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**SUE SPAID ¶ ANNE SOPHIE WITZKE ¶ CAMILLA BERNER ¶ JANE JIN KAISEN ¶ NANCE KLEHM ¶ MARIE MARKMAN ¶ NILS NORMAN ¶ NIS RØMER ¶ ASA SONJASDOTTER ¶ COLD COAST ARCHIVE: SIGNE LIDÉN / ANNESOFIE NORN / STEVE ROWELL ¶ KULTIVATOR: MATHIEU VRIJMAN & MALIN LINDMARK VRIJMAN ¶ LEARNING SITE: RIKKE LUTHER & CECILIA WENDT ¶ MYVILLAGES: KATHRIN BÖHM / WAPKE FEENSTRA / ANTJE SCHIFFERS ¶ OPEN SOURCE FOOD: ANDRÉ AMTOFT & ARENDSE KRABBE • CASE STUDIES: 'CASE PYHÄJOKI': MARI KESKI-KORSU / ANDREW GRYF PATERSON / ERICH BERGER ¶ 'SKOVENE – I DIN LOMME' [FORESTS – IN YOUR POCKET]: INGER KÆRGAARD ¶ DEN FÆLLES KOKKENHAVE [THE COMMON KITCHEN GARDEN]: YNKB & MORTEN BENCKE ¶**

