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Press Releases

Radical Art on Demand

Trude Schjelderup Iversen

There is undoubtedly something strange about a society in which the political establishment *requests* “dangerous” art: art that criticizes power, the policy makers, the establishment itself.

When, in 2008, the Norwegian minister of culture not only called for dangerous art, but even demanded as much, it seemed as if “dangerous” was now Newspeak for “left wing” or “socially responsible.” When the minister declared that this was the type of art he would support, we could only hope and trust that the funding programs themselves were solid enough to withstand this kind of interference.

The art institution is like a lobster trap. It’s hard to get into, but impossible to get out of, according to the Norwegian art historian Gunnar Danbolt; he says further that in Nordic societies, marked by repressive tolerance, it is hardly possible to create any such thing as dangerous art.[1]

What did the Norwegian minister want art to be and artists to do, if they were to be supported by public funding? What could “dangerous,” “radical,” or “political” art be when coveted by the authorities?

At first glance, Herbert Marcuse’s concept of repressive tolerance seems applicable here, but it’s not quite this logic that occurs in the cultural policies of Nordic countries, and not solely a grant program in which cash flows directly from the State to the artists. The artists themselves organize substantial funding through their unions. Marcuse’s concept would need to take into account the complexity of the various support programs and grant arrangements on the one hand, and the legal arrangements on the other. These form the basis of Norwegian arts funding.

Art Without Market

According to sociologist Dag Solhjell, Norwegian culture policies for artists have at least eight main purposes: education, stimulus for new artistic production through grants and project funding, honorary awards, assistance to elderly and poor artists, improved welfare and living conditions, increased public use of artworks and reasonable compensation for their display, strengthening of artists’ trade unions, and support for artist-controlled dissemination.[2]

The support and funding structure rest on two different principles—the legal and the political. The legal basis is made up of intellectual property and copyright law. The political basis is the political will to support the arts beyond those funded in the legal basis and the art market. The history of these funding structures, interestingly enough, happens to be the history of the struggles of artist organizations in Norway.

In 1974, the Church and Education Department (KUD) worked on a comprehensive art and culture report, and asked artist organizations for input. The opening of the annual Autumn Exhibition hinted as to what would come, as artists collectively raised the question: “Artists do not get a cent in compensation when their work is displayed and used in society. Is this reasonable?” That same year, Artist Action was formed as an interdisciplinary coalition of creative artists. More than twenty organizations of artists, craftspeople, writers, composers, and filmmakers came together. Their purpose was to improve artists’ social and economic situation; this was seen as the very foundation for free, autonomous art.

First, the group decided to create a new national organization. Second, it presented three demands, in the now famous Three Point Program:

1. *Compensation* for any public display / use of artwork.
2. *Increased* (public) use of art.
3. A *guaranteed minimum income* for all working artists when points 1 and 2 do not provide reasonable income.

Artist Action also appointed a negotiating committee to counter KUD’s art and culture report. Over the next four years, Artist Action coordinated several campaigns. It arranged open meetings, demonstrations, and boycotts of the new trade union for artists, the Norwegian Visual Artists Association (NBFO), which was formed in November 1974. Ultimately, the KUD decided to approve the Three Point Program.

The content of this program was not new. Rather, the program’s requirements were applied more broadly, raised on behalf of a community of interdisciplinary artists, and assembled as a coherent program in which the different requirements supported each other.

Compensation would ensure the artist an income from public use of art, whether in libraries, TV programs, schools, or the National Gallery; *increased use* of art would ensure an economic basis, thanks to fees; and the *minimum income* would apply in accordance with the minimum income paid to farmers and fishermen. The Three Point Program was listed in order of priority, and order meant to stress that this was not about “alms,” but first and foremost about equitable compensation for *work*, in accordance with the principles of the social democratic welfare state at play in the rest of society. It therefore came as a disappointment when the authorities changed the order of the Three Point Program to prioritize a guaranteed income, arguing that it was the one most effective way to reach as many individual artists as possible.

Another two years passed before Public Art Norway was founded in 1976. This government agency aimed to ensure commissions for artists, and also to bring “art to the people,” based on the idea that everyone should have the right to experience art in their daily environment. The office was to enforce a law requiring that 0.5 to 1.5 percent of the total cost every new State building be invested in art. Public Art Norway quickly became the most comprehensive authority for artists in the country. Every year, 50 to 60 new public buildings were constructed; hospitals, prisons, cultural centers, university buildings, train

stations, health centers, military barracks, etc., and Public Art Norway's annual budget of NOK 50 to 60 million (ca. 1 million USD) was earmarked solely for commissions and direct purchases.

The founding of Public Art Norway as a government agency under the Ministry of Culture was a direct result of Artist Action's 1974 initiatives. Together with the guaranteed income and the compensation for public display and use of artwork, Public Art Norway's annual production still, to this day, secures social welfare among artists. But the hands-on public policies have also severely diminished private interest in the cultural field. As a relatively young nation without philanthropic traditions, Norway provides artists with very few choices other than State funding.

By requesting "dangerous" art in 2008, the minister of culture not only demonstrated a lack of sophistication but also clarified once again that this State-funded paradise is always ready to ensnare the artist with contradictory requests that are impossible to fulfill. The historical struggle for today's support for artists represents an important *possibility* for art to challenge the establishment. Turning this possibility into a policy requirement violates an arm's-length principle, the principle that ensures the sufficient artistic autonomy that allows art to be what it chooses to be.

Trude Schjelderup Iversen (b. 1974) is a curator and theorist and a doctoral candidate in aesthetics at the University of Oslo, currently writing a dissertation entitled *The Aesthetic Argument*. Schjelderup Iversen was the 2008–09 curator in residence at Bard CCS ,, where she lectured in contemporary art theory. She was director of UKS (Young Artists Society), Oslo, from 2001 to 2005, where she curated several exhibitions, including *Transaction: The Possibilities and Limitations of the Art Space* (2004), *I Reread the Odyssey Last Night* (2005), *Done* (artist Lina Viste Grønli) (2005), *Opacity* (2005) (together with Nina Möntmann). Since 2009 she has been senior art adviser for Public Art Norway. She publishes regularly, including texts on art in *Frame*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *Morgenbladet*, *Kontur*, *Klassekampen*, *Billedkunst*, *Kunstkritikk.no*, *Chinese Art Magazine*, and *Ny Tid*, in addition to work in various catalogues, art magazines and books, such as *Capital It Fails Us Now* (2007), ed. by Simon Sheikh; *Art and Its Institutions* (2006), ed. by Nina Möntmann; *Noe kommer til å skje* (Something is Going to Happen) (2005), ed Marit Paasche / Tone Hansen; *Frameworks / Catalogue for the Nordic pavilion in Venice* (2007); *Lights On* (2008) Astrup Fearnley Museet. She co-edited the anthology *The New Administrations of Aesthetics* (Torpedo Press, 2007), which included contributions from Maria Lind, Gerald Raunig, Stian Grøgaard, Tone Hansen, Lina Viste Grønli, Craig Buckley, 16Beaver Group, and Carey Young, among others. Since 2009 she has been an editorial member of *Kunstkritikk.no*.

Notes:

1. Lecture by Gunnar Danbolt at the annual Culture Council conference 2008 [return to text](#)
2. *Det norske kunstfeltet. En sosiologisk innføring* (The Norwegian Art Field. A Sociological Introduction), Dag Solhjell and Jon Øien, Oslo 2012 [return to text](#)

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