

THE VERNACULAR, THE DISAPPEARED, THE REDISCOVERED AND OTHER STORIES FROM NATURE: ABOUT THE EVENTS BY FRENCHMOTTERSHEAD

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Understories, režija/director: FrenchMottershead, UTN, 2012
Foto/Photo: Arhiv UTN

It is an often repeated refrain slogan that we (humans) have lost contact with nature. Today, the common understanding of the concept of nature has also been lost along with our contact with it. We humans have become clumsy; gawky with our hands and ignorant in our minds when it comes to the skills and knowledge that our ancestors grew up with and used in their everyday life. And it is clear without saying: they lived in a close and uncomplicated relationship with nature.

We are also socially incapable and our second nature is directing us toward technologically oriented life-systems. At the same time, our societies have more scientific information than ever before, and the amount of expertise knowledge of biological processes and the functions of so-called nature has increased.

These two topics: the dying out of hand skills and the precise scientific knowledge of nature were the topics of a series of microperformances organized by the London-based artist duo FrenchMottershead in the context of Up to Nature. FrenchMottershead realized *Understories* at every Up to Nature site. The pieces were repeated, but in every place they adapted the understories to the local human, social and natural life conditions, habits, traditions and technologies. This meant that every city had three different workshops, which increased the total number of the interactive events to twelve: from developing your awareness of what it's like to be a Wild Boar or a Red Deer and to eat, sleep and be hunted like them to mushroom picking to tree carving, and from studying the roots of trees on the forest floor and the forest's decomposition process to night-fishing.

The name *Understories* has at least two meanings. On the one hand, the notion "understory" means the level of natural landscape or forest that is in between ground and canopy. On the other hand, understory means the hidden story that unfolds underneath the official one.

In the FrenchMottershead performances, the understory refers to both meanings of the word. The participants took part in local traditional activities and these activities took place in and activated the understory level of landscape, i.e. the part of the landscape that is the in-between area in landscape paintings but that is seldom given any attention. It is too near, too obvious, too casual and it lacks subliminal elements.

FrenchMottershead have worked together for more than ten years. They have acquired a working method where the artist is an initiator directing the situation in the background than acting in the scene, where the artist merges into the audience anonymously. At the end of the 1990s, when they started their collaboration, the tendency of public art was to engage people socially and to make interruptive gestures in the urban environment.

This tradition owes much to Henri Lefebvre's ideas of *social* production of space.¹ Following Lefebvre, Rosalyn Deutsche made an important distinction between assimilative site-specific works that are geared toward integration into the existing environment, and an interruptive model where works function as critical interventions into the existing order of a site.²

If we apply this distinction to FrenchMottershead's practice, it is easy to see that they are not trying to create the space of harmonious cohesion that is needed in assimilative work. Although FrenchMottershead's working methods belong to the interruptive model, they do not endeavour to change socially constructed urban structures as such. FrenchMottershead's method is more cunning in terms of their social effects. Namely, they invite or, in an unnoticed way, *persuade* people to participate in the event that is not necessarily art in the first instance but which in their skilful hands changes the participators' perspective not only of the thing at issue but also of their relationship to the environment.

I participated in the *Understories* that took place near the city of Kuopio, Finland, in late September. The event took place on an island outside the city. An exceptionally beautiful autumn weekend on a lake in Northern Savonia is astonishing as such. The natural conditions of the Up to Nature event on the nature reservation island Karhonsaari were overwhelming, so in order to give attention and room for an art event, you had to take one step back, I thought.

But that was not actually necessary at Karhonsaari, because while travelling to the island, you detached yourself from the normalities of urban life and entered into a space of reflection. *Understories* on Karhonsaari was about traditional fishing, about orienteering on the island and about weaving with natural materials found in the

forest nearby, all of which have been, and partly still are, traditional activities of Northern Savonia.

I was surprised that there are still fishermen who continue the old manner of night fishing. The fishing happens in the darkness, with the help of a light attached to the front of the boat in order to see the resting fish near the shoreline. The fishermen catch the fish with a gig. Although our fishing luck was not good, the trip on the lake in the moonlight in the rowboat with a local fisherman gave a multi-layered experience. It consisted of nostalgia but also of a fresh understanding of the multiple possibilities of how one can be, at home, with our natural environment.

