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# In the flow of the city



Jon Benjamin Tallerås  
*The Seeming Disorder*

Bergen City Hall / Rådhusgaten 10  
15-17 June 2015

For three days in June 2015 a small part of the Bergen city centre was transformed, almost imperceptibly. Jon Benjamin Tallerås placed three artworks at a corner of the City Hall in Bergen. The City Hall is one of the city's most visible architectural landmarks, and its foremost democratic arena. The symbolic aesthetic of the building has also been the object of artistic interventions in the past.<sup>1</sup> Tallerås built up three works specifically with the distinctive outside space at the southeastern corner of the City Hall in mind – a place where the building stands on columns which create an open space and a passage under the building. In a low-key way the works addressed the buildings and passers-by with both gesture and speech. Tallerås thus attempted to activate a place in the city that normally attracts little attention and on the whole lies idle.

In his artistic practice Tallerås has consistently related to the marginal zones of architecture: the unutilized, overlooked or less well-functioning gaps in public space. His explorations are centred around alternative uses of such spaces, and his practice ranges from photography, video, performance and installation to text-based works. The in-between and inaccessible spaces of the city were the starting point for the exhibition *Vagrancy and Idleness* at Kunsthall Oslo in 2012, in which among other things the artist's physical and improvised actions in the city were documented in a series of photographs taken with a self-timing camera. The ephemeral performances took the form of an often-demanding bodily experience of the city where the artist challenged and played with urban space and architectural elements through his movements. In 2014 the exhibition *I belong, as we know, to the family of the street* at Akershus Kunstcenter further explored the private use of urban surroundings, among other ways in a series of photographs where the gaze of the camera was directed at an otherwise neglected and unassuming place.

## Béton brut (Viksjø blues) I and II

The installation in Bergen consisted of the two works: *Béton brut (Viksjø blues) I and II* and the video work *The Seeming Disorder*. Placed in a door and an office window on the ground floor, *Béton brut (Viksjø blues) I and II* took the form of bright yellow rectangles that appeared as architectural elements in the City Hall building, most of all like an originally intended decoration that had only now been realized. One's thoughts go immediately to certain 'hits' from the history of art, especially from Russian Suprematism, as known from Kazimir Malevich and his crackle-surfaced monochrome paintings. The Suprematists represented a pure abstract art typified by geometric forms and bright colours, emancipated from the regime of representation in favour of purely emotionally-based expression. The movement was to have a strong influence on the American post-war generation's exploration of the formal properties of painting, especially the further exploration of expressionism's color-field painting by artists like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, whose paintings also have features in common with the reliefs of Tallerås.

However, the reliefs had a different history – they were casts from a wall in a tenement building on Kjøllberggata between Nedre Kampen and Tøyen in the eastern district of Oslo. Tallerås set up a temporary workplace outside the building for 24 hours, the time it took to make a negative mould in silicon. Then he made a cast in his studio. The workplace had been set up without permission, as a reflection of all the changes that happen daily in an urban landscape, planned or unintentional, temporary and permanent, improvements and vandalism. The reliefs were adapted to the size of the door and window in the City Hall, and were

mounted on the outside, exposed to wind and weather. The intense colours broke up the grey concrete and created life and contrasts, as a reminder that modernism was by no means as monotonous as its posterity would have it. An important part of the original modernist architecture was bright colouring of frames and curtains. Le Corbusier's well known housing block in Marseilles had panels in blue, red and yellow in the facade, and his own apartment had a bright yellow door. Their otherwise minimalist interiors were not grey and colourless.

The reliefs showed traces of the bricklayers' circular motions with the putty knife across the wall plaster, but also had marks that had appeared later. The surface was not smooth; on the contrary it was peppered with cuts, stripes and circles. Most of the buildings in Kjøllberggata are tenements built for workers in the period 1870-1900. The relocation of an architectural element, if only a copy, from Kjøllberggata to the City Hall in Bergen brings into play a number of historical, sociopolitical and economic perspectives. One central and inevitable focus in this respect is the intersection between materiality and aesthetics: the work drew a line from cheap wall plastering to specially mixed and treated natural concrete, and in so doing insisted on the specific material sides of the city that surrounds us. By transferring casts of old building details produced by artisans to a building that is characterized first and foremost by industrial production, Tallerås engaged in the discussion of modernism's posthumous reputation. By bringing together the different historical layers the work commented on urban development as a material, aesthetic and ideological process, just as dependent on the workers' execution as on the architects' ideals and the planners' calculations.

For Tallerås, however, the materiality of the city consists not only of buildings, roads and pavements, but also of the people who move around in it. The city arises in the encounter between the architecture and the people who use it. The materiality of the city therefore comprises ourselves, since the people who live in and use the city daily are part of the city, form it and influence our surroundings and our perception of them.