**AN EDGE EFFECT / ART & ECOLOGY IN THE NORDIC LANDSCAPE**



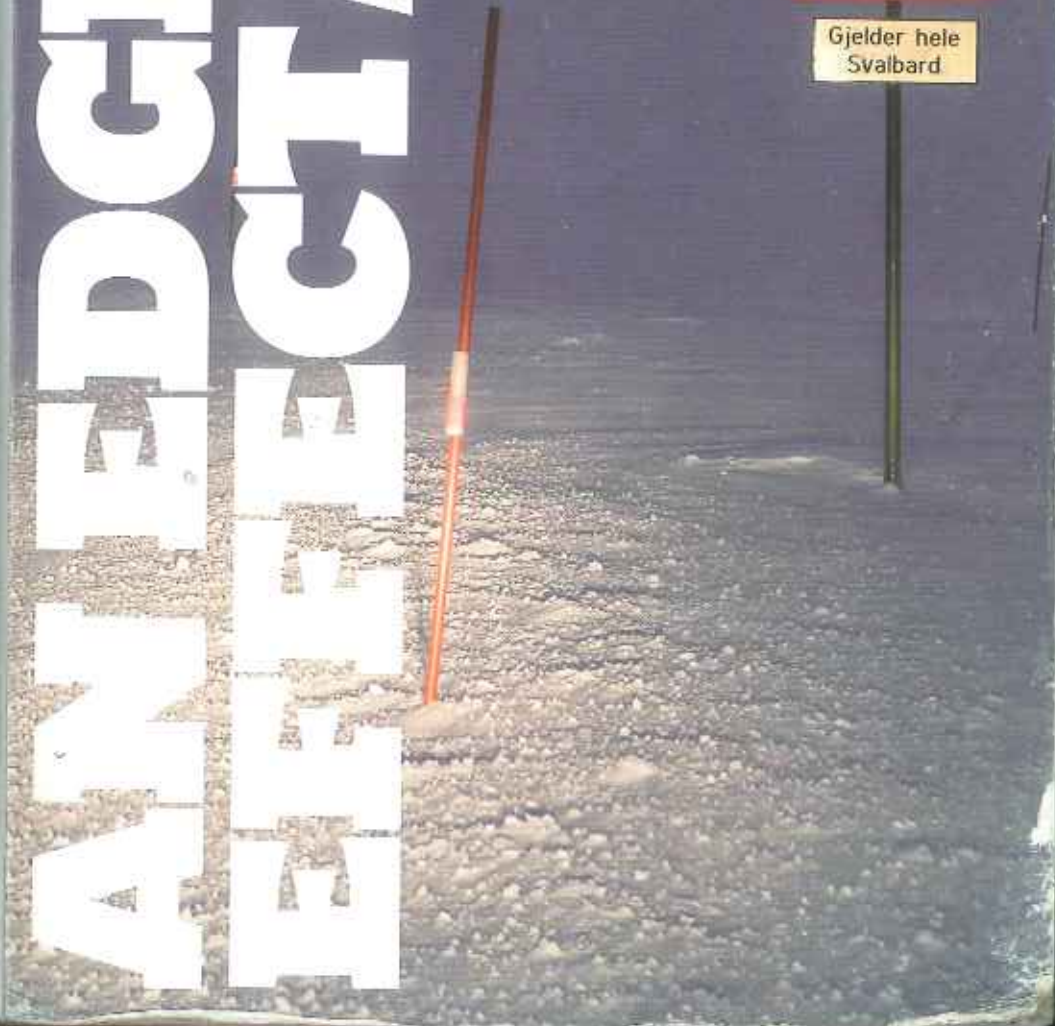
# ART & ECOLOGY IN THE NORDIC LANDSCAPE

EDITED BY Bonnie Fortune

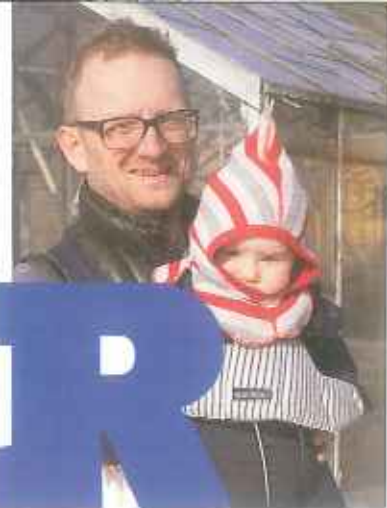
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# NIS RØMER



city space use ¶ urban planning ¶ architecture ¶ urban gardening ¶ public space ¶ environmental justice ¶ ecology

Nis Rømer is an artist, educator, and curator. His art examines the social and political organizations of space with a particular focus on the ways in which globalization affects the city and the natural environment. He works both as a solo artist and collaboratively with groups like *Field Work* and the curatorial group, *publik*. He currently teaches art in Holbæk, Denmark. ¶ [www.nisroemer.dk](http://www.nisroemer.dk)

This interview took place on February 27, 2013 in Holbæk, Denmark at the Holbæk Højskole where Rømer is an instructor. Informed by the disciplines of architecture and urban planning, Rømer's art practice manifests itself in public projects, collaborations, and curatorial initiatives. Here Rømer discusses several works and projects that deal with environmental themes in public space, primarily focusing on his curatorial project "Hot Summer of Urban Farming" (2006). ¶

BONNIE FORTUNE (BF): How do you think about your art practice?

NIS RØMER (NR): My way of working is like a big umbrella with lots of different projects coming together. There are different collaborations with other artists, and sometimes scientists. Many projects are around ecology or public space, and my role in these varies depending on the project. Sometimes I am a curator or organizer, and sometimes I am the artist. But I really do define myself as an artist, even though I am also trained as an architect/urban planner.

As a side note, the reason for studying architecture and urban planning has always been to take it back to art—how can art go into urban structures and rethink them? Of course, with an interest in the social fabric of the city and thinking about how the city works. How do we build our societies? How do they look on a physical and material level?

There are many intersecting interests. There is the ecological. There is the urban, which I think relates to the social and how it is shaped and how it shapes us back. Then of course the cultural aspect of how art spreads ideas and how art can be a tool for new ideas in both the social and the political realm. When I am most optimistic I think artists can invent new ideas, and also public policies.

To speak more directly about what I do as an artist, it is difficult because I think I set myself such a relatively broad way of working. I wanted to make a space that I could work in that was not too narrow. I wanted to make a space where I could work sixty years without getting bored and without lacking challenges. That is also the reason why I work in groups. That is to have the social aspects and dialogue as part of my everyday life and work. My main focus has been on the groups that I work in, but all along I have been doing projects on my own.

**Field Work**<sup>01</sup> is a group with **Lise Skou**. **Publik**<sup>02</sup> is with **Katarina Stenbeck** and **Johanne Løgstrup**, which started as a more political organization to further political contemporary art in public space, but then went into a production unit with artists and art historians. **Free Soil**<sup>03</sup> was an international group with members from San Francisco, Berlin, Australia, which was part of an online documentation of ecological and social practices to create an international network. Another group is **Gåafstand [Walking Distance]**<sup>04</sup> with **Pia Rönicke**, a field research unit. Pia is also a visual artist and we both share an interest in writing the story of the city and city spaces.

