

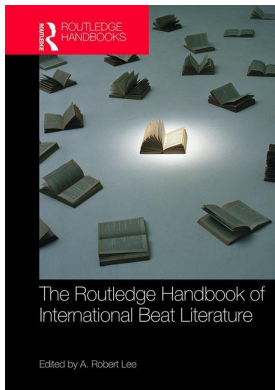
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A. Robert Lee

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Frida Forsgren

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16

NORWEGIAN BEAT CULTURE

Reading Beat and Being Beat in Oslo in the 1950s

Frida Forsgren

Introduction

How best can we speak of a Norwegian Beat tradition? To take soundings one needs to step back into the larger history of Norwegian modernism and the avant-garde, with Oslo as its operative center. This account proposes that poets like Jan Erik Vold, Kate Næss, and Axel Jensen, and visual artists like Willibald Storn, Marius Heyerdahl, and Kjartan Slettemark give grounds for thinking that Beat had its Norwegian manifestation not just in one domain of the arts but in several.

Traditionally, Norway has not been seen as belonging to the avant-garde in matters of culture. A proper national art milieu was established only around 1880 (Danbolt 2009: 193–313), and the country's lack of artistic institutions, critics, or an art-buying bourgeoisie made the introduction of modernism slow. The history of Norwegian modernism and the avant-garde has thus been a story of periphery versus center, outriders versus elite. But what if we see culture as a rhizome—an underground system of roots and shoots from its nodes—rather than as a linear and hierarchical movement? Hubert van den Berg has suggested that we should consider this avant-garde culture as belonging to a wider Nordic counterculture (Berg 2005). According to this line of thought Norwegian modernism can be seen as an integral and equal part of European modernism, rather than as a peripheral movement.

In much the same way Tania Ørum has argued that local modernist movements and international avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements must be seen as symbiotic and part of a larger global system (Ørum 2016). I propose that we employ the rhizomatous lens in order to study American Beat culture and its influence on Norwegian culture. How exactly did American Beat culture influence the formation of a Norwegian literary and artistic avant-garde movement in the late 1950s and 1960s?

Norway in the Post-War Years

Despite of its long history, Norway is actually a young state. The country only became independent in 1905 after a 400-year union, first with Denmark and then Sweden (1814–1905), and, after the Second World War, it was still exploring its new identity as an independent nation. The main project after the war was the construction of a social democratic welfare state that would ensure and secure citizen's rights and wellbeing. From the end of the war in 1945 until 1970 Norway underwent strong growth in nearly all areas of society (Ohman Nielsen 2011: 140). The war had created a sense of unity, and people were prepared to make sacrifices for the common

good. The Labour Party retained power throughout the period and carried out a policy of public planning focused on unity and stability rather than the politics of class struggle characterizing the interwar years. After the war a social security net was gradually established, supported by strong economic and industrial achievements with American industry as the model. Prospecting in the North Sea started in 1966, and in 1969 Philips Petroleum found oil in the Ekofisk field, which proved to be one of the ten largest fields in the world and was to secure Norwegian wealth and stability for decades to come.

But socially, post-war Norway was a conservative society where life was regulated by family values, religion, and traditional norms. Post-war society idealized marriage, the happy housewife and the manly breadwinning male: 97% of children were born within marriage, in 1960 55% of Norwegian women were housewives, and 62% of all women were married. In 1960 no other western country had fewer women in its workforce (Ohman Nielsen 2011: 159). In a society that was conformist to such a large extent, many did not find their place, an alienation particularly marked among a number of “dissident” artists.

A further controlling social mechanism in Norway is the so-called “Law of Jante” described by the Danish author Aksel Sandemose in the novel *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks (En flyktning krysser sitt spor)* of 1933. The “Law of Jante” is deeply embedded in the Norwegian psyche—it involves a condescending attitude towards individuality and success. It reflects a mentality that plays down individual effort and places far more emphasis on the collective, while discouraging those who stand out as achievers. Skepticism towards modernity and change is a characteristic feature of this view of life, and may in part explain why Norwegians were reluctant to welcome the new literature and visual languages of modernity.

Beat and Avant-Garde Movements in Academic Literature

In the research literature Norwegian modernism is located as a movement that took place in close dialogue with Nordic and International Modernism. But in this dialogue the Norwegian movement had by far the weaker voice. The poet Jan Erik Vold went so far as to say that “the modernist lag is a trauma in Norwegian post-war poetry” to underline just how far behind Norwegian poets and painters were compared with their Danish and Swedish peers in the development of independent modern expression (Vold 1976: 347). An editor in the Norwegian Journal *Profil* asked in 1966 whether the development of Modernism had in fact passed Norwegian prose writers by completely (*Profil* 1966, p. 7). Due to the 400-year-long union, the development of an independent Norwegian creative language, literary and visual, had met with strong structural and cultural obstacles.

