Bo Krister Wahlström, the new art of the 1990s, at least in Norway, can be characterized as experiments taking place in a bomb shelter. In the 1990's the young Norwegian art scene experienced a giant lift-off and several artist-initiated projects, galleries, magazines and biennales were born. The role of the artist shifted from being mainly art producer to curator, writer, critic and theorist. The focus was mainly on linking to current international art trends rather than making explicitly political art, but this focus also had the effect that concepts such as social criticism, and the later term relational aesthetic slowly had an impact, also in Norway.

The need of an international viewpoint was urgent. Norwegian art had lived long under the regime of art as a phenomena with certain national characteristics, in a tradition stretching back to the 19th century, when the beginning of Norwegian art was related to the establishment of the independent Norwegian state and national consciousness. But despite a shift from formalism to content that emerged already in the early 1970s, the Norwegian contemporary art scene of the 1990s, including the spectators, seemed to share an attitude of 'window-shopping' rather than focusing on the clearly obvious content. This attitude most certainly lightened the rather heavy seriousness and implications of art as a complicated and incomprehensible area. The disinclination of artists to make certain standpoints is understandable in the historical context of the seventies, when even the best Norwegian artists fell into the trap of art's

serving specific political ideologies. Socialism and Marxist-Leninism, combined with nationalistic attitudes, flourished in the struggle against Norway becoming a member of the Common Market; the present European Union. The autonomy of art in the nineties therefore was as urgent as ever, not in the case of the artwork ñ art for artís sakeî was long gone, at least for trend-setting artists ñ but as an insistence on the freedom of the artist, and the institutional legacy of the definition of art, and artís quality.

I think it is at this point one has to understand the negative response to an initiative from The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when Norwegian artists were invited to collaborate on a research project concerning art as a tool for solving conflicts, aimed specially at conflicts relating to war. The initiative caused a minor scandal, where criticism fell on the implication of art being instrumental. Of course artists are not a homogenous group, like all other people, they have different political and artistic views. But the negative response did not only come from artists with a general ñmodernistî attitude, but also from artists who in other respects had no problems with defining art as a tool for reflection, or seeing artís political potential. It appears that the main reason for the reaction was because the initiative did not come from the art institution itself, but from outside art, and as such was felt as a threat to artís institutional autonomy.

During the late nineties it seems a new political awareness appeared among the young generation of artists. This could be noticed not only in several exhibitions but also in manifest-like texts, where a radical, mainly socialist political attitude towards society was combined with a strong criticism of Norwegian art politics, directed outwards to political and financial institutions, and inwards to artist organizations. UKS, (Young Artists Association), has for several years criticized its elder artist organization NBK, (Norwegian Visual Artists), for its combination policy of viewing art as a carrier of national characteristics with an old fashioned segregation of art into different mediums, (for instance, different departments for painting and graphics) and a support of art with no political interest when it is viewed in relation to the problems of Norwegian society. An interesting case in point is the Curatorís Statement for the participation of UKS in the Melbourne Biennale, written by artist and curator Anders Eiebakke, who during recent years has been one of the most active and inspiring spokesmen for a political turn in art. Under the headline, ñitís typically Norwegian to be goodî (8), a quote of Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director of WHO and previous Norwegian prime minister, he lines up his objections against Norwegian society. A society that according to him, has neither managed to produce one curator or theorist of any international significance, or is able to take care of the most obvious social rights of its inhabitants. His objections are quite unpleasant for a society which likes to brag about its welfare and long, social-democratic traditions: More than 10 years of difference in life expectancy between certain areas in Oslo (the capital of Norway) according to their income and social status. Norway, that has an image as a moral guardian of the world, has for several years led a secret war against ethnic minorities, including lobotomies and sterilization. Oslo has the highest percentage of drug related death incidents per habitant in

