



Svein Flygari Johansen

Am I making up what really happened?

11 November 2011 – 12 February 2012

Exhibiting for the first time in the UK, Svein Flygari Johansen, an artist with considerable influence in Norway, might not have surfaced in London for some time longer, since his international projects have taken him East rather than West, had we not had the good fortune to engage with him more than thirteen years ago. The ambitious and provocative work does not easily lend itself to the market (although it features in a number of national collections) and there are few commercial galleries in Norway. To further obscure him, there is little to be found of Flygari Johansen's work on the web and what is still available (of considerable press attention) is to be found in national press rather than international art magazines. Online conversion of these articles from Norwegian into English is so crude, that the reader becomes acutely aware of just how much must be lost in translation – particularly frustrating in the case of work that is not easily documented and conceived to come alive in the mind, in the moment.

The work links themes of indigenous culture with capitalist meltdown and patriotism with global politics: subjects that, now, even affect one of the most independent, oil-rich countries in the world and which undoubtedly resonate in an international arena.

Flygari Johansen is based in Oslo for most of the year actively engaged in the discourse of contemporary art. He was a founder member of the artist-run Galleri Struts, Oslo and curator of Zoolounge, Oslo during the 90s and teaches in a number of art schools. As part of his London project, Flygari has invited former students Frode Halvorsen and Jorid Levke Eide to make new work for Beaconsfield's ongoing FlatScreen programme. It was as a curator that he first engaged with Beaconsfield in 1998¹. The long association has enabled us to co-produce this new commission and to rework a number of earlier works for London in the context of today's climate of global recession and trend for adopting terrorist tactics as a form of personal catharsis.

Flygari Johansen is a landscape artist whose fundamental identification with nature is at the core of his work. At heart a creature of the forest and fjord, he spends the summer months high up inside the Arctic circle, wild salmon fishing on the river near which he grew up in the northernmost city in the world – Alta. His relationship with the river was forged as a boy campaigning against a power station. The local Alta-Kautokeino waterway was the site of the only instance of civil unrest in Norway's recent history: a political controversy that came to a head in 1980. Centred around Sami land rights and the conservation of one of the largest freshwater fish reserves in the world, this clash with the Norwegian government over the building of a huge dam attracted international support. The dispute not only had a huge impact on the national psyche but specifically shaped Flygari Johansen's interests.

Like his hero, the 19th century painter Caspar David Friedrich, Flygari Johansen reflects upon the impact of civilisation on nature, but asks *how do we understand nature and what do we do in its name?* Linked to these questions, disjunctions between ancient and contemporary cultural identities have been a recurring focus and several earlier pieces on the theme have been recreated for this exhibition. The language of the work connects

imagery from the organic world with high technology, fusing water, sticks and stones, Ammonium Sulphate and bacteria with sophisticated computer programming. Code for all Flygari Johansen's digital works is written by Jonny Bradley with whom he has collaborated since 2001.

In the Upper Gallery, a burnt-out camp-fire is surrounded by the sounds of surface and underwater field recordings from the River Alta, *Call of the Wild (London)*, 2011. Sonic depth is controlled by a live, digital feed from the London Stock Exchange. The artist describes an earlier version (*Call of the Wild*, 2001) as his 'breakthrough piece'. Now owned by Samiske Samlinger, the organic elements of this version were finished in chrome.. The artist speaks of coming from a place where there was no art and where expression came through politics and an oral tradition repeated around fires and the campfire is a big theme – the encapsulation of a beautiful memory from childhood given a contemporary form, shaped by the expediency of capital. Water, carrying political themes, continues as a motif running through his artworks which finds another form in this exhibition in *Drawing Russian Rivers*, 2005, an aerial video tracing waterways in a circle from a passenger plane.

The circle described by the fire-stones echoes the porthole window in the Upper Gallery and is re-drawn on the back wall by *Måne* (moon), 2011 a video projection derived from the early silent movie *Laila*ⁱⁱ. Picking up this subject, *The Fence* is a couple of framed digital prints documenting the artist's replacement of a traditional Sami reindeer fence in the Northern territory with an industrial fence. This was an action taken in the name of art, with a real-life outcome that effectively converted 'landscape' to 'territory'. The images were originally presented as part of a larger work in 2007, where the pieces of the old gate (pictured) were used sculpturally to construct the word *Schizotopia* – the title of the piece. This work points to a bitter battle raging in the Northern border regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia over the privatisation of what has been common land for thousands of years.

