

You said, 'irony'

Jesper Alvaer

You said, 'I appreciate it when articles start with a quote, it kind of sets the tone, allowing the reader to tune in. I will use one as well.' – Could you tell us what you had in mind?

Yes, some weeks back, while skimming some pages of a random book, a short entry on Art and Reality caught my attention. A collection of writings by the painter Robert Motherwell. Something particular in regard to this thing under discussion. It is from 1976. I quote:

An odd contradiction, if the layman were correct in his unconscious assumption: the artist begins with reality and ends with art: the converse is true – to the degree that this dichotomy has any truth – the artist begins with art, and then through it arrives at reality. If one were to ask such-and-such a painter what he felt about anything, his just response – though seldom he makes it – would be to paint it, and in painting it, to find out ... It could be that, in trying to paint it, he finds that he cannot, that something else keeps appearing on the canvas; that is, in regard to this thing under discussion, he finds out that he has no feelings at all ...⁽¹⁾

You said, 'Perhaps less romantic, in 2009, the research group Political Currency of Art (PoCA) addressed issues of irony and contemporary art' – Could you tell us any more details?

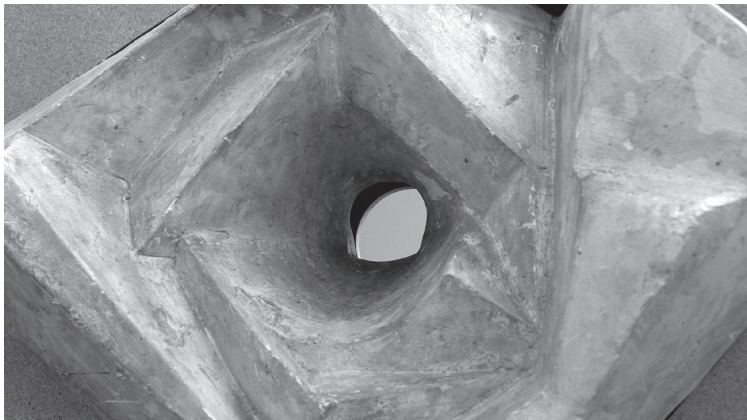
Yes, they questioned if irony still could be used as a meaningful artistic and political device when its rhetoric is appropriated by the language of late capitalism. Further, if the ironic gap between a private and public voice, between what is said and what is generally understood, necessarily entails a position of passivity? Could we critique a system which relied on irony without ourselves being ironic? Last question, was if we could find a mode of irony which does not assume a double audience and hence a privileged sphere of knowledge?⁽²⁾

It would just be too interesting and too complicated to pursue PoCa's enquiries here. I believe that exactly these kinds of questions serve well in approaching a possible thematic field where situated ironies in relevant proximity to artistic research could be found. For now, this will only serve as our introductory backdrop.

You said, '*The challenge must be to address how (unconscious) irony is currently playing an operative role in artistic research*' – Could you clarify?

In this case, I am forced to narrow this down and elaborate from perspectives available to me, in short, the practice in which I am involved and work myself. In this regard, this text will look into two research exhibitions and attempt to locate how (unconscious) irony could possibly be playing an operative role as a meaningful artistic device, enabling an effective dissemination of artistic research.(3) This without *irony* itself being in explicit focus or even thematically addressed in either of these exhibitions. It is simply there (*unconscious*). This comparative set-up will allow for an approach to irony in a subjective *situated sense*.

This remains to be elaborated with the reader as well, or as we shall see, with our Case A and Case B visitors. We can begin to observe how its *modi* are being played out in a range of related situations. But first, a short introduction of the two respective research exhibitions. We have two cases. Case A: 'Mother, Dear Mother' at Kunstnernes Hus, in Oslo, and Case B: 'Competence' in Fotograf Gallery, Prague.



Sculpture by Ørnulf Bast, *Breakthrough*, front view detail. Still from the film *Mother, Dear Mother*. (Cinematography by Cecilie Semec)

Case A: 'Mother, Dear Mother'

Jesper Alvær's art is based on a lengthy investigation of various cultural phenomena and exchanges. For the next month, Kunstnernes Hus will be exhibiting Alvær's latest work, *Mother, Dear Mother*, an installation that combines soundscapes and staged lighting to comment on a few selected objects. The exhibition is the outcome of Alvær becoming a member of every major political party in Norway in conjunction with the general election in September 2013. He used these memberships to become involved in the political activities of the respective parties, both prior to and after the election, and the objects in the exhibition refer to his experiences during these activities.

The objects have been abstracted to four reductive, sculptural forms that serve as narrative bases. The exhibition's lighting has an auxiliary function, indicating the visitor and listener's movements in the room by way of a soundtrack – a series of brief statements that allude to political scenes both from present day and modern Norwegian history. The soundtrack comments in its entirety on a subject matter that can be encapsulated in terms such as change, transformation and restructuring in the context of contemporary Norwegian politics.

The exhibition features a handful of objects with a certain political resonance. The *Breakthrough* (*Gjennombruddet*) is a plaster cast of a sculpture by Ørnulf Bast, famous for the two bronze lions guarding the entrance to Kunstnerens Hus. The *Breakthrough* demarcates the entrance to the exhibition, while the original bronze sculpture is located at the headquarters of the Labour Party in Oslo. The exhibition also alludes to the sculpture *The Pioneer* (*Pionéren*), Per Palle Storm's monumental homage to the working man, which is also to be found at Young's Square, Oslo.

