

An interview of sculptor Marit Benthe Norheim who is commissioned by The European Capital of Culture, Kaunas2022 to bring her flock of Rolling Angels for their use during 2021 and 2022.

Interviewed by Lina Kukytė, from KAUNAS2022 team

Could you please tell me shortly where you are from and describe the biography of your creative work in 10-15 sentences?

Marit Benthe Norheim I was born 1960 in Norway, spent my early childhood in Iran and India, but now I live and work in Denmark.

A postgraduate diploma from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in London, where I also have been a guest lecturer, gave me the opportunity to teach at among others Central/St. Martin School of Art, London and at California School of the Arts in the US. I have exhibited widely and created publicly commissioned artworks in many countries.

Mobility, flexibility, social participation, direct involvement and collaborations are substantial components in my construction of artistic concepts.

My most known works, are Life-boats – a sailing sculptural project in collaboration with the European Capital of Culture, Aarhus 2017, (Denmark) and Camping Women, 5 caravans



transformed into female sculptures, created for the European Capital of Culture Stavanger2008, (Norway) and Rolling Angels, my first mobile and still expanding project which participated in the 55th anniversary of peace in London and the 75th commemoration of the bombardment of Dresden, Germany. All of these three projects include music by composer Geir Johnson and have all travelled extensively since they were made.



Life-boats sailing to Aarhus European Capital of Culture 2017 - www.life-boats.com

Please tell me about your most important art projects?

As mentioned above, I have had three substantial art projects running the last years, which have had aspects of collaboration and the need for people to acknowledge the fact that we have all been inside of a woman – we have all been born with biological similarities and I wish we would be able to focus more on what we share, rather than what makes us different from each other. **Life-boats** consists of three sailing sculptures propelled forward by electric engines and recyclable batteries. They are each sailed by a captain and a crew and have visited more than 70 harbors as protective figureheads with the theme of the Life-cycle.

They took 8 years in the making and involved more than 500 people in the process. Each of them are 12 meters long and shaped as female figures with subtitles as:

My Ship is loaded with Longing, My ship is loaded with Life and My ship is loaded with Memories.

When we docked at a small island in Denmark some old boat builders came up to me

and asked about my technical process – and suddenly, without filter- one of them said: “That you have been able to sail these sculptures all the way to our island, I think will have done something to our brains when you leave: - A feeling of a possibility of us also doing something we never thought would be possible!”

It was beautiful to experience the use of them by Aarhus as European Capital of Culture, who shared that wish of bringing art to people who would not seek art in galleries etc.

I had already experienced the effect of bringing art to unexpected places by driving with the five **Campingwomen**, a five-faceted female portrait, where you could enter them and experience their inner installations as also Life-boats invites the audience to experience. Stavanger European Capital of Culture used them for a year and moved them to different cities and sights, with collaborations around the themes of **The Refugee woman, Campingmama, Sirene, The Bride and Mary the Protector.**



Campingwomen on their way to Stavanger European Capital of Culture 2008 - foto: Niels Fabæk

How did Lithuania discover you and how did you discover Lithuania?

Dr. Daiva Citvarienė Curator, for the program “Memory Office” was in Dresden in February 2020 to do a talk about Kaunas22 in a seminar related to the 75th commemoration of the bombing of Dresden. When she saw my Rolling Angels, she said that she suddenly understood the deeper reason for her to come to Dresden; to bring the Rolling Angels to Linksmakalnis! We continued our communication by phone and zoom during the corona - pandemic period.

I have visited Lithuania twice. The first time was in 1993 where I exhibited at Galleria Langas in Vilnius. The second time I participated in an exhibition at the National Art Museum, M.K Cirlionis, in Kaunas in 1995. Both times curated by the Norwegian exchange project 3,14 . It was a great experience for me to visit both cities, their museums and their surroundings. I got particularly interested in the folkloristic art and the wooden religious sculptures. I was drawn by the seriousness that I could identify with in the Nordic attitude. I could also sense the tragedy, as well as a melancholic beauty.

This is also when I bought a small booklet based on the creator of Fluffies and children's books; Stasė Samulevicienė – who received the Order of Smiles which previously was given amongst others to Mother Theresa, the Pope and Astrid Lindgren. When Daiva asked me to come up with an idea for a sculpture to stay on permanently in Linksmakalnis/Kaunas, I immediately found the booklet on Stasė Samulevicienė and decided to create an angel specifically based on her – A very expressive and playful Angel of Smiles.



The booklet *Padauziukai* by Stasė Samulevicienė

Could you please share your emotions and feelings seeing the contemporary circus performance in Linksmakalnis?

The performance touched me deeply, both as a concept and by experiencing the procession:

-The performers interaction with the angel sculptures made the concrete become part of the performers skin, the way they intertwined acrobatically into the creatures as they pushed and pulled them made them belong to the same core. Also their way of bringing surprise elements into the handling of these magical mystical beings as angels are, and creating daring acrobatic acts which made them leave

the ground, made us feel that the concrete angels also could fly.

