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Obituary

Ingvil Aarbakke

Scandinavian artist whose N55 group challenges the way we live today

Charles Lock

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The artist Ingvil Aarbakke, who has died of cancer at the age of 35, was, with her husband Ion Sorvin, the moving force behind the Copenhagen-based collective N55. She thus made a central contribution to its aim of questioning and transforming the practices of everyday existence through a thoughtful, radical approach to the exercise of her gifts.

Born in Bergen, Norway, Ingvil was the daughter of academic parents: her mother, Jorunn Hareide, is professor of Nordic literature at Oslo University; her father, Jarle Aarbakke, is a medical researcher and currently vice chancellor of the University of Tromsø. Ingvil studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Art in Copenhagen from 1991 to 1997, and exhibited 510 Drawings and Letters to the Dead at the graduation show, Exit 94. It was her only individual exhibition; she quickly went on to make an impact on the Scandinavian art world by participating, in 1996, in the founding of N55, whose name has become far better known than those of any of its members.

N55's first showing came that year at the NowHere exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, north of Copenhagen, to mark the city's year as European cultural capital. N55's contribution consisted of a table and chairs, a pot-plant, a jug of orange juice, their own manifesto and a photocopier which visitors were invited to use. The exhibit was hard to distinguish from office space; many visitors walked past, unseeing.

Named after both a street address and the latitude of Copenhagen, N55 came into being with its half dozen members sharing their living space and holding all things in common, with the minimal of "private life" or property. The challenge to private property was focused through the need to preserve and extend the public domain; N55 holds that material objects ought to be shared and saved from the constraints of private ownership. Rights and power - above all, the right to resist the power of ownership - are central to the group's endeavours.

Ingvil's own thinking on these questions was shaped by the work of the Danish philosopher Peter Zinkernagel. What N55 has published is also freely accessible: their manuals, manifestos and images can be seen online and are not copyrighted, nor is the book in which they were gathered in 2003.

N55's work ranges from the domestic to the terrestrial. From the outset, living spaces, furniture, hygiene and plumbing, the cultivation, preparation and distribution of food, have all come under creative scrutiny, as detailed in ingenious, quirky and distinctive fashion in their manuals, with examples to be seen around Europe and north America. Each of N55's redefinitions of the shop, factory and rooms is efficient, witty and aesthetically challenging.

In the project they called Land, N55 began to acquire and dedicate to public use small plots of land, from northern Norway to the Californian desert, in less sparsely populated places in Denmark, Holland and Switzerland, and in waste patches of cities such as

Chicago. On each is erected a steel polyhedric cairn (characteristic of much of N55's design) by which the area is declared to belong to "the commons". Anyone may use it as long as it is acknowledged that "Land gives access to land."

While N55 has not been subject to serious legal harassment, it has received favourable attention from those concerned to protect the public domain, and from those looking for workable and just alternatives to patents and copyright. The aim has been not to antagonise capitalists but to present alternative ways of existing on the planet.

The group's work can hardly be described in terms of shows, installations or performances, for there is nothing for sale and often no object to look at. What we are presented with are everyday routines, done differently. In 2002, with support from the Henry Moore Institute, Ingvil attracted interest when she rolled, through the centre of Leeds, N55's Snail Shell System, a cylindrical polyethylene tank to enable people to move around and live in various environments. That same year, N55's Shop caused some consternation at the Glasgow Centre for Contemporary Arts; goods were exchanged, borrowed and taken, but no money was involved. The Shop enjoyed further success in 2003 with an apexart exhibition in New York.

From 2002, Ingvil and other members of N55 lived in the Spaceframe, mounted on a raft of their own tessellated tetrahedric construction, in Copenhagen harbour: a truncated tetrahedron, with a floorspace of 20 square metres, the Spaceframe requires no foundations and can be assembled by hand. N55 appreciated the possibilities that modern technology provided for a revival of nomadic living. Their Micro Dwelling, for example, is a minimal space in which one person might live, supported on a tripod, thus minimally disturbing the Earth; it can also be floated or submerged.

Prior to her death, Ingvil had already contributed to N55's participation in the Space Soon project, in collaboration with Arts Catalyst, which is scheduled for the Camden

Roundhouse next September. Based on the Micro Dwelling, it is called Space on Earth Station - a title that embodied much of Ingvil's vision: the fascination with space, with the dynamics of the mobile and the static, and, above all, her sense that there may be very little that is "natural" about the way we live on this planet.

Ingvil was a woman of extraordinary radiance and grace, her intense vision matched by a pragmatic determination. Every action of living, each moment of the everyday, posed a question: how it might be lived differently, more truthfully and more respectfully. Death was approached without regard for convention; in her dying, she was a model of composure, offering a lesson in dissent as the way of utmost harmony. An eloquent and persuasive speaker, she was also a prolific writer. Many of the 400 pages in the N55 Book are hers.

She leaves her parents, her brothers and sisters, and her husband and their one-year-old son, Frode.

• Ingvil Hareide Aarbakke, artist, born July 26 1970; died November 23 2005

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