

## *Eyes lifted!*

### *The understanding of art as a document in five different art institutions*

#### **Preface**

For my MA in Documentation Studies, I performed a comparative analysis of five different art museums in Norway and Denmark. In this extract I will share my thoughts of art as a document, and give a small presentation of the five different art museums I visited.

I will base my understanding within hermeneutics. Positivism has natural science as its ideal, where actual incidents are explained as a logic context between causes, incident and circumstances. An important aim for qualitative studies is to obtain an understanding of social phenomena's (Thagaard 2003:11).

Using document science and hermeneutics as a frame of understanding, I interpret the (linguistic) expressions which have been materialized. This means that this is a qualitative research, influenced by my power of empathy and my subjective observations.

#### **Introduction**

Man uses different channels for communication, and through this he creates documents.

#### **My issues:**

1. The understanding of the term document.
2. Form of presentation.  
Does it mean anything that the art has been produced within museums?
3. Which story to be told?  
Is our view on the producers changed by their art and their social status?
4. Is our understanding of art influenced by our knowledge of the context of the art?

**My thesis:** The context does not lead you out of the works, but into it.

**My aim:** Contribute to creating attention and debate, and be a communication channel for a group of people who have not been considered as art producers within our society.

#### **The term document**

To document or documentation is related to mans need to show or prove something. Through a process of documentation, one documents something using certain medias in certain ways, and as a result of this, one obtains one or several documents (Lund 2000:28f).

By studying art as a document, the understanding of what is art develops. If you consider a document as both a *result* of a process of documentation and also the *previous process*, then the process of creating the art objects are also parts of the final products.

Through knowing the circumstances (the social story) around the objects, you can present a *different* story, and thereby you can give other artists, in this case: mentally disabled people and mentally ill people, a chance to get their respect and acknowledge as fantastic artists.

## Different traditions

The understanding of the term document can be linked to different traditions.

### 1. Legal tradition

Linked to evidence, that is the production and use of pieces of evidence (Lund 2000:29).

### 2. Bibliographic tradition

Linked to the organizing and access to documents.

### 3. Scientific tradition

Recently, focus has been made on ways of expressing, and what actually represents reality (Fulsås 2001:232f).

### 4. Digital tradition

Digital documents have given new challenges with regards to credibility, organization and accessibility.

### 5. Artistic tradition

By adding two new definitions to the term document; searching to copy or represent something, the possibility arises to include artistic documents as objects or study for documentation science (Lund 2000:32).

## The conception of art

Our view on art has changed, just like our view on man has.

According to Johannessen, art can be defined as “an organized expression which gathers figures and space into one whole” (Johannessen 2003:35).

According to Danbolt, the conception of art started with the theory of imitation, with clear rules about what was important. The main aim of a picture was to show what was real and valuable at any time (Danbolt 1997:138).

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century an alternative view on mankind emerged, where emotions were the most important because emotions were natural, whereas sensibility was influenced by culture. These new views also lead to a change in how one conceived the phenomenon of art.

According to Danbolt, the poet William Wordsworth defined art as “spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions (op.cit:139). This theory was called expressional theory, because the artist “gushes out” his individual and original feelings. The art was not supposed to represent anything, but be autonomic and have value within itself.

## Outsiders Art

The modern term of Art has opened for other ways of interpretation, which has opened the possibility of seeing other people’s creativity as suppliers of art. A new term in this context is “Outsiders Art”, which can be defined as “*art created by people who are mentally ill or have intellectual and/or learning disabilities and who have lived or who are living at the edge of society*” (The project description II.2).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, this definition includes all kinds of people.

Although there is a common European definition of the term Outsider Art, there is a discussion on how to interpret the term. I have chosen the Gaia museums interpretation that either the product is on edge of what is considered traditional art, or the artist is on edge; he or society does not see him as part of the art world.

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<sup>1</sup> This definition is used in an application from art museums in Belgium, Denmark, Holland and Norway to EEC, regarding project funding.

## Five different art institutions

### 1. Trastad Samlinger (Collections)

Trastad is a combination of museum/gallery situated in Kvæfjord municipality, and developed from Trastad Gård Institution, which from 1954 until the mid 1990s were Northern Norway's home for the mentally retarded.



At its starting point, *Trastad Art* was not produced by people who socially were considered as artists. These people were diagnosed as “not educationable”, and they had no care- or learning services in their local societies. They were therefore admitted to Trastad. Here there was a change. Through educational arrangements and focus on free artistic activities, numerous art objects were produced and preserved.

