

Presenting the Record of Relational Aesthetics: Bjørn-Kowalski Hansen/Håkki™ at Gallery Yujiro

By Edward Sanderson

I popped over to Gallery Yujiro last week for the opening of their new show – the work of Bjørn-Kowalski Hansen and the Håkki™ project.

Håkki is essentially a brand and was created as an umbrella term to identify the products and activities relating to the artist's work in the town of Ljungaverk in the heart of Sweden. Ljungaverk has been at the sharp end of the effects of globalisation - the major employer in the town closed fifteen years ago leading to the decimation of the community, as large numbers moved to more promising areas for work.

The project was originally developed by two artists from Trondheim, in neighbouring Norway, as a way to work with the local community of Ljungaverk creating ways to revitalise the area through the development of products based on the Håkki brand. The proceeds from these go back into projects to improve the local facilities and quality of life generally in the area, these projects also become part of the artworks subsumed under the Håkki moniker.

One of the aims of Håkki is to give the community back self-respect and control of their future, and to stop Ljungaverk becoming a ghost town. It does this through the creation of a set 'tools' which will allow the inhabitants to make their own success based on their existing environment and qualities – the projects are designed to become self-sustaining. The artists hope the local community will accept and adopt them to ensure this long-term survival and success. There is an appreciation that Håkki should not be just a temporary 'art' project which exists only by virtue of the presence of the artists, but should have its future as part of the community built into it.

Håkki at Gallery Yujiro

Before reaching the main gallery space, you enter a blacked out room with a video projection through heavy felt curtains. It's showing some sort of short visual introduction to the little town of Ljungaverk, the video seems to be a promotional tool directed at us as potential visitors to the town—"Välkommen till LJUNGAVERK" the sign says as you enter the town – Welcome to Ljungaverk. Rather worryingly the video takes its cue from the titles of "Twin Peaks", borrowing the distinctive soundtrack and recreating some of the shots used in the opening sequence of David Lynch's macabre '90's TV series. Otherwise the town looks fairly nondescript, with no real landmarks apart from a lot of snow and pine forests.

Having left this acclimatisation chamber, the main gallery space presents itself as a branch of the Håkki store concept, the main feature being a clothes rail cutting across the length of the gallery spaces. This rail presents a range of t-shirts in various carefully graded sizes. These t-shirts are the major physical product produced under the Håkki brand and one of the USPs of the shirt is that the screenprinted design changes every week. In the gallery today we had a brown shirt with two images, one of which translates as "I have friends in the forest" and another that I didn't take a note of. On the walls throughout the gallery were graphics in the Håkki style, a whimsical, ironic, bold form of illustration, picking up on Scandinavian influences, children's book illustrations and '70's pop-culture references which are in their turn heavy influences on contemporary skater visuals. Some screenprinted sheets of promotional designs were also pinned to the walls, as well as framed photographs documenting events which the project has initiated and a painting of Håkki himself dressed

up warmly in one of his t-shirts and fur hat in front of the local ski-lift. On one wall a small record player has been fixed, playing a recording of the local rocker-billy band's songs.

Outside of the main gallery space there is a small office area which is presenting three estate agent's boards with descriptions of properties in Ljungaverk. The artists are using the show as an opportunity to sell the properties to an interested visitor, thus increasing the population of the town and bringing new blood into a town which is being presented as lacking any hope for regeneration in the near future.

The press release for the show places Håkki fairly and squarely into Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the "relational" work. The release defines this as "an artwork which is not complete without the participation of others within both the production and the reception of the work."¹ I'm interested in writing a bit about the relevance of Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics (referred to as RA from here on in) to Håkki generally and to what extent this show addresses this aesthetic. To begin with I'll have a look at Håkki's rôle within the town of Ljungaverk and the gallery, and then at the end go back to Bourriaud's eponymous text² and try and make some connections between the works and Relational Aesthetics in general.

Some analysis

The works presented in the gallery can be categorised into two broad camps, those which are records of activities and those which are activities in themselves. Overall the show is presented very much as a discrete set of *objects* divorced from their original context, ultimately leaving them in the only remaining context – that created by the interaction of the works and the gallery itself. This disconnection removes any of the active, participatory aspects of the pieces, presenting only the remains of these events. The pieces present evidence of an engagement with other audiences, i.e. the record of the activities which Håkki instituted, but they do not present an engagement with the one that is in the gallery at that moment.

So the show presents the effects and remains of an RA encounter – so how do the artists sit with respect to this presentation? I would say it's an uneasy relationship between them and the gallery-style presentation, one in which there could be seen to be an incongruity of purpose. The artist comes from the context of working directly with the residents of the town, to a new context of the gallery where the works remain purely as archives, sitting in a new relation to the visitor but one which reverts to that of the traditional art object.

