Home and Abroad: The Construction of Periphery in the Avant-Garde of Relational Art

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> What really happened in the 90's? Well, we learned the art of collecting frequent flyer miles, travelling to peripheries in search of the new.[1]
>
> Nordic Art Review

> Today's fight for modernity is being waged in the same terms as yesterday's, barring the fact that the avant-garde has stopped patrolling like some scout, the troop having come to a cautious standstill around a bivouac of certainties (*biuoac de certitudes*). Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world; today it is modelling possible universes.[2]
>
> *Nicolas Bourriaud*

Introduction

Periphery makes out a persistent theme in the avant-garde of the so-called relational or social art of the mid-1990's and onwards. This decade, which saw the rise of economic and informational globalisation, became a time when artists from the Nordic countries chose to concentrate on local environments – not, that is, in order to isolate themselves from the rest of the world as a negative reaction to globalisation but to disclose matters of global interest in singular cases. In Hal Foster's sense, relational art was a "return to the real";[3] it was about finding "moments of truth" by staging (social) reality and to explore the ethical and political problems pertaining to particular singular contexts in order to communicate findings to the public and to the art world.
In the Nordic countries – a region in the world that historically has found itself as a periphery to most of the traditional centres of the avant-garde communities in Fine Art – artists and curators came to play a central part on the global stage of the art world during the decade. This article focuses especially on how Nordic artists played with notions of periphery on a relational art scene which was both distinctly global and local in its social and political involvement; a dual approach which led to the focus on singularity ("micro-politics") and a problematization of centre. Artists like Superflex, Elin Wikström, Olafur Gislason, Roi Vaara, and

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[1] *NU: The Nordic Art Review*, no. 1, 2000, p. 59.

[2] Nicolas Bourriaud. *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002 (1998), p. 13.

[3] Hal Foster. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge Mass./London: The MIT Press, 2001 [1996].

many others, distinguished themselves by a renewed political interest taken by art in particular persons, particular places, and particular living conditions around the world. The decade thus saw an apparent return to the historical avant-garde's ideal of annihilating the division between Art and Life and let Art serve Life (cf. Bürger 1984), but in a distinctly new and innovative way and with a tactical approach whose potential still today seems far from exhausted.

This article seeks to identify the peripheral in relational avant-garde profiles among contemporary artist from the Nordic Countries. The thesis is that this direction in art not only got engaged with peripheries as a *theme* but also that it may be characterized *tactically* by its initial demarcation of "peripheral", local environments that may be staged by art and thus lend themselves to the "modelling of possible universes", as the leading theoretical figure, Nicolas Bourriaud had it in his unusually picturesque metaphor above. So, despite its global orientation – recognizing the rise of globalisation in its economic and informational sense, realizing the possibilities of working in very different environments around the globe – the avant-garde of relational aesthetics thus paradoxically depends on a construction of the local, of periphery in order to communicate the outcome of their cases of intervention and to maintain its global address. I would like to do so here first by presenting an outline of the complex relation between centre and periphery, local and global, with reference to two female artists, Simone Aaberg Kern and Elin Wikström, who are both characteristic of the relational orientation in contemporary art but who came to unfold two, apparently very different avant-garde profiles and avant-garde tactics. Whereas the former travelled to the far corners of the world as part of her art, the latter stayed at home and concentrated on the homely everyday live environment. Hence the title of this article; "Home and Abroad". However, as I would like to demonstrate in the article, these two "faces" of relational avant-garde may in a certain sense be seen as Jason head, in the sense that the two faces rather should be seen as two sides of one common complex. In this sense I suggest that the orientation towards and construction of peripheries belongs to a common concept of avant-garde, that is no matter whether one travels to the far corners of the world or whether one decides to stay at home.

However, before I venture into an outline of this split and complex home-and-abroad approach to relational avant-garde peripheries, I would like in the first chapter below to provide an art historical contextualization. The aim of this part is to understand the initial position of the relational artists in terms of the institutional field of art, and how a feeling of being peripheral developed into a situation where the peripheral came to be a tactical and thematic construction, a

kind of reflected peripheral state. Here I set off from curator and critic Lars Bang Larsen's review of the 1990's Nordic art scene with special reference to his perception of the peripheral among artists of the time, the role of the curator, and the institutions of art during the decade. Thirdly, after thus having outlined the complex relationship between Kern and Wikström's avant-garde attitudes and having given this complex topology an art historical context I finally venture into an analysis of notions of periphery implied in Danish art group Superflex, which also emerged during the mid-90's, and which characterizes itself by combining a home-and-abroad approach in their construction of periphery. In this part I will examine how their work consist in the construction of peripheries near and far and how they thus seem to integrate the two faces of relational avant-garde.

