

# OSLO

CITY REPORT

Europe's fastest-growing city is home to a supportive community of artists, curators and writers. From independent spaces in the Grønland neighbourhood and the influential Academy of Fine Art to OCA's uncertain future and Renzo Piano's divisive Astrup Fearnley Museet, *Jason Farago* and *Milena Hoegsberg* report from the Norwegian capital







## CITY REPORT

JASON FARAGO

My flight from New York to Oslo was packed solid, mostly with Norwegian parents and their teenage children frantically texting before take-off. It was a school holiday in Norway, explained my seatmate, a burly man who worked in energy. Like everyone else, he and his family had come to the US for a little shopping. (Abercrombie & Fitch, the kids demanded; they queued for half an hour.) The exchange rate is favourable at the moment, I observed. 'There's that, yes,' my seatmate said. 'But also, everyone in Norway is rich now.'

Well, it couldn't have happened to nicer people. Norway's discovery of massive oil deposits in the North Sea in 1969, followed soon after by natural gas, might have led politicians to shower citizens with 'petrokroner', if not to squirrel the cash away for themselves. Instead, the country put the revenues into the *Oljefondet* (oil fund), now the world's largest sovereign wealth fund, and instituted its famous *handlingsregelen*, or budgetary rule, which earmarks most of the fund's capital gains for sustainable development. According to the World Bank, Norway now ranks third worldwide in GDP per capita, behind Qatar and Luxembourg – but unlike most other states that have hit it big with natural resources, the country has managed to spread the wealth across its population, thanks to progressive taxation and a good old Scandinavian cradle-to-grave welfare state. Even the homeless heroin addicts on Skippergata, Oslo's skid row (and home to the young gallery Tidens Krav), receive over £1,000 a month.

It's a strange place, Oslo: smaller and grittier than the other Scandinavian capitals, prosperous but not patrician, and only subtly hinting here and there that this is the Riyadh of the north. New mixed-use developments have arisen around the fjord, and some glass towers have gone up in Bjørvika, near the central train station. (One houses in its lobby the Kunsthall Oslo, directed by Will Bradley, late of The Modern Institute in Glasgow.) But where other oil capitals have speckled themselves with imposing, not to say ostentatious architectural projects, Oslo has just two recent examples. One is the famous opera house, designed by local heroes Snøhetta, which opened in 2008; the other is the new home of the Astrup Fearnley Museet, a Renzo Piano package funded by private sources, which opened in September 2012.

Piano did the best that he could with a beautiful but unwieldy lot, a triangular spit of land with a small beach on the fjord and a canal running through it. He also had to incorporate a fair amount of rentable office space, which should give you a sense of how different Oslo's economy is from those of other European capitals. The architect solved the problem by designing three buildings, two on one side of the canal and one on the

other, and unifying them with a single glass roof whose light-modulating louvres recall his Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas or the Fondation Beyeler near Basel. Some visitors have grumbled that you have to step outside to get from one gallery to the next and, while I actually liked that nature/culture transition moment, the museum's lazy splash of an inaugural exhibition called unwelcome attention to some circulation problems. The first show, 'To Be With Art Is All We Ask', a cop-out from the title onward, scattered the Astrup Fearnley's permanent collection around both buildings with neither argument nor progression, and it wasn't until my third visit to the museum that I discovered I'd missed an entire upstairs gallery, home to Jeff Koons's *Bubbles* (1998) and a predictably enormous sculpture by Anselm Kiefer.

About that permanent collection: there are too few women and far too many New York young guns with Gagosian pedigrees. (Queen Sonja herself, in what a more royalist critic than I might call *lèse-majesté*, was reduced to giving the inaugural speech in front of a dreadful chewing-gum painting by Dan Colen.) In *Kunstkrittikk*, the excellent pan-Scandinavian online art magazine, critic Line Ulekleiv flayed the inaugural exhibition as 'a celebration of the banal'; other members of the press were harder still, and even one of the museum's own board members criticized the show on the national broadcaster NRK. So the new Astrup Fearnley has an ironic charge: it points to both the maturity of the Oslo scene and to the risk – now that so much money is sloshing around – that its particular character may become diluted.

