



It is true that I had accumulated a lot of cultural capital, but like so many others I had never found a way to convert it into cash

This could partly be explained by an extreme inflation in the currency of culture

This extreme inflation could partly be explained by an extreme production increase in culture over the course of several decades

This extreme production increase seemed to correlate with the extreme increase in cultural producers over the course of these same decades

It couldn't be established whether the production increase in culture was the effect of the increase in cultural producers, or if more and more people had been inspired into becoming cultural producers because of the extreme increase in cultural products surrounding them

'It is true that I had accumulated a lot of cultural capital, but like so many others I had never found a way to convert it into cash'

— A conversation with Henning Lundkvist, Gro Sarauw, and Mette Kjærgaard Præst

Gro Sarauw (GS): I am very happy that you have both agreed to take part in this conversation to discuss Henning Lundkvist's book *Planned Obsolescence – A Retrospective* published in May 2018 by Atlas Projects. Henning, is this the first book you have published?

Henning Lundkvist (HL): Yes, it's my first book – or novel. To me it is a novel, as that is how I wrote it – in many ways it's a self-portrait, and a self-portrait is also always a fiction. It is about the position of a cultural worker or an artist or a writer in 2017, which is when the novel takes place. It's about now.

GS: I found it intriguing to see how you unfold this conceptually as a novel. And the reason I thought it would be relevant to talk about this novel in the context of UKK (Organisation for Artists and Curators)

is exactly because it captures notions about contemporary art and the conditions of the cultural worker within contemporary society. I have a lot of questions, but I have also invited Mette Kjærgaard Præst, who works as a curator predominantly in London, to join us in this conversation.

Mette Kjærgaard Præst (MKP): Thank you. I really enjoyed reading this book and I agree with you both that it accurately describes the conditions of life for artists and cultural workers today. It would perhaps be useful if you could introduce the novel briefly; what is its context and what is it about?

HL: The first sentence – which is also the front cover of the book – is: ‘It is true that I had accumulated a lot of cultural capital, but like so many others I had never found a way to convert it into cash.’ That is the starting point and I tried to stay anchored to this sentence throughout the whole book. In many ways it is a novel about the economy; or as a friend of mine explained to me, it’s a portrait of the author written by the economy. The narrator is someone looking back at a time where another person or the narrator him/herself is living in Copenhagen in 2017 working as an artist and a writer without really making any money, so also works in a bar in order to pay the rent. This is the main storyline of the book, a condition that is surprisingly similar to my own life, but it is not the same, it is fictional. The novel is written in the past tense, which gives a certain distance and, at least for me, made it easier to write about a lot of things. If you are looking at the present situation from the future, instead of being really furious all the time, it’s possible to look at it from a sarcastic or ironic perspective.

MKP: Considering the narrative of the book as a whole, it is notable that there is no redemption, or no catharsis – what I mean is that it is not like a *bildungsroman* where the reader follows the protagonist as they experience something and learn a lesson. With *Planned Obsolescence – A Retrospective* it’s like a wheel that continues to turn and in a way the story could just start again when it ends. There is also a certain speed to the novel, it is written without any full stops and you use repetition throughout. Due to the fast pace and the rhythm of the repetition it reads like something in between a poem and a rant – a very poetic thing and a very aggressive thing. What does that pace and rhythm mean? Did you write it in one angry go, or is it a style that you have developed slowly over time?

HL: It was a stylistic decision to write at a fast pace, and as a result you can also read it at a fast pace. You can read it in one go – in a couple of hours if you want.

Planned Obsolescence – A Retrospective is published by a small publishing house called Atlas Projectos that mostly publishes art books. Their readers are, to a large extent, likely to be artists and cultural workers who are in a very similar situation to myself. Although the book can be read by anyone, not only artists and cultural workers, there is a core audience who I think have rather similar experiences to the author. And because the readers are probably familiar with the themes and situations described in the book, the language as well as the theme is deliberately rather straightforward and immediate. It’s all out there already, not only what I am thinking, but also it is what my friends are talking about. It’s just there! So that is also why I wrote the book quickly. It’s a kind of channelling.