For lack of support from a national arts academy or university, Norwegian writers and artists had to study elsewhere in Europe. And even though the University of Oslo and the State Academy of Art were founded in 1813 and 1909 respectively, in the twentieth century artists and intellectuals were heavily influenced by the wider European continent. Norwegian writers and artists of any degree of radical persuasion, moreover, met with less tolerance than was the case in other Nordic countries (Bäckström and Børset 2011: 11). For instance it was only at the beginning of the 1960s—several decades after the rest of Europe—that non-figurative visual art was tentatively introduced (Berg 1993: 234–237, Kirkholt 2002). The same tendencies came late to literature. The major modernist revolt was first brought about in 1966 by the so-called “Profil-generation” with its demands that writers should distance themselves from the lyrical and romantic tendencies inherent in modern Norwegian prose and poetry.¹ In an editorial article in the first issue of *Profil* in 1966, the new chief editor Tor Obrestad wrote that the aim of the journal was to provide a focus for a modernist literary movement (Garton 1985: 352). The journal’s critics and contributors would go on to greatly encourage significant development of a Norwegian modernism from the late 1960s onwards.

If Norwegian modernism is customarily seen as a story of periphery versus center, local artistic dissent versus elite, newer research suggests that this view must be nuanced in important areas. The

anthology *Norsk avantgarde* (2011) illustrates how Norwegian literature and art history have also told a different story. Norwegian cubists, Dadaists, Surrealists, assemblage artists, performance artists, Fluxus and pop artists did indeed build on International Modernism, but in so doing helped develop a highly particular kind of Norwegian modernism. A number of recent exhibitions underline Norwegian contributions to modernism, including *God natt da du... Surrealisme i norsk kunst 1930–2010* (*God Night... Surrealism in Norwegian Art 1930–2010*) at Stenersenmuseet (February 5–May 2, 2010), *Rom for abstraksjon: Impulser i norsk kunst 1957–1975* (*Room for Abstraction: Impulses in Norwegian Art 1957–1975*) at the National Museum, *Pop etc. Norsk Popkunst 1964–1974* (*Pop etc. Norwegian Pop Art 1964–1974*) at the Henie Onstad Art Center (June 5–August 16, 2015), and *Like For (Just Before)* at the Museum for Contemporary Art featuring the Norwegian female pop artist Sidsel Paaske (October 21, 2016–February 26, 2017).

The art historian Gerd Hennem has made an important contribution in *Med kunst som våpen. Unge kunstnere i opprør 1960–1975* (*With Art as Weapon. Young Artists in revolt 1960–1975*) (2005) where she discusses the radical generation *femtiåttenerne* (the 1958-generation) in Oslo, which shows how avant-garde culture presented itself earlier than previously thought. In *Norsk avantgarde* (*Norwegian Avantgarde*) (2011) presents a gallery of Norwegian avant-garde artists. Its editors stress how there is still important work to be done in expanding and filling in the full dimensions of Norwegian modernism and the avant-garde (Bäckström and Børset 2011, 19). The emergence of Norwegian Beat plays a part in expanding and changing the usual canon. Only rarely, as in the case of the writer and journalist Fredrik Wandrup, has there been serious analysis of Beat's impact: that is, how Beat was read, performed, and received in—above all—the Norwegian capital.

Introducing the Beats: Translation and Inspiration

Unlike their fellow writers in the neighboring countries of Denmark and Sweden, Norwegian writers and translators, just as they were in the issue of modernism generally, were slow to pick up on Beat. *På Drift* was issued in Sweden in 1958 and the Danish *Vejene* in 1960. In Norway, Jack Kerouac's *De underjordiske* (*Subterraneans*) was translated early, in 1960,² but the three canonical Beat works *Naken lunsj* (*Naked Lunch* [1968]), *Hyl og andre dikt* (*Howl and Other Poems* [1974]) and *På kjøret* (*On the Road* [1992]) were translated by Olav Angell considerably later. In 1970 two anthologies on Beat poetry were published: *Det nye amerikanske huset* (*The New American House*) by Paal-Helge Haugen and *Bemann barrikadene – fienden har sluppet løs sin pyjamas* (*Man the Barricades – the enemy has unleashed his pajamas*) by Haugen and Einar Økland. Lawrence Ferlinghetti has been published twice by Jón Sveinbjörn Jónsson: *Et tankens Coney Island* (*A Coney Island of the Mind* [1994]) and Jan Erik Vold's *Og Homer kom og så ut som Odysseus* (*And Homer came and looked like Odysseus* [2014]). Jón Sveinbjörn Jónsson's most extensive Beat anthology was published in 1994.³

These comparatively late translations have been an important influence in Norwegian literature, both stylistically and also substantially when it comes to theme and focus. After the 1970s the interaction of US Beat writing with Norwegian literature becomes increasingly clearer, as Fredrik Wandrup has emphasized (Wandrup 2015). Wandrup cites a number of Beat-inspired Norwegian authors: Noel Cobb, Kaj Skagen, Ole Paus, Kjell Erik, known as Triztan Vindtorn, Terje Dragseth, Helge Torvund, Bertrand Besigye, Baste Grøhn, Nils Yttri, Fredrik Dahl, Lars Saabye Christensen, and Jón Sveinbjörn Jónsson. He also links Beat writing to the new confessional style in Norwegian prose represented by Tomas Espedal, Vigdis Hjorth, Karl Ove Knausgård, Hanne Ørstavik, and Ari Behn (Wandrup 2015).

