

# **Does It Work? Contemporary Uses of Avant-garde Methods Beyond the Sphere of Art.**

## **Adams & Itso – The Reclaim of Urban Space.**

*Julie Thaning Mikines*

### *The hidden room*

This paper takes you into the artistic practice of the street artists Adams & Itso who are investigating the boundaries between art and something beyond the sphere of art. Adams is Swedish and Itso is Danish. They are in their late twenties. Not much more is known about them, as they have it as criteria to be “unknown”.

This paper will consider the two artists and their work of art as something, which have an avant-garde potential today. Adam & Itso’s artistic expression and their ideology behind their practice enable this potential.

In 2003 Adams & Itso found an unused space under the Central Station in Copenhagen near track 12 and made it into a home using only material that they found on construction sites. They created a fully liveable room with framed pictures on the walls as well as a kitchen and beds. The room was a secret for four years.

On February 2nd 2007 the Central Station was renovated. During this renovation the construction workers found the hidden room. They were of course surprised when they found the room, which is actually a work of art.

A couple of weeks later on February 20th 2007, the talk show, *Den 11. time*<sup>i</sup>, had the hidden room as the evening’s topic. The DSB<sup>ii</sup>’s chief inspector Per Buur was the guest on the show and he spoke about this mysterious secret room that found under the Central Station. This is how the work of Adams & Itso was first communicated to the world.

### *The urban sub territory*

Within any large city there lies an urban sub territory that all our lives depend upon, but which we rarely pay attention to. The city is based on an extensive underground

system of pipes, cables and hidden areas, which gives the city its structure, supplies and order. Since it is all located under the ground it is not often explored by ordinary people. In spite of this, the underground contains numerous hidden rooms, which easily can be used as we have seen with the work of Adams & Itso. They reclaim the urban space by finding and using these hidden spaces in their everyday life.

The use of urban sub territory can be seen in other cities. For example, in New York City homeless people live in the abandoned train tunnels beneath the streets. Jennifer Toth's *The mole people: life in the tunnels beneath New York City* from 1993 discusses this very matter. In 2000 Marc Singer investigates this phenomenon in his documentary, *Dark Days*. The movie focuses on the area under NYC's Penn Station, wherein lies an entire society of homeless people. However, there is a vast difference from Adams & Itso's approach to the sub territory; the homeless people live in the sub territory out of distress whereas Adams & Itso do so by choice.

**Timeline:**

**2003:** Adams & Itso find an unused space under the Central Station. They create a real room by installing beds and decorating the room so that it is furnished and fully liveable. The space includes tables, chairs, beds, a microwave, and framed pictures on the wall.

**2003-2007:** Adams & Itso lived in the hidden room throughout this period for various periods of time. They cooked, slept, played cards and listened to and watched all the people on the streets through small holes in the wall.

**February 2nd - 3rd 2007:** The Copenhagen Central Station is renovated and the secret room is discovered beneath the building.

**February 20th 2007:** *Den 11. time* (talk show on the Danish TV channel, DR2). DSB's chief inspector Per Buur is guest and talks about a mysterious secret room, he found under the Central Station of Copenhagen. Mikael Bertelsen explains to him the proper context: It is art, or rather reality with artists behind.??

**February 2008:** Adams & Itso write six texts on the side of six old DSB train wagons.

**April 12th – May 18th 2008:** Adams & Itso exhibit in this period in the window of "Kontoret for undergrundsanliggender" (Office for Underground Affairs). Visitors can see the exhibition between 24 and 04 each night. The exhibition is simply a projection on the window that shows pictures of the six old DSB train wagons with the texts written on them. The six pictures are running in a loop.

**July 28th 2008:** Reportagen "Hulen under jorden" (The underground den). A radio commentary about Adams & Itso on P1 by Anna Thaulow.

**May 2009:** Article about Adams & Itso in "Byens Puls" (DSB magazine). A picture of Adams & Itso's new home is shown in the article.

### *Gentrification*

Market economy is the engine of gentrification. Gentrification is when poor working-class neighbourhoods are turned into fashionable and restored areas. Then rents increase thereby ousting the original occupants due to the higher prices<sup>iii</sup>. Gentrification excludes certain groups of people.

Adams & Itso criticized urban gentrification by placing their work in the most central location of the city, without paying rent. When an area is gentrified there is an increasing regulation of what is permitted at street level. This fact it also stated by the artists: “The city is shrinking – it is almost becoming claustrophobic”<sup>iv</sup>. By living without the use of money Adams & Itso criticize the economic-related development. “I see it as a political statement not to consume”<sup>v</sup> as Adams expresses it. Adams & Itso’s anti consumer ideology and use of Free-culture is made clear in their hidden room: The work is organic, so to speak: it is created by using the city's remains. It remains a mystery as to when it will be discovered, cleaned and made to waste again. This is also a critical comment on our affluent society where good materials are just thrown away.

