

CHAPTER 6

Norwegian Plastic Wood: On Marianne Heske's *Gjerdeløa*

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Abstract: When artist Marianne Heske re-presented the iconic artwork *Gjerdeløa* (1980) in an art gallery in 2014, the traditional wooden hut was coupled by a new companion made out of white resin. *Project Gjerdeløa*, that originally emphasised the ephemeral event of artistic intervention, became in the 2014 installation concrete and made visible within the artwork itself, underlining the receptive change of the object when represented in a different material. This chapter emphasises the break that the new installation of *Gjerdeløa* represents, and how this change may be read as a commentary on how modern lifestyle today has disconnected with—and is now placed outside of—life cycles in nature.

Keywords: conceptual art, inverting objects, object in transition, nature and culture, material and form

Introduction

Within the white walls of the museum, two huts stand side by side [figure 1]. One is old, the other new; one is dark and dense, the other light and hollow. They are two, but the same; they are identical, yet each other's opposite. The visitors can approach them, they can stretch out their hands and feel the aged wood of the old hut and sense the refined smoothness of the new, they can walk around and inside of them. The logs are inscribed with markings, names, and dates; everyday activities and

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Figure 1. Installation image of the old hut and the resin model presented side by side for the first time. Installation image from the exhibition *tour-Retour* at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, 2014. Photo: Marianne Heske. Reproduced with permission of Marianne Heske. © Marianne Heske/BONO 2021. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

medieval mythology.¹ These are traces of people interacting across centuries and cultures. What has been engraved in the first hut is preserved in the other. While the first hut is made of timber from the forest in which it once stood—a material essence of *decay*—the other is detached from natural processes, made from a thin plastic material with the potential to last forever.

An Object of Transition

In 1980, artist Marianne Heske (b. 1946) presented *Project Gjerdeløa* at the Centre Pompidou Museum in Paris and at the Henie Onstad Art Centre in Oslo. The artwork consisted of an authentic traditional Norwegian hut from the 17th century that originally stood in Tafjord, where Heske grew up. For the 1980 Youth Biennale in Paris, Heske dismantled the hut and transported it through Europe by car. By rebuilding the object within

¹ For more information regarding the inscriptions, see the chapter ‘Mythology’ in Heske, 1984.



Figure 2. Gjerdeløa displayed in between the white walls inside of Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 1980. Image from *Project Gjerdeløa: Tafjord – Paris – Oslo – Tafjord* (1984). Photo: Marianne Heske. Reproduced with permission of Marianne Heske. © Marianne Heske/BONO 2021. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

the white walls of the museum, exhibition visitors at the Centre Pompidou and the Henie Onstad Art Centre would experience the 17th century Norwegian hut up close, in the same state as it was before being dismantled and transported from Tafjord [figure 2]. By placing it inside the museum, Heske made the hut available for the visitors of the art institution to interact with it. They were allowed to walk around and inside the object, touching the construction and engraving the logs with their own inscriptions. The roof of the hut was covered in fresh turf, which had to be watered by the museum staff to prevent it from withering. The object was, in a sense, literally alive, being a part of the natural cycle, transforming with the seasons (Heske, 1984, p. 25). The museum visitors could smell and touch the living material, making the tactile experience of nature an important aspect of the artwork.

The traditional *Gjerdeløa* hut was constructed according to the premises of nature: it was built of local timber logs and the surrounding terrain had weathered the construction. Even though the building was made by and for humans, the hut had become an integrated part of nature in



Figure 3. Løa i Tafjord (1980). The hut placed in the steep terrain of Tafjord, Norway. Image from *Project Gjerdeløa: Tafjord - Paris - Oslo - Tafjord* (1984). Photo: Marianne Heske. Reproduced with permission of Marianne Heske. © Marianne Heske/BONO 2021. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

the Norwegian cultural landscape. As a motive, such huts are often seen within the national romantic scenery of famous Norwegian paintings. Made out of timber and built in a traditional manner, the object had become a part of its surrounding environment. This aspect is underlined in the photographic documentation from *Project Gjerdeløa*, depicting the hut as an integrated part of the scenery [figure 3]. The Centre Pompidou, on the other hand, is a monumental building with a complex exterior construction of glass and steel. Placing the simple *Gjerdeløa* inside this post-modern icon emphasised the contrast between the two buildings, each of them representing different time periods, cultures, and ways of life. The original placement of the hut was within the context of nature, but at the Pompidou in 1980 *Gjerdeløa* became radically detached from it. The contrast between the two ‘worlds’ was established through the photographs from the original location in Tafjord; as a part of the artwork,

Heske showed documentation of the transportation process, thereby revealing the hut's original context for the museum visitors in Paris. Included in Heske's 1980 installation were also two video monitors placed next to the hut, showing the hut surrounded by nature in the Tafjord scenery on one screen, while the other screen presented the hut in real time, encircled by the audience viewing the hut as an artwork (Veiteberg, 2002, p. 71). An important aspect of the 1980 *Project Gjerdeløa* was the contrast between nature and culture, between the rural terrain of the Norwegian forest and the contemporary art scene.

