

Another side of north

Northern Norway's Artscape Nordland broke the boundaries of art exhibition processes. No White Cube, this sky-roofed gallery covers 40,000 sq miles, interfacing contemporary art with a world far removed from the usual art entrepôts. The woman who originally conceived the idea, artist Anne Katrine Dolven, talks about the project.



Anish Kapoor: 'The Eye in Stone'

photo Artscape Nordland

In the winter of 1987/8, Anne Katrine Dolven moved from the far north of Norway to one of Europe's art centres, Berlin. Dolven, an artist, had lived for a number of years in the large but distant Norwegian county of Nordland. Although originally from Oslo, she had made a home on the Lofoten islands, off on the north-west coast, because of the nature, the people, and being able to live cheaply. When she moved to Berlin, the art world was in flux, post-modernism being in full sway, and an urban aesthetic influencing the burgeoning art graduate market which was exit-ing each year from the European college network.

Dolven wasn't too well known in Berlin at that time, although she was back home in Norway. Before the next summer of 1988, she had been invited back to Nordland to give a paper at a regional symposium, concerning the cultural development and strategy for the far-off northerly region, and she had an idea which she took to the seminar. The usual art development strategy was the building of regional museums which would import foreign art and provide tours, even if its sphere of influence would be limited to where the museum is situated. In Nordland's case, it would have been the region's main town, Bødø, and its immediate surroundings. Similarly a sculpture park in a rural location would again only be of interest to those in its immediate proximity. Nordland is big, 40,000 square miles, and such strategies didn't make sense. In place of these tried and tested art routes, why not try and develop a cohesive and coherent, albeit distributed, art exhibit which would span the whole of the region? Each of Nordland's forty-five communes could, Dolven suggested at the seminar, be guardian of one piece which would be conceived and completed with that specific location in mind. Singly, they would be significant for the commune represented, but as a whole, they constituted a countywide exhibition. Not only this, but Dolven proposed making the art completely international, by including some of the leading figures from that international art firmament. The region would be host to this contemporary, not to say avant-garde art, usually identified with the established art centres of the planet, rather than with distant regional parts of out-of-the-way Europe. Dolven's proposal was warmly and enthusiastically received, and she returned to Berlin with a request to write up the idea as a formal budgeted proposal. Thus was initiated one of the most unusual projects the contemporary artworld has seen unfold in the last decade.

Eleven years later, on an autumn day, Anish Kapoor flew to Nordland to be present at the opening of his piece, 'The Eye in Stone' – the last piece to be finished and formally launched as part of Artscape Nordland. He had extracted 18 tonnes of stone from a local

quarry, working together with local people from Lodingen, the northerly commune he had been working in. Overall, the evolution of the project had been long, arduous and tinged with controversy. At first it divided the Nordlanders down the middle, some curious about 'modern art' arriving in their midst, others wanting to protect the nature of the county. After the exhibition's initial preparatory work a group of four curators was put in place, under the directorship of the Finnish Curator, Maaretta Jaukkuri, from Kiasma in Helsinki. At this stage, Dolven bowed out of active involvement in the project, although she continued to participate in meetings. 'The next step', recalls Dolven, 'was to invite all 45 of the communes to participate. This started the first interesting discussion – because suddenly both local governments and local communities were talking about contemporary art, and whether they wanted to participate. That was the first discussion about contemporary art. It was in all the local newspapers. Some said yes, some said no. And for the ones who said yes, the next step was, "here is your artist".'

'At the beginning, thirty-three counties said yes and the curators set about putting together an international grouping of artists, consisting of eighteen from Scandinavian countries and fifteen from the rest of the world. Six were Norwegian. Once the artists had been chosen, they began arriving to visit their appointed region. 'Next the artist visited the place – and then again there was new discussion: "Is this what we expected? Is this art?" They already had their ideas of what art was, and that to me was the most interesting part of it. From there, these local people, in these places, first met with the artists. The artists came, and met people, rather than an art-scene curator. The local people took care of the artists, who stayed locally. That created a very special relationship between artists and people and their artwork. I think that was a very very important part of it, that it didn't happen through an institution. It was very direct.

'And then from there would be new discussions again. So it was ongoing. Some critics were saying we're getting this international rubbish here, to destroy our nature. The nature is so huge though, and these art pieces are such a small thing. And also the local architecture is, more or less, horrible in that area. When roads are built, horrible buildings also go up. The culture isn't an enriched culture by these things. And then, if you call something art, someone else says you destroy nature. But there are so many other things which really destroy nature. There was one local artist who was most critical. It was very interesting to see how local people began to challenge him in the local newspapers, and said "Oh come on, do you think we're stupid? Do you think we can't relate to contemporary things?" He was a very romantic painter, from the landscape and all that. That was a watershed, for the people. They grew