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HOLY FLUFF

KVADRENNALEN:

Let

the

Art World

Unite

Alice Máselníková, Interview with Thierry Mortier

Vänligen rör
inte konsten

Over the past few months, the art movement KVADRENNALEN has been popping up in various instances all over Sweden, listing and promoting exhibitions, performances and other events from various sectors of the art world, flagshipping its manifesto both online and offline. In its scope reminiscent of the recently discovered ten-armed octopus ancestor *Syllipsimopodi bideni*, aptly named after president Joe Biden, KVADRENNALEN is continuously growing in order to gather more voices and achieve its goal. Which is? To show that the artworld has the capacity to stand united, fight for a cause, and share similar values. How does the movement operate – and what is the meaning behind this recent addition to the art world? Find out more in our interview with KVADRENNALEN's initiator, Belgian artist based in Stockholm, Thierry Mortier.



GREBNELLAW, 'OONA/NANO/ONAN/ANNO/ANON/NONA', Candyland, Stockholm, 21 January–6 February 2022, photo: Thierry Mortier

What is KVADRENNALEN?

KVADRENNALEN is an open invitation to everyone in the art world to voice the same message: (free) art is essential in (a free, democratic) society, and do it with what we do best: art! It is an idea I presented to the Swedish art scene several months ago in connection to the 2022 election year in Sweden: to create a platform together where, for nine months, from 11 January 2022 (opening day of Riksdagen – the Swedish parliament) until 11 September 2022 (election day), across all disciplines and across the nation, the Swedish art scene gets to voice its concerns about the

political threats to the free artistic expression in Sweden – through art. The important part is to also bring the message across to the general public, not just the regular art audience, but the entire voting public: that art is essential for society, and consequently for them. It is essential because of art's independent critical voice; because art is the manifestation of their society.

It is not a fun idea, but a necessary idea. Free artistic expression is under threat here in Sweden, as well as throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Personally I saw what happened in Flanders, Belgium, once a populist government took over. There are artists originally from Poland and Slovenia that joined KVADRENNALEN because they know what politics has done in their homeland to those art scenes. I always assume this is general knowledge already and I believe that in the art world it is to a certain extent. You, Alice, and Andreas Ribbung understood it immediately because you already knew, and it is why you gave KVADRENNALEN a programme slot at Supermarket 2021. But even if I am wrong about this being general knowledge, the consequences are even more important: when free artistic expression is under threat then the freedom of expression of the people is under threat. That means that we need to convince the public of art's importance in their personal lives, and do that *before* their votes are cast, since it will have immediate and direct consequences for everyone working in the arts... as much as everyone outside of the arts.

How exactly does it work to implement these ideas in practice? Can you give us an example of what KVADRENNALEN does, and has done?

KVADRENNALEN is not so much the 'acting agent', it is rather the result of many agents' actions. But, a great question that needs some explanation. For nine months in 2021, I and over time a number of artists and art professionals, like Anna Koch (Weld), Conny Blom and Nina Slejko Blom (CAC), and too many to list here now, spoke with all the different layers of the Swedish art scene, meaning public, private, semi-

public organisations, artist-run spaces, artists and we found a couple of issues. The first one was that KVADRENNALEN could not be political itself, we are artists and art organisations, we know art, not politics. The second one is that 'the art world' is a label given to us from outside of the art world even though the general perception is that 'the art world' is divided, we are still labelled as one homogenous group. These two observations formed the basis of the KVADRENNALEN manifesto: art is essential in society and the art world is united in their belief in art. By keeping the message pure in terms of art KVADRENNALEN avoids being political. It wants to change the general misconception that art is not essential, which means we are not speaking for one or another political agenda, we are speaking up for art, and we can approach art from a societal perspective. The second one is really special: we, the art world, are labelled as such by the general public, by the politicians, by the media. Whether we actually feel connected, united, whatever word we do not like to accept here, does not matter. We are viewed as a group, which actually makes us a group.

But, apart from that outside perception, there is also a lot of truth here. I believe that every artist, irrespective of their discipline, believes in art, and when you have approximately 30,000 artists working today in Sweden that all believe in the same thing, namely art, that actually means that they are all united in their 'belief' in art. To state that the art world is divided is ignoring the one thing that allowed the outside perspective to label it as a single group. KVADRENNALEN is working to get these two pillars across, both internally and externally. How do you show that the art world is united in their belief in art? You put an umbrella over all the individual efforts that all the individual actors in the art world are setting up. If you have an art show in Landskrona on the same day that you have a music performance in Umeå and a dance performance in Dalarna then the perception is countered that we, the art world, do not work together. It's all about the perception, because political policy is actually made on perception. The art world is seen as divided? Then show, really show visually, that this is not true.

