

PISSING ON THE NORDIC MIRACLE

by Power Ekroth

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Knut Åsdam "Pissing" 1995

A healthy art world contains not simply artists, but also critics, curators, and collectors, as well as an infrastructure of institutions, which would include newspapers that take contemporary art seriously, magazines and journals, museums with competent and open-minded personnel, kunsthalls, initiatives showcasing private collections, along with all the other events that can boost the sort of exchange that takes place within these circles and beyond them. For at the end of the day, this is what it is all about: the exchange of ideas, and content. Art is one of the few meta-structures of our realities, if not the only meta-structure, and without exchange and communication, everything is more or less futile. This goes for the reality the art reflects, not just the art that is trying to reflect reality.

The Norwegian art world has without question boomed within the last decade. This has to do with a local infrastructure that reflects, for the most part, how things work in the world at large, and which permits an international dialogue.

The art of the '90s was generally speaking all about diversification and pluralistically dissolving genres, and also a return to the "real" – to the everyday. It was about finding one's identity, about center and periphery, the global vs. the local, and an opening up towards a "global village". Or, to put it in the language of Seinfeld, one of the most popular television series of the nineties: loads of "yada, yada, yada". And while on the subject of yada, it is noteworthy that the bestseller of all times in art literature came out in 1998: *Relational Aesthetics* by Nicolas Bourriaud, which today still has an impact on everyone in the field of art. This was also when the curator stepped up and became king of the art world for a decade, stealing the crown from the art critic.

One of the most talked about curators during the '90s, and perhaps still today, is Hans Ulrich Obrist. For some, his words were gospel. Artists chosen by him could count on a bright future in the international circuit (or so they thought), which by itself was enough to make things spin upwards on their own, and collectors with big money were always sniffing around just one step behind Mr Obrist. Right about when the Obrist frenzy was about to become really big, he wrote something which is now familiar to those in the Nordic art bubble, something that was quoted over and over again in the region in the following years because it gave us something to brag about.

The most reproduced sentences were from the Nordic exhibition *Nuit Blanche* in Paris, in 1998: "Periods when certain places claimed to be the center of the artistic world have come and gone. Such an attitude is old-fashioned in an age in which we see a plethora of dynamic art centers emerging in Europe and elsewhere, centers which have their own special realities to investigate. In the '90s we saw capital cities like Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo, Reykjavik and Stockholm contributing to this trend, along with Bergen, Malmö and Oulu, with an explosion of creativity which seems to signal a genuine 'miracle'. By being places for meetings and for transcending boundaries, these cities constitute a floating network that is at once compact and loose."

The two words "Nordic miracle" were singled out and were picked up by a number of prominent people in the business. For this was what it was all about: business. The words "Nordic miracle" could be turned into green for everyone who had seen the rise of the phenomenon referred to as "YBA", Young British Art, in the early nineties – a group of artists with Damien Hirst in the foreground and Charles Saatchi as the man behind the scenes promoting the art, the artists, and its grand making in the market. About this time, NIFCA, the Nordic Institute For Contemporary Art (now defunct), decided to fund a magazine that would promote Nordic art to an international audience. The Finnish magazine *Siksi* and the Swedish magazine *Index* were merged into the new magazine *NU*: at the end of the '90s. NIFCA gave *NU*: a considerable sum of money to start up a promotional machine for the art of the North. The "Nordic Miracle" of course became a useful tool because it was a catchphrase that could be turned into a label, as was "YBA". This is part of the reason why one finds the label "Nordic miracle" reproduced in so many articles and catalogues from the Nordic region during that time.

The reason the phenomenon of the Nordic Miracle occurred at that time, we have been told, is the oft-mentioned globalization of the art world, which meant that places previously considered to be at the geographic periphery – and the Nordic region had indeed been considered completely peripheral from the international perspective of New York, Paris, London, and Köln – could now compete on the same terms as the centers. Coinciding with this change was the curatorial hunt for "newness" that had people "shopping for art" in every remote corner of the world.

