

CONFRONTING THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL ñ SOME NORDIC ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY
SOCIAL SCULPTURE

By Fred Andersson

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First of all I have to make a comment on the subtitle of my paper ñ some
Nordic aspects of contemporary social sculpture. The Nordic aspects here
will be not so much the aspects of Nordic artists, but rather my own
aspects, derived from being a critic in a very dynamic and interesting
situation, in situ. I'm living in a very small Nordic town. I write about the
local scene in my neighborhood, but also about the national Swedish scene
and about global or international events. This provincial and in-between
situation is maybe odd, but rather interesting if one wants to evaluate the
potential of social sculpture.

The potential of social sculpture is basically its openness. It could be
defined as the dissolution of fixed roles and functions into a freedom of
differences ñ a social sculpture being nothing but the differences between
places, groups and cultures, and the negotiation of differences. Concerning
the notion of triangular mutterings in this session, it is of course
self-evident that the practice of social sculpture makes unclear the
triangular distinction between artwork, artist and critic, or between doing,
seeing and being seen. Another triangular muttering is the one happening
between the local, the national and the global. As far as differences
between groups and places is a matter of urbanization and involvement,
social sculpture may occur within this triangle and explore its dynamics.
An important aspect of this activity is the condition of the limited,
physical place as opposed to the transgressive nature of electronic
networks.

We may all be very globalized, but I wonder if anyone can avoid being a
local in a general sense of the word. Manuel Castells has noted the
increasing tendency towards the forming of local communities within the
world's biggest cities. This is of course an ancient phenomenon, seeking
comfort and safety in small and local worlds. But what many sociologists
including Castells are talking about today is how the nature of the local is
affected by structural and ideological changes towards faster communication
and economical or political multinationalism. In Sarat Maharaj's keynote for
this session, the main issue is the post-colonial problems of national and
cultural identities in a time when more and more people in the world are
being constantly transported, transferred and dislocated.

Maybe, the Others that used to be the opposite of dominant Western culture in a world distinguishable into Center and Periphery now has to be re-defined. Maybe, the primary Other will no longer be another race, another continent or another history, but rather, as Manuel Castells has pointed out, inferior levels of urbanization and involvement in network society. In other words: we might look for the cultural Other next door or at the other side of town, as well on the other side of the world. In contemporary art, the approach of social sculpture may be regarded as a way of recognizing the Otherness of marginal places and classes - of the provinces, the suburbs, the outbacks, and the low-tech Masses. However, it is hard to avoid a certain colonizing and exoticizing approach, and here I find an important connection between my subject and Sarat Maharaj's keynote.

When Sarat Maharaj speaks about the risk of putting people and artworks into certain fixed categories, he also describes the similarity of the languages of art history and anthropology, both being languages of power which establish a fixed order for the description of reality. And I quote Sarat Maharaj: 'People, practices and practitioners come to be seen in terms of an assumed, static origin elsewhere rather than the ebb and flow of unceasing translation through which they live the present.' The word translation is very important here - Sarat Maharaj talks about everyday life as an unceasing translation between different cultures and personalities. He stresses the importance of process and change as opposed to the fixed roles and identities which are ascribed to people and objects through various languages of power. This translation and this orientation towards Process rather than Object is important in social sculpture. And also, I would add, a certain passivity of letting things happen. This is, I think, what Maharaj talks about when he describes an open-ended, unscripted production of difference in everyday cultural translation.

In his essay 'The Masses - Implosion of the Social in the Media' from 1985, Jean Baudrillard described the passivity of the Masses as a subversive force, a silent protest against the informative and enlightening efforts of authorities and intellectual elites. Maybe the basic conflict underlying the idea of social sculpture is the one of passivity versus activity, or the will to adaptation versus the will to education. If the first aim is completely fulfilled, if the artist and the art becomes indistinguishable from the surrounding everyday life, art has reached beyond the limit of complete disappearance and become pointless. If, on the other hand, the educational aim of art for the people dominates too much, the desired exchange and interaction may not occur.

