

LEITH SCHOOL OF ART STUDY TRIP TO BERGEN AND HORDALAND REGION

13 -17 September, 2015

BACKGROUND

Leith School of Art is an independent college of the visual arts in Edinburgh, and a limited company with charitable status. Uniquely the art school owns and operates in the oldest Norwegian seamen's mission outside of Norway. Leith School of Art recognises the importance of the building and always welcomes Norwegian visitors and strives to develop relations with the Norwegian community.

When the Norwegian church was no longer sustainable as a church and sold, a group of people based in Bergen formed a small trust to maintain an interest in this important old building. The Helping Hand Trust remains an active partner with Leith School of Art in striving to maintain the old building, in developing relationships between Norway and Scotland and in arranging cultural events in the old church with a Norwegian connection.

PURPOSE

The Chair and Principal of Leith School of Art were invited to Bergen by the Helping Hand Trust with assistance from Hordaland County Council to meet with artists, galleries, art centres, art schools and other cultural establishments in order to:

- Build relationships
- Establish connections
- Explore potential for student exchanges and residencies
- Explore potential for staff exchanges and continuing professional development
- Explore the potential for Norwegian students to undertake the Leith School of Art one year Foundation Course as a stepping stone to studying for a degree in the visual arts in the United Kingdom or returning to study in Norway
- Discuss the possibilities for exhibitions to be arranged from Norway to Scotland or from Scotland to Norway.
- Discuss opportunities for cultural visits in both directions
- Gain a better appreciation of how the visual arts are organised in Norway
- Gain a better understanding of contemporary culture in Norway
- Raise the profile of the creative work undertaken by Leith School of Art in Norway's oldest church overseas
- To help raise funds to maintain the fabric of the old Seamen's Mission.

PROGRAMME

The Helping Hand Trust pieced together a full programme which led to many fruitful conversations, exchanges of experience, thoughts and ideas resulting in initial plans for further exchange being drawn up.

On Monday the first meeting took place in the visionary Litteraturhuset where we were introduced to Kristin Helle-Valle the director, and we soon established a mutual interest in the writing of the Scottish author Kathleen Jamie, who Kirstin is eager to promote. Her book *Sightlines*, is not well known in Bergen, despite its chapter featuring the Hvalsalen (Bergen's Natural History Museum) and Kathleen Jamie's book *Findings* became the theme for our students to explore last year and an interview with Kathleen Jamie with readings from the book took place in the School.

We met with Tor Titlestad, Senior Advisor from Hordaland County Council and Ruth Rorvik, Advisor for Business Development for the city of Bergen and Prof Nils George Brekka, previously Professor of Cultural Studies, Vernacular Art and Architecture at Bergen University, along with Lisbet Iversen and Terje Inderhaug, members of the Helping Hand Trust. We were able to explain our vision for the visual arts which is essentially to create a small community like art school with a passionate belief in teaching with clarity, order and structure while caring for each individual and encouraging the growth, development and flourishing of each individual gift. Leith School of Art is a mature and well established organisation, showing steady growth over 26 years. We were invited to explain our connection to Norway through our building and how that connection provides a great opportunity for the exchange of cultural events. We were able to explain that the building faced some costly repairs for which we needed to raise funds.

Prof Brekka provided suggestions for student study tours that could be of mutual interest connecting drawing, architecture and the natural environment of both countries. Ruth and Tor agreed to consider how links might be developed through their respective organizations.

It was recognised that relationships can take time to build and that we had made a very positive start that could lead to exciting cultural exchanges.

Our next meeting was at KIB (Kunstscolen i Bergen) with the Principal Arne Bakke and the administrator Rieneke Schilperoort. It was very worthwhile to make contact with a small art school running a course equivalent to the Foundation Course at Leith School of Art. It was also very interesting to see the studios and general facilities and the work of the students. Once again we soon found common ground and will keep in touch to explore possibilities for student study trips and staff continuing professional development. We would welcome a visit to Edinburgh from students and staff of KIB.