From Peripheral Status to Periphery as a Construction

Looking back on the 1990's in a special issue dedicated to the decade, *NU: The Nordic Art Review* posed five questions which they found characteristic of the period to five critics from the Nordic countries, among them Danish curator and critic Lars Bang Larsen, who had been a leading figure on, or rather of, the Nordic scene, and who found that "artists from the Nordic region have, in the 90's, contributed to the internationalised language of contemporary art and enriched it with some new inflections" (Larsen 2000: 65). The second of these questions addressed explicitly the issue of globalization, centre, and periphery: "Another big issue was the collapse of the dichotomy between centre and periphery. Was this visible in the Nordic region, and if so, in what ways?" (Ibid.) In his answer, Larsen admitted that "The collapse between centre and periphery has been visible in the Nordic region to the extent that it looks like Nordic artists have successfully made it through the institutional rite of initiation – the 'Miracle' situation – into an integrated position on the international mainstream art scene" (*Ibid.*) However, and more importantly, Larsen approached the question with a good deal of scepticism by assuming that the art world was already global and that the collapse of the dichotomy centre-periphery "often [had] meant the perpetuation of hierarchies by other means" (*Ibid.*); an obvious reference to the economic dimension of globalisation which meant a freer flow of capital and thus a stronger global dominance of capital powers. However, "to talk about the Nordic region as a periphery sounds as if it is one of the neglected, underprivileged backwaters of the world", but, as Larsen continued, this "is hardly the case" (Ibid.). However, he admitted that "Coming from the North or any other – in 'art world' terms – peripheral region, it can be pretty hard to fight

the allure of a gravitational pull somewhere on the information highway from a denser cluster in the network, than the one in which you find yourself" (*Ibid.*). It should be noted here that, despite the central role played by artists from the Nordic countries, the last decade did not see any emergence of similarly innovative institutions in the region – in contrast to Germany, for instance, where Berlin and the art societies of some of the larger provincial cities came to set the agenda. Larsen regrets this polemically by asking:

> what sort of initiatives are there to integrate the art institution in a broader cultural context (such as assuming a responsibility for discussing the art institution's relationship to dominant culture)? Why aren't the art institutions hothouses of broad, local dialogue? Where is the experimentation with new ways of reaching the audience and with reaching new audiences? (Ibid.)

Larsen encourages us to "ask what the art institution up North has done to break down some of the cultural peripheries internal to its own art scenes." In this sense, artists of the period still had to look abroad to find an audience, a public, and a buyer.

One of the few positive exceptions was Lousiana's exhibition in 1997, *New Art from Denmark and Scania*, which was curated by Åsa Nacking, Lars Grambye, and Tone O. Nielsen (Grambye et al. Eds., 1997), and which focused on the contemporary art scene of the Øresund region that was undergoing discursive construction at the time in parallel with the construction of the Øresund bridge between Malmö and Copenhagen. Although of course artists were not a driving force in the construction of a regional Øresund discourse – this took place on a political level and among industry and research networks – the curators of the exhibition did have a vision of the area to become an important node in the circuit of the art world. The emerging question of regional identity thus played a minor role in the concept of the exhibition. The curators noted that "Above all, we have found that art in the Danish-Scanian region is marked by an extremely high degree of heterogeneity, a quality increasingly conspicuous, and a tremendous amount of energy. People are working based on a variety of positions, which a mounting awareness – particularly young artists – of being part of not only a local, regional scene, but also of an international art life" (Grambye et al. 1997: 8). So, as far as the regional art scene was concerned, what was important was that the local artists seemed to share a sense of pioneer spirit; a spirit which among other things was fuelled by a belief in new media and

technologies, change and growth in the local, old harbour and industrial cities of Malmö, Copenhagen, Karlskrona, and the recognition of a global perspective for art emerging from the region; a global perspective which at least could be said to be mediated by nearby Berlin and other German cities where most of the really interesting action took place. This pioneer spirit is important, I believe, for understanding the avant-garde attitude of especially the relationally oriented artists from this context.

It should be noted, though, that the regional orientation of the Louisiana exhibition differed from the much more local scale that characterised the works of most of the relational artists. In fact, the "New Art from Denmark and Scania" exhibition featured a number of artists who made use of other strategies than the relational ones. Still, this exhibition was, along with the Exogen exhibition at Nicolai Kirke in Copenhagen same year, still the first collective manifestation of local relational artists. Rooseum in Malmö, with its ambitious choice of directors (Lars Nittve, and later Charles Esche) also played a significant role, and the exhibition *What if: art on the verge of architecture and design* at Moderna Museet in 2000 was perhaps the most comprehensive and reflected exhibit of relational artists during the decade, albeit only a few of the featured artists actually came from the Nordic countries.

