

SVALBARD AS A MOTIF AND A PLACE OF ARTISTIC EXPLORATION: INSIGHTS FROM AN ART GALLERY DIRECTOR

Jan Martin Berg (Galleri Svalbard, Longyearbyen)

Abstract

The article outlines the history of artists' exploration of Svalbard as a motif, and then proceeds to describe a number of more recent art practices by the artists relating to Svalbard in the new millennium. The article traces the artists' development from being supporters of research by providing visual material, to becoming researchers in their own right.

Keywords

Kåre Tveter, H. A. Schult, Solveig Egeland, Terje Roalkvam, Sigbjørn Bratlie, Risa Horowitz, Stein Henningsen, Galleri Svalbard, The Recherche expedition, Artist in residence, Trash people, Ocean Hope, The Schnork Institute of Arctic Research, Arctic Action, I set out to track the sun

The purpose of this article is to give a brief introduction to what one might label as the artistic discovery of Svalbard as a motif. Then I will try to give a rough outline of more recent artistic strategies used by local and visiting artists on Svalbard today. As the article is intended to appear in an academic journal, it would be intellectually indecent to try and mask the role of the article's author as director of Svalbard's local art gallery. This will in some cases shine through in the text, especially when describing some of the art projects herein, as they are a result of collaboration between the artists and the gallery.

Svalbard, being the remote and exotic place that it is, tends to appeal to our desires to explore and research our surroundings. Research (regardless of its final purpose and including artistic research) – taken both as an economic exploitation of resources and the sheer quest for new knowledge and adventure – has been an inalienable part of Svalbard's history. Still, artists' aims when coming here are not necessarily exactly the same as in earlier times. The artists accompanying the Recherche expeditions in 1838 and 1839, for example, were there to provide visual documentation of the journey and its findings.



Fig. 1. The research vessel *Recherche*. Drawing and lithography by Auguste Mayer. Photo: Jan Martin Berg, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

What did things look like? The first photographic processes were patented by Daguerre and Talbot in 1838, but for field use in Arctic conditions they were simply useless until the development of the dry plate technique by Richard Leach Maddox in 1871.¹ Artists were a common, one might even say compulsory, part of the staff on scientific expeditions in those days. The works of Bayot, Mayer et al.,² were not intended as what we tend to perceive of as fine art – imagining a solitary genius receiving divine inspiration “from above” to execute his masterpieces. These artists collected motives much like photographers would – recording details of landscapes, animal life, people and natural phenomena (e.g. the northern lights) – and later on used these sketches to compose images that would in their opinion best resemble their experience of the new region they explored. It is not uncommon to see figures recorded by one artist, the landscape formations by a second, fused together on a litho stone before printing by a third.³

Later come the artists who explore the landscape from a more purely artistic point of view, like Michaloff Wigdehl around the turn of the previous century. Or the German artist Ernst Ludwig Ostermayer (1868-1918). He visited Svalbard in 1911, and his landscape is fairly typical of the period, indicating that the non-avantgarde mainstream art still followed rules of composition and painting style of previous decades.

¹ The new process attracted attention and underwent a series of improvements but it was not until 1879 that the first factory for dry plate production was established by Eastman, the predecessor of Eastman Kodak.

² Out of almost 800 motives by the artists 311 were selected for publication along with the scientific data from the expedition. These were published from 1840 to 1852 under the title *Atlas Historique et Pittoresque*, see Knutsen and Posti 2002.

³ As an example, motif 143 in Knutsen and Posti 2002, *Baie de Smeeremberg*, was designed by Lauvergne borrowing the figures from Bayot, and lithographed by Sabatier.



Fig. 2. Ernst Ludwig Ostermayer, Magdalenaaffjorden, 1911. Oil on canvas. Photo: Jan Martin Berg, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)

Then in the 1930s, came Gert Jynge, who found his motives among the workers in the coalmines, and Else Christie Kielland – both artists who concentrated their efforts on landscapes and the industrial motives to be found. Typical for both is a shift from the landscape to concentration on human presence and human activity.



Fig. 3. Else Christie Kielland, Svalbard, 1936. Oil on canvas. SNSKs art collection, cat.no. SNSK.0135. © Else Christie Kielland. Please contact [BONO](#) to obtain permission to use the artwork. Photo: Jan Martin Berg, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)

In 1983 came the Norwegian artist Kåre Tveter, who – strictly speaking – could have worked anywhere, but as rendering the *light* was his principal subject matter, Svalbard took on a dominating role in his artistic production. His ability to handle light and texture is hard to be done justice to by a photograph, hence to appreciate them viewers have to come in person to Galleri Svalbard, where Tveter's paintings are exhibited permanently.

