

The Three Ecologies

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Self-sufficiency, solidarity and self-respect. After many years working as artists, producers, curators and performers, Søsja Jørgensen and Geir Tore Holm found new inspiration on visiting the project *The Land Foundation* in Thailand. This project was, however, concerned not so much with art as with practice and respect, with the ability to have an *effect*, with being practical and direct, concrete and functional, in a social context and in life in general. *Sørfinnset skole / the nord land* is a potentially open-ended project based on ecology, in other words, on mutual respect and adaptation to the many aspects, great and small, of humankind, nature and society.

The project

Sørfinnset skole / the nord land was started as part of Art in Nordland's *Artistic Interruptions*, an initiative curated by Per Gunnar Tverbakk in the period 2003-2005. The aim of *Artistic Interruptions* was to investigate site-specificity in terms of relations and mechanisms that are different in nature from the physical manifestations of *Artscape Nordland*, among other things, the social dimension that constitutes part of a specific geographical locality. Most of the projects that made up *Artistic Interruptions* are now concluded, but *Sørfinnset skole / the nord land* lives on and still has links to Nordland County Council. The *Sørfinnset* project revolves around cultural cooperation – with the community of *Sørfinnset*, with Thailand, and with a range of other artistic and cultural bodies in Norway and abroad. The project really got going in 2004, when Jørgensen and Holm took over *Sørfinnset's* disused school, with the old school building serving as a cultural centre and a hostel, and the two artists sharing responsibility for the running of the set up with the *Sørfinnset* residents' association. Arrangements at the school include a Saturday café, debates, parties, workshops, and much more, and on a nearby patch of ground, beside the Kjellingvatn lake, the artists have worked with volunteers and a Sami expert to set up a fully functional Sami turf hut, which passers-by are free to use. Inside the turf hut one finds a coffee pot, a reindeer hide on the floor, and firewood and matches for a fire, while on the wall hangs a cured leg of mutton and some dried fish. The turf hut is a tribute to Sami culture and the North Norwegian landscape, but it is as much as anything a refuge, a gesture that says welcome on behalf of people and nature.

Also to be found on the open space beside Kjellingvatn is a Thai

house, now almost fully built, designed by the artists Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rikrit Tiravanija, the same two artists behind *The Land Foundation*, which was the inspiration for the Sørfinnset project. Here as well, functionality and sustainability are important factors. The house is being built to North Norwegian standards and must be capable of weathering a snowstorm or two, and as such it too represents a meeting between cultures. It will constitute a concrete social and physical compromise between Norway and Thailand, and not just an image or symbol of this collaboration. The entire Sørfinnset project is thus process oriented, but even so, it is at all points about actual activity and genuine results. People in the local community should feel that they are heard and included; they should feel that the artists are giving them something. For their part, the artists themselves want to feel that they are giving something meaningful while also developing both as artists and people. Holm and Jørgensen wish to offer “cultural services”; they want to use their skills in the cultural sector to nurture valuable aspects of the local culture, which should thereby become more valuable still for those who live here, as well as for the artists themselves, for the region, and for the world; they are putting local pride in a global perspective. One of the artists’ objectives in this project is to render themselves superfluous. They want others to feel they have ownership, hoping that those others will take initiatives without them. If they, the artists, are not needed, then they will feel they have succeeded.

Compromises

In 2005, a delegation of some fifteen people from *The Land Foundation* in Thailand came to Sørfinnset in Norway. The delegation consisted of Lertchaiprasert and Tiravanija, together with a clutch of young artists and students who were participating in an alternative educational project at *The Land*, called *The One Year Project*. The aim of this educational project was to examine alternative forms of community through art and culture, with fifteen young Thais living and working together for a whole year. These were the people who formed the delegation that came to Sørfinnset for a month in the Summer of 2005; they were accommodated at the school, while they worked on the Thai house and participated in a range of other cultural exchange activities. They served spicy Thai curries to the old ladies at Gildeskål, created performances, took part in seminars, wrote poetry and fell in love with the North Norwegian landscape.

The collaboration between the local community and Thailand, and the on-going dialogue, meant that pragmatism and compromise became crucial skills. If the artists were to reject suggestions from other participants, they would also reject those other people’s

ownership of the project, which would thereby fail as a form of community and collaboration. So although, for example, the artists wanted to uphold non-commercial values, they had to accept that some of the young Thai artists sold home-made trinkets at the St. Olaf's Day market in Gildeskål, and that the local council wanted to build facilities and a car park at Kjellingvatn. On the other hand, they can attempt to influence the degree or the consequences of other people's decisions on the basis of ecological and non-profit principles; at the market, Thai food was served free of charge, and at Kjellingvatn, it will hopefully be possible to limit the new facilities to toilets without having to have a café and a car park.