However, with Rooseum and a few other, smaller venues as the exception, the institutional framework did not in Larsen's view match the artistic one, and in the rear-view mirror it seems paradoxical that the political inclination in art only rarely was taken up by actors of the political systems. In other words, despite their recognition on the international stage of the art world, the "feeling of being peripheral" was, according to Larsen, still an important issue among artists from the Nordic countries. This is worth emphasizing in this context as the peripheral also made out an important theme in their art and indeed that their political tactics as artist consisted in staging "peripheral" environments in order to explore its possible development: To "model possible universes", as a leading theoretical figure of the decade, Nicolas Bourriaud, had it, cf. the quote above. What was important to Larsen was the feeling of being peripheral in a globalised world, and, as far as artists was concerned, "where and what you desire to be." Accordingly, to Larsen,

> What is more interesting, I think, is how you successfully accept your peripheral status and transform it into a culturally grounded practice of art production and communication – in a genuine dialogue with the international circuit. (Larsen: 65)

This acceptance of being peripheral does of course have an institutional background for Nordic artists, as Larsen suggests above. However, what he also seem to imply is the recognition that, in relation to the general system of economic and informational flow, one would always be peripheral as an artist whereas the art world makes out a rather independent and often isolated social system in the world. One may also generalize his idea of admitting a peripheral status in terms of being a fellow human being in a globalised world, as the social and socially existential dimension certainly came to the fore as a central theme in relational avant-garde art: The picture of the artist as not only a staging director of social relations but also as a friend and a fellow human being on that very same stage. To Larsen, the relational artist should set off – and be seen as someone who sets off – from this double (or triple) acceptance of a peripheral position in a globalised world. Bearing in mind the political and social orientation of relational art, this acceptance first of all consists in the realization of the local, peripheral environment as an artistic material. However, the idea of a "culturally grounded practice of art production" which is based on an "acceptance of one's peripheral status" also implies a possible ethical and political involvement in art in which the affiliation to the art world possibly might loose importance. This tendency may be found in orientations within social art and design where artists first of all seem to address a political public space rather than an artistic audience. Prominent examples of this direct political orientation are Kenneth A. Balfelt's fixing room project that sought to provide proper conditions for hard drug abusers on Copenhagen's Vesterbro quarter – and to attract political interest in this issue. And Ellen Nyman's performance outside the Danish parlament Folketinget in connection with the general election in 2005, where the nationalist party Dansk Folkeparti consolidated its influence on the liberal-conservative government; Nyman with her background as being born in and adopted from Eritrea to Swedish parents, and wearing a Moslem bourka, coldly reciting the Danish national anthem before the press.

This acceptance of one's peripheral status is closely related to what I in this article identify as the staying-at-home approach in relational avant-garde. The other direction, the ones who went to the "far corners of the world", should in Larsen's account be seen as the result of international recognition of artists from the region:

> artists from the Nordic region have, in the 90's, contributed to the internationalised language of contemporary art and enriched it with some new inflections. This has happened by virtue of their willingness to seek out

> possibilities for production and exposure were to be found – which was mainly abroad, at least in the case of a generation of Danish artists. (*Ibid.*)

In Denmark, Jens Haaning and groups like N55 and Superflex were quick to benefit from and explore the new possibilities that followed from the international interest that was taken in Scandinavian artists. Whereas the local institutions of art probably played a very little role in attracting international interest to these artists, a relatively limited international network of curators probably meant a lot. For Larsen, the 1990's was the "decade of the curator", and this was for him "the single most significant development in terms of the importance of the ramification of geographical, institutional and professional networks and especially of the discussions of the where, how, and why of production" (*ibid.*). Lars Bang Larsen and Swedish curators like Maria Lind and Åsa Nacking formed part of an international network that also counted figures such as Okwui Enwesor (Nigeria/America), Barbara Steiner and Ute Meta Bauer (Austria), and Tony Webster, Will Bradley, and Charles Esche (Scotland/UK) who all took a special interest in Scandinavian artists and who assisted them in identifying local environments that might lend themselves to peripheral constructions. A seminar, "Remarks on Interactive Tendencies", which was held in Copenhagen by the Danish Contemporary Art Foundation 1998, seemed in the rear-view mirror to have had an important function as a meeting between Danish artists (i.e. Superflex, Jens Haaning, and Henrik Plenge Jakobsen) and international curators (Enwesor, Steiner, Bauer, Esche, and others). Characteristically the seminar was held, not in the Copenhagen airport but between two railway tracks at the central rail station in Copenhagen (cf. Grambye 2001: 6).[4] As far as international recognition, the artists thus "found the right track" in the years to come. As far as Superflex is concerned, their focus on regions in Europe that were undergoing a dramatic development in terms of recession and lack of economic growth, were primarily facilitated by local curators. Superflex' virtual worlds project in Wolfsburg, which sought to equip local youngsters with a forum to develop alternative visions for the city of Volkswagen, and the group's competition for Chinese citizens to solve the problem of shrinking cities in the formerly Eastern Germany, were both made possible because of curator Barbara Steiner's affiliation to the art societies of

