

When “The Art of the Strangers” Throws Light on Place and Local Identity

Oddrun Sæter

Firstly, let me provide some introductory information about the landscape art project, and the region where it is located.

This landscape art project, which was launched as a result of an idea of the Norwegian artist Anne Katrine Dolven, was carried out by the regional government in Nordland. The idea was that artists from all over the world should be invited to display a piece of sculpture in every one of the 46 municipalities in the region.

The landscape was to be regarded as a huge gallery, and the sculptures were to be made from local materials with the help of local resources. The artist was to visit the place in question, try to get to know it, and create the sculpture there in a kind of dialogue with the cultural and physical surroundings. An international committee chose the artists, and almost everyone who was invited, – many of them among the best known scul-

Theme: Building Bridges

In this article I sketch some issues from an international landscape art project which has taken place in an area in Northern Norway, “Artscape Nordland”.

My study of this project has focused on the long and heated debate in the local newspapers concerning the art project. My data was supplied by visits, observations, talks with project leaders, interviews with artists and “key persons” from a few municipalities.

I want to show that art can have functions we rarely reflect upon. Art throws light on social aspects of places, local aesthetic values, and local symbols and cultures, often in an indirect or non-intended way. In this way I hope to add some knowledge to local discussions about architecture and building and rehabilitation projects in both rural and urban communities. Hence my study, which concentrates on a rural district, can also be used as relevant knowledge for urban contexts.

tors internationally – was very eager to participate, even if the payment was not the kind many of them normally receive.

The wish of the regional government was to provide local people with the opportunity of seeing modern art, and also to utilise art as a way of developing the communities by allowing people to become more conscious of their own local values. The key issue when the project was introduced by the regional government to the municipalities was *local identity*. It was also hoped that the art project would have some commercial effects, such as increasing tourism. 33 of the municipalities were willing to participate, some of them after tough local political discussions.

It has to be emphasised that Nordland is a region where nature and the landscape are very close to the everyday lives of people. People have been making their living by fishing, mining

and agriculture for hundreds of years, tourism being the recent commercial development. The landscape is valued at all levels, including the “mental” one. The myths about nature in the region are part of this. The tough and very beautiful landscape relates stories about human forces, a kind of local mythology, as well as about the forces of nature. The language of the discussions around “Artscape Nordland” is also coloured by the features of these natural forces (which takes too long to explain here). In these discussions the local populations also very strongly advocate local values and symbols, especially as comments to, as they put it, “art they do not understand”.

I want to show how these local reactions to art are able to relate something about local values analysed by the notion of *the sacred*, in the broad meaning of the word. The sacred may be the feeling for the landscape, much like it is in pantheistic religion, as often expressed by the author Knut Hamsun, who lived in this region. But the sacred may also be used in the profane meaning of the word, more like Durkheim’s definition, where the sacred is a special kind of feeling for material objects or figures – symbols of the “conscience collectif”, or what Durkheim calls *society*¹. The sacred may be a place, a piece of landscape, a figure, a construction or an object connected to the local appreciation of everyday or traditional utility, symbols which point to a common history, and which give the region or the place features different from other regions or places.

What I call sacred in this context, is something which local people feel is special for the region or the place, and

which also often catches the eye of visitors.

Whereas the *tourist* simply wants to see these special local features, experience them in different ways, or take some pictures of them, the *artist* wants to *do* something with them, place a sculpture in the landscape, or translate local symbols into his or her own artistic language. These acts may arouse conflicts which have their roots in different ways of experiencing the landscape in question, and linked to this, different perspectives in experiencing the language of art. I want to show you some of these conflicts, but also mention cases where no conflict or hard debate took place.

To be specific, I want to give some examples from the process of creating a work of art in some of the municipalities. Let me start with Brønnøy, where the Swedish artist Eric Dietman was invited to create a landscape sculpture.

