

Art And Society

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BA Thesis

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Abstract.

I grew up on the Faroe Islands a small Island group in the atlantic ocean with beautiful nature and picturesque scenery, but something was missing.

The whole social structure of the Faroe Islands was, and still is based on the ten commandments in the Bible. Darwin was banned in the schools, Man was created by God.

People who thought differently were pushed out of the small community, and often ended up moving to Denmark. It is believed that almost 10,000 people have abandon the Faroe Islands and live abroad. The fanatic religious ideology had a big impact on the faroese society, and it made me very angry as a teenager, I wanted to change something in my society. I went against the set rules and started to provoke the system, by for example hang out with people on the wrong side of life according to, the Christian society rules. I joined the Sea Shepherd at the age of thirteen, as one of the first persons in the Faroe Islands. The Sea Shepherd is an activist group whose aim is to stop whale killings. They are extremely much hated in the Faroe Islands, because they claim, that we kill the whales in a very barbaric style and I agree. When I look back this has also been a common thread of my artwork, the provocation against the system that I find unfair, or unlikely to be true.

For me humans and nature are not separated. Society can be a group of wild goose flying over your head. I believe that there is a social structure, and a plan in the universe for every living organism, also on a spiritual level. I'm interested in the interactions between living beings. I will try to bring the discussion up in this thesis on, why art is an important part of our modern society. The role of the critical artwork, in connection with own works. My thoughts about being a female artist, and shed light on artists, that have influenced and inspired me.

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Background

When I was a child I used to draw on every paper that I could find, on tables, phonebooks, I did tasks for my friends at school like portrait drawing, I was not interested in learning anything from the regular school system. Drawing was my escape, from the situation I was in and it was like a safety zone for me where everything was possible and endless opportunities occurred. I could draw something that had not yet been discovered, strange combinations of animal parts, and humans with more than two arms or legs creating and inventing, was my pleasure.

In my teenage years I started to perform, but I did not realize it at that time, my first performance was in college. Like I mentioned above the provocation in combination with the sheer boredom of being told what to do, made me think of a way to get through college, I wanted to be the first student that had a diploma that would go from 03 to 13 (Danish grading system) like in a row so it would start in the lower end with 03 and then end up with 13, the scale is

00-03-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-13

So instead of going to an examination and doing my best every time, I had to go and get a 8 or get a 10 so it would fit into the diploma in the correct way. I had to get control of the situation, and if I was doing too good I had to fake it and say something totally ridiculous just to lower the grade, the teachers of the school, did of course not know about my plan, so they often just sat and stared at me. The result was not what I expected but almost, because I did not get the 13. When I was handed the diploma the headmaster of the school told me that he had never seen such a strange diploma, and asked me if I wanted to take the course again. The reason for me doing this work was because I saw no future in anything that was connected with education, and I have only used the diploma once in my life that was when I applied to the Art academy here in Iceland.

I'm interested in the outcome of the work and when I was trying to provoke a certain grade from the teacher, it was done because I wanted to get the exact reaction, I needed for my project, I guess it is exactly the opposite, of the chance theory, that I connect many of my works to. But still it floats somewhere between spontaneity and chance, because the outcome of the grade is still relying on me as being the chance object, that makes the outcome possible, I can only depend on my human skills and the texts, I had read before the examination, the rest is up to chance.

Chance And Society

Mark Boyle¹ made a work in 1966 called 'Any Play Or No Play' he called his manifestations 'Events' the idea behind the work was to see the outcome of the reaction of the audience. The work is played out in a theater with invited guests, when the curtain was supposed to go up he stopped it from going up, and then he invited people in front of the stalls up on the stage and behind the curtain, so when the curtain went up some parts of the audience became the actors. The audience on stage, felt that something was expected of them, just because they were upon the stage. Nothing was instructed or demanded from them and the performance went on for twenty minutes, nobody in the audience was pleased with the result of this happening, except from the artist himself. He said that the anticlimax was so extreme that he could write an essay about it, Mark Boyle accepted the outcome unconditionally and appreciated chance as the ultimate answer to everything, he said if one provokes chance the result is what it is. George Bataille² who was a 20th century western philosopher divides chance into being present in two ways.

