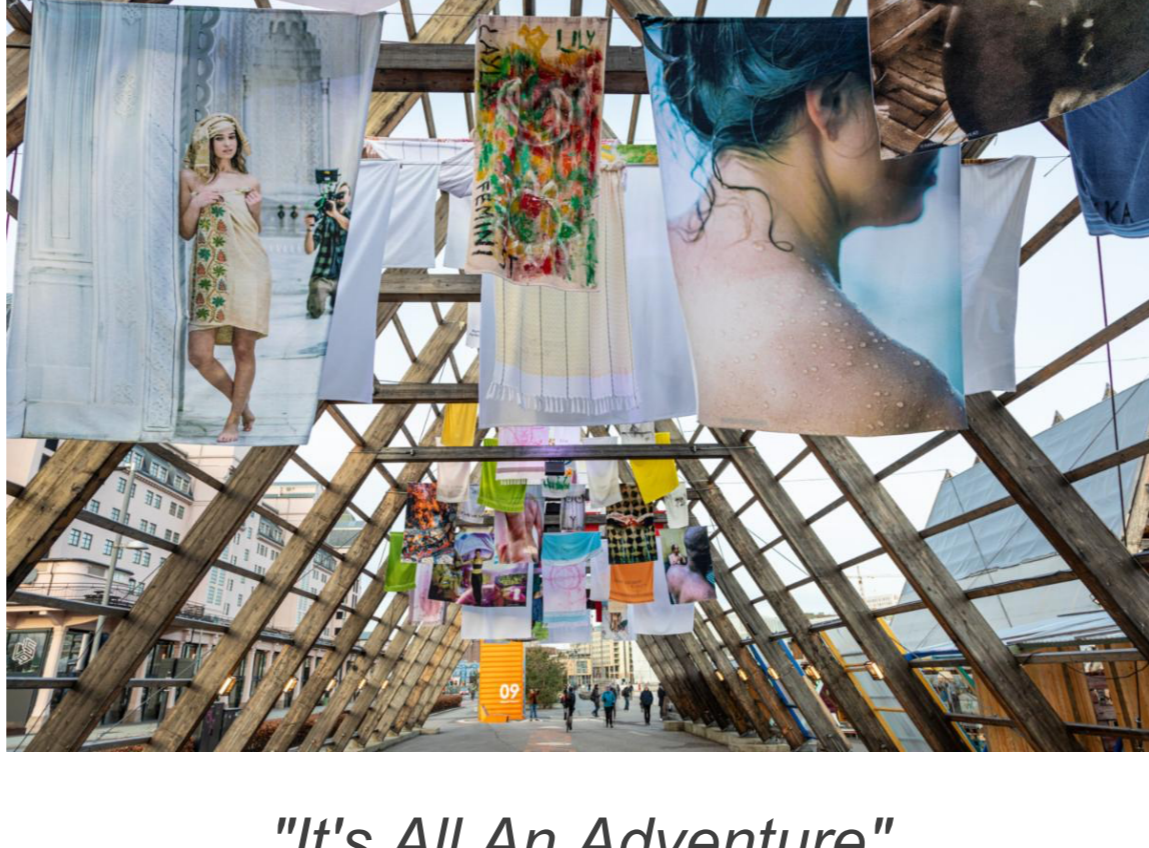


Mikkel Aaland



"It's All An Adventure"

Sweat Art in the Time of COVID

Mikkel Aaland

This writing originally appeared in the 4th issue of [Hamam, The Magazine of Letting Go](#), published periodically by Ekin Balcioglu and Steve Weiner. Hamam was partially inspired by Leonard Koren's 1970s Wet magazine, to which I also contributed. Hamam is beautifully designed and printed and I believe every issue is destined to be a collector's item. Check it [out](#).

As I write, most public bathhouse facilities around the world, from San Francisco to Istanbul, Helsinki to Tokyo, are closed thanks to the coronavirus. It's hard to imagine that only a year ago, on February 11, 2020, I was on a crowded plane, *sans mask*, flying from San Francisco to Oslo, my checked bags filled with one hundred sweat-drenched towels safely stowed in the baggage hold.

The towels, in many sizes and colors, had been used by enthusiastic bathers at local bathhouses, then signed and sometimes artfully painted on. They were on their way to join nearly four hundred more towels collected from other bathers and bathhouses around the world for an art installation titled *Homage to Wellness*. The personalized towels, along with other towels imprinted with my photographs, were scheduled to hang on a giant outdoor frame modeled on a fish-drying rack. The display was sponsored by SALT, a nomadic art project in downtown Oslo, and would run through the winter, spring, and summer of 2020.



Anna Artemieva dipped her body into chocolate in the banya and created this art towel for the installation.



Ekin Balcioglu at Archimedes Banya painting a towel for the installation.



Our Aufguss friends sweated and signed this towel for the installation. Thank you Lasse Eriksen for organizing it.



Mr. Yoneda sweated and signed this towel in Japan.

The man behind me coughed for most of the long flight, and even though the coronavirus was startling to make headlines, I only felt a slight annoyance at his hacking. Knowing what I know now, I probably would have had him thrown off the plane. Then again, the airline probably would have thrown me and my sweaty towels overboard as well.