Among the chief early promulgators of Beat in Norway is Jan Erik Vold, who on January 6, 1960 contributed an influential newspaper article to *Dagbladet* about the Beat phenomenon. In “Beatniks på landeveien” (“Beatniks on the Road”) he offers an overall introduction to the Beat concept and its affinities to jazz, stating that: “The expression is borrowed from jazz. If music swings, it must possess “Beat” (“tæl” in true Norwegian).” The Norwegian word “tæl” means to have guts, and is a striking and indeed original way to capture the pulse of Beat literature.

Towards the end of his piece Vold reflects on the message and morality of *On the Road*: “The book may seem filthy, without morals. Maybe it is. But as a painful message throughout the text, this arises: Where may I find a firm platform? Who, or what should I believe in?” (Vold 1976: 10). He concludes by stating that this is precisely the dilemma of being young at the time he is writing. How does one balance the welfare state’s humanist ideals with the threat of the atom bomb—manufactured as a result of the highest human education and desire to explore? In 1961, Vold went on to write a long feature article on Allen Ginsberg for the same newspaper entitled “Allen Ginsberg – Howling Poet under the Mushroom Cloud” (Vold 1976: 10), where he again addresses the atomic threat, and again, the power of jazz poetry. Vold offers his readers a passionate and heart-felt plea, quoting long passages from “Howl” based on the Danish edition by Poul Sørensen under the title *Vindrosen* (1959). Vold’s own language is clearly inspired by Ginsberg’s jazzy run-on lines, and expresses a cacophony of thoughts, reflections, and ideas fueled by the poem’s energy: “the reader slides into a poetic fantasy world where suicide, genitals, mad houses, Zen-Buddhism, visionary Indian angels, drug intoxication, lava and ash, rock n’ roll and mass organized homosexuality create the deepest thinkable degrading chaos” (Vold 1976: 15).

That Beat’s use of jazz as reference point would prove particularly fascinating to Vold comes as no surprise. He was a young poet and journalist, but was particularly drawn to jazz music. He was member of the Oslo Jazz Circle and heard Louis Armstrong perform at the Colosseum cinema in Oslo 1952, and Red Mitchell and Billie Holiday in 1953. Norwegian jazz had its own golden age in the 1950s, with a thriving club scene consisting of clubs like Big Chief Jazz Club, Pingvinklubben (The Penguin Club), Jazzkjelleren (The Jazz Basement), and Metropol Jazz Centre (Førland 1998: 20). Vold wrote passionate jazz reviews for *Dagbladet*, and looked to the US for new music that he urged his readers to get hold of despite its limited availability. In the articles “May jazz inspire writers to literary jazz achievements?” (1960) and “Jazz in words” (1961), also published in *Dagbladet*, Vold introduces readers to the American poetry and jazz scene, showcasing it as the new literary scene (Vold 1976: 10 and 17).

He also was among the first in Norway to introduce Kenneth Rexroth and his ideas about getting poetry “out there,” “out of the hands of the squares,” and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and the early recordings of his poetry. He devotes space to discuss, with clear admiration, how the jazz and poetry scene has been adopted and embraced in Sweden. In 1963, Vold was awarded a scholarship by the Norwegian-American Association and studied for an academic year at the University of California, Santa Barbara. While in the US, he went to jazz concerts in San Francisco and New York, and further developed his interest in jazz and poetry. Upon returning to Norway, he got a Norwegian jazz and poetry scene going based on his own texts, and translated a fair amount of Beat poetry.⁴ His poetic collaboration with renowned Norwegian musicians like Jan Garbarek and Egil Kapstad, and international virtuosos like Chet Baker and Bill Frisell which, together with his own extensive body of playful, musical poetry, attests to the inspiration he drew from jazz, Beat and the US.

Colbjørn Helander, who translated *The Subterraneans/De underjordiske* in 1960, remarks that Kerouac’s hectic prose stemming from the street talk of the American city and road was difficult to translate into Norwegian (Helander 1960: 166). In fact, Helander makes successful free-flowing Beat prose out of Kerouac’s text. Helander’s edition contains a short afterword by Jack Kerouac himself, with a powerful address to the reader insisting upon his style as the only literary one of the future:

I believe this is the only form of literature for a free future, without interruption and correction, a complete confession of what really happened. And it is not as easy as it seems, because it is a pain to tell the truth and let it be felt, as you people of Norway know in your knowledge of truth. It is pain and a purgatory.

Helander 1960: 162

After this appeal to the reader, Helander’s own afterword continues with a presentation and discussion of Kerouac whom he characterizes as one of North America’s most controversial young

contemporary writers. Helander suggests that Kerouac has a magical ability to make the reader identify with the main character, as Knut Hamsun did in *Sult* (Helander 1960: 163). His afterword, moreover, discusses the Beat generation as one that did not feel spiritually at home. The translator draws parallels between the Beat generation and the ideologies of Søren Kierkegaard, Wilhelm Reich, and Oscar Wilde, and shows a deep concern with the spirituality and philosophy of Beat as a concept (Helander 1960: 164).