1) Catastrophe. The calculus of probabilities limits the scope of this catastrophe, but as death makes us subjects of its empire, the meaning (or non meaning) of catastrophe isn't to that extent humanly cancelled.

2) Part of human life escapes from work and reaches freedom. This is the part of play that is controlled by reason, but, within reason's limits, determines the brief possibilities of a leap beyond those limits. Play which is as fascinating as catastrophe, allows you positively to glimpse the giddy seductiveness of chance.

In short words chance is the word used for the unknown outcome of a work. It is in the hands of the spectator or the physical rules of nature, what the outcome will be. I connect many of my artworks to the chance theory, I see society as a layer of chance related results all brought together by human desire and impulses, we are living organisms who want to as Bataille describes it, live by set rules and systematic understanding of the existence, through science and knowledge, but we cannot deny the fact that every law was decided by chance or luck without reason entering the picture, except when the calculation of probabilities allowed it.

¹Documents of contemporary Art Edited by Margaret Iversen Page.114-115 Jasia Reichardt on Chance and Mark boyle

²Documents of contemporary Art Edited by Margaret Iversen Page.30-31 George Bataille Chance/1944

My inspiration is often my own anger towards something I feel closely attached to, or that I'm found off. I use the unfairness of the world as my source of ideas, I feel like my voice is heard through my work, when I get a feedback from the audience, or if some of my works are in the media addressing the problem that my work was related to, it makes me feel like I have made an impact on some issues that could be adjusted in our society, and that's the main role for me as an artist. As an example I can mention that I once sent a photo of a place that I usually go for walks, outside my town, there was a lot of metal and iron waste from an old fish factory in this beautiful landscape. I sent the photograph to an exhibition and by chance a journalist saw my work at the exhibition, and after that a newspaper did a weekly article about what town had the most industrial waste lying around, most of the waste was cleaned up and we had a more environmental policy in the local communities in the Faroe Islands. Fig 1.

In my last work called 'The Artist Is Not Present' Fig 2. I just have a title and my name, under the sign where the title should be, so the title is the work. It is a personal work for me because, I see myself at a starting point in my life as an artist. I have many ideas and creative thoughts, but will it be enough to get me through a lifetime as an artist. My direct inspiration was Marina Abramovic's latest work 'The Artist Is Present' Fig 3. Where she is receiving auditions from her audience, they have no formal platform to work from just that, the viewer can meet her and talk to her, she does not have to perform any work of art, her presence is enough to make people stand in line for 3 days to meet her. This work has led me into thinking more deeper about the fundamental role of an artist in society. In my opinion an artist always has to cross the line, of normality and critically investigate his or her surroundings and society, to make things better or shed light on some problem in the social structure, and in the following pages I will discuss why this is so important, and what movements and artists have investigated this issue deeper.

Does one have to sacrifice a normal life to become an important artist for the society!

I can only compare my own experiences as a woman, who was brought up to have a husband and a family, that the ability to only be present parts of the day, will make things a lot easier, when it comes to having a family life besides the working process of being an artist, but I'm not sure if that will ever be enough to do any reasonable good works of art, I believe that the total presence, is the only way to go, but that determination and decision will demand the sacrifice of losing some of the most common human desires, and become a solitude person who only lives for the creation of art and brings art into life, as if art is life and cannot be separated. This is what I'm trying to express with my own artwork 'The Artist Is Not Present' I'm not sure if I want to make this sacrifice, I'm trying to let time show the way for me.

Dadaism And Society

So can a work of art be both critical on society and also be chance related!

Yes In my opinion this is possible,like Abramovich´s work, it derived from a lifetime of performing critical artworks. Other artists that have been influenced by chance,are the Dadaists they started their group as an anti-art movement in Zurich in the year 1916 when the first world war just broke out, the Dadaists were against the society and the culture that they had been told to adapt to, by the political governments of their representative native countries, the Dadaists where anti-war and anarchistic in their expression.