Oslo, more than any city in Scandinavia and even more than some of the bigger European art capitals, has fostered a community of artists, curators and writers for whom art isn't always at the service of the market. That's not to say the market is absent: the gallery Gerhardsen Gerner, long based in Berlin, reopened in Oslo in 2012 after a decade away, while STANDARD (OSLO) remains a principal driver of the artistic conversation. But public institutions and publicly funded independent spaces are where the real action takes place. Hadia Tajik, Norway's 29-year-old culture minister, recently announced the largest-ever budget for the arts, with visual arts getting the highest percentage increase. A new Nasjonalmuseet, scheduled to open in 2017–18, will unify four institutions – including the current National Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Art – into one harbourside museum; the design, a cool grey bunker by the architectural firm Kleihues + Schuwerk, was selected in an open competition. The impressive Office for Contemporary Art (OCA), set up jointly by the foreign and culture ministries, hasn't just helped Norwegian artists such as Bjarne Melgaard and Matias Faldbakken gain international exposure, it has also led symposia and put out publications that have made Oslo into an art-historical hothouse – although, if you spend enough time drinking at Oslo Mekaniske Verksted, a crowded bar near the younger galleries, you'll



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discover that not every artist in town is a fan. Well-funded art schools also play a large part in the scene, and publications such as *Billedkunst* and *Kunstforum* (not related to the German magazine of the same name) lead an impressive mediascape. Such is the great Norwegian irony that the trophy galleries in Aker Brygge and the out-of-the-way nonprofits quoting Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) in their press releases both ultimately depend on the oil derricks in the North Sea.

Oslo is crushingly expensive. It has the highest cost of living of any city in the world, in fact. (Tourists always whine about the price of beer, but what really shocks me are the books: a copy of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* – or *Rowdy at the Door*, as it's re-titled in Bokmål – will cost you about £45, almost six times the usual price.) The one thing that's slightly affordable is rent, and the independent galleries have mostly taken up in Grønland, a melting-pot neighbourhood home to a fair number of Somali immigrants and a reminder that Oslo is the fastest-growing city in Europe, thanks both to international immigration and to Norwegians relocating to the capital. Exhibitions in Grønland sometimes stay open for just a weekend. Openings go until 1am, but they may not be announced, and at one gallery the owners allegedly beat up the artist they were exhibiting, then trashed his work with a baseball bat and chucked it outside.

The most ambitious independent space in Oslo is surely 1857, founded two years ago by artists Stian Eide Kluge and Steffen Håndlykken. The gallery comprises a low-ceilinged front room and a soaring space behind it, a former lumberyard so large that there was still enough space left after their last exhibition was installed for people to park their cars inside. When I first visited, they were exhibiting the German sculptor Lena Henke alongside 19th-century American landscape photography on loan from an American university collection (refreshing, since in too many artist-run spaces older art can be an afterthought), while a functional sculpture/furnace by Petter Ballo flickered in the corner.

Like much of the Oslo art world, 1857 demonstrates that hard-to-translate Norwegian virtue of *dugnad*: participation, pitching in, working for the common good. The principles of the welfare state and of the small community are deeply intertwined. You feel the same at VI, VII gallery, founded last year by the New York-born Esperanza Rosales and housed in a bunker-like series of rooms and hallways beneath the Grønland Menighetshus, a 1913 congregation hall. VI, VII was showing the painter James Hoff, whose work will also be exhibited at Kunsthall Oslo this year, and you can see how the practices of artists, curators, critics and others overlap with and inform one another. It's the same at Tidens Krav, run by four young artists, and at SALT (Saltarelli Salong), a young gallery named after (and allegedly directed by) a 15th-century Italian male prostitute: artists do more for themselves, and for one another, than in almost any other city I know.

