

**Commissioned writing for B-Open and Visp**  
**A Malaise in the Making - Reflections on Bergen Assembly**  
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A work that came to be representative of my overall feeling on Bergen Assembly was the large-scale installation *In the Stomach of the Predator* by Siekmann & Creischer at gallery 3.14. I spent two hours there and still left with rather mixed feelings about the content: it was neither fish nor fowl. There are several strategies when trying to make social commentaries with artistic means, two obvious ones would be: either you want to create awareness with fact and information, state the situation and build an understanding and reflection around a subject matter or you aim to generate sympathy, empathy and reflections with more emotional tools. The work at gallery 3,14 was clearly leaning towards the first approach, using the language of logo's and advertisement and archiving to give us numbers in relation to the inequality in the world. Numbers are easy to grasp, but here they were mixed and jumbled with signs, video and archive material. I felt at a loss to what it was trying to tell me. Maybe I could have made sense out of it, if I would have spent an entire day or several days there. At the same time I feel like I do not owe a work of art a surplus from the beginning: it is the work that has to demand the time it needs by seducing or drawing in or on its opposite end by provoking and challenging me/the viewer. Even with a will to understand here, I did not. When an artwork is trying to negotiate important political and social matters, I think it should not hide between visual paradigms in such a way that all information is lost to our senses. I left the space frustrated, and indifferent to the works on display.

After a cursive reading through the catalogue and experiencing the Assembly, I understood that the curators came to Bergen with a mission: to tell the tale of how Bergen became such a cultural oversaturated hot spot and by doing so they were aiming to lay bare the pulsating wounds of this cultural body. The triennial was based upon a novel written by the Strugatsky's brothers called *Monday Begins On Saturday*. They chose the format of the novel, out of a shared interest in time-based and time-intensive art: hunting to expose the underlying crisis of the Bergen art scene by using the Soviet Union as a model to contrast and compare, while using satire as strategy - in the humoristic or absurd names of the different research institutions, in the short excerpt from the book and the digital clock at the entrance of every venue. This satiric approach could have been very interesting were it not that it was failing in a major way: rather than making us engage it was aiming to expound. Since to engage in this case would mean a dialectic approach and not a didactic one! I think the Assembly was a critique hidden under the guise of an investigation or research if you will. I'm paraphrasing: The current Norwegian cultural funding system and its democratic character, is a beautiful ideology - 'the last socialism on the planet'<sup>1</sup>. "This might be one way of defining real socialism, we thought: ... Places of happy isolation and barely tolerated communality, or sometimes the other way around, these rooms were about a system where production failed but research blossomed, where material things were overshadowed by ideas, and where bureaucracy was actually working wonders rather than denouncing them."<sup>2</sup>

The above quote unfolds my two points of critique: first of all the curatorial strategy was over-emphasizing a cerebral attitude towards the works a bias towards logic and reflection with the result that the body, senses and emotions were being denied. I also find the curatorial entrance to the works deceptive: with texts and words it propagated

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<sup>1</sup> Degot E. and Riff D., Catalogue *Monday Begins on Saturday*, p21, Sternberg press

<sup>2</sup> Degot E. and Riff D., Catalogue *Monday Begins on Saturday*, p20, Sternberg press

itself to be a renegotiation of and engagement with the cultural heart of Bergen, but instead of using a dialectic way of enfolding it was pushing from a didactic higher grounds. This strategy bored me and kept me indifferent rather than challenged and engaged. The etymology of 'to curate' also implies a care, a care for the works to be put on display, but also a care for the viewers and the host of these same art works. There seemed to be an insistence that we, the viewers, should spend an equal amount of time with the art works as the researchers, in this case the artist did: this is the care that was being asked from us. Again I do not think that this care or engagement from the viewer needs to be easily given; I think it has to be earned by the works separately but also by the framework or curatorship.

Overall, the set up of the show was classic and rather dry. There were many video works that required time, and even the sculptural or installation works spread around the venues were so dense in subject with an emphasis on set up - I wondered if the curators could not be regarded as contemporary incarnations of Daedalus, father to Icarus in Greek Mythology and famous for his inventiveness and craftsmanship. However personally I missed the burning of Icarus' wings here. I missed the colors at the other end of the spectrum where wit and cleverness are in battle with passion, romantic gestures and irrational decision-making. This assembly was, after all, a dictatorship: one that was ruled by thought, content and context: all very clever, but in my opinion also rather dully factual. There should have been a better curatorial balance between more sensuous and flirtatious works, beside the heavy loaded, time consuming installations and video.