## The Seeming Disorder

Alongside the small relief in the office window one is confronted by the video work *The Seeming Disorder*, shown in a loop as a back projection. A video clip of about six minutes' duration showed people wandering around in busy city streets. The scenes were shot in Oslo, but seem generic, and the point of view, with the focus on people in motion rather than markers of place, suggests that it could have been any city. For anyone who is used to moving through the streets of Oslo, it is nevertheless easily recognizable that the camera moves within the area Majorstuen, Karl Johans gate and Grønland, from the west via the centre to the east. We see people who walk, busy and alone, on stairways and pavements, on a quite normal day in the city.

The film ran in a loop, a procedure that is of course practical, aesthetic and normative for this type of showing; but at the same time the repetition of everyday relocations added something more to the theme: we experienced the movements as patterns. We could find a kind of order in the random. The people in the film were reflected in the real city scale outside the screen where the Bergen citizens walked past the City Hall. The sound from the video was replicated out on the square in the encounter with the sounds of the city: people on their way to work, school and kindergarten, the flocks of gulls and pigeons at Lille Lungegårdsvann, the airport bus and the local railway's eternal traffic shuttling between centre and periphery.

In *The Seeming Disorder* we hear a woman's voice reading a

text. The text is a passage taken from the book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs (1916–2006), an American writer and urban planning activist. The book first appeared in 1961 as a critical response to the rigorous urban planning of the 1950s, in which people were subordinated to the architecture. In the decades since then the book has become a central reference work in architecture and urban planning all over the world. The following extract is read aloud in Tallerås' work:

Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvellous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of sidewalk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance — not to a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in unison and bowing off en masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations.<sup>3</sup>

The passage synthesizes Jacobs' main point in the book and in her work: that people and their material surroundings — city spaces, parks, pavements and buildings — form part of the same ecosystem and that the city and its dynamics develop according to the ways in which the urban spaces are used. Such an ecosystem builds on interdependence. An urban space only functions as an urban space if people make use of it, but the urban space must be properly designed. Urban development must therefore be thoroughly thought-out with respect for the people who live in the city. The ideal city, according to Jacobs, is characterized by great diversity, created by streets and urban spaces that meet different needs at different times of the day: short distances; a variety of building types from different epochs; close-built neighbourhoods. Altogether, things will be arranged to create life in the streets, and life in the streets is an important part of society's safety net: places in which people move around are on the whole safer than corners of the city empty of people.

The corner of the City Hall in Bergen which Tallerås made use of is normally a place that is not used by pedestrians, to a great extent because of the wind conditions that are created in the passage; but Tallerås' video projection of a busy cityscape activates the corner and gives us an idea of how it could have been a living urban space. In a passage about urban planning in American cities the writer Rebecca Solnit describes how the streets are the arteries of the city, while the urban space, the public square, is the heart from which the life-blood of the city flows out. If the urban spaces do not exist and function as real meeting places for all those who live in a city, the city, democracy and the society will die. Solnit makes a point of saying that this has already happened in many American cities, and that we stand in the midst of a crisis of heartless cities, especially as a result of the design of public buildings and the razing of well-functioning natural urban spaces. A kind of original depiction of this can be found in the work of the American historian J.B. Jackson, who in 1966 described how the authorities are

everywhere destroying public gathering places near or around Federal buildings. Small-town post-offices, formerly congenial gathering places, have been landscaped and isolated; and the very term 'public building' has become a contradiction: no one in his right mind goes into a public

building except on business. One thing can be said: there must be many more such places, large and small, scattered throughout our communities.<sup>4</sup>

Tallerås takes such a call to create meeting places seriously, while at the same time meeting Erling Viksjø — one of modernism's most iconic Norwegian practitioners — halfway to discuss what his legacy involves.

## Beauty and Brutalism

*Béton brut* (*Viksjø blues*) is a nostalgic title bearing the message that a certain time and a certain aesthetic are now obsolete — modernism is no longer a movement we embrace or distance ourselves from; it has become cultural heritage. At the same time we have by no means finished with the modernist formal language and its radically formalistic, but also democratic ideals. It appears again and again as reference and model, in art as in architecture. *Béton brut* is the French term for raw, untreated concrete where the walls are allowed to stand with clear traces of the formwork. The working process and the materials are exposed. The modernists Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe were two of many architects with a special fondness for *béton brut*. The expression has given rise to the architectural movement Brutalism as presented by the British architect couple Alison and Peter Smithson in the programme *New Brutalism* in the 1950s, which with its authoritarian expression dominated public architecture in the period 1950–70. Brutalism is characterized by three fundamental principles: that the ground plan is rendered visible by the exterior; that the structure of the building is clear; and that the materials are used 'as found'.<sup>5</sup>

The Norwegian architect Erling Viksjø (1910–71) is considered one of Norway's foremost architects in the post-war era. His most important building is the high-rise block in the government quarter in Oslo, finished in 1958. Viksjø was inspired by Le Corbusier's and Van der Rohe's buildings and urban spaces, among other ways by the idea of creating more effective green areas by putting garden complexes and urban spaces under the buildings, and by the basic principles of Brutalism.