A good and unusual example of social sculpture as an exchange between center and periphery was the project 'Public Safety', designed and performed in small Swedish village Skoghall during 1999 and 2000. Skoghall is situated just to the south of my current hometown Karlstad. 'Public Safety' is very much the work of one singular man, namely Jorgen Svensson, artist and professor at the Valand Academy of art in Gothenburg, Sweden. Jorgen Svensson was himself born and raised in Skoghall. He is one of the most important figures within Nordic social sculpture. In his projects, he has often returned to his native village, for example when he created a bus-line between Skoghall and Stockholm as a part of the project 'The Rules of the Game' in 1993.

In 'Public Safety', Svensson realized a dream to put Skoghall on a more international artistic map. The project was created as a cooperation between him and professor Anna Novakov at San Francisco Art Institute. Novakov did the selection of artist and wrote an introduction, whilst Svensson managed all the rest of the curatorial work, and also participated himself as an artist. Four other internationally recognized artists participated, namely Alfredo Jaar, Esther Gertz and Paco Cao. The artists were specifically chosen as practitioners of public temporary art or social sculpture. They were all asked to stay in Skoghall for several weeks, and to develop projects with the aim of directly engaging the inhabitants of the village.

In her essay about public temporary art which has served as the theoretical

guideline for the project, professor Novakov describes the history of temporary and site-specific art-activities in the big cities, noting that: the small town, as a public space with its own distinct social dynamics, has been largely ignored. And she continues: How does contemporary public art function within a small town? How are the dynamics of a small city experience examined through the work of five accomplished and yet very different artists? She concluded that the artists will be asked to address the small town as a space, and in particular Skoghall as a specific site. The participants will be asked to interact with the town as a way of directly engaging the inhabitants and creating works that are intended as exchanges with specific sites.

From the start, Public Safety was thus aimed towards avoiding the danger of merely exoticizing local identity. Skoghall is a very small community with no cultural institutions in the ordinary sense of the word, and its inhabitants have generally no experience of the aims and manifestations of contemporary art. To quote Sarat Maharaj quoting Joyce, there was a risk that the project wouldn't show anything else than the spectacular difference between the arriving Europeanised Afferyanks and the local inhabitants. A turn towards the spectacular was evident in both Paco Cao's and Jorgen Svensson's contributions. Paco Cao transferring himself as a living sculpture without passport from Oviedo to Skoghall, Svensson commissioning two American policemen from Phoenix, Arizona to patrol the streets of Skoghall during two weeks in September. Esther Gertz chose to interact with the inhabitants in a more thorough way, continuing her film project Portraits of stories which she had realized two times before within similar contexts in France. In Skoghall, 43 persons contributed with their answers to Gertz's question What story should be told today? They were selected as a representative cross-section of the inhabitants.

Alfredo Jaar's project proved to be the most controversial one, dividing the village into for and against. He investigated the role of the big paper-mill which once created the village and which totally dominated it until the beginning of the eighties. As a symbolic action, he decided to build a kunsthalle out of paper from the mill, to open an exhibition of young and promising Swedish artists in the kunsthalle, and then burn it after 24 hours. By doing this, he wanted to create a feeling of loss, of losing something important which you maybe didn't know was important. The mill now had to contribute to the creation of cultural values, and not only material ones.

I think this project of Alfredo Jaar is a fine example of the balance between disappearance and presence, or adaptation and education, which I described earlier. In Skoghall, I talked to several people who don't know anything about the project Public Safety, because they're not interested in art and they don't read the cultural pages in the newspapers. However, they all had something to say about Alfredo Jaar's building. The important thing is maybe not to get the attention of all inhabitants or to learn everyone what contemporary art is, but to start processes which, in the long run, may lead to a cultural production which is open-ended, unscripted.

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