A Norwegian Road Novel and a Court Case Against Literature

The clearest example of a Norwegian writer who emulates Beat style writing is Axel Jensen (1932–2003) in his road novel *Ikaros: ung mann i Sahara* (*Icarus: a Young Man in the Sahara* [1957, translated into English in 1958]). It tells the story of a young man who travels to Algeria and the Sahara to find meaning in his life, spending several months in the desert as a hermit. The novel was based on Axel Jensen's own road trip in the Sahara in 1952 and shares stylistic and thematic traits with Kerouac's *On the Road*. The story is told in the form of a flowing, confessional monologue at once highly personal and intense. Interestingly, Jensen manages to transform Norwegian into correspondingly pulsating language with run-on lines and poetic fluency. Axel Jensen's follow-up novel *Line* (1959), a love story told in the same kind of upbeat, confessional prose, was even accused of plagiarizing Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*, despite its being impossible for Jensen to have read it.⁵ As Fredrik Wandrup suggests, the striking similarities between Jensen's and Kerouac's prose stem from their resistance to much of the habits and appetites of the western world (Wandrup 2015). The feeling of alienation and general lack of direction in post-war society as personified in the restlessness of the main characters in Axel Jensen's and Kerouac's novels, finds form in a rhythmic jazz-like style. Wandrup sees Jensen as a lone Norwegian Beat poet:

travel is a literary point in common for most of Jensen's books. Stylistically Hamsun is point of departure, but a Hamsun transformed into Beat poet, a modern vagabond on the run from himself and the world in the Sahara desert. Axel Jensen emerged as a one-man Beat movement with *Ikaros* (1957) and *Line* (1959). He caught the jargon of the first free youth generation and transformed the typewriter to a piano. Axel Jensen wrote jazz.

Wandrup 2015

Icarus: a Young Man in the Sahara, *Line*, and the follow-up novel *Joachim* (1961), with their male outsider protagonists and the jazz-prose in which their stories are cast, all underscore working affinities with Beat literature. Jensen's life-style of extensive travels, love and drug experiments, emphasized through extensive interviews in the press, cast him as the incarnation of the Norwegian rebel and bohemian (Eide 1988: 42).

A second Norwegian writer who can be well juxtaposed with Beat culture in the 1950s is Agnar Mykle (1915–1994). But in Mykle's case it is predominately thematic and social factors that constitute the similarities. Mykle wrote the two novels *Lasso rundt fru Luna* (*Lasso Round the Moon* [1954]) and *Sangen om den røde rubin* (*The Song of the Red Ruby* [1956]) whose young male protagonist, Ask Burelfot, displays a personality at once confident and diffident as he seeks a fulcrum for his life. It is the narrative of his personal trajectory through shame and disappointment which leads to a closer and deeper understanding of himself—in many ways a classic Bildungsroman. About his novel Mykle would write: "What I meant to do with this book was to envisage in words a young man's attempt to reach a richer life, that is his fight for a *higher* existence" (Heger 1985:17). Central to both novels are Ask's sexual conquests even as he searches for seriously meaningful love. Mykle's narration is given in direct and explicit sexual language which may have caused shock. Among those who took offense was the culture editor of the southern Norwegian newspaper *Fædrelandsvennen*, who reported *Sangen om den røde rubin* to the police on the grounds

of obscenity leading to a court case in November 1956. The trial against Agnar Mykle and the publisher Gyldendal attracted enormous attention. The affair was discussed in Parliament, in the bishop's council, and in homemaker and women's associations. Municipal libraries throughout Norway were called upon to review acquisition of the book. Debate spilled over into national and local Norwegian newspapers. Large parts of Norwegian intellectual life became involved, although most—and nearly without exception—were in favor of the author. This unusually heated newspaper controversy not only revolved around literature's right to depict sexuality but also brought up the kind of US censorship issues that had involved Ginsberg and Burroughs.

Central, too, was the issue of Mykle's use of "live models." The author was accused of having violated the privacy of the people in his circle in his literary portraiture. The plot of the novel unfolds from Ask Burelfot's education at an institution that is easily recognizable as the Norwegian Business School in Bergen, and several people the author had met in Bergen are believed to be portrayed in the book. The book and the publisher were eventually acquitted in October 1957, but it was only after a later Supreme Court ruling that the book was once again released for sale. The trial—known as the Mykle Case—is a startling example of 1950s puritanism and is an important chapter in Norwegian cultural history. The animated debates about literature, sexuality, and morality indeed show striking similarities with the trials involving Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and City Lights Publishing that same year. The trials show how two western post-war countries were profoundly threatened by a free, direct, and countercultural view of the world in language to match. Anders Heger, an expert on the Mykle Case, sees the trial as a first signal of a Norwegian counter culture, and he draws a parallel with American Beat culture:

There is a connecting line, even though it is not always as visible, between the Rubin case, (...), the Beat generation, the hippie movement and – Blitz.

Heger 1985: 4

Thematically, *Sangen om den røde rubin* much resembles *On the Road*, not least in its concern with a young man whose travels give the outward show of his inner evolution. For Mykle, as for Kerouac, the journeying primarily signifies a spiritual enterprise. If for Sal and Dean their journey is a *Beatific* journey, so for Ask Burelfot it is an attempt to reach a *higher* form of consciousness and existence.

