

## Unreasonable Organisations and the Organisation of the Unreasonable

In a thoroughly regulated world, any form of organisation run by artists is a rare zone of ungovernability. It provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between the conventions we are an inextricable part of and exercise as social beings, and the freedom that is promised to each of us on the threshold of the art world, but which quickly proves difficult to fulfil. The production of art for the outside world is the scope of an artist-run organisation. This zone of encounter between art and a public enables us to experience the mobilisation by art of non-existent meanings as something other than mere symbolic orders. Here, with one foot inside the domain of art and the other outside, art can also serve as a social realisation of potential realities. In this sense, a form of organisation run by artists can be regarded as a utopian way of being together. But how is this to be understood?

Between 2010 and 2017, I was part of TOVES, an exhibition venue and production unit run by a number of artists (and later a single curator, too) in Copenhagen. We started off as a temporary, three-month project in empty premises in a disused shopping arcade. Following a presentation by the artist Pind, it was agreed that all artists participating should bring along older works that were lying around in their studios, and collate them in a kind of "exhibition warehouse" in the middle of the 150m<sup>2</sup> showroom. Using these works, we could take turns at curating various exhibitions and activities. It was a way of self-organising that gave us freedom to relate more loosely to the works than we might otherwise have done. The fact that they had been exhibited before, and that we perhaps had already had more traditional exhibition experiences with them, altered our relationship to them while they were stored in this "warehouse", possessing a different kind of potentiality. This potentiality also related to the institutional and organisational aspect of art.

After the three months had elapsed, we were able to extend our stay in the arcade. We quickly did away with the limited basis, and started curating the work of other artists, over time conducting more exhaustive experiments on what it actually means to plan the production and presentation of art, as an organisation. The role of the artist and the performativity of the exhibition space itself became an increasingly integral part of our work. At TOVES, the exhibition concepts, invitations and even the annual reports became part of the body of art.

One example of our approach was the exhibition Janus Høm (2014), which was presented in another artist-run exhibition venue—1857 in Oslo—and the accompanying TOVES production, which opened that same evening in the exhibition Europe, Europe at the Astrup Fearnley Museum elsewhere in the city. For several years I had been interested in Janus Høm's work, which at that time mainly involved the curation and juxtaposition of works by other



artists, thereby producing new artistic statements. It is a type of artistic role that incorporates curation as a method. As a study of, and challenge to, Høm's model of artistic practice, I invited him to devise a solo exhibition, in which I would be curator and he the artist, thereby problematising his accustomed position as the person who determines the overall context for a Janus Høm exhibition. The idea was to further complicate his artistic position, focusing in more detail on what his approach entails.

Over more than one year, Janus developed a sculptural practice in response to my proposal and invitation to exhibit. At the same time that his solo exhibition opened at the 1857 gallery, the remaining TOVES members had made a film about the creation of the exhibition. Ultimately, it also ended up dealing with the genesis of the artist subject, Janus Høm, now a sculptor in his own right. Thus, in various ways, the artist subject served as a motif and title for both the solo exhibition and the film.

The film was screened as a TOVES work at the Astrup Fearnley Museum, planned as an interpretation/public engagement video, like those one sees in the context of many solo presentations in art institutions. Visitors are given insight into the formal problems and processes of artistic creation in an instructive introduction to the exhibition they are about to see. A shuttle bus between the museum and 1857 transformed the Astrup Fearnley Museum into a kind of institutional interpretation/public engagement space for the exhibition at the other end of the bus route. In other words, a multifaceted artistic and institutional setup enabled us to act in multiple ways and capacities in what in a way amounted to a rewiring of the landscape of artistic statement.

To a great extent, during the TOVES years, on the basis of projects like these, I reformulated my own practice: no longer merely expressing myself as an artist-subject, but also operating within a more organisational form of artistic expression. As my practice evolved, it also became clear to me that there are connections between the great degree of freedom or autonomy under which we as artists operate, and the infrastructural work that an artist-run organisation entails. The fact that this should be the case may sound obvious, but nevertheless I had a hard time finding explanations that described exactly what this connection might consist of. It was clear, however, that the other artist-run projects I found interesting were also activities in which the organisational approach assumed a certain subjectivity. The artistic aspect clearly spilled over into the contextualisation and, consequently, artistic agency could also exist outside what we traditionally understand as the framework for a work of art.

