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## **The sculptural and musical experience space**

**Marit Benthe Norheim's Camping Women in collaboration with Geir Johnson**

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On the occasion of Stavanger's nomination to European Capital of Culture 2008, five Camping Women, created by the Norwegian artist Marit Benthe Norheim, stood in front of Stavanger Cathedral for the opening in May. Now they are travelling around Rogaland and will continue their journey for the rest of the year.

Around Scandinavia - especially in Norway and Denmark - Marit Benthe Norheim has erected sculptures on an often grand scale, which function partly as a meeting point in the city space, partly as a landmark, but they also give the places they are located a new identity and a striking new profile. These sculptures also contain patterns of meaning, which interpret and enhance the special events that are connected to the locations where they stand. This can be seen in the seven-metre tall Lady of the Sea (2000 - 2001). This is situated at the harbour front in Sæby and functions as a landmark for the town. However, the sculpture also visualises the Lady of the Sea, the mysterious, ambiguous character in the play of the same name, which Ibsen wrote in the summer of 1887 in Sæby.<sup>2</sup> The conflicting emotions of The Lady of the Sea were interpreted through the music that Geir Johnson created for the unveiling ceremony.

Marit Benthe Norheim works within the public space in a manner that Annette Østerby has described as follows:

"The artist uses the public space to create a closer and more personal contact between the audience and the groups in the local population. In this manner she raises questions of identity in relation to a specific place, about the relationship between the individual and society."

These days, various artists are working energetically to find new relationships between sound and image, between music and the visual arts. However, Marit Benthe Norheim has, since the mid 90's - first and foremost in collaboration with the composer Geir Johnson- endeavoured to expand the event and experience space by drawing on the music in such a way that it intensifies and deepens the feelings and attitudes that the artworks express. In a series of Marit

Benthe Norheim's large sculptural installations it is precisely the dialogue between the sculptural idiom and the musical language that have been apportioned a central role. The music is no longer just a part of the unveiling ceremony. It is built into the sculpture itself in an organic way. For her large and fascinating installation of the 16 Rolling Angels (1999 - 2000), Geir Johnson created music, which in a nuanced and contemporary manner interpreted what angels can symbolise today. The music is built into the "hearts" of the angels and underscores the fact that they do not only appear in a Christian context but also as symbols for important life values and they enter into a personal connection for many people. 4 He has also created music for the seven-metre tall sculpture The Rat Maiden, which was erected in Skien, Norway, in 2006. The music can be heard in the slide, which is incorporated into the sculpture. His musical interpretation is called The journey between laughter and tears. This sound installation intensifies Marit Benthe Norheim's interpretation of the ambiguities in the Rat Maiden, who is one of the most mysterious figures in Ibsen's drama Lille Eyolf (1894).

This year Marit Benthe Norheim has created a new large-scale project, which is full of surprises. She has created nothing less than a rolling sculptural installation with five Camping Women. It is five large female sculptures, which are built on top of five working caravans. Their interiors are filled partly with sculptures, partly photographs, partly porcelain mosaics. In each space, Geir Johnson has composed or adapted music, which in a richly expressive manner, emphasises the themes that the Camping Women symbolise.

The Refugee bends lithely forward and gazes - with both bravery and fear - into the foreign world that she has been forced to flee to. Inside the caravan, 400 children and refugee women from Stavanger have created porcelain mosaics with motifs that express longing and loss. In the poetry, which Geir Johnson has created music for - and which fills the caravan's space - the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish has, in his poem, State of Siege (2002), expressed both the pain and fear that are a part of the refugees' everyday. However, Darwish also points out the "the malady of hope is incurable". Moreover, even though the refugees must live an uncertain existence, they are "eternity's guests". Marit Benthe Norheim has modelled the Mary the Protector in such a way that she can symbolise modern humanity's need for care, love and protection, because it exists in a one-dimensional and individualistic world. Maria Protector also contains associations of the concept of the Virgin Mary from the Middle Ages, who prays for mercy for the sinners she has hidden in her cloak (fig.2). Geir Johnson has interpreted the tension between the human and the divine aspect in Maria the Protector musically in his personal adaptation of Gregori Allegri's musical work Misere Dei, which was composed in the 1630's. The piece is sung by Trio Medieval.