Mykle's literary style too, has similarities with the pace and jazz-like "spontaneity" of Jack Kerouac. Even though Mykle writes in the conservative Norwegian idiom of *riksmål*, his sentences are frequently long and hectic with only occasional interruption by a comma.⁶ For example, his description of the character Constance runs to over 49 lines. The scene where he thinks about revolution runs to over 31 lines. And a love-making scene runs to 53 lines.⁷ The reader keeps pace with his observations and impulsive thoughts as though to exactly follow his whimsical mind, a feature that gives the text authenticity and truthfulness. The story is told with intensity and a feeling of deep urgency, confessional features that again recall any number of Beat generation texts. The sexually explicit scenes reflect Ask Burelfot's life, his different conquests and loves, and show the same bold explicitness as Ginsberg's "Howl" or Kerouac's *On the Road*. Mykle has also said that like Jack Kerouac he drew inspiration from Thomas Wolfe and novels like *Look Homeward, Angel* (1938). He even went so far as to say he was "obsessed" by Wolfe (Heger 1985: 140) as indeed he was by Kerouac: two sources from America transposed into modern Norwegian literary form.

Beat Poetry and the Oslo Underground

Let us now turn to the underground milieu in Oslo in the late 1950s to see how Beat avant-garde impulses seeped into bohemia from the late 1950s onwards, a milieu in which the poet Kate Næss emerges as a central figure. Even though Norway had a limited artistic community at the beginning of the 1950s and into the 1960s, a small but rebellious experimental bohemian underground did exist. It was to be found in such venues as student theater, the jazz club Club 7, the Tronsmo Bookstore, the

literary magazine *Profil*, the art academy, underground galleries such as *Zum Blauen Apfel*, the artistic community Skippergata, and in pockets at the University of Oslo.

However much Norway's homogeneity was evident in its Labour Party politics, the 1950s also had their dissenters—be it in respect of nuclear arms, consumerism, or general materialism. 1958 had seen one body of protest, almost ten years ahead of the more famous and international revolts of 1968. Gerd Hennum has come up with the term *femtiåterne* (*generation fifty-eight*) for this earlier generation of protesters (Hennum 2007). Kate Næss, active in student theater, was one of the first Norwegian writers to pick up on Beat culture through her extensive contact with avant-garde networks in Europe. Næss was an internationally oriented young student who was wholly determined to open Norway and its readers to avant-garde poetry. Besides student theater and acting she was active as a translator, costume designer, artist, and reciter of poetry. It was in this latter respect that she was able to deepen her interest in the poetry of post-war America and also that of avant-garde literary Europe.

The student theater to which Næss belonged had a wide European net of contacts; it traveled to theatrical festivals in Scandinavia and Germany and to Istanbul, networking with intellectuals across Europe. They staged off-Broadway and European avant-garde theater. Both Kenneth Patchen and Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote for the theater, being among the American poets that Næss translated early in the 1960s for the students' activities. Additionally, she translated Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, as well as several European modernists, particularly German post-war poets.⁸ As Jan Erik Vold points out, Næss was an expert chooser of poets to translate and was at least twenty years ahead of later Norwegian translators (Næss 2003: 351).

To understand Næss's impact in full, we need to consider the oral culture in which these texts were performed: in the theater, student cafés, and jazz clubs where young artists, writers, and intellectuals were exposed to them. Næss was a seminal figure in the bohemian underground, and her voice and choice of poetry mattered. She was one of the initiators behind Oslo's main jazz haunt, and credited with inventing its name as Club 7 (pronounced *cloobshoe*). She was also a highly respected poet in her own right (Førland 1998: 17). During her career she published *Billedskrift* (*Picture Writing*, 1962), *Mørkerommet* (*Darkroom*, 1964) and *Blindgjengere* (*Duds*, 1969). The cover of her *Mørkerommet* (*Darkroom*) was an expressionist etching by the underground artist Anders Kjær.⁹ Næss's poetry carries almost inevitable similarities to the Beat poetry she translated.

Most of the American poems she translated were by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose poetic universe inclines towards capricious twists on scenes from everyday life. Ferlinghetti has neither the pace nor the flow nor the visceral subject matter of more typical Beat writers like Kerouac or Ginsberg. It was maybe this that Næss admired in his work. Her own literary style, however, is dense and often fraught with symbolism. Her central themes are angst and modern annihilation articulated in a sharp and distinct, but sometimes rather hermetic style. The poem below, "Magic," is from her first collection *Billedskrift* (*Picture Writing*) and offers a powerful statement of love. It comes close to the simplicity of haiku in dwelling on the coming and leaving of the lover: when you come, when you stay, when you leave. These simple manifestations of the lover's presence are then opened further to embody the entire universe in a magic-like yet very concrete and physical manner. The lover is transmuted into the ocean, the glowing vaults, and in the stars.¹⁰

Magic
 When you come
 the closed room opens
 letting in the seas.
 Your spell touches the walls
 and turns them
 into glowing vaults.
 When you stay
 the stars are given wings of fire

silently sinking
in timeless sun-night
taking root in the ocean bed.
When you leave
a gust of invisible wind
blows through the room.
The walls collapse
and damp stars
rise and unfold
fugitive wings.

