

## Change the Rules, Now!

Paying with her own labor, Sol Kjøk went all out and succeeded in putting Norwegian art on the map in New York. Now she wants the Norwegian government and the country's professional art community to chip in to continue promoting Norwegian art in this global art metropolis.

### Please Don't Call Me Gallerist

"I am a visual artist who has founded an artist-run exhibition venue," the New York-based Norwegian artist Sol Kjøk clarifies. Expanding on this, she says that the term 'gallery' has the wrong connotations for NOoSPHERE Arts' activities. Everything is based on an egalitarian foundation.

This is not my privately-owned exhibition space, nor is it a commercial venue. NOoSPHERE is meant to be an arena for exposure, not a sales venue.

You could call it a springboard that allows Norwegian artists to forge further international connections."

Kjøk stresses that this is a DIY endeavor where everybody involved must contribute, and the exhibiting artists participate in many of the efforts that go into producing a show. "This is a collaboration between all parties involved, and everything runs on a voluntary basis. I am lucky to have a team of people who are willing to work for NOoSPHERE. In particular Annemarta Strand Mugaas, who appeared like an angel from heaven. She is the one who primarily mans NOoSPHERE at daytime, and if she had not come aboard at the tail end of 2011, we would not have been able to stay afloat."

However, running an exhibition venue takes more than camaraderie and equal footing.

"Had I known how much work is required to run an artists' space when I first got the offer, I wouldn't have done it. All the start-up efforts and the costs involved with founding NOoSPHERE came out of my own pocket. But," she adds with shining eyes, "as a showcase for Norwegian art, we are offering Norwegian artists an opportunity that did not exist when I was a newly-minted artist in this town."

For three years, NOoSPHERE has served as a platform for Norwegian art in New York, exhibiting a broad variety of artists and art forms ranging from her own work to Kurt Johannessen and Morten Traavik. Agnes Nedregård is one of several performance artists who have shown work in the gallery backyard. The venue has been reviewed in leading publications such as *Artforum* [sic] and *The New York Times*. Last summer, *The Huffington Post* ranked the space as a Top 5 art venue to visit in New York City.

### The Reluctant Benefactor

"Oh, that's a long and pretty funny story," Sol Kjøk laughs when asked how NOoSPHERE came about.

In 1998, she was a recent MFA graduate from Parsons School of Design in New York. Together with friends, she rented an industrial space in the Greenpoint area, which was then predominantly Polish.

"It was a very intriguing neighborhood at that time, like some odd time capsule from Eastern Europe. Back then, you didn't even have to learn English! But there aren't that many of them left now."



The Mothership artists' collective, view from the roof deck at dawn. ©NOoSPHERE Arts



Morten Traavik and Peter Fend's exhibit *Power Games* in June 2012 was praised in a prominently placed review in *The New York Times*. ©NOoSPHERE Arts

in the neighborhood and evicting tenants to convert the buildings into movie studios. [Born in Sicily and] known as a tough nail, he stays away from the limelight, and few people knew what he looked like back then."

A dogged Kjøk repeatedly showed up at his office, each time waiting for hours on end without ever being granted an audience. Then one day came the hidden turning point for her and the artists' collective. A friend of hers came by early in the morning to borrow some money; it was 6:30 am and Kjøk emerged at the top of the stairs in her pajama with sleepy eyes. Then the plumber, who had been by before, came walking towards the stairs. When he caught sight of her, he abruptly turned and disappeared. He did not return. Another few weeks go by, and an eviction notice appears on the artist collective's door: they are summoned before the court.

"As soon as I entered the court room, I realized that the 'plumber' was none other than the new owner! I also understood why he got so scared by seeing me in my pajama in the morning, because meanwhile, I had researched the rights of artists living illegally in commercial spaces: in New York, the rule is that if the tenants can prove that the owner *knew* they were living there, it is his responsibility to legalize the situation. Now I could point to an exact scenario and present a witness testifying that Tony did, indeed, know, so the judge took my word over the property shark's. And so the case entered the court system, which bought me some time. "

Once Kjøk knew what the man looked like, she started following him in the street and cornering him with pleas to let them stay. "I am pretty stubborn," Kjøk laughs again. "This went on for a whole year, and little by little, we became friendly. One fine day, he'd had enough and threw his hands up: '*Fine! I give in! You win!*' and offered us a different building close by, which he renovated according to my drawings."

This space now houses the artists' collective The Mothership, which also serves as an extension of NOoSPHERE with time-based art on the roof in the summer.

"The funniest thing is that Tony A. has become a major collector of my artwork, and also a benefactor for the promotion of Norwegian art in NYC." In the wake of an exhibition in 2010, Tony asked whether she would like to put up a show of her own work in an empty storefront he owned. This is now NOoSPHERE Arts.

"My immediate response was 'Sure!', and I started the efforts of getting the space ready and bringing other Norwegian artists on board. This became our inaugural project, the *NORTH STARS Series*, which lasted three months." Following critical praise and great interest in this exhibition series, she decided that this opportunity was too good to let go.

They spent a year and a half converting the loft into painting studios where they also lived illegally. One day, the artists' collective discovered that the building had been sold, but nobody would tell them who the new owner was. Disturbing things started happening: Black vans driven by beefy fellows keeping a watchful eye on them were circling their block. The electricity was cut off, then the gas – in short, the new owner wanted them out.

