

Mirror, mirror...

Reflections on Entrée's first two years

By Eva Rem Hansen

At Entrée all activities are reflected in polished floors and sparkling clean windows. This encourages self-reflection, and in fact, the analysis of their position and practice has been a central theme at Entrée during the early years of this venue.

Less than a year after it opened its doors for the first time, Entrée was invited by Bergen Kunstmuseum to curate one of the rooms of the large Bergen exhibition, *BGO1*. To fill the allotted space Entrée chose the young Bergen artist Gabriel Kvendseth and the Swedish artist Michael Johansson, whose works tend to be well dimensioned construction kits composed of everyday objects, such as white goods or office supplies. For his *BGO1* work *27m3*, Johansson chose, as in several of his previous works, to carefully piece together various found objects into a strictly rectangular shape. As a unique feature of his Bergen project, Johansson's work here was built of materials found in various art institutions and art studios in the city. A tight composition of painted shipping boxes, filing cabinets, gallery chairs, boxes of light bulbs and movie reels, all of varying sizes and contrasting colours, formed a sculpture which more than anything else resembled a still unsolved Rubik's cube. By designing this compact, but fragmented and multifaceted image of the city's art scene with authentic artefacts from the participants themselves, the Entrée contribution to *BGO1* was an explicit and apposite illustration of the aim of the exhibition; highlighting Bergen's artistic diversity.

Youth

The invitation from Bergen's largest art institution and the positive reception of the contribution to *BGO1*, as well as other Entrée exhibitions, both in the press and among the public in general, testified to the venue's immediate acceptance into the art scene: Entrée matured very soon. Like a precocious teenager caught off guard by the adult world, the gallery became an active player in the art scene before it had defined its own profile. Hence, the current owner, Randi Grov Berger, has described the first years of operation as a constant exploration, a kind of youthful quest for identity.

Surely every teenager feels split between different roles, should you be good and serious, the one who, without a major need to assert yourself, fulfils expectations quietly and properly, or should you identify with the coolest of the lot, the rebel who smokes behind the gym in the breaks and is therefore late for class? When the founders of Entrée, Berger and Cato Løland, early on stated that they were looking for a profile somewhere between that of the art school project room and the professional gallery, they merely indicated extremes that we might think of as an art institution's response to such characters in a high school class. On the one hand, the straight, professional or commercial gallery, working mostly along the lines of conventional and established display forms, has been a starting point for Entrée. This is reflected on several occasions when the gallery has initiated discussions relating to that epitome of the established gallery, *the white cube*, which, somewhat tendentiously, may be said to belong to a modernist view of art and the notion of work and the gallery as two distinct phenomena, where the gallery is merely a neutral, unmarked framework for interchangeable works of art. On the other hand, another model for Entrée has been that of the self-organised, artist-run initiative, which is generally thought to focus on process, showing projects that are less perfected, and acting fast when it comes to taking in new trends - that is, a far rougher, oppositional and progressive place.¹

The gap between the stereotypes project room and established gallery is great, with many possible intermediary stages. Entrée has used the artistic projects it has participated in to map these alternatives and analyse its own potential and character to find its place between the extremes. Thus, Entrée can be said to have spent its youth in front of the mirror, the place has retreated within itself and carried out a constant, exploratory self-criticism through its own activities, in order to establish its own profile. For example, Johansson's cube at *BGO1*, which assembled material from studios and museums alike, may be considered a visual study

of possibilities, it is an exhibition of different options for the venue, one solution to the relationship between the professional and the self-organised, which can also be taken apart and reassembled in other ways. Furthermore, Entrée's self-critical examination has been expressed through the regular exhibition program in at least three ways, which will now be presented in more detail.

A range of possibilities

One of the differences between a white cube and the project room is the way these two kinds of venue tend to invite works of contrasting character, works that relate very differently to the space in which they are exhibited. Broadly speaking, the white cube most often presents individual works, objects that are separate from the place and turn inward, for example, to its own medium, as modernist art is claimed to do. Contrast that with the archetypal project room, which is considered an extension of the artist's studio, displaying works that are not limited in the same way, works where processes and materials are more clearly visible, and where the relationship with the exhibition venue, therefore, is more palpable. Entrée has explored its position between the gallery and the process driven project room with this in view, by putting on exhibitions covering the whole range from the specific to the dissolved work.