A Norwegian customs officer at Gardermoen airport watched nonchalantly as I dragged two huge bags filled with used towels past his gaze. It would be a few weeks before Norway had its first case of COVID, and at the time it didn't occur to me, or him, that I might be bringing biohazard material into the country. Meeting me on the other side of customs was Sebastian Sanders from SALT, and on the drive into town he updated me on the latest news: no, the virus was not yet in Norway, but the news from other parts of the world was worrisome.

"And," he continued, "there are towels from England and Japan and Turkey sitting at the post office. We need to pick them up."



Picking up sweaty towels in Tepoztlan, Mexico.



Fredericka Adam at the Albany Sauna.

Alarm bells went off in my head. I've written extensively about historic plagues and public bathing, and I had an uneasy feeling. I know, for example, that outbreaks of cholera periodically closed the giant Roman *thermae* from 100 BCE to 500 CE. Somewhat ironically, the baths, which accommodated thousands of bathers at once, were publicly subsidized and considered critical in preventing disease in the first place. During the Middle Ages, when the Black Death swept through Europe, and bathhouses (smaller than the giant *thermae* but still popular) were once again closed. (An interesting aside: some of the bathhouses turned their heating ovens temporarily into bakeries, prompting cries of unfairness from the bakers' unions.) And during the late 1970s and early 1980s, I witnessed firsthand the public hysteria in San Francisco surrounding the AIDS epidemic. At first we didn't know how the disease was spread, so almost all human-to-human contact was avoided, forcing the closure of public pools and bathhouses.

"If they ask, don't tell them the packages contain sweaty towels." I told Sebastian. "Okay? Just say they contain art."

To be clear: our sweaty towels played no part in introducing the coronavirus to Norway. Sweat, the experts say definitively, doesn't transmit the virus, and high heat, like that found in most saunas, banyas, and other sweat baths, kills it anyway. The idea that sweat is something bad, to be avoided, is a modern concept. In many traditional societies sweat had magical connotations. A Russian story, for instance, tells of God taking a banya (a Russian sweat bath), wiping the sweat off his body with straw, and tossing the sweat-laden straw to earth, where it became the material with which humans were created.



"The structure is available in January," he said. "Can you organize five hundred towels by then?" We signed a random towel in his office, dated it, and snapped a photo to document the sealed deal. And then it hit me: we had a lot of work to do. We started at the Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert and collected nearly one hundred signed towels. The word got out, and friends all over the world went into high gear gathering towels. Used, sweaty towels poured in: Russia, Japan, England, Finland, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Mexico, Turkey, the United States, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Denmark, even as far away as Australia. Some of the art was incredibly creative. In Russia, for example, our friend Anna Artemieva organized a banya party where her girlfriends covered their naked bodies in chocolate and left imprints on large white towels.

Even though it was in the middle of winter, the area around us was bustling with people and activity. SALT, which originated in the far north of Norway, is now located on the harbor near the famous Oslo opera house, and hosts concerts and eating facilities plus three public baths, including a huge *badstue* (the Norwegian name for the sweat bath) that can accommodate more than eighty people at once. Nearby are other sweat-bathing options. KOK, for example, offers a range of floating wood-fired *badstues* for rent. Sorenga, a community-based organization promoting open-water swimming, also boasts public *badstues* on the harbor. It seemed that a new public bathhouse was being built in the area every week. Oslo, pre-pandemic, was one of the hottest bathing scenes in all of Europe.



Watching a rough cut of the Aufguss episode of *Perfect Sweat* on opening night of the installation.



Me and my towels.

We finished the installation just in time for the official opening, which attracted more than one hundred people who braved the freezing weather to hear the leader of Sorenga, Ragna Field, and me discuss the Norwegian bathing scene and watch a rough cut of an episode from the documentary series *Perfect Sweat*. Little did I know it would be my last public gathering for a very long time.

I flew back to San Francisco on February 25th. On March 12th, Norway locked down and SALT and all public bathing facilities closed. San Francisco followed on March 17 with a shelter-in-place order. The pandemic had officially begun in the West.



The towels remained hanging for seven months, until July. At a time when the Oslo waterfront would normally be bustling with tourists from all over the world, the streets were quiet. Not so many people got to appreciate the creativity and effort put in by so many contributors. Of course I was personally disappointed, but in the big picture my feelings were unimportant; hundreds of thousands of people all over the world were dying. I'm the type to make lemonade from lemons, and so I figured, like Tibetan prayer flags flapping in the wind and sending prayers and mantras for goodwill on Earth from the faraway Himalayas, our towels were gently sending forth a message of wellness and harmony from Oslo to the rest of the COVID-19-weary world.

When the worst of this pandemic is over and physical distancing rules are relaxed, bathhouses will reopen and we will sweat together freely again. By the time you read this, things might even be back to normal. I am vaccinated and ready to go. Most of the towels survived their long exposure to the weather and are now carefully folded and stored in my garage at my other home south of Oslo. Like me, they are waiting for the day when a fear of disease doesn't control everything we do. I can't wait.



Towel Contributors

A hearty thanks to ALL of the 500 plus bathers from over 16 countries around the world who contributed towels and sweat to our project, with a little extra special thank you to the following people, companies, or bathhouses for their efforts:

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