

Stream Nest - the tale of a battle for art

By Ingunn Eriksen

Once upon a time there was a feud in the town of Hamar, Norway. The conflict was about Stream Nest in Åkersvika (the Bay of Åker). How the conflict ended is almost beyond belief. But let me tell you about all that came to pass, one thing at a time.

In connection with the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer in 1994, the LOOC (Lillehammer Olympic Organizing Committee) invited eight international artists to make landscape art for Åkersvika in Hamar. The Japanese sculptor Takamasa Kuniyasu was asked to take part since he used both bricks and logs in his work. He was just the man for the job, since this area had in times past been the site of both brickworks and a depot for log floating. Even today old people can remember a time when women washed clothes at the water's edge and timber-drivers jumped adroitly from log to floating log. The young of today have grown up with the log depot, which was closed down the year before this art project was started.

The root cause of the conflict which later came to the fore is to be found in the choice of location. Åkersvika is a wetland area with a large number of archeological finds from the Viking era, and it is also a bird reserve. When the Olympic Skating Hall, christened the "Viking Ship", was to be built, there was a huge rumpus – a debate between the protagonists of the environment and the champions of change and development. Despite this, the art project "Åkersvika Landscape Art" got off the ground and received financial support from the LOOC, the Nordic Culture and Art Museum, Hamar Municipality and the County Authorities.

Takamasa wanted to build a gigantic bird's nest, but he wasn't allowed to place it out in the water - which is what he wanted to do. For reasons unbeknown to me the best location was near the entrance to the car park to the Viking Ship skating hall, fifty metres inside the borders of the bird reserve. A possible reason was that the ground at other places was too soft, so the LOOC insisted hard and fast that the sculpture should be built inside the nature reserve. The County Commissioner granted permission for the project to go ahead on condition that the construction would be dismantled before the migratory birds returned the following spring. Takamasa was happy with this and duly started work on the sculpture - a 6 metre high, 27 metre long and 17 metre wide bird's nest made of three thousand logs and twenty three

thousand bricks. The newspapers wrongly reported that the artist had used fifty thousand bricks, but the correct number is impressive enough in itself.

Nobody at the time could have known that teeth would be bared, tears would fall and words would fly in the newspaper columns. Hans Christian Gjerlaug in the County Environmental Office declared that he was not “the big bad wolf in the case”. But this is jumping ahead of events, so I’ll go back in time a bit, to a man who was later to get a great deal of attention for a heroic rescue operation, but whose role as a “catalyst” has hardly been recognised. For it was only when his music was installed in the “Stream Nest” that interest for the log sculpture really took off. No-one was prepared for the fact that the Japanese-Norwegian music sculpture would straight away become an attraction that the level-headed locals, Olympic participants and tourists would throng to like pilgrims. The sculpture gained international fame when it figured in foreign television reports. And no-one predicted that the people of the district would refuse to relinquish their new art treasure. Had it not been for the tubist’s music, Stream Nest would never have become what the newspapers called “an artwork destined to delight and irritate from the first brick to the last log”.

Tones in a mute bird’s nest

How did it come about that there was music in the mute nest? Well, at the opening of the art landscape the tubist Geir Løvold wandered quietly over to have a look at Stream Nest along with Bente Erichsen, who had earlier been in charge of the Olympic cultural agenda. The dramatic construction impressed him, and he said that he could turn it into a sound sculpture. Nobody before or since has composed music in Takama’s sculptures, so both the artist and Bente were excited by the idea. Geir set about composing music which would suit the sculpture’s form and expression. In the spiral forms of the nest he could see “dramatic movements, enormous energy, a heavy, unhurried mass – a fairy-tale atmosphere in slow motion”. He thought of everything from birdsong to complex tone language. He pondered and wondered through the whole of December. He read poems about logs written by Rolf Jacobsen, the famous Norwegian poet from Hamar. And in the end he decided to do something completely new. During the course of a couple of December evenings Geir wrote and played music for solo tuba for the first time ever. Thus it was that the hitherto silent nest was filled with beautiful, enigmatic, drawn-out tuba tones. The music poured out of loudspeakers concealed inside the sculpture and was aired 24 hours a day during the Olympic

Games and Paralympics. The music was also played in the Viking Ship Olympic Hall before and after skating events.