Tone Wolff Kalstad's *This Color is Everywhere*, shown in October 2010, is an example of an Entrée exhibition that consisted of what might be called introspective works. Whereas the exhibition title suggested a colourful and a varied experience, Kalstad's works employed a rather muted palette, almost entirely white, and were uniform in the sense that all sculptural forms were made of paper. The paper sculptures formed tight, closed objects, and could be seen as an internal analysis of, and a supercilious commentary on, the medium of drawing. Thus, the works were in keeping with the modernist ideal of exploring the possibilities inherent in the individual art form, and they chimed with the idea of art as independent in relation to an allegedly neutral white cube.

In the exhibition *Erasing Knot Paintings*, Ragnhild Johansen, like Kalstad, based her work on a single material. This time the material was not paper, but wood, and rather than drawing, Johansen worked with an almost invisible paint on plywood. Johansen's approach was to manipulate the wood with a brush so that the wood grain patterns took surprising twists or commented on other objects, such as when a false shade from a pallet gave colour to the wooden board under it. The rendering of an expressive paint stroke made in wood in Johansen's work *Brush Stroke* is reminiscent of Roy Lichtenstein's work of the same title. With his painting, in well known cartoon style, the pop artist mocked the emotional brush strokes of abstract expressionists, and using this paraphrase, Johansen is also distancing herself from modernist ideals and approaching the oppositional.

Another exhibition that can be linked to the late modernist or neo avant-garde incipient confrontation with modernism's clean look and idea of art as isolated, is *South of No North*, with works by Patricia Hansen-Wagner, Nina Nowak, Samuel Seger and Patrick Wagner. Several of these works were roughly prepared hybrids between sculpture and ready made, like most of Robert Rauschenberg's sculptures. Novak's sculpture existing of a box mattress, which was close to collapsing under the weight of an "action-painted" colossus placed in the bed, could even be interpreted as a direct reference to Rauschenberg's *Bed*. Another work that not only violated the boundaries of the media, but also represented a crumbling of distinctions between work and space, was the Hansen-Wagner *Hèrodiade*. This work started as a painting on the wall of the gallery, but continued as a material relief, seemingly growing out of the gallery wall and occupying the room.

Serina Erfjord's exhibition *Repeat*, and *Pica Pica*, a group exhibition curated by Johanne Nordby Wernø, showing works by Kaia Hugin, Per-Oskar Leu and Ebba Bohlin, moved even further toward the process driven, material-based and site specific. In Erfjord's captivatingly beautiful *Normal Blue*, made from a spinning, vertically-mounted satellite dish covered in oil, it was precisely the relationship between process, material and location that was decisive, as the thick oil would have spilled into the gallery, hadn't the dish been in steady rotation. In Ebba Bohlin's work *Här*, the fluid, highly sensual mass, in this case clay, was not similarly kept in check, but was allowed to spread apparently unchecked throughout the gallery -

and out of it. Both works have superficial, obvious, similarities with the works of Anish Kapoor, who can usually be found in the more established, commercial section of the art world, but who is still known for his active use of the gallery space and the texture of his materials. However, the movement into the undefined and enveloping, the use of natural materials, and Bohlin's continuation of her work in the street outside Entrée, creates associations to land art, which itself ventured out of the white cube and the established view of art it championed. We might say, therefore, that Entrée, in its search for an identity, has lived out history's battle with the white cube on a "personal" level, as the gallery has explored different venue models through various relationships between work and space.

A formative room

In August 2010, the exhibition *On the In-Between* was shown at Entrée. For the exhibition the Irish artists Ivan Twohig and Alison Carey had created works based on the maximum dimensions allowed for luggage on planes. Four shipping boxes made of plywood, which in different ways fulfilled the requirement $L + W + H = 158$ cm and the weight limit of 40 kg, were the framework of four works that were integrated in each individual shipping box. The artists had created entirely self-contained works that could be sent, assembled and put on display without anything being added or removed. When the crates arrived at the gallery, they were opened, folded out on the floor into finished, geometrically shaped sculptures, and simply folded back together and returned after the exhibition period. The relationship between crate and sculpture in the Twohig and Carey structures may serve as an illustration of the relationship between venue and works in several other Entrée exhibitions. In fact, the venue's exploration of its own possibilities has not merely been a general study of different variations on the work/space relationship we discussed above. In addition, Entrée has initiated a range of exhibitions that have explored and mirrored the specific qualities of this particular gallery space. Like the Twohig and Carey boxes, the Entrée architecture has had a direct impact on several exhibition projects, and it has been a defining framework for the design of the exhibitions' content.

