7007 Oaks

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Approaching the village of Thorum along the Fur road, in North Salling in the Fursund region, stand seven very young oak trees, flanked by seven, meter-tall upright basalt stones. As you come closer to Thorum, you can see a new forest of 7000 oak trees gradually taking shape on the now defunct playing fields beside the community hall in the centre of the village.

The seven oaks and the seven basalt stones that you pass on your way in to Thorum are artist Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensens artistic supplement to the village-forest project driven by the residents of the village. Her work is an element of *Grasslands*, a project included in the European Capital Of Culture, Aarhus 2017, under the theme “Rethink the Village/Coast to Coast”. This artistic aspect of the village forest takes form as a piece of living art, directly relating to change and the processes of nature. One could also call it a natural or earth-based artwork, somewhere between sculpture and landscape architecture, which, as implied, is site-specific, encompassing a distinct relevance to this particular place, and yet in no way preventing the work – and its hopeful and anticipated expansion across the landscape – from referring to other national and global meanings.

Regarding national connotations arising from the content of the work, *7007 Oaks* associates to the status of the oak (in strong competition with the Beech) as the national tree of Denmark, a symbol of strength and resoluteness. The oak appears in this guise in Olaf Rudes painting *Danish Landscape* that hangs in the Danish Parliament, where a row of twisted oaks with stones lying at their foot, stretch out into the landscape. In addition, the so-called Constitutional and Women Oaks, planted to commemorate the introduction of the Danish Constitution in 1849 and women’s right to vote in 1915, often with a corresponding stone memorial, come to mind.

Unlike the shifting and growing trees, the basalt stones appear as constant and unchanging markers in the landscape, functioning, so to speak, as a measuring-stick for the growth of the oaks. For the moment, the upright stones dominate the trees that will, with time, grow and spread their crowns above them. The basalt stones, like the trees, are firmly connected to time. They hold astonishing geological eras in situ, as silent witnesses to the development of the planet. As art historian Lucy R. Lippard writes:”Stones affect people because they imply immortality, because they have so obviously survived.” Moreover, the stones draw parallels to mysterious prehistoric megalithic centres like Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain in England or Carnac in Brittany, with their standing stones or menhirs, erected in circular or long, vertical rows.

The most important of the more contemporary references is to the German artist Joseph Beuys and his processual art project *7000 Oaks*, begun in Kassel, Germany as part of the exhibition Documenta VII in 1982 and completed, in 1987, shortly after his death. This project began with Beuys depositing a large number of basalt stones in front of the exhibition space, in the form of an arrow, pointing towards a small oak tree he had planted. For every oak that was planted in the wider city of Kassel, with an associated basalt stone marker, the original pile of stones diminished until all 7000 trees had been distributed and spread in the urban area based on suggestions from the city’s residents, schools, neighbourhoods, etc.

The aim was to transform the city’s asphalt to green areas, subjecting the city to a *Verwaldung*, a “reforestation” that would facilitate a social exploitation of the urban space. Similar projects have been implemented around the world since, in Oslo, Sydney and New York and with *7007 Oaks* Thorum has become a part of this worldwide network.

*7000 Oaks*  is an expression ofBeuys concept of social sculpture, which he developed in the early 1970’s, and according to which the materials of art could not only consist of marble, bronze or pigments on canvas, but could actually include all of life – thoughts, actions, relationships, conversations and objects – and thus could be performed by anyone. Beuys aspired to the activation of the audience as a social community, as participating and performing players, and were it up to him, the distinction between art and life should be completely abolished. As *7000 Oaks* demonstrates, Beuys’ action-based, collective sculpture projects were often underpinned by a strong awareness of ecology and the environment and, interestingly, he was a co-founder of the German Green Party. In Thorum, the project *7007 Oaks,* (which Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen has very appropriately called the work, in a sort of tribute to Beuys and his legacy) has the potential to counteract and transform the many changes imposed on rural areas, which can easily be observed in villages in the form of abandoned and decaying buildings.

Beuys’ thoughts were later expanded on, by among others, French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud, who in 1998 introduced the concept of “Relational Aesthetics”, an artistic method, that through a variety of processes aims to develop social spaces, by identifying alternative forms of cohabitation. Art, in this sense, must communicate social interaction rather than merely creating aesthetic objects. A work of art, according to Bourriaud, must contain an impulse to inhabit the world together. This is an art presented outside the art gallery or museum, and whose ambition is to be public and democratic, with a focus on temporary and more permanent interpersonal relationships.

Both Bourriaud’s views and Beuys’ works and theoretical considerations are relevant here in relation to the narrative behind the creation of Thorums *7007 Oaks.* The process involved in the project testifies to a new way of understanding and making art, where the artist takes a step back and working as a facilitator or catalyst for an artistic process involving the local community and its needs in the form of a dialogue based on communal discussions. The residents of Thorum have therefore discussed the location of the seven oak trees and basalt stones in depth, and their conversations with the artist and each other have been decisive in deciding where the next round of marked trees, to be sourced through crowdfunding, will stand.

The project also expresses a new vision of nature as something that we cannot merely regard through a distanced appreciative gaze, as when we examine framed landscape paintings or photograph a particularly attractive tourist view. We have become more aware of our dependence on nature – and possible more importantly – nature’s dependence on us for survival.

A project such as *7007 Oaks*, which deliberately sets out to establish a synergy between the needs, ideas and plans of the residents of Thorum, here in the form of an urban forest, can help to strengthen this awareness.