³Dada is the groundwork to abstract art and sound poetry a starting point for performance art, a prelude for postmodernism, an influence on pop art, a celebration of anti-art to be later embraced for anarchic-political uses in the 1960s and the movement that lay the foundation for surrealism.

The Dadaists were inspired by society and they found a creative way into looking critically at society, the members that formed the group were mostly from Europe but also America, they believed that the anti-intellectualism of the capitalistic world had lead the world into war, hunger and so on. All the misfortunes the individual in the society could be traced back to,a capitalistic vision on looking at the world and the society,the anti-art was created as an op poser to the esthetics of the beautiful art which did not criticize the society or change it in any way. The only purpose of the beautiful art is to be aesthetic to the viewer. I have often been wondering about what people want from art! Or do they even want anything from art! Do they want to get an experience, or be educated or inspired, does the artist hold the responsibility to enlighten and inform the viewer. Somehow it must be inside the human nature to live with art as an information platform, because it has been around since the beginning of Man. So when we look back the Dadaists were the provocateurs of their time, and the need for provocation, was the artistic response for the need of change in a society, they laid the tracks for future generations to go against the set rules, and the disharmony of the social structures, if it demands it, and if I compare it to a very similar case just here in Reykjavik, where Jon Gnarr a comedian and actor was elected as major of Reykjavik, this shows the power and will to change a disharmonious society, and the performance he started has ended as a political opposition for the need of change in the social structures.

³Mark Lowenthal translator´s instructions to Francis Picabias I am a beautiful monster.
Poetry,prose and provocation, quotation

Philosophy

The philosophy that I have found mostly connected with my perception of life and the meaning of art is the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, he was a German philosopher that stated that every action of a human being, or for that matter any living bacteria including the nature itself is controlled by will, not free will just will⁴.

The will is the strong blind man who carries on his shoulder the lame man who can see

Will is the reason for being, for any actions we take and for any movement in the universe, the will is always what makes a human being crave and the will can never stop or negotiate, will is connected to the raw human desires and the pain and suffering is the cause of the cravings. The only way to end the misery of the existence and the ongoing decadence of the craving is to free the object from the will, this can only be done if the object is totally detached from the will, or the second best option, escape through the inspiration of aesthetic complementation. He indicates that there is a higher level of spirituality that connects, the living mortal will controlled individual, to the enlightenment of a better understanding of the universe, but the cost is that the will must be put aside for this period, where the connection to the spiritual high is made. If one does put the will aside, and tries to get in connection with, the pure spiritual existence and get in touch with, something that is beyond the capability of the known human existence, what does one find! And how does one get there! By letting go of the demands of your will, like the most basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothes, family. Schopenhauer was inspired by Buddhism, where meditation, and other powerful techniques as hunger was said to provoke, a level of higher understanding of the universe, this makes sense to me and I find it fascinating, that we as living individuals can enter this level, if we sacrifice the need of the will. Also there are many stories of the troubled genius who is often a very creative individual, but is not seen as a successful human being, because he has fallen off the will cravings, or perhaps only obeys one craving like for instance drinking. If we compare Dadaism to Schopenhauer's philosophy, the meaning of art is to get people away from the suffering and the craving, perhaps it also can be a catalyst for getting people to let go of the desire of human nature, and start to think more intellectual about the reason for the suffering, and change it by the enlightenment of art, by this I mean if we compare the Dadaism to the Schopenhauer philosophy, the Dada movement wanted to get away from a social structure they did not approve of, that we can compare to will, and change the structure into a higher level of consciousness that would make the suffering less, and the level of moments of no will, longer for the individual.