The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) bestows a miniature version of this sculpture to its members as a decoration for long and faithful service; at the exhibition, however, this miniature version is shown indirectly by way of its casting mould, similar to a cast-off shell that emphasises the transformative nature of Alvaer's exhibition.

Mother, Dear Mother can be seen as an attempt to describe not only the contemporary emotional experiences of a nation undergoing a political shift, but also how value hierarchies are susceptible to continuous pressure and change. In order to develop this argument, the exhibition is accompanied by a series of events with invited guests, whose comments will be documented and incorporated into the exhibition.(4)

You said, 'It was an attempt to undermine both spatial (space of exhibiting versus space of practice) and occupational (makers versus viewers) divisions still characteristic of the art world.' – Can you tell us how this played out in the exhibition?

Yes, I will get to that in a moment, but it is first necessary to describe the second case study, in order to enable a comparison through locating us in-between these two case-study displays.



Sculpture by Ørnulf Bast, *Breakthrough*, back view detail (Hole in the wall) Still from the film *Mother, Dear Mother*.



Sculpture by Per Palle Storm, *Pioneer*, front view detail of mould. Still from the film *Mother, Dear Mother*.

Sculpture by Per Palle Storm, *Pioneer*, back view detail of mould. Still from the film *Mother, Dear Mother*.



Case B: 'Competence'

One exhibition in four successive interventions. The exhibition approached the question of art-related collaboration by transgressing and expanding the notion of artistic competence. It addressed the capacity to make and imagine while avoiding the typical regimes of objecthood and representation.

Instead of simply replicating the division between an artist and an audience, either under the guise of relational aesthetics or in the form of traditional viewership, our intervention aimed at a radical critique of the difference in competences underpinning both of these positions.

We transformed rituals inherent in the traditional form of an exhibition in order to constitute a paradoxical space, where our visitors could shift between being a creative maker and a reflective viewer of artistic objects. We wanted the visitor to become neither producer nor consumer of an aesthetic experience. Instead, we invited our visitors to practically experience two fundamental stances – of creating and of contemplating – during the same visit.

We designed a situation which forced the visitor to experience his/her own resonance to the material reality and imaginary projections, both of which are characteristic of an aesthetic experience. We redirected the investment inherent in aesthetic attention – normally induced by an exhibition – to combine different modes of experience reflectively, inviting our visitors to contemplate the self-generated artistic contents, presented back to them through the aura of a discrete art object.

However, we were not interested in simply reiterating the notion of participation, which only seemingly activates viewers as participants but does not question more fundamental differences between an author and an executor of an artistic script.

We wanted the visitor to have experiences as neither viewer nor participant in some sort of art performance, in which our competence would be a primary object of consumption. Instead, we

stepped back and created an opportunity for visitors to enter into active dialogues with their own competences as makers and viewers of art. In order to create conditions for this unusual experience to emerge we very carefully orchestrated the process of visiting the exhibition.(5)

You said: *'This comparative set-up will allow for an approach to irony in a sense of situated subjectivity and will illustrate how its modi are played out'* – Could you give an example?

We will get there, do not worry. But first, let us assume the role of the visitor entering the exhibition. One visitor enters Case A: 'Mother, Dear Mother', while the other enters Case B: 'Competence'. We will follow both slowly and compare the two cases, step by step. Both visitors (in other words the split reader) are now prepared to be exposed to these demonstrations of artistic research. They have both planned their visit carefully and put time aside for this experience; ready to take things in, understand, be touched, moved and perhaps transformed.

Entering as a visitor Case A and Case B

Case A visitor enters the exhibition. The building is famous in Oslo. Two playful bronze lions guard the modernist entrance. As she passes them on the way to the main entrance, she reminds herself to be like those lions: playful, spontaneous, open and explorative. She thinks to herself that those lions are there to guard the child in her, alert and playful. Inside, in the reception, she is given an earmuff radio headset and told that the radio is already tuned in. It is to be used just to listen and follow the shifting lights in the room, to match what you hear with what you see. She is listening. All outside noise is eliminated with the headset on. Inside, a voice is speaking at a slow pace. She is resting her gaze on a small kind of abstract lit-up sculpture in plaster, with a hole in it. It is mounted on the wall. She is up-close, and while she is looking through the hole, through the wall, into the other parts of the exhibition, this is what she hears in the earmuffs:

*Someone had recognised the sculpture
Like a drill it had moved towards the torso
The breakthrough
Looking through the art had been insisted on
It wasn't for sure that that was the main point,
even at the time when the lions had been shaped a few decades before ...
An emotional breakthrough
And on the back only a hole
A peephole
Forces that had sought security in the establishment*

After a short break, the calm voice continues, and she listens once more:

*It is an anus, someone had mumbled
A starting point
Standpoint, stance, or viewpoint
A rose
Like a threshold*

*Two tunnels meet and form a union
Unity and flow
See others see, and be observed yourself
Be somehow in it, unseparated
The key to understanding resistance had been to understand it as uncertainty
Resistance could be explored, understood and faced*

Meanwhile, our Case B visitor has a completely different experience. When he enters the exhibition in Prague, the gallery staff address him, talking to him from behind a screen. They tell him that, if he wants to see this exhibition, he has to make a drawing of his hand before entering. There is no other way. He sees another person sitting in the room, making a drawing of her hand. He accepts the premise and is handed a big sheet of white paper and a pencil, through a slot in the wall, like at the post office. There are a few special chairs with support for the paper at his disposal, so he sits down, positions the paper, looks at his hand, chooses from what angle to draw and starts.

