Konstgödning: Co-producing Art in the Outskirts of the World

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Introduction

Regardless of whether we are talking about remote Aegean islands, isolated mountainous regions in the Carpathians or the periphery of northern Sweden, many communities have to negotiate solutions to chronic problems in order to survive. To be sure, there are several success stories within the ocean of failures. The one thing that is certain is that the realization of the potential of regions (leading to their competitive advantage) strongly depends upon people’s ways of thinking, their norms, values, social relationships and their entrepreneurship. An abundance of these ingredients is necessary to foster economic diversification and overcome some of the most serious handicaps.

Several EU and national level strategies aim at overcoming the economic malaise affecting such regions. Inter alia these include: direct subsidies, decentralization of governmental agencies, job training programs and subsidized employment schemes. Over the past 15 years, the mainstreaming of creativity and innovation as drivers of economic development has resulted in municipalities exploring “soft” strategies to increase their competitive advantage. This turn largely stems in the academic discourse on the ‘creative class’ (Florida 2002; Lloyd 2006; Petridou and Ioannides 2012; Zukin 1989).

In Sweden, national cultural policy has been tied to sustainable regional development, aimed at “[a]n attractive region with developed natural, cultural, and cultural heritage resources contributes added value to the business environment and furthers the regional competitive power” (Lundström quoted in Petridou and Ioannides 2012: 128). As part of this approach certain communities focus on art-related strategies as a means of increasing awareness about them while simultaneously seeking to increase their attractiveness as livable spaces. This research involves an assessment of one such strategy.
Project Description and Aim

Our study focuses on an art project (Konstgödning) comprising 9 constituent projects respectively targeting each of the county of Jämtland 8 municipalities (Bergs Kommun had two projects). The entire project centers on linkages between art and place and specifically, the co-production of art by the inhabitants of each municipality in situ.

This does not entail the production of art for art’s sake. Neither does the project promote the production of art for direct economic growth. Rather, the aim of the co-production of art in situ is that rural inhabitants feel that positive energy is produced; that their rural realities are seen as important and deserving attention, and finally that the act of producing art has made a positive difference in these realities. In other words, the main purpose of the project was to engender dialogue about place, about what it means to occupy space in the outskirts of Europe and to increase awareness and bring increased attention to the realities of uneven development. Importantly, the production of art is used as a vehicle to highlight the positive elements of each place instead of pinpointing the usual complaints about living in a peripheral place such as bad connectivity to the capital and lack of services of general interest. Another purpose of Konstgödning is reflected in its name—fertilization—or the explicit notion that this dialogue continues and develops in substance and intensity. A main concern from the project’s outsets and a criterion for assigning the constituent projects to the artists was that the dialogue—mainly among the co-producers of art—continue beyond the life of project.

Method and Evaluation

Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews and email correspondence. We attended the meetings between the project managers and the artists and the closing event in September, 2016. Extensive interviews were conducted with the project managers as well. The criteria we use to evaluate the success of the project stem from a workshop conducted in 2015 in which the project managers shared their thoughts, ambitions and aims.

First, we ask whether all the constituent projects finished and delivered the event the artist promised. We then evaluate the project based on expectations outlined by the project managers, which had a threefold perspective: the inhabitant, the artist and the project manager. The inhabitants were expected to perceive their participation as meaningful both as a group and as a collective (the village). The artist is also expected to judge their contribution as valuable and perhaps be interested in more projects in the periphery. The managers expect that the project will create a dialogue that will continue beyond the life of the project.
Description of Constituent Projects

This section is an account of the nine projects in eight municipalities.

1. Municipality of Berg: Route 321

Artists: Alva Marlen Ljusberg and Henrik Ljusberg. The venue chosen by the artists is a stretch of road (route 321) between the communities of Hoverberg and Myrviken. The choice of venue reflects the choice of art — street art — mostly produced and consumed in marginalized, in-between urban spaces. Whereas such interstices in an urban context usually connote abandonment by capital and urban decay, route 321 for the artists was a connector-canvas, a linkage between the two communities. What is more, this stretch of road is on the way to Åre, one of the most popular ski resorts in Sweden.