Countercultural Venues: Club 7, Tronsmo Bookstore and Skippergata

Much of Kate Næss's own poetry and her translations of Beat literature were performed at Club 7, the bohemian club par excellence of post-war Oslo. In the 1950s the Oslo club scene was highly conservative: one had to wear a tie or a skirt, conduct cultivated conversations, and keep to one's place at the table. Puritanism guided sexual relationships. Sex was restricted to marriage, and the law prohibited homosexuality until 1972. In the underground milieu there was an expressed need to establish a true bohemian club where one might dance, drink, smoke, and date—and set one's own rules. And again, it was impulses from abroad that helped shape and fuel the bohemian underground.

Attila Horvath and Odd Skaug, nicknamed Blomst, established Club 7 in 1963, inspired by the student theater's trip to the student theater festival in Erlangen (Førelund 1998: 16). Attila Horvath was originally Hungarian and had spent two and a half years in Vienna, where he had experienced a night life and a cultural scene that he wished to recreate in Norway. His aim was to establish a place where Norwegian intellectuals and artists could meet, a club by and for artists, with poetry, music, art, and theater. In an article for the newspaper *Verdens Gang*, one of the founders described Club 7 as follows: "It might best be described as a free haven for young people with certain artistic ambitions and talents—people that have their hearts set on something and would like to express this in one way or the other. This might be through song, reciting poetry or prose, theatrical plays, different kind of music etc." (Førelund 1998: 20). Jazz and the vibrant jazz-and-poetry scene were always driving forces at Club 7. But the club also had a theater stage for cabarets, a gallery where artists exhibited, and a cinema for cartoons and avant-garde films. Club 7 continued through to 1985 as *the* bohemian haunt in Oslo in the post-war years. It much resembled the kind of venues that existed in New York and San Francisco in the same period. Galleries such as *The Six*, *The Spatsa*, *The Place*, *The Cellar*, and *The Dilexi* in San Francisco, and the Cedar Tavern in New York, were examples of the kind of lively underground communities that supplied the models for Norwegian bohemia. A gallery that sought to emulate the informality of *The Six* and *The Spatsa* was the Oslo venue *Zum blauen Apfel* (*The Blue Apple*), founded by the artist Willibald Storn, and yet another reaction to the conservative and closed artistic milieu in the capital.

The Six Gallery in San Francisco was created because the established art community was very much resistant to countercultural artists and figures. One of the founders, Wally Hedrick, recalls: "Nobody would have us, so we had to make a place of our own. It never occurred to us that we could not do it. We just did it." (Natsoulas Gallery, 1990: 33). In the same spirit Willibald Storn decided to found his own gallery in a rented storage space in Niels Juels gate in downtown Oslo. He painted the space white and named it *Zum blauen Apfel* (*The Blue Apple*) after *Zum roten Apfel*, a similar venue in Vienna run by an artist friend (Hennum 2007: 30). The gallery was short-lived, and the art that was exhibited there met strong opposition from critics. But it marks the first attempt to show art outside the established channels in Norway. Furthermore, in 1964 Willibald Storn and Marius Heyerdahl organized an art exhibition of "rejects," "Noen unge refuserte" ["some young rejects"], namely those

artists rejected for the annual Høstutstilling (the Annual Autumn Exhibition) that year. Works by Per Kleiva, Kjartan Slettemark, Ole Rinnan, Knut Rose, Knut Jørgensen, and others were exhibited at Håndverkeren ["the artisan"] (Hennum 2007: 88). All the works presented were experimental ones such as Willibald Storn's driftwood assemblage and Per Kleiva's work made of glue and sand. They mark the beginning of an artistic revolt both in the organization and style of the Oslo bohemia.

Willibald Storn was also involved in underground Oslo's most vibrant artistic community in the late 1950s: Skippergata. Artists were looking for cheap rents and, with Ole Rinnan, Storn rented a studio space in a condemned apartment building on the corner between Rådhusgata and Skippergata. This was a highly "alternative" neighborhood populated by drunks, prostitutes, and pimps, where empty apartments could be rented cheaply as storage space. In the 1960s "Skippergata" became a central workplace and meeting place for the bohemian underground of artists and jazz musicians. Siri Aurdal remembers it as a "free haven, worn-down and shabby" but as "an eruptive, creative milieu" (Hennum 2007: 13). Per Kleiva, one of the artists who belonged to the Skippergata milieu, mentions Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* as a hip book that inspired life and art in the artistic community: "If we did not completely catch the subject matter, we partly lived in line with the spirit in that book" (Hennum 2007: 79).

A different and significant underground venue in post-war Oslo that must also be mentioned in this connection is the Tronsmo bookstore. It is an independent bookstore founded in an old dress shop by Ivar Tronsmo in 1971 that focuses on art, politics, and cartoons. From the very start Tronsmo had its own Beat shelf, and the bookstore remains an important place for the distribution and discussion of Beat culture in Norway.