As he is sitting there, drawing in quiet concentration, the other person finishes her drawing. She posts it through a slit in the wall. He observes her. She has to put her arm into a hole next to the slot, so the gallery attendant can verify that this is truly her hand and her attempt to draw it has been genuine. Her drawing is accepted and they keep it behind the screen. The gallery attendant slides open one of the separating screens to let the woman into the next room. When our Case B visitor is done with his drawing, after maybe 15 minutes, the same thing happens. He hands in his drawing and is then let into the next room.

He recognises this second room as more familiar, since it looks like an exhibition. He observes five kinds of abstract photographs mounted in frames on the walls around the room. He cannot recognise what is being depicted in the photos. It could be snowy landscapes viewed from the air, with dark areas of trees or forests. It reminds him of the abstract paintings of Franz Kline. He notices that three of the five images have had a small hole drilled into them, even through the glass. From these holes come headsets. He decides to listen to what might be on there. He rests his gaze on the image and puts on the headphones. There is a voice of a young woman speaking. This is what he hears:

My room-mate likes to fuck. She goes out every Friday night and it's never happened that she came home without a man. They then shut themselves in her room and go at it. I listen to them through the wall. I lie in my bed and – based on the exhaling, the breathing, the laughter and the sounds of the furniture – I imagine what the guy she brought home looks like and what they are doing at that moment. Sometimes it's really easy to guess. At other times it's, on the contrary, very difficult. Then I imagine that she doesn't have a normal guy there, but rather one with three arms, two dicks, or something else. I try to imagine whether they are naked or if they fuck with their clothes on; and if so, what they are actually wearing – mainly what he's wearing, because I know what my room-mate is wearing. I even know all her underwear, because she walks around the flat in them during the day. When my room-mate has an orgasm, I wait to see if they will

continue. When I imagine this, I feel that what's happening behind the wall is more real than my own life. It is more present than my presence in my own room. The next day I try to meet the guys before they leave. I want to compare them with my imagination. But some of them slip out of the flat very quietly and extremely early.

You said, 'One exhibition in four successive interventions', about the Case B exhibition – Can you describe a particular way to understand these interventions?

The first intervention was asking him to make a drawing, with the aim of changing his mode of sensing, being in the space. The second intervention is to expose the visitor to the images viewed and stories told in the second room, where our visitor in Case B is now spending time. He did not discover that the images are molecular photographs of those kinds of drawings he just made in the first room. They are all close-up details of graphite on paper. Then there are two more rooms, or interventions, prepared for him as he moves along. He can choose not to continue and return where he came from, let us see what will happen, what he decides. As for the visitor in the Case A exhibition, she is resting on one of the benches in the exhibition room, still wearing the earmuffs. But for a little while longer let us continue with visitor B:

After listening, he picks up another of those headphones. He sits down on a chair provided in front of a lower hanging image. This time it is a male voice. This is what he hears:

K. sat down at the table and steeped a tea bag in a cup of hot water. He observed closely how the liquid slowly took on a brown colour. Then, with two fingers, he took the string with the label and bag and pulled it up and dropped it back (in the water) twice.

He observed how the surface of the water quivered and the stirred molecules of water began to colour the up-to-now clear spots in the liquid in a noticeably complex turbulence. He pulled the newspaper with classified ads closer to him and began to flip through them. He found a double page with job offers. He took a pencil in his hand and gradually marked three adverts. First, one after the other, he underlined them with a simple line and when he had read the entire two pages he drew a rectangle around the underlined ads. After a while he surrounded each rectangle with lines of semi-circles so that they looked like three square flowers in a field of letters. In the end he filled in the rectangles until they were black. Meanwhile, crumbs and grains of salt fell onto the page from the bread he was biting into as he held it in his right hand. Only after that did he put the pencil down and pick up his teacup and sip.

He is alone in this second room of the exhibition. The woman he saw entering the room earlier is not there, so he assumes that another wall will soon open and he will be allowed to continue to a third room. He senses a kind of duty on the behalf of himself as a visitor and decides to continue to listen to the third and last headphone installed. He puts on the headphones and hears another person talking, but in a different female voice:

Mr J. is an exceptional person. He knows how to talk to children and is able to engage people. They listen to him. He knows how to gain their respect. He exudes optimism. But when he speaks about young people and school, you can hear a certain bitterness in his voice. He gradually lost touch with his peers at the atelier. He watches culture programmes on TV, especially art programmes, and when he by chance sees a former schoolmate on a programme, he comments on their appearance out loud with sarcastic and usually accurate remarks. He also knows how to imitate them in a comedic way. He doesn't like to show the sketches he himself did in school. When you ask him about them, he guides the conversation to another topic, or he tells you he doesn't wish to talk about himself. Almost immediately after the revolution, Mr J. started up one of the first IT companies here in the Czech Republic. But still today he claims that he knows nothing about computers. He could have allegedly started an advertising agency like many of his friends at the time, but he was impressed by computers and how it was not yet possible to imagine just what they would be capable of doing. During 20 years he allegedly did not have to bribe or corrupt anyone, and despite this his company became one of the 20 most successful in the industry. When you ask him how he has been able to become so successful when he knows nothing about computers, he answers that he doesn't know how to explain it: he always contemplates everything 'organically'. 'I don't think about the thing itself but about the background. Each problem lies on something or stands before something and is explained by something. So I don't sort it out by devoting time to it (the problem) directly. I give all my attention to the surroundings – the light and the background.' When M. J. speaks about his approach to work, he uses words that he learned as a student at the State Academy of Fine Art.



