

YNKB (Outer Nørrebro Cultural Bureau) and Morten Bencke The Common Kitchen Garden

This text was initially written as a part of an involvement in a long-term project called ArtReach, hosted by the Nikolaj Kunsthal, one of the major institutions for contemporary art in Copenhagen, Denmark. The text was produced collectively over a short but intensive period of three days on the basis of previous and individual fragments of writing, notes and scribbles. Apart from introducing the idea and concrete initiative of 'The Common Kitchen Garden', it discusses the framework within which this idea was developed - ArtReach - and more genuinely the instrumentalization of art and the matter of collective practices for resisting this tendency.

ArtReach

By initiating the project 'ArtReach', Nikolaj Kunsthal in Copenhagen has put forward an intention to challenge its traditional institutional framework, by attempting to move away from the usual exhibition and gallery space in order to seek new and unknown horizons. One could call this ambitious as well as good timing, a vision in good keeping with contemporary international trends among cultural institutions.

For Nikolaj Kunsthal, ArtReach was a well-intentioned attempt to bring 'art' from the city centre to the residential neighbourhoods of Copenhagen, to where people are living their everyday lives. This is something that 'we' - as YNKB - have been working on for a very long time, and accordingly something that we know is not as easy as it sounds. 'YNKB' is an abbreviation of the Danish translation of 'Outer Nørrebro Cultural Bureau' and is tied to a particular space located in the area of Nørrebro as well as being tied to a changing group of individual artists that have collaborated and worked collectively since 2001. The work of YNKB seeks in however different ways, formats and media to explore, diagnose and act upon the situation that we find ourselves in in Copenhagen - as an expression, however, of a more global development.

Methodology

Framed as a pilot outreach project in Denmark and a long-term investigation of the potentialities and limitations, YNKB was invited to take part in ArtReach. From the beginning this activated a number of discussions as well as the decision that our contribution had to be a project that would support, continue and expand already existing activities that were meaningful to the community. We did this to avoid contributing to the event and consumer culture that prevails among the initiatives in arts and culture often implemented in the Nørrebro area.

More particularly, there has been a lot of cultural activities around Blågård's Plads, which is a central square on Nørrebro that for decades has been stigmatized in the national media. Eagerness to stimulate and culturally engage this particular square, however, often results in short-lived activities and, more overarching, in large parts of the knowledge and trust built up during the project-making disappearing as soon as the event is over. Apart from this, it is always incredibly difficult to come from the outside with a project that local people have not been a part of initiating. This often leads to alienation and mistrust towards the project.

Thus, instead of a spectacular art event, which would soon be over, we wanted our contribution to be the beginning of something that could be continued by local residents and work in the longer run. In this sense, our aim was to initiate an art project which would be meaningful and would tend to a latent need in the neighbourhood of Nørrebro.

After a research period of three months from October till New Year 2010 which entailed long walks several times a week, conversations and casual meetings with local residents, we slowly started to approach a potential project.

During a walk in the area around Blågård's Plads, we came across some disused and neglected raised garden beds in the yard behind the Cultural and Social Center on Kapelvej. This Cultural and Social Center houses the kitchen where the food for the local popular people's kitchen is prepared. This particular people's kitchen was started by local activists and serves food for up to around 200 people every Wednesday at around 30 to 40 DKK per meal. It is one of the initiatives that has been most successful in bringing the local residents together. To us this seemed like a unique opportunity to combine a number of the criteria of success defined in relation to ourselves and our contribution to ArtReach. These criteria were already drawn up in our early meetings with Støberiet. (See the illustrations).

From our conversations with the people working in the kitchen at The Cultural and Social Center we drew up the project "The Common Kitchen Garden". This is in short a garden which is meant to support the local people's kitchen through local production of vegetables and herbs. "The Common Kitchen Garden" is a contextual project aimed at the creation and strengthening of a community around food supply. To grow healthy and ecological vegetables and follow them from the soil to the table. At the same time, it is a project that can bring the necessity and possibility of growing a part of your own food in focus, even if you are living in the city. We wanted to create a space where people could just drop by and get into things. Where people of all ages could get together in the open air. An urban garden as social space.

We had a logo drawn up, so people could recognize the project; a heart and two carrots. We put ads in the local paper, handed out flyers and put up posters in the area and invited anyone who might be interested to a big meeting at the Cultural and Social Center.

Urban Gardens

A lot of urban gardens have shot up the last 20 years, in Nørrebro as well as other places in Copenhagen and cities around the world, not at least in the big cities of the US. The number of urban gardens increases in times of economic crises, and when food prices are going up.