The leader of the orienteering, Markku Ruotsalainen, gave the participants a slightly manipulated map of Karhonsaari. Ruotsalainen had taken away all other signs save the contour lines from the maps. This clever idea got you to see the terrain in a new way. You started to focus on and feel the unevenness of the ground and to look at the forest differently. Instead of watching the species of trees and nice vistas, you perceived all the small hills and slopes. There occurred an entanglement between the participator and the forest.

Although I haven't experienced all twelve *Understories*, I would dare to argue that, together, they formed an impressive whole. Simultaneously, the series took into consideration the material stratification of the local landscape engendered by human and nature together over a long period of time, and the scientific information about nature that is mediated via technology.

Through the *Understories*, FrenchMottershead has moved from a performance that emphasizes social change toward a materialist account of performance, where the stress is put on the interaction and inseparability of human culture and nature, without forgetting the social exchange where people together form a creative act.

1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

2 Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City", in *October*, Vol. 47, 1988, pp. 3-52; *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.

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LJUDSKE, IZGUBLJENE, ZNOVA ODKRITE IN DRUGE ZGODBE IZ NARAVE: O PERFORMANSU FRENCHMOTTERSHEAD

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PREVEDLA
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Understories, režija/director: FrenchMottershead, UTN, 2012
Foto/Photo: Arhiv UTN

Pogosto slišimo, da smo (ljudje) izgubili stik z naravo. Danes pa se je ob tem izgubilo tudi splošno razumevanje koncepta narave. Postali smo nerodni; nespretni in nevedni, ko gre za veščine in znanja, s katerimi so odraščali in jih v vsakdanjem življenju uporabljali naši predniki. Ni treba posebej poudarjati, da so oni živeli v tesnem in pristnem stiku z naravo.

Postali smo tudi družbeno nezmožni, naša druga narava nas usmerja v tehnološko naravnane življenjske sisteme. Naše družbe razpolagajo z znanstvenimi informacijami bolj kot kdajkoli, čedalje večje pa je tudi naše strokovno poznavanje bioloških procesov in funkcij t. i. narave.

Tematiki izumiranja ročnih spretnosti in natančnega znanstvenega poznavanja narave sta bili v središču mikroperformansov, ki jih je v okviru festivala *Up to Nature* priredila umetniška dvojica iz Londona FrenchMottershead. Umetnika sta na vsaki lokaciji, kjer se je odvijal omenjeni festival, izvedla performans z naslovom *Understories*¹ (Podrast ali Skrivne zgodbe), ki sta ga vsakokrat prilagodila lokalnim človeškim, družbenim in naravnim življenjskim okoliščinam, navadam, izročilu in tehnologijam. To pomeni, da so v vsakem mestu potekale tri različne delavnice, tako da je bilo skupno število interaktivnih dogodkov dvanajst: vključevali so vse od spodbujanja zavesti o tem, kako je biti divji prašič ali navadni jelen ter jesti, spati in biti tarča lova kot ti živali, do nabiranja gob, rezljanja v drevo, raziskovanja drevesnih korenin na gozdnih tleh, spoznavanja procesa razpadanja gozda in nočnega ribolova.

Naslov *Understories* ima vsaj dvoje pomenov; na eni strani pojem »podrast« označuje tisto plast naravne krajine ali gozda, ki

¹ Kot ugotavlja avtorica besedila, izraz 'understories' pomeni tako 'podrast' kot 'skrivne zgodbe'. Zato smo za namene tega besedila pri prevajanju naslova *Understories* upoštevali obe različici prevoda (op. prev.).

se nahaja med tlemi in krošnjami dreves, na drugi strani pa pomeni prikrito zgodbo, ki se odvija v zakulisju tiste uradno pripoznane.

V performansih umetniške dvojice FrenchMottershead zajema »understory« oba pomena besede. Prisotni na performansu so sodelovali v lokalnih tradicionalnih dejavnostih, ki so se odvijale na ravni podrasti krajine, ki so jo hkrati tudi aktivirale. Odvijale so se torej v tistem delu krajine, ki velja za vmesni prostor slikarskih krajin in ki se mu redko namenja pozornost, ker je preblizu, preveč očiten, preveč vsakdanji in brez subliminalnih prvin.

FrenchMottershead deluje že več kot desetletje. V tem času sta umetnika razvila delovno metodo, po kateri je umetnik pobudnik, ki režira situacijo iz ozadja, namesto da bi uprizarjal sceno in se anonimno zlil z občinstvom. Na začetku njenega sodelovanja konec devetdesetih let minulega stoletja je bilo za javno umetnost značilno, da je v ljudeh poskušala vzbuditi družbeno angažiranost in je z interruptivnimi gestami posegala v urbano okolje.

