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Renegotiations

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ART IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM



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Art Work in Public Time: a study of Forest Calling, Ställbergs Gruva and Eternal Employment

// Dan Karlholm

In the allocation of public funds, a distinction is made between what used to be called project grants and operations support, which, regardless of their content and quality, are defined primarily in terms of time – as short-term and long-term activities respectively.¹ In other words, there are temporary, short-term, fleeting, occasional or even ephemeral elements (intended to disappear) and long-term, ongoing (indefinite), permanent or even perpetual events (intended to endure). The former can be occasionally supported, the latter need more continuous backing.² In both cases, we are talking about investments in the unknown, the future. The fact that artists have been working on projects for quite some time (with no set end dates) has certainly become a cliché, much like the fact that they do research (whatever it is they do), which affects how we understand the notion of *artwork* today. However, the oft-cited notion that the development of the art field has moved from unique works or products to undefined projects or processes needs to be problematized. Here, I will discuss the issue of art, time and projects based on three recent public artworks with theoretical support from art theorist Boris Groys.

The three works mentioned in the title all relate to what could almost be called *longue durée* (Braudel), in terms of the extended time perspectives involved. They can all be said to challenge the accelerating fluidity and adaptive flexibility of late modernity. They are also at odds with all notions of marketization and commodification, as well as the modern need for instant gratification. The first example is Malin Arnell and Åsa Elzén's *Skogen kallar – Ett oändligt kontaminerat samarbete eller Dansandet är en form av skogskunskap* (*Forest Calling – A Never-ending Contaminated Collaboration or Dancing is a Form of Forest Knowledge*)

1 Today, we speak of greater limits to grant funds and increased or decreased funds for ongoing management. However, these categories do not necessarily correlate with support for temporary or more permanent art projects.

2 However, this is a theoretical division. In practice, the permanent is understood as more than five years - perhaps even 20 years - as discussed in Håkan Nilsson's contribution "Temporary Liaisons and Far-reaching Convergences" in this anthology.

(2018-20), which although relatively short-term has the idea of infinity inscribed in the forest. In short, the work is about seeking legal protection for 3.7 hectares of Sörmland forest in order to take it out of production and protect it permanently. The Fogelstad group (1925-54), pioneers of both the women's movement and organic farming, are also brought to the fore here. The second work is the collective *Ställbergs Gruva (Ställberg's Mine)*, led by Carl-Oscar Sjögren and Eric Sjögren, which is based on a disused mining site in Västmanland on 9 hectares of land and a number of buildings, which they acquired in 2015. The work explores the living conditions in a depopulated corner of the world through various artistic and cultural activities, which also involve the local population. The third artwork, *Evig anställning (Eternal Employment)* by Goldin+Senneby (Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby), was the winning proposal in 2017 for Korsvägen station in the *West Link: Kronotopia* competition in Gothenburg. The work – essentially a job position without a job description – was intended to be inaugurated alongside the station in 2026, but in 2022 Trafikverket decided to abort the project, due to financial difficulties. The position was expected to last for around 120 years. It deals with, among other things, wage labor, capitalism and the meaning of life.

All three works deal with long timeframes, while these time perspectives also constitute the works' conditions of existence. They are very much about extended periods of time (a piece of forest in Södermanland, a depopulated mining community in Västmanland and a permanent job in Gothenburg) but are thus themselves extended in time, which is not a necessary condition for their existence as works, only a possibility resulting from a concept of art favorable to open-ended processes. The roots of this concept of art lie far in the past, in the transformation of the 1950s and 1960s, of an increasingly closed and pure form of modernism that had reached its apogee at the same time as it was becoming an object of historiographical interpretation.³ This applies in particular to the process art of the 1960s, as an extension of conceptual art in which the physical work was subordinate (though not eliminated, since a work must take some kind of form, if only

3 A testimony to this period of change in Sweden is Leif Nylén, *Den öppna konsten. Happenings, instrumental teater, konkret poesi och andra gränsöverskridningar i det svenska 60-talet [Open Art: Happenings, Instrumental Theatre, Concrete Poetry and Other Border Crossings in the Swedish 60s]* (Stockholm: SAK, publication 107, 1998). See also Hans Hayden, *Modernism as Institution. On the Establishment of an Aesthetic and Historiographic Paradigm* (Stockholm & Stehag: Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion, 2006).

through words, in order to exist). Relational aesthetics represented a kind of continuation, which from the 1990s onwards became one of the most influential tracks in global contemporary art. The fact that a government agency started commissioning public artworks of an explicitly short-lived or “temporary” nature can be tied to this history, albeit with a previously unknown emphasis on the end part of processes.⁴ It is thus the temporary works that are delimited and closed, while permanent works are open and undefined.

Time, projects and art projects

Now, if we look more closely at the temporality of these works, are they all examples of what is often described as an evolution in the global art field from work to process or project? I will question this in what follows and instead suggest that they are works as process and processes as works. It is only if we understand works as identical with a physical form or material entity that the above description can be justified. But works must first be understood as shorthand for artworks, and there can be little doubt that these three examples of public art also exemplify this abstract category. Secondly, all works of art must be understood as both material and immaterial, contemporary and deeply rooted in history, in that they all, briefly put, materialize an idea.

The projectification of society, and in particular its organization of work, is a phenomenon that has taken hold globally in recent decades.⁵ In his text “The Loneliness of the Project,” Boris Groys discusses how project applications have come to proliferate in the arts as much as in academia.⁶ It is about securing a period of “socially sanctioned solitude” or freedom to make something of one’s own, which also means mortgaging the future.⁷ Given that only a minority of all project applications in all fields and in all sectors are approved, it also

4 Works that are explicitly temporary were given space within the activities of Public Art Agency Sweden starting in 2012, at the same time that Magdalena Malm began her stint as director of the council, a position she held until 2019. The temporary work is reminiscent of the classical drama’s emphasis on “beginning, middle and end.” <https://statenskonstrad.se/arbeta-med-konst-i-offentliga-miljoer/arbetsprocesser-inom-offentlig-konst/arbetsprocess-for-tillfallig-offentlig-konst/> [accessed 10/08/2020].