In freezing cold, the beautiful Stream Nest, laden with snow, came to be loved and admired during those winter weeks. The people from the Hamar area were spellbound by the sculpture and the music which poured out of it - contemporary art had become accessible for everyman. Then migratory birds began to arrive, and it was only then that the admirers realised that the sculpture was never intended to be there till the end of time. Art lovers and Stream Nest pilgrims decided to fight for the work of art to ensure that, whatever the cost, it would stay one of Hamar's attractions the whole year round.

Can a bird's nest harm a bird reserve?

Even though the bird reserve was close to busy, noisy roads, and there were plans afoot to make pitches for ball games and other activities close to the reserve, somehow it was the tuba tones from the nest which seemed to worry the County Environmental Office most. An alert group of politicians in Hamar voiced their concern to save Stream Nest, but they spoke to deaf ears. The conflict just went on and on with no solution in sight. One of the premises for the Landscape Art was that it should represent *temporary art*. All the sculptures were to be dismantled when the exhibition closed. Now, however, art lovers wanted to turn the plans and regulations which had been passed by the powers-that-be upside down by allowing Stream Nest permanent residence in a protected area.

Initially the LOOC suggested that Stream Nest should be transferred to Hamar Municipality if they were granted exemption from the conservation regulations for a further nine years. The people of Hamar complained that "if we don't look after this art treasure we'll be making a mess in our own nest". But the County Commissioner said "No! No! And No again!" Officials in the Environmental Office despaired that anyone would listen to their argument that it was better to be safe than sorry. A second attempt to preserve Stream Nest was made by a group of enthusiasts in Hamar. They asked for the nest to be moved 50 metres out of the bird reserve onto the car park. But the bird reserve has to be protected, thundered the authorities. And in the meantime birds had built their own nests in this enormous bird's nest and had their ears full of tuba tones. It seemed as if they were rather partial to the meditative and mysterious music of Geir, according to some wags. But the County Commissioner would

have none of that. The bird reserve was reserved for wetland birds; any other birds that build their nests there are unwelcome. Wetland birds needed to have their meals in peace and quiet.

Things were looking grim for Stream Nest. The Directorate for Nature Management considered the appeal that the LOOC had lodged, and judged once and for all that the nest had to be removed. The same day the LOOC announced in the press that the dismantling, removal and re-building of the structure would cost one million kroner – which obviously nobody had. Anyone who could come up with a solution would be worth his weight in gold, and who was it who came up with it? None other than Geir himself.

The tubist who would not let himself be deterred.

By now the authorities had become so hard of hearing that they could neither hear nor grasp what was being said to them. Geir understood that any further attempt to get through to the champions of wetland birds would be like talking to a brick wall. He therefore got in touch with Karl Sandøy, a man he had met when he played at a church concert in England some years earlier. He had found Karl a good, kind-hearted man who had liked Geir's music. What's more, Karl had recently had some incredible good luck. He had left England and bought his grandmother's smallholding in Osa to retire to. But he reckoned that he would need water laid on. Amazingly, tests taken of the water table under his farm showed that the source was the purest mineral water to be found, and there was loads of it. So now Karl was selling Osa Mineral Water throughout the whole of Norway. Was *he* the man who would save Stream Nest from being torn down and ending up as a giant bonfire?

- Good Evening Karl, Geir here

- And a very good evening to you too, Geir

Geir set about putting Karl in the picture and Karl listened attentively. Finally Geir asked the question he'd had on the tip of his tongue throughout the whole conversation:

- Karl, will you adopt the nest and its music?

- Thanks for asking me, the good-natured businessman replied. This sounds like creative madness, so the answer has to be YES.