Here, a huge change in our view on the mentally disabled developed after the employment of teacher Sigvor Riksheim in 1958. She was born and raised in Northern Norway, educated handcraft teacher, with several years of work in the USA. In a large hall in the institution, she established what was to become Norway's first open school<sup>2</sup>. Learning was based on each student's motivation, and they all got to use their skills within free choice of colours and materials. Riksheim then differentiated the disabled. By creating expectations and demands, not towards the cognitive aspects but rather towards the creative and spiritual, she saw each student's skills and artistic talent. Through this, restrained creativity expressed itself as exposed creativity. This resulted in that two of her students, Herleik Kristiansen and Torstein Nilsen, have membership in Norwegian artist organizations.

#### The collection

The main part of the exhibition is the *Trastad Art*, but there is also a national and international art collection built up by works of mentally disabled from the whole country. Some foreign artists are also represented. Gathered, this makes the world's largest art collection produced by mentally disabled people.

It is an exciting collection with various selections of styles and methods; lino-prints, paintings, embroidery, pottery etc. Through different art expressions one can express experiences, thoughts, dreams and everyday-happenings through e.g. sculptures and pictures, craftsmanlike, with motives from sea and land, bible history and other stories. These works vary from childish and naïve to highly artistic.

#### Esthetical framework

The exhibition room is a long modern room, in light grey colours. The variation between the different shades of grey in walls and exhibition mounts, gives the room a warm atmosphere without the interior taking the attention away from the art objects. There are down lights in the ceilings, lighting up the art objects and giving the room a warm atmosphere.

One corner in the gallery is black and designated Herleik Kristiansen. Here there are lithographic and pottery objects. Only few down lights are pointed towards the objects, giving the room a special atmosphere. But since mounts and lights are fitted to the original exhibitions, a change in the exhibitions is difficult.

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<sup>2</sup> Riksheim's work from 1962 till 1970 resulted in that public school opened for mentally disabled children.

On a small poster we can see the artist's name, address and some information about the work. On some posters there is no address or date of birth. Since origin was a very important issue amongst the people at Trastad, I see that as an omission in the biography.

Although the exhibition seems well organized, it was difficult to differentiate the Trastad art and the other national works. I think the collection should be better systemized and the contents of the texts on the posters should be renewed.

## **2. The idea of learning: Karavana culture workshop**

Karavana was opened October 1<sup>st</sup> 1993 as an artistic and cultural production workshop for adults with mental disabilities. Criteria's were that both personnel and students wished to work with creative activities. The workshop is established within Lyngås school, a school for children with mental disabilities in the Århus municipality.

Karavana was not to be a placement, but a service where development, challenges and learning was in focus. The name Karavana comes from the term movement, and Karavana as a name is both symbolic and concrete (Thomsen 2003:5).



### **The collection**

Karavanas collection consisted of a small selection of the total production, since most of their products are sold. The collection has a wide selection of materials and motives.

### **Esthetical framework**

Karavana did not have its own exhibition room, but I photographed several objects and exhibited the photographs at Harstad University College in 2005. The photos shown from Karavana are from this exhibition.

Most exhibitions centered around one theme. F.ex certain materials, colours or sizes, or certain artists. The pictures were to have same size and same frame, and the pictures used had to suit each other, be in harmony with each other even if they had different expressions. Otherwise the exhibition would be considered as chaotic.

The exhibitions had little text and no titles, only the students' signatures. Giving titles to pictures was often difficult for the mentally disabled. There was no information about the artists, but a list over the exhibition containing information about previous exhibitions, decorative works and overview of pictures sold. The aim was to give the visitor a sensory experience without disturbing elements. For Karavana it was essential that the art object was in focus, rather than the production. Therefore, the learning process was in focus.

## **3. The idea of conservation: Dikemark Hospital Museum**

This museum was the first psychiatric hospital museum in Norway, opened in 1985. At first the premises were in a bad state with difficult access, but from 2005 the museum has been situated in new premises.

Dr Gjessing introduced modern diagnostics (Mamen 1955:158f). He was interested not only in research in human biology, but thought that his patients had many artistic skills within them. He therefore encouraged them to express themselves with colours and paint brushes.



**The collection**

This collection consists of several thousand objects, amongst them around 300 patient paintings. The paintings have different qualities, and different materials are used. However, some of the most expressive paintings had been removed from the collection. Several paintings were framed, and they decorate walls in hallways, wards and other rooms in the institution, also Dr Gjessings laboratory.

**Esthetical framework**

First and foremost, Dikemark was a historic museum focusing on preservation of historical material, but in the new premises they had also exhibited picture art. The new premises had a beautiful hallway with high ceilings and open stairway to the second floor. This gave light and air to the room.