The landscape

Brønnøysund

With the help of his fantasy the artist had visualised some figures from Nordic mythology on the small mountainside by the town of Brønnøysund. He wanted to make the figures more visible by using dynamite and mirrors. The figures were to be “Løke” and his child “Midgardsormen”, the gods of malice.

The sketch for this piece of art was firstly presented to the owners of the land, and the leader of the art project asked them to keep the proposal confidential before it was decided to accept the artist’s work.

But the property owners were not able to keep this secret. The day after

the meeting which had been held in private, the local newspaper contained a big article on the subject, with large headings and showing the “image” placed on the mountainside, the newspaper’s own sketch being a slight exaggeration of the artist’s original (Fig. 1).

The battle was on. The newspaper strongly resisted the proposed work of art in the town, and the local people joined this resistance by writing articles and small ironic poems in the papers about “governmental art”. People did not want these evil faces on their beloved mountain. Some said the artist was just a dilettante who wanted to create one single picture on the mountainside, a place which many people from their childhood and onwards had looked at and visualised their own pictures; the mountain was in effect occupied with a *lot of local individual images*. This was the reason why many people maintained that “for us the mountain is a sacred place”.

Some also claimed that the ecological balance would be damaged by this encroachment by the artist.

Even if any encroachment would not be as big as many people seemed to believe – I think the artist by his sketch wanted to visualise the images rather than cause physical encroachment – his proposal was in any case in collision with local interests and local cultural feelings.

The proposal was rejected. The artist was asked to create a new sketch. But some days after the hard debate had calmed down, the landowners of the mountain on the other side invited the artist to create his sculpture there. The locals on the other side had

realised that the piece of art could provide a tourist attraction! They could “sell their place” with the help of art.

The municipality, however, took no interest in this invitation, and the proposal was permanently rejected.

Gildeskål

Let me provide another example of how the “sacred” became threatened by works of art. In a municipality named Gildeskål there was another Swedish artist, Jan Håfström, who wanted to build a model of a village in the landscape. The artist told the local people he was inspired by a photo of a bombed Kurdish village, and by this wanted to show a “journey in time and place”. The sketch was produced together with an architect, and was presented to the local people, accompanied by representatives from local newspapers. This proposal also evoked the collective indignation of the local people. They did not want to be reminded of war while taking their Sunday outings in their beloved and untouched landscape! (This region had also been hard hit during the Second World War). And even worse, they rejected the idea of a village from that part of the world. It was regarded as being a “strange element”, an extraneous element in the landscape, a point of view which often came forth in the discussions. After a time the notion of *sacred landscape* figured more frequently in the debates, probably becoming the most important argument. The local people did not want this sculpture placed *there*.

The artist wanted to meet the inhabitants to discuss his proposal. A meeting was arranged, and it was well

