



MS Innvik: A Ship with a View – Culture is who we are

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Abstract

The video works *A Ship with a View* and *The Kitchen Garden* were made during 2010 on the theatre ship MS Innvik, run by Nordic Black Theatre. This turned out to be the last year of the ship's existence as an intercultural creative environment in the urban development area Bjørvika. The works are created as montages with music, art, and performance contributions by people with links to the MS Innvik. They show glimpses of activities on board and the changing surroundings. This work pertains to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable," and in part to SDG 7: "Clean and affordable energy." It also suggests that culture should be included in sustainability discourse.

Keywords: M/S-Innvik, theatre boat, cultural sustainability, art in urban development, inclusive cultures

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Video 1. A Ship with a View. <https://film.oslomet.no/a-ship-with-a-view>



Video 2. The Kitchen Garden. <https://film.oslomet.no/the-kitchen-garden>

When the theatre ship MS Innvik was finally towed out of the harbor in 2010, Nordic Black Theatre succeeded in finding a new venue in Grønland, in the eastern part of Oslo, known for its minority cultures. The newly developed harbor area of Oslo thereby lost a cultural opportunity of intercultural diversity and integrated collective creation. Political initiatives to keep and develop this cultural hub as a new project *Snelda – the island of tomorrow* in Bjørvika were abandoned for a number of reasons. According to human geographer Heidi Bergsli, lack of political will to develop minority cultures based on what she calls Oslo's policy of attractivity—an aesthetic consolidation to stimulate the economy and workplaces—was a major factor (Bergsli, 2017, p. 66). Being in the center of an urban development became too rough to comply with after nine years, and strict enforcement of fire regulations proved to be the end of MS Innvik. The first important part of the ship to be closed was the popular, reasonably priced bed & breakfast. Along with this economic asset was breakfast in the morning, attended by people from Oslo and all over the world, enjoying the best views of the opera building and the seascape around it. The fatal attack on the inner soul of MS Innvik, however, was the closing of the theatre for several weeks. When the theatre was allowed to open again, the restrictions were so severe that audiences were reduced to one-third of their former normal size (Nordic Black Theatre, no date).

My partner and collaborator Alexis Parra Pucho and I followed the last ten months of the MS Innvik's existence in the inner former industrial harbor of Bjørvika. At the outset, we did not know what would happen nor that the existence of the ship as a cultural venue would be limited. Alexis worked with scenography and other artistic chores on the ship during this time, making MS Innvik a natural meeting place for us. However, we did not at that time look at our artistic work on board as a project rooted in research questions or that followed prescribed methods. Our recordings and experiences from MS Innvik in 2010 were another layer of a practice we had developed since Alexis Parra and I started our collaboration in 2004. At first, we documented our environments and realities to each other while living in the very different societies of Norway and Cuba. Later, we developed common works as performative events followed by video documentation. *Bar Candela*, for instance, was a major project designed to reflect on Cuban diaspora and how this appeared in a European or Norwegian context. Our way of working was reflected upon as an artistic practice from epistemological and sociological perspectives, with the help of colleagues Venke Aure and Oddrun Sæter (Aure et al., 2009, p. 294). The conclusions of this article are as follows:

We have shown how art in social meeting places, such as bars, can function as a medium for intercultural communication, both through spoken language and through other cultural expressions, such as music, dance, imagery, and digital communication. Bar Candela is displayed in the form of a multilayered event, involving the senses, perception, and reflection. It is a diverse arena for communication, in which some structures and narratives are embedded in advance. Art and life are interwoven.

A Ship with a View and *The Kitchen Garden* are continuations of this practice. However, in retrospect, these works come to mind when we ask what art education could bring to a discourse of sustainability, which I will comment on further after a presentation of the works.



Figure 1. MS Innvik moored at Langkaia in 2010
Photo: Alexis Parra Pucho and Kristin Bergaust

The red, white, and blue ship was moored at Langkaia, adjacent to the beautiful marble slopes of the new opera house, which opened in 2008 (Fig. 1). The opera was the initial project in the largest urban development in Norway to date. Bjørvika

encompasses cultural institutions such as the new main public library Deichman and the Munch Museum, as well as the Bar Code financial district and thousands of housing and business units. Art and cultural institutions are commonly used as engines in commercial urban development, while artistic initiatives that initiate interest and activity — more self-organized and alternative cultural hubs such as MS Innvik — tend to end up excluded. During this period, I also collaborated with sociologist Oddrun Sæter and art theorist Venke Aure on a project on artists' roles in urban development through a case study in Williamsburg, New York City, which gave perspectives on what was happening in Oslo (Sæter et al., 2012).

Despite this, we did not know or expect that the conclusion of our episodic video work *A Ship with a View* would capture the end of MS Innvik. We collected glimpses of life on the ship and portrayed the rapidly changing urban development in the surrounding environment. We then combined the material in a manner that could be described as a form of montage: “an assembly of images that relate to each other in some way to create a single work or part of a work of art” (TATE, no date). This means that the documentary material was treated in a poetic or associative manner rather than being documentary in the sense of journalism. The three episodes of *A Ship with a View* were made consecutively and presented as rough cuts at the Open Xpressions events that took place on board about once a month. Open Xpressions were organized and led by musician Sheldon Blackman from Trinidad. Presenting our unfinished and experimental work in this context led to reactions and discussions, contributions of music, art, performance, and slam poetry, as well as camera work and interviews, provided by people on the ship. This exchange was spontaneous, and we allowed it to shape our work. Inspired by collective practices from different experiences and sources throughout our artistic careers, we facilitated and developed these relations as best we could. However, there were no money or resources for the project, and it was entirely reliant on friendship, enjoyment, trust, and a common understanding of what MS Innvik meant to each of us. Accordingly, this work has never been presented outside of this context. The collaborators are all credited by name at the end of the video work, but also listed among the references in this text to clarify how they contributed.