The aim of this constituent art project was twofold. It encompassed that which we see, and that which occurs. What we see, the art itself, is meant to be a loud and powerful voice. The fact that the periphery (or at least this periphery) adopts a kind of art associated with the urban aims at increasing the volume of the residents’ voices in stating that people live here, too. That which we see leads to that which occurs, which is a dialogue among the residents not only on the space they inhabit, but also on what art produced in that space would (or should) look like and what public art would look like? With a view to making space more livable, the object of discussion and the gaze of the residents and the visitors is the graffiti, which in turn throws a wrench in, and provokes, the way we view peripherality.

The intended output comprised (i) graffiti on three barns; (ii) an event in the community where the inhabitants were active participants; (iii) graffiti workshops for children and young people, and (iv) integration of (graffiti) art in the planning vision for the municipality as a way of concrete inroads into the future. Preparatory work included several meetings with the municipality and interest groups from both communities to ensure that the residents were on board. The majority of the intended output was realized with the exception of the third barn, which was not painted. Dialogue with both communities (Hoverberg and Myrviken) regarding further meetings is ongoing, though the artists, in reflection, state that it would have been easier, perhaps, to focus on one community. The difficulties rest with cooperation among communities, which is an issue well documented in the planning literature.

2. Marntallsåsen

Artists: Karin Alfredsson and Michael Sundberg. Alfredsson and Sundberg made a film about a nature preserve in the municipality of Berg, which was meant as a portrait of the area in personal terms. The artists aimed at showcasing the inhabitants of the nature preserve, the collective memory of the present and the past, as well as the lights and sounds...
sharing that space. The project was completed in time, however, the resident aspect is not applicable in this project, since the preserve in not inhabited. What is more, there is no indication that the dialogue initiated in this project is planned to continue in the future.

3. Municipality of Bräcke: Sundsjö

Artist: Vanja Steinholtz. The project involved local residents forming a choir as well as writing and performing music during a summer, 2015 festival event. Vanja was the only artist without any direct personal connection to the municipality in which she worked. Therefore, she had to content with the issue of the young-Stockholmite- expert-artist imposing their know-how on the non-expert countryside folk--- a common core-periphery power imbalance image. She was aware that she had to maintain a balance between guiding and imposing and allowing people to express themselves and confining them to the “one right way” of writing and performing a music piece. Steinholtz describes this as the most difficult aspect of her project:

I don’t really want to come in and give orders and say ‘you need this and that from me’. At the same time this can be a little unclear and rather fuzzy for the people there when I say ‘no, it is you who will decide the content’ and people go ‘ok…?’ and think that is tiresome to not have clear boundaries. (Interview with Vanja Steinholtz)

The choir was formed through in situ “conversation workshops”, where residents talked about things important to them in groups. The topics of discussion revolved around place: what would people miss if they moved away, what they miss where they live now. The same issues kept coming up; sometimes the discussion became quite political and people started to talk about how rural places are an afterthought in Swedish politics, how jobs disappear only to be replaced by nuclear power plants and wind turbines. Even so, there was more to the conversation than expressing dissatisfaction about the economic decline of rurality. In one of those workshops which took place in late May, 2015, Vanja described how participants just talked about the beauty of the surroundings—“connecting to place in a lyrical and emotional fashion” (Interview with Vanja Steinholtz).

Though the choir performance was the focal point of the festival which took place in Tavnäs on August 15, 2015, a host of local artisans also participated, including artists and local food producers. Steinholtz has expressed a will for the group to continue before the life of the project, but it is unclear if concrete steps have been taken to ensure this.