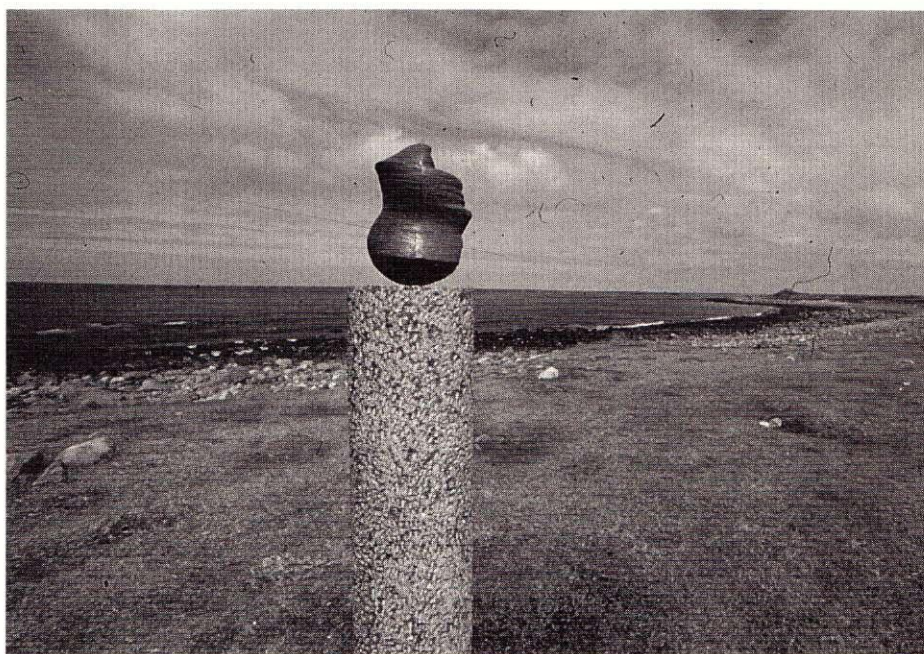


Figure 2. *Hode* (head) by Markus Raetz in Eggum, Vestvågøy, 1992. Photo: Werner Zellien.

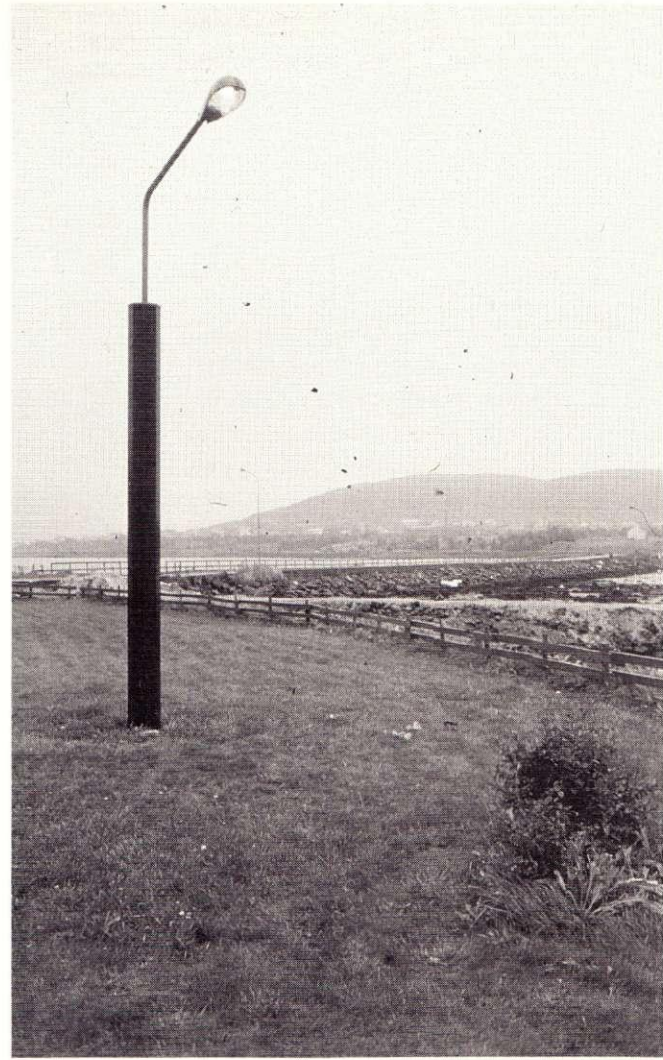


Figure 3. The Coast-Women, a light sculpture by the Norwegian artist Inghild Karlsen. Two sculptures have been placed out in two different places: One in the abandoned fishing-village Nyksund and the other in the new community Myre in Vesterålen 1995. The blue lamp light is lit up all the time. A women's face has been made in the lamp glass. Photo: Inghild Karlsen.

attended. According to my informants there was an atmosphere of lynching there! The artist tried to explain his idea of time and place, and claimed it was of minor importance to regard this piece of art as a Kurdish village. But the local people were not impressed, one of them was quoted as saying in

the newspaper the day after "we do not understand all those words from artists when they show their art". The conclusion to this story was that it was decided that this piece of art should be placed nearer to where people lived, a long way from the untouched landscape, and carried out in a smaller scale than

the 1 000 acres as originally planned.

