# UNG URO

## Unsettling Climates in Nordic Art, Architecture and Design

Ingrid Halland (ed.)

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CAPPELEN DAMM AKADEMISK

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For the young: Tord, Åse and Amanda

# Contents

**Preface** ..... **9**

**Chapter 1** **Introduction** ..... **11**
*Ingrid Halland*

**Part I** **Unsettling Climates** ..... **27**

**Chapter 2** **Changing Atmospheres: The Proto-Ecological Landscapes of Nikolai Astrup** ..... **29**
*Siri Katinka Valdez*

**Chapter 3** **Exhibiting Nordic Values: A Critical Look at the IKEA Store** ..... **37**
*Riccardo Biffi*

**Chapter 4** **Form follows Environment: On Snøhetta's Powerhouse Brattørkaia** ..... **49**
*Kathrine Helene Skarsholt*

**Part II** **Restless Resources** ..... **57**

**Chapter 5** **Ice Art Ethics: On Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch*** ..... **59**
*Fiepke van Niel*

**Chapter 6** **Norwegian Plastic Wood: On Marianne Heske's *Gjerdeløa*** ..... **69**
*Sigrid Stenerud Steien*

**Chapter 7** **Solar Reflections: On the *Sun Mirror* in Rjukan** ..... **79**
*Liv Gunhild Fallberg*

**Part III** **Entering Darkness** ..... **89**

**Chapter 8** **Uncanny Drought: On Apichaya Wanthiang's *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines*** ..... **91**
*Tiril Sofie Erdal*

**Chapter 9 Touching the Unknown: On Marte Johnslien's Ceramic Presences** ..... **99**
*Martine Hoff Jensen*

**Chapter 10 Becoming Bear: On the Sami *Yoik*, Music, and Human Involution** ..... **107**
*Filippo Greggi*

**Part IV Deep Relationalism** ..... **117**

**Chapter 11 Bioacoustical Ethics: On Joakim Blattmann's *Treverk (9)*** ..... **119**
*Lena Trydal*

**Chapter 12 Sensing Algae: On Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen's *Reclaiming Vision*** ..... **129**
*Eirik Zeiner-Henriksen*

**Chapter 13 Creative Fungus: On Fredrik Værslev's *Mildew Paintings*** ..... **137**
*Vera Maria Gjermundsen*

**Chapter 14 Future Stories: On Oslo Apiary & Aviary 2014–2018** ..... **145**
*Emma Christine Karlsen*

**Further Reading** ..... **153**

**Biographies** ..... **155**

# Preface

This book started with the belief that the final essays written by art history students during their education should be made public. Normally, student essays in the humanities are read only once. Compelling ideas and new interpretations are forgotten the moment the students receive their final grade from the one, or perhaps two, readers of the text. When planning the course 'Art and Criticism in the Anthropocene' at the University of Oslo in the autumn semester of 2018, I decided to make public the students' writings and developed an online research platform called Oslo Form Lab. During the semester, 88 essays of art criticism by Norwegian and international students were published, and the project continued under the name Trondheim Form Lab when I taught the course 'Art in its Contexts' at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in autumn 2019. The outcome of these two courses were strong essays written by young voices who felt that traditional art-historical approaches were not sufficient for our current times; new kinds of questions need to be asked, and new methodological approaches and theoretical foundations need to be developed. The university courses laid the ground for the public seminar Klima for Kritikk [Climate for Criticism]—organised in collaboration with the Norwegian Critics' Association in November 2019—and several of the authors in this book presented papers. This event became the start of Oslo/Trondheim Form Lab as a book project.

There are several collaborators and supporters that have been of vital importance for the realisation of the book. First, I wish to thank Andreas Ervik, Panagiotis Farantatos, Charlotte Bik Bandlien, and Stéphane Aubinet for valuable comments on early versions of the chapters. I wish to thank editor Katia Stieglitz at Cappelen Damm Akademisk and the two peer-reviewers for believing in the project and for providing valuable

feedback on the final draft. Lena Trydal has been an outstanding assistant editor in the final stages of the project.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Arts Council Norway, the City of Oslo, the Fritt Ord Foundation, the Department of Art and Media Studies at NTNU, and the Oslo School of Architecture and Design for providing support for publication.

