

Sven Lütticken

## THE NAME OF THE ROSE — FRAGMENTS FROM A CONVERSATION WITH ROSE HAMMER

Sven Lütticken is an art critic, curator and historian who contributes regularly to art magazines such as *New Left Review*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *e-flux journal*, *Grey Room* and *Afterall*. In this conversation he talks to two of the individuals who make up the artist persona Rose Hammer.

Rose Hammer is an artistic persona made up of a variable group of individuals. **ROSE HAMMER 1 (RH 1)** and **ROSE HAMMER 2 (RH 2)** are members of this group.

**ROSE HAMMER 1** Creating a collective author under the name Rose Hammer is something we came up with as a way of countering the inertia of individual artistic authorship, CV, photo, style, expectations...

**ROSE HAMMER 2** The name Rose Hammer partly stems from the curious change in iconography among European socialist and social democratic parties in the years following 1968. From what we can tell, the Parti Socialiste in France was the first left wing group to adopt the rose as a symbol with its well-known fist and rose emblem designed in 1969. Soon after, the rose was more or less universally adopted as the visual identity of socialism, at the expense of more 'militant' imagery of labour struggles such as hammers, torches, trios of arrows etc. The rose and the hammer encapsulate both the triumph and the subsequent failure of the socialist project in Europe. Besides, Rose Hammer is a versatile and somewhat international name, as the words are the same in English, German and several Scandinavian languages.

Rose Hammer is an exercise in working together, using tools borrowed from the workers' theatre movement of the 1920s and '30s such as the speech choir. There will surely be conflicts along the way, and our attempts may fail miserably (as tends to be the case with this type of idealistic undertaking). But if our predecessors were able to speak in unison and rally around a common cause, why shouldn't we succeed in doing the same? While some of us have played a bigger role during the initial stages of this project, it is our hope that Rose Hammer will grow into a horizontal unit where everyone's voice carries the same weight. As such, Rose Hammer is also an experiment in relinquishing individual ownership. By joining Rose Hammer, every member will receive an equal part of the credit (or blame) for the works of art produced by the collective.

**RH 1** Rose Hammer is the author of the work: a collective persona made up of a variable group of individuals. The name “Rose Hammer” may, though not exclusively, refer to: a) the hammer inscribed on Henrik Ibsen’s gravestone in Oslo; b) the former emblem of the Norwegian labour movement; c) the famous quote attributed to Brecht “Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it”; and d) the rose-fist symbol (see above). So, we are socialists, we are agitprop, we are Brechtians, we go for a dialectical, didactic, and collective approach. We back formal experimentation meeting radicalism in thought.

Our group now consists of between 15 and 20 persons; it is transgenerational, and while some of us continue our research into the events at Grini, the group is also busy building itself as a collective through exercises, songs, camaraderie, working on a webpage that helps to control the information disseminated about us. There are many challenges involved in group authorship – some members need and are looking for leadership; it is hard to distribute tasks without sounding authoritarian; decision-making takes longer. It can be said that we are aware of the difficulties of group dynamics; that we observe a mood that is both nostalgic and recognises the end time; and unavoidably, everyone is turning to what each does best and so a division of labour is emerging.



Performance of *National Episodes: Episode 1: Grini and the Futures of Norway* at Páfuglen, Hammersborggata, Oslo, May 2019

### The Grini Compromise

**RH 1** *National Episodes* is something slightly different from a typical Biennial project: it hopes to be a place for conversations about history and stories, narratives and narrative. Our idea originates in an analysis of the novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus, and the corresponding opera by Roberto Gerhard. From this, a narrative structure was extracted, one that could potentially be applied to different historical, social, political situations and events. Although they were different, they could be recounted using an identical narrative structure. And from that, the idea came that such a narrative/dramaturgical structure could be applied to a number of key events in Norwegian history. This led to the idea of *National Episodes*: to write and perform a series of short theatrical pieces, that would, in the Brechtian *Lehrstücke* tradition, speak to a wide audience about some key, pivotal moments in the history of Norway. Of course, the idea is not to opt for some epic treatment, but on the contrary, to construct these pivotal moments, again following in the footsteps of Brecht, or even Genet, using domestic, indoor scenes that are easy to play and stage.

We will construct our first episode from an anecdote recounted by Johan Galtung on a radio show. Galtung mentions *Griniforliket* (“The Grini compromise”), a meeting between WWII POW representatives of the Labour party and the Conservative party that allegedly took place at barrack number 12 in the spring of 1945, at the Grini detention camp. Here, shortly before the German capitulation, the political future of Norway was mapped out.