5 For example, Anders Jensen, Christian Thuesen & Joana Geraldi, “The Projectification of Everything: Projects as a Human Condition,” in *Project Management Journal*, June/July 2016, pp. 21-34.

6 Boris Groys, “The Loneliness of the Project,” in *Going Public* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), pp. 70-83.

7 Groys, “The Loneliness of the Project,” op.cit.

means that the future that will actually emerge is one that bears the stamp of the predictable and the feasible, a future that the assessors of the applications understand, recognize and confirm. All results should be expected, and nothing strictly speaking should come as a surprise. The diverse array of rejected projects represents as many possible or rather impossible futures. Projects in both science and public art also usually have their own project duration, typically three to five years, after which they must be finalized and some kind of concrete result demonstrated.⁸

Groys certainly discusses other types of projects, orchestrated by sects or religious practices, but sees projects in particular as something typically modern. He cites the various “projects” of the artistic avant-garde as an example, but the question is whether the project, more than anything else, reflects the culture and public sector of our time, fundamentally imbued with new public management. NPM can be said to revolve around the idea of evaluating short-term projects in two stages: before (conditions, objectives and expected returns) and after (results, outcomes, impacts). Documentation (and evaluation) has a central role here, which Groys builds on, as we shall see shortly.

In all three of the works discussed in this text, the outer limit of the artwork lies several decades in the future, which means that these works must be left to themselves before their effects or degree of fulfilment can be verified.⁹ The planned, conceptually extended time, which thus runs into the unknown future, makes these works impossible to definitively evaluate. They can, of course, be documented

8 For example, The Swedish Art Grants Committee specifies the following: “Project grants may be applied for by individual artists for a limited experiment or development work. The project must have a clearly formulated goal, be limited in time and have a budget.” In addition: “the results of the project must be publicly demonstrated in some way” https://www.konstnarsnamnden.se/projektbidrag_bild_form [accessed 10/25/2020]

9 Henrik Orrje, Administrative Director of Public Art Agency Sweden, describes the art project process as follows: “Completed temporary projects are given final approval by the responsible curator at Public Art Agency Sweden, or a partner such as a municipality, but the artists participating in temporary projects do not create a final report. In government commissions that Public Art Agency Sweden has taken on in recent years, the production of artworks (permanent and temporary) has been combined with other cultural policy objectives concerning knowledge development, such as interdisciplinary collaboration, development of the concept of design, the participation of civil society, self-organized art practitioners and common meeting places for the people. In these assignments, artists have played an important role in strengthening knowledge development and have actively participated in the dissemination of lessons and experiences, i.e., mainly qualitative aspects, through texts, films, conferences, seminars, etc. Artists have also participated in program activities and other dissemination activities after the commissions have ended.” (email correspondence with author 11/27/2020)

and evaluated *to some extent*, but never completely, which may actually add to their attractiveness.

Groys stresses that projects are always about (future) time:

Each project is above all the declaration of another, new future that is thought to come about once the project has been executed. But in order to build such a new future, one first has to take a leave of absence, a time in which the project shifts its agent into a parallel state of heterogeneous time. This other timeframe, in turn, disconnects from time as society experiences it – it is de-synchronized. Society's life carries on regardless – the usual run of things remains unaffected. But somewhere beyond this general flow of time, someone has begun working on a project – writing a book, preparing an exhibition, or plotting a spectacular assassination – in the hopes that the completed project will alter the general run of things and all mankind will be bequeathed a different future: the very future, in fact, anticipated and aspired to in this project. In other words, every project thrives solely on the hope of being resynchronized with the social environment.¹⁰

First, the project is described as a new future, then as the time it takes to imagine this future. A time frame in the form of a new future and one in the form of “another time frame,” which constitutes the conditions of the first time frame. The project thus requires a project to come into being (money = time and necessary resources). The project is both the path and the goal, both the condition and the result, which makes it extremely difficult to even think outside this project box. Are we even witnessing a translation of art into projects? No, it is not a question of one replacing or being able to stand in for the other, but of a two-component combination – art projects.

Each project, according to Groys, represents a proposal for a new future, which is generated by the project. It is perhaps a slight exaggeration but aptly put. When it comes to the project period, which includes working on the project, as a researcher I certainly know the feeling. Every draft and idea worked out in the artistic field can also be described in project terms, even if art projects are a different kind of time-based

10 Groys, “The Loneliness of the Project,” op.cit., pp. 76-77.

project where the important thing is the “result” that develops over time, neither its preliminary work nor its definitive final report. What is important is what unfolds along the project’s own time axis, what is in progress, the activity rather than the finished work. Or – the work is the activity. The work of art is the art activity (the artwork).

The conceptualization period of the work and its production period (for which project grants can be applied for) precede the result, which is also called a project (and is listed as such, i.e., in its finished or historical form on websites and in archives).¹¹ In academia (including artistic research), projects end with the delivery of something: one or more texts or an exhibition, for example. In the art world, a project ends with – a project.¹² Despite this difference, Groys’ ideas about an alternative temporality for the project are relevant here, for even the completed project (which in turn extends into the future) can, after all, be likened to a heterogeneous temporality in relation to ordinary time, a parallel time that is thus desynchronized from ordinary time: the time of the clock, the almanac, and the seasons of the year. The aim, Groys then writes, is to reconcile or re-synchronize the time removed from this flow with ordinary, social time. This does not mean that it will disappear or become invisible, but that it will be integrated with and add to, influence or change this temporality (the extent of which is unclear). What artists are applying for is time outside the ongoing everyday social flow in order to contribute something back to this flow and to some extent change its course.

