

## Marianne Heier, *A Frame Around Reality*, 2006



Picture 1

Art's position in society and in the public arena is an important issue and a starting point for several of my projects. The very definition of art works like an extremely powerful tool within reality, something I take great advantage of in my work. By applying Duchamp's famous concept that something is art if declared so by an artist (the basis, of course, for all ready-mades), it is possible to use the definition of art as a frame around already existing situations and in this way lift them out of their surrounding reality. This mechanism works a bit like an exercise children are often asked to do in order to learn visual composition: After covering a huge sheet of paper with random abstract spots of colour, you move a smaller *passe-partout* around on the paper until the 'right' image is captured by the frame. The very recognition of what is a 'right' image is what lifts the fragment out of the rest of the painted surface. The slightly mythical, out-of-the-ordinary, maybe even inexplicable and inaccessible character of art enables it to work like an almost magic tool when applied to reality. It is possible to obtain a sort of hyper-real state. In this sense the definition of art is truly powerful. And this definition is ultimately owned and can be activated only by artists. I believe it is our greatest privilege.

Through this process the artist takes on a temporary ownership and responsibility of actions and experiences taking place within the frameworks of the situation defined as 'art'. This is necessary in order to offer the audience the possibility to experience the work as freely as possible. Both aim and product in these cases is the experience in situ, not the physical installation as such. When this strategy works, it opens up for situations to appear as new and different; as never seen before. It provides new eyes.

### **A Drop In the Ocean**

Picture 1 shows Bjørvika as it looked six months ago. The area is in the process of being transformed from an industrial harbour into becoming Oslo's maybe most ambitious residential area. From being associated with hard work, and also prostitution, drugs and so on, this area is supposed to become an area filled with cultural activities, clubs, and the very best contemporary Norwegian architecture has to offer. The area is marketed as the 'Fjord Town' of Oslo, and there are already guided tours for tourists who wish to visit the unfinished Opera House, built to look like a glacier rising directly out of the water. It is no secret that this area is an enormous financial investment, and that the money invested here is, for a large part, private.

The target groups for the residential quarters are labelled SINKs, DINKs and Empty Nesters. These groups are considered the strongest buyers in the real estate market, as they are usually willing to

pay high prices for small spaces as long as the estate is associated with high social and cultural status (lifestyle). This market provides a quick economic gain, but is considered unstable on a longer term. There are not many artists in these groups, but they still like to surround themselves with art and culture.

It should be mentioned that the area in question has one of the most typical working class areas of the city, Gamlebyen, as its closest neighbour. Despite walking distance to trendy Grünerløkka, this area still has, together with certain areas of the suburbs, the largest quantity of socially and economically challenged families in the city. This area is considered colourful, almost exotic, and very promising by the real estate business. Quite a few artists still live here, too. It is a classic example of gentrification.

I was invited by Bjørvika Development AS (consisting of the various investors in the construction of Bjørvika) to make a project that would 'activate' the area. This sort of invitation does present some problems that are really impossible to ignore:

The critical potential of any project in this situation is necessarily at least partly compromised. However critical you intend to be, you still end up confirming the structure you meant to criticize, because the project is proposed within a framework defined and paid for by them. Accepting an invitation like this implies accepting the senders of the invitation and their project.

It is impossible to avoid contributing exactly with what they want you to: making sure the audience associates the area with cultural and artistic activity. In a certain sense you could even say that the edgier and more aggressive you are, the better: It would just make the audience more curious, and make the area appear edgy, bold and even trendier.

Of course it is also possible to see it the other way around and think that these investors are investing in art and making otherwise impossible projects happen by letting the artists access the construction areas and financing their projects, but there is no doubt these activities at least indirectly have an influence on the market value of real estate in the area.

The question is whether you can use this attention and redirect focus to other problems or parts of the city, and through this create topics for new discussions. The challenging nature of the situation triggered me. After considering the various aspects of the situation as carefully as I could, I decided to accept the invitation.

### **The Strategy of Robin Hood**

I chose to focus on the notion of the value and meaning of the notion of the 'Fjord Town' and I decided to try and adopt a sort of 'Robin Hood-strategy' to the situation. I would try to 'steal from the rich (in this case Bjørvika Utvikling AS) and give to the poor (the increasingly impoverished municipality of Oslo)'.

My initial idea was to encourage Bjørvika Utvikling AS to pay for the refurbishing and reopening of Sagene Public Baths. After a couple of meetings this proved impossible as the costs would exceed what they were prepared to spend as an art investment. The actual budget was not at all unlimited. The suggestion of applying for public money to cover part of the production costs was made, and only abandoned because of the impossibility of meeting application deadlines. I think generally it is fair to say the benefits of basing art production on private money, at least at the moment here in Norway, are extremely overrated. We are a very young nation when it comes to arts and culture, with no tradition whatsoever for private investments in art. This means the artist easily ends up with the private sponsors trying to close the best possible deal by benefiting from the 'old' system of

public funding for the arts, and the institutions increasingly expecting private sponsors to cover production costs. The matter of the facts is that we are risking the economic basis of art production in Norway to dry out as no one feels responsible for it anymore.

At this point I have to briefly introduce the other sponsor of the project, Oslo Kunsthall. Oslo Kunsthall opened with great ambitions and an international profile in a former garage in 2000. From the very start their existence was signed by the conflict between the high artistic level on one hand, and very unstable and unpredictable economy on the other. Their economy during the last years got worse and worse, until 2005 when, after repeatedly receiving positive signals and investing enormous amounts of work, they received only 50 000 kroner from their main sponsor, the Municipality of Oslo. This was supposed to cover all aspects of their activity, which of course is completely impossible, and a large project that was supposed to take place in Groruddalen in Oslo was abandoned due to lack of money. I was supposed to take part in this project, and I decided to combine the two invitations and continue the collaboration with Oslo Kunsthall and Bjørvika Development within the same project.