Ingrid Halland,
January 2021

CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

*Ingrid Halland*
Associate Professor, Oslo School of Architecture and Design, and University of Bergen

**Abstract:** In *Ung Uro: Unsettling Climates in Nordic Art, Architecture and Design*, thirteen young writers, critics, and art historians examine how Nordic visual art, architecture, and design relate to the Anthropocene. The chapters in the book represent a new generation of scholarship in the field of visual studies, which holds that critique and analysis of artistic expression must have a different form and agency than before: less descriptive and impartial, according to objective parameters, and more speculative and insistent, in accordance with subjective experiences. By discussing the artwork *Future Library: 2014–2114* by Katie Paterson, this introductory chapter presents key notions that run throughout the book: Arne Næss' deep ecology, Donna Haraway's 'staying with the trouble' and Giorgio Agamben's notion of profanation. Further, chapter introduces how *ethical criticality* functions as a methodological underpinning for the authors' interpretation and proposes the term *deep relationalism* as an analytical concept for describing a tendency in the Nordic arts in the latter part of the 2010s: an interest in processual works with an ethical value base directed towards destabilising human exceptionalism.

**Keywords:** art criticism, Nordic arts in the 2010s, Anthropocene, ethical criticality, deep relationalism

On the outskirts of Oslo, there is a clearing in the woods. The tall trees that once grew here were felled in 2014, leaving a sharp border between the dark forest and the open space [figure 1]. In this clearing, a new generation of Norwegian spruce is growing. The young trees are marked by red ribbons and, after growing for a hundred years, these trees will be felled, transformed into paper, and become books containing unpublished and unread texts by writers and poets of the 21st century. The newly planted

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**Figure 1.** The clearing in the woods in which the trees for *Future Library: 2014–2114* by Katie Paterson grow. Photo © Rio Gandara/Helsingin Sanomat. Reproduced with permission of Katie Paterson Studio. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

trees are a part of the artwork *Future Library: 2014–2114* by Scottish artist Katie Paterson. Every year since 2014, a manuscript read by no one except the author is handed over to Paterson and the Future Library Trust for safekeeping. So far, Margaret Atwood, David Mitchell, Sjón, Eilif Shafak, Han Kang, and Karl Ove Knausgård have submitted their manuscripts relating to the theme of 'time and imagination'. The young spruces grow parallel with the collection of manuscripts, and the thin trunks will one day make public *Future Library's* final anthology, which will contain one hundred essays.[1] Most of us living today will never read this book.

1 Each year, the Future Library Trust invites an author to the project. Guiding the selection of authors is the Future Library Trust, whose trustees (as of 2020) include artist Katie Paterson,

**Figure 2.** *Silent Room*, by Atelier Oslo, Lund Hagem and Katie Paterson. Deichman Public Library in Bjørvika, Oslo. Photo © Vegard Kleven, 2020. Reproduced with permission of Katie Paterson Studio. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

The trees that were felled in order to clear the ground for the new generation of spruces now clad the walls of the *Silent Room* in the newly opened Deichman Public Library in Bjørvika [figure 2]. Located on the top floor of the building, the room was designed by Paterson in collaboration with the architectural team of the library, Lundhagem and Atelier Oslo. From 2020 onwards, this room will keep the growing collection of unread manuscripts safe.

Entering the *Silent Room* is like entering a sacred space. The smell of pine eliminates the everyday urban noise outside the room, and the light, roughly

Publishing Director of Hamish Hamilton Simon Prosser, former Director of the Deichman Bibliotek Liv Sæteren, Publishing Director of Forlaget Press Håkon Harket, Editor-in-Chief of Oktober Press Ingeri Engelstad, and Bjørvika Utvikling's Project Director for Art Anne Beate Hovind.