In a continuation on Groys’ insightful essay on the loneliness and particularity of the project, he becomes an exponent of the clichéd notion that the development of art has moved from the work to process or project. After all, what is described in the quote above is that each project aims to realize a new future, that is, as I understand it, an ever-so-small shift in what is to come, what comes next. But for this to happen, project time itself - understood as the time taken to conceive and flesh out a future project - establishes a parallel “heterogeneous” time, a time separate from ordinary time. Project time can be likened to a pocket of time or alternative time, which aims to make its mark on the dominant, more or less homogeneous, normal or ‘ordinary’ time to which project time is an alternative. Thus, two aspects of

11 On Public Art Agency Sweden’s website, in 2020, works of art are listed under the tab “Our art projects.”

12 This name, of course, can conceal all kinds of physical manifestations.

projects emerge as a result and as a time for the realization of this. But the category is even more flexible, and Groys discusses unfinished projects, and even contends a little later that projects "cannot" be finished, even though he exemplifies the project results with books and exhibitions: "...even if the heterogeneous project time cannot be finished, it [...] can be documented." But since it was the heterogeneous time that was desynchronized from standard time with a view toward resynchronization of the two, this must reasonably imply that it is also completed as such, not only touching or overlapping but integrated with the standard time it has also influenced in some way.

Groys continues, "One could even argue that art is nothing more than the documentation and representation of such project-based heterogeneous times."¹³ This argument has also been presented in an earlier essay of his and is reused here, I speculate, without the author being in full control of the implications for the project discussion.¹⁴ Of course, that art "is nothing other than" the documentation/representation of art-as-project not only sounds barren and meaningless, it also empties the concept of art of substance – reducing it to a conduit or mirror while also emptying the concept of project of substance by removing its life-giving connection to art. After all, the whole value behind the idea of art projects is that they are a new type of artwork. When he claims that "art is no longer understood as the production of works of art but as documentation of life-in-the-project - regardless of the outcome," he misunderstands both what art and projects are about here. Further: "...art is no longer manifested as another, new object, for contemplation that has been produced by the artist but as another heterogeneous time frame of the art project, which is documented as such." The conclusion is that "art documentation is, by definition, not art."¹⁵

By simultaneously adopting the term art project, Groys' entire argument as presented above seems to nullify itself. Such a project obviously involves, or is itself art, or alternatively – the art in question manifests itself here in the form of a project. What at first appears to be a posthumous documentation is in fact the finished manifestation, a presentation of the completed art project, whose content – actions, events and forms

13 Groys, "The Loneliness of the Project," op.cit. p. 77.

14 Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation," *Art Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 53-65.

15 Groys, "The Loneliness of the Project," op.cit., pp. 78-79.

– has been largely consumed and dissipated over the years. The only thing that is never consumed or dissipated is the idea of the artwork/art project. It is not the documentation but the presentation of this idea in its most mature form that a viewer ultimately encounters when the work is exposed. This stage does not mean that the work becomes historic or ceases to exist, as its very survival may well be inscribed as a mode of artistic existence in the project. The work may have been programmed as “definitively unfinished” to paraphrase Marcel Duchamp.¹⁶

In all these cases, art presents itself as an art project (with a time frame that is heterogeneous in relation to everyday, normal time). According to Groys, an art project is a project in two senses of the word: from the draft or planning to the result via the journey between these two points (which also lends itself to the name project). In sum, there are rather three meanings of project contained in the word art project: 1) someone puts together a project, a document describing the intentions and expected consequences, 2) then (in the best case) implements this project (as conceived or with a number of deviations) during a certain stipulated time and finally 3) presents the project as a result. The idea is of course present throughout the process, but it is only realized during the development of the project and in all its aspects (accumulated as sediments) only at the very last stage.

Now, what is the role of project and temporality in the three works *Forest Calling*, *Ställbergs Gruva* and *Eternal Employment*?

16 Cf. *The Definitely Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Thierry de Duve (Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1991).

Forest Calling

In the work *Forest Calling* (*Skogen kallar*), with the English subtitle, *A Never-ending Contaminated Collaboration or Dancing is a Form of Forest Knowledge*, the word project is removed in favor of “collaboration,” referring of course to the collective work of the artists Malin Anrell and Åsa Elzén, but certainly also to the activities that are organized and take place in this forest (including dance in the form of raves).¹⁷ The main action, as presented by the artists at a public presentation of the work, is “to take a piece of forest out of production,” which I interpret as a symbolic act of protest against the highly efficient industrial forest industry that defines a young forest such as this, which is no more than 70 years old, as a “production forest”: a forest only there to be harvested and sold (more like a plantation than a forest and, significantly, with little biodiversity).¹⁸ The land covers 3.7 hectares and is located in Julita, Katrineholm municipality in Södermanland. This anything but pristine piece of cultivated nature is owned by Fogelstad estate, whose origins as a mill date back to the 17th century. In 1925, Elisabeth Tamm founded the *Kvinnliga medborgarskolan vid Fogelstad* (Fogelstad Citizen School for Women), a veritable home for the Fogelstad Group, which was formed in 1921 by, among others, Elin Wägner, and became one of the Swedish women’s movement’s most important centers.¹⁹ What the artists today seek to realize through this work is a lease agreement (*Skogsavtal*) for a maximum of 50 years for this patch of forest, which cuts like a rectilinear wedge into a much larger forest area, thus resembling a piece of a large cake.²⁰ The forest is not classified as worthy of protection today, mainly because of its young age, but in another 50 years, it may well be. The plan is therefore to spare this area from the ravages of extraction and exploitation, so that the forest can both regain its natural agency and age without direct external influence and be classified as a protected old-growth forest in half a century, with the intention of achieving legally protected status in perpetuity.

17 “This is one of twelve local art projects that were part of Public Art Agency Sweden’s government commission Knowledge Hub Public Art (2018-2020). The projects aimed to explore the concept of art and what art can be.” <https://statenskonstrad.se/konst/skogen-kallar/> [accessed 10/02/2020].