4. Municipality of Härjedalen: Hede

Artist: Bodil Halvarsson. This project sought to create meeting spaces between newly arrived asylum seekers on one hand and established Hede inhabitants on the other. Whereas the asylum seekers came from Eritrea and Syria, the long-term Hede residents were ethnic Swedes. Halvarsson turned to the local SFI (Swedish language instruction for immigrants, provided by the Swedish state at no cost to the students) instructors for help
in recruiting individuals from the immigrant community. She contacted the church and
the local village association for help in recruiting residents. Because Halvarsson’s family
comes from the area, she also enlisted friends and relatives in this effort. The result was 14
participants, in a series of meetings between recent immigrants and long-time Hede
residents, each lasting between 2.5 and 3 hours.

Halvarsson says: “I wanted to explore how art as a tool might interest people to share their
stories with each other and by taking an active, physical and creative part in each other’s
stories could become part of each other’s life and memory.” (Halvarson, 2015, n.p.). Each
of the participants produced a piece of art and though that piece was the tangible product
of the meeting, the aim was to get people talking, Halvarsson provided a set of questions
as general guidance, which some participants followed whereas others did not. Notably,
she herself did not actively participate in the meetings; she sat in the back and took notes
as the meetings were not transcribed. It was the voice of the recent arrivals and the
longtime residents she wanted people to hear; she functioned as a facilitator, an amplifier.

One would perhaps expect that the narratives would mostly come from the asylum seekers,
however the co-production of art becomes the grammar of mutual story-telling. Hede
residents, both recent and people who had lived there all their lives, came together to share
their stories and experiences. These stories, along with the art produced during the
meetings and photographs of the participants comprise an exhibition that is being
displayed in area libraries. Halvarsson has presented her project for different audiences
outside the confines of Konstgödning. What is more, she has forged friendships with the
project participants. Halvarsson herself is haunted by the tiny green boat Hussein made of
clay. She has exhibited the artefact in a prominent place, along with the rest of the art that
was produced during the meetings, in several occasions.

5. Municipality of Krokom: Kluk
Artist: Martin Johansson. Johansson’s work drew from his experience as an artist and a
director. The project consisted of a series of meetings in Kluk, where the women of Kluk
told their stories to each other. It is important here to note that the storytelling was intended
mainly for the consumption of the participants. There was a (sold out) event in Kluk on
May 23, 2015, but otherwise these women refused to come to Östersund. If one wanted to
listen to them, then one had to also see the space they inhabited. This pride of place, evident
in the women’s narratives, lent a certain urban ephemerality to the event as no video
exists—like a Springsteen concert in Gothenburg or a Madonna event in Melbourne. If one
is not there to watch it, one misses it. What does exist, however, is a book with the women’s
stories.

They sat around the table the table, some spoke in the local dialect. They talk about their
families, where they come from, trips they took. One woman speaks of how her mother
died when she was four weeks old in the late 1940s and her father had to raise her and the half-brother from her mother’s previous relationship and also take care of the farm all by himself. Another cites her journal entry from a trip to Kenya in which, all to familiarly to those of us who journal, she apologizes for not having written recently—it had been too hot; a third says she grew up in Springfield, Missouri, which incidentally is the city we, the authors of this paper, lived for a large portion of our adult lives. Human snapshots, distinct voices, connections, the act of talking about oneself, not exactly self-evident in the Swedish periphery where the closest neighbor can be miles away.

Johansson wanted to bring the female voices of Kluk forth, to distinguish them from the masculine hunting-and-fishing image of the area. The women forged bonds that have outlived the event in May of 2015, in line with the goals of the project in general and his constituent project in particular.

6. Municipality of Ragunda: Skyttmon

Artist: Sara Helene Gedda. The project was titled “If we seize being here” and interrogates the relationship of the inhabitants with the forest. Gedda chose the location because of the historic resistance of the municipality against illegal exploitation (bäggböleri) of the forested areas for timber in the 1800s. This concept was in the background of her departure point for this project and Gedda wanted to see if it made a difference in the way the current inhabitants of the municipality view the forest. We have to note here that the forest is a large part of the identity of Northern Sweden (Norrland) in general and the county of Jämtland in particular. The forest is a source of income through timber exploitation as well as tourism. Concomitantly, the forest is also a source of recreation; people hike, camp, hunt, pick berries. These factors also make forested areas spaces of contested interest.