Thus it was that Geir and good old Karl approached the LOOC at the last minute to inform them that a home had been found for the homeless bird's nest. The LOOC were relieved to hear that a solution had been found. The people of Hamar let out a sigh of disappointment. If

there was anybody who knew anything about the value of tourist attractions it was not the unexcitable people of this area, but the people of Hardanger in western Norway, with its fiords, moors and mountains. At its new site, Stream Nest would be on the itinerary for cruise ships. In Hamar there was a weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the articles and letters in the local press were those of a people who felt let down and cheated.

The journey

Geir had found a good Samaritan in good old Karl, but this was only the first step in the process. Stream Nest had to be removed from the reserve, and removed pretty sharp. What he most needed was good assistants in Hamar too. The LOOC chipped in 30,000 kroner, but Geir needed many willing hands to dismantle the sculpture. Log after log had been piled up on and round each other two thousand nine hundred and ninety nine times. Now they had to be unravelled and released from the steel wire which held them together in the reverse order. Each of the twenty three thousand bricks had to be carefully tapped loose and cleaned, and everything had to be removed without leaving a trace. Working hands were all that Geir needed now. The logs couldn't be re-used, and the tubist had to think up a solution which everybody would gain by and at the same time get the nest to disappear.

- If you want to be a part of this, get cracking, said Geir to Løten Employment and Training Centre. You can have the timber for free if you remove the nest and stack the bricks ready for transport. The woodmen came straight away, sawed up the logs and put them in sacks for winter fires. Sales of these sacks gave them a nice little extra cash in the coffers. The bricks were meticulously stacked on pallets and ended up on lorries heading for their new home in Osa.

One spring day, the Japanese artist arrived airborne in Norway, frozen to the bone. He wasn't the only thing that was frozen. Spring normally arrives early in this part of the world, but this year the gods of winter just wouldn't let go. Day after day they delivered load upon load of biting snow and rain. There was bound to be trouble. The bricks froze into small mountains of ice which were completely impossible to take apart. Karl had got hold of 3000 new logs, but they lay slippery and unmanageable in the snowdrifts. The artist, unable to get on with the reconstruction, stood on the doorsteps with his return air ticket in his hand. All he knew was that he would be leaving on the dot in five weeks' time, come what may. Geir had got Knut

Engeland from Voss College of Art and Craft to round up 30 of his students for a working bee. Crisis was in the air. Eyebrows were raised, foreheads furrowed, brains searched. It was looking as if the mineral water man from Osa had bitten off more than he could chew. But Karl kept his cool, for life had taught him that where there's a will there's a way. He would give those winter gods as good as he could take. He emptied a container of mineral water bottles, loaded it with blocks of frozen bricks, and turned on a 12000 watt industrial hot air fan at full speed. The winter gods would be sent packing double quick and faster than fast.

At last the work could get going. Takamasa gesticulated and directed; there were no sketches; everything was in his head. Japanese punctuality and work ethics ruled the day with polite bows. "Tea-break" was an unknown word, because the artist spoke Japanese and only Japanese. In other words there would be no mercy for the poor, hard-working, cold and sweating students. Takamasa darted back and forth between the logs and the bricks so that nothing should go awry. Every log was fastened with the help of steel wire using centuries-old Japanese methods, and finally the bricks were laid between the logs. Every single small or large building element was placed in a yin-yang relation to each other - perfect balance without a single right angle. Round, soft forms, undulating and majestic with bristling logs. The reconstruction work was a hard slog all the way. Time was running out. Takamasa worked till the very last moment. He barely had time to kick off his work boots before climbing into the car to take him to the airport for the flight back to Sapporo.

Like a resurrected Phoenix, Stream Nest rose again at a site which Takamasa described as the best location he had ever seen. This enormous bird's nest now stands on solid earth with 1200-metre-high mountains as gallery walls, an ever-changing sky as its ceiling, and the roar of waterfalls adding musical accompaniment and harmony to Geir's deep, unfathomable tuba tunes. The battle for art had finally been won. And now, thousands of people flock to the site every year from east and west to enjoy a unique experience of Stream Nest.