**RH 2** We interviewed the aforementioned Johan Galtung, an expert on Norwegian cold-war history, whose father August was interned in the Grini prison camp during WWII. He is the main source of the story of the informal meetings that took place at Grini the spring of 1945. Galtung emphasises the spirit of collaboration among the prisoners who, sharing the same fate and facing a common enemy, were able to form friendships across class divides. He claims that Socialists and Conservatives struck a deal whereby the left would agree to a westward orientation in the field of foreign policy, rather than strengthening ties with the Soviet Union (it is worth noting that the Norwegian Labour Party had been a member of the Communist International until 1924, and that at the time the Grini meetings were held, the Red Army had just liberated the northern part of Norway). In return for this concession, the Conservatives pledged not to block the implementation of the Norwegian welfare state. As a result, Norway accepted US aid via the Marshall Plan, joined NATO in 1949 and has been under the sphere of American influence ever since. On the other hand, the compromise made at Grini provided the country with free education and health care, powerful labour unions and heavy taxation of the wealthy. When North Sea oil – the source of Norway’s current riches – was discovered in 1969 (with the help of American companies), the oil industry was quickly nationalized so the proceeds would benefit all of the country’s citizens.

The Grini compromise is a fascinating story of how personal relationships between a small number of individuals had far-reaching consequences for the nation of Norway, well worthy of a theatrical adaptation. But what are we to make of it exactly? Is it a happy tale of consensus-building and fraternity (in stark contrast to the polarized climate of today), or a dark story of political horse-trading and the selling out of ideals? Was the Grini compromise Norway’s salvation from Soviet totalitarianism or the early infection of an American-style individualism that is slowly eating away at the nation’s soul? Norway is one of the world’s most equal countries, but one of Europe’s toughest on immigration. How do we reconcile this contradiction?

## History behind Closed Doors

**RH 1** Camus’s *The Plague* (written during WWII and published in 1947) and *The Grini Compromise* are contemporaneous. We are working at identifying pivotal moments of the history of Norway that shaped what Norway is today, taking into account practical challenges such as the fact that *Rose Hammer* is made up of about fifteen amateur dramaturges and actors and that our resources are limited; we must remain light and flexible in order to present our productions anywhere with minimal preparation. We are aiming at huis clos productions: feasible, flexible, cheap, and efficient. Another important element of all this is that we believe we have arrived at the end of the world order configured after WWII, built on a legitimacy derived from the defeat of Fascism, “built over millions of corpses”, as the Commune Eins in Berlin used to say. This is over now; and Fascism is shamelessly showing its ugly face again. We are trying to understand the kind of world we are headed towards by re-analysing the classics that shaped our vision of the world, so post WWII, so post ’68.

**RH 2** I hope *Rose Hammer* can create a space for thinking about the history and possible futures of Norwegian social democracy. As a nation, Norway has experienced an extraordinary rise in living standards within a relatively short period of time. My generation, born into prosperity and equality, are in many ways the ‘spoiled brats’ of the welfare state, oblivious to the struggles that laid the foundations of this model less than a century ago. As artists we enjoy free education and grant schemes that – at least in theory – make it possible for anyone to pursue an artistic vocation, regardless of their economic background. Many of these systems of support came into being as a result of unionized efforts, such as *Kunstneraksjonen-74* (the Artists’ Action of 1974). Norwegian artists still reap the benefits of the victories won by the activism of that time. However, there is not much gratitude to be found, either within the art field or in society at large, and there is little interest in exploring modes of collectivity. In the national political debate, “socialist” is increasingly used as a derogatory term, and attacks on “Cultural Marxism” are becoming more and more frequent.

## Avant-Garde Folklore

**RH 2** In organizing the collective we have taken several cues from the labour movements' amateur theatre groups of the interwar years. The so-called Tramgjenger/"TRAM-gangs" originating in the Soviet Union, which became widespread in Norway in the 1930s (TRAM being an acronym for Teatr Rabotschej Molodjoshi or "The Workers' Youth Theatre"). The TRAM-gangs were viewed as a vital tool in election campaigns and educational outreach at that time. These amateur ensembles were championed for their mobility and versatility of repertoire, ranging from singing and sketches to speech- and movement choirs. With simple means and limited props the TRAM-gangs (described as "combat groups") could perform just as easily on a pavement as on a stage.

Needless to say, there are obvious pitfalls in leaning so heavily on past formats such as 1930s agit-prop. We may easily end up romanticizing a past that has little to do with the current social and political conditions. On the other hand, we think it worthwhile to reconnect with the folklore of Socialism in order to gain a better understanding of our own recent history. Or to put it another way: to get a feel for the chains our grandparents' generation were able to shed, at a time when new, less tangible shackles are being forged through temp-working, disruptive technologies, increasing inequality and an unravelling of the social safety net. Perhaps these collective measures can strengthen our own defences against the mechanisms that aim to isolate the individual from its fellow human beings.