Project Gjerdeløa was understood as an event, where the placing of the hut within the art institution—and the transformation of the building into an art object as a result of this action—was to be understood as the artwork. After the Pompidou event, Heske exhibited representations of the conceptual performative event: the work now consisted of photographic documentation. The hut itself, however, was returned to the steep terrain of Tafjord. Standing in its natural habitat, the hut was returned to the same state it had been in before the event. The walls, however, witnessed the transformation that it had endured, through the inscriptions from visitors at the Centre Pompidou and the Henie Onstad Art Centre. Heske's art project was now part of *Gjerdeløa's* identity, as the new engravings joined the already existing drawings, the oldest dating back to the 17th century.

A Permanent Object

In 2014, the dark, heavy and dense [figure 4] became translucent, light and hollow [figure 5]. Almost 35 years after *Gjerdeløa* first became an object in the Parisian art museum, the old construction once again appeared within the art scene, but the work had evolved since the previous exhibition. The well-known construction emerged with a new and unfamiliar appearance, as the original natural material had been converted into a synthetic replica.

The act of transformation from natural to synthetic may be seen as an act of eternalising the 17th century construction. After the 1980 transportation event, the original *Gjerdeløa* was reconstructed back in Tafjord. The act of dismantling the hut in 2013 was said to be a consequence of a lack of



Figure 4. The white lights of the museum shining through the walls of *Gjerdeløa*, displayed in the exhibition *Far From Home* at ARoS, 2019. Photo: Sigrid Stenerud Steien. Reproduced with permission of Marianne Heske. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

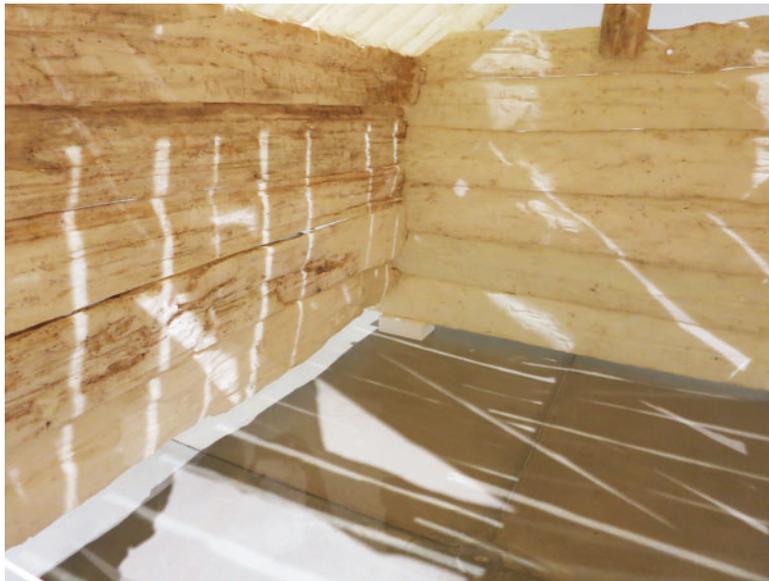


Figure 5. The white lights of the museum shining through the walls of the resin replica, displayed in the exhibition *Far From Home* at ARoS, 2019. Photo: Sigrid Stenerud Steien. Reproduced with permission of Marianne Heske. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

care, as the timber had begun to decay (Aasarød, 2018). Considering the history of the hut—regarding both its status as one of the first conceptual artworks in Norwegian art history and its status as cultural heritage—the hut itself became an object that was valuable enough to preserve.