The North was far away from the center, but maybe not far enough? Although *documenta 11*, in 2002, with its platforms and all, cited Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt's *Empire* and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, common knowledge about "the periphery" never seemed to be about anything other than something exotic to most Westerners – which after all constituted the bulk of the target group of *documenta*. The Nordic region and its "miracle" were quite simply not sufficiently exotic to make the cut from the standpoint of those dividing up reality like this. So, ironically, the most cited reason for the Nordic Miracle also became the ultimate reason for a diminishing role for Nordic art in the world at large shortly after its inception. Places that seemed to the Western "center" to be distant, such as China, were now the latest territory to be explored and exploited by an art world where the role of the curator was now taken over by the collector, who had emerged as the new diligent explorer of art and creator of the new. "The curator is dead, long live the collector."

But let's get back to the Nordic Miracle and its significance to the Norwegian climate, in particular by the time of the turn of millennium. In a Scandinavian context, even during the Nordic Miracle boom, if one can call it a boom at all, Norway and its art seemed to be a bit of backwater. Of the artists most mentioned in connection with "the miracle", most were Swedish; many of the hippest were Finnish (maybe due to the inclusion of quite a few Finnish artists in the Venice Biennial of 2001, curated by Harald Szeemann); and fewer were Norwegian or Danish. And oh, yes, we can't forget the one artist that quite often was erroneously referred to as Icelandic, the very same artist who gained the most international recognition during this period within the group. Frankly, the Nordic Miracle in retrospect wasn't all that Nordic, in fact it wasn't "all that" at all because it had clung to a very small group of artists within a particular generation and no one tried to pin the label on the generation of artists that emerged immediately after, so it wasn't a very inclusive term. No one really cared about the miracle anywhere at all after a few years, aside from one or two of the most enthusiastic spin doctors.

To an outsider, it seemed that the Norwegian art world had been liberated from the ravages of modernism, at least more than Norway's Nordic neighbors had been. In point of fact, in the midst of a weird system that had been clinging to the structures of past centuries, lingering in its academies and museums, Norway all of a sudden woke up to a rupture of post-postmodernism. After what seemed like a wake-up call, quite a few Norwegian artists who emerged after 9/11 didn't seem to be bothered to take part in the local or even the broader Nordic scene, even when they were both interested in, and up to date on, the local and the international art scene. Instead, many took a leap out of the local and moved ahead – to New York or Berlin or somewhere else, and found other ways of distributing their art, instead of using the local scene as their primary springboard. This seems to be an entirely natural and logical step to take for someone in the middle of antiquated local structures. By comparison, the Swedish situation looked quite different. In Sweden, artists seemed at the time to be steering towards the opposite pole, trying to take one or two influences from the outside world and implement them back home. During the very same period, the important scene for them seemed to be at the home base and not somewhere else. There are other reasons for this too. A significant incitement was the Norwegian centralization of numerous museums and institutions into one, the National Museum of Art. This was a drastic decision and things looked grim, and it might have been disastrous for the art scene, since the move made it in some ways increasingly impossible for young artists to come into the art world at large. Paradoxically enough, this turned out instead to be a positive thing for the art scene in Norway, even if the artist had to struggle even more. What happened was that a great many artists took things in their own hands; they started their own artist-run spaces, opened up shop, and let the world know that they were there and they weren't going to leave. Some, of course, instead chose to leave Norway for good, which also makes perfect sense.

The Nordic Miracle was a label, a brand without any real content, initially mentioned as one of many generous terms that were able to form a lasso that could capture an exhibition context. And as we all know, group exhibitions generally speaking all have themes that are often so loosely formulated that they don't really mean anything, but can be used to pin down at least some aspect of every one of the most disparate art works included in the show. This terminology took on a life of its own, into a brand pushing art and artists to an international market as a national export that could add flavor to another brand; the brand Nordic, and to Nordic heritage in general.

The miracle died out for the very same reasons it started. The Western concept of globalism has spread out to the corners of the Western World. What matters are the influences and friends one has – just like before, when a country or art academy had more relevance. Before, it was more reasonable to assume that most of one's influences and friends came pretty much from the same local place, had more or less the same cultural background, and teachers and other influential people in the more immediate environment had a huge impact on what one did and in what direction, or within which "ism", one was working. Influences come about via networks and the networks are not really necessarily local any more. Neither are they completely global of course. The larger population of this "global" world still does not have access to a computer, much less to the Internet, if they can even read and write at all. The gap between who is connected to a network and who is not, no matter the network, is quite wide indeed, and it keeps widening every second the technology takes "a leap forward".