**BF:** Can you describe the overall connection with these various projects and collaborations?

**NR:** To go into the overall perspective and not be too specific with each project, one of my key references is **Felix Guattari's** "The Three Ecologies". He describes the three as the social, the mental, and

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01 [www.field-work.dk](http://www.field-work.dk)

02 [www.publik.dk](http://www.publik.dk)

03 [www.free-soil.org](http://www.free-soil.org) ¶ [Free Soil was active from 2005–2011. This is an archived site]

04 [gaaafstand.blogspot.dk](http://gaaafstand.blogspot.dk)

the environmental. These three ecologies have to be present at the same time.

That is why I, and other artists, are probably weary of calling themselves ecological artists as such, because I think ecology should be the concern for our environments, hand in hand with a concern for the social and how we as people live together and treat each other. Of course, art can touch on all three. I try to do that. I seldom do a project that is 100% about something ecological. It would have a view on ecology and a view of the social at the same time.

One recent example was the *Plant Nursery* project,<sup>05</sup> made for a suburb in Copenhagen where lots of old people and immigrants live and work. I was invited by the Danish Architecture Centre to think about how cities for old people might look. The population is aging in Western Europe and I found that question really interesting. The Danish Architecture Centre did not have so many ideas of what this could be apart from putting out more benches and having good access for wheelchairs, and maybe some sports for old people.

From talking to people in the area, I developed this plant nursery. It was about how you can make sort of a social hub using plants as a tool. So when people were away in the hospital or travelling, if they didn't have a close network, they could bring their plants into this kind of mini, ad-hoc institution and have them taken care of there.

That was a project that sort of worked with plants but also with how they enter a social field. You could give the plants away, you could swap them, or you could have them taken care of. One

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05 *Plantplejehjem [Plant Nursery]* (2011). Sculpture in public space with silk-screened texts. Commissioned by Danish Architecture Center for Blokland at Albertslund, Denmark ¶ [www.nisroemer.dk/Plant\\_Nursery1.php](http://www.nisroemer.dk/Plant_Nursery1.php) ¶ ACCESSED APRIL 7, 2014