The replica was displayed in the 2014 exhibition *tour-Retour* at the Astrup Fearnley Museum, and was made of semi-transparent, white, synthetic resin. The casting of *Gjerdeløa* in this particular material is a poetic notion, as it synthetically mimics natural resin, which again is a product of trees (Astrup Fearnley, 2014, p. 30). The transformation of the familiar object may in this manner be understood as a natural development: an offspring and product of the original both in a material sense and through the practical method of casting. When the audience enters the hut, light shines through and almost penetrates the white, translucent timber [see figure 5]. The logs are smoother to touch, yet reveal the rough texture of the wooden surface. The casting of the wooden logs in synthetic resin has preserved the inscribed markings, names, and dates, as if the traces of a living history have been paused in a permanent transitional state—the replica seems to be neither living nor dead.

In Heske's artistic practice, the transportation of objects from one place to another is a recurring theme, as the original *Gjerdeløa* bears witness to. By relocating different objects into new contexts, the viewers are given the opportunity to experience the objects under completely new circumstances, provoking new interpretations to reflect upon. The development of the project in 2014 is described by Heske as natural growth, in her words a metamorphosis, transforming and giving new life to the 17th century construction (NRK, 2018, 16:44). In the same way that *Gjerdeløa* changed its status by being relocated from Tafjord to Paris, the act of replicating transports the meaning of the traditional hut once more. This time, however, the transformation occurs in between the huts, making the sensory experience of the new construction something quite different than the experience of the wooden hut. The change of material opens up to new meanings of the same motif.²

2 This type of material transformation is also a recurring theme in Heske's artistic *oeuvre*. For example, the reappearance of a doll's head in numerous variations of materials and arrangements.

Although being a replica, the synthetic resin model does not replace the wooden hut; the two are displayed together, making the comparison between them available to the public [see figure 1]. The two huts materialise two different centuries, making the contrast between nature and culture visible once again, but this time in a different way. The wooden hut represents a *local* traditional identity of Norwegian nature, culture and history, whereas the synthetic replica represents a *global* artificial condition, as the hut consists of a material we are surrounded with on a daily basis on a planetary scale, namely plastic. Yet the form of the translucent replica originates from the wooden logs of the original hut, hence traces of Tafjord's natural resin *merges* with the global synthetic resin and, thus, the new hut blurs the difference between the specific and the generic. In this sense, the replica also becomes a new original—and not only at a symbolic level. The material metamorphosis changed *Gjerdeløa* into a permanent, pure art object.³ The replica does not hold the qualities of the sturdy timber logs and is not able to replace the function of the hut made in timber; in the change of material, the hut's original function as shelter has been eliminated.

A Permanent Break

Synthetic resin is, in a figurative sense, everlasting. While natural materials decay and rot, synthetic material such as plastic does not. Left within nature, plastic makes new constellations, making hybrids with stone and soil. Today, plastic is conserved within nature, integrated in stones as fossils, making human traces visible for generations to come (Miller, 2016). The replica may be destroyed, as the material may melt and deform at high temperatures, or it may fragment into smaller pieces, but it will not

3 After the exhibition *tour-Retour*, the hut was dismantled and placed in storage. Marianne Heske presented a proposition to the National Museum to purchase the work for their permanent collection in 2013. The proposal was rejected by the National Museum five years later, which led to a debate in autumn 2018 regarding whether or not this was the right call as *Project Gjerdeløa* has a central position within Norwegian art history. The National Museum argued against the purchase, as they understood the work as a past event that was already represented in their collection through the purchase of the photographic documentation of the event in 1980. *Project Gjerdeløa* was sold to the Tangen Collection in 2018 and will be a part of the permanent exhibition at the Kunstsilo/Sørlandet Art Museum in Kristiansand, expected to open in 2022.

transform into soil. With the new addition to the work, Heske preserves her work inside plastic logs. In this sense, the making of the replica is an action of breaking with the degrading cycle of *Gjerdeløa*.

As the geological era of the Anthropocene marks the shift in which human activity has made a permanent impact on Earth and the environment, Heske's replica may be understood as a representation of a similar permanent change, as the two huts represent different time periods, cultures and ways of life. The original *Gjerdeløa* represents an object of human activity and presence, stretching over almost four centuries. It is an object that shows traditional building techniques while also including inscriptions and drawings of boats, horses and other cultural symbols. Presented within the context of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the hut represented a *contrast* between the lifestyle connected with nature and the Parisian lifestyle connected with culture. With the inclusion of the synthetic replica, however, the work now stands as a material symptom of the radical break instigated by the new geological era. The two huts, side by side, show this radical break. Completely detached from its natural environment, the new *Gjerdeløa* will not decay and the traces of human inscriptions are now permanently preserved. The Norwegian wood has become plastic; nature and culture have become one.

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