Knut Hamsun, in his *ur*-Modernist 1890 novel *Hunger*, describes Oslo (or Kristiania, as it was called then) as 'that strange city no one escapes from until it has left its mark on him'. That's still true, though not in the same way as before. Hamsun's Oslo was the capital of one of the poorest countries in Europe, and the Oslovian mark was one of anomie and weirdness. The mark that Oslo and its art world leave today has a rather different character. At a moment when many others in Europe are packing up, Oslo makes you think that wealth and seriousness aren't always at odds, so long as you have a community that knows the value of both. Money isn't always pretty, but – as Hamsun would be the first to say – poverty isn't a virtue either.

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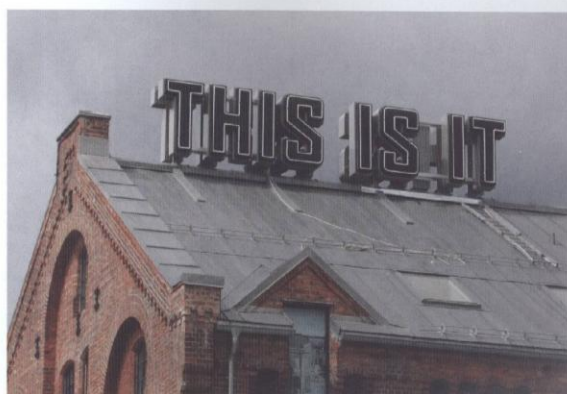
A cross-section of the Oslo art scene crowded around an itinerant stage set constructed by the artist group Parallellaksjonen (Parallel Action) inside Kunsthall Oslo. It was an August evening in 2011, and it was my first week in Oslo after moving here from New York. The preparations for the public performance had begun hours earlier at a closed party greased by heavy drinking and rumoured drug use. The culmination of a summer school of talks and performances in Kunsthall Oslo, the baptism ceremony consisted of members of the collective dressed in costumes and covered in honey and glitter reading a statement (now long forgotten) before crawling through a tubular, symbolic umbilical chord. Emerging on the other side with a new name, the main participants (all men) were cheered on by young women, mostly fellow artists, also dressed in costumes, reduced to cheerleaders on the side. The hedonistic ritual emanated an air of insider fun, legitimized by the discourse-laden language with which

*'The new Astrup Fearnley Museet points to both the maturity of the Oslo scene and to the risk that its particular character may become diluted.'*

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Previous pages:  
Architectural rendering of the planned National Arts Museum between Aker Brygge and City Hall, designed by Kleihues + Schuwerk, scheduled to open in 2017

1  
Astrup Fearnley Museet, Tjuvholmen, designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop in collaboration with Narud-Stokke-Wiig

2  
Artist Lars Laumann (centre) at the finissage of his exhibition at VI, VII, 2012

3  
Gardar Eide Einarsson  
*This Is It*, 2012, installation view at Oslo National Academy of the Arts



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*'Whatever the roots, there is an admiration for the pursuit of a bohemian lifestyle, and with it the fantasy of a more authentic artistic practice.'*

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1  
Inga Sund Hofset  
*Ligninger for en fallende kropp/  
Vi roper mot hverandre*  
(Equations For a Falling Body/We Shout),  
2012, installation view at Holodeck

2  
Tito Frey, *Homo Ludens, Ars Ludicera*,  
2012, installation view at SALT  
(Saltarelli Salong)

opposite page:  
David Keating, *Causeway*, 2011,  
installation view as part of  
'Drop Handkerchief Backdrop' at 1857

Parallellaksjonen's four male founders (Leander Dønne, Anders Smebye, Snorre Hvamen and Anders Dahl Monsen) framed the collaboration on their website. But as an experience of art, the performance fell short, not quite convincing in the subversive strategies to which it made claims.

Although not as sophomoric as that particular event, there is an unmistakable, underlying macho vibe in Oslo's art scene. Queer and feminist perspectives are not often visible or deemed relevant. Last year, FRANK – a platform revolving around gender issues initiated by artists Liv Bugge, Synnøve G. Wetten and Sille Storihle – organized a Sunday screening series titled 'Curing Nomality' at Kunsternes Hus. It was a welcome counterpoint to a context that has allowed ample space for the exploration of male subjectivity in the artistic process. A local curator I broached this subject with insists that the tendency can be traced to the Academy of Fine Art in Oslo (KHIO), where a bohemian, anti-establishment attitude is still cultivated by male professors of a certain generation. Whatever the roots, there is both an expressed and unacknowledged admiration for the pursuit of a vaguely bohemian lifestyle and, with it, the fantasy of a more authentic artistic practice. With neither critics nor artists too concerned about problematizing this, the critical framework for assessing such activities falls away, reduced to shaking heads, grinning all the same.