The brand quite soon lost its allure in "the global village" and couldn't fool anyone – being Nordic or coming from the region wasn't really that different from coming from any other Western region. What seemed to be the final blow to the brand was the rather large travelling survey, shown first at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 2000, called Organizing Freedom, which included the Nordic art that emerged during the 1990s. It was maybe in the very same instant that it became clear that the lounge-style, with designer furniture in light, bright and icy colors, and birch and pine, was part of the Wallpaper hype, and was completely and utterly dead, or was at most a cul-de-sac.

It should thus come as no surprise that to an artist from the region born around 1980, the concept "Nordic Miracle" makes no sense today. No one claims today that a unique and distinctive trait in the art coming from Scandinavia exists, that there is a special "spiritual quality" to it. Nevertheless, some of the things that happened during this time had what can only be called "sustainability", and

were of great importance in the creation of the field of art today of course.

The machinery of the Nordic Miracle, including the Nordic Council, the cultural policies of the Nordic countries' central governments and institutions like the Finnish FRAME, Swedish IASPIS (International Artist Studio Program in Sweden) and Norwegian OCA (Office for Contemporary Art) were thus initiated in its wake. The main objectives of these organizations is still to promote their national artists in an international arena via an exchange of studios and grants for artists. The programs were indeed helpful in initiating a larger network for both national and international artists within the larger system of art production and consumption. All of the Nordic countries have also been very generous with state grants for artists. This fact make some artists from less generous nations jealous and others are instead astonished to see that even with generous state support for artists the average result does not really differ from that of other regions.

In Norway, regional investments like the biennial Momentum, in Moss, were initiated where the Nordic Miracle was mentioned in the first paragraph of the curatorial statement of the first catalogue. The first biennial took place in the summer of 1998 and included most of the artists often mentioned in the Nordic Miracle. The show was curated by Danish curator Lars Bang Larsen, the Swede Daniel Birnbaum, at the time director of IASPIS, and the Norwegian Atle Gerhardsen of the gallery c/o Atle Gerhardsen. Initially the biennial was named "festival" and it was a Nordic festival of contemporary art. The festival is now a biennial (though the schedule is slightly irregular, it does not happen every second years always, but it is supposed to) and it is not a solely Nordic matter but instead an event with international artists.

A biennial is generally considered something to be proud of locally, and during the '90s a plethora of biennials sprouted up to boost national credibility and to brand cities – and eventually to get the best goodies a government can imagine: gentrification with more taxes coming into the system and a prosperous urban culture. Nowadays, cities do not seek primarily to initiate new biennials – today the rage is art or design fairs, and every major city is looking to get one of their own, in pace with the ferocious market for art (and design).

Coinciding with the international art market's extraordinary expansion during the past five years, the Norwegian art world can no longer be considered to be solely Norwegian – it is extremely up to date about international occurrences, partly because the artists are spread out in places far away from Norwegian soil – and it has become much more integrated in an international art circuit than ever before. One name that should be mentioned in particular in this context is of course Atle Gerhardsen, who has initiated an influx of international artists to Norway and an "out-flux" of Norwegian artists into an international market through his gallery, expanding his territory hand-in-hand with the market's expansion. Other galleries should be mentioned as well, in particular Standard Gallery. Unfortunately not many critics have emerged on the international circuit from the region, even if the art criticism in Norway itself is extremely vibrant – it is most likely just a matter of time. Some Norwegian institutions, museums and kunsthalls have also been important factors simply by doing their job and exhibiting a wide variety of international artists, thereby providing a rich input to the dialogue on art. The most important factor however is of course the artists, working hard and within an international context just as well as in the national context. The network of artists is large and complex, it transcends national borders, aesthetic interests, theoretical discourses and other boundaries – all factors that can readily become obstacles to exchange or dialogue. Dropping the names of artists, à la Easton Ellis, would be entirely superfluous in this context, where we're already "sliding down the surface of things" – suffice it to say that there are many artists who could be mentioned here.