Beat Culture in Art

While there were fewer direct stylistic and thematic affinities between Beat poetry and Norwegian modernist poetry in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I suggest that clearer parallels may be seen between Beat art and Norwegian abstract painting and funk sculpture. This is particularly evident in the 1960s work of the artist Marius Heyerdahl, for whom Beat culture played a defining role in the creation of his oeuvre. Heyerdahl entered the Norwegian art scene as an outsider in the early 1960s. He was internationally oriented, having worked in Asia and Africa, learned five languages and studied art at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the Arts Students League in New York in the 1950s under the painter George Grosz. The paintings and sculptures he created upon his return to Norway were highly influenced by American expressionism and California funk.

Few of Heyerdahl's art works are extant because he, like the young generation of American artists, did not consider art primarily as merchandise. Rather he considered art as social and existential rather than as a commodity for the museum or private home and he destroyed several of his sculptures. He died by suicide in 1979. Heyerdahl wrote an art manifesto strongly inspired by the ideas of the Black Mountain School and Jackson Pollock, both of which inspirations bear closely upon his own sculptures and abstract paintings. Furthermore he organized independent art exhibitions and was the first kinetic and sound sculptor in Norway. Lack of acceptance, exhibition spaces, and insufficient economic support left him outside the established art world, disillusioned, poor, and estranged, quite like the generation of Californian Beat artists who were only included into the canon in later years.

But when we consider Heyerdahl's writing and art it is surprisingly cutting-edge. The manifesto, and the paintings and sculptures, are examples of Beat and neo-Dada impulses that have seeped into established art, however great the initial resistance from the established Norwegian milieu. The impact from New York and California of expressive and performative experimentation was clear, a direction he was among the very first to introduce to the Norwegian public. His monumental action paintings "Korsfestelse" (Crucifixion), "Delirium" (Delirium), "Kråka" (the Crow), "Tertiærtidens fugler" (Tertiary birds), "Orgiet" (Orgies), "Det kunstige selvmord" (the Artificial Suicide) and

“Nymphomania Blues” shocked many Norwegians. The powerful lines, dramatic subject matter and bold colors reminiscent of COBRA, Jackson Pollock, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Edvard Munch, and indeed paintings from the Beat underground were nothing if not new, provocative, a challenge to the visual senses. Heyerdahl never provided the public with information about his interests, but we know that, like Jackson Pollock, he studied Indian ritual sand painting and Jungian ideas (Rajka 2005: 81). This indicates that he may have seen painting as a cathartic emotional process, something evident in his sketch-like, intuitive brushwork.

“Korsfestelsen” (1960) shows a bleeding skeletal man in close-up. He seems entangled in a cobweb of straining lines emanating from menacing totemic masks in the lower parts of the picture plane. His eyes stare out from the canvas with empty red glowing eyes. An equally dense and spidery-layered structure is spelled out in the painting “Delirium” (1964) which shows pulsating strokes and masked figures moving in a trance or dance. All the surviving paintings from Heyerdahl exhibit this intensity of expression, human emotions pushed to the extreme. In his manifesto Heyerdahl had written enthusiastically that painting should have no reserved arenas but include everyone “criminals, insane, retarded, normal etc.” (Rajka 2005, 63). This viewpoint must surely evoke the Beat formulated by Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.

The Beat poets demand writing open to all experience, unfiltered and inclusive of all statements and expressions. It should be for the outcasts, be they communists, homosexuals, mad, or, especially, those who cannot be saved. Norway’s Beat visual artists likewise sought to create imagery drawn from daily life but rendered almost physically, in intense bursts of color and design. George Herms’s painting *Larkspur Does A Haemorrhage* includes blood from his daughter’s birth. Keith Sanzenbach’s paintings include semen, shit, and vaporub. Michael McCracken’s paintings have found objects such as sticks, metalwork, and paint tubes. Typical of Beat aesthetics is the idea that there are no borders between art and life, and that art is something that comes from within your physical body and your inner emotions, rather than as a product of the intellect. This is particularly true of the Beat milieu in California, which Heyerdahl knew first hand.

If we turn to Heyerdahl’s sculptures they show clear thematic and formal affinities with San Francisco Funk sculpture and the contents evident in Beat poetry. About his sculpture Heyerdahl explains:

I gather strange items on the city’s dumps, rebuild them and cut them up with a blowtorch. The figures from the Høstutstilling (the Annual Autumn Exhibition) consist of gun parts, cooling systems for jet engines and washing machine parts. All these different items that surround us I find so expressive that by placing them in a new context I try to create a new reality.

Alt for damene, 2. May 1966, number 30

His two sculptures *Homo Cyberneticus I* and *II* consist of machine parts, painted with aluminum paint. *Homo Cyberneticus II* is taller than the first robot and includes an astronaut’s helmet with a blinking lamp, an oil-heating gauge and a manometer as a penis. *Homo Cyberneticus I* consists of washing machine parts and a complex system of tubes. The couple constitute a male and a female counterpart: the female forms stressed by the round washing-machine belly and the male with long, spiky forms. Both figures make sounds and revolve at different speeds. They connect to the 1960s fascination with, yet fear of, the space age, as also expressed in cybernetic sculpture by Nam June Paik (as in his *Robot Opera* from 1964) (Rajka 2005, 73). Heyerdahl also comments on gender conventions, as well as making a striking response to the anxieties inherent in moving towards a new cybernetic human order. The robots have strong parallels to the part of Allen Ginsberg’s epic poem “Howl” where he foresees the destructive forces of capitalism and conformity represented by the monster robot Moloch. In a similar manner Heyerdahl’s robots epitomize these soulless, empty monsters made from the debris of modernity.