Mattias Arvastsson's exhibition *Presence No. 5*, shown in February 2010, is an example of work that has been performed in response to the gallery space. Arvastsson's exhibition consisted of simple, rigid forms that sometimes repeated, sometimes disturbed the gallery's equally rigid, white-painted surfaces. Through the shadows they cast, the sculptures themselves played with the natural light that falls into the gallery through large windows; in addition, they were illuminated by projected patterns. Thus, the result of the minimal formal intervention in the room was a complex, never-ending swirl of shape formation and spatial disintegration, where sculptural forms wore down the space, the projections wore down the forms, and the natural light, in turn, wore down the projections. Hence, the audience had to grope for the boundaries between work, showroom and surroundings.

One work that mirrored Entrée's architecture in a more affirmative way was Ethan Hayes-Chute's *Make/Shifted Cabin*, shown in the summer of 2011. Using materials collected during a two-month residency at Nordic Artists' Centre in Dale, Hayes-Chute built a primitive, shed-like cabin inside the gallery space, filled to the brim with all imaginable symbols of the simple life of a lone wolf in the Norwegian countryside. Horseshoe, ski wax, bell pull, crab shells, radio receiver, typewriter and old pin-up magazines were placed in a spatial assemblage that awakened associations with Ilya Kabakov's all-encompassing archive rooms. By combining hundreds of items in the small cabin, *Make/Shifted Cabin* pursued the building block principle, which was present in both Johansson's cube and Twohig and Carey's fold-out boxes. Like the latter work, Hayes-Chute's cabin also thematized the idea of self-sufficiency, both because the gallery itself may be said to have given shape to the work, and because the cabin was based on the dream of a simpler life, fulfilling both instinctive and creative needs in a few square meters. This dream of being master of one's own castle can also be said to be a driving force behind a number of self-organised art initiatives, and the cabin installation may thus be seen as a comment on Entrée's status as an independent gallery.

In the exhibition that succeeded *Make/Shifted Cabin*, Entrée's audience were presented with another work that reiterated the gallery's architectural form, but this time the relationship between space and work was not a mere approximation, like in the case of Hayes-Chutes. The main structure of the Sveinung Rudjord

Unneland exhibition *U.T.* was in fact a painstakingly accurate, scaled-down version of the showroom. Since the gallery itself was presented as an installation, as an independent work, in Unneland's exhibition, this may be regarded as yet another comment on the vague boundaries between a showroom and a work, and a reminder that galleries, and perhaps artist-run galleries in particular, may function as artistic projects in their own right. Despite Unneland's meticulous reconstruction, there were also some significant differences between the real Entrée and his model. Whereas the former is an open showroom with glass frontage to the street, all the walls in the model were boarded up, so that the scaled-down gallery appeared to be hermetically closed. The small, protected space in the middle of the larger one might suggest the location of the cella in the centre of a temple. In antiquity the cella was a room used for religious rituals; it usually hosted the temple treasures and sacred statues, while Unneland's cella contained paintings with obvious references to the modernist abstraction. Thus his installation could be interpreted as a symbol of the art institution as a canonising space, and a visual underlining of the typical criticism of the white cube, where it is clear that the seemingly neutral gallery space is charged with values, norms and preferences. Projects like that of Unneland's, which is based on the specific architecture, analyses the space and is mirrored in its characteristics, have contributed to the self-criticism that has been characteristic of Entrée's first years in operation, bringing the exhibition space a step closer to its own identity. By exhibiting projects of this nature, the gallery has proved that, despite its shiny surfaces, it is not a white cube in the sense that the works shown there are independent and interchangeable, but a place that promotes the idea of work and showroom mutually influencing and transforming each other.