Communal singing is as old as mankind, found in every culture, on every continent. It is a defining feature of our species for one very good reason: it brings people closer together. Allegedly, scientists studying choirs have discovered that within minutes of singing, the heartbeats of all the participants synchronize. It is fair to assume that the secular song rituals of the workers' movements (in particular the speech choir) were modelled on Christian liturgy, and that the rituals served to fill the void that was left after God had been declared dead and the position of the Church weakened. But choral singing also embodies a collective spirit that is very much in line with the Socialist ethos. At its best, the choir can function as an equalizer, making space for a multitude of voices, and doing away with the notion of the 'Star.' Everyone's contribution is the same, and everyone shares the same emotional reward. A good mixed choir is a unifying force, welcoming all genders, ages and ethnicities, and thus a potential antidote to the toxic individualism that has reigned unchecked for the past few decades.

I'd be the first to admit that this is all very dreamy and utopian. Can our 'guerrilla troupe' be an efficient political weapon in the age of Trumpist social media? Probably not. But as the ghost of nationalism is once again rearing its ugly head in Europe, reviving the anti-fascist theatre of the past is a small first step towards overcoming our own paralysis. As artists we cannot do much more than flap our butterfly wings and hope for the best. It is not as if Brecht's plays and poems were much of an obstacle to the tanks rolling into Poland in 1939 either...

So yes, we are engaging with the increasing interest among artists in "the training camp as a form." In my view, the exercise in thinking, acting and speaking together with one voice is of equal importance to whatever work we end up producing. At the very least, perhaps we can develop a few survival skills while making our feeble contribution to the cultural resistance effort. Hopefully it will be a learning experience for everyone involved, and who knows, maybe some seeds will be planted among the participants that can grow into fruition in the future, even long after Rose Hammer has ceased to exist.



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### Pleasure among the Eternal Returns of the Worse

**RH 1** I hear Don Fabrizio Corbera say: “Everything must change so that everything can stay the same”. But even if we seem to be living a Groundhog Day, we fear things are spiralling towards disaster. But it is a good experiment and I cannot help thinking that we are building a classical structure for survival, a training camp for the Apocalypse, although perhaps we are more preoccupied with building (or recognising) the imaginary of this Apocalypse than with creating any really effective means of survival. We always keep in mind the subtitle from *Dr Strangelove*: How I stopped worrying and learned to love the bomb. We are both apocalyptic and integrated.

You could say that we want to become a secret society aimed not only at surviving, but at surviving with a smile. In *Fahrenheit 451*, people did not read books because they wanted to bring down the totalitarian system – they read them first and foremost for the pleasure of reading. Pleasure, if anything, will bring down the system. We are working for pleasure. The pleasure of being together, the pleasure in referring to the authors we love, the comfort of poetry, the pleasure of constructing a solid, believable, well structured, formally coherent, self-assured, beautiful performance. That is our job. It is not our job to turn Fascists into Communists or propose an alternative to neoliberalism. We should bear always in mind that we are aiming first and foremost for a well-built form, for a form of intelligent poetry. The rest will come by itself. Or not.

### The Future Is Unwritten

**RH 2** In attempting to imagine a brighter future, I sense that the runaway train of economic growth is (to mix metaphors) the elephant in the room. Of course, any political project worth its salt should aim to secure a dignified existence for all, should work against exploitation and guarantee food, shelter and other basic necessities. But in 2019 as standards of living are improving in many of the world’s ‘developing countries,’ it is painfully clear that the frenzied consumerism we have embraced in the West is not sustainable on a global level. Holding onto our lavish way of life while denying others the same privileges is of course criminally unjust. It seems to us that there is no morally valid way forward other than drastically cutting back our own consumption.

Besides, is fighting for the middle-class right to carry on shopping really what we should be doing? Trump branded himself as the saviour of American workers, promising that under his leadership they would all get ‘rich.’ Shouldn’t we be asking ourselves how to make everyone – and especially the Trumps of this world – content with less? It goes without saying that a voluntary ‘austerity program’ will never succeed as long as the top one percent keeps lining their pockets at the expense of the vast majority. No one would or should accept lower wages or less job security if the only effects of these measures—as is often the case today—is increased economic inequality. Sacrifices must be made willingly and be duly compensated for, not in monetary value, but in other, less quantifiable types of reward.

**RH 1** I want to say that today’s youth – at least in Europe, in Brussels, in Spain – is actually very politically active and concerned and they now demonstrate every Friday. They already know they will never be rich, so why bother? They are more afraid of death than of being poor. They are applying strategies of survival and they are profoundly anti-fascist. Perhaps they are not the majority, but we were not a majority 20 or 30 years ago either.