GS: To me it is a super dark story of our time, where you’ve found it necessary to address the form by saying ‘this is a novel’; as if it had to be a novel for you to be able to write it – to capture that moment. You address the contemporary condition and experience of precarity of this poet-ranter-author-writer-artist, and as *your* story, you give it form.

Somewhere in the in the novel you state, how artists continue to make art, writers to write books and poets, poems even when no one asks them to. Does that refer to some kind of hope?

HL: I think the book has a few openings. Yes it is dark, but I don't think it is darker than anything outside of the book. For me the book is written in a superficial language and at a speed that exists outside of the book – so the book is on one hand a portrait of the author by the economy, and on the other it is an attempt to 'mirror' reality (which sounds very old-school as an idea of what art does), to be furniture or music; it tries to be what is around it. That could mean that maybe there is no escape, but as I see it, it is in itself a form of escape, at least it is for the guy who wrote it! It is a way of using all the things around it to actually make something; a way of using the complaining, the ranting, and converting it into something you could call creative or positive as it produces something – it produced a book. It produced a novel.

MKP: I'd like to stay with this a little bit longer. As you say, it is dark but it is not darker than the reality. You also talk about how some of these conversations about precarious conditions of life for artists and cultural workers happen but that nobody really talks about it much in public, or nobody really stays with it. For me that is where this book has something to offer, or at least offers me something, because it *stays with it*. Even though it only took me a couple of hours to read, I felt like *I stayed with it as a result*. As I've told you before, I started reading it on a low cost Ryanair flight from Copenhagen to London and finished it in a train from the airport, and I felt like it was the perfect setting.

HL: It's the best setting. I recommended it to several friends!

MKP: It was perfect and I really felt like it hit me, but it also made me stay still with these issues while I read the novel and thought about it afterwards. This was a positive experience, because for me as a reader it wasn't an attempt to produce something or get some work done – it was actually a moment of staying with a problem or a lot of problems, not to feel at ease with them, and not to accept the situation, but to continue thinking about my own position and role within this as a cultural producer. This is not to say that I have never done that before, but the book gave me a moment to think about it in a different way.

In the book you talk about your unwillingness to produce new things, and then by writing the book you produce something new from this unwillingness – the book itself – both an object and a novel. The book then creates a moment for its reader, like me, to think about production. Could you talk a bit more about this relationship to producing and staying with something and to time in general?

HL: The book insists on only talking about things in economical terms – it tries to do that as much as possible – and in economical terms art is, to a large extent, completely useless, in the sense that most artists produce art without there being any economic gain. This is of course only one way of looking at art, and I am not saying that that it is the way you *should* look at it, but in *Planned Obsolescence – A Retrospective*, that is kind of the mantra. This is a mantra that reflects the capitalist ideologies of the world outside of the book and outside of the so-called art world: if it can't sell it shouldn't be produced. In a way, the narrator in this book agrees and says, "yes it is useless, so why should I have to produce more things, when they don't get anywhere, when they don't benefit my career? And when I do produce something new, I show it once in a mediocre group show somewhere, which had some kind of curatorial theme that I can't remember and wasn't very precise to begin with, and no one really saw the work or the other works, and then afterwards I get invited to yet another group show to do the same thing with a new work?" And this is the way the art world works, which is not very beneficial for anyone, perhaps least of all for artists.