[4] The papers and discussions of the seminar was subsequently published as an anthology: Lars Grambye et al. (eds.). *Remarks on Interventive Tencencies. Meeting between Different Economies in Contemporary Ar*t, Copenhagen: Borgen, 2001.

Wolfsburg and Leipzig.[5] Similarly, their extensive work with retired working class people in a tower block in Liverpool could not have been realized without the initiative and assistance from local curators and cultural workers in Liverpool and Glasgow. I shall not dig deeper into the curatorial aspect of relational art here, but conclude that the artists who relatively early attracted international interest came to find their peripheral constructions in corners of the world, where the notion of periphery appeared in what one could call a stereotypic manner and where art was seen genuinely as a tool to develop visions of and strategies for change.

Home and Abroad: The Two Faces of the Relational Avant-Garde

As I have tried to indicate by the two epigrams and in the brief contextualization above, the avant-garde profile of relational art seemed to develop in two different directions from the mid-1990's among artists from the Nordic countries. Whereas some of the new actors (i.e. artists, curators) on the global scene of art did not hesitate to utilise the opportunity to explore the far corners of the world (i.e. the "frequent flyer miles people" that the NU editors refer to), others stayed at "home", making a "cautious standstill around a bivouac of certainties" as Bourriaud, had it. So, whereas Danish artist Simone Aaberg Kern conquered the skies along with fellow sisters around the world and took off in a little, forty-year-old single-engine Piper airplane to traverse all sorts of militarised air spaces between Lille Skensved (Denmark) and Kabul,[6] Swedish artist Elin Wikström literally settled, not in a bivouac but in a bed in Malmborg's ICA supermarket in Malmö for three successive weeks in order to explore the reactions from the customers.

When Kern's project was presented at the Gallerie Asbæk in Copenhagen, it was entitled *Crossing Line: Fragments from a Micro Global performance.* And where it is true that Kern's project functions on a truly global stage, she constantly maintains a "microscopic" focus, local scale of intimacy – on herself and her emotions by means of filmic documentation when caught with little fuel somewhere above the mountains of Iran, and on the relationship with her "flying sister" in Kabul (Kern flew to Kabul in order to teach a local teenager how to fly) or with retired pioneer female pilots from the American air force. Wikström's

[5] Barbara Steiner was lead curator for the Kunstverein Wolfsburg during Superflex' first solo exhibition in Wolfsburg 1999–2000 and is currently a director for the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig.

[6] This project was presented at Gallerie Asbæk, Copenhagen, as *Crossing Line: Fragments from a Micro Global performance,* 31 October–22 November 2003

concentration on the homely, everyday environments is, on the other hand, loaded with references to a global context. By settling in a supermarket, she also dwelled in a global environment of goods and symbols. This attention to the functioning of the global circulations of e.g. symbols, goods, money – and water – in the homely environment is a reoccurring theme in her work, as is the question of what the global system of art adds to such performative staging of the everyday life environments. For her, ICA would not just mean "Inköpscentralen" ("The Shopping Centre") but also Institute of Contemporary Art. Wikström suggests that we think of the supermarket as a focal point in the art world.

Kern's and Wikström's works complement each other in a way that, in my view, captures the issue of centre and periphery, global and local, in the relational avant-garde of the last decade. It is true that the artists forming part of this project at a first glance may seem somewhat split in regards of whether to look into "one's own back yard" in order to identify peripheries of interest in the everyday life environment – or whether to concentrate on what one may characterise as "stereotypical peripheries", the "far corners of the world", i.e. regions which are given by a distinctly peripheral position in relation to some centre, for instance in terms of (lack of) power and growth.

However, firstly, as we have demonstrated above, Kern's operations on a global scale cannot be understood without the intimacy of her personal sphere, that is, her feelings and relations to other flying sisters. Similarly, it would be pointless to perceive Wikström's work without recognizing her references to art and globalization. In this sense the artists seem to establish a kind of correspondence between the local and the global in their work, irrespective of their actual focus chosen.