In Nørrebro in Copenhagen, many of these initiatives have been connected to the struggle to preserve an area called 'The People's Park' and have been started by the grassroots organization 'Økologiske Igangsættere' (= 'Ecological Entrepreneurs') that existed in the 90's. Amongst these projects is the famous "A Garden In One Night" at Sankt Hans Torv, or the foundation of the very garden and raised beds behind The Cultural and Social Center on Kapelvej. Today, other groups are continuing this work, like for instance DYRK which is working with mobile raised beds and establishing a garden on the roof of a local school in Nørrebro.

The raised beds behind The Cultural and Social Center on Kapelvej were built by the group 'Økologiske Igangsættere' as a part of a social and ecological vision of turning the asphalted city areas into a green and sustainable place to live. When the group (Økologiske Igangsættere) started working in the winter of 1993 it consisted of around 20 dedicated local residents. The first thing was to get permissions from the fire department, the Directorate of Roads, and the municipal Department of Parks, as well as applying for

funding - e.g. from 'The Green Foundation' and 'The European Cultural Capital 96'. The second step was to finally remove asphalt and concrete. Huge piles of waste were removed, and at the same time recycled bricks and fresh soil were brought in.

Repair

We see "The Common Kitchen Garden" as a necessity, as the repair of an already established but neglected urban garden. But also as an extension, in the shape of four new raised beds in front of the Cultural and Social Center towards the street, the re-establishing of the composting system, and a re-articulation of the need for places like this one. The wish to repair and cultivate the garden stems from our daily involvement over many years in the neighbourhood of Nørrebro, but also from our common artistic practice which rather than the image as such is concerned with the everyday practicalities of real life.

In YNKB we have been working both practically and theoretically with the term "repair". Repairing is, and has always been, a part of everyday life for most people. But it is an activity which requires good ideas as well as thoughtfulness and a practical relation to the surroundings. By using this term in an art project, we do not attempt to stand above all the people who have been repairing destroyed or worn out objects. All the people who have fixed their bicycles, sown in buttons, mended old socks, prolonged the lifetime of cheaply made products, or repaired things which have a special importance to them. We wish to draw attention to repair as a sustainable and creative act.

A significant extension of the raised beds at the Cultural and Social Center at Kapelvej is the founding of a new garden behind a local library at Blågårds Plads - the central stigmatized square on Nørrebro. This was already planned in the spring of 2011, but is yet to be realized and will continue beyond the timeframe of ArtReach. We want to open the library up for "The Common Kitchen Garden" in the shape of a lush orangery and permaculture garden. Fruit trees, bushes with berries and espaliers are part of the plan as well as a henhouse with cackling hens. In 1970, the artist group 'Kanonklubben' (= 'The Canon Club') created a garden in the atrium of the retirement home 'Peder Lykke Centret' in the Amager neighbourhood of Copenhagen. It still exists, and for more than 40 years it has brought joy to the residents and people working there.

The investigation

One could then ask: what was the motivation for accepting the invitation to participate in the ArtReach programme?

One reason was the possibility to investigate the framework of the art institution and its role as a political actor/body and hereby to investigate what the ArtReach concept can, should, and could be.

We had many considerations along these lines even before the actual beginning of the project. This becomes clear when we look back at the many notes and minutes taken at numerous discussions and meetings. As for instance in the following excerpt:

"The square already seems over-stimulated by projects, which are often in an "event format" since the projects inside the framework of the institution often should be judged as either "success or failure" - both socially and culturally (actually the success of the social event seems to lay the foundation for the scholarly evaluation of the quality of the artwork.... thus making it virtually impossible to produce a good art project of any interest on other terms than those which make the work/action easily recognizable as a success.

...

We talked about how two different motions seemed to be at play. One going from the art institution Nikolaj Kunsthal to the neighbourhood of Nørrebro. The other one is from Blågårds Plads on Nørrebro and back to Nikolaj Kunsthal."

Quoted from the resume of a meeting at a falafel restaurant, December 1 2010

If Nikolaj Kunsthal as one of Copenhagen's major institutions for contemporary art asks what contemporary art can accomplish as a local factor for young people, we, in turn, could ask how Nikolaj Kunsthal wants to act as an art institution outside its own four walls? This in a field of the arts where there has been attempts at dismantling the categories and to replace them with the investigation of the relation between aesthetics and social reality? Where does the art institution draw the line to show how much challenging they want of their institutional framework? How willing are the curators to discuss their own part as political actors/bodies? To what extent is the art institution ready to put work into the creation of trust and positive relations on a local scale as an active part of ArtReach?