Gedda med with the residents of Skyttmon about ten times. Some people came once, others came more often. Despite her original purpose of focusing on the forest, she allowed the residents to stir the narrative and the art that was produced. The issues that emerged as much more important than the forest per se, though inextricably tied to it, were in terms of the self-image the residents because of where they lived and the tensions between core and periphery and especially why it is longer from Stockholm to Östersund that the other way around.

Gedda managed to attract a divergent pool of people, which is unusual as timber and hunting interests rarely sit at the table. The residents of Skyttmon had a voice and they used to tell the story of what it meant to live there in the meetings, at the final event of the constituent project, but most importantly in the book curated by Gedda. The narratives of the residents, journalists and researchers were accompanied by photographs they took, all telling the story of the interaction of place with the people who lived and experienced it.
The project finished on time and produced a tangible artefact (the book) but it is unclear whether the residents have continued meeting.

7. Viken-Ankarede, Municipality of Strömsund

Artist: Ger Andersson. In a vein similar to the project by Alva Ljusberg and Henrik Ljusberg, Andersson chooses a corridor as his canvas, the area of 25 km as the crow flies between Viken’s chapel and Ankarede in Frostviken, to erect seven pillars in the form of the Big Dipper. Distinctly spiritual, these pillars are made of polished wood with a glass upper part. The material has both a symbolic and a functional purpose. On the one hand, the wood represents the connection of the Sami people as well as the local farmers have with woodwork and celestial objects. Andersson’s purpose is for these pillars to be able to be captured by Google Earth, connecting the peripheral extreme local to the digital vastness of the global in an effort to turn core-periphery perceptions on their head.

Not all the pillars were installed by December, 2015. Andersson plans for all seven pillars to be up by spring, 2016 so that activities connecting them can continue for the next seven years. Andersson plans to engage the public through these activities, which include a midsummer walk passing all seven. Andersson does not report any conversations with the residents prior to the pillars’ erection.

8. Hallen: Municipality of Åre

Artist: Ulla West. West’s family comes from the area though she grew up in the west coast of Sweden and then lived in Stockholm for all her adult life, where she is one of the many transplants. Though most artists had a personal connection with the place they chose to work on, West’s narrative is the most personal one. West says: “[i]n this work, I knot together my own experiences from time to time, from place to place. Lived through time and experience is important in my work in this project it is my method to enable me along with others on site, by crafting, talking and walking. By collecting stories from the past and from the present” (West, 2015, n.p.).

West’s project is twofold: she and residents knot a rug. They also walk. These are two activities that people do in Hallen and they are vehicles through which people have space to do something together; to co-produce their own map and share their own narratives. The knotting of the rug takes place in the community building and the rug stays there all the time. The rug is a map of hiking trails with Hallen as the departure point and participants knot their home on that map-rug. West travels to Hallen every month and every time she goes there “things have happened” and the “rug is slowly growing” (West, CITE THE EMAIL).

Interwoven in this project is another, older story about another rug, called Marby rug. It is said that pilgrim brought this rug to the church in Marby from present day Turkey some
600 years ago. The story of that rug has twists and turns, and this magic carpet seems to crop up in different places, each version different than the last one.

Through this work, West knots together her own life story with Hallen, the residents of Hallen together as well as a piece of history. From this project, different activities have emerged. Hallen wants to order one or more copies of the Marby rug from Istanbul; the Museum of History in Stockholm is interested in the copies of this rug as well in cooperation with the Jamtli, the local museum, and West is planning to collect the stories he gleaned from Hallen in a manuscript.

9. Lit: Municipality of Östersund

Artist: Po Hagström. The project is called “the others”, originally focused on “otherness” inhabiting the forest and the imagination: ghosts, gnomes, and other fairytale encounters. Hagström’s medium is visual art and narrative. Hagström plans on curating a book with narratives from Lit residents broadening the definition of “other”, but until September, 2016, this processed had not started.

