

INHABITED 6 SPACES

Below: Spacecampaign 2001. Photo: Lars Krabbe. Opposite page: Jörgen Svensson, *Public Safety* (American Police Officer in front of the burning art space made by the artist Alfredo Jaar), 2000. Photo: Jörgen Svensson

Space campaigns and living work

Lars Bang Larsen's discussion of visual art extends beyond new sites and contexts to ask questions of how art meets the ideological spaces of politics and mass media – and how behaviour has become aesthetic.

JENNY HOLZER, WHO RE-SHAPED PUBLIC ART with a propagandist touch, once stated that "We live in an over-informed but action-weak society". Tibor Kalman, executive of the design company M&Co, who curated Holzer's truism billboard series for the Times Square redevelopment in 1992, held much the same view: "We need to be shocked out of our complacency, out of our suburban lawns and swimming pools, in order to understand what's going on."¹ Kalman's call-to-arms took place in a TV interview on the occasion of the scandalised reception of Benetton's *Colors* magazine, which he edited. If his political vision wasn't entirely in keeping with this corporate patronage, at least it was in tune with Benetton's controversial panache. Kalman was a declared socialist who churned out McLuhanesque slogans such as 'Consumer culture is an oxymoron', and made record covers for Talking Heads. He was also involved in contradictory activities such as gentrifying Manhattan's Lower East Side, organising art exhibitions and fundraising for

charity. Now, some ten years later, art increasingly finds itself on the same terrain where the commercial 'arts' of advertising and graphic design have always operated as a matter of course. Whether or not this is inherently good or bad, the question is, how is art going to function in order to avoid becoming a part of the entertainment and service industries as we know them?

In other words, the notion of art that takes place beyond the white cube is today more than open air group exhibitions and projects in non-institutional spaces: in a radical sense its concerns are at a more fundamental level than that of place, the statement of the artwork and its audience. In the knowledge economy art is on the brink of developing into something we might call vision industries, where our behaviour in civilisation – work, consumption, communication – is exchanged with the function of art. The artists Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen, who run the project space Copenhagen Free University, don't mince their

words: "When we turn our attention to the mode of aesthetic production we have to recognise that the artist is becoming the role-model worker of the knowledge economy. The artist traditionally invests 'the soul' in the work, which is exactly the qualification modern management is looking for when looking for a new employee. The entrepreneurship, self-employed independence, and the sacred individuality of artists are the dream qualifications of the knowledge worker of tomorrow: an unorganized, highly skilled individual with no solidarity, selling his/her living labour as a day-labourer. The heroic avant-garde artist of yesterday will become the scab of tomorrow."² In other words, productive behaviour – understood as everyday, individual functions – has become a form of aesthetic activity, the dynamics of which are basically no different than artistic work.

We sometimes tend to view process-oriented or site-specific art practices with the idea that it provides an inherent sense of engagement, even if such





Above: Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, *Cruising Pavilion/Powerless Structures*, Fig 55 1998, Møselisborg Forest. Courtesy: Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen. Photo: the artists/Bent Ryberg, Planet Foto. Below: Andrea Lange, *Adhan Corner*, 2001/2002.

a notion is tenable only as a critical response to the media and themes bestowed on us by art history. The neo-liberal displacement of the function of the artwork makes apparent that no such privileges in terms of media can be held any longer.³ For example, in the art/advertising/politics greyzone he operated, Kalman used strategies and styles that formally speaking were aligned with some of those used by contemporary visual artists. So what happens to art when it leaves the architectural and ideological protectorate of the white cube and is placed parallel to other kinds of productivity? What tools do we have at our disposal when Marx's and the Italian Autonomists' notion of 'living work' has become almost indistinguishable from the exchange of capital and communication?⁴ How do art and artists work in the unstable and heavily trafficked spaces offered them by contemporary civilisation, where its significance is as fleeting as it is vague and ambivalent? In the following, I will present some recent Scandinavian art projects, which can be said to articulate this type of complex interaction with the world.

The two artists groups N55 and Superflex, that are perhaps the best known Danish exponents for collectivist, post-media work, participated in 2001 in a project called *Visionsindustri*.⁵ The project matched the artists with employees of two factories with a view to creating mutual inspiration between the visual artists and the industrial workers. At a larger electronics business, Superflex – a group whose artistic status can be difficult to distinguish from corporate avant-garde – implemented a local version of their interactive internet-TV software, Superchannel. In keeping with their ideology of emphasising local rather than global uses of digital technology, the software was put to use as the factory's own information highway for the exchange of dialogue between workers and management. The four members of N55 engaged in more hands-on, free-form activities with the employees of a smaller bicycle components factory, such as planning a



garden, developing a bicycle together, cooking, etc. These activities were gestures towards employee empowerment, and N55's critique of the concentrations of power was painfully exemplified when the business was closed due to a Dutch competitor buying the company and half of the employees being fired.

Visionsindustri's curatorial concept was to inject creativity into the workplace by introducing artistic concepts of work, and to create a transfer of knowledge between art and industry – something that unfortunately dovetailed with the then government's efforts to make artistic activity 'economically viable'. *Visionsindustri* proved how difficult it is for rationalising curatorial concepts of this type, whatever the effort of the artists may be. Where volatile and fragile artistic economies and resolutely pragmatic corporate economies meet, the former will usually become locked in a rather traditional role as the purveyor of creative surplus.