We can of course claim that the latter story also tells us something about the *intolerance* of the local people, similar to the intolerance we can find towards immigrants or between other kinds of sacred movements. Some of the local people even said they could

bear “constructions of utility” in their landscape, but not that of a work of art filled with symbolic meanings.

As far as I can see, the notion of “sacred” must be connected to the special intention or meaning represented by the work of art. The examples illustrate that the messages in the works of art were those of conflict, such as malice and war. For Norwegians the natural landscape represents a place of peace, and this is often their reason for spending weeks in their small cottages in the mountains during their leisure time. Both artists wanted to place symbols of conflict in virgin landscapes, the very symbol of peace for the local population. In addition, one concept was taken from an area of conflict between complete strangers, the other represented unfamiliar, non-Christian symbols. The threat towards these places was also accentuated as it was “the art of strangers” – many people regarded the fact that the artists were foreigners as a drawback for being able to understand local identity and symbols.

Vestvågøy

In another municipality an artist erected a small sculpture in a place remote from where people live. This is a place where you can look at the mid-night sun hanging above the horizon, and it is very often visited on summer nights by people living on the island.

This sculpture placed in this landscape does not relate any “story”, it is not an interpretation of local symbols, it is not monumental, and people have to go there to look at it. Before people did not venture so far for their “sun trip”.

The sculpture is often visited by the local population, who are very proud of it. It has added new values to this beloved place. As I see it, the sculpture has strengthened the sacred dimension of the place. The language of the sculpture is that of humility and peace, and seems to be in keeping with the feeling of being small in the face of the greatness of nature.

And of course, the configuration of the piece of art is what ordinary people are able to “understand”, a head on a pedestal facing the horizon, which when viewed from the other side is inverted. It is a “well made” work of art, the craftsmanship of which is highly appreciated by ordinary people (Fig. 2).

The “Coast-Woman”

In the coastal districts of Norway the woman has traditionally had a strong position. From ancient times families often made their living from both fishing and farming. While the men were out fishing often for weeks at a time, the women had to be farmers, raise children and look after the economy and the home. The man was dependant on the woman’s economic and administrative contribution. “The Coast-Woman” is therefore a symbol for a special kind of Norwegian woman. I have noticed there is a growing interest in this kind of woman in local cultural arrangements and monuments.

One of the municipalities wanted to erect a monument to the coast-woman, and the idea became affiliated to “Artscape Nordland”. An artist from northern Norway, Inghild Karlssen, accepted the invitation. She hoped to

enter into a dialogue with the local people, and manage to combine their special wishes with her own kind of art, even though she was aware there would be strong feelings and notions as to how the coast-woman should look.

She made a sketch, but the local people did not accept it. Karlssen wanted to make a lamppost made of marble with a woman’s face in the lamp glass. She wanted to place her work in two different places, one in a village which people had been forced to move away from because of centralisation policies, the other one in a recently built community, with small standard looking houses, a petrol station and a local shopping centre – a rather common uninteresting built environment of the kind which can be seen everywhere in Norway. With her sculptures the artist wanted to throw light on this kind of local development. She was aware that the abandoned place was a wound as far as local history is concerned (Fig. 3).

The artist found that she had two problems to fight against in the resistance to her proposed work. She wanted to transform a firm symbol, the coast-woman, into an ordinary object, even if her intention was to show the role of the woman as a “bearer of light”. This idea, however, did not represent the dignity and the naturalistic language people had expected. “We want a woman of flesh and blood!”, they said. The other problem was that the artist wanted to throw light on local history; the politicians who accepted abandoning an old community, and the problems which followed for the people who had to move. She had lin-

ked a “universal” symbol to a specific area of conflict.

Her sketch was rejected. She did however produce her sculpture – on behalf of “Artscape Nordland” and not on behalf of “The Coast-Woman”. She changed the name of the sculpture, and called it “Reflections”. The Coast-Woman will be carried out by an artist working in a naturalistic manner.