When do we give a work of art time? What is the difference between relating to something on a more logical than on an emotional plain? As a maker, I propose that we relate to and access a whole array of moods and associations so that the body is also triggered and enlivened. Just like a still image, for example a painting, requires differences in texture, shape and color for it to become dynamic and enchanting, so does a curatorial spread require different media, shapes and content to encourage a potent and differentiated way of perceiving and relating to it. I love the idea of using the structure of a novel to build an exhibition upon: the format of a classic novel always suggests a linear order. The over simplified analogy here would be chapters in a book as a tool to organize the narrative because of the classic literary and thus linear inspiration every exhibition has to be placed in a sequence in accordance to the geographical or physical lay-out of the show (a writing in space). However, despite this sequential strategy as a way to compensate the linear and time based art works or content, I felt that my overall impression was still linear: that of a passive reader. To rephrase: a sequential framework did not suffice to balance the linear demands of the content of each venue.

The framed pictures and documents at Rom 8 and Kode 1 generated a distanced relationship between how I perceive and what I think about, i. e the content. On a more positive note I think the spatial alterations made at Bergen Kjøtt surely made it the most atmospherically stimulating venue of this triennial. The lowering of the ceiling and the labyrinth-like corridors emphasized the enigmatic characters of the works put on display here very well. Even though the same treatment happened in Knipsu for example, here it did not enhance the work for me but it became a rather indifferent add-on. So I would have loved to see stronger spatial alterations inside the venues and at the same time alterations more specifically tailored to each works' subject matter.

Also noteworthy is the fact that there was generosity from the curators through the funding of commissioned work. These works happened to be among my favorites of the triennial: they were works were play and romance rang through without dissolving

their investigative nature. I specifically enjoyed Ane Hjort Guttus's, *A City in the Night* and Jan Peter Hammers' *Tilikum*.

*A City in the Night*, the video work at Kode 1 by Ane Hjort Guttu contained an interesting dialectic between two types of contemporary artists. On the one hand we have Hjort Guttu who models for an academic approach, investigating with the camera and with the interview format. The interview is an investigative format: someone is always (re)searching for something or someone. On the other hand we have the anonymous artist, making art purely as a manner of engaging with the world. They meet: the anonymous artist shows us, in the video, some drawings from her archive. She has never shown it before and has no intention whatsoever to show it to anyone in its entirety. The archive spans several decades and shows us the time spent. Then Hjort Guttu asks: if you do not want to show your work, why did you agree to this interview in the first place? She replies: I thought about this... but I only show you some of the images. My works are still protected... behind your work. I felt that the work was a proper showcase of how to do artistic research in its most straightforward shape. The overall mood of this video piece was a bit gloomy. This had mostly to do with what was being said, but also with the meta language of for example showing a still picture of a drawing in the video. It addresses visual structures, surplus languages while we also have to deal with the voices a top. I felt that these constructions were successful due to a certain active nostalgia. I believe that meta-languages or metaphors always carry within them a certain amount of nostalgia: there is always an attempt at talking about something in an indirect manner, which points us to a loss of things.

*Tilikum*, a documentary film about Jhon C. Lily and his life long research relating to dolphin communication, human consciousness and extra-terrestrial search by Jan Peter Hammer was a piece that was persuasive, seductive and absurdly serious. When I first saw it I thought some parts of this must have been fictionalized, after reading on the net I found out that this particular story was barely enhanced. It was clear that also here, an extensive material collecting phase preceded the making of the video. In the end the storytelling aspect of this piece, the jumping from different phases and places in relation to Lily's research, was masterfully done. The video talked about human attempts at achieving greatness through absurd experiments and infallible will. What I loved about this story and the way it was told was the fact that it was such a striking metaphor for striving towards an end with very little or no reservations. The story felt tragic in its immoderate goal and I left the screening space feeling deeply affected.

Lately there has been much talk and panel discussions about the first Bergen Triennial. Honestly I feel like the subject has been exhausted to the point of no return. There is an over abundance of criticism from local art institutions that, besides the occupying of the venues, the Triennial had nothing to do with them and they had nothing to do with it: they landed here like UFO's in an unknown plain, planted their critique, and left without a genuine exchange of thoughts or labor. In retrospect I wonder: is this kind of swift and cold exchange the nature of the animal or better the space shuttle? Triennials have popped up all over the globe, in cities that are thriving and that are wealthy enough to give a face to its infrastructure. Here in Bergen, there seems to be an on the surface consensus, that the works in the Triennial were good, that it was well chosen and set up. There were several art producers patting each other on the shoulder, saying: 'well done! We can be proud of the professional scene we have! Here, Here! Here, Here!' My impression is that this kind of positive affirmation among local institutions is a counter reaction to the rather harsh critique that The Assembly got in local publications. I was asked to write about the art and the general curatorial concept. Perhaps by doing so I inherently complicate the triennial: by doing so I hope to propose a subjective attitude to art making and to promote an intuitive curating.