**Figure 3.** Deichman Public Library in Bjørvika, Oslo. Photo © Reinert Mithassel 2020. Reproduced with permission of Katie Paterson Studio. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

carved timber makes you forget Bjørvika's smooth, grey facades [figure 3]. The public room is dedicated to reflection. Perhaps the smell of pine makes you think about the wild forest; maybe you speculate about Knausgård's secret essay, or perhaps you think about why this organic room has such a ritualistic atmosphere, like in a church. When sitting on the elegant hand-carved wooden bench in the midst of the Norwegian capital's newly developed fjord area of office buildings and Nordic coffee bars, the difference between the natural inside and the urban outside might seem vast. But then you notice goosebumps on your skin, and you realise that the air conditioning system has reduced the temperature, making it slightly cold. After all, the room is not that different from its surroundings. The capital penetrates and merges with the *Silent Room*, and what you thought was different was in fact the same.

## A New Generation

In the year 2000, the term 'Anthropocene' was popularised by chemist and Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen. The concept arises from geology and

holds that traces of human activity can now be found in the geological layers of the earth. Crutzen and his colleagues proposed that human beings' impact on the earth had now reached an irreversible point and that the geological epoch of the Holocene was therefore over and that a new era had begun (Steffen et al., 2011). The concept of the Anthropocene has been widely addressed in humanities and artistic practices, thus translating the geological concept into a cross-cultural analytical category that allows for an understanding of nature and culture as intertwined. A united group of researchers from several disciplines now agrees that humans have used technological tools to exploit natural resources to the point of environmental collapse (see Bjerregaard & Kverndokk, 2018). In the Anthropocene—the geological age of humans—we have lost control of that for which we are responsible. Rooted in an ideology of overproduction and mass consumption, a new kind of unease is spreading in our environment, in politics, and consequently also in the arts.

'The end of the world has already occurred,' writes philosopher Timothy Morton (2013, p. 7) when investigating the philosophical consequences of the Anthropocene. A rhetorical exaggeration perhaps, but, nonetheless, it is an indisputable fact that irreversible human impact on the earth forces us to rethink the way we think about the world. How can the unsettling climates of our times be understood? What kinds of theories and concepts could be used to explain the new relations between nature and culture now that these two categories are completely entangled? How can art, architecture, and design that engages with the complexities of our new geological age be analysed and criticised?

In this book, *Ung Uro*, thirteen young writers, critics, and art historians examine how Nordic visual art, architecture, and design relate to this new state of unease. The Norwegian word 'uro' is defined etymologically as having a double meaning: it means 'movements and unease' but also 'riots and disturbance'. The word comes from the Old Norse *úró* and is used to describe political turmoil, social disorder, and a psychological state of restless anxiety. The title of the book (meaning 'young unrest') thus carries a paradoxical tension between describing the new condition—the Anthropocene—and referring to the reactions this condition provokes. In 2018, Greta Thunberg sat down in front of the Swedish

Riksdag (parliament) and started a global protest. All over the world, young voices demand action. They demand a different economic paradigm, not based on unbridled growth: 'If solutions within the system are so difficult to find,' Thunberg affirmed, 'maybe we should change the system itself' (Thunberg, 2018).