1:1 copy of volume of the refused work by Vanessa Baird, *To Everything There is a Season*, close up detail view from uninstalled work, storage position. Still from the film *Mother, Dear Mother*.

After listening to this, our visitor walks around a bit and wonders what is going to happen next. He is full of impressions and not sure if he normally spends this much time in exhibitions. While our Case B visitor in Prague is walking around, waiting for what will happen to him, we move swiftly to our Case A visitor in Oslo. She is still spending

time by the sculpture. She starts to enjoy the slow pace of the voice, the subtle lighting. She walks to the other side of the sculpture, where she continues to listen to the voice. She hears the following:

*A comparison had been made between the planned, the controlled and the spontaneous
The guardians of change, on the one hand, which entailed preparatory work and
rational deliberation*

*A reverse image, but characterised by sorrow, fear, anger and anxiety
The other side, conversely, was characterised by expectation, joy, confidence, excitement and childlike surprise*

*A certain emotional intensity
Resistance as reaction and force, as a reply to change
It wasn't the first time they heard about the difference between the lions in front of
Parliament and the lions holding guard outside this building
This ludic insistence, in contrast with the premises for creating the sculpture itself
After they had been informed about the design of the animals down there at Parliament, things became more serious*

*Cross-pressure
The energy and power inherent in the opposition had been used in a constructive and
positive way
Measures that concerned each individual, but that they nonetheless were not emotionally prepared for*

She gives up trying to understand what this all means to her now. The lights shift and she moves along to another object in the exhibition. She observes the new object presented to her as the light in the room intensifies and the object appears almost with an aura. She hears the following:

*Change became improvement
Privatisation became diversity
Permanent position became new job
Individuals or citizens became people
Segregation became alienation
Weakening became softening
Private became free
Cuts became alleviations
The creative mind defused*

This she easily relates to. It is all about framing language, she thinks to herself. She notices that the object being described is 20 Pioneer Figures in bronze, packed in two cardboard boxes on loan from the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions. The casting mould of the same miniature statue, with auxiliary parts is displayed next to the cardboard boxes. It is a 25cm-high copy of the large statue on the main square in Oslo, the

famous statue of the worker with his tools on the way to the quarry, erected in the 50s. She learns that this miniature statue is a service decoration bestowed upon deserving individuals after at least 25 years of service with the union. A salute to outstanding effort in the movement. Now she listens carefully. The sound is simply a summary of what those respective candidates receiving this 'Oscar of the Confederation of Trade Unions' has actually worked on during their years in service. She is surprised by the instructive power of the imagination as she loses herself and emotionally drifts into those lives. She perceives these celebratory moments as pure poetry:

For outstanding efforts in the field of labour by promoting employment and improved working and living conditions, thereby enabling social equality at an ever higher level

Helped ensure adequate social protection, improve dialogue in the labour market, develop human resources and combat social exclusion

Co-founder and first leader of the Organisation of Fundamental Rights in the European Social Charter in 1961 and the Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers in 1989

Finally, for efforts in Norwegian bargaining rights and the right to collective negotiations where workers and employers or their respective organisations had the right to negotiate and enter into collective agreements and, in the event of conflicting interests, the right to take collective action, including going on strike, to defend their interests

For a reason unknown to her, she almost starts to cry, but manages to hold tears back when the listing continues, covering several servicemen and women. She thinks about the relationship between life and work; do we live to work or do we work to live?

A champion of improving the work environment in order to protect workers' health and safety; working conditions; information and hearing of workers; integration of those who were excluded from the labour market; the work for establishing equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market and equal treatment in the work place

Helped put Norway in the driver's seat concerning rights in conjunction with mass layoffs, equal pay, transfer of ownership, bankruptcy

For efforts on the European Framework Directive on Safety and Health at Work, as well as requirements to work equipment, safety equipment, written contracts, security and protection for atypical and pregnant employees, and mutual approval of qualifications

Has been instrumental in developing many of the directives that are based on European inter-party agreements, such as the right to maternity and paternity leave, equal rights for part-time and temporary employees, protection from sharp objects in hospitals and the health sector, long-distance work, frameworks for lifelong learning and equality

Helped instigate and set the terms for the work on employees' social insurance and social protection; protection of employees upon the termination of a contract; representation and collective defence of employees' and employers' interests; co-determination; working conditions for citizens from third-party countries with legal residence in the Community; combating social exclusion; modernising systems of social protection

For facilitating and helping develop a number of revised directives, such as protection of minors in the workplace; improving the Posting of Workers Directive; the burden of proof in cases related to gender discrimination; mass layoffs; a number of directives regarding working hours in transportation, participation in European companies and information and consultation in national companies; as well as for being the driving force behind the work on equal treatment and the anti-discrimination directives and the Temporary Agency Work Directive

Worked steadfastly to the very end to prevent work-related stress, prevent violence and bullying at work, and promote an inclusive work environment

You said, 'The objects have been abstracted to four reductive, sculptural forms that serve as narrative bases.' – Is it correct that our Case A visitor now has been through half of those four reductive forms: one being the sculpture looking like an anus and the other these miniature Oscar statues?

