

Bobrikova & de Carmen

Living in
the beginning
of times



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Skiens Kunstforening

Greenlightdistrict national art festival

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The national art festival greenlightdistrict, is arranged by Skiens Kunstforening, Kunsthall Grenland, Spriten Kunsthall and Telemark Kunstsenter. The arranging institutions have chosen a common concept for the festival: A district in transformation, where post-industrial projects spring up next to both traditional and new industry, technology and an increasingly strong focus on ecological problems.

The festival is founded on topical social discussions. The region Grenland is the largest industrial area in Norway, with strong and international directed business and industry. The industry's history is a premise provider for further growth, together with the areas rich and diverse nature.

A river runs through and connects the two cities Skien and Porsgrunn. After downsizing a lot of the traditional industry the region is in a state of transformation, with new activity in fields like biotechnology, IT and high-tech technology. Environmental issues have a renewed topicality with a current debate about the establishment of a national depository for un-organic and toxic waste. The governmental office for environmental issues have sited the limestone mines in Brevik as the most suited location for such a depository. The recommendation goes against the expressed view of most of the population in the region. The festival greenlightdistrict gives the four arranging institutions a unique opportunity to put this region and the challenges it faces in a national spotlight.

Martinka Bobrikova & Oscar de Carmen

Living in the beginning of times

Re-imagining the past, present and future simultaneously, this three-part installation by artist duo Martinka Bobrikova and Oscar de Carmen raises critical questions about human activity on Earth, and the possible future scenarios this might lead to. Using locally sourced industrial materials, sound and screen elements, a digital audio-image synthesizer and a pile of soil on which a bunch of local weeds thrive, this large-scale presentation portrays a temporal shift to a time in the near future from which the age of corporate exploitation of natural elements, capitalist consumption and the infrastructure of civilisation is in ruins and looked back at with shame.

As “traces of an unmentionable time,” three crumbling, ruinous columns – monumental in size – reference the ominous effects of this age. The columns are made pertinent to the site of the installation – Ibsenhuset – as well as the Grenland region. While resembling Ibsenhuset's intact columns in placement, size, texture and colour, these decaying replicas are in fact made from polystyrene which has been covered by a thin layer of cement – materials sourced from the Norcem cement factory in nearby Brevik. This, which directly ties the installation to its exhibition site and the region's corporate production, makes the retro-futuristic scenario all the more effective since only the temporal, not the spatial is made to shift.

The long-term effects of the industrial revolution, from which modern capitalism and corporate dominance arose can be seen as a backdrop to this sinister forecast. It is therefore noteworthy that playwright Henrik Ibsen – who Ibsenhuset commemorates – wrote his 1877 play *The Pillars of Society*, set in the middle of Norway's industrial revolution, portraying the forms of greed that came about with the aspirations of the bourgeoisie.

Supplementing the apocalyptic prognosis, Bobrikova and de Carmen's project also provides creative proposals for a possible future that can arise from the ruins of our past. This is the case in the part of the installation dubbed “contextualisation for a new revolution.” Here, a pile of soil appears to have emerged through the tiles on the floor and weeds of the types that can spontaneously arise in the Grenland area grow, in symbiosis with the numerous microorganisms that inhabit the soil. The lack of human presence is notable here, as this life-supporting micro-ecosystem appears to be self-organised, spontaneously emerging in the otherwise

ruinous environment, where only traces of human infrastructure remains. Speaker elements in the soil amplifies the distinctly robotic voice of Google Translate, uttering words that become ingredients for a better future, like a manifesto: “change, renewal ... freedom ...equality ...”