This way of working doesn't work, and I don't think I am alone in feeling that this is not the way I'd like to produce things. So, in this context, I have a reluctance to produce anything new. On the other hand, as you say, the book in itself is something new and it has created many conversations. I have been talking a lot about this book with friends and colleagues who have read it – it is a really beautiful thing, even if it is just for a short time, to have a lot of people talking to you about something that you have made. Again,

this is very different from having one work in a mediocre group show where people would say to me, “ah nice” and that’s it – you don’t have much of a discussion. Some people have responded positively to the novel as it connects to things they have been thinking about themselves. Of course there are others who have objections too. Some people have stopped reading it because they just think it is depressing and they don’t want to think about those things. For me, if you are an artist who is thinking about these issues, about how art is completely embedded in capitalism, how it is either instrumentalised or being made useless, how you have to live in a really precarious condition to be able to be an artist, then what’s the point of producing or making art? If thinking about these things means that you actually don’t feel like making art anymore then I think it is probably better that you don’t think about these things.

MKP: Instead of stopping?

HL: Instead of stopping! Because I am also not stopping! I am doing things, but I am trying at least to find a way that works for me. Even though both the book and I are very critical of how the art world works, how it demands new works and new artists all the time, it doesn’t mean that I think that people shouldn’t make stuff. It’s nice when people make stuff... sometimes!

GS: This idea of being aware of and confronting the issues whilst remaining creative and proactive is certainly relevant in the context of an organisation such as UKK. For a lot of people, considering a membership, or even just knowing that a union exists, means that you have to confront these issues in the same way as the readers of your book. It is like going through, or staying with the trouble. Then, when you make art about, of, or with it, that allows you to both withdraw and create your own space or temporality, which works out as this productive evidence of the cycle you are in. Does it produce a kind of therapy as well – for yourself or the reader, perhaps through identifications similar to Mettes experience of reading it on Ryan Air?

HL: If it is therapy as you say, a self-help book for artists, I think it is completely useless. The book is to a large extent about aspects of the art world and the cultural sector in general that are really depressing for artists, like the fact that cultural capital is worth less than it has ever been worth before, because there is simply so much of it, so there is an inflation that is completely out of proportion with the financial economy. Then again, the same is unfortunately the case in the world at large – you don’t really make any money working for Amazon either, which is supposedly a ‘real’ job. So to write a book about these issues as a self-help or therapy book I think would be pretty useless – it would quickly reach the point of: why would you go through this? Where does it lead? And I don’t really know if it is leading anywhere. To me it was something that I approached in a very classic artistic way – it was something I felt that I should do. It had an aesthetic starting point. In the sense of “I think this is something that would be nice to make.”

MKP: For yourself or for ‘the world’?

HL: For the world... I don’t know, it sounds very conservative. It quickly gets into this field of: does it mean that it has to be useful? Does it mean that it has to be able to be used? And I am not so sure about that.

MKP: It makes me think, in *Planned Obsolescence – A Retrospective*, you often refer back to this idea of not knowing: “we didn’t know”. For example, when you talk about copying and sharing and using the internet to the extent that it has deflated the whole cultural industry. You write: ‘as my Swedish grandparent’s generation said about living in ‘neutral Sweden’ during WW2 “we didn’t know”’. What you are saying with this book is that actually we do know. It’s an interesting statement because the Copenhagen, European, Scandinavian or whatever contemporary art world often suffers from not saying things out

loud. It suffers from taking one on the chin and turning the other way or whatever it is that we have been taught growing up. Whilst it is not necessarily a call to arms, this is a book that says, “hey I know something, and we all know something – and this is something we can talk about.” Is that part of what interests you?

HL: Maybe. Maybe you could make an ironic description of the book as ‘everything you wanted to say to a random powerful curator at an opening but were too afraid to say,’ because these are the last things you should say to someone when you are ‘networking’ – to essentially just complain and say “yeah, you know, it’s tough” and “I have a job, and that job has nothing to do with art – and that is something I have to do.” All of these are things that even if people do discuss them, it is rarely out in the open.

GS: This also speaks to the ongoing debates in Danish cultural politics; which come forth as a huge challenge because artists are essentially being asked to legitimise themselves by the state. Which is a very strong call for people in power to make towards artists.