As to what KVADRENNALEN actually does? It allows individual efforts from artists, art spaces to be perceived as the collective effort of art, and if we keep that up long enough then there will be a turning point, where every individual effort is going to get a push from the collective, and where the platform, created by all the individual actors, will push through the public debate to allow artists and art spaces to speak for art.

Is it possible today to think that art can change politics, or change people's minds? Has it ever been possible?

I really like the formulation of the question, because it shows the challenge at hand. KVADRENNALEN is not set up to change the outcome of the election, that would mean that it is doing politics and it does not do that. The aim is to change the misconception around art in society. The thinking is this: if artists and art organisations can show the general public that art is essential for them then the general public will never vote for a politician that wants to take away something that is essential for them. Indirectly that would change both politics and the people's minds. But, the question as to whether art ever had the possibility to change anything is particularly interesting, because it opens up another perspective: what persuaded the people and the politicians that art is not essential in the first place? Was that a collective observation? Or is it a nurtured perception, and if so who nurtured it? If not art, then what has the potential to generate change? Personally I believe it is impossible not to create change with art. There are already too many examples in art history, Goya, Picasso, Santiago Sierra, Jenny Holzer, Valie Export, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler, Kara Walker, Otobong Nkanga, Francis Alys, Theaster Gates, ... the real question is however,



Björkö konstnod/HYBRID, opening of KVADRENNALEN, 11 January 2022, photo: Thierry Mortier

what do you mean with “to change people’s minds, or politics”? All the people’s minds? All the politics? Most change takes a lot of time and it becomes difficult to pinpoint the one thing that created the change, because it almost never is just one thing. An old Belgian example, the story goes that the Belgian revolution for independence started because of an opera performance in Brussels in 1830, where the public stormed out of the ‘The mute girl of Portici’ and started the fight against the Netherlands. Was it the opera piece that gave the Belgians their courage or insight, or was it a culmination of events and the opera just hit the right nerve at the right time? When the Yes Men made their Dow Chemical piece and got Dow Chemical to admit something in public that they were determined to never reveal, did that change the world? Actually, it did. Dow Chemical made an admission they would never have made otherwise.

But I understand that you are also asking whether it is still possible ‘today’ to have that belief in art’s strength and there I need to agree that it feels more probable that the art world has lost its belief in its own strength, although honestly I do not know if we can make the comparison today. Perhaps there is just as much activism today as in any other time in history? If you read about Guy Debord’s frustration with the art world in the 1960s, then perhaps there’s

just as much belief in art today as before? A big part of KVADRENNALEN’s message is to actually reclaim or ignite the naive belief in art, and in our own strength. No real change has ever come out of purely realistic probability calculations. If KVADRENNALEN was not a naive idea, it would not stand a chance. If we do not believe we can actually change the misconception about art in society then there is no point in trying.

The vast majority of criticism KVADRENNALEN gets, has very little to do with the idea of KVADRENNALEN itself, but has everything to do with the individual perspectives that do not allow naiveté as a viable option. Yet it is perhaps the only option that has not yet been tried. Across the globe we have seen protests, demonstrations and rallies by all different art scenes to protest against censorship, budget cuts and much worse in some countries. What all those actions have in common is that they happened after the fact, after the censorship, the cuts, the much worse... and it is always too late. Why not try and stand together before the radical political shift happens? If the worst case scenario does not become reality then we will still come out stronger because we will have worked together... so there is no bad outcome here. And, if the worst case scenario does become reality and we did not even try something else this time, then we will only have ourselves to blame, don’t you think?

You make it sound like joining KVADRENNALEN is the only ‘right way’ to make art credible or to be united or to convey a message.

That is not the intention, but I can see where that perception is created, and I have not found a way around it. There is a nuance that really is key which the KVADRENNALEN manifesto addresses by stating the difference between ‘art’ and ‘art in society’. It is not threats to art, but threats to free artistic expression that concern KVADRENNALEN and those threats are societal, meaning they are coming from politics and the general perception. To be more specific about KVADRENNALEN as ‘the only right way’. From the start I have said if you have a better idea than KVADRENNALEN, then KVADRENNALEN will join that! So it is not that KVADRENNALEN is the only right thing to do... I believe the only right thing to do as an artist or as an art space when you are being threatened is to do something... and perhaps a little more specific, something you have not tried before, because everything we have tried until now is what got us to where we are now – under threat.