There are two works which move away from this inertia of the gallery and try to re-engage with the visitor: the t-shirts and the properties. The t-shirts could be seen as a move away from the action of reification by the gallery environment, a point of connection with the audience which could set up some kind of dialogue. But this would simply be that of consumer to seller, the brief interaction that takes place in the exchange of money for goods. These shirts are sold as commodities like any other artwork. There is perhaps some confusion being instituted by using the gallery as a store, against its type as it were, but this is only down to the brief uncertainty brought on by the difference in product. The sale of the shirts has two possible effects that in a simple way might be seen as effective: the proceeds from the sale of the shirts goes towards a continuation of the project, and those wearing the shirts expand the reach of the project beyond the gallery, however this is a somewhat passive activity.

¹ Press Release, Gallery Yujiro. 2007.

² Bourriaud is the writer most frequently associated with this term, but Grant Kester has also written about the subject. Kester refers to it as Dialogical work.

But does this matter? Well, for me, it comes down to my engagement with the work, how interesting I find it, and that depends on how effective I think it is or could be – in general I think RA works are by design effective, traditional art objects potentially less so. By effective, I mean the power of the work to create change, and by change I mean amongst a group of people i.e. change in a society not just the individual. I think that in these terms the pieces in the main gallery are actually end up being distractions from the one piece that could potentially reinvest the show with some relational effectiveness, this being the sale of the properties.

This work converts the gallery into a temporary estate agency, selling three properties in the town of Ljungaverk. We are presented with the standard estate agent's sheets announcing the details of the properties with a photo and the list of features considered worth highlighting.

This piece directly confronts the viewer, serving to confuse their role as appreciator and potential buyer of art with that of a house buyer, and creating a collision between the house as habitation and as sculpture. What does it mean to judge an artwork by such prosaic considerations as whether it has high-speed internet access? This could be a brilliant way to implicate the viewer in the piece, to more or less demand that they mentally invest in the work by

But there seems to be lack of commitment in the presentation of this aspect of the show, which I think reflects the rather half-hearted nature of the other pieces. I expected there to be an agent attempting to sell the properties. Bringing in someone unconnected with the gallery would be one way of reinforcing the message.

Also in terms of the effects of this piece, does it serve the same ends that the other pieces do? Does having a British gallery visitor buying a house in this town bring any benefits to them, in the way that the other projects are designed to (this assumes that this is what the other projects are indeed doing, which may be misunderstanding on my part of the meaning of the works)? Does this play dangerous games with the town? It seems to me that this particular piece extends the work away from directly benefiting the local community towards addressing another audience entirely, one which may or may not have any interest in the town and to contributing to the community and hence may be nothing but an increment to the population figure.

Although I liked the premise of this work, I have doubts about the ethics of offering these properties to a public as art objects. That said, what does this say about my understanding of the way we treat art objects that makes them different from how we treat our other property? Those who are prepared to pay large sums for art objects are probably prepared to keep them in good condition to safeguard their investment, so how does this differ from the way we treat our other large purchases, such as houses? Perhaps my concern regarding the fate to the properties is misplaced when the people who will buy them are arguably better able to take care of them than the local people. Of course I am generalising here, but if no one is buying locally, why should the sellers not look further afield? And if by making the properties into an art work this attracts someone who brings money into the area, thus potentially regenerating part of the town, again why not?

Relational Aesthetic

So, can Relational Aesthetic tell us anything about these concerns of mine? Just to quickly review Bourriaud's original definitions, this *aesthetic* is about “. . . judging artworks on the

basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt,"³ and the result, relational art, is:

A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.⁴

A very basic reading of this tells us that this is opposing the presentation of the work of art in a physical or conceptual 'white cube' space—a space which redefines the work's context, masking any formal and societal distractions from the 'pure' contemplation of the work—with one which makes a formative feature of the engagement with the audience. Gallery Yujiro's press release explicitly co-opts this aspect as a feature of the show itself:

The exhibition thus becomes a collective experience that questions the authorship and autonomy of the artist and the artwork within society.⁵

While I can see this as being perfectly valid for an analysis of the Håkki work in itself, I think that it is more the case that the show actually denies and subjugates these factors in the process of representing the Håkki experience. You could say that the works in the show do not in themselves perform *any* kind of relational activity, and this is due to their nature as archives and the way they are being presented in the gallery (although this could be seen as more a matter of how you define a relation). In only one case (the property sales) does a work attempt to escape from this trap, and have a good chance of doing so, but even this piece loses its efficacy because of what I would suggest is a lack of commitment in its staging.

³ BOURRIAUD, Nicolas (1998). *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. France: Les Presses du Réel. p. 112.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵ Press Release, op.cit