The next day, Tuesday, was a full day out of town to visit two beautifully positioned art centres; Oseana (guided by Marianne Gathe) and Kabuso (guided by Karen Noer Korssjoen), which both provided an insight into the art and culture of Norway with contemporary and traditional art on view. We then travelled to Hardangar Fartoyvernssenter (guided by Geir Madsen) meeting Board members from Haku Art School which is a small art school similar to KIB in the course it offers. We heard of the struggle involved in trying to keep this art school open with a very small cohort of students, resulting in its temporary closure.

We met the artist Aud Baekkelund who provided us with a presentation on the strong fraternity of artists called Harding Puls, working around the Hardangar Fjord. It was exciting to see such a vibrant group of artists so well organised, exhibiting together and offering summer residencies at Kunstnarhuset Messen which would certainly be of interest to Scottish artists associated with Leith School of Art. We will seek to develop the links established in meeting this artist and lecturer.

As we travelled we visited Holdhus Church in Fusa, a significant wooden, post reformation church, now preserved by the Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments (Fortidsminneforeningen).

In Bergen, on Wednesday we were able to visit Amalie Scram's House (guided by Eli Veim) which we recognised was a wonderful initiative to provide a creative community for those suffering with mental health illnesses. We were very impressed by the range of facilities and the gentle methods applied to facilitate the members of this House. Our School is a different type of organisation but we were able to learn from our visit as we also aim to create a positive community of artists and students and we have students with mental health illnesses.

After this visit it was a pleasure to meet Bjorn Follevag and to learn of his work as a freelance curator and his work with many of the best contemporary Chinese artists including Ai Wei Wei and Li Songsong who is married to a Norwegian. Bjorn very kindly gave us a guided tour of the city galleries Kode 2 and 3 which included a beautiful exhibition of contemporary textiles, the collection of the Romantic artist Dahl, an exhibition of Art in Battle (a reconstruction of the German art and non-art exhibition of 1942/43) and of course the great collection of Edvard Munch. In the Art in Battle exhibition we noted two modernist paintings by Aage Storstein, an artist we were already aware of as his grandson is a valued lecturer with us at Leith School of Art.

Over lunch, Bjorn suggested that some exhibition exchanges might be established between Gallery 3:14 and Leith School of Art (see below).

Our final visit was to the Bergen Kultureskole visual arts department and we enjoyed our meeting with the director Alf Gjerstad and the Scottish born and Edinburgh School of Art educated teacher Gillian Carson. We were very impressed with this publically supported after-school opportunity for children to develop their creative gifts (including music and the visual arts) to a high level. Our understanding is that most post-school activity of this sort in the UK depends on small, privately run after school clubs. We would be very pleased to help facilitate study trips to Scotland and Leith School of Art and recommend our Foundation Course for any students interested in studying in the United Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

Our study tour was very well organised by the Helping Hand Trust and we have gained a real understanding and appreciation of the art and culture of western Norway. At every meeting we were very warmly received and able to establish links, connections and relationships.

With the assistance of Bjorn Follevag, we have agreed, in principal, to hold an exhibition of Bodil Friele paintings at Leith School of Art in April, 2016. We plan to exhibit Bodil Friele's work relating to her father who flew Lancaster bombers with the allied forces from the UK

in the second world war. In exchange we have discussed holding an exhibition of some of the best work by staff and past students of Leith School of Art at Gallery 3:14 in Bergen. The exhibition should include paintings by Matt Storstein, grandson of the well known Norwegian artist Aage Storstein. Bjorn Follevag has also agreed to visit Leith School of Art to give a lecture on Ai Wei Wei and contemporary Chinese art.

We were encouraged by the interest expressed by all those involved in the Helping Hand Trust during our visit in assisting Leith School of Art to raise vital funding for repairs and, if possible, improvements to the old Norwegian church in which we operate.

We are grateful for the hospitality shown to us by Jan and Eli Holdhus, Terje Inderhaug and Lisbet Iversen.

We believe we have made an excellent start in discussing and organising cultural exchanges between Norway and Scotland which will go a long way towards raising the profile of Norway's very special and oldest overseas church.