The City Hall in Bergen was built in the same style as the high-rise block and in 'natural concrete', Viksjø's own patented method of making concrete, which was used in a number of his most high-profile buildings. The City Hall was only built after Viksjø's death, in the period 1971–74, at the tail-end of Brutalism's popularity in Norway. Natural concrete is an integral part of the architectural expression. It is made by adding pebbles before it is sandblasted. The result is an enduring surface in which the natural stones are visible, which gives it a more rustic expression than smooth concrete and plaster. The pebbles give life to what is normally a neutral surface. The patterns in the facade in Kjøllberggata, transferred as reliefs to the City Hall in Bergen, were made with lumps of mortar used by the bricklayers who plastered the surface of the facade when it was new. The motions of the bricklayers were the point of departure for the abstract patterns in the facade. The plaster was applied and rendered by hand, but Tallerås' reliefs of the surface are casts, such that the natural concrete of the City Hall in Bergen is cast in moulds.

## Mankind against the infrastructure

Viksjø won the architectural competition for Bergen City Hall in 1953, and the original plans involved more buildings that were to





be constructed after 'Marken' and the old fire station had been removed according to the plans. The clearance plans were shelved after massive protests, a decision that Jacobs would probably have applauded, and only the 14-storey high-rise block was built, side by side with the throng of streets and small buildings in 'Marken'. The building has been criticized for its rigorous architectural expression among the otherwise so traditional low timbered buildings along Lille Lungegårdsvann. It is a good example of fragmented urban development in the post-war era. The formal idiom of the building stands out strikingly from its surroundings.

One of the points of building tall blocks was to free up space at street level, so that people could move around freely among and beneath the buildings. In many cases the modernist architecture had exactly the opposite result from what was intended, and the people steered clear of it. What should have been good urban spaces became problematic areas. Well known examples are the housing complexes built to plans by Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. The story of the failures of these projects has become a central part of the narrative of modernism's antihumanism – so much indeed that it has perhaps become a kind of historical cliché.

In Oslo it has been suggested for the sake of security after the bombing of the government district on 22 July 2011 that the Y-block designed by Viksjø should be demolished. The building is clad in natural concrete with areas decorated by the artists Pablo Picasso and Carl Nesjar. The suggestion has met with vehement protests, a signal of Viksjø's strong position in Norwegian architecture and of modernism's enduring popularity and relevance. The reliefs and video works of Tallerås in Bergen can be read as part of the ongoing discussion of the future of the government quarter. The buildings in Oslo are monuments to Norwegian policy in the post-war era and to the growth of social democracy and the modern welfare state; and the City Hall in Bergen had its design based on the idiom of the government quarter. Read this way, Viksjø's building represents a number of political ideals that have been realized, but which are threatened today by the entry of the financial market into ever-larger parts of our life-world. However, this does not mean that everything about Viksjø's architecture – or even social democracy – is worthy of preservation.

Despite the undoubtedly unique culture-historical value, the outdoor areas of the government quarter have been little used. In Bergen one sees the same thing: if one does not have business there the corner of the City Hall is not a place one frequents. Tallerås' work changed this pattern in the course of the three days the installation lasted, not only because people interested in art visited the installation, but because the combination of the striking yellow elements and the video work with its soundtrack attracted the attention of casual passers-by. By making the works actors in the city space the artist actualized the themes of the works quite explicitly; they played with the material components of the urban space. In this way he took seriously Jane Jacobs' call to find out what functions and what does not in a city by moving around in it for oneself. Tallerås does not take for granted the seeming chaos that reigns in the totality of human movements in a modern city. The people who moved around past and parallel with one another do so because they are guided through the city in particular ways.

The exhibition *The Seeming Disorder* articulates sorrow and joy over the grand architectural ideas and plans of Viksjø and the modernists which do not live up to human needs and the ideals of the new age. Jane Jacobs' critique of the modernist city pointed to the architects' blind spot: the unruliness of human life. Jon Benjamin Tallerås' confrontation with Viksjø's building shows, however, that the last word has never been said.

- 1 A project that activates the same passage under the City Hall as Tallerås' work was Maia Urstad's and Hilde Hauan Johnsen's audio and light work *010103* from 2008, in which they used fibre optics to gather telecommunication signals in the surroundings and transform them into light. Another project worth mentioning is from 2013, when Knut Henrik Henriksen showed his exhibition "Notes to stones" in collaboration with Bergen Kunsthall in the same place, and where, with his point of departure in the same city hall's architectural elements, he worked up his own sculptures in wood and natural concrete.
- 2 Jacobs, Jane: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House: New York, 1961, p. 139.
- 3 Solnit, Rebecca: "The Heart of the City" (2004) in *Storming the Gates of Paradise. Landscapes for politics*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2007, p. 347.
- 4 Brekke, Nils Georg; Nordhagen, Jonas; Skjold Lexau, Siri: *Norsk Arkitekturhistorie Frå steinalder og bronsealder til det 21. hundreåret* Det Norske Samlaget: Oslo, 2003, p. 351.

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Jacobs, Jane *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House: New York, 1961

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#### Work information:

*Béton brut (Viksjø blues) I & II*, 2015. Acrylic on. 97 x 70 cm / 186.5 x 63 cm.

*The Seeming Disorder*, 2015. Video installation, HD video. 6:20 min (loop).