Tveter's primary concern was not whether his pictures resembled some outer reality that could be experienced, but rather: Does this painting function to the artists' satisfaction *as a work of art*? "I'd rather just paint light and space, but I have to introduce some simplified, recognizable shapes to avoid ending up in a mere private monologue".⁴ It is on the surface a somewhat puzzling statement, but if one wonders what the artist might have meant by this, it would be helpful to imagine some of the masterpieces by the American abstract painter Mark Rothko. In Rothko's paintings there is definitely space and light, there is an indisputable illusion of depth for anyone to see – but they *represent* absolutely nothing. This tells us at the very least that Tveter did have his audience in mind, and a desire to communicate – or his market, if we are a bit more cynical in our approach.

The art scene on Svalbard today is of course a new and rather different one. We used to have an art society, Kunstforening, run by voluntary amateurs until Galleri Svalbard opened in 1995. In the same building, the local community opened the arts and crafts centre a couple of years later, where local artisans can rent studios and exhibit their works. The centre houses both professionals and devoted amateurs side by side.

An artist residence has also been established, where visiting artists can stay and work for up to three months. This was at first a part of NIFCA's artist in residence programme in Helsinki. When NIFCA later discontinued their residency programme, a local decision was made to keep up the offer to visiting artists.

Several artists have found Svalbard to be a fascinating arena to introduce their ideas and concepts, and their approaches are quite different from the notion of art being about rendering beauty or reality. This is of course not new in any sense if you look at art history for the last hundred years or so. But, as anywhere in the provinces, it takes time before ideas settle.

The German installation artist HA Schult, for instance, has toured his much debated "garbage army" across the world. It consists of sculptures of life-size human figures constructed of different kinds of trash, whether it be rebars, empty shampoo bottles, molten plastic bags, etc. The numbers by themselves make it rather impressive. In 2010, he decided to give it a show in Adventdalen right outside Longyearbyen – quite a contrast to previous shows he has done on the Red Square in Moscow, on the Great Wall of China, in the streets of Paris and similar places known to the world's public as former and present places of power and influence.

⁴ Johansen, Jan Otto: *Vandringer med Kåre Tveter*. 31. Author's translation.



Fig. 4a. HA Schult, *Trash people*, Rome. © HA Schult, Photo: Thomas Hoepker, [CC BY 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)

Fortunately, he had luck with the weather, or we would have probably still been picking up the remains of his army all across the archipelago, adding a striking yet unintentional dimension to an art interpreter's options.

The Norwegian artist Solveig Egeland has also worked with the same kind of environmental focus, using garbage found at the beaches for building materials. To say that her garbage hut was considered controversial by many is putting it mildly, and it stirred up quite a local debate. To some people's surprise, Egeland's project generally received a much more debated reception than Schult's project. There are probably several possible explanations for this:

1. One thing is the old saying that you don't become a prophet in your own country. Schult is an artist of international repute; Egeland is a well-established but not widely known artist in Norway, and her formal education has been within land use planning.

2. As a Norwegian artist, she was able to seek public funding for her project. So people had to see "taxpayers' money" spent on claiming a garbage assembly to be fine art. It has been a century since Duchamp exhibited his infamous "fountain" – a tilted urinal – and turned modern conceptions of art around completely. Still, something similar may become a heated topic when public money is involved.

3. Schult's project only lasted for a week, whereas Egeland's hut was there for almost two years, quite a bit beyond the originally intended time. Popular among the kids, though – but it collided with more conservative views on what "fine art" should be like.

4. It might appear as if, once the outward madness of a project is on a sufficiently grand scale, it becomes easier to embrace it, probably due to the notion of what kind of personality one expects from an artist, and how that manifests in his or her work. Part of

Egeland's declared intent was stirring a debate on environmental and ecological issues, whereas most of the negative reactions appeared to stem from aesthetic points of view.



Fig. 4b. Solveig Egeland, *Ocean Hope*, 2014. *Garbage Hut*. Photo: Måns Salomonsen, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Focus on the place as such

Terje Roalkvam is one of the established Norwegian artists who work not only with Svalbard as an artistic theme, but also concentrate on using materials gathered here. He is mostly known for his combining of industrial aluminium and natural items. In his notable exhibition in Galleri Svalbard 2011, the works were made of stone, minerals, fossils and even seal fur, almost all locally procured for the project.⁵ In Roalkvam's case, the focus is still on minimal aestheticism rather than an attempt to make extra-art statements.