This embodies an approach to the future which decentres the human and considers other life forms in an extended sense, in line with the posthuman literature of among others, Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti. Haraway’s question from her recent text, “Tentacular Thinking” is relevant here:

What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social? Seriously unthinkable: not able to think with.¹

For the possible future that is mapped out in Bobrikova and de Carmen’s project, looks more like an insistence on the vitality of non-human life forms as a necessity for a life supporting future, than an attempt to preserve the anthropocentric idea of the human as the destroyer of the earth. The spontaneous growth of non-human life forms here, considers the more likely alternative in which the earth will adapt after the fall of civilisations and human infrastructure, with or without support for human existence. The robotic voice may in that case be a trace of our less mortal digital creations, even connoting – as post-apocalyptic works often do – the persistence of artificial intelligence. It could therefore also be seen as an argument for our present time and all its transformations, following Haraway, that the future is forever unfinished, rather than defined by the so-called “age of Anthropocene” as the final epoch.

Despite the installation’s futuristic and retro-futuristic parts, there is also an element which unfolds itself in real-time, inextricably tied to the present while re-negotiating the future and past. “PostIsotype” consists of a series of wall-hung LCD screens, a digital synthesizer, sound elements and a pile of paper. Isotypes based on Otto Naurath and Gerd Arntz’s Vienna Method are portrayed on the screens and paper, while a rhythmic, industrial sound emerges from speakers. Via the synthesizer, the figures on the screens are made into moving images, shape-shifting wobblingly with the

sound pulse so that lines bend and figures merge. This effect dissolves the clear cut categories that these Isotypes represent, merging and bending the boundaries between constructed binary or exclusive categories such as gender (male/female), ethnicity (white, black), class (workers, middle-class, upper-class), or even the boundary between human and non-human. The effect is that the constructed categories of human subjects are scrutinized and questioned, giving way to a future of blurred boundaries. In Rosi Braidotti’s terms, this is a nomadic exercise in which “the nomadic subject is a myth, that is to say a political fiction that allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without blurring experience.”²

These themes, as well as the materials that are employed in the installation both directly and metaphorically reference Greenland as a region in transition. While traditional industries have had a strong presence in the region, these are now downsizing in favour of cutting edge trials and initiatives within the fields of bio- and nanotechnology and within the IT sector. This art project is embedded in the region’s past, present and future, using both locally produced products from the industry, and naturally occurring materials such as soil and weeds to reimagine what their roles might be in a possible, yet slightly dystopian future scenario.

1 Donna Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking: Antropocene, Capitalocene, Chtuhulucene,” *e-flux Journal* #75 (September 2016): <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chtuhulucene/> accessed 05.06.17

2 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, (Columbia University Press, 1994), 4.





PostIsotype (installation view)



Traces of an unmentionable time (detail)



PostIsotype (detail)



Traces of an unmentionable time



Contextualization for a new revolution



Contextualization for a new revolution (detail)

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Martinka Bobrikova & Oscar de Carmen have been working together as an artistic duo since 2005. Central to their artistic practices are the notions of an open interaction within the art world beyond the confines of what is often considered acceptable artistic institutions. They view their artwork as embedded within lived experience, as a single space of coexistence and confluence. They believe that this open dialogue between art and life is a productive context to emphasize the current interchange and flux in social life and to promote social transformation. Through this methodology, the artists critically investigate our roots and social habits, questioning the mechanisms and contexts which create these powerful current systems of values. They have participated in several residencies such as Seoul Art Space_ Geumcheon, HomeBase Saitama, Kulturkontakt Austria, Nida art Colony or MeetFactory. Their works have been presented in venues such as the Saitama Triennial, Nitra Gallery, Akershus Kunstnersenter, Tranzit.sk (2016); the 2nd Tbilisi Triennial, Prague Quadrennial, Babel Art Space, Entrance Gallery (2015); Centre Contemporary Art in Singapore, Høstutstillingen, Kunstnerhus, ANX/Atelier Nord, Skånes Kunstforening, City Gallery Bratislava (2014); Karlin studio, Rake (2013); Museum of Contemporary Art Roskilde, KURANT, (2012); Singuhr (2011); Center of Contemporary Art – Tbilisi, Röda Sten, City Museum of Gothenburg, Space gallery, Bratislava (2010).