Dikemarks previous exhibition was unorganized. The new collection seemed systematic and authentic. Each room was well planned, and both institutional and medical history was better preserved. The art objects strengthened the impressions, for instance the choice to hang an art picture above each patient bed. Clear evidence that the context can have impact on the understanding.

The artists were presented collectively and anonymously. This generalises the history, and the individual as a subject does not get the recognition and valuation that the product creator has tried to obtain by expressing his inner thoughts. For the time being this is the situation, because Norwegian legislation is strict concerning personal integrity.

**4. The idea of workshop: Museum of Psychiatric Hospital**

This museum is situated in Risskov, Denmark. Possibly the least known museum in Århus, and probably the largest within its type in Europe. In 2001 the museum moved to new premises near Jydske Asylum. The museum (also called Risskov) is around 1500 square metres divided in to wards; Psychiatric Historical Museum and the Art Museum.

**The collection**

The museum holds 7500 objects. The Art Museum had around 850 exhibited art objects, all created by artists who had knowledge of different psychiatric ailments. The Art Museum owned 4000 art objects.

**Esthetical framework**

“We do not discriminate the mentally well people”. This sign met me as I arrived to Risskov, and I understood that this museum was different from the others. The museum was fabulous, with objects, art, sculptures, pictures etc in a wonderfully organized chaos. The exhibition was personal, impressive and somewhat “chaotic”. One was bombarded with impressions, and even the smell was special. Pictures hung close together, and around them were small notes or large sheets of paper. The texts had three types of information; name of artist with information about him or her, diagnosis, number and periods of admissions, and information of the patients state of mind while producing, and what the object represented. Context was obviously most important. Each object had its history. Also, there was information about material and work technique. Last, there was a historical contextual introduction, about how the asylum was organized.



Risskov



Gaia

The text was not neutral, each history had clear interpretations. I came into a different reality, where human destinies and identities had great meaning. The general institutional history was not told here, but the individual patients' difficult and personal story interpreted both through their own and the previous museum director Johannes Nielsen's eyes. With contextual insight I could go into the work in a different way. This made my experience stronger and a closer relation with the work and the persons behind it.



Gaia Museum, Randers  
 Museet Psykiatrisk Hospital, Risskov

These photographs illustrate the differences between Gaia and Risskov. At Gaia the pictures hung in strict rows with large distance between each picture, whereas at Risskov the pictures had different sizes and hung in different heights. The frames were usually different, and other sculptures and objects were also placed in the room.

This exhibition strategy was very different from the other art museums. It was "rowdy" and chaotic, though organized, since the whole museum had this organisation and therefore was a

whole. The negative side of the closeness between the pictures was that they took attention from each other. I think that it would be an advantage for the museum to give each object more air and space, still maintaining some closeness.

## **5. The idea of exhibition: Gaia Museum Outsider Art**

Gaia museum was in Randers, Denmark, a newly established museum (2002) who rent their premises from Randers council.

Opposite to the other institutions, this museum did not spring out from an institution. Instead, they worked with establishing their own ways of doing their work.

Gaia museum was both a project of integration where the mentally disabled people were employed, and a museum focusing on exhibiting art created by minorities.



### **The collection**

Gaia had over 300 objects. Their aim was to have a permanent and a changing exhibition simultaneously: their own objects combined with special exhibitions. The exhibitions are changing every three months.

### **Esthetical framework**

Gaia's exhibition room was on the ground floor with access directly from the street. Its space and shape reminded of a gallery.

The premises had light walls and high ceilings, making lighting difficult. The walls were loose from the floors, and could be moved. This allowed them to change the shape of the room to fit the different exhibitions.

During my visit the walls were placed in a way that divided the premises into five small rooms. This presented each artist individually, whilst joined together.

The exhibition showed cleanliness, nakedness and tidiness. This is also shown in the texts, since each artist had a simple sheet of paper next to the picture, giving information about the artist; his/her education and interests, work techniques and choice of material. Diagnoses could not be seen, nor explanations about what the pictures presented. Some information and interpretations could be found in the brochures which Gaia produced.

Gaia had defined their art as special and deviant by calling it Outsider Art. Still they presented their art within the traditional way of showing art. Also Trastad Samlinger exhibited their art within frames of traditional galleries. Here the art is not specialized, but still segregated because it was exhibited alone in a special museum.

Risskov, on the other hand, focused on not segregating their art, still they had chosen to show it as deviant since it is presented in a different way than in traditional art museums.