Most of the writers in this book are still students in a wide variety of disciplines within the humanities: art history and visual studies, philosophy, fine arts, gender studies, and media studies. The book started out as a course in art history at the University of Oslo, Art and Criticism in the Anthropocene (developed and taught by the editor in autumn 2018), and the project continued at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, as part of the course Art in its Context (developed and taught by the editor in autumn 2019). Consequently, the Nordic framework of this book refers mainly to Norwegian art, architecture and design, but the chapters also discuss artistic expressions relating to Danish, Swedish, Sami, and Icelandic contexts. During the university courses, Norwegian and international students wrote cutting-edge critiques of contemporary artworks in Oslo and Trondheim, and the group developed a common methodological base when continuing to develop their texts into book chapters. Each author selected an artwork and a topic that they had explored in the university course, and they developed it further into a subjective reading in which they reflected and fabulated *with* the works, in order to draw out the multiple complexity of our current times that the various artworks discussed in the book open up to. During 2020, the authors developed their chapters through writing workshops, and in these meetings a common methodological stance emerged: the authors of *Ung Uro* believe that academic analysis of the visual arts needs to be reconfigured in order to be relevant in a time where the climate crisis, global capitalism, and blurry truths are increasingly interconnected. The writers of this book say 'no' to the current condition by speculating, critiquing, and analysing Nordic art, architecture, and design that either prefigures, participates in, opposes, or is a consequence of, our present unsettling climate.

The chapters of the book all explore how the relationship between nature and culture is negotiated in a wide range of case studies. The chapters span from early 20th century landscape painting to contemporary

bio-acoustics; from energy-positive architecture to the Sami chant *yoik* and critiques of IKEA. However, most of the empirical material consists of specific exhibitions, artistic projects, and related events which have mostly taken place in Norway from 2018 to 2020 and, as such, the book also functions as an archive for critical issues at stake in Nordic contemporary art and culture. In addition, each author discusses her or his case study by drawing on novel theories and concepts; thus, the book introduces academic concepts and terms (such as *posthumanism*, *natureculture*, and *non-human agency*) and shows how these theories can be employed when writing about the visual arts.

The thirteen chapters represent a new generation of scholarship in the field of visual studies, which holds that critique and analysis of artistic expression must have a different form and agency than before: less descriptive and impartial, according to objective parameters, and more speculative and insistent, in accordance with subjective experiences. If writing about the visual arts and artistic work—which are creative fields per se—observations of these expressions need to come from a subjective point of view. Yet, perhaps the key common trait among the approaches in the book is a desire to disturb traditional and outdated frameworks of thinking, and venture into an *ethical criticality*; in other words, the texts in this book want to participate in changing ethical thinking—an approach that is deep-rooted in Norwegian academic thought.

## Deep Ecology

> Today, we see the possibility of a destruction or deterioration of the biosphere. If we try, in a few words, to summarize what makes the situation so critical, I would propose: the accumulation of increasing—almost or total—irreversible environmental decay or destruction brought forth by a deep ideology of material production and consumption. (Næss, 1972, p. 1)

These words were written almost fifty years ago by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (1912–2009). This is the opening segment of his 1972 report *Økologi og filosofi* [Ecology and Philosophy], in which he presented a radical way of thinking about the new powerful catchword 'ecology.' In

this work, Næss suggested combating notions of progress and growth by changing mankind's pattern of thinking and ethical behaviour.

Fifty years ago, the ecology movement was generally understood as a political ideology with the aim of, in Næss' words, 'combating pollution and the depletion of natural resources' (Næss & Anker, 2008, p. 59). Yet, if the measures to combat pollution and over-exploitation of natural resources were confined to signing international agreements on specific issues, Næss claimed these man-made problems would never be really solved. In *Økologi og filosofi,* Næss suggested that the concept of ecology had much *deeper* implications than such political objectives.

Thus, in 1972, Næss formulated his notion of *deep ecology,* in which he blamed the 'hard sciences' and Western scientific models for producing a false feeling of competence in how to grasp accelerating world complexities (Næss & Anker, 2008, p. 63). Næss stressed that ecologists who were using scientific models to describe present conditions and followed up with warnings about a forthcoming catastrophe, belonged to the *shallow* ecological movement. According to Næss, a *deep* ecological movement would, on the other hand, entail a normative concept of ecology; the matters of concern in deep ecology could be described as a political wisdom of ecological harmony or equilibrium. Næss declared that in order to meet the environmental challenges of the future, an 'ecological equilibrium' was needed at every level of society, from local communities to global bodies. Far from being a back-to-nature philosophy, Næss' concept of ecological equilibrium also embraced industry and technology. However, to achieve equilibrium, the organisational principle had to be changed from a belief in growth and progress to a perception that technology and development must be based on circular principles.