Planned Obsolescence – A Retrospective draws attention to issues most likely well known to cultural producers – we could probably all identify with the narrator even where it is the most fictional. But in reality there is still a separation between recognising this contemporary condition as *real* in political terms and what Mette is addressing in terms of people not really knowing *how to know* and *how to use* that knowledge effectively. That is an interesting discrepancy, especially in the cultural sector.

I am thinking about the long-lost sense of collectivity, of being open to doing things together, and actually knowing how to respond to things collectively.

MKP: That is something we have unlearned – how to do things together, how to organise and how to change our situation. There is a really beautiful or sad moment early in the book where you say, ‘united we stand, divided we fall ... we were actively undermining our own industry’. However, as we have talked about, it’s not only specific to an art context, it is a problem within the western economy as a whole. The next question is what do we do? How do we react to that?

HL: Yes, that to me is a huge part of the problem with the economy. I am not an economist so I don’t know much, but I think it’s pretty clear that a significant part of the problem is finance and tax evasion made by huge multinational companies, who most of the time don’t really produce anything, or produce very little in terms of actual production. They produce a lot of money and a lot of users, who are then used to accumulate data. But art can’t do anything about that! What would that be? It is a huge problem that has to do largely with legislation.

GS: Yes, and the most successful art celebrates, or benefits from, or is beneficial to those systems.

HL: Yes, the most successful artists are actually part of the same thing. For example, the practice of ‘flipping’ artworks is very similar to buying and selling shares in companies. The art itself is irrelevant to that; even if most art that is being sold in this way are paintings that look nice, it could just as easily be conceptual art. In fact, it would be much easier for the buyers if they bought immaterial work, because then they don’t have to store it anywhere and storing it costs money; everything that is physical makes the transaction slower and more complicated. It would be even easier for them, if they just invented artists and invented works that never even existed and flipped them back and forth between each other.

MKP: Which is essentially what is already happening with Bitcoins and stuff, which is easy to earn a lot of money on.

HL: Exactly, but with Bitcoins you need to have shitloads of computers running all the time and if you just invent artists and sell them back and forth you don't even have to do that; it is even more efficient. But in that sense it also means that the content of an artwork is completely irrelevant to how the economy works, at least this part of the economy, and this part of the economy unfortunately is shaping everything around us.

I also don't know if there is any point in demanding that art should deal with these issues. As I said before about this book – which insists on talking about money, insists on following the money all the time – I am not sure if it can lead anywhere at all.

MKP: Well, by letting this conversation 'follow the money' we seem to have ended up with imaginary or disappearing artists, so perhaps it is also time for us to us to disappear!

GL: Thank you very much for your time Henning and thank you Mette for being our guest editor.

HL + MKP: It's been a pleasure.

Edited by Mette Kjærgaard Præst, Edd Hobbs and Gro Sarauw

Henning Lundkvist is an artist and writer living in Copenhagen. His practice spans over many different media, including text, voice, sound, and image. He has published texts in various catalogs, books and magazines, including in "To the Reader", published by BAK Utrecht; "Provence After Dark", published by Paraguay Press; and "While we are asleep...", published by OEI Editör. Earlier this year, his book "Planned Obsolescence - A Retrospective" was published by Atlas Projectos, and "Jolene", his first novel in Swedish, will be published by CLP Works very soon. Among other places, he has exhibited and performed at Moderna Museet, Malmö; Kim?, Riga; Vermilion Sands, Copenhagen; Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon; Index, Stockholm; Rollaversion Gallery, London; Sismógrafo, Porto; and Kunstraum, London.

Purchase a copy of *Planned Obsolescence – A Retrospective* by contacting the publishers at ATLAS Projectos or the artists directly. ISBN 978-989-97141-8-2

Lundkvist's new book, *Jolene*, is released at Møllegades Boghandel, Friday 23 November, 2018, 5pm.