4 Arthur Schopenhauer *The World As Will and Representation* Payne New York Page.262 volume I.

Schopenhauer's theory can also be interpreted, by my own opinion, directly into what is good art and what is not good art, if the moment of the presence of the will, does not disappear when the viewer is looking or experiencing a work of art, the work of art does not resemble a good artwork, it will just be mediocre and have no saying to the presents or the future for the universe. For me a meaningless artwork is for instance when the ego of the artist and actually the will that Schopenhauer talks about is seen in the work, in this context I have to mention the television media and reality programs such as Big Brother, Paradise Hotel, The Bachelor, where individual people get famous only by using their ego. They have no other talent other than their will, also people like Paris Hilton fall into the same category, this can also be seen in thousands of artists that lack the enlightenment to lose the power of the will.

So why do people want to become artists, when history tells us that most of all the good artworks of our time, have been performed by people who had troubled lives, as the story of the troubled genius, and often ended up in a psychotic state of mind, or abusing alcohol and other substances.

By saying this I do not want to generalize because I'm aware of, that there are also many great works of art that have been made by artists, who are not in the role of the troubled genius, I am convinced that it's not a choice, but a calling of your spiritual intellectuality that convinces you to, rethink your situation in any given moment in time, and this makes some people unhappy because they don't understand the meaning of life, they don't have the will of Schopenhauer's theory the meaning is not defined as an end or a beginning, or something in between, the meaning can only come in moments. If we go even more deeper into the loss of the will, and the reason for why I'm creative. I imagine that I'm trying to set myself free from the regular time based reality. I can start to not believe in time and try to figure out, what happens if there was no time, just day and night like in winter, there is a lot of night, and in summer a lot of day, because it's obvious that there is night because of the darkness, and day because of the light. I once heard about a woman in China who was 110 years old. She slept for two nights, and stayed awake for two days, this worked for her and she had been doing it as long as she remembered, she will experience the darkness once, but will not obey its demands and go to sleep perhaps she was trying to not go with the will, that Schopenhauer talks about, and had overcome the first of the basic needs and cravings of the will, and therefore she could prolong her life. This is just a short story about a woman in China, I don't think she did this on purpose because she wanted to live longer. But I think it's a good example for what is humanly possible in context with the searching for the meaning of existence, and reaching the level higher level of enlightenment. The first step is that you have to get in control of your cravings of the will.⁵

5 Arthur Schopenhauer 'The World As Will And The Representation. F.J. New York Page.263-264 volume I.

Artists working with social projects

Superflex

Superflex was founded in Denmark in 1993 by three Danish artists, called Jacob Fenger, Rasmus Nielsen, and Bjørnstjerne Christiansen. The mission was to put words into action, and take the responsibility that artists often show in their works into real life. By this I mean that often a work of art is suppose to get people thinking or making some changes in their behavior or lifestyle, but the artwork is often just a suggestion to change, and not the actual change. So this is taking the demand for change in a social structure one step further and doing the change that is needed as the artwork itself, the work is the action.

They have developed projects that are global and use countries all over the world as their work area, I will explain about two of the projects here.

Guarana Power

Guarana Power .Fig 4. is a project that they have been working on together with farmers in a small village in Amazon as in Brazil, they established a co-operation firm called The Power foundation who is in charge for the distribution and sale of the drink, so what they are doing is to cut out the one of the most important link of distribution which is the commercial part of selling a product ,they don't take any charges for doing the promotion in for the sale in Denmark, so the farmers in Brazil get some more value for their raw materials, they deliver to the brewery in Denmark. The ultimate goal for the project is, that the farmers can have more control over the ownership of the product they produce, and to promote the Guarana Power drink.

Bio gas.

In 1997 Superflex started to work with engineers in Denmark and Africa, to develop small bio gas units, in small villages in Africa so that a family could be provided with enough gas to cook and use lamps in the evenings. The families could buy the units for a very cheap amount of money, that did fit with the average wage of a working pay in Africa, they started in Tanzania and now, they have developed the same techniques in many other poor countries such as Cambodia, Zanzibar with great success Fig.5

Art And Society

Superflex is a group that is working directly with the need, for social changes in the structure of society. Their goal, is not so much different than from any other artist who is trying to put an end to man made suffering, but there is a long way, from taking a photo or doing a video about let's say poverty, to actually standing in Zanzibar in Africa, digging a hole for a bio gas station.

