

LETTER FROM NORTH NORWAY

Disappearing Acts

In operation since 1991, and established as a biennale by the late 1990s, Lofoten International Art Festival (LIAF) is widely recognised as the most important contemporary art event in North Norway. Nonetheless, it did not appear on my radar until I was invited to participate in a seminar organised by LIAF 2013 curators Anne Szefer Karlsen, Bassam El Baroni and Eva González-Sancho. Although intrigued both by the remarkable setting of the Lofoten Islands, just inside the Arctic Circle, and by the involvement of El Baroni (also curator of EVA International, Ireland's only biennale, in 2013), I couldn't attend due to teaching commitments. Happily, a second opportunity to visit Lofoten – albeit in a different capacity – arose this year when my partner, artist Dennis McNulty, was invited to participate in 'LIAF 2015: Disappearing Acts', curated by Matt Packer and Arne Skaug Olsen.

Responding to the region's changing economy and the spectacular setting of Svolvær – a fishing town increasingly populated by tourists – as well as to the possibility of imminent human extinction, 'Disappearing Acts' features works by 24 artists, including many new commissions. Packer and Skaug Olsen invoke a mix of current concepts, such as the Anthropocene (Bob Dickinson, 'Art and Anthropocene', AM389) and more obtuse reference points to explore the changing relationship between humans and their environment. For example, they note that, according to anthropologist Marcel Mauss (*Techniques of the Body*, 1934), swimmers were once taught to swallow water and spit it out again, imagining themselves as steam boats. Taking up this digestive metaphor, 'Disappearing Acts' addresses a moment in which we are 'drowning in our own goo'. This sticky stuff is a consequence of various forms of mining and refining, involving images as well as natural resources, with the Lofoten Islands framed as 'a pictorial fantasy' where 'image technology and geological form seem to perform each other'.

Even before touching down at Svolvær's tiny airport, I was drowning in this image goo and my Instagram feed is jammed with shots of huge, jagged mountains, picturesque red cabins on stilts (once home to fishermen) and pyramid-like wooden constructions (still used to dry fish). I was also fully embedded in the exhibition's production machine – living with the artists and

curators in the Kunstnerhusnet, or artist house, which owes its foundations to Anna Boberg, a *plein-air* painter and frequent Lofoten visitor in the early 1900s. Boberg is just one of several artists drawn to Lofoten for its landscape and the region is also home to an art school (Nordland College of Art and Film), which has contributed its prominence as a centre for art activity in Norway. Nordland is cited more than once in the small but thoroughly researched publication (edited by Annika Wiström) accompanying 'The Festival That Wouldn't Sink: The Lofoten Art Festival 1991-2013', an exhibition marking LIAF's 25th anniversary. 'The Festival That Wouldn't Sink' is framed as an initiative of Packer and Skaug Olsen, but curated by Torill Østby Haaland and Svein Ingvoll Pedersen, director of the North Norwegian Art Centre. The centre's foyer is the site of LIAF's temporary Mondo bookshop, with the gallery dedicated to the display of selected works from each year of the festival's operation, along with articles culled from the local newspaper, *Lofotposten*. While the articles are displayed without translation, the accompanying publication includes English translations, and addresses not only LIAF's history but also developments in the Norwegian art scene and the biennale form. As the festival is simply administered from the North Norwegian Art Centre, and has no permanent exhibition venue, the invited curators can choose to work with a diversity of sites and (if necessary) repurpose existing venues in Svolvær or elsewhere.

'Disappearing Acts' seems to be relatively unusual in LIAF's recent history in that, apart from a one-off cinema screening of a film by Steinar Hagar Kristensen, all of the works are presented in one venue: the former Jern & Bygg furniture store, located near the centre of Svolvær. Operating from the 1940s until 2010, a period spanning Norway's postwar reconstruction and subsequent emergence as a petro state, Jern & Bygg gradually expanded and ingested many of the neighbouring business premises, and 'Disappearing Acts' stages a moment before this mutated form is replaced by a high-rise residential development. Some of the installations (most notably Sam Basu's *The Actual Possibility of Escape*, 2015) incorporate remnants of the store's interior furnishings, and the curators fully exploit the disorientation produced by the building's only partially interconnected floors, amplifying differences in acoustics, lighting and ambient temperature.

Not surprisingly, the sea is everywhere in *Disappearing Acts*, whether referenced as the scene of posthuman genesis, in *West Hinder*, 2012, by Elizabeth Price (Interview AM326) and *Pattern of Activation (Loki's Castle)*, 2015, by Katja Novitskova, or a setting for self-exploration, as in the case of *Slime is the Agony of Water*, 2015, by Roderick Hietbrink or *Visitation Rights*, 2015, by Juha Pekka Matias Laakkonen. There are other recurrent themes, with several artists (including Anna Ådahl, Sissel Blystad, Fabien Giraud & Raphaël Siboni, Ciaran O'Dochartaigh and John Russell) exploring changing technologies of image-making and consumption, either directly or implicitly.

Many of these artists were present for the opening weekend and participated, along with other visitors, in a seminar held in the main auditorium of Svolvær's only cinema. This event was framed as a research-focused collaboration between LIAF and three other organisations: CCA Derry-Londonderry (directed by Matt Packer), Treignac Project (based in Limoges, France, and co-directed by artist Sam Basu) and Tromsø Kunstforening (directed by Leif Magne Tansen, incidentally also the author of a report on LIAF 2006). The most engrossing presentations, including a hashtag-filled and semi-staged conversation between Katja Novitskova and writer Agatha Wara, addressed not extinction but rather the potential coexistence of human and non-human creatures, and the closing session (involving artists, curators and LIAF board members) articulated a sense of productive and lasting exchange, attuned to the specific knowledge generated through the exhibition of contemporary art. The seminar was followed by an event that, while not necessarily a formal component of the festival, vividly communicated a sense of its context, ethos and history. Three coachloads of visitors were bussed to Kvalnes on the north of the island, stopping to collect some Nordland lecturers on the way. All were welcomed into the newly built studio of artist AK Dolven before being led by a brass band (in rapidly deteriorating weather, but good spirits) to a homemade pub called the Midnight Sun Bar'n, where locally based artists Kjetil Berge and Mei Szetu presented an evening of performances, screenings and songs, articulating diverse yet equally heartfelt attachments to Lofoten. ■

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