18 Conversation on “Temporality and Public Art,” Public Art Agency Sweden, 04/12/2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eqAbQ5gb78> [accessed 10/10/2010].

19 <https://statenskonstrad.se/konst/skogen-kallar/> [accessed 10/02/2020].

20 At the time this text is due to be published, I am informed that such an agreement has been signed.



Malin Arnell & Åsa Elzén *Forest Calling – A Never-ending Contaminated Collaboration or Dancing is a Form of Forest Knowledge* 2019, Photo: Ricard Estay/Statens konstråd

Forests are a collective singularity, as evidenced by the expression “can’t see the forest for the trees.” The dialectic between the component trees and the forest as a whole is intricate, and if too small an area of ‘forest’ had been clipped off, the very definition of forest could have been compromised. A certain degree of distribution and diversity thus seems necessary, but this narrow sliver of land is now bordered by neighboring trees with extensive roots and continuous vegetation that are sacrificed, biotopes are split, animal trails cut... Is it not a problematic act of violence to carve out a segment of the forest from the forest? How do we delineate and maintain these boundaries? Will the carved-out forest become an unnatural, cultural entity as well? A question that brings to mind the philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s reflections on the small tribe discovered in the Philippine jungle in 1971, where they had lived for centuries without contact with the outside world, but who were nonetheless transformed by the artificial act of leaving them alone in their “primitive” virginity.²¹ Transformed, or even “contaminated.”²² There is an ethical dilemma here that could be explored further. *Forest Calling* also has points of contact with artist Henrik Håkansson’s *The Reserve* (2009-12), a 2500 square meter area at Wanås Castle in Skåne that was enclosed with fencing to allow a piece of terrain to “develop without human intervention and contrast with the surrounding nature.”²³

I cannot help but connect the idea of a separate era of seclusion or “solitude” for this forest with Groys’ basic idea of projects. The forest here becomes de-synchronized from the normal and normative flow of time and develops in a time outside this hegemonic time with its cyclical demands to produce. A heterogenic, or rather heterochronic, parallel temporality emerges here, which aims to let the forest be itself and which, through this artistic intervention in an economic

21 Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University Of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 7-8.

22 The title revives the negatively charged term contamination, which may refer to a linguistic confusion of expressions but otherwise means something stained, polluted, soiled... *Svenska Akademiens ordböcker [Swedish Academy Dictionary]*: <https://svenska.se/tre/?sok=kontamination&pz=1> [accessed 11/01/2010]. However, the term is reclaimed today, e.g. Anna Lowenthal Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton U.P., 2015), 27-34.

23 Even without large mammals, there can be an impact on the environment, which helps not only to lock in a space for sustainable development but also to influence and partially redirect the immediate environment from an animal perspective. <http://www.wanas.se/svenska/Konst/Konstn%C3%A4rer/Konstn%C3%A4r.aspx?fid=67> [accessed 10/08/2020].

system, offers a critique of the system as such.²⁴ A number of more evocative and metaphorical associations are also attached to the work, expressed as “3.7 hectares of symbioses, histories, temporalities and relationships,” not least through the concept of “desire,” both to lesbian love and to “a larger space–time and a different future,” which fits well with Groys’ analysis.²⁵

Furthermore, the forest becomes, according to the artists, an “assemblage with its own temporalities,” but also a “monument.” Its monumentality sounds somewhat more static and definitive. However, unlike most monuments, what is emphasized is continuous change: “The forest becomes a monument - an on-going, transformative, performative public artwork.”²⁶ It is also “a public artwork, a forest and a habitat for endless and endless dead or alive vibrant matter,” which indirectly refers to the work of the New Materialist theorist, Jane Bennett.²⁷ But if it becomes a changing, transformative monument, one might also say that such a monument becomes inseparable from its own documentation – how else are we to make transformation visible (and of what?). This actualizes and problematizes Groys’ argument in an interesting way. For Groys, the starting point seems to be a sentiment of disappointment that an increasing number of art exhibitions are content to showcase what has already been done elsewhere (the dulllest aspect of documentation), rather than creating a presentation that becomes one with itself and the artwork that ‘happens’ each time it is activated by a viewer/visitor/audience. This is also, of course, a case of the continuous response to the calling of the forest in the form of excursions, walks, conversations, dance and interaction with the forest itself.²⁸

24 On heterochrony see, e.g., Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham & London: Duke U.P., 2013); Dan Karholm, *Kontemporalism. Om samtidskonstens historia och framtid [Contemporalism. On the History and Future of Contemporary Art]*. (Stockholm: (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2014), pp. 276-286.

25 The artists have a close relationship with the organization *Naturens Rättigheter (Rights of Nature)*, which is modelled on the Declaration of Human Rights and led in Sweden by the activist Pella Thiel.

26 Presentation of *Forest Calling - A Never-ending Contaminated Collaboration or Dancing is a Form of Forest Knowledge* by Malin Arnell and Åsa Elzén: <https://statenskonstrad.se/events/programdag-in-forests-call> [accessed 10/10/2020].

27 Ibid, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

28 These activities are in turn a contemporary echo of the activities of the Fogelstad Group, which was a group of (newly enfranchised) women who met in a sheltered context and learned to act as political subjects.

Interestingly, something performative also happens in the mere classification of the forest as “public art”: “When the forest is understood as a public artwork, it is lifted out of its predetermined context and becomes a kind of resistance to the Western teleological concept of time.”²⁹ The lease would lift the forest from immediate logging, but the public art classification also lifts the forest out of the Western concept of time. Or is it more accurate to say it is lifted from the economic system? That this concept of time would find symbiosis with capitalism and the forest industry complicates the artists’ reliance on the same concept of time in their negotiation of a fifty-year lease.