So, getting down to the nitty-gritty: does it mean anything in particular to be a Norwegian artist today, in contrast to being a Swedish, Caribbean, Iranian, Ukrainian or Nigerian artist? Maybe it does, but it might be more interesting to ask whether this question is at all relevant in the first place – and if so, in what ways? – rather than trying to grasp any answer about what it means for an artist to originate from within a particular national border. Most answers to that question are empty or ad hoc. Cultural heritage is of course not unimportant – on the contrary – but a common cultural background is not equivalent to commonality of national borders. That might seem like stating the

obvious, but this is not the perspective manifest in most national governments' cultural policies. Instead, the governments address the same issues in a different way: by including policies about "integration" and "minority inclusion" – whatever that means. It certainly goes without saying that it is still good business for a government to brand a group of artists from within its borders as important or interesting since it increases GNP in a multitude of ways. And there are indeed a great deal of artists with a Norwegian passport out there, visible in an increasingly international art world, both in the commercial world and in the "high brow" regular world of biennials and art fairs. But let's get real; as soon as region replaces thematic context and content as a category we should hear a little warning bell.

As long as it is human nature both to collect and to systematize there will be regional categories like this. It makes life easier, since complex things become less difficult to grasp. "Isms" and movements were created this way, and still are. One of the attempts to put a label on one direction within Norwegian contemporary art is worth mentioning, since it not only had a deep impact on the local debate but it also reflects a larger international phenomenon; moreover, it is a locally constructed label: "new conceptualism". The Norwegian so-called new conceptualism is strongly associated with a close-knit group of artists who pinpoint subjects in society at large and comment on various structures (of power) in a critical way. Others may call it institutional critique. When this is incorporated into a structure that is part of, and supports, the very same structures that are criticized in the art works, another label is more commonly used, internationally, about the institutions: "new institutionalism". "New institutionalism" is often linked to some of the leading curators from the '90s like Charles Esche, Nicolaus Schafhausen, Jérôme Sans, Nicolas Bourriaud, Catherine David, Maria Lind, Vasif Kortun, the afore-mentioned Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Ute Meta Bauer, the first director of OCA; all of whom in turn used to be headstrong independent curators, but have now been working for a couple of years within the institutions instead of "outside" as freelance curators.

Back in the days when it first occurred, institutional critique was considered unable to incorporate itself within the institution it criticized without losing its impact. Cheerleaders of the new institutionalism however claim that the institutional critique indeed works, as currently implemented, within the very same structures by emphasizing other functions than the exhibition itself and the objects of display (and power). Instead it focuses on seminars, the artist as a "researcher", and investigates the production of works through "processes" in conferences and through the new institutionalism's residency programs that focus on all aspects of production, aside from the results. Value is measured in its discursive and participatory elements. One of the problems with this approach, which is increasingly being used within quite a number of institutions, is that the discursivity is only directed towards a narrow inner circle, a choir that has already been converted, and while everyone involved pats one another on the back, there seems to be a disconnect with any wider audience. Another problem is that the new institutionalism seems to manifest no interest in true competence and knowledge, and praise is unthinkingly given to any artist with an interest in working within another field, like sociology or biology, even though the results are both poor and uninteresting, artistically, and also as seen by the lights of the other field (as in the "used car syndrome", as Hal Foster calls it: "you buy my used car and I buy your used car and we both end up with two shitty cars"). One simply eschews any kind of critical standards in both art and whatever other genre or area the artists are moving into.

Additionally, working as an artist in the context of institutional critique, new institutionalism, and relational aesthetics as well, if you wish, can itself become quite a cynical tool used to gain artistic recognition and international success in terms of both artistic credibility (exhibiting in the very same institutions, biennials and exhibitions that the curators that support new institutionalism arrange) as well as, ironically enough, artistic viability in an economic market. But this is merely one outline of many in the increasing internationalization of artists and the infrastructure of art. All labels or trends lose their impact and interest sooner or later. Content and originality does not – content that has something to say to someone outside the tiniest group of people within the art bubble. Everything else is a lot of yada, yada, yada, and thankfully many of the Norwegian artists today have learned this lesson and are fully liberated from the national or regional labeling, which is more about branding and business than art.

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