Window on the world

The exhibitions at Entrée have not only turned inward and explored the premises of the venue itself; some of the exhibited works may also be said to have mirrored themselves in the open windows by thematizing their relationship with the world outside the art space. Questions of accessibility and community involvement have also been discussed in connection with Entrée's role models. One of the intentions behind the white cube was precisely that of availability, if we are to believe the critics who use the white cube as a concept. Apparently, the idea was that the simple, naked room was neutral and unprejudiced, and as such it would neither exclude anyone nor influence the public's perception of the exhibited works, but isolate the works in a universal sphere, far above contemporary issues. As we know, the critics claimed that this goal was never reached, that even the most pared-down display form has its ideology and its ideals, and that the white cube, therefore, was a charged and closed space, like the gallery in Unneland's installation. For its part, the stereotypical artist-run project space has never aimed to be neutral, it would rather ask confrontational, political questions, and may also change its agenda according to who the exhibiting artist is. Community involvement and the highlighting of the individual artist's voice over an ideological system may be seen as a sign of an outgoing institution, but even so, the changeable and progressive character of the project spaces, as well as their lack of prioritisation when it comes to publicity, makes them just as closed as the more established galleries.

During its first two years Entrée has only put on one exhibition with a clear, political content. In the gallery's second exhibition, *It's like Nothing Ever Happened*, Malin Lennström-Örtwall commented on the plight of the Palestinians, as trapped and confined in their own surroundings. In a centrally located work, a seemingly ordinary and pleasant dinner table was locked inside a hostile steel cage, which might also be considered a repetition of the shape of the gallery. Furthermore, the room was lit by a pink neon sign, where the lamps forming the statement *Maybe I'll never see you again* were partially destroyed after shipping from the production site in Palestine, through various obstacles which the Palestinians themselves encounter if they try to travel outside their own area.

However, a handful of projects have taken a critical approach, thematized availability and the relationship of art to society in general, by addressing popular culture, media and the entertainment industry. In the exhibition *Road Show Svent Plan*, Knud Young Lunde took as his point of departure the computer program Google Earth and the growing event industry, two phenomena that have emerged to make human life more manageable, more spectacular, more efficient and easier to

consume. However, In Young Lunde's works, such as in the distorted images of the world taken from Google Earth, it becomes apparent that the instrumentalization of the environment can go wrong and be counterproductive. The artist introduces, in the form of a work built with Lego and the image of a young boy drawing irregular shapes, the child's spontaneity and unpredictability as an alternative to an ever more efficient adult community. Kjersti Vetterstad was equally critical when she exhibited at Entrée in late winter 2011. In her work *Lethargia* she confronts the way the mass media forms and standardises our picture of the world by creating a video collage of clips from various movie sources. Furthermore, in her work she chose to play only the dialogue, showing subtitles on a black background, thus allowing for the viewer's own associations and images. A third work, which also deals with the media and entertainment industry, is *We Are Making History* by Danilo Correale, brought to Entrée from Manifesta 8. The work consisted of three TV screens mounted side by side. The first one showed a movie studio with a green screen, i.e. a solid-coloured background which may be activated after recording, to create the illusion that the actors and the reporters in front of the screen are present in real environments. The second TV showed the cameraman who filmed the green screen of the previous TV picture, and in the final screen the first two cameramen are filmed, and thus a complex introspection, not unlike Entrée's own, is documented. In this work Correale, Like Young Lunde and Vetterstad, comments on the representation of the world as seen in the media, reminding us that media images are not authentic, certainly no more real than the experience a work of art can give.

The critical look at the media in the three works referred to, may also say something about Entrée's positioning on the issue of accessibility. These works suggest that an art gallery should provide more than just entertainment, commercialism and efficiency, that it should rather be a place for critical reflection. This notion of art as the opposite of culture as such, and the gallery as an alternative space shielded from the day, resonates with certain aspects of the white cube, aspects that have met with harsh criticism. By allowing for this, and by engaging in deliberate and systematic self-reflection, an activity that may also prompt associations with modernism's process of self-definition, in what is a self-organised exhibition space initiated by artists, Entrée places itself in an unresolved position between the polished gallery and the unestablished, mutable project room, thus contributing to the softening of stereotypical views of these different varieties of showrooms.

1. This, of course, is a crude description of showrooms run by artists, but not an uncommon one. As is seen from the media, for instance, who described Entrée as a corrective to the existing art scene in Bergen as soon as the space presented itself as a gallery run by artists.