

Everywhere Else Than Here

Christian Skovbjerg Jensen & Wooloo

Around Mr Palomar's house there is a lawn. This is not a place where a lawn should exist naturally: so the lawn is an artificial object, composed from natural objects, namely grasses. The lawn's purpose is to represent nature, and this representation occurs as the substitution, for the nature proper to the area, of a nature in itself natural but artificial for this area. In other words, it costs money. The lawn requires expense and endless labour: to sow it, water it, fertilise it, weed it, mow it.

Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*, 1983

WE'RE STANDING IN THE GARDEN in front of Galleri F15 looking out across the fjord. The moment seems carefully stage-managed, either by the culture or by nature itself: the wintry stillness, the straight rows of bare trees, the blinking water. If it weren't for the fact that we've just been reminded of the opposite, you might think time stood still, that this place has always looked like this. A few minutes ago we were sitting in the gallery's office

leafing through lavishly illustrated publications on the centuries-long history of pruning and adornment that has been imposed on the garden and the surrounding natural environment. From one fashion to the next. For instance, around 150 years ago there were pavilions suspended in the trees with stoves for making hot chocolate and coffee. And what today is a parking lot for visitors was once a fruit orchard. There was a trickling stream, a pond, many flower beds and many big garden parties. But then the entire estate burned down, and since then the garden has been a smaller version of its former self. It was last landscaped in the 1980s, and today its main attraction is the view created by the baroque touch of a little bend at the end of the lawn, which makes it look as though it slopes all the way down to the water.

Christian Skovbjerg Jensen (C):

How did you get the idea of leaving the garden fallow?

Wooloo (W):

It started with the thought of applying Norway's international environmental policy in the country's own back garden. Not as a comment on climate change in general, but in relation to the policy's active function as an expansion of the Nordic countries' foreign aid policy: a new weapon to control the South. Our work takes its point of departure in the *UN's Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation* (REDD) programme. Briefly, this is a programme that's about paying selected developing countries to stop cutting down their forests and

thereby releasing the large quantities of CO₂ sealed in the trees.

The founding agreement of the programme is Norway's promise of one billion US dollars to Indonesia if the country decreases its annual deforestation to one million hectares of forest. This agreement was made last year [2010, ed.], a year in which Norway invested more than 20 billion US dollars in its oil industry and produced an average of 2.2 million barrels of oil daily. In other words, Norway earns enormous amounts from the further pollution of the planet, while simultaneously using a fraction of this income to pay a poor nation to put its own development and industry on hold. Using the official methodologies and calculations promoted by the REDD programme and its carbon offsetting approach, we want to argue for the benefits of a complete halt to grass-cutting, tree-felling and other human interventions in the natural development and environment of the F15 garden for a period of two years. Until the next Momentum Biennial.

C: The first time I visited the gallery, my thoughts also immediately led me out into the garden, and farther out, towards the paths in the forest and Mount Jeløy. In general, I think this place inspires you to move or dream yourself away from the place you're in. The villa or gallery is just the base you return to. Back to the art and the social world: Alby pastry and coffee.

CHRISTIAN SKOVBJERG JENSEN & WOOLOO

Your contribution to Momentum, *Two Years' Untouched Garden*, takes place in nature – if you can call a garden that – and doesn't directly involve people. It's not about creating a concrete commitment or community, which you've aimed at before, but on the contrary encourages us *not* to do anything. Also, it's practically invisible to the audience – at least to start with! Why have you chosen to do things differently this time?

W: We actually found your approach to the concepts of time and place very provocative. The invitation we got was very academic and abstract and filled with sweeping statements about temporality and spatiality which in effect could apply to 95% of the world's artistic practices. Also, when we first read your invitation to *IMAGINE BEING HERE NOW*, we felt that you were expressing yourselves from a place populated only by politically and financially free individuals who not only can imagine being precisely where they want to be but also have the physical means to be there, and that you weren't relating critically to this.

C: Interesting. But I have to say I don't see it that way. For me the biennial's paradoxical title is first and foremost about creating an interesting platform for artistic strategies and experiences that can challenge our understanding of the concepts of time and place. The gallery windows will be blacked out, which

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will allow the art to close in on itself a bit. But only so that we can lose ourselves in an intensive and disorienting presence in a labyrinthine exhibition space.