Ta tradicija veliko dolguje idejam Henrija Lefebvreja o *družbeni* produkciji prostora.² Rosalyn Deutsche je, sklicujoč se na Lefebvreja, izpostavila pomembno razliko med asimilacijskimi »site-specific« deli, ki stremijo k vključevanju v obstoječe okolje, in interruptivnim modelom, po katerem dela učinkujejo kot kritične intervencije v obstoječo ureditev nekega prostora.³

Če to razlikovanje prenesemo v prakso dvojice FrenchMottershead, zlahka opazimo, da njun namen ni ustvariti prostor harmonične povezanosti, ki je nujna pri asimilacijskem umetniškem delu. Čeprav so njune delovne metode bolj značilne za interruptivni model, umetnika z njimi ne poskušata spremeniti družbeno skonstruirane urbane strukture. Njuna metoda je pretanjena bolj v smislu družbenega učinkovanja, saj umetnika povabita ali neopazno *prepričata* ljudi, da sodelujejo v dogodku, ki ni nujno umetniški, a spričo njihovih spretnosti spremeni pogled udeležencev ne le na neko pereče vprašanje, ampak tudi na njihov lasten odnos do okolja.

Tudi sama sem se udeležila performansa *Understories*, ki se je odvil konec septembra na otoku v bližini mesta Kuopio na Finskem. Prelep jesenski konec tedna ob jezeru v Severni Savoniji je že sam po sebi osupljiv. Naravne okoliščine dogodka *Up to Nature* na otoku Karhonsaari, ki je naravni rezervat, so bile naravnost očarljive, tako da sem pomislila, da bi moral človek stopiti korak nazaj, da bi se lahko osredotočil na umetniški dogodek in mu dal prostor.

Toda to na otoku Karhonsaari ni bilo potrebno, ker že samo potovanje tja pripravi človeka k temu, da se odmakne od vsakdana urbanega življenja in vstopi v prostor refleksije. *Understories* na otoku Karhonsaari so pripovedovale o tradiciji ribolova, o orientaciji na otoku, o preživljanju z naravnimi materiali iz bližnjega gozda. Vse to so bile in so deloma še tradicionalne dejavnosti v Severni Savoniji.

Presenečena sem bila, da so ribiči tukaj ohranili stare navade nočnega ribolova. Ribarjenje poteka v temi s pomočjo luči, ki je pripeta na prednji del čolna, da ribiči vidijo ribe, ki počivajo ob obali. RIBE lovijo s harpuni podobno kovinsko palico. Čeprav pri ribolovu nismo imeli sreče, je bil izlet na reki v mesečini in s čolnom na vesla v spremstvu lokalnih ribičev večplastna izkušnja, ki je vzbujala nostalgичnost, a tudi spodbujala k novemu razumevanju neskončnih možnosti o tem, kakšno bi lahko bilo naše naravno okolje tam, kjer mi živimo.

Vodja orientacije Markku Ruotsalainen je udeležencem izročil nekoliko prirejen zemljevid otoka Karhonsaari. Z njega je odstranil vse oznake razen izohips. Ta odlična zamisel nam je omogočila videti teren pred seboj v novi luči. Postali smo pozorni na razgibanost tal in to razgibanost tudi občutili, gozd smo začeli gledati z drugačnimi očmi. Namesto da bi si ogledovali vrste dreves in čudovite vedute, smo zaznali vse najmanjše vzpetine in pobočja. Med udeležencem in gozdom se je vzpostavila posebna vez.

Čeprav se nisem udeležila vseh dvanajstih performansov *Understories*, si drznem trditi, da skupaj tvorijo impresivno celoto. Upoštevali so tako materialno slojevitost lokalne krajine, ki jo že dolga leta sestavljata človek in narava, kot tudi tehnološko posredovane znanstvene informacije o naravi.

Z *Understories* je umetniška dvojica FrenchMottershead naredila odmik od performansa, ki izpostavlja družbeno spremembo, in premik k materialističnemu prikazu performansa s poudarkom na interakciji in neločljivosti med človeško kulturo in naravo, ne da bi pri tem zanemarila družbeno izmenjavo, ki ljudem omogoča kreativno dejanje.

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2 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

3 Rosalyn Deutsche, »Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City«, v *October*, letn. 47, 1988, str. 3-52; *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996.