A more serious ethical problem ultimately presents itself: “What is our obligation to the forest? Our responsibility? Who should we listen to? Something whispers that it is completely impossible to own ‘nature’, to own land. Making a profit on the commons, the land, is a loss of our future.”³⁰ But in the meantime, would not responsibility be exercised toward the forest through what is called forest management? And what to do about the potential ravages of the spruce bark beetle (it is mentioned but in more poetic than alarmist terms), which could jeopardize the future protection classification it hopes to achieve? How do we protect against increasingly frequent forest fires during the Anthropocene? After all, sometimes nature does consume itself, which is really only a transformation of the energy it holds. In a very sympathetic way, this work seeks to counter the harmful effects of capitalism embodied in the successive felling of forests, in favor of the forest’s own agency and its own rights. This certainly comes at the cost of an anthropogenic divestment in which the carved-out forest risks becoming an unhappy singularity that may in a few years miss its symbiotic environment, though in return emerge as a protest against and a monument to the documented greed of modern humans.

29 See note 153.

30 See note 153. The concept that the earth cannot be owned is a central theme. An important source of inspiration for this project was Elin Wägner’s and Elisabeth Tamm’s *Fred med jorden* [*Peace with the Earth*] (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1940). The book was also included in Åsa Elzén’s exhibition “Träda - Fogelstadgruppen och jord” [Notes on a Fallow - The Fogelstad group and earth] at Sörmlands museum 05/30/2020 - 01/26/2021.



The Non Existent Center, Ställbergs gruva, 2018,
Photo: The Non Existent Center

Ställbergs Gruva (Ställbergs Mine)

The work *Ställbergs Gruva* is described by the artists as follows:

Ställbergs Gruva aims to be a place where the big issues become more personal – and the personal part of the big issues. A place for learning, doubt and living. Collectively and individually. Existential and political. A place where space and the market live side by side with the roots of the field pea and the sound of an engine room. Ställbergs' mine is run by the economic association The Non-Existent Center [sic!] and spans nine hectares of land and 1000 square meters of buildings in Ställberg's decommissioned iron ore mine in the municipality of Ljusnarsberg.³¹

31 Ställbergs gruva: <https://www.stallbergsgruva.se/> [accessed 10/10/2020]. Unless otherwise stated, quotations in the text are taken from here. This is one of twelve local art projects that were part of Public Art Agency Sweden's government commission Knowledge Hub Public Art (2018-2020). The projects aimed to explore the concept of art and what art can be. The selection team at Public Art Agency Sweden that chose the projects consisted of: Magdalena Malm, former director, Åsa Mårtensson, project manager Knowledge Hub Public art, Elena Jarl, assistant curator, Giorgia Zachia, coordinator Stärka Konstorganisationer (stronger Art Organizations) and Edi Muka, curator." <https://statenskonstrad.se/konst/processen/> [accessed 10/10/2020].

Tempus states that this is a vision, something this collective work hopes to be. The text uses classic rhetorical figures of speech, from the opening chiasmus, a few anaphors and contrasts to a breathtaking shift in perspective from “outer space” to “the roots of the field pea.” And in the very name of the association – the non-existent center – there is a paradox. Even more intricate is the apparent doubling of the subject in the paragraph: The Ställberg mine emanates from the land and buildings of the Ställberg mine... But as everyone understands, there are two Ställberg mines, yet only one mine.

In the next paragraph, the wording “wants to be” is used by the authors. In light of this phrasing, I consider their text as a vision rather than a program, policy or project description. Here things become more straightforward. The activity has been in operation at this location since 2012, which is also a work (an art space?) with the title (which I italicize for the sake of clarity) *Ställbergs Gruva*, by eleven people with varying backgrounds in arts and handicrafts, in addition to journalism and psychology. As of 2015, the land and buildings are said to be “cultural worker-owned,” since “the group’s other association, Non Existent Resources, purchased the property.” Further: “Ownership is seen as a long-term investment, with a repayment plan extending to 2070.” It is one thing for everything to be paid off and the eleven participants to be debt-free in fifty years’ time, but the extent of the commitment should also be indicated here and closely linked to the long-term investment in question. This is also roughly the estimated remaining lifetime of the crew.³² The concept of a project, which can last for many years, but usually connotes something more temporary, is rejected by the authors. This seems to be a question of art in the more open-ended sense of the word. The time perspective is interesting, since nothing here starts from scratch, neither in 2012 nor from the 2015 acquisition. After all, the Ställberg mine has its own history, as does the land, the village, the municipality and this place on earth. Another paragraph on the website describes more about the place in response to the question “Where are we?”: “Ställberg’s mine is located on manganese and iron-bearing primary rock in the valley of the Hörksälven, just north of Kopparberg in Ljusnarsberg municipality, Örebro county, Västmanland province.” A geological link at the bottom leads to a location on the map today. Copper, iron and silver

32 Presentation by C-O Sjögren at Temporarity [sic!] and Public Art Symposium 12/12/2019, Public Art Agency Sweden: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3h7palzuH4w> [accessed 10/15/2020].

were mined here from the Middle Ages to the end of the 20th century. All of the local services that once existed here are gone – not even a grocery store remains. There are no train stops and fewer than 100 people live there today.

In the 1950s, the mine's main shaft is said to have been the deepest in Europe (1072 m). In 1977, everything closed when Jan Stenbeck became the owner of *Ställbergsbolagen*. In stark contrast with the centuries-old mining business, Stenbeck “invested capital in ZTV and Comviq, today's Tele 2, among others.” From the industrial age to the information age. Since 2012, TNEC has been conducting “artistic, cultural and social activities based on the mine and its expansive surroundings.” From the local to the global, we might be tempted to say, but the correct statement is rather: from the local to the glocal (i.e. the new local is determined by its intertwinement with the global).