Other Danish cultural agents have drawn the same conclusion as Holzer when she requested more action, and have prioritised activist strategies in an increasingly right-wing – some use the term post-fascist – cultural climate. Spacecampaign, not an art group as such, but a characteristic example of the current cross-pollination of interests between political and artistic activism, use what the hippies called media-freaking to direct attention to xenophobic discourses in government policies and public space. Spacecampaign's height of fame was on election night in 2001, when an Eritrean woman (surrounded by edgy police and veiled in what looked like a burka but in fact was a yellow IKEA table cloth) was transmitted on several TV channels singing the Danish national anthem for Pia Kjærsgaard, the flummoxed leader of the right-wing populists, entering the parliament to celebrate yet another great election result.

Other identity-based work use codes of high art to carve out a voice in the public mainstream. Michael

Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's *Cruising Pavilion* (1998) confronted the local authorities' recent ban on outdoor sexual activity in a pastoral location near Aarhus in Denmark. Elmgreen and Dragset's pavilion was an innocent looking, labyrinthine rendition of the white cube that by day would welcome families on picnic and at night would transform itself into a place for lovers; an adventurous architecture with glory holes awaiting bodily traffic. In this case, campaigning for space mobilises several independent functions (artwork, picnic site, darkroom) that overlap and thereby create a scenario for the co-existence of different groups of users.

The philosophers Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's concept of 'radical democracy' may be to help us to navigate further the greyzones of contemporary civilisation. They demand an inventive attitude to what is particular, plural, heterogeneous: "Radical democracy demands the formation of new subject positions which will allow for the common articulation of, for example, anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-capitalism. These struggles don't spontaneously overlap each other. In order to establish democratic equivalences, a new common sense is necessary; a common sense which is capable of transforming the identities of different groups, so that the demands of each group could be articulated together with others' demands according to the principle of democratic equivalence. Because it is not just about establishing an alliance between given interests, but about actually modifying the very identity of these forces."⁶

Staying with the earlier example, Benetton's advertising campaigns from the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrate how struggles don't spontaneously overlap: 'United Colours' challenged stereotypes with its multiracial aesthetics, while being criticised for being a new form of economic and cultural imperialism. In this sense, the marketplace has no problem with countering fundamentalist hate (or with avoiding to confront fundamentalist prejudice should that be necessary), but mostly lacks the will to articulate any new democratic equivalences because it needs to colonise the spaces in between different struggles in order to accumulate value, whereby it controls the transformative dynamism of the social body.

Two projects by Danish Katya Sander and Norwegian Andrea Lange respectively revolve around discursive formations of difference and both embody forms of counter-integration and modifications of the host body. Lange's *Adhan Corner* (2001/2002) was a public installation of a loudspeaker that played Muslim prayer calls five times a day at the actual times when Muslims prayed at the site of its installation. The calls had been selected by the artist from purely stylistic criteria as the most beautiful ones. When *Adhan Corner* was installed at Copenhagen's most fashionable square, Kongens Nytorv, for a five-week period last autumn, the sound sculpture erected an imaginary mosque on the site that resonated in the absence of official mosques in Denmark, despite the fact that Islam is the country's biggest minority religion.⁷ In this way Lange's piece became a challenge to a democratic deadlock, as well as to Muslims who would see her piece as an irreverent artistic interference with religious matters. Katya Sander's *Kahve & Kulüp* (1999) also took place on a horizon of tolerance that spanned the private and the public. In the former working-class boroughs of Copenhagen one often comes across spaces that in everyday slang are denoted 'as Turkish coffee-clubs' or 'gambling dens'. Unlike other public or commercial spaces they don't have a sign. Sander undertook to identify the function and denotation of the spaces, and learned that the spaces were mostly used by people to meet, discuss the (Turkish) newspapers and football results, have

a cup of tea and maybe just gossip; their facilities varying depending on the age and composition of the audience. Users call the space a 'Kahve' or a 'Kulüp'. 'Kahve' means 'café' and 'kulüp' means 'club' in Turkish; but they all agreed that neither of the Danish uses of these words would apply to the function. Sander met with the Danish Language Council, an institution that registers the Danish language's use, history and transformations, and asked them to admit Kahve and Kulüp into the Danish language. In principle Kahve and Kulüp meet their requirements, since the words have no existing translation. So with a widespread use and visibility in the media and/or public spaces, the words will appear in Danish dictionaries.

Perhaps the Holzer dichotomy between information (too much) and action (too little) isn't just a question of a balance to be redressed. Action informs information: the right kind spread in the right place and at the right time; just like information inhabits action: the desire to dissent by linking things up in a new and disruptive way. The Swedish artist Jörgen Svensson decided to take action on the level of the spectacle, and for a public art project called *Public Safety* (2000) in a small Swedish community, he invited two American police officers from Phoenix to hang around as living sculptures. Maybe this points to a European knee-jerk reaction: if you want to feel safe, bring in the Yanks! Being at the same time actors (by being out of their jurisdiction), movie icons (real American cops as seen on TV), and ordinary police officers, the intention was to make the American officers real to the residents in their own environment. "It all turned out the way I had imagined, only worse," Svensson says. "The American cops were looked upon as movie stars. They were asked to sign autographs, participate in radio and TV shows, and the newspapers carried long articles discussing their activities on an almost daily basis. Schools called me and asked me to bring the cops over, since they couldn't get anything productive done: the students just talked about the American cops. What took place was both fascinating and scary."⁸ In the information galaxy, there is nothing like misinformation.

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Katya Sander, *Kulüp 52* 1999. Photo: Katya Sander

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