María Lundberg and Andrea Diaz, ‘VOICES: From inside to here’, curated by Juanma González, Flat Octopus, Retorikkabinett at Färgfabriken, 13 March 2022, photo: Thierry Mortier



I know that KVADRENNALEN is not the only option, but it is the only option I could come up with. I also understand that it is much easier to criticise an idea that is in front of you than to come up with a better idea. A lot of people, including artists, understand everything that is happening and they also see what is ahead, but that does not mean they have figured out what they themselves can do about it. When we applied for funds, which we did not get, we were told that there was actually a movement that had a similar thinking. It was called 1000 Days of Culture and was set up in 2019 by seventeen big art institutions to show the importance of art in society. By the time we found out about the initiative it had already been stopped.

One of the big goals of KVADRENNALEN is to show the public that the art world will unite under threat. The only way to show the public one big art world, is to do just that, meaning the art world cannot afford two or three or fifteen different movements all trying to do the same thing that would be completely counterproductive and actually show division. It does not mean that KVADRENNALEN is a replacement for all the good work that is already being done to safeguard the free artistic expression here in Sweden. So many artist-interest groups are doing all the necessary lobbying work now, a lot of organisations are setting up talks and lectures and more. All that work is needed. KVADRENNALEN just tries to fill a big void that is not being addressed yet: voice the art world's concern with what the art world actually knows best, art! KVADRENNALEN is set-up as a complement to all the other work that's being done and it is something every single artist, art space, art institution can do right now: bring art to the people and have the conversation with the public. No threshold, no membership fee, just bring your artistic responses to the political threats we are facing... and show it to the biggest possible audience!

What are your hopes with KVADRENNALEN?

There are two – the naive, idealistic hope, and the realistic one. The idealistic one is that by 11 September this year the entire Swedish art scene, artists, art spaces, art institutions, all alike, will have figured out that the time to act is now, and that it is up to us, each and everyone of us, to act. Just imagine, 30,000 artists and all the art institutions and venues standing together, and showing just that very thing to the public, media, and politicians – that they stand together. A pure coup de force... and it only takes one decision to do so.

The realistic hope is that we get 5% or maybe 10% of



our art colleagues on board, and we still make art history. Because that is what we are doing. Never has this been attempted before the fact! Meaning, never has an art scene stood up *before* a radical political shift happens. After the fact, no problem, then the art scene anywhere in the world finds each other to go demonstrate against the cuts, censorship, forced political directives... Unfortunately it is always too late then. The only thing to do at that moment is damage control.

But let's say that we only get 10% onboard, after months of showing the label KVADRENNALEN out there, people are going to start noticing a change, the media will pick it up and then we, the art scene, can make a seemingly little tweak, but with a huge impact. Instead of doing what we always do, installing shows and performances individually in our own little bubbles, we do exactly the same thing but we show it under a collective label and for a collective cause to which every single artist owes their livelihood: art. That in itself is already quite a radical move! Now, the radicalism of KVADRENNALEN might seem unimpressive, but that is only a superficial perception. KVADRENNALEN is transdisciplinary – visual artists working with musicians, authors, theatre producers, dancers and others. These different categories do not make sense in our cause: they are all artists, they all manifest society through their work. KVADRENNALEN has no hierarchy; emerging and

established artists work side by side. This is because when art is under threat, every artist is under threat. KVADRENNALEN is nationwide, it is not about Stockholm versus another city or versus art outside of the urban landscape. KVADRENNALEN is not even an organisation, it is an idea, and an idea that does not even belong to me, or to you, or to any individual actor, it belongs to all of us as a collective, whether we want to accept that or not. There are plenty of colleagues out there that have a hard time accepting that the art world is a collective... which it very much is, although perhaps not self-declared, meaning if the

Valie Export, Jenny Holzer and Hans Haacke are out there, brewing absolute masterpieces... so I hope that they will bring that work in front of the public who need to see it – now.

So where is KVADRENNALEN now?

Right now, we are only at the start, but by the time this gets printed we will be half way through already. And it feels as if every day we are in yet another situation. We opened KVADRENNALEN in January with decentralised openings. Everyone who was already onboard or interested got the invitation to open KVADRENNALEN themselves. It was the only opening format that felt right. When you set up a decentralised ownership, where everyone who joins actually decides what KVADRENNALEN is going to be, then it makes little sense to have a centralised opening in one city, in one art venue. So we had spaces open KVADRENNALEN, but also artists and all in their own manner and with their own voice. Since the opening, every couple of days we have had spaces and artists join, bringing events, works, performances and others to the calendar. The movement is growing, which is brilliant.