For example, in Oslo-based artist Kristian Skylstad's film *Violence of Silence* (2011) – a noteworthy portrait of youth backpacking culture and temporary escapism in Thailand – clichés of the artist narcissistically playing guitar or reflecting on life while shirtless in boxer briefs constantly threaten to strangle his critical embeddedness. In light of this, it is perhaps less surprising that it is the key male art figures who emerged in the 1990s – Matias Faldbakken, Bjarne Melgaard and Gardar Eide Einarsson – and their neo-conceptualist language that set the bar for the current generation of artists. In 2008, Einarsson put his permanent mark on the National Academy of the Arts in Oslo with a public sculpture commission spelling 'THIS IS IT' in large capital letters, placed prominently on the institution's roof. Undoubtedly a reference to Michael Jackson's song of the same name, the letters loom high – a vague promise of the successful art career that begins with professional credentials. Though they enjoy less of a cool factor, there is a strong presence of other talented artists in Oslo from the 1990s generation as well as younger generations, such as Ane Graff, Ane Hjort Guttu, Marianne Heier, Ann Cathrin November Høibo, Camille Norment and Tori Wrånes, to name just a few and leave many out – several of whom are still studying but worth keeping an eye on.

Indeed, KHIO is an important locus for the art scene, securing the frequent presence of prominent international artists, curators and theoreticians. With the appointment of its new director, Vanessa Ohlrahn, who is intent on raising the academic level and beefing up the curriculum with a greater focus on feminist and critical practices, the academy is just one of many Oslo-based art organizations undergoing positive change. A widespread state-enforced museum reform in 2003, which merged museums devoted to art of different periods under a single programme, left many struggling with new bureaucratic demands and inconsistent curatorial programmes. A feeling of rupture and the renegotiation of institutional profiles and curatorial directions is in the air. In the past year alone, an increasing number of international curators have taken positions at Oslo's important institutions: Mats Stjernstedt at Kunsternes Hus, Sabrina van der Ley at the National Museum, and Stephanie von Spreter at Fotogalleriet. The time seems ripe for change, but it also raises the question of how foreigners can invigorate and move the local art context forward while playing by the written and unwritten political directives of a system largely supported by public funding.

*Kunstkritikk*, a serious online pan-Scandinavian undertaking, leads the debates on art politics, often in opinion pieces authored by its chief editor, Jonas Ekeberg, who knows the Norwegian art context intimately. A brewing, multilayered conflict between OCA and The Ministry of Culture





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1  
Chris Bould  
performance as part  
of exhibition  
'Long Left – Short Right',  
2012,  
at Dortmund Bodega

2  
Objectiv no. 6, 2012  
cover image: Tori Wrånes,  
*The wind does not break  
a bendy tree*, 2012,  
self-portrait commissioned  
for the magazine

3  
Nina Beier  
*Smokes*, 2013, chewing gum  
on handmade Persian rugs,  
diptych: 56 x 170 cm x 140 cm  
and 48 x 240 cm x 200 cm

*'Considering the wealth in Oslo,  
the art scene remains relatively independent of the market. For now, it has the  
unpolished energy and momentum of a city in the making.'*

MILENA HOEGSBERG





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over spending and funding reveals that local art politics are laced with emotions, but also that the art community is deeply engaged in questions concerning the future of its institutions. OCA has undoubtedly been crucial to the increased visibility of Norwegian artists abroad, through its grant programmes for artists, its visitors' programme for international curators, and in recent years under Marta Kuzma's leadership, through its own often precise curatorial productions. The looming question now is whether OCA should remain an independent organization, allocating grants at the educated discretion of a staff and board comprised of art experts, or if it should begin to allocate funds more democratically, but with stricter directives from the cultural ministry. For many, the latter would seem an unfortunate step back.