These philosophical ideas were formulated while Næss was a professor of philosophy at the University of Oslo (UiO) and, importantly, his ideas were not formed in a vacuum. Several pivotal figures, such as Sigmund Kvaløy and Nils Faarlund, worked together with Næss to formulate the movement's ideological content. At the time, the Philosophy Department at the University of Oslo was the core of the deep ecology movement, but important inspiration also derived from the *outside*—per se. Næss' interest in mountain climbing started already in the 1930s, and in 1969

the Philosophy Department at UiO founded the activist group 'Cooperation Group for Nature and Environmental Protection', which initiated a protest in the north-eastern part of Norway to stop the development of a hydroelectricity plant in connection to the Mardøla Waterfall (see Anker, 2020). For the deep ecologists, thinking, nature, and political activism were deeply related.

As a way of thinking and being-in-the-world, deep ecology aimed to alter human beings' mode of thinking; in order to combat pollution and the over-exploitation of resources, humans needed to redefine their philosophical perception of themselves. In the West, the legacy of philosophers like René Descartes and Immanuel Kant had fostered the idea that the existence of the world is inextricably linked to the way humans map, classify, and conceptualise reality. Fifty years ago, Næss and his colleagues affirmed that we had organised the world as a hierarchy, and we had placed ourselves—the humans—on top. Deep ecology promoted the idea of an 'equal right to live and blossom', but that restricting this right to humans alone would have harmful effects on our quality of life. Næss claimed that quality of life depends on a symbiotic relationship, or coexistence, with other forms of life.

Drawing inspiration from Eastern philosophy, Næss and his colleagues suggested that a de-hierarchisation—a degrowth—of the philosophical value of human beings was imperative for the survival of the planet. Deep ecology's turn towards notions such as coexistence and relations contributed to a conceptual shift that still echoes today and, in this way, the questions explored by the deep ecologists are tied to our current situation.[2]

## Beyond Humans

Returning to the clearing in the forest outside Oslo, the trees with red ribbons [figure 4] require us to think of as together what has usually been

2 Although ecological concerns have a long and complex prehistory, Næss is considered to be a pioneer of ecological thinking. Often-mentioned contributions that also inspired environmental activism include Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), the first Earth Day in 1970, Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971), and the report *The Limits to Growth* (1972).

**Figure 4.** A growing three which is a part of the artwork *Future Library: 2014–2114* by Katie Paterson. Photo © Bjørvika Utvikling by Kristin von Hirsch. Reproduced with permission of Katie Paterson Studio. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

understood as distinct: in *Future Library*, nature and art become one—as if reminding us that nature and culture cannot be understood as separate. *Future Library* exemplifies and participates in a major issue and theme in contemporary art and theory: a turn *away* from the human as an ultimate guarantee of definite knowledge and lived experiences. The understanding of the world in which the human is placed in the centre of the world—and thus is given more value than other living and non-living entities—is called *anthropocentrism*. In both art and humanistic disciplines, artists and scholars attempt to challenge and even break such

anthropocentric attitudes by, for instance, speculating about the realm of the non-human, exploring non-Western worldviews that open up to multiple understandings of reality, or activating more-than-human experiences through science and technology. In light of this, a common topic in contemporary art is *multiple timescales* that surpass human capacities (for instance, a human life); time as either stretching backwards to past geological epochs—so-called *deep time*—or into unknown futures. In the *Future Library* project, the artwork is entangled in the lifetime of trees and this radically changes the interpretation of the work. Those of us living today will not experience the finished artwork and critics cannot fully understand it in order to interpret and critique it. Our humanity limits the full experience of this artwork, and the public can only partake in a segment of the long process of *growing* the work.