This gave the possibility to sharpen the political focus of my work: The contrast between the strong private, market oriented economy on one side and the ever weaker public economy on the other in my view was very clearly illustrated by the comparison between Bjørvika Utvikling AS and Oslo Kunsthall, between the construction in Bjørvika and the maintenance of the suburbs in Groruddalen, and finally between the financial investment behind the slogan of the 'Fjord Town' and the swimming instruction offered to school children in Oslo.



Picture 2

### **Sagene Bath, reopened for one day**

Picture 2 shows Sagene Public Baths as it looks today. In this facility generations of people from Oslo have learnt to swim. It is situated on top of Grünerløkka, an area considered very attractive today, but still quite poor until just three decades ago.

It was designed by the architect Hagbarth Schytte-Berg, and was completed in 1900, as Oslo's third public baths after those in Torggata and Enerhaugen. Construction of the building was financed by Kristiania Brændevinssamlag (a collective distillery), which in response to an application from the municipal council granted 83,000 kroner in the years 1895-99. The baths provided people in the area with the possibility to shower and bathe. In 1926 a swimming pool was added on the site between the baths and Sagene school. This extension cost 87,700 kroner in 1926.

Today the baths are owned by Oslo Council, which has put them up for sale. The complex has stood empty and dry since 2000 in expectation of a settlement. For each year that passes the renovation and investment needed for a reopening of the swimming pool to the general public grow more daunting. In 2001 a reopening of the entire facility would have cost an estimated 35 million kroner, while a reopening of the swimming pool merely for teaching purposes (with access from the school but not from the street) would have cost around 8 million kroner.

Sagene Baths is registered as a listed building by the city's Directorate for Cultural Heritage. The preservation order applies to the building's exterior and certain internal features, such as its doors and mouldings. The sales value of the building in 2005 has been set at 1000 kroner.

Swimming instruction has had high priority in Norwegian schools during the last half of the twentieth century. Together with the construction of public swimming pools it can almost be seen as a part of the social democratic project. Since we actually are a 'fiord country', drowning accidents have traditionally been common here. Therefore, there was a very specific reason for investing in children's swimming abilities, and the goal was that they would be given the possibility to exercise these abilities regularly throughout their whole childhood. This actually worked, it led to a large reduction in the frequency of drowning accidents in Norway.

In 2003 the Norwegian Swimming Federation together with the Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue commissioned MMI, a market research agency, to conduct a survey of swimming proficiency among Norwegian ten-year-olds. The survey revealed that children in their final year at Oslo's primary schools received little or no swimming instruction. Pupils in the "fjord town" of Oslo and schoolchildren of foreign cultural background were consistently less proficient in swimming than the national average. Here only 2 percent of pupils receive swimming instruction in school as opposed to 46 percent on a nationwide basis. The main reason for this is lack of finances within the municipality. This affects both the swimming pools and the provision of teaching in schools. The Norwegian Swimming Federation is calling both for maintenance of existing swimming pools and for the construction of new facilities to meet existing demand.

This is a very clear image of the big changes in the very structure of our society. What used to belong to everybody now belongs to nobody. Oslo Council is hoping to sell the building to a private owner, who would take on all the expenses related to the place, including maintenance (it would maybe be more accurate to talk about reconstruction at this point), and assume the responsibility to open it to the public again. I think this is rather unlikely, the numbers of course just don't add up and the building is not attractive on the market as it is now.

On the 25th of June, Oslo Kunsthall and I opened Sagene Bath to the audience for one day. The room contained a sound recording made in another, swimming pool in Oslo which is still in use and the physical emptiness and dryness of the space was contrasted and highlighted by a very realistic sound of water splashes, children playing and jumping etc.



The installation in Bjørvika consisted of large photos of public swimming pools in the suburbs and outskirts of Oslo, and lasted all through summer. These facilities are all still open and in use, but are under constant threat of closure due to lack of funding both for maintenance and for paying people to work there. The empty pools with still water contrasted the waves in the sea behind the pictures. To arrange for the pictures turned out to be the easiest thing in the world, as the pools are already more often closed than open.

### **Public Art within the Art Institution**

A problem often encountered is the reintroduction of this kind of projects in the art institution. How can they be presented efficiently inside a gallery or a museum? Very often the work cannot be separated neither from the process of making it, nor from the place for which it was conceived. The work is the process, and it is the place. What is left afterwards is a sort of slightly faded trace or a good story. A curator once told he thought the radio would be the place most suitable for my projects once finished, I could just talk about them.

These strategies are by now rather common within contemporary art. The relation between the art institutions as they are today, and this sort of art is known to be problematic. I think today the biggest problem is how to make sure these strategies can maintain their autonomy. This is to a large extent simply a question of economy. Institutions such as museums and galleries can provide a certain security by financing exhibitions and art projects to take place on their inside, but these strategies are more exposed to the free market regulations as they tend to fall outside of or not be covered by existing financial possibilities offered to the production of more traditional 'artworks'. Despite a rather long tradition it is still a challenge to include the 'experience' among the various categories of artworks and finalized art productions. The risk as it is now is that the only available definition for this kind of artistic activity is that of 'entertainment', a definition with room for the experience, but not very much for the critical or analytical aspects of art. The meeting between art and market interests on the present terms ultimately endangers the autonomy of art that takes place outside of the art institutions.

© Marianne Heier

For further information on this and other projects by artist Marianne Heier, see [www.marianneheier.org](http://www.marianneheier.org)