

ARTFORUM

Suddenly Next Summit

[Hili Perlson](#), Stockholm, 11.23.14



Left: Creative Time artistic director [Anne Pasternak](#). Right: Artist [Tania Bruguera](#).
Photos: Amy Helene Johansson)

“**ARTISTS ARE NOT PERIPHERAL** to our daily lives, but central,” said Creative Time artistic director [Anne Pasternak](#), speaking from a multicolored, inflatable podium, one of three playful props situated around the stage of Stockholm’s Kulturhuset. With issues such as migration, nationalism, xenophobia, and surveillance as foci, the sixth iteration of the Creative Time Summit wasn’t going to be light fare, and the whimsical decor by artist [Bella Rune](#), who’s also worked on sets for the Knife, offered welcome comic relief throughout last weekend’s two-day marathon. Rune’s design aimed to render the summit “more Creative Time and less TED.” It worked. “I feel like I’m in Pee-wee Herman’s playhouse,” said Creative Time chief curator [Nato Thompson](#) in his opening remarks.

This was the first Summit to be held outside New York City—and the US—as Creative Time

partnered with the government-affiliated Public Art Agency Sweden to bring the summit to Stockholm. The event largely consisted of thematic clusters of ten-minute presentations by artists engaging with social justice and activism, often probing the loopholes of the law to challenge institutions of power. In one instance, artist [Tania Bruguera](#), inspired by Pope Francis’s 2013 Mass on the Sicilian island of Lampedusa that commemorated migrants dead at sea, launched a campaign petitioning the Pope to declare the undocumented migrants to Europe as “citizens of the Vatican.”

The harsh, Procrustean format dictated a degree of professionalism usually missing from presentation in the arts. The Summit’s curators—Thompson and [Magdalena Malm](#), director of Public Art Agency Sweden—stressed the multiple methodologies found across politically and socially engaged public art. While



Left: Ghana Think Tank and Soraya Post. (Photo: Amy Helene Johansson) Right: Artist [Bella Rune](#).

At the end of day one, presenters, organizers, and friends gathered around small tables at the Moderna Museet for a vegetarian Ethiopian-Swedish dinner designed by artist [Loulou Cherinet](#) and head chef [Malin Söderström](#). Guests were also encouraged to give back “energy” to Kultivator, an artist-run farm from which the food had been sourced, in a specially designed toilet.

The second day was packed with presentations on intersections of social justice and politics, with high-profile speakers and moderators such as [Edi Rama](#), prime minister of Albania and artist; [Birgitta Jónsdóttir](#), a Pirate Party representative in the Icelandic Parliament; and the impressive powerhouse politician Soraya Post, the EU Parliament’s first member elected on a feminist ticket in Sweden, and only the second Roma candidate ever elected. Creative Time’s [Laura Raicovich](#) opened the day, which focused on surveillance and migration.

Some of the most captivating presentations included the brilliantly simple subversions of the Ghana Think Tank, which sets up self-sustaining laboratories in so-called “developing countries” to help solve first-world problems. When Westport, Connecticut, residents complained about the lack of diversity in their community, Ghana Think Tank’s task force on El Salvadoran issues suggested they invite the day laborers who clean their houses and tend their gardens to Westport social functions. Ghana Think Tank

hired workers to do precisely that, for fifteen dollars an hour.

Tomáš Ráfa’s documentary *New Nationalism* was particularly intense, equal amounts brave and bleak. But not all presenters were as compelling. Artist [Dora Garcia](#) waxed philosophical on a recent work constructed from East German Stasi archive material. Not only was the work itself misguided in its breach of Stasi victims’ privacy by using their files for the purpose of an art project, but her conclusions were equally naive: She essentially declared Big Data to be harmless based on East Germany’s failure to anticipate the fall of the wall despite the Stasi’s ubiquitous surveillance—that is, neglecting to recognize the difference between mere information and metadata.

Privilege, power, and empowerment were ultimately the weekend’s buzzwords, as artists reflected on the impact of their interventions. Danish curator [Tone Olaf Nielsen](#) drove home the point regarding long-term impact as she stressed the need for permanence: “Asylum-seekers and forced migrants in Denmark are sick and tired of artists coming in temporarily to do a project inside the camps and leave again.” Shifting power relations between artists and the disempowered they are seeking to help is arguably the most essential element to effecting meaningful change. The summit proved that there’s a lot of pragmatic “artivism” around.