

Final Report on Trip to Oslo, Svalbard, Bergen from 2.-9.3.2009, Carsten Seiffarth, Berlin, supported by PNEK Norway.

Following an invitation from PNEK, I departed for a one-week trip to Norway at the beginning of March 2009. The idea behind this trip was to make initial contact with institutions and persons in the Norwegian sound and media art scene, and to lay the foundations for a future exchange.

I travelled to Norway for the first time in 2008 in order to work with the students of the "Nordic Sound Art" master's programme. At the same time, I was familiar with the many activities in the Norwegian electronics and sound scene through a plethora of information on diverse festivals and projects. Coming into direct contact with some of those active in these scenes was now a precondition for this trip. Per Platou, the artistic director of PNEK, prepared this excellently for me.

I first met the founder and director of NOTAM in Oslo for a two-hour conversation where we discussed our experiences with regard to music and technological development, workshops and residence projects for artists, etc. It was interesting to learn the reasons for NOTAM's evolution into a country-wide independent educational and events institution. The director of NOTAM, Jøran Rudi, presented the different residence and work opportunities at the institution, and explained its networking character. We agreed to remain in contact, and especially to think of ways to enable an exchange of projects and residence artists between NOTAM and Germany, and especially Berlin.

Much as in Germany, a growing desire to differentiate between artists who work with sound and composers whose work rather tends towards the field of 'audio art' is taking place in Norway. This is also connected with the current blurred line between sound art and tonal art (music) that can clearly be seen in the different approaches of artistic work with the material of sound. Yet this is hardly reflected in the public perception and classification of sound art. In addition, academic institutions are becoming less dominant in contemporary music and sound art production, and this, among other reasons, has to do with the increasingly simple entranceways and, at the same time, the constantly declining production means. And it is precisely these better production means that NOTAM in Norway, for example, is working on.

From Oslo, I travelled to Svalbard, where the "super ultra North of everything project", organised by Harald Fetveit of "dans for voksne", was underway. This project at the edge of perception was a very particular one because it did not follow the usual festival-event-culture concept but gave the artists the space to engage in serious work and realms of experience. Five international musicians and a Norwegian performance collective were invited to Svalbard. While the performance collective in Russian Barentsburg experimented on a special life cream based on polar bear fat, and then produced this on the spot and presented it, the five musicians had completely different events to deliver. In addition to a prelude and a postlude in Oslo, the first part of the project began in the abandoned mining town of Pyramiden. All five musicians (Jaap Blonk, Kaffe Matthews, Roger Turner, John Hegre, Anla Courtis) gave approximately half-hour solo concerts for no one in unusual venues in extremely cold temperatures. This conceptual idea is nothing new; Terry Fox' great sound performances in empty churches, under highway bridges, etc. come to mind. To date, these have mainly been one-off artistic concepts, and to my knowledge were not models developed by the organisers.

This existential individual artistic experience combined with the collective necessity to survive the extreme conditions (minus 25 degrees Celsius) determined the very special energy of the two concert evenings scheduled at the end of the festival in Russian Barentsburg, this time with a local audience that at times came out in large numbers as well as three “official” visitors from Madrid, Bergen and Berlin. The participating musicians – who had not played together up to that point, and probably would not have in the near future – produced different combinations in these concerts, transmitting the unusual spirit of the landscape and the preceding individual and collective experiences into their musical interplay. Viewed sceptically by some participants at first, the only criticism the participants later had of the idea and its realisation was the presence of a video documentation team at each solo concert in Pyramiden. This view was backed by the musicians during conversations. An inconspicuously mounted camera without an operator would have been better for the solitary setting since, according to Harald Fetveit, this documentation had not been intended for publication anyway. I arranged a current information exchange on the respective plans with the festival director, and one topic we discussed was his new project in the Norwegian seamen’s churches scattered around the world. The spirit of this unusual festival can hardly be transferred anywhere else, although we would like to try to jointly present the “super ultra North of everything” formation in Berlin in 2010.

The last part of my trip was a one-day visit in Bergen, where I was accompanied by Jørgen Larsson, the director of the “lydgalleriet”. We began our day with a visit to BEK, or Bergen Center for Electronic Arts, where we talked with its director, Trond Lossius, about current developments in medial arts and the opportunities for a bilateral exchange of medial artists and workshop ideas between Bergen and Berlin that could start in the late summer of 2009. After that, I visited the rooms of the “lydgalleriet” to prepare for an exhibition project in autumn 2009. Indeed, the week-long discussions with Jørgen Larsson, who was also in Svalbard, were highly interesting. I was able to learn more about current developments in the Norwegian sound art scene, and we commenced work on our first joint projects. In addition to my first curated exhibition in Bergen, Jørgen Larsson, among others, will become a member of the European events and curator group “Resonance”, that has been bringing together sound art curators from France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany for the past two years to exchange information and, at the same time, to try to develop and realise a European residence programme for sound artists. With the inclusion of the director of the “lydgalleriet”, this network is expanding into the Scandinavian area for the first time.

Berlin, 26.04.2009

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carsten Seiffarth', written in a cursive style.

Carsten Seiffarth