Change is not without tension. The Munch Museum has also fallen prey to political disputes at municipal and state levels, causing the postponement of the decision about the location of its new building – a point contentious enough to prompt 400 people from the art community to walk through Oslo's streets with torches in protest in the autumn of 2012. At the museum's current, unpretentious location away from the commercial buzz of Bjørvika where it may end up, one can still stroll through Oslo's Botanical Garden and enjoy changing exhibitions on Munch's exemplary work. The Oslo edition of last year's much-lauded touring exhibition of the artist, 'The Modern Eye', for example, included gems like his iconic *Scream* on the cover of a 1 May 1898 issue of the national newspaper *Social-Demokraten* (The Social Democrat).

As a rapidly growing city of almost one million inhabitants, Oslo still feels decidedly uncosmopolitan and, on the surface, a bit dead. But inside shabby-looking houses, things are brewing. Oslo boasts a vibrant and eclectic music scene, and a fair share of very solid sound and performance art productions, thanks to organizations such as Ny Musikk (New Music), now led by Anne Hilde Neset; Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival; and Prisma records (now under the wing of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter), committed to disseminating new commissions by artists working with experimental sound. Courtesy of a generous funding system, several independent, often artist-run spaces have been allowed to flourish, such as Holodeck, NoPlace, Grünerløkka Kunsthall, Dortmund Bodega, Tidens Krav (a clever language-specific name which translates as 'demands of the time'), Percival Space and PINK CUBE. The weekly Monday-evening initiative 'One Night Only' – an artist-programmed pop-up exhibition and social gathering with home-cooked meals and sometimes cocktails, hosted at the exhibition space UKS (Young Artists Society) – can be thrown in the mix.

These independently run initiatives offer the varying quality that comes with presenting the work of emerging artists. But they also feel like important sites of formative artistic experimentation and informal communities. Compared to so many other cities where serious, independent curatorial undertakings remain underfunded, it can be perplexing to learn that Dortmund Bodega, a gritty space with an uneven, at times nonchalant programme, received one million NOK in public funding over a three-year period. Other aforementioned spaces make do with much less. MELK, a gallery that is run and funded by two artists, is – alongside the magazine *Objektiv* – staking out a territory with an interest in redefining what camera-based work can be, showing both promising young local artists and more established international names. In the same neighbourhood of Grønland, the galleries VI, VII and 1857 are in a league of their own. American curator Esperanza Rosales's programme at VI, VII, which is just under a year old, presents a conceptual strand in dialogue with and in counterpoint to the more playful and sometimes predictable programme at STANDARD (OSLO). In a small commercial scene, the latter enjoys a well-deserved admiration for its professional success and commitment to its artists, even if their artistic expression can't always keep up with their demand. In the same week, in the raw, ambient space of VI, VII, one can see quiet sculptures fusing the industrial and the material by young British artist Eloise Hawser, and Nina Beier's slick and punning sculptures such as *Heavy Hand* (2013), comprising piles of Persian rugs – quite literally stacked value – in the starkly lit white cube galleries at STANDARD's generous new space.

While galleries such as these are piquing interest in artists in Oslo, the young art scene is becoming more international – with everything this brings: conformity to whatever conceptual style the art market seems to favour, ideas picked up on a semester abroad in Frankfurt with star professors, and not least, art speak. (Curiously, independent spaces in particular seem to have developed their own misguided recipe for press releases, advocating dense, opaque and nonsensical language.) But, considering the wealth in Oslo, the art scene remains relatively independent of the market. For now, it has the unpolished energy and momentum of a city in the making, and the feeling that we are all in this together, contributing to change. ♦

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Ebba Bring and Torhild Berg  
30 Minutes Only, 2012, performance as part  
of 'One Night Only' at UKS

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Steingrímur Eyfjörð and Helgi Thorsson  
'Kjerringen og Rúsi Sæng'  
(The Old Hag and the Raisin Blanket),  
2012, exhibition view at Tidens Krav

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Battle 10: Janna Thøle-Juul vs.  
Fast Forward, 2012, part of the 'art-battles'  
series at PINK CUBE