Yes, that is correct and if we think about our Case B visitor, he is also exactly half the way and getting a bit impatient to continue. We will go slowly and follow the exhibition carefully step by step. We return to Case B again.

One part of the wall allows him to proceed to the third room. He finds it empty, except from a chair standing in one corner. The screens are dividing the space in two, and as in the two other rooms, he can hear the gallery staff moving back and forth on the other side; sometimes he get a glimpse of them. He moves towards the chair and sits down. He doesn't know it, but on the other side of the screen there is a person sitting, waiting for him to arrive.

The person behind the screen cannot see who is coming into the room, but is employed to engage in conversation with the visitors. The gallery attendant has already brought the drawing he made in the first room to this conversationalist, so the person could choose to talk about the drawing, just to get started. The employed person is instructed to approach visitors in a friendly manner and lead the conversation to the point of a shared imagined space, then to keep the conversation open toward imagining together. He can decide how it should go. So, not knowing what to expect, visitor B sits down. Here is how it all unfolded:



Installation view from the 'Competence'
in Fotograf Gallery, Prague. Room 3.
In collaboration with Isabela Grosseová and Jiří Ptáček.

(Conversationalist:) Hello?

(Our visitor:) Hello

Are you excited?

I don't know.

You don't know.

More importantly, I can't hear you properly.

I see, so I will articulate.

How did the drawing go?

Normally.

What does the hand that you drew look like?

Umm ... I tried to make it look like my hand.

Tell me something more about it, describe it for me.

The hand is quite slim, with long fingers, with a distinctive ring with stones ... There is a leather string wrapped around the wrist.

Imagine the leather string begins to strangle your hand ... What will you do about it?

I'll cut it.

So you'll take a pair of scissors, cut it ... What happens? Describe it to me.

You mean the whole process?

Yes.

The leather string is too tight, blood is rushing into my hand and it's unpleasant ... The string is beginning to cut into my skin; I take the scissors and cut it from the inside of my wrist.

What happens to the string?

It falls to the ground.

Look carefully at the ground then, and describe it to me.

Well, it's this floor, and it's white and clean and there is the red, cut string ... it is cut sort of in six parts.

Does it make up a shape?

Excuse me?

What does it look like? Does it make up a shape?

Well, now that you mention it, it does ... It forms a half circle.

Does it remind you of something?

Yes, it reminds me of circles, when you throw a stone into water.

Yes ... So, imagine the surface of water, imagine the circles spreading on the surface ...

What kind of water did you imagine? Where is it?

It is a pond, some kind of pond next to a forest park.

What else do you see there?

I see reeds, pines ... pine cones ... a doe.

A doe? What is drawing your attention in this scenery?

Everything altogether, everything that's going on, the ripples, the smell of the pine cones and the forest and ...

Describe the smell.

The smell?

Yes, that sounds interesting.

The smell is a beautiful smell, of soil, pine cones and moss ...

Try to come up with a name for the smell.

A name?

Yes.

Like a human name?

Yeah, for instance, a female name.

Rachel.

Rachel. And colour?

Brown [laughs]. But a nice brown.

Nice brown. Good. What about the doe? Where did it disappear to?

It ran away somewhere.

What if you run after it?

I can do that; I can run after it.

Follow it then. Where are you running? Where is it?

We run to a meadow, to a small area.

Has the doe disappeared or is it still there?

Hmm, yes, it led me to the meadow and disappeared.

It disappeared? Why did you -?

I knew that I shouldn't follow. It led me to the meadow ...

What stopped you? How did you know you were not supposed to follow?

I don't know, I felt I should run after it, that it was offering to lead me somewhere, but only for some time, up to a certain point, and I could not follow after that, and maybe I wouldn't even want to.

I see. And what was the reason then? What led you there?

To the meadow?

Yes – why were you meant to go there? It seemed like the doe was leading you to something.

To a new world, to freedom, I am not limited by any trees, by any – there were some parts of the forest ... some hills ... the meadow was unlimited, open.

So ... I will not limit you any more either by my suggestive remarks. I will let you go to the next room.

Goodbye!

Bye!

The visitor is surprised. He did not expect any such thing. He is led to the next room a bit puzzled by what is happening to him. He imagined such a detailed picture and shared this with a person he did not even see or know. It is a positive experience, but how could that be? The whole story stayed with him, he really had a sensation of being there for real, and he recalls even the smell and all of the details. What does this all mean? He soon realises that this is the last room and he sees only one small framed photograph, hanging on the other side of the room. He walks over and recognises that it is his own drawing framed for him to see, but his hand is there as well. He compares the two. That must have been what the gallery attendant was doing, walking back and forth, he thought, changing photographs in this frame. They probably change it from the back, he contemplates.