⁵ I truly wish I could adequately describe the eager look of a tripping toddler when setting his eyes on Roalkvam's *Svea kvadrat*, and no less the desperate posture and facial expression of the mother, trying to grab her kid before he got to dive into the artwork. The normal workday of an art historian rarely provides such priceless moments.



Fig. 5. Terje Roalkvam, *Diviso I–XI*, 2011. Aluminium and fossil sea mussels. © Terje Roalkvam, Photo: Jan Martin Berg, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



Fig. 6. Terje Roalkvam, *Svea kvadrat*, 2011. Floor installation in aluminium and coal. © Terje Roalkvam, Photo: Jan Martin Berg, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Common for many recent visiting artists working here is a concentrated focus on things like climatic changes, ecological issues and political debate. The Schnork Institute of Arctic Research, a project by the Norwegian artist Sigbjørn Bratlie (b. 1973), is a good example. It is simply a mock name of a non-existing agency. The institute has developed statistics, prognoses and various scenarios in relation to the Arctic environment and

landscape. The institute has been plotting – not observations, but predictions of climatic changes in different places around the world. Predicted how? By the “science” of osteomancy – casting chicken bones on a soothsayer’s diagram, and interpreting the results as predictions. Which – spoiler alert! – are of course not looking good for the future, as the artist himself bluntly put it. A tongue in cheek parentheses remark: the artist actually claimed greater accuracy than standard scientific climatic models, but the result was no less pessimistic than most of today’s climatic research proper.



Fig. 7. Sigbjørn Bratlie, *Schnork Institute for Arctic Research*, 2013. © Sigbjørn Bratlie, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Bratlie was part of PolArt 2013, a collaboration between Tromsø Kunstforening, Troms Fylkeskultursenter and the research network Arctos. This allowed selected artists each year to participate on ship journeys for scientific research. This kind of projects can be seen as a continuation of the practice of former times, like the *Recherche*, though the artists today are given a much freer role – to the extent that it is justifiable to use the term artistic research in comparison. So the role of the artists has changed somewhat, but they are present nonetheless.

Elizabeth Leane paraphrased the “linguistic turn” often attributed to Hayden White⁶ to describe what she saw as a shift to a culturally focused approach to the Antarctic research beginning just before the turn of the last century (see Leane 2011, 149).⁷ As I describe herein, this coincides roughly in time with a similar type of shift for Svalbard. This is no coincidence – as stated by Biggs et al. (2009), “it is understandable, if not inevitable, that

⁶ Most notably to his work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, Baltimore 1973. See, for example, Muszynski 2017.

⁷ “Things have changed markedly in the last 10 or 15 years”, she wrote in 2011.

the newly academicized arts should have turned to the existing models of research and academic practices to find these models”.

So far we have mostly talked about visiting artists to Svalbard and their outside gaze. Now I shall turn it around and talk about successful art export for a few moments.

Stein Henningsen (b. 1962) grew up in Longyearbyen, left it and then returned a few years ago to settle here again. It has already been noted that one cannot be a prophet in one's home town. Which is normally true. In spite of initially receiving quite modest praise in Norwegian art life, Henningsen has, however, become something of a celebrity at international performance art festivals abroad.

Henningsen is an artist with a very physical approach to art *as a process*. He crashes through a symbolic Chinese wall to open the performance art festival Guangzhou Live in China. As he discovered when working there, censorship of art expressions by Chinese authorities is not necessarily so harsh, unless you take the massacre of the Tiananmen square in 1989 and rub it in their faces. Unfortunately, the live footage is not available anymore where he starts running from fifteen yards away before hitting the wall. The symbolic meaning is obvious, though, and the stills speak clearly: one can see that opening new gateways of life and new modes of thinking – literally speaking – hurts.



Fig. 8. Stein Henningsen, *The Wall, PERF #1, Guangzhou Live, 2010*. Photo: Ming Luo & Hongtao Zhang, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



Fig. 9. Stein Henningsen, *The Wall*, PERF #1, Guangzhou Live, 2010. Photo: Ming Luo & Hongtao Zhang, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

On another occasion, Henningsen sits in a bathtub filled with red wine in a French street, smoking his Cuban cigar for hours, just to discover, when he rises from the tub, that you don't have to drink alcohol for it to have an effect on you. It can be absorbed through your skin as well. The added dimension to his work was unintended at the time, but the financial newspaper he had been reading was the last issue before the 2008 financial crisis hit the headlines all over the world.