Secondly, it should be emphasized that this split of attention between home and abroad, the back yard and the far corners, cannot simply be reduced to a matter of distance in a geographical sense. Whereas it is true that the latter approach primarily thematizes a geographical sense of centre and periphery, distance and proximity, the former rather addresses the dichotomy of Art versus Life; of the artificial, critical, conceptual, and reflexive dimension of art versus the apparent homeliness of the everyday life that in a certain sense is being staged by art.

Thirdly, in this sense, the complex dichotomy of staying at home or going abroad also addresses two basically different avant-garde profiles, not only in relational art but in modern avant-garde art as such. For whereas at least some of the artists who "went abroad" seemed to be playing demonstratively with the role of the pioneer and thus the (military) avant-garde metaphor, the artists "staying

at home in the bivouac" rather seemed to emphasize the discreet exploration of the everyday life, where the artist typically seeks to abandon his or her traditional part played as artist in order to form part of the environment studied. It is true that Kern's work is anything but militant, but the military dimension is nevertheless significant in her work; from her personal and gender politically driven interest in female pilot pioneers in the American air force, to her own insisting on traversing the airspace of fundamentalist Iran and occupied Afghanistan. As an artist, Wikström is of course a pioneer as well, but her approach as an avant-garde artist is still very different to that of Kern as the outwards, "actively" exploratory attitude here is subsisted by a more subtle and discreet approach, a kind of "passive" position that contrasts the performative tactics of staging encounters with the persons she find in her everyday environments.

Still, fourthly, despite her seemingly passive position "staying at home", Wikström's work should also be characterized by a sense of uncanniness given the contrast between the homely, everyday life and the staging of this environment by something which establish itself in the situation as utterly artificial; that the homely suddenly emerges as art, that it is staged by art and may be reflected upon as a "model" that may be studied in its development. This aspect seems to be less emphasized in Kern's approach where she, as a female pilot and a human being in a friendly fashion approaches sister pilots or pilots to be in Afghanistan and in the Midwest America. This friendly attitude that recklessly appears to abandon the art world in favour of "real people" is also characteristic of art group Superflex whose profile as an avant-garde project has been developed around a basic concept, "tools"; that the group intends to develop tools that may empower somewhat "endangered" people around world. Whereas Wikström seems particularly interested in discussing how she as an artist contributes to the development of art, Superflex – at least publicly – find reflexions on the theoretical perspective of their artistic strategies less relevant to their work; reflexions which are thus left for others to indulge in; for instance by critics like the author of this article.

Looking at the relational artists that emerged during the mid-1990's and onwards in general, it thus seems possible to distinguish between "those who stayed at home" and "those who went abroad". A number of artists sought to made use of similar tactics as those of Wikström's and concentrated on local environments in their region in order to stage them and follow their development. Some of the most notable examples in this group would be figures like Jes Brinch and Jens Haaning with their Burn Out installations of turned-over

and burned out busses and cars at Kongens Nytorv (1994), which was censored by the authorities as they feared that this social model may develop into riots, Alexandra Mir's "Life is sweet in Sweden" where the artist organised an alternative tourist bureau for visitors of the World Championship in Athletics, Ellen Nyman's performances in bourka, RACA'S restoration of public benches on Copenhagen's Vesterbro district, where the duo – dressed up as municipality service persons – refurnished the worn out benches with pillows in the bottle green colour of the municipality's service profile. A few others chose a different approach in their work and went abroad to study peripheries of the far corners of the world. In addition to Kern, one should mention a couple of Superflex projects: their involvement in guarana bean farmers' living conditions in the central Amazon region, after the dumping of the market price of guarana due to the South American soda cartel's dominance of the market (i.e. the "Guarana Power" and "Free Beer" projects); their Supergas project where they developed a biogas plant for nomadic farmer families in tropical regions, and their Superchannel project, where they developed an Internet television broadcasting system for the empowerment of retired working class people in tower blocks in Liverpool. Also, another Danish art group, N55 belongs to this group with their "Land" project where the group facilitated a land acquisition program so that everyone by means of N55 were able to buy a piece of marginal land everywhere on the planet for the benefit of the public.

Staged by Art: Working with Superflex' Relational Strategy

Superflex make use of a strategy that make use of the periphery as theme in a distinctly different way than Kern and Wikström; a staging strategy by means of which the group treats the social matters that they involve themselves in. The metaphor of staging relations originally arose as an idea following my cooperation with Superflex concerning the development and implementation of the Karlskrona2 concept. For in the geographical 3D Multi-User Domain (MUD) of "Karlskrona2", Superflex sought precisely to "make things happen" by establishing and "staging" a variety of relations between individual human "agents" and to investigate their development in a computer mediated communication environment.