The group arranges walks, talks, exhibitions, festivals and more, and also has an international residency (all suspended at the time of writing due to the pandemic). In terms of subject matter, the work revolves around questions about the potential of art and culture to “work through the difficulties today's societies face,” not least in relation to climate change. By transforming the site in an energy-efficient and sustainable way, the hope is to facilitate permanent housing in the short term. The activity is further described in terms of “openness to the living, to history and to the common” through “a formative social investigation.” Around the corner, it is pointed out, is “the world and its economic, human and ecological conditions,” and the question then posed is: “what knowledge is needed in a world where the climate is changing rapidly?” Collective exploration is highlighted, “[an] exploration of known and unknown parts of the self and the world.”

The poet Jonas Gren, who was involved in *Ställbergs Gruva*, does not wish to call this kind of art activity a project, which is associated with time: “For me it is important not to call what we do projects but work. It's important for the feeling that you are promising something to yourself. Otherwise, it becomes something to where we go a few times, take something and leave other things behind. That when the project is done, there is still an us and a them. I want to blur the line between the us and them and have that intertwinement persist over time.”³³ It is a powerful vision that *Ställbergs Gruva* embodies, both

33 Marit Kapla, “Berättelsen om 2070” (The Story of 2070), *Ord & Bild*, 2-3, (2017) pp. 47-52.

as a work and an industrial ruin with networks of invisible tentacles stretching out toward the outside world in a planetary expansion. In 2019, *Ställbergs Gruva* received the Swedish Art Grants' committee structural grant, not to create temporary projects but "permanent places for art and cultural production outside of big cities."³⁴ One of the goals is to develop residencies of about 40 people per year in this "thought hub" (C-O Sjöberg), where all thoughts are also constantly concretized and translated into action, while depopulation and the dismantling of social services continue all around.



Sketch for Eternal Employment by Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby
© Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby / Bildupphovsrätt 2021

34 <https://www.stallbergsgruva.se/Renovering-2020> [accessed 10/27/2020].

Evig Anställning or Eternal Employment

The artwork *Eternal Employment* by Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby is presented by Public Art Agency Sweden as:

an idea-based work in which one person will be employed at Korsvägen station. What the employee chooses to do shapes the content of the work and thus the artwork. In an idea-based artwork, it is the work process itself, the entire creation process, not the realization of a physical object, that is the focus. An idea-based artwork elevates a particular issue and invites debate, comment and spontaneous reaction. What happens in the comments and reactions becomes new material for the work to build on, which continues to evolve based on the changed conditions. The form of the work thus depends entirely on how it is received, and in this way, it is never really finished.³⁵

Much of this is true of all art, except for the premise that what is said and done in the reception of the work is absorbed as part of the work, a principle propounded by Lars Vilks and Dan Wolgers, among others. It is an effective defensive strategy that asserts that whatever anyone says or whatever criticism anyone makes regarding the work in question itself contributes to the further “creation” of the work.

At Korsvägen station, which is scheduled to open in 2026 when the West Link in Gothenburg is completed, a time clock and a special light will be installed at the station, as well as a changing room for the employee. “The question of what the future of work will look like is one of the central elements of the piece,” it goes on to say, implying that the sights are set on the future, which is in line with Groys’ ideas on (art) projects. However, the punch clock seems to be more about the past, as a semiotic figure for the employment conditions of modernity, even a marker reminiscent of the *Folkhemmet* era. The analogue punch clock in the image above transforms the invisible core activity – a job position without a core or pre-defined activity – into a kind of visual theater. The mechanical punch clock with its round dial with Arabic numerals uses paper cards that are slid into the “clock” and are

35 <https://statenskonstrad.se/konst/evig-anstallning/> [accessed 10/10/2020]. Curator Lotta Mossum, assistant curator Alba Baeza. For the artists’ “proposal” in English, see https://statenskonstrad.se/app/uploads/2018/09/3-Eternal_Employment-WrittenDescriptionA4.pdf.

stamped with a date and a precise time.³⁶ The act makes clear that it is not so much a clock as a control device, manifesting the employer's absolute biopolitical power over the worker, as a monitor that is not concerned with what the worker does, only recording that he or she punches in on time and does not punch out until the end of the shift (although this can be manipulated if the worker has someone else punch in or out). The device becomes not only an agent that controls the worker's movements and work conditions but also a symbol of the power imbalance between the parties. Artists may live precarious lives in scarce, insecure circumstances, but if there is one thing they have, it is the freedom to formulate their work themselves (unless they exclusively perform commissioned work). There is a stark contrast here between the artists and their idea-based artworks imbued with meaning and the meaningless work they have conceived for someone else to undertake.

A further conceptual component of this work relates to the French economist Thomas Piketty's thesis that "today, invested capital increases in value faster than wages increase, which, according to Piketty, leads to increased class divisions."³⁷ This work of art uses the existing budget and invests it so that the return, according to current projections, is enough to cover one job position for 120 years.³⁸ To empty the concept of work of all content, all preconceived meaning, to examine what it can be filled with, given the stark formality around a job position, is an interesting thought exercise. What may be perceived as cynical is that this thought experiment involves, indeed requires, a kind of guinea pig in the form of people whose perseverance and willpower are tested in this experiment. Here, then, is an ethical complication that is unusual for conceptual works. How have the artists resolved it? It is of course too early to say, as the work is still only at the first of the three project stages, as discussed above. However, the realization of the artwork has already begun by being presented as a winning competition entry and documented as such. After all, when the art critic Frans Josef Petersson went to great lengths to severely criticize the work in *Kunstkritikk* in 2017, he not only helped to add a dimension to the work, he also managed to get the head of Public Art Agency

36 The exact design of the clock has not yet been decided, but the above concepts are based on the image communicated by the artists. Incidentally, many time clocks today are digital.

37 <https://statenskonstrad.se/konst/evig-anstallning/> [accessed 10/10/2020].