In *The Politics of Installation* (2010), Boris Groys argues that what separates the role of curator from the role of artist can best be exemplified through installation. The exhibition space serves as the place where art meets the public. In the exhibition, Groys argues, the curator must make it clear to visitors

how and why we should become acquainted with the art on display. Thus, when you experience works of art curated in a biennale, in an art gallery or in a museum, you are encountering them not only in their pure form, but also an interpretation/mediation that expresses the reasonableness of its existence in the presentational context: the exhibition. In this situation, the role of the curator is to 'cure' the work of its congenital disease: its unreasonableness—its totally undetermined status in the eyes of the public.

On the other hand, Groys continues, in the case of an installation, for the artist the exhibition space constitutes an artistic medium. When Marcel Broodthaers juxtaposed two objects in his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968–1972), we did not expect the same reasonableness of statement created by the juxtaposition as if we had witnessed it in a museum of natural history. On the contrary, we assume that what takes place within the framework of an artistically organised installation is whatever the artist might want, and, therefore, that the artist's unfounded will must always be the final argument that can be put forward for our encounter with a work's components. In an art installation, Groys concludes, the exhibition space becomes an integral part of the artistic medium and thus also of the work's autonomous statement. In this context, the exhibition space no longer functions as the public domain, but rather as an annexation of the artist's intimate space, which visitors are visiting for a while.

We might also formulate Groys's point as follows: The task of the curator is to organise the unreasonable. The purpose of the artist, on the other hand, is to create unreasonable organisations. Both artistic roles desire and support the display of the unreasonable. But, of the two, the artist is the one who has a mandate to initiate actual production of the unreasonable.

Groys's analysis of the relationship between the public domain and the domain of art can be used to form a picture of what is going on in an artist-run form of organisation.

When it comes to artist-run activities or organisations—be they research collectives, exhibition spaces or film clubs—we can expand Groys's reflections on the validity of autonomy: not only to apply to spatial organisation, but also to encompass an institution's programme and its interpretation/public engagement—the way it stage manages our encounter with art. Just as an artist involves the exhibition space in an installation, the institution's mandate to organise and mediate art can also be included in the organisational aspect, thereby assuming an expressive and autonomous character. In that sense, an artist-run endeavour owes nothing but its own logic in answer to the question of why its programme exists. Consequently, in an artist-run exhibition space, visitors encounter an unreasonable organisation of art, rather than an organisation of the unreasonable, which is what we expect of a museum, for example.

Of course, in practice, the extent to which artist-run organisations deploy this transfer of autonomy to the infrastructure varies, as does the extent to which the organisational unreasonableness is activated. Only in very few cases does the entire organisation effectively become a work in itself, with all its operations thus covered by this artistic autonomy. Therefore, the unreasonable appears in the concrete realisations of artist-run initiatives far more often as autonomous features of the way things are done. There is no doubt that it is also possible to find artist-run exhibition venues that do not make unreasonable use of their mandate at all, mainly operating within a framework of quite reasonable organisations. But the same can of course be applied to artists and their practice in general. Cases, in which an organisation either becomes an actual work or where it does not deploy its mandate for autonomy at all, are less relevant to this study. When an organisation has both feet firmly either completely within or completely outside the domain of autonomy, the discussion is no longer so much about the realm of possibility of the artist-run organisation, but rather about the way an artwork works or the conventions of the social space.

The partial exercise of autonomy by the artist-run organisation is thus what characterises the encounter with it, and is expressed as an elasticity in the dosage of the unreasonable between art and the outside world. Here, the public and the artistically autonomous space are modelled and moderated in ways that are organisationally far more unpredictable than if an exhibition venue or a radio station were automatically declared a finished work of art. Through its relative nature, such a dynamic can create opportunities to rewrite the infrastructural aspects as such. This becomes possible, because the artist-run organisation is not fully integrated into the domain of the autonomous and therefore still finds itself with one foot in the infrastructures of prosaic reality, but at the same time brings its mandate for autonomy into this reality with its other foot, so to speak.

At this stage, it is important to distinguish between autonomy and independence. In this context, what we mean by artistic autonomy is an immediate meaningful/categorical incomprehensibility rather than a societal/material independence. Artistic autonomy is in a way decoupled from the relationship to its concrete infrastructural conditions of existence: in the sense that the innumerable meanings that can be deduced from the immediate incomprehensibility of the work, its autonomy, are not given with the delimited infrastructures that support it, such as funding, acumen, career opportunities etc. These can occur non-linearly and disproportionately to each other from the inside out. As we know, a work of art that has cost a lot of money to produce does not necessarily trigger a correspondingly extensive formation of meaning. On the other hand, a work that did not cost very much to create does not necessarily possess a great degree of autonomy, even though it is quite undetermined by the economic conditions of its production. Thus, autonomy does not arise as a result of the artwork's specific infrastructural

circumstances, although it can of course easily include these in its operational logic.