The concept of Karlskrona2 – which not only has been applied to the old naval and industrial town of Karlskrona, Sweden, but also the home town of Volkswagen, Wolfsburg, in Germany – consists of a 3D world which is based on a virtual model of the city center, and a large video screen that displays online images of the virtual city taken from more or less the same location as that of the

screen itself. Karlskrona2 is thus meant to be a kind of public participation system in which citizens can discuss the future of their city on a strategic, yet very concrete level, by building houses, establishing parks, etc., that is, in a sense by constructing scenarios of development. Local citizens are allowed both to chat, move around, and make simple, virtual buildings, whereas non-locals are allowed only the privileges of "tourists", that is to chat and move around in the on-line environment.[7]

As a public participation system for the Internet, Karlskrona2 has been developed in a peculiar co-operation involving primarily an art curator, a local art gallery, an architect, local public authorities, and then Superflex, of course, who stands for the concept development, manages the work processes, and decision makings – and "signs" the project as a work of art.[8] I entered the process in the role of a media scholar doing research on the use of web-based visualization of landscape and urban space; research that I was undertaking for the planning studies department of a national applied research center.[9] My interest was in a sense fourfold, namely to take part in the creative processes of developing further the project concept, to monitor as a media scholar the processes that were taking place in Karlskrona2-environment, to take part in the project at a strategic level in order to improve the application of the project concept in other contexts, and recently also to study the project as a work of art. It should be noted that I did not take part in the initial project development of Karlskrona2, but joined in later (during Summer 1999) as a "discussion partner", having an obvious interest in their work because of the orientation of my current research.

Superflex often labels Karlskrona2 as a "free space" (Superflex 1999), and Karlskrona2 does indeed represent a popular ambition among both planning information and Internet critics, namely that "information must be free", i.e., that citizen users should be able to retrieve and share the visual information that he or she finds the most relevant for decision-making. The notion of free space is usually referred to by relational artist in order to demonstrate that art may

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[7] The concept of "tourist" is well-established in the so-called Active-Worlds 3D MUD system as the name for the lowest level of privileges that one can possess as a user <http://www.activeworlds.com>.

[8] I.e., Will Bradley of the Modern Institute group of curators, Blekinge council's art gallery (Blekinge Museum), the municipality of Karlskrona, and Rune Nielsen, Aarhus School of Architecture.

[9] Department of Landscape & Urban Planning, Danish Forest and Landscape Research Institute, Ministry of Energy and Environment <http://www.fsl.dk>.

facilitate discussions and social processes which might perhaps not have been possible else (cf. Bourriaud, 1995: 33–34). As a work of art, however, Karlskrona2 is more than "just" a concept for a public participation project in cyberspace. Karlskrona2 exemplifies perfectly what Åsa Nacking (1998) has described as Superflex' general strategy as a critical art group, namely to "relate" or intervene in various functions that are believed to have a strong impact upon society; that may be functions of, say a technical or economic character.

As a critic of planning communication in cyberspace, Superflex' strategy of process intervention, I happen to experience various positions, some of which have been quite traditional (i.e. as a critic, a commentator, and a media scholar with national applied research interests) and some more unusual: as a discussion partner, an exhibitor, a fund-raiser, and an art critic).[11] Åsa Nacking notes that "Superflex' projects are such that they have to consult with specialists to execute them. Superflex come up with the idea, but the actual realization of the project happens together with the collaborative partners that they seek out" (Nacking 1999: 43). However, as Barbara Steiner observes, "It seems that all of Superflex' projects change everybody including themselves" (Steiner 2001: 135), and although having perhaps "officially" a role in the project as "expert", my function in the art project has of course gradually developed much further than that. Superflex' art is very much about establishing new possibilities for all project participants, so the "natural" way of engaging oneself in these project is precisely to realize that the options are there and simply take advantage of them in such a way that it will benefit all partners.