Western Europe, but of moralistic grounds Norwegian politicians refuse to try treatments that have been effective in other European countries. The waiting lists for hospital treatment are the longest of all Western countries. The extreme right wing party, with its racist and generally reactionary politics, has an electoral support of 15-20%, and we are used to hearing about harassment against asylum seekers by the police and Norwegian inhabitants. There is an unwritten rule that any Norwegian, born of foreign parents, will be introduced in the news as a 'Norwegian citizen of foreign origin' the very minute he/she is suspect of a crime. The list could go on, but I rather refer to Eiebakke's own text, and ask the reader to take special notice of how his social criticism is constantly linked to the official's treatment of art in this country. Another example is UKS-Forum's issue 1 / 2 2001 (9), which under the headline 'Something rotten in the state of Norway' invited writers from different academic backgrounds to present texts about Norway. The intention, according to the introduction of artist Terje Nicolaisen, was to 'diagnose one of the world's richest countries, a country that ñ until recently ñ presented its artists abroad with that evocative title No Art.' (10) The direct impulse to the topic is mentioned in the very beginning of the article, a question asked by the German director and curator, Kasper König: 'What actually is the problem with Norway ñ a very wealthy country with public poverty and an insignificant concentration upon culture?' (11) Again ñ the link between the cultural and the public poverty in combination with private wealth seems important and outspoken, although not always analyzed and scientifically proven. The articles are herein recommended.

When I was asked to write this essay on art and politics related to the Norwegian art scene, it was stressed that emphasis should be mainly on artists, and their projects and ideas, than on the institutions, where (political) decisions on which art should be shown are made. I must apologize for not complying to the original intention expected of me, but when I take into consideration how little we know about each other, and my own experience of how idyllic an impression foreigners more often than not have about Norway ñ if they indeed have an impression at all ñ I have found it necessary to paint a backdrop for the few presentations that will finally conclude this long tirade. **The examples are chosen due to their quality and their diversity in the use of artistic language, the level of communication with the audience and the relation to society, both historical and present.**

"Schpaa - You haven't got a chance, take one!" is the name of a group exhibition curated by Anders Eiebakke. The title is taken from two Norwegian movies, 'Schpaa' (directed by Erik Poppe) from 1998, which deals with the brutal reality of young immigrants in Oslo, and 'Du har ikke en tjans ñ ta'ni' (You haven't got a chance, take one!) from 1984 (directed by Jarl Emsell Larsen, Ulf Breistrand and Helge Aarestad), which present a far more optimistic picture of an environment of residents in the same city 20 years earlier. As the curator says in his introduction to the exhibition, 'It seems as though there is an ocean of time between these two films'. An ocean of time, which includes a change of language, that renders a word such as 'schpaa' possible, (a word that means something like 'cool' or 'wicked'). It also

represents the development of a new language created from a blend of many different languages, mainly from youngsters in Oslo, which over a number of years has become quite a multi-cultural city. The exhibition presented approx. 20 artists and artist groups, some of them on the borderline of the traditional art world, like the *Hot Rod tea-room*, both an exhibition space and a magazine run by artist Jan Walaker, which presents visual art, design and fashion and tries to show, in his own words, *the crest of the wave* in contemporary culture. Another borderline example was the presentation of two graffiti-painters Goal and Coderock, they exhibited a huge graffiti-painting with elements from urban culture, hip hop and science fiction, and stickers related to the authorities of Oslo's war against graffiti, a war that has left every legal application of graffiti-art impossible. In the true sense of the word, popular artistic expression in the city. The exhibition presented mostly artists from an ethnic Norwegian background, a paradox in a context that underlines the global and multi-cultural influences of the new art condition. It is possible to read the contemporary artist's self-criticism into the curator's remark on this situation, when he says that up to now no social mobility has been created for minorities in Norwegian society. The present priority given to recruiting professional artists from minority backgrounds is extremely low. In the follow I have chosen to present two of the works more thoroughly.