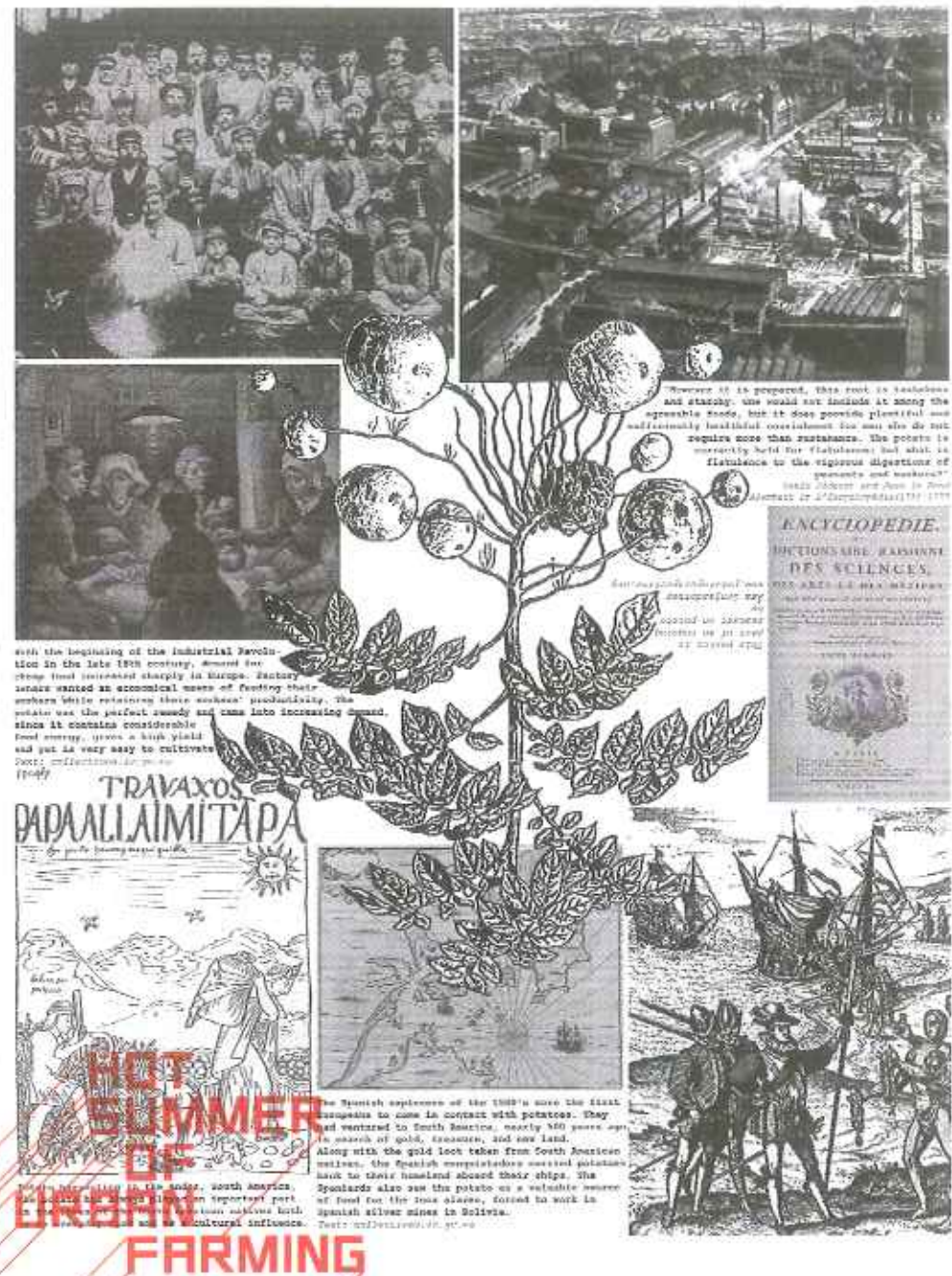
woman came with a plant she had since her husband died in the 1980s. Every time the plant died she could take a part of it and make a new plant. It was a way of continuing her husband's life. It was very personal. That project combined both the social and the environmental.

**BF:** The plants were a way for people to meet their neighbours and exchange. Is it still going or was it only for the length of the project?

**NR:** It is still going. It was taken over by the people living there. I made an appointment with the gardeners there because they have quite strong social institutions in the area. Many social housing projects have quite strong support around them. They have strong gardening units that could take care of all the practical stuff of maintaining the project that the people living there couldn't or maybe shouldn't be asked to take care of, because I also think it is a problem if you come with a social project and then you put a huge burden on people that they didn't really ask for. Sometimes a gift can be more of a burden than help. In that case, it was also quite important to see to it that the basic service is provided for.

**BF:** You talk about not wanting to be someone who works with ecology and environmental issues only, but you are still drawn to these issues and work with them. Can we talk about the intersections in social practices with art and ecology and what impact this work is having?

**NR:** It is always hard to say exactly how an artwork impacts society. For example, you see huge urban gardening movement, and many artists have been working with this to great effect. It is no longer a marginal kind of thing. I think that has an effect in how we live in and shape our world. I think by demonstrating that you can change things in your own environment that has kind of a liberating effect. Public space becomes something that you can touch.



Åsa Sonjasdotter, *Potato Perspective* (2006).  
"Hot Summer of Urban Farming."

to push the boundaries of where growing might happen in a location such as this. Why are plants and growing so important to people?

**NR:** Studies have shown that quality of life improves when you have areas very near by where you can be out doors. The general life quality in a neighborhood is better if you have more small, green spaces, say 100 meters from your main door than if you have one big park that is a little bit further away. Of course, the distribution of possibilities in a more equal way is important. This also touches on issues of spatial politics and the idea of social and environmental justice, that resources are equally distributed.

**NR:** You did a project called *Environmental Justice*<sup>07</sup> with **Field Work** around the COP (Conference of the Parties) 15,<sup>08</sup> the gathering of world leaders to discuss climate change in Copenhagen in 2009.