We have all in YNKB experience from working in activist projects, at street level, and with no institutional backing. A lot of the art we have created together has its roots in an artistic tradition which tries to set up, make visible, and practice utopias. It is a tradition which moves the artistic expression away from the object and towards a language of critical engagement in society. And therefore will not be able to shy away from a problematization of the way art institutions facilitate an instrumentalization of art.

Instrumentalization of art

It is no new fact that artists and cultural producers to an increasing degree, rather than engaging themselves in local and social infrastructure, end up, consciously or unconsciously, contributing actively to the processes of gentrification. That the economy of artists and cultural producers, together with states, local authorities, entrepreneurs, and real estate speculators, are part of the mechanism that increases the prices of housing, attracts investments, and pushes people into precarious positions and out of their neighbourhoods. But still the discussion about the role of the artist often seems to end here. However, public art is increasingly being used biopolitically in an attempt to mobilize and activate the citizen per se. The hope is that through art the citizen will learn how to become a good citizen.

The disciplining of the self and the body takes place in the school, the workplace and spills out into the public space. Here it seems that art and the way in which the city is being formed, with its economical, political and technological acolytes, to a still greater extent is being instrumentalized to meet the specific demands from state and capital.

Thus, art is not merely meant to entertain, attract investments, and educate, but also to activate the citizen to become part of the structure of feeling of a so-called community. But this "community" is carefully analyzed, calculated, and the rules of behaviour are very often predefined. The citizens become participants, the budget is tight, and the goal is clear. There is no room for coincidence, inefficiency, deviancy and contemplation.

The institutions which up until now have defined the community as part of the welfare state are in the process of being phased out. Public bath houses, libraries, and cultural houses

are experiencing economical cuts and threats of closure. Certain kinds of culture are being normalized, criminalized, and standardized. Then comes the attempt at patching up and renewing, in a zombie-like form, through a make-believe participation in society, in orchestrated experiences with art.

Art is already over-instrumentalized and has to meet far too many demands to be called 'free'. What mayors, city planners, cultural workers, curators, real estate speculators, and entrepreneurs want is something that looks like art at a passing glance. Art and the artist are more than ever something that just passes by, on to the next project, a new curator, a new budget, a new goal. Left behind is often some piece of junk, a failed vision, a proof of the fact that no-one took the local citizen into consideration.

The idea that inclusion into a public art project can solve structural inequality in society or a certain neighbourhood is not just naive, it also causes further exclusion. Inclusion for the sake of inclusion often homogenize difference, in the same way that openness can constitute a rhetorical trap, and hereby weakens the possibility of disagreeing at all. Thus art with its openness, social participation and (exclusive) inclusion, has been part of creating a false equality between the ones who have access to be heard in public, and those who usually are not heard. What is normally very serious, and maybe even criminal, is allowed in art, but only as long as it remains detached from everyday life and under the label of "art". In this way, socially engaged art often ends up working towards the same goals as the politicians with whom it disagrees. They are told that art and creativity can save the world, if nothing else at least part of it, but what they probably truly wish for is that it will save profits and solve the social problems that the state has given up on.

The open investigation

Our interest in these relations and "conflicts", and our way of treating these as 'raw material', has to do with a certain curious investigating gaze. We see ArtReach as an open investigation. For something to qualify as an investigation it is essential that one does not pretend to know the answer beforehand. There are many different ideas as to what ArtReach should do and must be; but if we want it to turn out to the benefit of the local citizen on Nørrebro it is important not to try to control how relations and circumstances evolve towards categories like "success" and "failure".

This is how we understand the matter of art today. Not as a continuation of modernism, with its demands of novelty and the unique, but as a suggestion of a contextual, holistic, all-encompassing, sustainable, and inclusive cultural and artistic way of thinking, which instead of a reproduction of capitalist consumption and economic growth builds on self-sustainable solidarity, and generosity.

In an art context, this can be achieved by creating spaces in the local environment, which people can then take over as meeting places, their own museum or an ecological urban garden, initiatives coming out of and developing micro-cultures within the community which is already there. This means long-term art-projects that could evolve into permanent projects. This can not be realized in an exhibition period of a month or two, but takes several years to develop and implement.

In the middle of the city lies "The Common Kitchen Garden", open and with no fences, integrated into the space where young people and others meet and hang out every day. One could ask why it has not been vandalized, why no-one has destroyed the fragile plants fighting for survival in the shade? Could they somehow be affecting the lives of local

residents, the everyday lives of young people? Creating new utopias in the city? This is how we have interpreted and decoded the process.

We don't know it all. But as a collective drawing on various experiences, practical skills and theoretical engagements, we know enough to act upon these ideas, as well as having learned a lot. It is a question of re-using and practising what we know already from small attempts at sustainable utopias.