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AVANT-GARDE

A history of the odd ones out

The enormous impact of the Nordic avant-garde currents on mainstream culture and daily life would have remained unnoticed. The work of many ground-breaking artists would not have been preserved anywhere and their tales left untold. That is if a Nordic network had not had the new and experimental idea of recording the history of the region's avant-garde.

TEXT: KATRINE ZIESLER PHOTO: TERJE HEIESTAD

Guarding the avant-garde:
Tania Ørum and Marianne
Ping Huang just outside the
University of Copenhagen.

– There is a stubborn tendency to see the avant-garde as something marginal in the cultural history of the Nordic countries, says Tania Ørum, head of the Nordic Network of Avant-garde Studies (NNAS) and lecturer in comparative literature and cultural studies at the University of Copenhagen. – Most people don't realize the innovative powers such movements have had in our societies. Even so, faced with the increasing emphasis on popularity and sales, one avant-garde writer recently declared that he would consider any book attracting more than eight readers uninteresting. When the first volume of *History of the Nordic Avant-Gardes* comes out next year, it is expected to sell a lot more than eight copies.

– Part of our goal when we started up the network in 2004 was to make Nordic avant-garde research visible in a European and international context, Ørum says. With a comprehensive history volume underway and the establishment of a new European network modelled after the Nordic one, one may say they have succeeded.

was to compile a historical overview of the Nordic avant-garde from its subtle beginnings around 1900, and the next 100 years. While the underground art scene had been thoroughly recorded in other parts of Europe, the Nordic countries seemed to have failed in preserving this outpost of their cultural history. – Many of our foreign peers found this strange, and showed great interest in learning about the Scandinavian influence, the network founders say. So their work began.

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– When the editorial group within the network writes the history of the avant-garde, focus is on artists and writers that were left out of the traditional history books, says Ørum and looks over at colleague Marianne Ping Huang. She nods in agreement.

– Our project is to make a cultural history. We are not making a family tree or a list of the kings of avant-garde, they explain. Alongside colleagues from across northern Europe they are trying to create a non-



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Avant-gardistic researchers

Over the course of the last four years, the Danish researcher has helped create a tightly knit network of Nordic researchers within the field of avant-garde art and culture. This was not a simple task. – Avant-garde researchers are a bit like the avant-garde artists themselves; few and far between, laughs Ørum. After successfully connecting Danish researchers with each other, she and her colleagues decided to expand their researcher network beyond the borders of Denmark. The response from the neighbouring Nordic countries was immediate. Avant-garde researchers from Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland joined their Danish counterparts in a Nordic Network, financed by NordForsk. Working together made it much easier to trace avant-garde currents across borders and to compare research.

The network members started meeting once a year, and one of the first suggestions that came up

linear history of an interactive Nordic avant-garde.

– There is no precise starting point of the avant-garde. It is not an organized movement, and you will find few institutionalized connections between people. So the non-linear way of writing history seemed fertile for this field, says Ørum. Through the international network created by the Nordic researchers, it became apparent that other histories of literature, art, and culture were being constructed along similar lines in other parts of the world.

Not unnoticed

The Nordic scholars attempt to show that the extreme and the experimental artists, the "weird" ones that appear to be far from the mainstream art scene, may have had a more profound effect on both society and art than we tend to ascribe them. They also appear to have had much more frequent contact with each other than previously assumed. Nordic artistic colonies kept in touch with each other and with European groups. They inspired each

other, exchanged ideas, and cooperated. While some artists were integrated into the mainstream art scene, others stayed out in the cold until they disappeared.

Quality versus originality

One of the reasons why some of these creators were left out of the classic history books is perhaps the typical disregard for classic genre divisions. The avant-garde artists often had a goal of integrating art into the daily lives of people. They wanted to get their message out to the general public and their goal wasn't necessarily to be *good*, but to be *different*. – When a work does not fit smoothly into any preconceived category, it is easier to discard the artist than to adjust the categories, explains Ping Huang. The avant-garde often creates process-art. Their work contains highly interactive elements, produced to question or signalize identity. It was not necessarily meant to last or to accumulate value for the owner. It was often meant as an intervention in a certain cultural or historical situation, or simply performed for its here-and-now value in daily life. Such art is naturally difficult to preserve and label. – Some artists may of course have been left out of other books because their art is of poor quality. But the question we ask isn't really whether a work is *good*, but whether it is *interesting*. If we can assume that the ideas were noticed by others, then the quality of the craft itself is less significant.

Nordic differences

Art in the Nordic countries has acted as an important nation builder. Historically, its main concern has been to unify, not diversify. Such national framing is particularly apparent within nations that have experienced colonization, with colonized countries like Norway and Iceland as prime examples. Such countries have tended to give very little room for foreign artists to be part of the national art scenes, while the former “colonizers” have had quite other practices. – The nationalist emphasis evidently has a postcolonial dimension, Huang says. Take the example of the German artist Arthur Köpcke, who was a very important influence on the post-war art scene in Denmark. Although he was German, he still has to be seen as belonging to Danish art history.

A new cultural divide

While the old avant-garde can be seen as a reaction to high-brow art, which was the only “true” art at the time, the tables are now turned. In today's society popular culture is dominant and high art is seen as elitist. But is avant-garde passé? – Avant-garde isn't something you stay your whole life, says Ørum, – but rather an experimental period,

often in youth. Recent years have seen an increasing interest in the historical avant-garde movements, and many young artists have acknowledged them as predecessors. But whether you call it avant-garde or not, today's artists can still produce new and startling things, which will perhaps not be recognised as important until much later. – But if you ask an artist whether she is or isn't avant-garde, the answer would often be no.

Two of the new avant-garde?

Just outside the Copenhagen University campus, in a derelict old workshop, we get a chance to find out. Two young artists are rolling white paint onto a graffiti-covered wall. Only a rectangle of the graffiti is still visible in the middle, framed perfectly by white. – We are trying out techniques for a project called “Frame your Fame,” explains one of them, as he hands his colleague a paintbucket. She continues explaining. – The idea is to draw attention to something that isn't really art, by framing it. It seems that the moment something is put in a frame, it immediately gets value, she says. But do they consider themselves to be avant-garde artists? He says no. – I think of avant-garde as something a bit snobbish and self-righteous. She disagrees. –Avant-garde means to be at the forefront, to be ahead. To be provocative. Sure, I am avant-garde, she says with a smile, as she turns around and continues painting.

FACTS: Avant-garde

DEFINITION (WIKIPEDIA):

AVANT-GARDE: Used to refer to people or works that are experimental or innovative, particularly with respect to art and culture. Avant-garde represents a pushing of the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo, primarily in the cultural realm.

GOALS: Support and coordinate small and dispersed national centres of research, help promote the exchange of knowledge about differences and similarities among the avant-garde currents and research in the Nordic countries, and make Nordic avant-garde research visible in a European and international context.

SUPPORTED BY NORDFORSK: 2004–2007

PARTNERS: The Universities in Copenhagen, Aarhus, Karlstad, Stockholm, Tromsø, Bergen and Iceland.

ACTIVITIES: Annual conferences and work on a four-volume history work and an electronic archive of documents from the Nordic avant-gardes.

WEBSITE: www.avantgardenet.eu

For more on the new European network, go to: www.eam-europe.ugent.be