

## **Make your own institution**

*A lecture for Glasgow International about self organizing and the artist run scene.*

By Signe Vad

I work with self-organizing structures because I believe it is a way to approach the world: do you enter the all-ready made structure and fit in or do you take action to influence the existing structure.

In this lecture I will share a little of my experience with being an initiator and curator within the field of self-organizing. My experience is built on concrete action and projects, from opening and running two exhibition-spaces in Cph and from curating/coordinating the independent art fair Cph Alt\_Cph in 2009 and 10.

Besides that I am part of a European network AIM-network, which worked inventing an international web-platform and map for the independent artist-run exhibition scene. In order to strengthen a trans-local network between these exhibition platforms and to create a stronger visibility for this part of the art scene... which I consider is very needed, because it is difficult for others to find these off-spaces and to create networks, alliances and share experience across borders, which is a big help for the artist-run platforms.

I will show some pictures to give an idea of the projects I have worked with, and from the examples address some of my experiences of being an initiator and facilitator in your own environment.

When I arrived in Gothenburg, some years back, to enter a master program in art-photography, I had just finished clearing out after 1,5 years running an exhibition-space alone, with no financial or other support. I was working all kinds of jobs, teaching, webdesign, photographing etc. to make a living, and at the same time I was working as much as I could on my own art. So when I came to Gbg I was very tired.

But

I still had the idea that when you get involved in doing something for the whole society (in this case art-society) you become an active part, which means you get some kind of influence, and you take power over the situation, you can somehow create your own little disturbance.

But the reaction I encountered was for me a little strange, because it was as if my fellow students did not really understand what I was talking about.

So I spend the first year of my master concentrating on my own art, and at the same time I had opened a street exhibition space in two windows in Copenhagen. I was transferring the structure I had from my former exhibition space the website, mailing lists etc., using it in the new form, so it was easy to run also from afar.

Why did I begin?

My motivation is always that something is needed or important.

I opened my former gallery because I thought the photographic art scene in Cph was very "old fashioned"

I had been at a dinner party where some Cph artists were again complaining about the situation of the art-photographic scene. So when I closed down my darkroom and the photo-studio in my workshop, I decided to make the space into a gallery for photographic art. It was in 2005.

I knew nothing about having a gallery, but as so often I just threw myself into things, learning as I went along. And I did a lot of stupid things and made a lot of mistakes along the way. But I also all the time gained more and more knowledge and practical experiences to go on.

It turned out that around the same time as I opened the exh space, there was a boost in the art scene for photographic art, so instead I decided to change the focus.

Now something else became of great importance. The art world of Cph was flowing with money, and commercial galleries popped up like mushrooms, everybody wanted a piece of the gold-stream.

I decided that an alternative platform was of great importance, an underground place with a nonprofit profile and a totally different agenda. I was collaborating a lot with people from the noise music, sound art - scene. I wanted to have an energetic art space.

... this was also one of the reasons I later was forced to close, by the building administrators.

It was after this experience that I continued with curating exhibitions in two windows at the street. There I had an exhibition program running for three years, with new exhibitions every month. This I could do at the same time as staying in Gbg, because it was set up in a way that demanded not so much practical or physical attention. Which is also the reason I could keep it running for so long.

In my experience one of the biggest problems in the moneyless self-organizes world, is that you burn out after a while being full of initiatives and energy, you end up being really tired. In this field there is almost always too few hands to carry a big load. I have tried this a few times, but after awhile being fed up with it all.

One day in February 2009, I received a phone call and, a short conversation later, I had taken on the responsibility for Copenhagen's alternative art fair for 2009.

I had never arranged a big event like that, and there I was... responsible for trying to tame an uncontrollable space, and for inviting all the self-organized initiatives and non-profit ideas.

I had to thoroughly consider, what the whole idea was about, and then, which perspective, I wanted to place over the concept for Alt\_Cph 09.

Was an art fair, for non-profit, artist-led initiatives and exhibition spaces, necessary, or even important?

Was there a need for a specific platform, which could bring together, illuminate and promote this environment?

Nowadays, many artists establish their own exhibition spaces. This provides a strong degree of autonomy, but it also means that the art is displayed in small and, sometimes, relatively anonymous pockets of space, throughout the city.

However, creating one's own exhibition platform, outside the commercial art market and the established art institutions, has one powerful and essential consequence, and that is the existence of an "other" space, where artists can develop and re-think contemporary art practice, a space which provides fewer restrictions on experimentation, and also develops and professionalizes the artists, through achieving more exhibition experience.

For Alt\_Cph09, I chose to use the "profit-free initiative", as my framework, or guiding principle, as curator.

My inspiration came originally from the music scene, I had been an active guest to a bunch of noise concerts, events arranged in basements, old churches etc around in Cph. The focus for the people behind was the experiments in music and sound. They had a parallel music environment, where everybody who played this genre could participate. And they were more internationally connected, then connected to the conventional music scene in Cph. And it was never about money or fame.

So I decided that it was much more important for me, to invite a broad range of spaces, than to evaluate and select, on the basis of whether it was "good art".

This, in the belief that the wonderfully strange and unthinkable re-thinks possess an invaluable potential.

I emphasized that the energy, which exists in the profit-free initiatives, should be clearly felt in the art fair hall, by the participants and the visitors.

The second year 2010 Camilla Nørgård (the director of Fabrikken, that host the fair) and myself.

decided to “open” the space up much more,  
also in the literal sense.

We chose to disintegrate the conventional art fair structure, and to give free rein to the participating exhibitors.

Alt\_Cph 10 has the subtitle, *In Space*, because we opened up the hall, giving the participants the opportunity to create their own space, “create themselves”, in the hall, In addition, we gave the participants opportunity to work in the local community, with public space and/or relational projects.

That year we selected the participating spaces through an Open Call.

Over the past 4 years, we had experienced how, the more we arranged, the more we more we took away the initiative from these, otherwise, strongly motivated active participants from all kind of the self-organized exhibition platforms.

So in 2010 we did the opposite; minimizing the form, and left it up to the participants to bring their initiative, and from create the fair.

Behind this was an understanding, about that the initiative is the primary energy and foundation for these non-profit, self-organized art spaces.

When set free it can grow, expand and create a new space for experimentation.

One of the experiences I got from making the nonprofit art fair for two years in a row was the typical dilemma between

-taking the initiative away from others by arranging too much, and controlling the outcome.

and

-giving the responsibility to the participants, to use their initiative to shape everything in all kinds of unimaginable ways. And then live with a less consistent and well functioning outcome.

This was only a shallow dip into all the different thoughts and the dilemmas I have encountered working in this field. But I hope it have contributed a little to the knowledge and experiences you all already have.

I will end with quoting a danish independent curator Tone O. Nielsen from her opening speak at Alt\_Cph09

“The alternative and critical art remembers what the public forgets repress or ignore. It is the place where blind spots are visible, where overheard voices can be heard, and it is also the place where wounds can heal, and traumas can be overcome. It teaches us to rethink the current and shows us alternatives to the existing, it has short, the ability to imagine the world differently.”

It is our wish to show and communicate how imperative the alternative role is, and to emphasize its potential as a philosophy for society. Perhaps we have never been in more need of an alternative strategy than today.

(Curator Malene Ratcliffe Alt\_Cph 07)