**NR:** One thing that was important was just introducing the term *environmental justice*, which has not been used in Europe a lot. We invited people to come and talk about it and the environment. The other goal was to make a march from the site of COP15 to Charlottenborg, an art hall in Copenhagen. We did an open call for posters because we thought that many artists would want to do something in this kind of environment, but might not have had an outlet. Then we carried the posters through the city of Copenhagen. It was a very small gesture, but still I think in many

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**07** *Environmental Justice*—an open call for posters. (2009) with **Field Work**. Copenhagen, Denmark. ¶ [www.field-work.dk/environmentaljustice.html](http://www.field-work.dk/environmentaljustice.html)

**08** COP15—The 2009 United Nations Climate Conference held in Copenhagen, Denmark. ¶ [www.unfccc.int/meetings/copenhagen\\_dec\\_2009/meeting/6295.php](http://www.unfccc.int/meetings/copenhagen_dec_2009/meeting/6295.php). ¶ ACCESSED APRIL 7, 2014

cases it is better to do something than to sit on your hands. Even with this small gesture, we sparked a lot of discussion. Artists suggested that maybe they were being subordinated to a discourse about the environment and giving up their artistic freedom. This was a huge discussion in the artistic community. In general, I think that in the Danish art community there is angst. People are afraid of topics that are too political. It is a general truth that if something is too political it becomes bad art. Many people stay away from the political, but thereby make their art irrelevant to our lives and society, because our lives are so affected by politics.

**BF:** How do you as an artist who makes work with a political angle deal with working in this context?

**NR:** My work is political, but it is not overt. I really try to insist on this formal freedom. That is also why I make art to experiment with forms. I really insist that the work—the aesthetic work—is really as important as what is being said. I am only really happy when they fall into place instead of supplement each other. Especially in **Field Work**, this is something that we discuss a lot, the aesthetics of the things we do. We are in a way very political with the projects we focus on in that group.

**BF:** You mentioned earlier, that your collaborative work has also involved working in a cross-disciplinary fashion with scientists. Can you talk about that?

**NR:** Maybe the best example is *Public Air Quality Indicator*<sup>09</sup> where I worked with senior scientist, **Jørgen Brandt** from the National

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**09** *Public Air Quality Indicator* (2007). In collaboration with senior scientist **Jørgen Brandt** at the National Environmental Research Institute. Installed at the Copenhagen City Hall. ¶ [www.nisroemer.dk/luft/uk/index.html](http://www.nisroemer.dk/luft/uk/index.html) ¶ ACCESSED APRIL 7, 2014

Environmental Institute in Denmark. The idea was to make a prototype, public indicator for the quality of air in the city and thereby make an addition to how you can read your environment. Air quality is important, but it is completely invisible.

I made a very direct collaboration with Brandt who has developed the program that everybody uses in Denmark for measuring air quality and making warnings about it. It is a pretty fantastic computer model based on all the pollution outputs that we know from industry in Europe, from the cars in the street, etc. This is combined with a 3D model of the air in the city and the meteorological conditions. So, you actually don't measure, but you can calculate how much pollution there will be on one side of the street compared to the other side of the street three days in advance. Then you go back and check if the model fits reality and then you adjust.

I made an indicator that created a visual marker of pollution levels on any given day and placed it on a window on the city hall of Copenhagen. The window would open or close based on the amount of pollution. On the street there was a sign where one could read pollution levels. We placed the indicator at the city council, because I felt it had the most artistic connotations about art in public space. At that point, there was a public debate going on around building a road ring around Copenhagen, where cars would be charged for entering the city. I thought this would be a good way to enter that public debate.

**NR:** As someone who has worked with these issues in the long term, can you offer some final opinions on the intersection of art and ecology?

**NR:** I would insist that art is really crucial to our human ecology and how we behave. The pitfall with working with environmental issues is that quite fast they become very technical and

scientifically oriented. Some of the most acute things in the current environmental crisis are related to things that are measured by science, and things that should be taken up by politicians, globally, like emissions reduction. In the very technical discussion with scientists it can be hard to find a very good place to stand as an artist or else you have to develop something along side of this. ¶