So what you first saw as an arrogant and intellectual approach in Moss is hopefully more than that. The aim is to stage an unusual, intense and thought-provoking space for the audience with a show that works with the observer's presence and experience by shutting other things out and encouraging you to see and be present with what's right in front of you, and nothing else. The spectator never gets an overview of the next piece, their view is always blocked by high walls or corners, and this game – apart from isolating and intensifying the experience of each piece – is also about infecting and challenging the very act of looking at and moving around in art.

W: Being provoked is a good first sign. Most things you read or experience don't produce any particular response, so when you finally come across something you really love or hate, it's usually something worth dwelling on. The invitation really made us want to explore the idea of freedom your concept is based on, as well as the socio-economic structures that prop up the position you're writing from.

C: Your praxis often seems to involve attempts to break out of the exhibition space, away from

the art world, and instead operate from social or media platforms where the fact that it's art isn't that important. Is your strategy in this biennial different from the self-initiating, activist projects you've done in the past?

W: No. The strategy is always the same. For us it's about doing things that are relevant. We're not interested in doing lots of pieces every year, but prefer to focus on doing a few projects that mean something to us and to others in the long term. This has often resulted in very "activist" works, but that's not an absolute rule for us. In fact it's by no means always the case that an activist intervention makes sense in the context of an artistic event. That energy is often put to better use elsewhere. You always have to remember to ask: Why here? Why in the middle of all this art? But there are exceptions.

A while ago we were invited to take part in this year's 54th Venice Biennale by the Lebanese Pavilion. Lebanon had almost no money to pay the artists they invited or to construct their own exhibition. They had to give up on their space in the Arsenale area and find a cheaper place in town because they couldn't afford the rent. Funnily enough this is a situation that's astonished many people we've talked to. Everyone takes it for granted that it's expensive to be part of Art Basel, but they have somehow forgotten that

Venice is part of the same system. A system where money equals culture. In these specific conditions we proposed to the Lebanese curator that we arrange free accommodation for all his participating artists. Since he was planning a group show, we could save a lot of money on his budget by arranging free private lodging for all the participants. That money could then instead go to the artists and their productions. This also gave us the chance to grapple with the closed and exclusive nature of Venice and set up some human encounters between the very private local Venetians and the many artists who overrun their city every other year. These encounters wouldn't otherwise have happened.

C: But then the Lebanese participation at the Biennale was cancelled?

W: Exactly. That's what we want to get at. With a more traditional piece, like a video or a sculpture, the work's *raison d'être* would have disappeared along with the Lebanese Pavilion. But in this case, it's still there. The local hosts are the same and the hospitality is still needed, only by other guests. In fact there's so much demand that we're currently trying to find out who it makes most sense to give the accommodation to. As it stands we'll definitely be offering residencies to participating artists from Albania, Romania, Costa Rica and Haiti.

In other words, the piece doesn't depend on an official signature, but on its participants. So it's no longer important whether it's a biennial or not. That means the situation can just as easily exist completely outside the art world, as it did during our action at COP15 [the UN's climate change conference in Copenhagen in 2009, ed.]. In this case, there were a lot of environmental activists from less affluent countries who weren't able to come to Copenhagen for the conference. There simply weren't any affordable hotel rooms left. It would have been different if COP15 had taken place in the summer; then the activists could have camped. But you just can't go to Copenhagen in December with nowhere to stay. In other words: no shelter, no civil society. The public space was closed.

That was the first time we used hospitality as our medium. We found accommodation for more than 3,000 environmental activists with Danish families and it was a fantastic and exhausting project. But after that, we really felt like doing something smaller and more poetic.

C: Well, you're definitely doing that in Moss. I really like how your intervention very subtly illustrates the passage of time by refraining from action. By not being vain and embellishing and keeping nature under control, underfoot. So while we [Momentum]

bury artworks in the garden for people in the future to discover, you let the grass grow over them.

I also like that, curatorially, we're setting ourselves apart from previous biennials' predictable use of the garden as a space to show large sculptures and installations. Visitors should preferably be able to walk around the garden as it is, without visible artworks, and still think in artistic terms, think about the passing of time, about where they'll be in 50 years, about the West's environmental policies and life's unbearable slowness.

So, even though your conceptual gesture and demand in the end is about people and the way we treat nature, it's still the first time you're not working directly with any kind of participation, right?