So where is KVADRENNALEN now – it is right on schedule. It is slowly growing towards critical mass, which I hope we can achieve around the summer, so we can really have a massive amount of different art voices speaking up for art when the election noise is heading towards its climax, so we, as one art scene, can push through the public debate and let art and artists speak for art, instead of politicians and policymakers that speak about art, which are two very different things. In short, KVADRENNALEN is on, it is happening, it's here and whoever wants to put their art in the calendar just needs to reach out.

How does this accumulation of events differ from other art calendars that do this?

Oh, that is not too difficult. The KVADRENNALEN calendar is a consequence, it is the form that emerges when all the efforts are brought together. Regular art calendars list events to inform a public where to find what and most often monetise that service. They list individual efforts from actors in the art field. The KVADRENNALEN calendar shows the collective effort of all the artists and art spaces that are creating the platform, it is there to show the collective voice to the public of course, but also to the media, to the policymakers... and it also functions as a protection of the idea. KVADRENNALEN is an idea that is being executed right now, and ideas can easily get hijacked. I am not saying that it will happen, but it can. Since



Efva Lilja, 'Med Kärtek', Retorikkabinett at Färgfabriken, 24 March 2022, photo: Thierry Mortier

outside world calls us 'the art scene' then that is what we are.

In both versions, I like seeing great art appear on the platform, because that is what it is here for: to offer a platform for contemporary art to respond to the political threats we are facing. We all know that we can do it, we all know our heroes, we all know the brilliant artworks from the past that were addressing the political issues of that time and they all did it with great art. I know that the Swedish Santiago Sierra,



KVADRENNALEN is not an actual organisation our failsafe is the calendar. If an event is not in the calendar it is not an official KVADRENNALEN event. That does not mean the event or the organiser has bad intentions, perhaps they just forgot to send through their event details, but the possibility is always there that someone wants to discredit the movement or worse. Our calendar serves entirely different purposes than other art calendars, it is there to list but also to show the collective nature of the movement and protect it.

What are the biggest obstacles?

It is not easy to figure out what one can actually do in the face of political threats and that is exactly what KVADRENNALEN is asking everyone. So that is the first obstacle, it is a big ask. Another is the concept of decentralised ownership, as most people have difficulties with accepting that kind of 'empowerment' because it is quite confrontational to have to answer "what do you want to do?", when the question comes with the expectation that once you figure out what to do, that you also execute it. And, then there is the state-of-affairs we are all faced with: too much work, too much pressure, too many good causes to fight for, on top of that we just went through two years of pandemic, there is a war in Ukraine... How does anyone figure out what to prioritise when we are constantly in crisis mode? A whole different level of obstacles are the internal political threats – just for the record, KVADRENNALEN never specified which political threats are being answered from the platform, so it is easy to assume that it is only

towards the outer political threats but the internal politics of the art scene itself are just as much a threat. An example, I still believe, and to this date nobody has contradicted me on this, that KVADRENNALEN should not have started from the artists... It should have started from the public art institutions that have the assignment to execute the Swedish cultural policy goals (or Kulturpolitiskmål as it is known in Swedish), that is what they are paid for with taxpayers' money. The public institutions should be the first line of defence when the cultural policy goals are under threat. But, when we asked public culture institutions to join they were the first ones to state that the independent art actors should do this.

So, since you mention you have never done this – what are the threats?

Too many to list. Just take a look at what the art scene in Poland, Hungary, Slovenia is facing. How many political appointments are being made in those countries' institutions and museums. Look at what happened in Flanders, Belgium, where the first thing that happened when the populist government was formed is that the minister of culture disappeared, not the function but a person with culture as a full time responsibility. Bolsonaro did the same in Brazil, where the whole ministry of culture disappeared and its function is now under the ministry of tourism. In Flanders, the signal was given, and it was also stated, that art and culture are just hobbies which means that the function of a minister of culture should also be a hobby for a real minister. A textbook example how the perception is created that art and culture