Looking back at my years of collaboration with this art group, my experience of thus taking part in the "project community" surrounding Superflex is very much that of being "facilitated", perhaps sometimes even of being "staged" – not always knowing the precise agenda for a meeting, who will turn up, and so on. A

[11] I am currently involved in research on pictorial representation web-based visualisation of landscape change with special reference to public participation and planning communication. Ph.D. thesis: *Landscapes of Communications: Pictorial Representation in the Visualization of Landscape Change in Web-Served Computer-Mediated Communications*, Danish Forest and Landscape Research Institute, 2001. Further information including a full record of my collaboration with Superflex is available at my research web-site: <http://www.it-c.dk/people/tdj>.

group member once told me that this uncertainty is very characteristic of the everyday life in the art world of which they, Superflex, forms part. Nacking notes that "As with interactive art, one sees here a desire on the artist's part to affect and influence the viewer [or in my case, the discussion or project partner] more directly, sometimes with unexpected and unconventional methods" (1999: 42) As a project partner and a "user" of Superflex' art I am in a sense staged four times at the same time, namely first as a common user of Karlskrona2 as a geographical 3D MUD, second as a planning studies scholar who is invited into the "art scene" to talk about how I make use of relational art, third as a strategic partner taking part in the creative environment at Superflex' studio, an fourth, as a media scholar using Karlskrona2 as concept and as a technology in my own field to realize certain objectives as a researcher affiliated an applied research institution. Returning to my observation of being staged above, it is not only the virtual world of Karlskrona2's 3D MUD that resembles a stage; so does in fact Superflex' concrete contributions to the art world, that is, to galleries, exhibitions, etc. Whereas the material contribution to exhibitions is often limited to simple documentation of given "stages of development" in each project, Superflex often organizes their contribution as a stage that may serve the purpose of facilitating collaboration, for instance simply by offering the spectators with a table, some chairs, a PC, and their own presence, so that anyone who is interested in requesting information, having a chat, or perhaps involving themselves in the project are served accordingly.

This concept of staging participation at exhibition is quite characteristic for relational art; the most emblematic one being perhaps Rita McBride's contribution to the exhibition – *What if: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design* – at the *Moderna Museet* in Stockholm: A large bench construction in plywood for app. 50 people that simply made the exhibition hall into an auditorium, which was used for a related seminar series, or "listen-in's", during the exhibition.[12] Although this bench construction called for a perhaps rather light engagement in this sort of art, a discreet "listen-in", the audience was in a sense more than an audience in the traditional sense they were actually sitting on the art and in this sense staged just as much as the presenters.

The "work stage" character of Superflex' contribution to the art world is also characteristic of their office in central Copenhagen; a street-level business premise which serves as a creative environment for a number of partners as well

[12] *What if: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design.* Moderna Museet (Stockholm Museum of Modern Art), Stockholm, Summer 2000 (curator: Maria Lind).

as a Superchannel studio and a stage to promote new albums and artists produced and distributed by Superflex' little record company, MusicSystemM.
From these premises, Superflex organizes its networks of collaboration that also, at least conceptually could be seen as stages of work. Although the stage metaphor here may not be as manifest as in Superflex' media environments, exhibitions, and office, the processes still seem like stages, but perhaps rather in the narrative and temporal sense, that is, as the stages of an ongoing process. Whereas it is true that Superflex' projects may have some concrete objective, they cannot simply be evaluated in terms of goals and means. Superflex often stress that Karlskrona2, Superchannel, MusicsystemM, etc. should gradually obtain status as a project that are independent from the world of art. This means that unlike ordinary works of art, they are in a sense infinitely "ongoing", works which are eternally in progress. Accordingly, it is my experience as a project partner that the main temporal dimension in these projects is established not at some strategic macro-level (strategies are usually orientated towards the goals that one ultimately will obtain), but rather on a "tactical micro-level", which is about continuously making "steps in the right direction"; steps that may resemble stages of a historical development. A Danish term seems most precise to capture these stages of advancement: "Nu rykker det" ('It moves'). Superflex tactical role as facilitators for their project collaboration seems precisely to be about making things "move", thus creating new opportunities (in Danish: "At få det til at rykke"). Superflex is in this sense about possibility and future. If this group belongs to any "-ism" in art history it must be "opportunism".

The Nature of the Network: Staged Peripheries in the System of Art

Although Superflex may not be "net-artists" in the strict sense, and although Superflex' net-work does not entirely concern the Internet, this art group may still be said to make use of the Internet to fulfill its main objective, namely to "connect people", that is, to paraphrase a possible source of inspiration from the telecom business. Superflex certainly does take a sincere concern in the development of applications for the Internet, and as artists as well as human beings they seem particularly interested in the technical aspects of their art.Still, however ingenious their applications may be, I will maintain that Superflex' work functions not only on a technical but also on a conceptual level. For Superflex, information technology is perhaps just as much a "state of mind", a "cyber spirit" whose characteristics may also be applied to, or found in very different domains. Although the notion of "cyber spirit" may stress a connection between Superflex and the dot.com hype of the late 90's, I believe that "cyber" should be