The Bride, who has a powerful erotic aura, struts on the caravan roof and embraces two human figures in her skirt (fig.3). Inside the caravan, where we hear wedding songs from around the world, the walls are papered with wedding

photos, which show all the cultural differences which exist in our society today.

The Siren is a sensual female figure with a great seductive power. The inner space of the caravan is covered with handprints - without a doubt impressions left from the many people she has met, loved, kept or left. Geir Johnson has composed the music - which is sung by Siri Torjesen - but it is constantly interrupted by her banal, often scolding remarks such as "Why aren't you coming, the coffee is getting cold".

The seductive enchantment is broken and dissipated by the trivialities of the everyday. In the Camping Mama the same ambiguity appears. She is a large and loving woman but captures those she meets in an almost suffocating net of care and security. This theme is underscored by Siri Torjesen, who sings the popular songs in which unimaginative security appears in a petit bourgeois world.

The five Camping Women have driven through the windswept Northern Jutland landscape and in the Norwegian mountain areas (fig. 4). On the 6th of May they stood in front of Stavanger Cathedral to mark the occasion of the town becoming European City of Culture in 2008. Since then they have been travelling around Rogaland and will continue their journey until the end of this year.

The Camping Women contain an intense and richly expressive sculptural depiction of Marit Benthe Norheim's interpretation of our world. We live in a world subject to the laws of transformation. New situations and surprising turns of events constantly interrupt our secure everyday. But Marit Benthe Norheim has always been concerned with exposing the ambiguous, the mysterious, the powers of light and dark. The fact that the world is constantly changing means on the one hand, that it can be difficult to find a permanent foothold and create coherence in one's life and in the surrounding world. But a changeable world is also an open world, which creates the possibility of vision and creation of new life situations or the establishment of new human relations. However, it is precisely in an open world that liberating forces get free rein and new perspectives appear, which artists are often the first to spot and interpret. The Camping Women communicate directly with the senses and thoughts of the audience and appeal to be played with actively, to continue the stories that have been visualised and become an experience richer through the existential relationships which are revealed. This magnificent project shows the breadth, originality and depth of Marit Benthe Norheim's sculptural works. It has exposed small nuances and large perspectives in a known world and created connections where before there existed only an unmanageable multitude of fragments.

Marit Benthe Norheim has almost always worked with concrete, which we know to be a functional and rational material used in industry. She believes that it fits her artistic intentions in that it is not ostentatious, but relates to the world around us. With the Camping Women a different artistic experience has flooded into the cityscape. It appeals not only to sight, hearing, feelings, fantasy and

imagination - but also sharpens political awareness and ethical thinking. Added to this is the fact that the Camping Women will not remain in one particular place, but include a journey, a flow and a change. They can be moved to new town spaces in different combinations and create new visual dialogues with their surroundings and stimulate viewers in different and unexpected ways. The Camping Women show that Marit Benthe Norheim works with forms, which are deeply anchored in the condition, that human understanding of the world occurs through the body and the senses. Her sculptures encompass an invitation to enter into a direct and sensory relationship with the sculpture. In Camping Women she has succeeded in realising her artistic endeavours, which she has expressed as follows: " I have always been fascinated by art which has a will to communicate and in one way or another functions as a kind of door opener" The inclusion of the music in the five caravans creates a more intense experiential whole, because the various compositions are carefully matched to the spaces that the Camping Women have conquered.

The many surprising connecting lines which the Camping Women create between art, the adult's and child's and musical world are extended and strengthened in a series of new ways, because they travel from place to place and enter into new dialogues with the people that they meet en route.

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