

IN CONVERSATION WITH SVEIN BJØRKÅS

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2017

If I recall correctly, I was sitting in the dining room of the Clarion Hotel The Edge during the second day of the KORO conference *Offentlig kunst og byutvikling* in Tromsø. I remember I was feeling heavy, I couldn't manage to revive my body at any point that morning. I put some fish and salad on my bowl, my body asked for something fresh especially after such an overdose of alcohol the day before.

I was about to start eating, I was terribly hungry when suddenly a tall, very friendly man on his sixties sits in front of me. He smiled - in my head, I had only one thought: please don't be a super boring politician guy. I really didn't feel like talking to anyone - but okay to continue with the story, that gentleman introduced himself, "my name is Svein Bjørkås" he said. Until that moment I didn't have the slightest idea of who he was, soon later I realized he was the Director of KORO, the Norwegian agency for public art.

We began to talk about the conference, a lot of chit-chat until I decided to ask a question that at that time I considered essential to be able to understand KORO as an institution, through the very own voice of its Director. The question was, "Svein, how flexible do you think are the internal structures of KORO? Are they prepared to respond in real time to the context, situations, and realities of the day to day in Norway from an artistic and cultural perspective? I think he was definitely not expecting that kind of question during lunch time. He mentioned certain things that I found interesting, but he really managed to avoid the bullet like the Matrix and the Wachowski Brothers style.

I asked this question more into my role as a Director of a small-scale art space in Peru than as an artist, but both were present in that question. KORO being a large and public organization and Machaqmara Center for the Arts a very small and private one, in this case, I think the size does matter. In some ways, the work environment, strategies, schedules, and all the production work around artistic projects in a small or medium size organization are made of chewing gum, stretched and stretched. It becomes easier to adapt, to transform, to mold, to respond to a society and a scenario that is constantly in motion, is dynamic and ever-changing. One problem I find in some "large" arts organizations, let me put it this way: if they were a person I would describe them as "80 years old, bitter, conservative, impatient, afraid of change, and definitely afraid of failing."

This text is not intending to be an answer to these questions, in fact, is the opposite. I would like to open the question to all of you who are reading this text; how we help, how we shape large, dominant, hegemonic, and patriarchal institutions to become more flexible, self-reflexive, and open-minded institutions in a way that by proxy this helps to support the network of small and middle-size institutions. Is it possible to freely operate, from within, outside the political and ideological interests enforced by the mainstream and the bureaucrats? Can we aim for more democratic art institutions and approaches, to help reintegrate art into everyday life and address particular real-space situations?

I would like to end with this question based on a phrase that caught my attention from the text "Institutional Critique, an anthology of artists' writings" by Alexander Alberro (2009), "The center depends on the periphery in order to maintain its centrality". If the dominant institutions are the center and we - artists, small size institutions, independent curators, teachers, etc. - are the periphery; What kind of periphery do we want to be?