When he had his drawing and arm ‘inspected’ through the wall in the first room they must have printed out the image of his hand and his drawing. So he gets to see his own drawing, and the woman before him must have seen her own drawing. He is perplexed and understands that he himself was producing the exhibition all the time, in a way. He looks closely at the drawing and at his own hand. Then he leaves the room, he is in the back yard and now back on the street. The visitor in Case B is done, so we move to our Case A visitor. She is still in the exhibition and we will come to an end there as well, eventually.

You said, ‘*The soundtrack (in Case A) comments in its entirety on a subject matter that can be encapsulated in terms such as change, transformation and restructuring in the context of contemporary Norwegian politics.*’ – That is all well and good, but could you please move on to the point of irony? This should be about irony. Are we talking about affirmative irony or a kind of neutral irony? Should we understand what you are saying as subversive irony or read the whole text as a post-rhetorical transformation of irony through aesthetic processes? Is there any irony at all? At this point, it would be good to get some assistance or at least an indication of where we are going with all this!(6)

Yes, I understand. Let us first catch up with our visitor in Case A. We need to wrap up this other case study as well, in order to proceed to the discussion.

She is not alone in the exhibition. There are several other visitors. All are wearing their own earmuffs and listening to the same radio broadcast. They all move their attention to the same elements, when the light shifts. Sometimes it seems like people are standing around a campfire, individually, but kind of in a group. Nobody talks, since they are all wearing those earmuffs. It sometimes reminds her of a construction site, with those people with large earmuffs with antennae walking around. It has been quiet for a while, but the lights already indicate where to move next. It is a screen, looking like it is prepared for a cinema projection. Several people are gathered in that corner, as though waiting for the screening to start. She cannot see any projector. She hears a different voice now. It is

someone singing. It is only vocal. She is surprised and listens carefully to the text. There is no cinema being screened, but she rests her gaze on the screen anyway and sits down on the bench in front of the screen. She likes the way this is being presented. A male voice. Only the voice singing loud and clear:

*After many years away from home he's finally arrived back
For he could not forget his childhood years and his home
He has many cherished memories about the happiness she gave him
But the only thing he finds now is an old, neglected grave*

The voice changes and now there is a female voice continuing the song in the same melody. She immediately thinks of this as a duet and listens carefully. It is beautiful. Must be professional singers, she thinks, when she listens more:

*Mother, dear mother, can you hear me now? Take these flowers I've brought
In my mind's eye I see you still, just as you once were
Always so tender and so loving - no, there was no one like you, mother dear
I want to thank you, you've deserved it, but I've arrived too late*

She remembers the title of the exhibition. It must refer to this song. Now the male and female voices sing together:

*Mother, dear mother, can you hear me now? Take these flowers I've brought
In my mind's eye I see you still, just as you once were
Always so tender and so loving - no, there was no one like you, mother dear
I want to thank you, you've deserved it, but I've arrived too late*

The song was not funny. It was not too serious either. Not ironic either. She thought it was awkward. What to make of it? Quickly from memory she ran a semantic translation in her head to see if she missed out some obvious hidden message. She visualises and quickly reads through in her mind her translation of the song, as she remembers it. Her semantic translation of the same song looks like this:

*The duration of absence comes to an end
Justified origin and source
Retroactive experience characterised by euphoria
Reduction disappointment unconsciousness individualisation
Symbolic address offering
Imaginary notion restoration
Emotional description comparative confirmation
Gratitude evaluation guilt
Repetition transition ritual action
Constitutive continuity corresponding past*

Isolated qualitative properties idiosyncrasy
Dutiful virtue admirable capitulation

No, nothing special to notice, she tells herself ... The light moves again and the last element is now the point of attraction. She has been in the exhibition for quite a while now, more than 30 minutes already. Good that this is the last one, she thinks to herself, but at the same time she starts to get the pace and enjoy the movement. She likes the way the language resonates in her. She did not expect much from the first visual impression on entering the room. It did not promise any aesthetic reward when she made the decision to stay listening to the entire soundtrack.

Now she understands that this internalisation of language, the shifts, the political and historical content is resonating in her as a political subject. In her as a visitor. She now realises that the exhibition actually takes place in her as well. It is made in a fashion in which she can complement the exhibition by bringing in her own thoughts and emotions. That must be why it is so slow, to allow that to happen. She feels her heart beating, as if she is touched by this small discovery ... She remembers her philosophy classes and thinks especially about the semester studying phenomenology. The voice in her earmuffs is back to spoken words now. The light points to a carefully constructed stack of wooden plates, as if they are just stored there. It reminds her of the sculptures of Donald Judd. Minimalist in a certain sense. She is again listening and full of expectation. This is what she hears:

The circulation of punctuality with regard to public life

ART THAT WAS EMOTIVE

Took into account that people were human and had emotions

Otherwise the strategy quickly became passive, incomplete and instrumental

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON WHAT KIND OF MANDATE ART PROJECTS HAVE WHEN THEY
ENCOUNTER RESISTANCE

Often it was not the change in itself, or the result of the change, that led to people expressing
resistance

KICKED THE PROBLEM FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD

Recognised, responded to and managed the emotional swings in the wake of change

FORTUNATELY, ART WAS POWER

If the new goals had been congruent with how people thought they ought to be, people's
attitudes would have been more positive

THE DISQUIET IN SOCIETY WOULD SHOW ITSELF

Anger was linked to feeling offended, and this led to resistance

UPSET ABOUT THE ART CONTROVERSY

Mixed experiences gradually became either predominantly positive or predominantly negative

ART IN A PUBLIC VACUUM

The emotions led us to mobilising resources

ART IN PUBLIC SPACE WAS ONLY AS FREE AS IT WAS ALLOWED TO BE

Presented with a clear vision of the future that made one's personal inconveniences acceptable

Like a heading and not an archive

WHO DEFINED WHAT WAS ACCEPTABLE ART?

