

The Art Work That Never Happened – Wooloo at the Momentum Biennial in Moss

By Matthias Neumann

The sixth Momentum, the Nordic Biennial of Contemporary Art, in the town of Moss in southern Norway opened its doors this June under the title “Imagine Being Here Now”. Five curators, corresponding to the five participating Nordic countries, organized the exhibition with fifty international participating artists in three venues: the Gallery F15, a historic countryside villa, Momentum Kunsthall, a former brewery in the city center of Moss, and the Solberg Tower, an empty high-rise building near the city of Moss. The biennial theme is decidedly not site-specific, and rather tries to provoke an intimate dialogue between the spectator audience and each individual work presented. This curatorial focus away from the site-specificity of the art event in the city of Moss, however, did not entirely preclude works that related their critical content through the context of the local.

Most intriguing in this respect is the proposition by the Danish art collective Wooloo with a work titled “Two Years' Untouched Garden”. Wooloo was founded by Martin Rosengaard and Sixten Kai Nielsen to offer a production platform and collaboration network for a contemporary art practice that can establish relations through a wide set of people as well as within manifold situations and socio-political realities, introducing an activist element into the production of art. Highly visible works of Wooloo have included the accommodation for about 3000 activists to the UN Climate Change conference in Copenhagen in 2009, New Life Residency at Manifesta 8, and a current project at the Venice Biennial. The later was initially commissioned as part of the Lebanese Pavilion to offer free accommodation for Lebanese artists. While Lebanon had to withdraw participation in the Biennial due to lack of funding, the Wooloo project went ahead nonetheless, shifting its offer for free accommodation to participants from other countries in economic need. In part it is this success through failure that makes Wooloo's work most provocative and critical. While the official withdrawal of Lebanon highlighted the financial nature of the visible art world, Wooloo was able to disengage from the need to be “official” by utilizing the established networks between local Venetians and artists in need of accommodation. The work thus situated itself critically in the middle of the socio-economic realities of the international art market without being absorbed by its spectacle.

Critical failure is also the mark of Wooloo's project for Momentum. “Two Years' Untouched Garden” was proposed as a contribution to the Momentum Biennial in the historic park surrounding the Gallery F15. The landscape slopes gently in front of the villa overlooking the fjord below. It is a popular recreation area, carefully mowed and pruned and maintained in an English garden tradition. Wooloo's seemingly simple proposition suggested to cease maintenance of the garden for two years until the next Momentum Biennial, and to let nature take its course. At first sight this seems like a familiar intervention in the tradition of Gordon Matta-Clark's coined term Anarchitecture, highlighting notions of entropy and the passage of time. Had this been the sole point of reference the work would still be challenging as it sets itself apart from the time frame of the art spectacle, and proposes non-action in a highly visible public space where maintenance is part of its self-defining civic image. And in fact this later aspect triggered local resistance that ultimately led to prohibiting the work from being realized. Instead the lawn will be mowed every Friday in perpetuity by local decree. The criticality of the work, however, reaches beyond the local sensibilities of order and tidiness. Wooloo's proposition is firmly anchored in a political realism that takes a current UN program to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (UN-REDD programme) as a point of departure. The REDD program which is financed by wealthier industrialized countries offers financial incentives to developing countries to reduce deforestation in order to cut global CO2 emissions. As Wooloo points out: “The founding agreement of the program is Norway's promise of one billion US dollars to Indonesia if the country decreases its annual deforestation to one million hectares of forest. This agreement was made last year [2010], a year in which Norway invested more than 20 billion US dollars in its oil industry and produced an average of 2.2 million barrels of oil daily. In other words, Norway earns

enormous amounts from the further pollution of the planet, while simultaneously using a fraction of this income to pay a poor nation to put its own development and industry on hold.“ [1]

It is this same logic of inaction officially promoted by the Norwegian government turned against itself that Wooloo appropriates in their proposition. And it is here where the fierce local opposition gains a symbolic momentum that reaches far beyond the local municipality.

Notes:

[1] Everywhere Else Than Here, Christian Skovbjerg Jensen & Wooloo; <http://tinyurl.com/czpt5pe> (accessed 08/11/11)