The thought behind Free-culture is that the culture that we all create should not be owned or privatized by corporations: “No idea comes from solitary confinement, but builds on long traditions of free exchange, cultural production, everyday life and lived experience. The instrumentalisation of art and culture for economic gain is an invasion of our life worlds that needs to be addressed and countered.”<sup>vi</sup>

Are Adams & Itso leading a revolutionary lifestyle? This concept is discussed by Mikkel Bolt and Das Beckwerk in *I sammenbrudets tjeneste* from 2008: “The schism is a revolutionary lifestyle and a revolutionary life-feeling. What could be the problem with a number of contemporary movements such as Ungdomshuset, it is that they feel revolutionary, they have a revolutionary life-feeling, but there is no such thing. The project must obviously be the revolutionary life.”<sup>vii</sup>. This is one opinion on how to be revolutionary. If Adams & Itso were living their entire lives in the works they built, they would be living the revolution.

### *Historizing this work as avant-garde*

Adams & Itso's work has a clear avant-garde potential. It shows us an alternative reality where art and everyday life melt together as proposed by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974). The project under the Central Station shows us the possibility to live the revolution within society.

“The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men”<sup>viii</sup>.

If anything this project is reintegrating art into life practice. Adams & Itso's project can be seen as an avant-garde attempt that has a small revolutionary aim. Furthermore their way of living is a protest against consumer society, which has clear roots in the Situationist International whose core arguments also were attacks on the capitalist degradation of the life of people:

“Following Marx, Lukács and Henri Lefebvre the situationists described the capitalist world as a bewitched and demonic world. Capitalism was a reified and self-legitimizing system, which commanded the people who produced and consumed goods unconsciously”<sup>ix</sup>

Guy Debord states this view on anti-consumerism in his *Society of the Spectacle* from 1967. Again we can turn to Adam's statement: “I see it as a political statement not to consume”.

### *Adams & Itso's way of communicating*

Adams & Itso are artists who not only work in the underground, but also make a virtue out of being unknown. Interestingly, these artists have opted not to use social media such as facebook, my space or even a website. In this sense it is actually quite difficult to get in contact with the artists.

When researching for this paper, three girls were very helpful in informing about their way of communicating and working with Adams & Itso in different ways:

Anna Thaulow was introduced to Adams & Itso by one of her friends who knew them both. She met with the artists and did a radio commentary on them. The second girl, Line Kjær, came in contact with Adams by leaving him a letter in “Hælebaren” in the Central Station. Afterwards Adams contacted her by email and they met and Adams & Itso agreed to do the show in the window of “the Office for Underground Affairs” on Christianshavn, but on the condition that the work/slide series were only available at night and that they wanted no further dissemination of their project and that they did not want to talk to the press or journalists.

Carina Liesk from the DSB-magazin Byens Puls tried many different ways to get in contact with the artists, but with no result. Then one evening a couple of weeks after all her efforts, Carina opens her bedroom window in her ground floor apartment in Nørrebro, Copenhagen and suddenly hears something at her windowsill. And there on her windowsill was an envelope with her name written on it. With the letter inside was also enclosed a picture of Adams & Itso’s new secret home.

Adams & Itso’s choice to communicate is both their weakness and their strength. If the construction workers at the Central Station had not found the room then we, the public, would not have heard about it. Their concept would not have been shared.

Maybe the hidden room would have appeared in a book as Adams has done before. The earlier work of Adams is passed on in his book *Holes, Huts and Hidings* (2007) , a book that for a limited period of time could be bought in “Hælebaren” in the Central Station.

#### *Does it work?*

The secret aura surrounding Adams & Itso is also their force. This is a way to reduce the risk of being recuperated. Guy Debord and the Situationists first proposed recuperating in the sociological sense in the 1960’s. Recuperating is the process where "radical" ideas and images are co modified and incorporated within mainstream society.

Right now in our time we have a mecca of identity creating platforms such as facebook, twitter, myspace, blogs etc. In this time it is rare not to be found on the

Internet and not to communicate.

If we use the word avant-garde in the sense of just something new, I think this idea of being “unknown” is something that will be avant-garde in the future. Perhaps the reason Adams & Itso continue to be so alluring and unique is the very fact that they do not have the accessibility that otherwise characterizes our contemporary time.

Adams & Itso’s world inspires people to pause and think twice about consumerism and capitalist society. In that sense it does work! With their hidden room they have produced a small glimpse of how the world could also be. This is the force of art. In its ambition to change society it creates these glimpses of a different world.

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i A Danish TV show on the channel DR2.

ii Danish State Railways.

iii Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentrification> last visited 31.01.10.

iv Adams: quote from the radio commentary by Anna Thaulow July 2008.

v Adams: quote from the documentary *Inside Outside* (2005) concerning street art by Andreas Johnsen & Nis Boye Rasmussen.

vi <http://field-work.dk/freeculture/index.html>.

vii Bolt, Mikkel: *I sammenbruddets tjeneste*, 2008, p. 128.

viii Bürger, Peter: *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 1974, p. 49.

ix Bolt, Mikkel: *Avantgardens selvmord*, 2009, p. 80.