Criticism

There is no interest in criticising such projects simply because that is what is expected in the western art discourse. Criticism is of value only when as it has something heartfelt to say, and insofar as it exposes significant wrongs and injustices. One criticism that would fit this description is the claim that the local population does not know what part it plays in this project, and that the art institution is creating a false "cosiness" that masks differences and conflict. To my mind, however, this would amount to adopting a culturally chauvinistic attitude, whereby one does not ascribe strength and significance to cultures other than one's own. It would be equivalent to denying the local population an integrity that it very evidently possesses. It is far from irrelevant whom one chooses to ascribe power to in so-called power-critical issues of this kind. By saying that the USA is the world's only (super)power, one goes a long way towards confirming one's own assumption, and by disempowering a local community one goes a long way towards confirming personal prejudices. That said, neither is it the case that the indigenous community of Sørfinnset is anonymous or that they are being involved in a dialogical project against their wills. Kenneth Norum, a local politician, has married the Thai artist Yayar (they met through the project); his mother, who is steeped in the region's culture, works to preserve and develop local handcraft traditions, and uses political means where she feels they are appropriate. Jorunn Jørgensen can bake *lefser* like none other, while her son, Ronald, works in fish farming and can spin a yarn or two about the legend of Frank Zappa. The old Pite-Sami Knut Sundsfjord owns a farm dating back to the 18th century and is named after the place he was born. He is a fountainhead of local history and alternative Sami medicine. Ole Martin, who has moved back to his childhood home at Sørfinnset after many years in Bodø, is a structural engineer and can adapt the Thai house to the climatic conditions of North Norway. To mention just a few.

It is also a very curious misunderstanding that sees social projects

as matters of mere cosiness; does anyone really believe that interpersonal relations are nothing more than that? Living in society always implies conflict and negotiation; it invariably involves adaptation and pain, although, fortunately, rarely blood and violence – at least, not in modern day Norway. But blood and violence are a real danger, and this is why projects of this kind, based on mutual accommodation and non-violent cooperation, constitute important research into human ways of life. The Sørfinnset project – assuming one takes the trouble to spend some time there and to help with the washing up for a couple of days – will offer as many causes for irritation and anxiety as any other social situation. People get upset with one another, they fall in love, they feel stupid and small, are made aware of life, get drunk, disappoint one another, but almost every morning they get up and offer their apologies – or continue to sulk because they believe they were in the right. There is no reason to wish for unpleasantness and provocation in contemporary art for the sake of unpleasantness and provocation as such; these only become important where there is a danger of their being suppressed, and in my view this is not the case here.

On the other hand, there is a detectable critique of western individualism in this project. Those who participate are expected to make an effort on behalf of the community – everyone has to do their bit, and one rarely has time to ask whether one feels exploited or overlooked, since one is all too busy working, observing, discussing, learning etc. As in many of the experimental and conceptual works of the 1960s and 70s, something is expected of the participants; meaning is not served on a plate or neatly contained in the work, just waiting to be discovered. Each individual has to create meaning for him or herself, in this case in conjunction with other individuals. The significance for the individual also lies to a large extent in *practical* involvement or *engagement* in the project. Here one does not wander around inside a white cube, where each viewer has a personal space for “distanced reflection”; instead one is engulfed in situations involving other people, as in other aspects of life. Reflections mix with enthusiasm, hunger, concentration, the need to go for a pee, and fatigue.

Ecology

One can use the term ecology to conceptualise projects of this kind. In this context, ecology implies more than nature’s most fundamental cycles, or environmental consciousness. Ecology is a holistic concept concerned with mutual respect and adaptation, with how all aspects of an extensive and complex whole are interrelated. Small displacements on the micro level can quickly have consequences on the macro level, and vice versa. Ecology is

therefore about acknowledgement of the full range of factors, both what is big and important, and what is small and insignificant, what is ethical and well meant, and what is dirty and egoistic. The French theorist Félix Guattari describes three ecological domains: the mental, the social and the environmental.^[1] This means that personal and psychological matters also play a role in ecology, not just recycling and forestry. Ecology is thus a matter of a finely tuned balance between numerous nuances and components; it is about the *sustainability of relationships as such*.

Mental and spiritual concerns also have a place in the Sørfinnset project. Buddhist meditation gives people strength to endure adversity, while Sami spirits have approved the site for the turf hut. In other words, although the project can be viewed as a critique of individualism, there is no repression of the individual and his or her need for personal space. It is this connectedness and dependant sustainability that stand out as so important in these early years of our new century, when communication has become hyper-intensive and the plundering of natural resources more serious than ever before. We cannot live off air and love alone, and it is precisely for this reason that the Sørfinnset project pays serious attention not only to the real and the physical, but also to matters of the mind and to social mechanisms. In the Sørfinnset project, site-specificity, which was explored physically in Artscape Nordland and socially in Artistic Interruptions, is also accorded a mental dimension and combined with a more comprehensive understanding of both ecology and art.

^[1] Guattari, Félix, *Les trois écologies*, Galilée 1989.