Thus, when I claim here that the artist-run type of organisation possesses autonomous features, it does not imply that artist-run activities should in any way be independent of funding, regional restrictions, access to premises, work resources, networks etc. Quite the reverse, in fact. I simply mean that the expressiveness exercised by the artist-run type of organisation is not a result of these concrete parameters, but rather emerges in parallel with them, as a product of the artist's autonomy and the way in which it is incorporated into the organisation's practice.

As a society, we have ascribed to the artist a degree of autonomy. According to Groys, this autonomy can be extended to include elements of the artist-run form of organisation. It is quite rightly the artist's task to create unreasonable organisations. This is also true whether the artist organises the composition of a work of art or of an exhibition programme.

With this in mind, what realm of possibility does the artist-driven organisation pave the way for? The individual exhibition venue, discussion forum or community of publications is of course always about engaging in some very specific problems and interests. But it is the underlying agent that is organisationally exercised along the way, and that is what this text is attempting to grasp. In the case of TOVES, we were a group of artists who were interested in exactly the same issues vis-à-vis organisational agency, so our practice as an artist-run organisation was closely related to the concomitant questions. The above considerations reveal that the practice of the artist-run organisation paves the way for an interference between artistic autonomy and the infrastructural arrangements of society. What does the creation of such interference mean? A well-known argument for the value of art in society is that a work of art can pave the way for parallel realities, thus offering alternative ways of thinking about the world. In a work of art, we can see the world and thus ourselves from another perspective. But how does this logic operate when it comes to artist-run organisations, where we stand with one foot in the domain of autonomy and the other foot outside?

In TOVES, I sometimes had a strong sense of being situated in something utopian that simply expressed itself in full daylight, so to speak. A kind of improbable everyday practice that fulfilled a patchy utopian reality, though without having to overturn the world around it. A state of having it both ways.

TOVES started off in a half-empty, bankrupt shopping arcade against the back wall of a gym, through which the fitness instructors' encouraging exclamations and the heavy beats from the accompanying motivational music seeped into our cool arrangements of contemporary art. Our visitors would return with their shopping from the discount supermarket located at one end of the arcade, sometimes drifting inadvertently through our exhibits as

a shortcut to the exit at the other end of the arcade. This literal drift of everyday life through our exhibits enhanced the feeling of a simultaneous existence inside and outside the art world.

The anarchist thinker Hakim Bey's concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (1991) is based precisely on the idea of an autonomous practice that expresses itself within a society that still functions unaffected by it.

Inspired by more or less fictionalised accounts of historical pirate utopias that might have served as early examples of anarchistic free cities, Bey claims that the temporary autonomous zone is the only form of anarchist utopia that can be realised today within the framework of a now completely regulated world, with no more blank spots on the map. In the zone, for a moment we can evade the control that the state, capitalism and prevailing morality exercise over the individual. A festival, a party or a dinner can function as a temporary autonomous zone, during which social hierarchies are dissolved, and the individual is liberated from their regulated everyday life for as long as the event lasts and the zone is maintained.

However, Bey explains that the temporary autonomous zone can only occur in conditions where a sufficient amount of intensity is mobilised to abolish social conventions. And such an intensity cannot be maintained for very long. Therefore, according to Bey, the autonomous zone must necessarily be temporary. But temporariness is also what, in formal terms, enables Bey to propose an anarchism without the prior revolution that would otherwise traditionally lead to the realisation of utopia. In Bey's temporary zone, there is a more "house-trained" form of anarchism. When the zone dissolves because the festival ceases and the intensity can no longer be maintained, we return to the lawfulness of society again. Bey is sceptical about revolution as a viable form of anarchist social upheaval because, he argues, revolutions by their very nature always institute another valid order: an order that can very quickly turn out to function simply as a new prison for the individual. The advantage of temporariness in Bey's approach is that it has already built into itself the disappointment that is an integral part of the aftermath of the revolution. In this sense, Bey's proposal, looked at as a result of anarchist thinking, is remarkably grounded in everyday practice. And it is in this sense, in the integration of the autonomous into the non-autonomous, of the ungovernable into the mundane that the temporary autonomous zone has something in common with the artist-run form of organisation. They both form pockets of uncontrollability in an otherwise fully-ordered topography.