understood in a much broader sense, namely as a way of perceiving and acting in the world, of *perceiving the world as system*. We are reminded that the prefix "cyber" has a conceptual history that precede the age of the Internet, and which usually addresses a systems view on the world; as in the science of cybernetics which is about perceiving and navigating in systems. Superflex has chosen to designate their activities as "socio-economic integration" (cf. Nacking 1999: 44); to intervene into various social systems outside that of art in the name of art, trying to make a difference by functioning as a catalyst, trying to make things happen This system approach seems to lead to the conceptual matter that may perhaps be identified as the main "artistic material" for this kind of "net-art"; a relational, conceptual material which, not unlike our brains, seems to develop itself continuously, eternally, by the establishment of new links, new connections, and hence new possibilities. According to Bourriaud, relational art seeks precisely to establish a "network or relational universe: current art is composed of these mental entities which move like ivy, growing roots as they make their way more and more complex" (Bourriaud, 1995: 36). Interestingly, this systemic perception of art contrasts the peripheral position that artists may identify with and take up as a theme in their work. Whereas notions of periphery thus seem persistent as a theme in the relational avant-garde from the Nordic countries, it appears to be of less importance to Bourriaud. His image of the relational artist who has "stopped patrolling like some scout" and "come to a cautious standstill around a bivouac of certainties"; a dwelling place – perhaps not in a known or homely environment but at least not in unknown territories – does of course attribute the artist with a kind of peripheral position. Contrary to the artistic discourse of the Nordic environments, who according to Larsen set off from a "feeling of being peripheral" – he rarely employs the term himself. Bourriaud's image of the bivouac is thus a paradoxical one in the sense that he both invokes the idea of settling in an uninhabited area (why else use a bivouac?) and in a place which is, if not in the middle of a community then at least not at its absolute margin, that is on the very border towards something "other" (as the avant-garde, that he refers to has stopped patrolling).

By identifying and treating the world fundamentally as a systemic material, Superflex are in a sense "changing the world", or at least establishing "new realities" along these lines. Addressing Plato, Bourriaud finds that "the art work can be approached as a form of reality, and no longer as the image of an image" (Bourriaud, 1995: 34). And Lars Bang Larsen notes that Superflex' art consists in" simulating some social structures to the point of the simulation becoming reality, aiming to stretch the concept of art and explode the object [*sic*!] d'art so

that overall, cultural discussions may be involved and reflected in the sphere of art" (Larsen 1997). Recognizing that Superflex' projects "change everybody including themselves" (Steiner, in Grambye 2001:135) , and that they are simply "fun" to work with, a project partner, Birgitte Feiring exemplifies this by observing that in the Biogas project Superflex are playing with their roles:

> This does not happen accidentally. They go to Africa dressed for a safari. They are trying to fulfill their expectations, they are throwing images in our face. And as we react to them, they react to us. It is a very dialectical process. I do not think they have a very clear idea of what the end product of this process will be. In that way they are playing with the whole project. (Steiner, in Grambye et al. Eds, 2001: 135).

Again: The overall strategic goal of the projects seems obviously less important to Superflex than the processes leading to progress, moves in the right direction.

In Bourriaud's terms, relational art seeks to "represent models of space-time zones which are added to the global operation of society (they are not 'alternatives', but are continuations and show real behaviour patterns) ... Artistic practise ... demonstrates our rights to micro-utopia, the 'dolce utopia' [sweet utopia] that Maurizio Cattelan spoke of: a utopia without a teleology" (Bourriaud, 1995: 34). Thus, by simulating or "staging" reality as scenarios, stages of development, Superflex is evoking a sense of utopia, which is given, not by some radical negativity as in "classical" modernist art, but by sheer possibility, playful optimism, opportunism, that is, by the opportunities given in the relational environment that they are acting in. Hence my concept of immanent utopia in Superflex' art (cf. Johansson 2001: 108ff).

Fig. 1: The log-in interface of Karlskrona2.

We are, in other words, asked to think of art and its images as invitations rather than representations; invitations that call for a participation in and continuation of the new network realities born in art. Whereas representation is usually thought of in terms of the past, invitations are about future and possibility. Relational art is in this sense very much about making successful invitations, its poetics must be that of attraction and involvement. In Superflex' Karlskrona2 log-in interface, this idea is evoked by a double arrow (Fig. 1); an invitation to enter the virtual world of art, but also a reminder that tells us that this world of art is about to grow into the one we know.

I suggest that we all accept the generous invitations from the relational artists, and that we try to learn from the practice of Superflex, and others who are continuing the development of these strong and complex networks. This present work of mine is itself a concrete manifestation of how this organic continuation works out in practice; it is in a sense just another root or branch protuberating from a seed once sown.

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