There was little control in the initial stage

The consequences were not yet clear

REMOVED ART THAT CREATED ANXIETY

Emotional intensity corresponded directly with the perceived importance of what had happened

WANTED TO EDUCATE MINISTRY EMPLOYEES TO INTERPRET ART

The lack of feeling in control increased the sense of uncertainty, but heightened the degree of emotional awareness

THERE WAS NOTHING TO ARGUE ABOUT HERE

Another phase characterised by positive resistance

CALLED NORWAY THE THIRD WORLD OF CULTURE

The final phase characterised by active and ultimately aggressive resistance I COULDN'T

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OTHERS' ASSOCIATIONS

Changes at work represent a major intervention in a person's life

A number of stable factors were thus under threat

Art as discursive host – unfinished piece

A HOT-BUTTON ISSUE IN ART POLITICS

On the other hand, those who were dissatisfied with how things were being handled looked forward to change

THE ANXIETY FOR ART

The ambivalence disappeared because we had begun the process of establishing the meaning of what the changes entailed for us personally

You said, 'This comparative set-up of Case A and Case B will allow for an approach to irony in a sense of situated subjectivity and how its *modi* are being played out.' – I know we are repeating ourselves here, but is it not time to look into this matter now? We have been through the case studies. What approach?

Yes, it is time now. Why not give this comparative discussion of Case A and Case B its own heading. I propose the following:

Parabasis

Through these two particular exhibitions, we have demonstrated a delineation of imaginary capacities. We may attempt to describe this through a few structural aspects in Case A and Case B, which served to produce a certain type of psychic or virtual event for our visitors.

Going after irony in such a *situated sense* may perhaps enable an interpretation of irony as modernist strategy, premised on a radical historical discontinuity. We may observe how irony recast itself constantly into new and unpredictable modes through our visitors' situated subjectivities in Case A and especially in Case B. In this last sense, irony enables a mode of augmented sensibility, not unlike Kierkegaard's all-encompassing irony as vision of life.(7)

Besides having a dominantly historical approach to archive material and an assumed capacity for individual interpretation in Case A, we find in Case B a more direct engagement of the visitor's imaginary self. In Case B, the exhibition is self directed, personal and carefully modified to suit a particular individual at the time, allowing the visitor to build competence for readership and engagement.(8) With these modes of operational irony foregrounded, we should start to wrap this up, summing-up both Case A and Case B.

You said, 'This way of delineating imaginary capacities is an artistic demonstration'. – Is this a way of looking at limits: so far, but not further? Could you describe this in terms of absence?

Yes, it is true; the focus has been more on limits and where things end.

What is not there, not mentioned, not inscribed. For example, we did not get into this too much, but underlying these hypothetical experiences of visitors in Case A and Case B, we implicitly address questions such as, who are we really when we experience a work of art? On what ontological terms are we taking part in an exhibition? What procedures or mechanisms manifest themselves? What underlying logic is it these particular exhibitions maintain or reproduce? But I would like to ask you, if you would allow me, how do you see it yourself?

Well, you are more interested in formal readings of this material, especially in Case A. You find it constructive to consider the proposition to follow stylistic changes in the work of artist Arnulf Bast, who in 1929 designed the lions outside and also the 1953 plaster sculpture presented in the exhibition. The ludic lions were made to decorate the newly erected House of Artists, in Oslo, and the second sculpture, *The Breakthrough*, is from a competition for a workingman's monument at Rjukan, an early industrial heritage site in Norway. The latter is a compromised abstraction with a classic figurative element added to legitimise an artistic expression towards abstraction in the post-war Norwegian context. In general, looking at the 'art' included in the exhibition from a political representa-

tion perspective, you notice the typical asymmetry, especially in the ‘Oscar of the Confederation of Trade Unions’, whose style remains until today a traditional realist figurative language. You might want to think that abstraction was reserved for financialization, but not for political representation. This could be a possible entry point for me ...

Further, if I may, you would like to point out the generational gap inserted through the song mentioned in Case A: *Mother, Dear Mother*. As far as you know, this song was popular during the occupation of Norway in the 1940s. Without making this into a tool for ironic distancing, the song appeared during an interview with the conservative Christian party in a discussion on their live music repertoire for elders in nursing homes, during their national election campaign in 2013.