Heyerdahl's robot sculptures are a striking example of the belief that the concrete physical objects surrounding us constitute a kind of new reality and truth. Jackson Pollock famously rejected any belief that the old figurative forms of the Renaissance could capture the atomic age, a vision much shared by the Beats (Doss 2002: 125). Beat art should be real, true, and authentic, close to the essence of man. In a similar statement in his manifesto, Heyerdahl asks: "May there not be as great a beauty in the body of an aircraft or a bottle of coke, as in much so-called recognized sculpture?" (Hennum 2007: 81). He further asks: "Did not modern artists precisely wish to show us this, or have we lost the capability for an objective perception of the inner essence of things, and thus the appreciation of the beautiful inherent in the most ordinary thing?" (Hennum 2007: 81) These ideas about the beauty in ordinary things find their parallel in the aesthetics of the California Beat artists.

George Herms, California funk artist, saw art as a religious aspect of existence, where the beauty and magic in ordinary objects was fundamental. "Art (is) to be part of life, not something precious and separated from life" (Herms 1993/94). Herms and his peers Bruce Conner, Wallace Berman, Wally Hedrick, and Ed Kienholz in the funk milieu made assemblages of found objects that stressed concrete everyday beauty. They have their counterpart in Norwegian Beat artists like Heyerdahl.

Conclusion

Heyerdahl's direct link to California and New York in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and his oeuvre's striking links to funk, action painting, and Beat aesthetics is unmistakable. The same disposition is evident in the painters and authors connected to the Skippergata-milieu, the student theater, the gallery *Zum blauen Apfel* and the Club 7 where Beat literature was read, performed and lived. Axel Jensen writes confessional prose in a musical jazz-inspired language, playing himself as a modern bohemian, and Agnar Mykle challenged Norwegian post-war society's conservatism with an authentic, explicit language. May we then speak of a Norwegian Beat generation?

There can be little doubt that modernism had a slow introduction to Norway, and that the literary works of the Beat generation were translated late. But US Beat culture and those underground Norwegian artists, literary and visual, who responded to its influence helped challenge this status quo. Beat culture in Norway largely owes its imprint to those early translations by the poet Kate Næss, the articles and related writings of the poet-journalist-musician Jan Erik Vold, and the artwork of those like Heyerdahl, much of whose time had been spent in the United States. Beat achieved its audience through underground channels and connections like the National, Nordic and International "rhizome" connections described by Van den Berg. Beat impulses fueled the creative jazz, poetry and art scene in the Norwegian capital beginning as early as 1958 and continuing into the 1960s and beyond. The grounds for speaking of a Norwegian Beat generation are clearly there to be seen.

Notes

- 1 The Profil-generation consisted of Jan Erik Vold, Dag Solstad, Espen Haavardsholm, Liv Koltzow, Tor Obrestad, Eldrid Lunden, and Paal-Helge Haugen.
- 2 *The Subterraneans* was translated by Colbjørn Helander in 1960 with a foreword by Jack Kerouac. Kerouac 1960: 166–167. Helander (1911–1962) was a Norwegian scriptwriter who made war movies.
- 3 Jón Sveinbjörn Jónsson's *Beat: En antologi* includes works by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Gregory Corso, Brian Gysin, Herbert Huncke, John Clellon Holmes, Carl Solomon, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Whalen, Michael McClure, Peter Orlovsky, Amiri Baraka, Lew Welch, Philip Lamantia, John Wieners, Harold Norse, Diane di Prima, Bob Kaufman, Ted Jones and Anne Waldman.
- 4 For instance Jan Erik Vold, *Og Homer kom, så ut som Odyssevs*, Oslo: Flamme Forlag 2014 and *Beat. Dikt, tekster og fotografier fra en amerikansk generasjon*. Gjendiktet av Jan Erik Vold m. fl. Oslo: Den norske lyrikklubben.
- 5 Axel Jensen's manuscript was delivered to the publisher before Jack Kerouac's book had been published. Eide 1988: 35.
- 6 Riksmål is a written Norwegian language form, based on the Dano-Norwegian language.
- 7 Agnar Mykle, *Sangen om den røde rubin*, Gyldendal norsk forlag, 2010, 132–133, 140–141, 146–147.

- 8 Kate Næss translated poems by the following American writers: Walter Lowenfels, Marya Zaturenska, Kenneth Patchen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso. Her own poems “The Stars,” “Doors,” “Soap,” “Wednesday,” “Strange,” “The Bird of Fire,” “Fire Dance,” and “What the Boats Want” were translated to English and published in: F. H. König and Kate Naess, “The Bird of Fire,” *The North American Review*, 257:1 (1972), 67. In the article Næss is presented as “the most versatile, working with both conventional and concrete forms. She is probably the most promising of Norway’s contemporary lyric poets.”
- 9 The illustration is published in Hennem 2007: 92.
- 10 I thank the poet Annabelle Despard for this translation of “Trolldom.”

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