The leading part of the procession contained a powerful journey of a suffering man – with association to the traumas of this small long suffering town of Linksmakalnis and its people. Also relating directly to the Rehabilitation center where the performance started. As the performer moved forward he struggled to keep on his feet, fell on the floor effortlessly and as an acrobat he raised to his feet again,

though leaving us with the feeling of his heavy struggle to remain on his two feet. With the Rolling Angels slowly walking behind him, the positive forces were still giving hope – even more so, with his image of the Sufferer being protected.

When the young local performers participated with joy and pride acrobatically - ending up sending small candles of hope out into the little lake, and the whole event silently ended, I felt that my Angels had found their place.



*The project of an international team of artists presented in Linksmakalnis - a performance of a contemporary circus "Radio Angels: Arrival".
Foto: Andrius Aleksandravičius*

What did you like about Linksmakalnis, which is, I suppose, the smallest geographical location where your art project is presented?

The tiny town of Linksmakalnis gave an air of welcome to the sculptures as we met them in front of the town hall where the Mayor was taking care of them and greeted us together with the flock of Angels. Later on he showed us their tiny Angel Museum, a room in the town hall with different figurines, pictures and children's drawings of angels. And then we met the performers who showed us around and told about their ideas. I loved how these people were passionate about making Linksmakalnis a better place to be.

Have you learnt anything about Linksmakal-

nis beforehand? What notion have you got about this place before visiting it?

I was told the stories of Linksmakalnis by Daiva and also by the Director Roberto Magro who had been researching the history of the place when he created the Radio Angels.

From them I knew about the traumas of their past and more recent history, relating to the Russian and German presence which was possible to some extent to feel also by being in the town – at least after getting to know the stories I was told.



The Mayor of Linksmakalnis at the Angel Museum - foto: M.B. Norheim

It was quite unexpected that you were able to come to Lithuania.

What is more important for you - to see the journey of your angels or how do they look at a particular location?

It was not so unexpected for me –as Daiva and I had a long communication period on-line, (of course made a bit more difficult by the corona situation), so I was very excited to experience them live on site and as performative sculptures. Every time they have

been in use by different galleries, organizations and places they have been used differently, and I enjoy very much the fact that they trigger other people's ideas – that they create ripple effects in that way.

Could you please explain what do angels mean to you as symbols? Why and how did they appear in your creative work? Have the angels chosen you or have you chosen them?

An Angel is for me a part of the invisible spiritual glue that is exciting, comforting and necessary carriers of hope – in the belief that there are more to life than what meets the eye!

I like your question of who found who - maybe the angels found me and my curious mind connected to my hands?

One day I looked at my old rubbish bin and suddenly I saw a seated figure. I went to the scrapyards and found more of them -and I also found a construction to hold a water spreader for the fields. I welded that on the back of the rubbish bin and it turned out to be something between an angel and an insect.

All the Rolling Angels sculptures are modelled in concrete around old rubbish bins that I found at the scrapyards. That is why the arms are all embracing – where the rubbish bag

used to be. I really wanted to make something important and sacred out of something so useful but “low” in value. I also installed wheels on them, because angels have to be mobile.

Then I started thinking of them as a flock of angels that would also have sounds – like when you lie on the lawn on a summer day and you hear the air full of beautiful sounds – as a symphony – or depending on how you feel that day – you might just hear annoying flies, mosquitoes and wasps. But the insects are all important for the eco-system, like I feel the angels are.

The composer Geir Johnson made the compositions for each of the angels, based on insects and birds. The sounds installed inside of them are chance-operated, so sometimes they don't sing, sometimes you hear all of them and sometimes just a few.

People say that human face is the mirror of emotions. We can see joy, anger, sadness, and fear in facial expressions better than in any mirror. Your angels also have very distinct facial features. Your rolling angels, what emotions do they usually show, how do you create the faces of your angels?

It has been very important for me to create my flock of sculptural Angels as individuals, with very different shapes and personalities, because I want people to be able to identify with them from all different angles and experiences in life. I think that is what art can do; give the onlooker – the audience a mirror for existential reflection.

I think art can bring a sense of recognition

and belonging and as such contribute to minimize the experience of being estranged.

I have given the angels facial expressions that I try to keep as open as possible, for people to resonate with their own emotions and associations. And feedback from different people show that they do relate to them as individuals even though they are part of a large group of sculptures.



Rolling Angels, Dresden - foto: Anja Schneider

In your opinion, how does the art in general and sculptures in your particular case change the surroundings of the particular area, for example, Linksmakalnis or maybe you have experiences from your other art projects?

I think that art in general represent what people call irrational elements – I think these “irrational” aspects of life are necessary for us to be able to live as whole human beings.

I have experienced several times that my sculptures change situations and surroundings by changing the atmosphere. As I did when Kunsthau Dresden brought the flock of Rolling Angels into confrontational de-

monstrations between anti-fascists and neo-Nazis as peace-activist tools.

I hope that by making and doing art projects that are so unexpected, people will have to use their associations and share experiences in the public space that makes them have to relate to each other in different ways than they normally do.



Rolling Angels, Dresden . foto: Jacub Ivancik



Rolling Angels, Dresden . foto: Jacub Ivancik



Rolling Angels, London - foto: M.B. Norheim



Rolling Angels, Citytelling festival, Kaunas - foto: L. Kazakevičius