Victor Lind's work "CONTEMPORARY MEMORY who is afraid", a video and sound installation in four synchronized parts, was a remarkable statement which includes clues to the present condition of Norwegian society, as well as it created a picture on a hidden part of Norwegian war history. The video installation consisted of four huge projections with changing texts, pictures and the colors red, blue and yellow, an allusion, also in the title, to the American painter Barnett Newman's series "Who is afraid of red, blue and yellow" from 1966-67. Barnett Newman saw painting as a way of spiritual salvation necessary in a world left in chaos after the second world war, and together with the use of a poem of Paul Celan, whom according to Adorno was the poet that showed that it still was possible to make poetry, i.e. art, after the traumas of the war, it suggests artist's capability of restoring, constructing and reconstructing historical memory, individually and collectively. Of the four videos, the one in ordinary colors presents the official history of how 532 Norwegian Jews, with the help of Norwegian police, were sent to Auschwitz early one morning in 1942. From this number, only 11 survived. An important remark added to the story is that while only 0,7 % Jews were exterminated in our neighboring country Denmark, the level in Norway was 44,8 %. The highly traumatic story that develops through the four synchronized sections, assisted by court documents and by research reports from historians, is about a society that found the responsible Norwegian policeman not guilty for his actions, and left him free to pursue his leading role in the police force until he retired in 1965, i.e. less than 40 years ago, and as such still part of our contemporary history. In fact, hundreds, even thousands of Norwegians can be seen as sharing the responsibility of what happened to the Jewish population; each of them only obeying orders and neglecting to warn the victims, a few even in connection with their roles as double agents for the Norwegian

resistance movement. As such the topic of the work is individual responsibility, or more precisely, what happens when individual responsibility gets pulverized. The aesthetic composition of the installation overwhelmingly surrounding the viewer, the hypnotic atmosphere of the sounds and changing colors, talk as much to our subconscious and imagination as to the intellect. By combining facts, speculations, poetry, colors and sound, the aesthetics works together with the ethics, and create a possibility to question our own sense of personal responsibility as we sort out what all this is about.

Previous to the installation, Lind made a memorial event in Oslo (1998); he ordered 100 taxicabs to the same address where the same number of taxicabs were used in 1942 to transport the Jews. The work had the title "CONTEMPORARY MEMORY I'll bring you home", and could most precisely be defined as a live installation with certain ritualistic overtones; the place and time, even the weekday, was the same as the situation of reference 56 years earlier. The late night / early morning passer-bys as well as the invited audience was met with flashing yellow traffic lights and a 700 meters long line of taxis slowly driving into the street. A historical document of the incident in 1942 was handed out. The change in social belongings of the taxi drivers, as now many of them are of a not European background, added to the work's potential of reflection.

Victor Lind's work constitutes one of several peaks in a consistent production of politically engaged artworks that go back to 1970, and establish the artist as a member of the 'young' contemporary art scene, despite his sixty years of age. This also contradicts the notion of young and contemporary as anything, which has anything, to do with age. More important, the work creates a link between our recent history and our current situation, to the importance of memory, in a situation where right wing ideology and racism is rising in Norway as well as in all Western Europe. The paradox of the term contemporary, which refers to here and now, and memory, which refers to the past, reveals the unavoidable truth that history is always a construction on hindsight, at both a personal and collective level. The viewer herself is invited to make her own opinions from the presented fragments filtering through the sensibility of the artist. The impression is not that of a documentary, but of a more or less hidden connection we have to sort out ourselves, although it is admittedly difficult not to sympathize with the artist's experience.

More obviously contemporary in its references, but not straightforward political work, is Sverre Koren Bjertn's oil painting 'Line, Kathrine, Maria S, Linda, Maria, Elene, Signe, Stella'. This painting is monumental both in scale (375 x 200 cm) and the full figure, frontal presentation of the girls. It is executed in a photo realistic style, developed from his studies at the distinctively Norwegian figurative department of the Art Academy in Oslo. However, unlike some of his colleagues, Bjertn avoids the sticky romanticism, the loaded symbolism, and the anachronistic associations displayed specially by the apostles of the famous Norwegian painter, Odd Nerdrum. The girls' individual poses and way of dressing, their reserved but simultaneous



attitudes of confrontation as they appear lined up against a neutral background, their awareness of being focused on and the impression of a diversity of thoughts and feelings behind their calm faces, suggests both their personal search for identity and the artist's deeply felt respect for his models, not only as representatives of a generation, but as whole human beings.