"It was getting kind of creepy, and once the walls started moving when nobody was home; walls that kept us from working, I decided to go down to the City Records Office, where I spent a day searching through index cards to find the deed. It turned out that the new owner was Tony A, notorious for buying up industrial real estate



NOoSPHERE Arts, gallery front. ©NOoSPHERE Arts



Stills from various performance pieces. From left: Kurt Johannessen, Rita Marhaug, Molly Haslund. Photo ©Nisa Ojalvo, 2013

### On the Art Circuit

"There is great juju in this space!" she exclaims excitedly when narrating the building's history. It is a small storefront with a front stoop and a leafy backyard. The tin ceiling is marked by the building's past as a synagogue, then as a speakeasy. From the 70s through the early 90s, it served as a staging venue for notorious names such as Karen Finley, RuPaul and the cult band Television. And now NOoSPHERE Arts.

"There is a great community vibe here on the LES, with a special enthusiasm that manifests as collaboration rather than competition among local galleries. We are located right in the Lower East Side, on East Houston Street, together with respected venues such as Participant and New Museum.

We would like to get as many players as possible from the professional Norwegian art community on board. I am open to collaborating with both artists' organizations and curatorial studies programs, etc. I have no desire whatsoever to curate all the shows myself. Because we are a nonprofit, the artists are entitled to 100% of any sales revenue, but we encourage them to donate a percentage back to us."

Not all of the 200+ artists who have shown at NOoSPHERE to date are Norwegian. Kjøk believes the Norwegian artists benefit from this.

"We are located in a burgeoning arts district, and by incorporating known artists alongside the Norwegians, who tend to be newcomers to the NYC art scene, we attract an audience that would otherwise not have discovered them."

### NOoSPHERE Three Years Old

On February 4, NOoSPHERE Arts turns three years old. The works in the anniversary exhibit were selected by KJ Baysa, a distinguished collector and curator.

"We received a lot of submissions. Baysa made his picks from these entries, along with artists who have previously shown at NOoSPHERE. In addition, I put together a bonus show in the back room with photos of some of 'our' performance artists as well as work by other artist collaborators."

Kjøk springs from her chair and grabs a mason jar placed on the window sill. It is filled with sunflower seeds. "And we are going to auction off these!" she says, holding up the jar. "They are Ai Weiwei's sunflower seeds," she explains, and adds that through the intermediary of Bjørn Inge Follevaag, a curator based at the Bergen Academy of Arts, Weiwei's curatorial partner, Feng Boyi, along with the up-and-coming young curator Wang Dong, joined NOoSPHERE's team to organize the current show, *Fractured Lives/Fragile Existences*.

"And suddenly, I was a gallerist!" says Kjøk, who still appears surprised that it turned out that way.

For the three years since the start in 2011, rent has been paid in the form of her own artwork. An anachronistic bartering agreement that is now rarely seen in the art world.

"There is a 70s feel to this arrangement: he gets a painting, we get to keep it a little longer. But obviously, this situation is unsustainable in the long run. We are not receiving any operational funding from Norway. But we are hoping to be able to finance our overhead by other means than my artwork. Now that we have obtained tax-exempt nonprofit status, sponsors will be able to deduct donations from their taxes, so we can continue showing Norwegian art in NYC. After all, this city remains the world's art capital."



Ai Weiwei's sunflower seeds.  
Photo: Lisa Andrine Bernhoft-Sjødin

"Ai Weiwei has decided that he will make a contribution to any show that Feng Boyi curates abroad, and that's why we got this work of ceramic sunflower seeds that originated for the artist's installation at Tate Modern in London.

The anniversary celebrations are an opportunity for donations. On February 4, there will be an auction of work by former and current NOoSPHERE artists, conducted with Michael Ingbar as auctioneer.

"He is a Soho gallerist who has taken us under his wing."

There will also be live acts by artists such as Keith Middelton from the well-known [Off-Broadway] concept *STOMP*, and musician Katy Gunn, who has previously performed at NOoSPHERE.

"Following this week of celebrations, we will enter into a period of time-based art shown at night, *NOoSPHERE@night*. We are looking to collaborate with local organizations where Scandinavian artists are doing residencies. E.g., we will present performance pieces by Rita Marhaug, who currently has a residency at Point B in Brooklyn, and by Danish artist Molly Haslund, who is at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in Brooklyn. We are also open to considering applications from Norwegian artists and musicians residing in NYC."

### **Calling on Norwegian Politicians to Pitch In**

After the anniversary week, NOoSPHERE will be closed at daytime for some time while Kjøk lobbies Norwegian politicians during the spring of 2014. It won't be the first time she is making these rounds. What she realized the last time is that NOoSPHERE does not fit into any existing grant program, neither under Arts Council Norway nor Office of Contemporary Art Norway. Thus, accompanied by several supporters, Kjøk will meet with top level politicians in Oslo in hopes of obtaining a change in the rules. Their intention is to meet with the Minister of Culture, as well as the new OCA Director.

She sighs, a bit exasperated. "Luckily, I have great supporters backing me up: Gisle Harr, Steinar Christensen, Pierre Lionel Matte, Kari Steihaug, Thomas Pihl, Lucy Noël Thune and Bjørn Inge Follevaag," she says, and flings her arms wide.

"Because this is not just about NOoSPHERE. After all, this is an initiative that benefits Norwegian artists, and similar idealistic endeavors abroad. And in the continuation thereof, Norwegian art in general."



Sol Kjøk, Founding Artistic Director of NOoSPHERE, on the Mothership's roof. Photo: Mika Poloni