The mole

In the small towns of Nordland there are often moles or breakwaters to protect the harbours against the heavy waves. The mole has been seen as a symbol of protection against natural forces, and in some ways has become the symbol for survival: Coming in from the rough sea to the calm water behind the mole means you are safe – and home again. To build a sufficiently strong mole is an important local task, and often the moles have been destroyed by the sea and have to be rebuilt.

The moles are also local meeting places. The fishermen meet here and start their fishing expeditions here, and the population of the small towns have their boats for leisure-time fishing moored at the moles. In some towns the moles are also places where people spend their evenings, or have their picnics in the midnight sun.

In Bodø, the biggest town in Nordland, there is a mole where the English artist Tony Cragg wanted to create a sculpture. For him the mole was a symbol for the meeting of land and sea and the meeting of nature and culture.

The mole in Bodø, which was designed by a local architect, was rebuilt some years ago.

When the artist launched his idea of placing 12 stones, each with lots of holes in, on the mole, a local debate also started here. The municipality had recently refused to allow some small seabooths (small sheds for fishing equipment) to be built on the mole, because it would destroy the view of the sea for the inhabitants. Why then should an artist be allowed to place some stones without any meaning there? Why not, at least, give it a symbol which is able to relate something about the function of the mole? And why all these holes in the stones? The artist had even claimed that the holes would make sounds when the wind was blowing, and in Bodø it is always blowing! Should the artist bring even more noise to the town, besides all the noise from the airport? Why should a complete stranger be allowed to make structures on the mole so well constructed by a local architect?

The arguments and questions were many, and as everywhere the sentiments about the sculpture were strong. Many people did not want art on the mole. The sculpture could be placed elsewhere, and not at the most important place in the town, was the overall message from the local people, even if certain people like some local politicians, did welcome the plans.

The mole got its stones, but reduced in number from twelve to seven. The unveiling ceremony was combined by a visit from the Russian foreign minister, who had handed over an old military aeroplane to the air museum of the town, which opened the same day. The Russian and Norwegian foreign ministers also visited the unveiling ceremony on the mole, where the lat-

ter made the opening speech. Some musicians performed, and people were served fish out there, on that windy winter day in Bodø.

The problem for the local people had changed. Some days after the unveiling ceremony people reported, almost complainingly, that they could not hear the stones singing! Only their dogs seemed to hear the singing. And people were surprised the stones were so small!

Some of the local population had even discovered a new function for the mole, and this view was shared by others in the local newspaper. Probably inspired by the unveiling ceremony, a lady asked: “Why not use the mole for big cultural events in the future?”

The work of art, even if a lot of inhabitants do not like it or “understand” it, has shown the population that their local artefacts and places have a broader value. The stranger put his mark on it, and as a result the local people are able to discover new meanings and functions with the help of “strange artefacts”.

Some concluding remarks

I have attempted with the help of art to illustrate how elements which I categorise as belonging to the “sacred” dimension have certain local meanings, referring to the “conscience collectif” represented by local landscapes, artefacts and symbols. When artists set out to manipulate these sacred elements or meanings, the relationships between the place and its inhabitants become more tangible.

Linked to this aspect of the sacred, we also can apply Norberg-Shulz’ notion of the *genius loci* to understand

local reactions. The identity of a place is in relationship to wholeness, where history and traditions, local symbols, buildings and the social use of the surroundings, create a certain type of *meaning* for the people living here. When artists come in with their artefacts, they add another meaning to the place. The question is if this new meaning will be in line or in collision with local values.

We of course also have to regard these debates as traditional discussions about art. In these debates people often have articulated that they do not “understand” these works of art. We can observe how these conflicts are related to different classes of *taste*, as analysed by Pierre Bourdieu³, where the artist represents “pure” taste, and the local people “popular” taste. Pure taste is recognised by focusing on form, freed from necessity, in a language of *aesthetisation*, while popular taste focuses on the *content*, linked to the feelings and the needs of everyday life, or *ethically* based. For the local population the

Coast-Woman is a woman they know very well, not a lamp post, but Anna, Johanna, their mother... For the artist the Coast-Woman may be expressed by some chosen symbol, simply *representing* a woman of importance. In this case the symbol seemed too bizarre for the likes of the local population. In the same way, the mole for the artist is an allegory, the “the meeting of nature and culture”, for the local people it is a specific place with a certain practical meaning. The stones with the holes did not relate to them anything about this meaning.