This openness to collaboration led us to another project: *The Kitchen Garden*, which is portrayed in the video with the same title. Documenting demolition and faux recycling regimes in the developing sites around the ship for *A Ship with a View*, dreams of a different energy system emerged. The idea for the Kitchen Garden came

from a utopian concept of running the whole ship as a zero-energy, ecological environment, illustrated in Figure 2. This reflects SDG 7 “Affordable and clean energy”. The ship seemed to be a utopian platform already, so to think of how it could be developed as a self-running organism that produced electricity and collected water, using sun, wind, and currents came easily, while a realistic implementation was too complicated and expensive. Growing herbs for the kitchen was a first step, which we developed as a collaborative, practical project of symbolic significance. Since plants, like humans, may travel far from their origin, we asked everyone we met on board what herbs they liked most from their home countries, for culinary or medical use. We then ordered seeds, received seedlings or plants as gifts and started propagating them in time for planting in the spring of 2010. We constructed plant boxes from recycled wood and sack cloth, which allowed us to have varied growing conditions, organic fertilizer, and soil for different plants. No pesticides were used. The information we collected about the herbs were compiled in a folder that was distributed from the kitchen deck where the garden was constructed (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). There was also a website containing this information, as well as an overview of plans and results. As can be seen in the video, the project concluded with a buffet party using the produce in the autumn of 2010, when it was clear that the ship would have to close as a venue.



Figure 2. A vision of a zero-energy, organic MS Innvik. Illustration: Kristin Bergaust



Figure 3. Information brochure on the herbs in The Kitchen Garden.

Photos: Kristin Bergaust and Alexis Parra



Figure 4. Information brochure on the herbs in The Kitchen Garden.

Photos: Kristin Bergaust and Alexis Parra

The Kitchen Garden accordingly became a project in itself and could not be followed by further experiments with energy or ecology based on MS Innvik. The ideas developed in this project, as well as other artistic activities and research in my practice, have been inspired by notions from the essay *The Three Ecologies* by Felix Guattari, where he defines what he calls the three ecological registers: the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity. These intertwining levels form what Guattari calls *ecosophy* (Guattari, 2000, p. 28). This seems even more relevant today than when it was first written in 1989, before social media and the prevalence of fake news, political polarization, and conspiracy theories. The notion of sustainability should also include the quality of relations, abilities to co-create, and cultural exchange as part of a wider view on how sustainability can have a cultural meaning. This may be implied in the SDGs, but efforts are needed to clarify and further address it. Art education has the potential to demonstrate the connections between sustainability, culture, and diversity, also by employing multisensory, collaborative work modes. We will conclude with Director of the Division for Creativity in the Culture Sector at UNESCO Jyoti Hosagrahar's comments on the SDGs regarding culture. She is an architect, planner, and culture specialist and oversees the integration of culture in the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda. She concludes her argumentation with the following in the UNESCO Courier:

The precise role and impact of culture on sustainable development needs to be systematically studied, measured, and operationalized. As the implementation of the SDGs moves forward, further work is necessary to build a systematic and measurable evidence base to demonstrate each of the contributions of culture to sustainable development. (Jyoti Hosagrahar, 2017)

Although her language here points to a regime of measuring, which might not be in tone with the subject, there is a sense of urgency to why culture matters. As Hosagrahar's epitaph to her article says: "Culture is who we are, and what shapes our identity. Placing culture at the heart of development policies is the only way to ensure a human-centred, inclusive, and equitable development" (Hosagrahar, 2017). In line with this, SDG 11 "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" should also be interpreted to include the importance of cultural issues in a sustainability perspective.

About the author

Kristin Bergaust works as an artist, researcher and educator. She is a professor at OsloMet, Oslo, since 2008. She was professor and head of Intermedia at Trondheim Academy of Fine Arts, NTNU (2001-2008) and artistic director of Atelier Nord media lab for artists (1997 to 2001). Kristin is one of the pioneers of the self-organized early media art scene in Norway. Her feminist and relational perspectives on contemporary conditions are investigated through performative and technological strategies, sometimes fed by cultural history or other narratives. She often works in transdisciplinary research environments and initiates projects from ecological viewpoints.

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Collaborators

Cameras: Cheik Alyou, Frode Sten Jacobsen, Alexis Parra, Kristin Bergaust
Music: Sheldon Blackman, Jerel de Leon, Essa Chan, Amina, and Sarah
Slam poetry and reading: Taro Cooper

Kristin Bergaust. MS Innvik: A Ship with a View – Culture is who we are

Participants: Nordic Black Theatre actors, Chef Kyi and kitchen staff

Editing: Kristin Bergaust and Alexis Parra

Sound: Alexis Parra