Discussion

This section is divided in two parts. First we consider the practicalities of the project and whether the constituent projects fulfilled the formal requirements. We then conduct a deeper discussion regarding the value of art in peripheral areas

Most constituent projects finished on time; the projects in the municipalities of Strömsund and Östersund were well under way, but not completely finished by December, 2015. All nine constituent project had representation in the two-day event in Östersund in September, 2015, an event that attracted a lot of attention from the public, local politicians, public officials and the local art community.

The main purpose of the project managers was to create a meeting space in which to have a dialogue—a dialogue about place, rurality, power and empowerment; about what the past was and what the future holds; about where home is. Additionally, the explicit objective asked of all constituent projects was that they lead to further dialogue and a continued relationship. More specifically, the objective of Konstgödning had three dimensions: the inhabitant, the artist and the project manager. The inhabitants were expected to perceive their participation as meaningful both as a group and as a collective (the village). The artist is also expected to judge their contribution as valuable and perhaps be interested in more projects in the periphery. The managers expect that the project will create a dialogue that will continue beyond the life of the project. Table 1.1 summarizes the performance of each constituent project in relation to these three dimensions.
Table 1. The constituent projects vis-à-vis the overall project dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituent Projects</th>
<th>Overall Project Dimensions</th>
<th>Artist’s perspective (raise awareness and interest further)</th>
<th>Project Manager’s perspective (create a further dialogue)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kluk</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Willing, but unclear if realized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skyttmon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Willing, but unclear if realized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viken-Ankareda</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallen</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Value of Art

“Culture does not appear to square with the economy. In particular, art does not mix well with money” (Klamer, 1996, p. 7). If the go-to metric for the assessment of projects is not applicable, how can we make a judgement for the value of art produced within a certain project? One way is to evaluate the project on whether it met the objectives outlines at its onset. The discussion above reveals that, by and large, most of the constituent projects met their three-dimensional objective. Some constituent projects were stronger than others, but as a whole Konstgödning delivered on its promise to raise awareness, involve the residents and coproduce positive artistic energy.

The question that emerges, however, is one of scope. In other words, what difference can small projects make? To answer that, we apply counterfactual logic. We ask the question
instead: what if this project had not taken place? Turning the argument on its head allows us to shift the focus on what actually occurred and the impact this had on the artists’ and the resident/ participants’ lives, rather on focusing on what did not occur, such as a multitude of jobs or a sudden change of fortunes for the area. Small scale projects are a fit to sparsely populated regions with small-scale activities. These nine constituent projects allowed a number of people to interact and forge relationships; they allowed their stories to be heard, which would not have been the case had the project not taken place.

Moreover, art in Scandinavia and in general and in Sweden in particular is treated by the state as an equalizing factor. Access to the production of art especially is a means of social equality. Everybody should have access to culture regardless of where they live. This project not only allowed people to consume art, but also to produce it.

Finally, art and the act of (co) producing it restores order in an otherwise chaotic world, at least ephemerally. People knot a carpet; they walk and talk to each other. Recent immigrants exchange stories about their lives with longtime residents whom they otherwise might never have met. People are proud of where they live and they sing about it. And just then, things are ordered and clear.
Conclusions

In this paper we analyzed the art project “Konstgödning” through the evaluation of its nine constituent projects. We did so by critically evaluating each constituent project on three dimensions: the resident, the artist and the project manager dimension. We found that overall Konstgödning delivered on its promise to make the residents feel of value, to interest the artist in the area and perhaps in future projects and to create a dialogue about periphery and what it means to live on the top of the world beyond the end-date of the project.

What is more, argue that the small-scale scope of the project fitted the area and we use counterfactual logic to shore up our argument: what would have happened if the project had not taken place? We find that project such as this make places more livable. In this respect, art is very much relevant.
References