Ultimately, Artscape Nordland can be looked upon as an interesting meeting between two cultures, the “global” and the “local” culture. Artists use the international and professional language of art, developed in a world of global and placeless communication. The local population of Nordland also live in the same world of global communication, but are linked to the place with its traditions and history, in an everyday of lasting reality. They therefore expect

a work of art to be linked to the history of the place. This perspective leads us beyond hierarchical taste classifications, to where the art is more connected to its surroundings.

Unintentionally, or even in line with its intentions, “Artscape Nordland” has functioned, as one might put it, as an input for measuring the local temperature. The “Stranger”⁴ has represented a sort of threat from the outside, but at the same time has been an integrative factor in the community, even if linked to some hostile processes⁵. We have seen that the sacred dimension is able to be enhanced by the strangers way of manipulating it, both when the artist is in conflict with the local language, as well as when the artist is in line with it.

By these examples, I have indicated that there is a relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic aspects of art and artefact construction, and that the artist involved in public art can make certain choices concerning this relationship.

The author has earlier published an article about the Artscape Nordland-project “Samtidkunst i nordlandske landskaper – et umulig møte?” in *Om kunst, kunstinstitusjon og kunstforståelse*, ed.: Dag Sveen, Oslo 1995.



Oddrun Sæter, sociologist/researcher, The Norwegian Building Research Institute, Oslo.

Notes

1. There can be several reasons for looking at nature and artefacts as "sacred". Stories tell us that the fishermen took off their caps when they, in coming in from the sea, saw the silhouette of "Vågakallen", the biggest mountain in Lofoten. The ritual for the first fishing trip for the young fishermen, was to pass this mountain to greet it. The landmarks were the symbols of being alive, or survival in a broader meaning. The sacred feeling towards nature is also often expressed by Norwegians as a religious feeling, especially when being alone in the mountain landscapes, far from people, and near "God". Feelings of sacredness can also be linked to artefacts or objects belonging to the daily living, objects which have meant a lot both practically and symbolically, as surviving equipment, but also as symbols of belonging and safety, and which often get an important meaning when they are out of use, brought into "heritage museums", often also expressed in local amateur works of art. In Nord-

- land their old and very beautiful boat "Nordlandsbåten" has turned to be a symbol of the region, and at the same time representing an artefact of beauty combined to its marvellous functioning, being "a good sea boat", as we say.
2. In a talk with a woman who knows the Nordic mythology better than me (Astrid Matsberg Pedersen) she compares "Midgardsormen" to other mythical figures, like the worm and the drake, and the force of "Kundalini". "Loke" can also be the same force as belonging to Lucifer, the fallen angle. Daring to meet this forces, we can be released from our evilness, and turn wiser persons.
3. Pierre Bourdieu: *Distinction*, London 1992.
4. Georg Simmel (1908) has shown how "The Stranger" by his potential wandering state can add new values to social interaction in places.
5. Emile Durkheim (1897/1981) has also pointed to the integrative function of conflicts.

References

- BOURDIEU, PIERRE, 1992, *Distinction. A Social Critique of The Judgement of Taste*, London.
- DURKHEIM, EMILE, 1915, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, New York, .
- , 1981, *Selvmordet*, Gyldendal Oslo.
- FEATHERSTONE, MIKE, 1992, "Global and Local Cultures", i Bird, John, et. al.: *Mapping the Futures*, London.
- SIMMEL, GEORG, 1971, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago Press.
- NORBERG-SCHULZ, CHR., 1978: *Mellom jord og himmel. En bok om steder og hus*, Oslo.