38 Ibid. See Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century*, Lars Ohlsson (Stockholm: Karneval, 2015).

Sweden, which initiated the competition in collaboration with the Swedish Transport Administration, to respond and thus contribute artistically.³⁹ And now here I am contributing myself... One thing that is corrected in the debate is Petersson's incorrect assumption that the employee must spend his or her time at the station, there "is nowhere in particular that the employee must be at the station,"⁴⁰ Malm emphasizes in both her replies. Except twice a day, or nearly 500 times a year, it may be added, as long as the person in question wants to continue receiving a salary!

The question is whether this "idea-based" work could have worked, even done better, as a thought-provoking proposal, draft, project (in the first sense of the word, according to my three-part division above)? Consider the laconism of conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner: "The piece need not be built."⁴¹ Does not the realization of the piece, using actual employees as building blocks for a few years, threaten to lead to elusive, if not insoluble, ethical problems? Many who took note of the winning proposal found the problem to be that no physical "work" would be erected, but for me the problem is, on the contrary, that the piece is to be physically embodied at all costs.⁴² In this work, the cliché from-work-to-project seems inverted: an interesting art project, which could have stayed on paper (at the so-called project stage) would thus if it had been realized become manifest in a few years and for over a hundred years using living people as materials.⁴³

Comparisons and conclusions

All three works take on something seemingly mundane, something that is just there and that no one really cares about or can grasp. A patch

39 In *Kunstkritikk*: Frans Josef Petersson, "Statens konstråd sviker sitt sociala och demokratiska arv" [Public Art Agency Sweden Betrays its Social and Democratic Heritage], 11/17/17; Magdalena Malm, "Statens konstråd försvarar Goldin+Senneby," [Public Art Agency Sweden defends Goldin+Senneby], 11/22/17; F J Petersson, "Ska vi ha arbetsgivarkonst nu?" [Are We to Have Employer Art Now?], 11/22/17; Magdalena Malm, "Med omsorg om arbetstagarens förhållanden" [With Concern for the Worker's Conditions], 12/01/17.

40 Magdalena Malm "Med omsorg om arbetstagarens förhållanden" [With Concern for the Workers' Conditions] 12/01/17. <https://kunstkritikk.se/med-omsorg-om-arbetstagarens-forhallanden/> [accessed 10/15/2020].

41 Lucy L. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972...* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), s. 73.

42 This is discussed in Per Strandberg, *Monument över Fast anställning [Monument to Permanent Employment]*, bachelor's thesis (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2018), p. 27.

43 The work reminds me of the deeply controversial art of the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, where he, among other things, pays people to perform more or less meaningless tasks.

of forest, which cannot even be defined as a unit without a map or a systematic walk through the space it occupies; a disused mine and the more or less deserted community surrounding it, following the conversion and closure of the once thriving mining industry (a fossil activity that made this community possible), and a work in the form of something as bureaucratic and non-visual as an unnecessary job position – without a given task that needs a solution – but more a job as such, for a period of time that transcends an individual’s lifespan (and thus challenges the definition of a job), a position that just goes on, even long after the artists/employers have died. I have discussed them in terms of art, projects and time, though not always in that order.

It might sound as if these three public artworks in project form are unusually long in character in that they define themselves temporally in a less common way by way of three specified time spans: 50 years with a view to eternity; 50 years with a view to freedom from debt, or as long as the money lasts; about 120 years according to financial calculations. Paradoxically, however, this makes these works of art relatively short-term. By being absolutely limited in time, like all temporary art, they are exceptions to the rule for art, public and private – works that have an indefinite existence. The latter is not infrequently misunderstood as presumed timelessness. However, timelessness is a projected value and an aesthetic ideal, never a reality, as nothing can take place or exist outside of time. Timelessness is a dream of a long life, survival, beyond the flow of time (Bergson) and “the general run of things” (Groys). In a way, *Forest Calling* is an exception to the temporal, by experimenting with two temporal stages, the first encompassing half a century and the second encompassing eternity. In yet another paradoxical twist, however, it is temporally limited works like these that are able to articulate, concretize, and portray the notoriously elusive and potentially infinite phenomenon of time. They can also be said to pose basic ontological questions: what (really) is a forest, a society, a job? And thus: what is (today) a work of art? One work refers to nature (threatened), a second to culture (threatened) and a third to capitalism (unthreatened).

For the first two of these works – within these “projects,” according to Public Art Agency Sweden, – it was an important issue to “examine the concept of art and what art can be.” An answer to this has already been discussed and seems quite apparent today: art today can be *art projects*, which means that artworks can be project-oriented and

can extend into the future, but they also have a limited temporal projection in a way that distinguishes them from common artworks in the form of spatially delimited objects (with unlimited scope). At the same time, I have argued against the notion that development has thus moved “from” works “to” processes and projects because the latter are still (art) works, works that have come to be defined by their projected and prognosticated, immanent and generative processes. It is rather a question of the very concept of art being broadened to include, in parallel and synchronically, works of a project nature. Art today can therefore be art-as-project and projects can, under certain circumstances, be art.

The work that is most clearly art, for me, is *Eternal Employment*, which presents an elaborate idea in a clever and evocative way (but where the impending realization of the idea can be seen as an accompanying complication). It is a conceptual work of art that threatens to become absurdist theater. *Forest Calling* is a multi-level collaboration, interspersed with performative elements and activities, and with a clear goal in mind. That everything that happens in and with the forest from now on is art follows from the art project paradigm. As for the relationship between *Ställbergs Gruva* and the concept of art, things become more diffuse. Does it even matter to the artists and academics involved that this is art (other than the fact that the classification opens up certain pockets of funding)? At the risk of repeating Groys' view on projects, I still have to wonder whether a production and residence site for art and culture can really also, as such, be counted as art? Is every studio and exhibition space also art (work)? Public Art Agency Sweden has answered yes to this question in the most emphatic way possible, by allocating funds to the “project,” but somewhere along the way the line becomes so blurred between the conditions for the production of art and culture in general and what is generated from such production – ideas, physical forms and art projects – that the categories risk becoming obscure. In a text about this particular work, obtained during the final stages of writing this text, the subject behind *Ställbergs Gruva* slips between an it and a they. *Ställbergs Gruva*, unlike the mine itself, is alternately an activity, a project, a collective and an “artist-driven place.” It is also meta-art: a public artwork that aims to “promote careful thinking about public art.”⁴⁴