Notions of identity crop up again in the bacterial work set in Agar lab gel. The words *We are growing up as patriots* are written with the artist's saliva and emerge on the picture plane over the course of the exhibition as the bacterial culture develops. A new piece conceived for this exhibition, *Malevich Circle*, 2011, develops in the same way and reinforces the circular theme, completed by an oil drum linked to *Snowman*, 2003 The melting, digital *Snowman*, a reminder of decimated ice caps, is an iconic piece that continues to tour internationally. The snowman's rise and fall corresponds to the fluctuating price of crude oil, fed in real-time from Reuters' oil sales service and, here, reinforced by the reek of used motor oil.

Beneath the railway line, the new commission utilises the special sonic feature of the Arch space – the overhead train traffic to and from Waterloo station. The vibrations from the passing trains rattle a table in the gallery space below, on which sits a glass of milk. The glass is precarious but never quite falls from the table to smash on the concrete floorⁱⁱⁱ.

To reach the table, the visitor must negotiate a limestone promontory. The earthwork recalls a cinematic landscape^{iv} and glistens with crystals of Ammonium Sulphate – a chemical used as an industrial fertilizer and a close relation of the potentially lethal Ammonium Nitrate, also used as a soil nutrient and sometimes abused as an explosive^v

In the foyer of the Arch a young girl stares at a glass on a table, compelling the vessel to move along a table until it falls over the edge...^{vi} Moving into the space, the visitor is confronted with a suspended pool of Thames water, reflecting on the floor the image of a swimming trout which, as the visitor advances, recedes. When the human is still, so too is

the fish. Circumnavigating the pool, the earthwork is revealed and beyond, the vibrating table where the glass turns up in real time.

Am I making up what really happened? has a cinematic drive, moving the viewer is through various time-spaces in rapid succession to raise awareness of temporality and survival. The trout in its pool of water offers a real time encounter with nature, a distraction from the anxiety of the paranormal destruction witnessed a moment earlier. The pool simultaneously conceals the other constituents of the installation: the fertiliser sculpture (embodying an illusion) and an unexploded bomb – juddering in the present in response to the London train timetable.

Landscape, politics, circles – new forms arise but old themes endure, worked and reworked – enhanced by acceptable levels of confabulation. The retrospective works in this exhibition are illuminated by the new commission, where an oblique reference to the 22/7 Oslo bomber, nationalist vigilante Anders Brevik, brings the artist's preoccupations full circle. What starts as a passionate local interest in the principle of land rights – issues of ethnicity and territory in one of the wildest parts of the world – fans out to a more contemplative vision of identity and landscape: the self-interest of any single ethnic group will self-evidently lead to the edge of the table...

Naomi Siderfin, November 2011 (for Beaconsfield)

This is the third in the Beaconsfield series Phase, which turns the spotlight on mid-career artists with whom the organisation has a significant relationship.

ⁱ In 1998 the curatorial trio Offside (SFJ with Per Gunner Tverbak and Christel Sverre) approached Beaconsfield to co-curate *British Links*, a season of time-based art for Oslo's Nasjonalmuseet for Kunst and Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. (Bruce Gilchrist, Rona Lee, Hayley Newman, Bob and Roberta Smith, Geir Tor Home, Mattias Haranstan etc....) indirectly leading to Flygari Johansen's creative partnership with Jonny Bradley. SFJ went on to commission Beaconsfield Artworks for the Stavanger Speculum (*Earthshake*, 2000) and UKS Biennale (*Element*, 2001, Alta Museum)

ⁱⁱ George Schnéevoigt, *Laila*, 1929: the story of a girl torn between Norwegian and Sami cultures.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robotics by David Buckley

^{iv} “the Zone” as representing ‘life’ in soviet film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, 1979: a story of the human struggle for spirituality

^v film clip from *Stalker*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979

^{vi} Ammonium Nitrate is banned in London by MI5 and may not be sold in to farmers in Northern Ireland. Ammonium Sulphate is also banned in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ammonium Nitrate is believed to have been used by Anders Breivik in the recent car bomb targeting government buildings in Oslo.