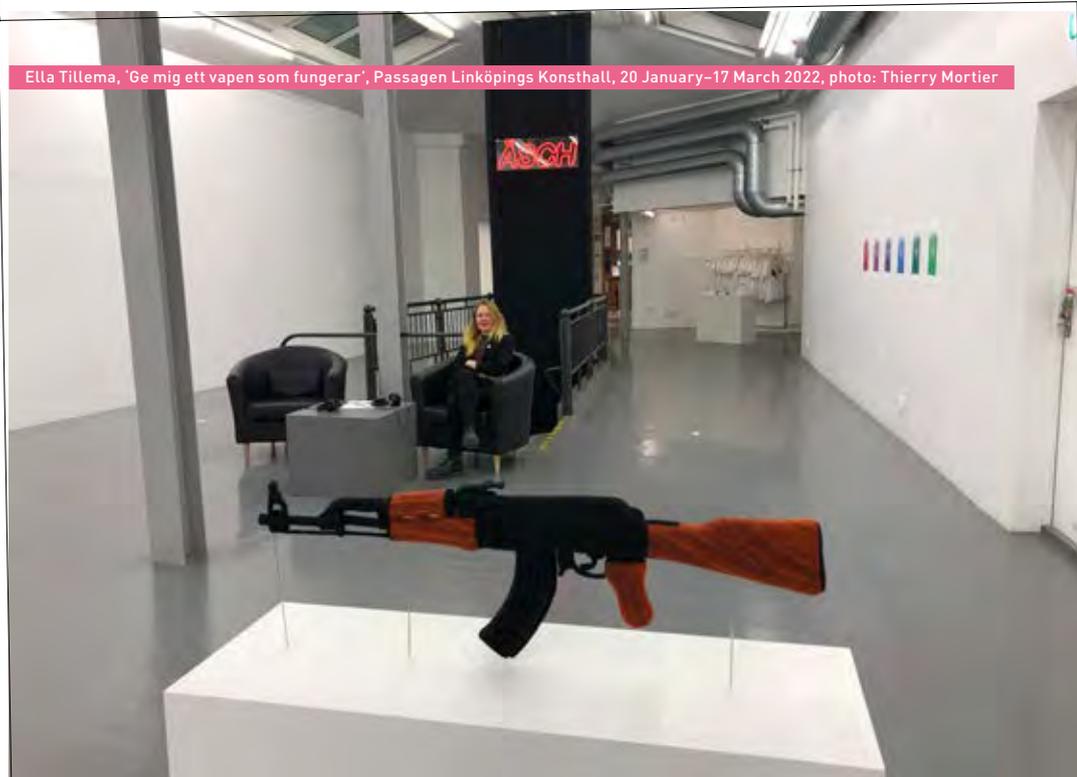
does not matter. The irony is that the ruling populist party actually states that culture is the most important thing in society from their point of view, as shown in their 'Flemish canon of art' that they are building now. Exactly the same rhetorics as here in Sweden, except in Flanders it is about Flemish culture and exporting good Flemish art.

Art history has already taught us what it means when politicians start making lists of what they believe is good and bad art. The art world should never fear politicians that have no interest in art and culture, it is the politicians that show an interest that we need to fear. Those are more of the big threats. Less obvious, but just as bad are all the small, little strategic cuts we are facing that are directed at short term political gains but have long lasting effects in the structure of the art world for example when funds are taken away from the culture school system – then the egalitarian, inclusive and accessible system to bring art into the lives of people at an early age is suddenly gone, the same happens when entry fees are installed at the state museums, again this comes at the expense of accessibility for the people... and these policies are actually installed under the false banner of fighting elitism. It is the change of political policy that is going to make the art world elitist at every level. There is nothing wrong with having an 'elite' when it is the consequence of having a broad base. The policies we see happen when populist politics take over is that the base, the egalitarian part, is cut to promote the top... in the long term that means we get lost generations of artists that could not develop because the base and the middle part of the structure was not there when they needed it. I could actually keep on listing here. The art world is a connected structure,

when it gets cut here and there, in a strategic manner, the consequences keep piling up. But to be really blunt, the most important threat in a free, open democracy is to lose the critical voice of free artistic expression. When that is lost, then we lose the freedom of expression for every person in Sweden. So what is really at stake are our democratic values. Losing free artistic expression is always the first symptom of a failed state.

What happens when/if KVADRENNALEN accumulates the 'critical mass' and gets the message out there? What if it does not change anything, the threats are turned into attacks and art in Sweden gets restricted?

We will have tried something that had not been tried before on this scale. We will have worked together across disciplines, across the whole country, across all the different levels... and that alone will have made us stronger. It will even prepare us for reinventing ourselves when needed. Art does not disappear when we lose our democratic structures, but our survival will need to be rethought, reorganised, and we will just have learned new ways of working together by setting this up. We will also have seen, made and shown some great art. In short, just by setting up KVADRENNALEN something will already have changed, it already has, regardless of how many threats will have been addressed. I have not figured out a single downside yet to standing side by side in an art world where everyone has each other's back... have you?



Ella Tillema, 'Ge mig ett vapen som fungerar', Passagen Linköpings Konsthall, 20 January–17 March 2022, photo: Thierry Mortier

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