Fig. 10. Stein Henningsen, *Infr'Action Int.* Performance Festival, 2008. Photo: Beatrice Persson, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Another change of scenery: Henningsen drags ship chains through the streets, he handles melting ice blocks for hours, while the promoters of the festival hope they won't need the ambulance waiting outside, should he suddenly suffer from extreme hypothermia before the ice is melted. It might not *look* so extreme, but 180 kilos of ice does require a bit of an effort to handle.



Fig. 11. Stein Henningsen, 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art, Toronto 2010. Photo: Toronto Performance Art Collective, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Not to mention dressing up in a suit and an open-collared shirt for the gentleman's afternoon walk in the countryside in the middle of a blizzard whiteout.



Fig. 12. Stein Henningsen, Man standing, Performance Adventdalen 2013. Photo: Sarah Gerats, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)

Henningsen's works have a broad span in his choice of the topics explored, but one common feature stands out in most of them: His focus on physical activity, of art as a kind of labour, if you like. It is tempting to make a point of the artist's local background in that respect – in growing up in a society where coalmining was the all-dominant industry, and the capacity for physical labour was key to belonging there. Ever since Leonardo argued with the Abbot of Santa Maria delle Grazie, there has been an insistence of artists to have what they do perceived as a mental activity, that which was considered art proper, along with poetry, drawing or composing music. This view gained hegemony during romanticism, whereas in later times, e.g. in the last part of the industrial era, there has been a certain shift to consider manual labour to be “honest work” and thus something to be admired. The step towards reintroducing the notion of art as labour is particularly tempting in performance art, as the concept of a performance is that of doing something there and then, rather than work alone in your studio to exhibit the result later.

Henningsen has remained fairly truthful to this key point in most of his artistic production. Often to the extent that it is a tough challenge that requires strength and stamina to perform the way he does, and to endure the hazard and pain that comes along with it. During a performance in Gothenburg, Sweden, he fell down from a ladder and broke his arm but managed to make it look like a controlled act to such an extent that most of the audience believed it to be part of the show. This aforementioned focus further on leads to the point that this so very physical approach of Henningsen's works makes them come forth as quite "open" in the sense that they are accessible also to a layman observer. The act itself is often impressive and spectacular, and it is only after this aspect is digested that one manages to identify and analyze the work's deeper layers.

Henningsen's recent contribution to Svalbard is Arctic Action – a performance art festival where other artists are invited to Svalbard to perform, sometimes in a remote countryside, some in the middle of the city centre. The Gallery has cooperated with the festival on several occasions by hosting art talks for the public, which sometimes transform into new performances in themselves. It has generated a considerable interest and opened up to a broader acceptance of performance art as an independent genre.

So there has been a shift in artistic approach, from the landscape and manmade structures tied to Svalbard's industrial and political history, towards a focus on temporality, environmental issues, global politics and an emphasis on local physical materials. As an overall impression, artists visiting – or residing in – Svalbard have gone through much of the same transformation in artistic endeavor as many artists elsewhere in tune with the changes in art itself. We are witnessing the focus shift from art as a physical product to art as a form of activity, an action. In case of the latter, whether as images on a gallery wall or as a narrative online, the final physical result is rather the documentation of what the artists do, rather than the final goal itself.



Fig. 13. Risa Horowitz, I set out to track the sun, 2018. Photograph on aluminium. © Risa Horowitz, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Risa Horowitz is a good example of art seen as activity, not product. She is associate professor at the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada. In her project, she set out to track the midnight sun, but nature (i.e. the weather) refused to play along. This changed the character of the entire project, forcing new solutions to what would have otherwise resulted in a seemingly common, although aesthetically very pleasing, display of the colourful beauty of Svalbard's nature. In the end, Horowitz's Svalbard undertaking resulted in a series of photographs where the position of the sun is anticipated and all the time lapse data are included, giving the images an air of scientific documentation, rather than being about the beauty of the place.



Fig. 14. Risa Horowitz: *As if to track the sun*, 2018. Photograph on aluminium. © Risa Horowitz, [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

The complementary series *As If to Track the Sun* imagines the sun's position in the round, with figure and buoy standing in for the otherwise persistently bright but hidden star. These two series were accompanied by a video compilation of imagery that Horowitz gathered – collectively entitled *Practicing Standing* – during the twenty-four hours that she spent in meditative action observing, and being within, the Longyear Valley.