So where does the role of the artist belong! Can it go too far, does art stop being art, if it is put into action and real life ,like the example of Superflex and Jon Gnarr and not to mention Bjork !

I think it is very hard to judge, where to draw the line between the role of artist and the activist .If you are sincere about your work, and the work you do is made up from a profound idea that you believe in, the work you have done means life and death to you. After that you don't have so many choices you just want to bring it out to life no matter what, but not everybody has the will or the means or courage to take the idea all the way.I'm for instance at the point now of just bringing topics up to discussion, and would not sacrifice my education for leaving with the Sea Shepherd to the Antarctic in January to save whales from being shot by Japanese whalers, this gives me a bad taste in my mouth, because how can I just do something half dedicated, I'm a member of many activist groups and help organizations, but I always just donate something and take photographs, but I have never taken the full step, and actually done something physical like travel to the place or situation, where the need for change is so crucial and use my resources to help. That's why I admire Superflex perhaps they are the further development in the history of art, and the overtakes of the Dada statement,taking action and work away from the guilt of the spectator. I mean we are all spectators, we see it in the media every day, that there are people starving, animal neglect, brutal wars, but nothing happens in our normal day, we go to coffee houses, to school, to work, as if nothing has happened, and I'm just the same and hate the feeling, but at the same time doing something, like address some social problems as an artist, has also been somewhat helpful to me personally ,and perhaps that's the line an artist should be feeling OK with in everyday life.

This winter we were a group in LHI ,working with a photo project from EU called poverty in Europe. We had to take photos of poverty in Iceland Fig 6.7.8..We had to work with people who had poverty directly in their life, and I worked with a single mother with three children, this was a very giving project for me and the family, it was actually the first time ,I had to work and have contact with people in that situation, and It gave me so much more insight, of what it takes to be an artist, who works with social problems on close hold. And it was a good learning experience for me to actually go to the places where they give out free food, and see the neglected apartments and the areas of Reykjavik,that are mostly inhabited by people who are on social welfare and where the unemployment rate is almost 80% . The project ended with an exhibition in the Samhjálp kaffistova at Borgartun in Dec 2010, and is now going to be traveling across the country.

Conclusion

The exhibition Poverty in Iceland, and the other subjects I was mentioning earlier in the thesis, like the work of Superflex, are all more or less a direct intervention into the social structure, because we had to work with people who were not artists and collaborate with them. The meaning of the artwork Poverty in Iceland is to make people physically feel the artwork, because when we had the exhibition, in the Samhjalp kaffistova we were in the situation of being confronted with the people who use the Kaffistova on a daily basis, we went there two or three times before we opened the exhibition, and I don't think any of the students had ever been there before neither the guests at the opening .One of the aims with the exhibition space was to make the audience and the students working with the project, more aware of the other social situation some people in Reykjavik are in.

You can as an artist also do something, or work with socially related issues without the direct intervention. Socially related issues are not connected to only, poverty unemployment, drug abuse racial issues an so on. It can be related to, for example the roles of the individual in the society.

I like the works of Cindy Sherman⁶ and Sophie Calle, if we look at Sherman's work first ,she was criticizing the American society for placing the woman in a specific role that was invented by the media. She did a series in 1977 called 'Untitled Film Stills' Where she took some scenes out of B movies and film Noir, and created them again but this time with photography, she would play the roles herself and also take the photos.

6 Cindy Sherman 'Retrospective Cruz Elisabeth A.T.Smith And Amelia Jones 1997.Page.1-7

Her criticism of the American mass media, was in the way the media had taken over the control of what a woman should be. The image was mainly created by male directors, and this had the effect that the young women who were growing up during the 1960s and 1970s had to many fictive unreachable role models to look up to, this created a unreachable image of reality. This gave her the inspiration to do one of her most famous work, the 'Untitled Film Stills' Series. In many ways, she has inspired me to do somewhat similar, but not exactly the same, because I live in 2011 and it is a bit different today, but if she would do a new version of 'Untitled Film Stills' from movies of the period 2000 to 2010 it would look very different I think, because we have so many improvements on the feminist front, when it comes to the role of women in movies today.