The later "Rune Red, Tor Olav, Kenta, Dennis, Nader, Rune, Henrik, Kirupa, Daniel and Shahab" is the male counterpart of the painting of the girls. The painting displays ten boys in the same frontal position as the girls, only here they are represented in groups of three and four, while the girls are depicted two and two – a rendering that seems logical in relation to how boys and girls respectively relate within group and best friend-relationships. The political content of these works, although not outspoken and to a large degree left to the viewer's own reflection, becomes clearer when both works are seen together, and then again in relation to the paintings in Bjertn's debut exhibition in Oslo 2000. Some of the same young girls were depicted in much more intimate situations, clothed, half-clothed and naked. As they play with sexual roles, within the scope of cultural images provided by society, we feel uneasy, as though voyeurs of situations originally not intended for our observation. We react with a different sense of guilt to half-dressed girls than to boys stripped to the waist, and the possibility that it is we, ourselves, and our culturally constructed interpretations, who create the uncomfortable associations, strikes us as we realize that the girls and boys look back at us with the same, withdrawn eyes. The play is among themselves, not directed towards adult society, and definitely not within it.

One condition in contemporary, political art is the seeking outside of the institutional limits, to communicate with that section of the public not normally seen at art exhibitions. By the Way Gallery of Contemporary Art (12) is situated on the corner of one of the busiest traffic junctions in central Bergen, the second largest city in Norway. The exhibitions are displayed from five large windows out towards the street, and as such the gallery is probably one of the most visited in the city. Although there have been examples of work that more or less use the space as just another wall to hang the art, the obvious possibilities created by this situation have inspired a lot of artists to focus on aspects of dialogue. One outstanding example, which managed to use both the actual spot and the situation within Bergen, related to structures in national and local legislation. In Andrea Lange's "Adhan Corner" (2001) the five windows were covered with wooden plates. Five times a day, according to the official Muslim prayer times, the gallery was made into a temporary mosque by transmitting the Muslim summons to prayer from two loud speakers installed on the walls. At the same time people were invited to hang posters or to tag on the plates. Andrea Lange had two starting points for this work; the new affirmation of the county governor of Oslo that sanction from the municipality is not necessary for summoning to prayer through loudspeakers, and the City of Bergen's prohibition of hanging up posters in the city. The affirmation from the county governor resulted from an

evaluation of the Criminal Code, the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights, and the European Convention of Human Rights, and initiated from a request from the previously mentioned Norwegian right wing party. Such an attempt, to stop any religious group from expressing their traditional beliefs in their own way, obviously has its elements of racism, and fear of cultural differences. The prohibition of hanging up posters also bears a social imbalance; there is no problem for those with enough income, i.e. business companies with their promotional posters, to buy themselves freedom of speech, by renting space for their publicity campaigns. Thus different cultural practices were invited to mingle in this questioning of democratic inconsistency. The exhibition achieved much attention since some of the neighbors protested against the 'sound pollution' of the prayers, and also representatives from some Muslim groups protested against the use of their traditional summons to prayer (in this case recorded from Mekka) from outside of a Muslim context; in their opinion such a use was blasphemy. The questioning thus expanded to include the level of tolerance within religious groups and individuals, and accordingly, the freedom of art, since in this context the prayer was part of an artwork, and as such should be protected by the law of intellectual property. Seen as such, and in relation to audience response, the work consisted of several layers, which together created a complicated pattern of the possibilities of freedom of speech, including the freedom of the artist, within a complex society. As such, Andrea Langes work can well conclude this essay, suggesting once again the close connection between political art and the struggle for artistic freedom, as a vital influence in the Norwegian contemporary art scene. (13)