W: Yes, Momentum has been a very exciting challenge for us. We usually focus on breaking away from a homogenous and interested art audience. We think it's interesting to look for an audience with different political views, people who may not be directly interested in art but maybe for that very reason can be challenged by art.

That's something we've thought a lot about in connection with Momentum. Here we are, working in Moss, in the middle of a local community that has witnessed numerous biennials. It's

a difficult place to do so-called relational aesthetics, because it's a limited public space that has already been dealt with by so many other artists before us. Every other year the circus comes to town, filled with people from New York and Berlin and their excellent interventions in the inhabitants' everyday life. You have to be careful not to get in that queue. So it seemed obvious to take up the challenge and try something more conceptual and subtle. The reason why we again ended up engaging with a space outside the institution is that that comes naturally to us. The white rooms inside are simply the ones that interest us least.

C: Was that why you chose to black out your exhibition space at Manifesta 8?

W: Yes, you could say that. But actually the inspiration for that piece began elsewhere. The curatorial proposal for Manifesta concerned "the history of visibility". In that context we thought it would be interesting to take a wider view of that history. That is, not just of visibility's own history but the influence of visibility on human history in general; of our apparently uncontrollable production and consumption of images and the effect this has on our lives and society. We tried to imagine a different, non-visual world. What would the world look like if we couldn't see? If everyone was born blind from tomorrow? That was the start of "New Life Residency",

the world's first non-visual residency programme for artists. We put out an open call for participants and ended up getting more than 1,000 applications! From these we chose five artists, who were then flown to the residence in Murcia, Spain, where Manifesta was being held. Here they lived and worked in a completely blacked-out room for a week, working with their assistants: five blind local women. The collaboration with these women was the most instructive thing about the project. But none of the men we talked to wanted to take part.

In Spain, visually impaired people are part of the street life in a completely different way than for example in Denmark, where we're from. In Copenhagen you rarely see a blind person. The welfare state keeps them home, pays them support and brings its services to them, whereas as a visually impaired person in Spain you have to go out and earn a living. Many blind people work as lottery ticket sellers for ONCE, an association for the blind, and it was through this organisation that we came into contact with our women. We introduced ourselves as artists, and they all had an opinion about that. They all had a personal relationship to the concept of "art", even those who were born blind. However, none of them knew that Manifesta had come to town. But then neither did any of the other locals, as it turned out! Even when the biennial had started

and was in full swing we didn't meet a single local person who knew what Manifesta was. When we first went to Murcia to do some research, we made it a daily habit to ask people we met on the street whether they'd heard of Manifesta. The more negative answers we got, the more we felt like doing a piece that didn't try to understand the city or the region. With "New Life Residency" we wanted create a situation where the participating artists were lost, where they were groping in the dark and were forced to renew themselves.

Manifesta's subtitle was "In Dialogue with Northern Africa", but if it had been up to us, we would have changed it to "In Dialogue with Murcia". That dialogue was far from happening in the first place. As a curator, what do you think about those kinds of site-specific realities? Is it possible to really be present as a temporary artistic event? And is it even important?

C: Yes, I think it's important. I also think it's possible. But it totally depends on how much time and how many resources you have for your exhibition. It's a hard thing to do, which is probably why so many avoid it, or don't succeed with it. In my opinion it's very rare that big artistic events relate in a direct, involved and curious way to the places in which they take place. Mostly they throw in a number of public art projects

alongside their main exhibition and that's pretty much that. Even though public projects aren't necessarily better at creating local dialogue and participation.

Biennials still seem to focus on artistic quantity, i.e. many artists and big projects. Monumental contemporary productions that present the latest, newest and best, here and now: a finger on the pulse of the art world. But with big expensive gestures come reactions and analyses that evaluate the art based on other criteria, e.g. by event organisers, sponsors or audiences. And the local residents may be sceptical before the artworks are even set up: What are they spending money on now? Or they might be excited. But how should you relate to this? How should you use this knowledge, which, however you look at it, will form a kind of parallel context and pose an unavoidable challenge for any major cultural event?

Sponsors and organisers often expect their events to create growth and development. But I don't think art can or should live up to this. There are very few examples of artistic events that have actually resulted in measurable growth and development for a region or city, and they can create a skewed idea of artworks as development projects. But if it's not about increased tourism, consumption and positive stories about and

associations with a place, what are we contributing?