One artist who has cited Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone as a context for his own artist-run practice is Jens Ivar Kjetså. Since 2015, he has been running Future Suburban Contemporary (FSC) from a rented house in a Copenhagen suburb. Here is part of the presentation on his website:

*"The FSC is now set in the residential area of Brønshøj, Copenhagen. In the middle of this suburban villa jungle, a garage is converted to a white space, the garden*

*to a place of exchange between the residential neighbours and the contemporary art. A meeting place outside of the conform frames of a typical gallery, FSC wants to merge and blur the borders for the art, the artists, the neighbours, the local and the international.”*

Kjetså clearly has an ambition to obliterate the boundaries between art and ordinary everyday life. An event that realised that ambition was the exhibition Biennale Of Future Contemporary Arts 2017, which Kjetså organised with upward of 100 participating artists from all over the world who exhibited in and around Brønshøj for a weekend. Here is an extract from the press release:

*“Spreading out from the FSC project space & into all of the strangest corners of Brønshøj, Copenhagen, Denmark. This new BIENNALE will expand/adapt/interact within & beyond the selected exhibition locations, to become a part, an alien and a friendly stranger.*

*[...]*

*FSC wants for a short time to create a 3rd space out in the neighbourhood of FSC, where contemporary art can coexist with what is there in its surroundings in forehand. To take use of the places of everyday eye gazes in Brønshøj, Copenhagen and convert them into small/medium/big art interventions that will blend in or distract realities of lived life.*

*[...]*

*This FSC Biennale takes the position of the traveller, of the explorer, of the visitor & at the same time - of the residential, the everyday life and the neighbour. FSC wants to blend/merge/interrupt/distort the borders between the insider and the outsider & for one day to make everything strange and friendly and good and funny for everyone that are there together as a part or just walking by. It is both for the normal kebab eater/coffee shopper and the art looker.”*

Resembling a surrealist version of Sculpture Projects Münster, the Biennale Of Future Contemporary Arts 2017 met its audience as an example of an artist-organised forum, which was both in and not in society, on the same experiential level. In Kjetså’s own words, the project was “the fastest and shortest biennale in the world”, thus coming close to Hakim Bey’s concept of the temporary autonomous zone as an intensifying and liberating event.

However, the emergence of event culture in recent years has also made it clear that the festival or event as a format cannot necessarily be set in any way automatically in opposition to the neoliberal agenda. Therefore, today, as a socio-political tactic to avoid the intervention of capitalism in our freedom, the temporary autonomous zone is still in a more problematic relationship with some of the models with which it has otherwise been associated. The penetration of the experience economy into many of the forms of intensification, by means of which Bey’s zone originally hoped to escape means that they cannot, to the same extent as before, promise us a release from

<sup>1</sup> Kjetså, Jens Ivar: introductory text to Future Suburban Contemporary, 2015, Copenhagen, <http://newlife.futuresuburbancontemporary.com/info/>

<sup>2</sup> Kjetså, Jens Ivar: Biennale of Future Contemporary Arts 2017, 2017, Copenhagen, <http://newlife.futuresuburbancontemporary.com/bofca2017/>, <https://www.facebook.com/events/165031134036246/>

the underlying regulatory mechanisms of capitalism.

Another approach to the aforementioned duality in the situation of a practice is Nora Sternfeld's concept of the para-institution. As Bey does, Sternfeld acknowledges that we live in a society that is completely systematised and that this poses an overarching problem, hampering our ability to create a free and progressive practice. But unlike Bey, who focuses on the individual's detachment through experimental forms of social interaction, Sternfeld's basis is the institution. And, when it comes to the issue of autonomy, the institution takes, traditionally speaking, a very opposite position in relation to the artist-run organisation. But here Sternfeld presents us with another idea of what an institution could be, or how it could act: the para-institution.

Sternfeld speculates on whether, in the criticism of the institution as representing hegemonic positions and discourses (which must constantly be challenged), there is also a parallel, neoliberal tendency to tear up the public institution. And whether in the desire to be critical of the agents of power in reality, unconsciously and unwillingly, one becomes complicit in the neoliberal agenda, which wants to see a liquidation of the public institution as we know it in the Scandinavian welfare state. Sternfeld's experiences and research responded with an unequivocal "yes". This realisation then forced her to rethink the place of institutional critique in a constructive critical practice, in the desire not to be placed in an alliance with neoliberal currents. This, in turn, required a critical re-positioning from within the institution itself. If you can no longer go outside the institution, you will find yourself inside it. And Sternfeld says that, in the attempt to think through this internal presence in conjunction with the institution's representation problem, the idea of a pre-presentation arises. The idea is to find a way out of the institutional stalemate, from within the institution, by imagining other new, future institutions that could act in accordance with what is not yet represented. Sternfeld calls such a utopian institutionality, which imagines a future institution in alliance with the limited, the para-institution.