And one last thing: concerning Case A and the carefully constructed stack of wooden plates, the Donald Judd lookalike mentioned. You understand the ongoing issues related to censorship present in this particular public commission, which was partly refused due to its (more or less random) association with the 2011 Norway attacks.(9)

This resulted in disproportionate public debate, and the soundtrack entries that our visitor in Case A is listening to in the exhibition are a collection of headlines from the main newspapers in Norway, about this particular debate. If you understand this element of Case A correctly, these underlined headlines are read together with reports from major consulting companies typically dealing with fusion and privatisation of public institutions, for example educational structures or hospitals. The selected quotes are from research on employed workers’ emotional reactions in terms of resistance to change at the workplace, in other words the very same argument for censoring the public commission in question at the Department of Health in a government building. you find that interesting, almost to the point of irony.

Yes, truly, truly, very good observations. Thank you. Any comments on Case B then, while you are at it?

You do have some comments actually. But first, could you possibly tell us more about the obvious manipulation of the visitor in Case B? I understand that what takes place is a breaking down of the ‘going to see an exhibition modus’ – a step by step *tuning* of the visitor towards becoming the content of the exhibition as such. You think this is the case to a lesser degree in Case A as well.

Yes, perhaps, but you see it more as a generous prepared situation in which time invested enables sensitivities in the visitor and thus activates a certain set of immanent competencies. It is thus an attempt in both Case A and Case B to grasp the here and now in terms of somewhere else, and by doing so, expand the actual inventively. It may be useful here to round it all off with a last quote, by Stephen Wright, on notions of competence:

But competence is not to be confused here with artistic métier or skill in the fine arts tradition. In fact it is to be understood as virtually synonymous with incompetence, for usership-generated practice is founded on mutualising incompetence. On the face of it, that seems an odd thing to say; but, a competence can only be defined as such from the perspective of a corresponding incompetence. And in effect, it is only because a given incompetence is somehow competence-deficient that it calls a competence to the fore. This is of fundamental importance in situations of collaboration, where art engages in

skill sharing and competence crossing with other modes of activity whose domains of competence, and hence of incompetence, are very different. By mutualising (in)competence, this difference is made fruitful and productive.(10)

OK, that is an interesting quote, which brings back issues mentioned earlier. To be more straightforward with you, do you see the irony used in Case A and Case B as a meaningful artistic and political device, even when its rhetoric is appropriated by the language of late capitalism?

Yes, you do, through, as we just discussed, the delineation of imaginary capacities – the limits of the social imaginary, in short.

If that is the case, then you do not understand the ironic gap between the private and public voice. Between what is said and what is generally understood necessarily to entail a position of passivity. You see in Case A, and particularly in Case B, the opposite, more a generating or producing of an active stance.

In addition to that, concerning the last question, namely if we could find a mode of irony which does not assume a double audience and hence a privileged sphere of knowledge – you forgot to mention aspects of double ontology in the phase of researching and preparing, getting access to empirical data. You are thinking of membership and participation in political parties, going to meetings etc. You see this reflected in the Case A and B as a way of enabling successive steps in the experience of the visitor, through portioning out or holding back information. In Case A through little information, slow pace, thus producing a kind of impatience. In Case B, though generous manipulation and control of information.

Yes, you might be right. Lets's end this conversation here. Thank you for your observations.

You Said 'Irony'



Installation view from the 'Competence'
in Fotograf Gallery, Prague. Room 4.
In collaboration with Isabela Grosseová and Jiří Ptáček.

Notes:

(1) Robert Motherwell, *Art and Reality*, exhibition catalogue (Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1976), p. 5.

(2) <http://www.thepoliticalcurrencyofart.org.uk/irony-and-overidentification-archive>

(3) Clarification: The approach with You said, the various dialogues and questions are all rhetorical approaches, some based loosely on the Biographical Narrative Interpretation Method (BNIM) developed from Tom Wengraf, especially from subsession II in the interview format.

(4) Extracts from press release; Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo, exhibition Mother, Dear Mother.

<http://www.kunstnerneshus.no/kunst/jesper-alvaer-2/> (10.1. – 28.2.2014) (4) -Guests included Stephen Wright, Christopher Kulendroan Thomas and Kuba Szreder

(5) In collaboration with Isabela Grosseová and Jiří Ptáček (30.1. – 28. 2. 2015). Texts in room 3 in the text by Jiri Ptacek. Overall extracts from project description *Competence*, elaborated with Kuba Szreder.

(6) See Armen Avanesian, Andreas Töpfer, *Speculative Drawing*. Extracts from Chapter 13, *Irony and the logic of Modernity*

(7) Sindre Frøysaa, *Et tveegget sverd, Ironi som en eksistensiell kategori hos Søren Kierkegaard og Richard Rorty*. Masteroppgave i filosofi ved Institutt for filosofi, ide- og kunsthistorie og klassiske språk. Det humanistiske fakultet, UNIVERSITETET I OSLO, Høsten 2013

(8) Stephen Wright, *Toward a lexicon of usership*, section on Competence [\[marteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf\]\(http://museu-net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf\)](http://museu-</p>
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(9) The 2011 Norway attacks were two sequential lone wolf terrorist attacks by Anders Behring Breivik against the government, the civilian population, and a Workers' Youth League-run summer camp in Norway on 22 July 2011. The attacks claimed a total of 77 lives. The commission in under discussion is a refused work by Vanessa Baird "To Everything There is a Season."

(10) Stephen Wright, *Toward a lexicon of usership*, section on Competence

<http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf>