Going back to Moss, it will be exciting to see how they respond to the empty garden in Alby, the blacked-out windows in the gallery, the labyrinthine exhibition design and the fact that they themselves aren't getting any special attention. The whole thing might be too arrogant. Time will tell. In any case I hope that with five biennials behind them the audience will be curious enough step into our space and leave with the feeling that they've navigated across a range of different geographies, times and forms of artistic expression.

W: Yes, with *IMAGINE BEING HERE NOW*, it seems like you're aiming for the opposite of *Manifesta*. Could your subtitle be: "Not in Dialogue with Moss"?

C: It probably could. But it's not enough just to reject things. Prior to our discussion about the concepts of time and place in relation to exhibition concepts, we curators had a collective, agreed premise about not doing a biennial about Moss. And about not doing an exhibition about major political issues. Instead, we came to an agreement to explore the possibilities of creating an exhibition with a more individually oriented, microscopic and philosophical approach.

If on the other hand you really want to create a presence as a big event, I think you need a totally different approach. For example, it would be exciting to create a biennial structure where you never started all over with new curators, concepts and themes, but instead formulated a starting point and direction from the beginning for all the future exhibitions to navigate from. This could be a direction or a set of aims developed in cooperation with the local political and social context to ensure the events were anchored in the local community or had an overarching theme. The same curator could then be responsible for five biennials, or five curators could arrange five different exhibitions around the same topic. Such a structure would automatically broaden the perspective beyond the usual two years or the latest exhibition. You'd continually be building on the previous projects' results and experiments and of course move in new directions, but always starting from existing activities and experiences.

From the perspective of "being present", what do you think Moss and Momentum can use *Two Years' Untouched Garden* for? And how do you think the audience will respond to an empty garden with slowly growing grass?

W: It's not important to us that what we do has a use value as such. If it were, there'd be no need to formulate ourselves in an artistic

context. There are so many other things you can do in the world that make wider rings in the water. What we're most interested in is how the total saturation of capital in society affects artistic production too, and how this is often somewhat taboo in artistic circles. This almost religious belief that the objects we make are genuinely more valuable to humanity than those presented in, say, a home furnishings trade fair.

In many ways, the art world is basking in the glow of the mainstream popular culture that's embraced it, but at the same time greater and greater financial requirements are put on the things we have to achieve in the eyes of society. The biennials play this game when they seek funding, but perhaps the real truth is that they'd rather not have to create real results. That they'd rather not perform a function or be part of a wider and often pretty complicated political system. We'd prefer just to address an interested, recognisable audience that knows the language and codes and wants to play the game so we can keep renegotiating the rules with our friends, and create new artistic languages, expressions and strategies.

Most people who'll see our garden will probably be in on this game. But while art is elitist, it's also very democratic. Anyone can encounter an artwork and have their own experience with

it, whether it's in a museum, a public space or anywhere else. And that's the kind of experience we want to tap into. We're not interested in creating a certain effect, but rather in creating a space where people can experience for themselves.

On the train on the way up here, you pass forests of giant cranes in Oslo. Everyone sees them, but who knows if they share our feeling of being surrounded by activity and development everywhere you look in this country. Who knows if they experience the financial non-crisis in the same way as we do. We think the fact that a country can earn so much by polluting that it can actually afford to pay other nations to stunt their own growth says something bizarre and telling about the global economic structure. It's this absurdity – the REDD programme's condescending promotion of non-action, paid for by action – that led to *Two Years' Untouched Garden*.

For us the work is a study of non-action in a society that lives and breathes by always doing things. Only time will tell how other people experience it.

Galleri F15's garden has been an object of debate for some time. In collaboration with the Norwegian University of Life Sciences and the Institute for Landscape Architecture and Spatial Planning, the gallery wants to make its artistic

profile clearer by linking more of its work with the surrounding natural and garden area. But the debate includes many different attitudes to the interplay between culture and nature, and there is no easy solution.

As it stands today, the garden is a mix of the Baroque and English landscape styles, and since the parties have not yet agreed on a definite plan for the future, they have so far maintained the garden in the same way as they would any other garden. Money and time are spent on controlling the representation of nature. The lawn is regularly weeded, watered and mowed. That is, until art – for a brief time – is allowed to decide.



The garden at Gallery F15, Alby