The unchanging common denominator in either case is that the final artistic expression is a display of art as labour – as a physical activity – rather than some frozen, divinely inspired moment. As such, the word “research” as used by Borgdorff (2009, 3) is a good descriptive term of what such contemporary artists do:

Much artistic research is conducted not with the aim of producing knowledge but in order to enhance what could be called the artistic universe; as we know, this involves producing new images, narratives, sounds or experiences, and not primarily the production of formal knowledge or validated insights.

Borgdorff argues that exploring artists most commonly do not start out with a Popperian hypothesis to be confirmed or falsified, but rather with an urge to discover. Intellectual distance and objectivity are neither achieved nor desirable. Scientific method in the traditional sense is not often to be found: “they thus do not operate within a well circumscribed discipline that spells out what may and may not be part of the research strategy” (ibid., 4). However, the harder sciences have also strayed from the strict path of Karl Popper, ever since Kuhn, Feyerabend and their many followers. With this viewpoint taken into consideration, Borgdorff suggests that “artistic research may have more in common with scientific research than is often presumed” (ibid.).

Horowitz's project began with her participation in the Arctic Circle Summer Solstice Expedition artist residency in June 2017 when she travelled around Svalbard on board the *Antigua*, and arising from her explorations as artist-in-residence with Galleri Svalbard in early 2018. The exhibition was displayed during the late autumn festival in Longyearbyen, KunstPause Svalbard 2018.

As for exhibition spaces like the gallery, and other more recently established institutions such as Kunsthall Svalbard or Artica,⁸ I'd simply like to point out that we the curators can never reflect everything that artists do. Perhaps not even what the most renowned artists do. None of us can or will be the driving force of artistic work in this area. Svalbard still has a power of attraction and fascination of its own. We are here to provide venues – the opportunities available to present to the public (local and visiting) – the **best** of the multitude of expressions that this region generates.

If one is tempted to draw some sort of conclusion after this brief summary, it would probably be that the circle could be said to have come to an end. The *Recherche* expedition artists played an important role in research providing visual descriptions of what this alien part of the world looked like. Today's artists are researchers in their own right. What they all have in common across nearly two centuries, is that they all are concerned with delivering narratives of a seemingly desolate place and its context as an inseparable part of the world. Narratives that are seen as increasingly important in our contemporary age, when the world has gradually become smaller and more interconnected than ever before in history.

Works Cited

- Biggs, Michael, Daniela Büchler and Simeon Nelson. 2009. "Social Dynamics of Knowledge Communication within Higher Education: The Case of an Art–Science Collaboration", in Brito, C. D. R. and M. M. Ciampi (eds). *Interactive Expansion of Knowledge: Communicating with Art in the Information Era: Proceedings of the World Congress on Communication and Arts (WCCA2011)*. São Paulo: COPEC - Science and Education Research Council, accessed 23 September 2019. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/354a/6463525790d2bb7cf568d5643d384866fac3.pdf?_ga=2.228090397.1085272958.1569229280-353018068.1569229280
- Borgdorff, Henk. 2009. *Artistic Research within the Fields of Science*. Bergen: Bergen National Academy of the Arts, accessed 23 September 2019. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=129692>
- Cederkvist, Tor. 2007. *Landet som ikke er: Kåre Tveter – mannen og bildene*. Skarnes: Galleri Lyshuset.
- Johansen, Jan Otto. 1990. *Vandringer med Kåre Tveter*. Oslo: J. M. Stenersens forlag.
- Knutsen, Nils Magne, and Per Posti (eds). 2002. *La Recherche – en ekspedisjon mot nord*. Tromsø: Angelica.
- Leane, Elizabeth. 2011. "Introduction: The Cultural Turn in Antarctic Studies". *The Polar Journal* 1 (2): 149–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2011.626619>

⁸ Opened in February 2015 and November 2016 respectively.

Muszynski, Lisa. 2017. *Unmaking History-as-Fiction: Decoupling the Two Incompatible Principles of Language in Hayden White's Linguistic Turn, 1970s–2000s* (PhD thesis). University of Helsinki.

Abbreviations:

NIFCA = The Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art

SNSK = Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani

Photo credits:

HA Schult: Trash People, Rome. Photo: Thomas Hoepker. Wikimedia Commons

Stein Henningsen: Photo – Ming Luo & Hongtao Zhang, Beatrice Persson, Toronto

Performance Art Collective, Sarah Gerats

Sigbjørn Bratlie: Photo – Sigbjørn Bratlie

Risa Horowitz: Photo – Risa Horowitz

Solveig Egeland: Photo – Måns Salomonsen

All other photos: Jan Martin Berg