I did one project called Identity. Fig 9.10. Where I went out with my friend, and we had wigs on. She had a blond wig on and I had a brown wig on, we went to a bar and did some research in how people respond to different appearances, I know the feeling of having a blond hair color, but have never had brown hair before, and my friend had never tired to have blond hair, she has always been dark haired, because she always had some resentment against blond girls, so the research was both personal and also related to social structures, and how our appearance affects, the way we met and socialize with others. The work was also chance related in the way of, that I could not control the outcome of the situation.

In ⁷Sophie Calles works I can imagine, the inspiration for her is the boredom of normality that makes her to go and look into what normal people would consider extremely plain and uninteresting, like her work with following tourists, and stalking a stranger all the way from Paris to Rome. Fig 12. Just to see what happens, her works is so fascinating for me, because I think this puts focus on why we exist, and what happens if we just do something un logical, something that goes away from the set rules, and is illegal but in a kind of un frightening and comic way, it is not legal to stalk a person on the street, or look into the guests personal stuff in a hotel room, nobody expects anybody to do it. So why not try and explore these opportunities if they are in front of you, that's my opinion, and I think that her form of voyeurism and mystification of reality, is often needed to keep the doors open to creativity, her artworks appear out of nothing, but when she changes the nothing a new world appears.

⁷Sophie Calle *M'as-tu vue* Editor Christine Marcel published 2003, the book was published with the exhibition in Centre Pompidou in Paris. Page 15-39 the Hotel excerpts. Page 161-169 suite vénitienne Page 84-92.

I see myself as an artist who is doing artworks, that are inspired by social relations, and the unfairness of the individual in connection with society's set rules, also the role of the activist inspires me

I have a dream one day, to do something about the problems surrounding the protection of animals. This may come in the form of photographs and being present in the situation, I think there is a big difference between press photographs and artistic photographs, so the aim of my work will never be the total documentation, because I'm not a journalist, my aim is to let people be inspired by my works to do something about the situation, rather than get frightened or disgusted, by the image that is often what press photos are about. As an artist I'm also interested in whatever comes up in my mind and every day situations, if I want to shed light on some issue, I will use whatever media that suits the goal of the mission, I'm not in favor of only using one media like I'm only a photographer, or I'm only a painter, I want to keep all doors open and see what works and looks best technically to get the message through. I feel I'm mostly connected to the works of female artists.

Abramovic, Sherman, Calle have inspired me the most during my BA years at the Art academy, and in the future I see myself taking a Master in Holland because I found a good short course in Utrecht, also I want to do something about the state of my small country. When it comes to art, we are decades behind the other Scandinavian countries, and my plan is to open a summer school for people who want to try to apply to art academies or work with art in the future, last year I was elected into a board of artists who set the rules of what artworks, are shown in the spring exhibition in the National gallery. So this year I have got the OK from the others in the board, that we should accept an invitation from Sara Bjornsdóttir and her group from Iceland to be in the show, and I'm going to be working with that this spring and find it very exciting, because then we as a small nation can start, to take the first step into the art world of 2011, and not be stuck in 1950s cobra inspired landscape paintings that have been the art motive here in the Faroe Islands since the 1970s.

A society is always judged on its artworks and culture, if the society is poor of culture it is often also poor in every other way, so my need for change when it is necessary, is my inspiration for my artistic works .

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Images



Fig 1. Iron Nature. Unn Joensen 2007

The Artist Is Not Present
Unn Joensen

Fig 2. The Artist Is Not Present. Unn Joensen 2010



Fig 3. The Artist is Present. Marina Abramovich 2010



Fig 4. Guarana Power. Superflex 2009



Fig 5.Superflex. Bio gas 2008



Fig 6.poverty In Iceland project,postcard 2010



Fig.7.8 Poverty in Iceland Project 2010



Fig 9.Identity 2010



Fig 10.Identity 2010



Fig 12.Sophie Calle Suite Vénitienne 1980.