Sternfeld associates the para-institution with the classical notion of a liberating and revolutionary education. We can think of revolution as a liberating moment, a violent and immediate upheaval of what exists. But, Sternfeld suggests, we can also think of revolution more as a process, during which change must first be made conceivable. In order to make what has not yet been conceived conceivable, we must activate the imagination in common thought. Sternfeld points out that we all know something about what does not yet exist. The para-institution can activate a utopian revolutionary potential in a common practice, which makes use of what we each know is not yet conceivable. This also paves the way for revolution to be an opportunity for the institutional agent.

The para-institution is thus a take on an institutional form of administration, which triggers new, possible institutions through the implementation of

a collective imagination as its central capacity. It opens the institution up to the future, and the community to the individual, in a unifying present.

As an example of a para-institutional approach, she mentions the artist collective Etcétera and their work *Nicht Alles Tun* (2008), during which a protest sign with a question mark was carried around in a demonstration procession. Sternfeld points out that, with the action, Etcétera not only managed to place itself in an antagonistic relationship with the ruling hegemony by declaring itself in cahoots with the demonstration, but also remained open to the fact that the demonstration's statements might be diverse or in principle unknown. Sternfeld adds that the very name of the group, "Etcétera", served such a para-institutional function, in that the placement of the name on a list of participating artists in an exhibition in itself paves the way for what has been hitherto unthinkable.

Sternfeld is still in the process of constructing her para-institutional practice, and it is not entirely clear how she views the relationship between the role of the artist and the curator. Basically, it seems that the para-institution as a collective agency space does not distinguish as harshly between the two as Groys did. As a form of practice, it may pave the way for a more diverse approach to a kind of semi-autonomous agency. In other words, an agency that is not only available for the role of the artist. Thus, the para-institution seems to be able to offer a collective utopian practice in the present, which could possibly pave the way for the autonomous capacities of art as we know them from artist-run initiatives, located in the space between the infrastructures of the outside world and artistic autonomy.

My own involvement in TOVES ended with the work *The Sale* (2017), in which we put the entire organisation and the collective artist subject up for sale in a kind of institutional business transfer. A future buyer would take over the TOVES brand, all our collective works (including copyright), our stock, and control of all communications and social media, thereby gaining full control of TOVES in the future.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde acquired *The Sale* for their collection, which very aptly focuses mainly on volatile art forms. The museum has not yet activated the organisation from its storage in the collection's warehouse, and we do not know how TOVES will behave, if and when it re-emerges as an artist subject and organisation. We do not know whether the autonomy of *The Sale* and the unreasonableness of the artist subject TOVES can be transferred to the future operation of the organisation within the framework of a curator-run museum. In this context, the unreasonable organisations and the organisation of the unreasonable meet in an immediately unmanageable institutional constitution, which does not set out any clear direction going forward. To mediate *The Sale* in a reasonable way, the Museum of Contemporary Art must engage the TOVES organisation in some form of unreasonable activity.

TOVES is thus left with The Sale in an agency space between the curator and the artist, where questions of unreasonableness and models of free practice reside.

Can the seepage of autonomy into the infrastructures of the outside world, in my re-reading of Groy's understanding of the relationship between the curator and the artist, constitute a space for a semi-autonomous practice that expands the capacities of the artwork for societal everyday space, as a fundamentally surreal relationship?

Can the artist-run organisation, in the sense of a temporary autonomous zone, still present pockets of ungovernability to those involved? And can an intense practice based on artist-run initiatives escape the ubiquitous self-realisation dynamics of event culture?

Is the para-institutional thinking of the unthinkable a form of practice that can pave the way for artist-run initiatives to be a realm of possibility for others than just artists? And is its collective capacity at the same time absolutely key for understanding the acceleration of performances that take place in artist-run initiatives?

Is the artist-run form of organisation more resilient to the neoliberal currents of institutionalisation, simply because it is not recognised as institutional? Can it be allowed to operate undisturbed, in plain sight, even though we now point out its existence?

## Literature & lectures:

Groy, Boris: *Going Public*, pp. 50-69, 2010, New York, e-flux.

Bey, Hakim: *Temporary Autonomous Zone*, 1991, New York, Autonomedia.

Sternfeld, Nora: *Paramuseum and the Spectres of Infrastructure*, lecture on 26 September 2019 at the seminar *Site-Sensitivity: Reframing/Refiguring Installation and Social Practices in the Museum*, The National Gallery of Art, Copenhagen.

Sternfeld, Nora: *Negotiating with Reality: Artistic and Curatorial Research*, lecture on 23 February 2018 at Sonic Acts Academy, Dansmakers, Amsterdam.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaMs36HXun0&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaMs36HXun0&feature=emb_logo), 3:33-15:5