The difference lies in how the museums imagine that the public would imagine that the art would be interpreted. Gaia, Karavana and Trastad chose to think that the subject status of the artist is preserved by not publicising their biography, whereas Risskov believe that the artist's background and thoughts about his art contributes to enhance the artistic expression. They all

want their art to be visible, but have different strategies on how to exhibit. Who is right? That depends on how one chooses to interpret the art. For some the art is more “valuable” when the viewer freely can interpret the object. For others the understanding becomes wider when the context of the work is known.

## **Framework**

My field study showed that the understanding of documents and forms of presentations were very different. This might be explained out from different framework:

### **1. Institutional frames**

The institutions were organized differently, and that made their form and work different. Gaia was an independent art museum, while the others were linked to institutions. It is therefore natural to think that the mother institutions contributed to how the museums should present their works.

The institutions are also influenced by others in the same system. Some people have had strong influence on the institutions, their aim and rules, and here there were strong, independent persons who had left their footprints.

Also, a form of socialisation happens, since thoughts and reflections are influenced by education, experience and institutional practice. Within each system a culture for how to solve problems and tasks is developed, also on how to relate to others. This institutionalisation happens when rules and standards take on rules that are taken for granted. Institutionalised rules and expectations contribute to deciding the domain of this institution, what tasks the institution can take on, and how to work (Audunson 2001:207).

### **2. Professionalism and processes for change**

Another form for institutionalisation is professionalism. Within each professional field lies a system of norms on how to work; a system which will not be recognized by people outside that profession. The persons in the different art institutions had different professional backgrounds; therapeutic (Dikemark), pedagogic (Karavana), artistic (Gaia and Trastad). This does not hinder change. One profession might search for new tasks in order to adapt new changes. These people were all open for changes on how to discuss documentation and expression.

Risskov had more than 50 employees, Trastad only one, while Dikemark was driven by volunteers.

### **3. Economical frames and ownership**

The economic frames were very different, which can contribute to defining the aims and works of the institutions, also their culture and tradition. Trastad had public funding whilst Risskov was self funding.

Ownership for the art objects was another factor. Previously this was not in focus; the art production was considered parts of therapeutic work and therefore belonged to the institution. This idea changed when the objects were seen by its own value. The producers became individuals with right to ownership, which has had economical consequences for the institutions.

#### **4. Public frames**

Public frames can also influence the presentation. In Norway many museums have been merged, and such establishments of new institutional forms also change the institutional frames. Museums which refuse to merge risk losing public funding. A consequence of this can be that only the objects that might earn money will be exhibited whilst the special museums' special stories might be ignored. Much is still uncertain here.

### **Conclusion**

#### **1. The conception of the term document**

My field work showed differences in what was seen as documents. Art as documents was totally unknown. Documentation was a known term, often within a historical or legal tradition. This could be linked to the aims of the museums. To "document" can be linked to "proving" or "showing" something, and for all institutions it was important to show that the mentally disabled or mentally ill had resources and needs to express themselves in different ways. To begin with, learning and stimulance was the primary reason for creative activities, the finished product was valued and given status. Therefore a need for presentation of it emerged. The challenge is whether to present it with or without its context.

There was growing awareness about expressions and what story to present, which is the scientific traditions. Some museums could need more competence within registration, organisation and accessibility to documents, which can explain why bibliographic tradition was less used than assumed.

#### **2. Forms of presentation in a museum context**

My field work shows that exhibiting in museums gives room for other forms of presentations, and for assets. One might see more economical possibilities within social historic documentation than within the art field. In time one could wish that the art objects are to be seen as artistic expressions rather than art therapy.

#### **3. Which story to be told?**

The aim was to bring conscience to which story to be told, that is a valuation of sources. Some museums focused on the institutional history, whilst others also presented the individual artists' story. Which story to tell is a choice, in which the use of artistic objects can strengthen or change the story. Silence is also a way of communicating.

Most of the museums had patients' art. What if they also opened for other kinds of art, for example by the employees? Would that change the story?

#### **4. The conception of art as opposed to the context of the document**

My field work has shown that the social and historical situation of the document can influence on how the work is to be interpreted.

Different exhibition strategies can give different consequences. How, and with what means the museums chose to exhibit its works does not only influence on the esthetical values, but also on the public view on the individual and on the institution. The context can preserve or break barriers, and therefore the contextual work should have more emphasis in the future.

## Closure

When the artistic process is considered a complementary process, one can discover and experience so much more. The science of documentation can contribute to break down conventions, so that non-traditional suppliers of art can *become visible*. The art objects are then not only physical objects. They also become symbols of lived life, identity and acknowledgement. But is this an accepted understanding? Is our understanding of art extended or reduced by us knowing the context of the document? I think my thesis was fulfilled. The traditional way of understanding art is changing. My goal is to contribute to extending one's view. Then, the artists can lift their eyes and a different story can be presented.

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