44 Unsigned, “Processen” [The Process], in *Vi förändrar varandra. Kunskapsnav offentlig konst [We Transform Each Other. Knowledge Hub Public Art]* (Stockholm: Public Art Agency Sweden,

All these works problematize the established definition of *public art*. The forest is hardly a public arena; it is more or less removed from the public sphere (despite the right of public access), and the mining community as a place is a mixture of public and private, but without labeling what is art in this project in a way that we are used to when it comes to public art. In the final work, this link – (public) art – is absent or largely invisible despite being public art in the most obvious sense by being delineated as a kind of addition to (hardly an embellishment of) a municipally funded train station.

Public art has been strongly tied to ideas of space and place,⁴⁵ but what has been touched on above points more toward what I call public time.⁴⁶ And the moment this is uttered, everyone realizes that it must be about public *space-time* and always has been. Time is extremely confined to a station in the third work, albeit within the context of the whole of Gothenburg; it unfolds in a small, depopulated settlement in the second work, albeit globally linked to the world and the planet; it is a virtually “detached” patch of forest in the first work, albeit linked to the imaginary and queer space that Fogelstad denotes, with extensions and symbiotic links to other socialities, human and non-human, and the dream of a literally eternal space-time. The conversation about public art today would benefit from a reflection on the temporalities and temporal spaces accompanying it. The latter word is an Einsteinian composition of the main coordinates of human and non-human existence, but the very concept of time contains two different dimensions. Time as space or scope must be related to time as speed, rate, rhythm, velocity. The first dimension of time answers the question “how long?” or “how long does it take?” while the second dimension indicates the speed or frequency at which something happens; it measures or “times” a phenomenon. Length is important in all three works, but also negotiable; it is stated and stipulated though open to change depending on what occurs. Pace is less of a given. In *Forest Calling*, the artists are clear that different tempos and temporalities are intertwined heterogeneously (or

2020), pp. 64-65.

45 A Swedish classic is Catharina Gabrielsson's *Att göra skillnad. Det offentliga rummet som medium för konst, arkitektur och politiska föreställningar* [*To Make a Difference: Public Space as a Medium for Art, Architecture and Concepts of the Political*], doctoral thesis (Stockholm: Royal Institute of Technology, 2007).

46 The term is unusual but is discussed, for example, in a more narratological sense by Paul Ricoeur in “Narrative Time,” *Critical Inquiry*, 7:1 (1980), pp. 169-190.

heterochronously) in a broader and more diverse sense than Groys' use of the word. *Ställbergs Gruva* also overlaps a range of activities at different speeds, from slow-paced restoration projects to short events, from poetic glimpses of eternity to the anticipated cancelation of debt by those responsible for systematic exploitation during decades gone by. In *Eternal Employment*, there is no eternity, despite the title, but rather a long and monotonous embodiment of the social and capitalist standard time, controlled by the clock, the calendar and the annual work hours that mechanically accumulate year after year.⁴⁷

Forest Calling and *Eternal Employment* are both similar in that they have an almost avant-garde experimental character (also a project quality according to the Arts Council) and both engage in a kind of investigation. They are also both abstract in that they abstract – “deselect, separate, remove”⁴⁸ – a sliver from the exploited forest in the first case – and in that they enact what Marx called “abstract labor” in the second case.⁴⁹ Thus, as it were, these drafts or projects also remain a form without content. However, even now *Forest Calling* fills its form with content of various kinds (walks, dance, performance, etc), but these activities can hardly affect the big question of the exploitation of natural resources. Rather, they burden the forest that is to be protected. In *Eternal Employment*, a basic idea is to let form constitute or rather completely replace content. The work becomes abstract by exposing pure work time, pure labor power, without regard to results, meaning or utility value. Rather, it becomes a celebration of speculation in capital growth as a supreme principle. Both of these works can also be described as unrealistic in relation to the real or actual and are thus both utopian and symbolic. *Forest Calling* stages an important action on sound ethical and ecological grounds, but can hardly contribute other than symbolically (3.7 hectares) to a better world. *Eternal Employment* stages the utopia in the present though without substance, in a specific place where nothing or anything can happen, and also becomes symbolic by taking a thought-provoking experiment to its

47 Eternal is in the title of the work, but that is not what it is about; it is about the temporal “indefinite,” as it says alternately in the artists' proposal for *Eternal Employment*: https://statenskonstrad.se/app/uploads/2018/09/3-Eternal_Employment-WrittenDescriptionA4.pdf [accessed 10/11/2020].

48 *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok [Swedish Academy Dictionary]* (1893): http://www.saob.se/artikel/?unik=A_0001-0087.lv3b [accessed 10/26/2020].

49 Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin, 1990), p142.

extreme without delivering any clear will or vision of the future. In contrast to these two works, but especially the latter, *Ställbergs Gruva* appears to be free of abstraction, utopianism and symbolism. In an extremely concrete, yet both visionary and poetic way, the work here is really about creating a place for creative activity, thus saving and recreating a piece of society. That this work is art is a little odd, but no worse than that.

All three works, in the end, are interesting, ambitious, transgressive and problematic. All of them have (at least) one foot in the past in order to activate new futures. The artists behind *Eternal Employment* do not work themselves; they only ask the question “What is work?”, now and in the future, but delegate to the future the search for an answer. *Forest Calling* is a collaborative work, with the aim of moving toward “a different future,” one better than the ecological devastation we face unless urgent preventative measures are put in place, while *Ställbergs Gruva* does the sloggish, collective work in the here and now based on the idea, I suppose, that the future is already here; there is nothing to do but roll up your sleeves and get to work.