

The Searcher for Things (Ting Leteren)

Sometimes Inghild Karlsen looks around her home, realises that nothing has happened for a while and goes out to see if things are better elsewhere.

She checks that she has what she needs, walks down the stairs and out. She scans the street scene. Moves in what looks like a space, a field of tension between hesitation and determination. Between stillness and movement.

I imagine that she is tuning her sensory apparatus to the spaces in between. The parallels to the spaces she finds herself in. The ones that most of us overlook on our way from one place to another. Where the sound and the echo and the glare are.

*

Towards the end of January 1982, Bergen Art Association held a versizage that caught my interest. "Syv tilfeldige i Bergen" was a group exhibition with enough "snitter" (cuts of bread with topping) and white wine to satiate both the random and others. For example, people like me, a struggling rock musician who survived much of the early 1980s in Bergen by cruising large and small art openings. There I could freely help myself to schnapps and white wine - and then join the artists for an afterparty. I think they saw potential in the lean, slightly cocky musician. Precisely what they saw was unclear to me, and perhaps to them as well.

During the opening speech at the art association, the seven artists stood in a row, each holding a rose. This was before the curator tsunami washed over the art world. However, the empathetic professionalism of the speech was still worthy of a curator, even if the speaker was content to refer to himself as an intendant. The artists all seemed to rest comfortably in the situation as they listened.

Except for one, who constantly and simultaneously seemed to be both present and on her way to somewhere else, who with her eyes and body gently but relentlessly took in the small details, the whole room, and everything in between, all the while paying attention to every word the speaker said. That was Inghild Karlsen.

It marked the beginning of a close friendship and a collaboration that remains alive to this day. At Easter that same year, we floated around the deserted streets of Bergen in a creative bliss that in some ways still lives on in me. We decorated the city's walls with quirky stencils and slogans and organised a large cross-artistic event at the venue Hulen, under the title Konkursbo. Even then, the time we were living in contained the potential for something threatening. What we had believed in during the post-war euphoria of prosperity was no longer a matter of course. The fearless storming of the skies may not have come to an end, but it needed an element of protection, resistance

and another form of visibility. Inghild equipped the members of the young post-punk band Alle Tiders Duster with black plastic bags with colourful reflective markings, which danced around the dark room. For me, who led the event, she sewed an entire reflective suit. She has kept the suit all these years and dressed me up again on appropriate performative occasions, such as at the closing of Inghild's major exhibition at the Bergen International Festival in 1999. In the performance Bacardy and Coke at Dramatikkens hus in Oslo in 2010. And in Fang øyeblikket (Catch the Moment), part of a performative installation in the basement of Kunstbanken in Hamar in 2013. As far as I know, the suit still fits!

But it wasn't until the following year, with our shared bliss at a distance, that I really realised what the artist Inghild Karlsen was capable of. Her placement of fifteen scarecrows in felted wool on an islet on the Norwegian coast of southern Norway, abandoned to wind and salt water, was a statement of staggering dimensions. An omen and a manifestation of something that was coming, something we didn't quite know what it was yet.

At the same time, it was also a powerful reminder of the struggle the coast, especially the coast in Northern Norway, where Inghild comes from, has always faced. Something that, to all intents and purposes, came to fruition when unknown people made their way over to the islet one night and cut down all the scarecrows.

The materials and techniques she used to create the scares were practically non-existent in contemporary art at the time. It was an old craft that was fundamentally about survival, which she had inherited from her grandmother. In this way, she established a bridge between contemporary art and traditional craft practices. But that's not all. The inherent brutality deep-rooted in the whole process, the fearlessness, the creative destruction - the same brutality that lives in nature and the temperament of the people where she comes from - was something I also recognised from the punk I came from.

This strong anchoring in a region, a craft and a tradition is, I believe, also the very basis for the openness and curiosity with which Inghild Karlsen meets the world: the fascination with people she meets, things she finds, leftovers on the shore and by the roadside, bones and fish bones, souvenirs at a flower market in Sao Paolo, trinkets in hidden shops in Italian back streets and Russian villages (which later manifested itself in *The Red-Eyed Dogs*). The ability to see the big picture in the small details is manifested in an artistic universe that encircles the daily lives and stories of people who exist on the margins. In other words, it is what mainstream politicians have now discovered and can't mention often enough: ordinary people.

People should not be minimised by comparing them to others. Nevertheless, I venture here to make a comparison that is unlikely to harm either party. In a catalogue text I wrote in 2009, I referred to Inghild as an artistic Pippi Longstocking. Not primarily because of the fearlessness with which both Inghild and Pippi take on things they don't know how to do. Nor in the classic clichéd image of Pippi as a feminist icon, but in the story of Pippi the Tinkerbell. She ventures out into the world on a voyage of discovery

with genuine openness, is constantly surprised and excited by what she finds, and immediately sets about interpreting and redefining the function and meaning of things. In essence, this is about taking care of the child within, about being able to reset and utilise experience at the same time.

These qualities are constantly evident in Inghild's work, often in marvellous and surprising ways. We're not dealing with a novice here, but she never fails to surprise.

*

Life as a vernissage punk could not continue. Work and family intervened, and as we all know, it's hard to reconcile the two aspects of life. Inghild and I faded and almost disappeared from each other, and with it, much of what she represented for me: Life with, in and for art. The dedication, playfulness, and commitment. I missed it, I searched but couldn't find the way.

One bright summer night in the 2000s, at a party after an exhibition opening on a small island in the outer Oslofjord, I met her again. She came over to me, gave me a glass of wine and asked me to join her for a walk in the woods. It had been several years since we last saw each other, and we had a lot to catch up on. But her message when we faced each other in a clearing in the forest was low-key, succinct and almost brutal: Come back!

It's as precise and straightforward as being exposed to a masseuse who instantly puts their finger on the spot where all your regrets, both what you've done and what you haven't done, are located.

When I stood on stage again a few years later, wearing my red Fender Telecaster, Inghild was there, sitting on the edge of the stage. There she was, taking in the small details, the whole room and everything in between, while watching everything I did.

Chris Erichsen