During the last decade, the Nordic contemporary art scene has seen a dramatic increase in processual artworks with an ethical value base directed towards destabilising human exceptionalism—in accordance with Næss' ideas. Simultaneously, in disciplines such as philosophy, history, and cultural studies, there has been a new development in theory and method that attempts the same. Today's methodological approaches in the humanities question the traditional understanding of the (human) subject as a source of action and the (non-human) object as a passive thing. In other words, recent methodological developments in the humanities aim to destabilise subjectivity and objectivity as epistemological notions, attempting instead to understand *multiple complex relations* between familiar epistemological dualities, such as subject vs object, mind vs body, and culture vs nature. The eco-feminist philosopher Donna Haraway is perhaps the most celebrated theorist within contemporary humanities today, advocating conceptual notions such as pluralism (which she calls 'tentacular thinking'), hybridity, and more-than-human beings. According to Haraway, all entities are hybrid entities which are constituted by their relations to other entities. On this, she writes: 'Through their reaching into each other, through their "prehensions" or grasping, beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not pre-exist their relatings. "Prehentions" have consequences. The world is a knot in motion' (Haraway, 2003, p. 6).

To understand all things in the world as connected through relations—thereby avoiding an anthropocentric perspective—and to understand the world as being in constant motion, or in flux, are fundamental philosophical underpinnings and ethical imperatives in recent developments in arts and humanities. These developments have been gathered under the umbrella term 'posthumanism' and include heterogenous directions and movements such as eco-feminism, new materialism, and object-oriented ontology. Apart from the writings of Haraway, theorists from these directions (for instance, Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, Jane Bennett, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Elizabeth Grosz, Timothy Morton and Anna Tsing) have been widely read in Nordic art schools during the latter part of the 2010s (Yazdani, 2019). Although these directions and movements differ quite dramatically from each other in terms of means and aims, they all claim that the superior status of the human being needs to be broken down and new approaches based on a *posthuman* ethic need to be cultivated. The motivation for these directions in both art and theory is a belief that the anthropocentric attitudes that have been predominant in Western thinking (See Latour, 1993) have led us to the point in which the world we now live in is radically different than before.

In the Nordic art scene of the latter part of the 2010s there has been a tendency towards the manifestation of Næss' relational ethics of deep ecology in the production of artworks; the relations that constitute the works are entangled in more-than-human processes. In contemporary arts there is also a growing interest in what can be described as a 'deep relational' connection between living and non-living entities: several works activate this deep relational connection by artistic practices in which the final outcome of the work is not designated by human intention but by creative agents such as trees, mushrooms, bees or algae.

## Staying with the Trouble

Returning to the sacred, wooden *Silent Room* in the Deichman Public Library, the entanglement between nature and culture has not yet been recognised by profiteers who market the Norwegian forest as pure, silent, and untouched by human meddling. The light timber in the hermetically

sealed room makes the contrast between the inside and the outside of the room remarkably explicit. The artwork *Future Library* might seem like a true 'ecological' artwork but, in accordance with Næss' distinction between shallow and deep ecology, a rather different value base is revealed when investigating the specific situation underpinning the work.

The Future Library project was conceived by artist Katie Paterson, but 'commissioned and produced by Bjørvika Utvikling' (Bjørvika Utvikling, 2021)—a real estate developer whose goal is to develop Bjørvika into Norway's most attractive area for real estate and commercial businesses.[3] In this context, the artwork can be considered to be participating in what Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre call 'the enrichment economy'. In *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities,* Boltanski and Esquerre analyse the European economic paradigm that emerged after industrial production moved from Europe to East Asia. The new form of capitalism is not connected to industrial production, financiers or industrialists, but instead to the arts, luxury goods, and cultural heritage. According to Boltanski and Esquerre, agents in the enrichment economy are creatives, travellers, and culture makers that might not even be aware that their actions are entangled in paradigms of financial growth: in urban development, real estate marketing or tourist industries.

In the 1970s, art theorist Brian O'Doherty (1999) wrote a classic essay about the ideology of the art gallery space that he identified as 'the white cube'. The white walls of art galleries, O'Doherty argued, had become of such vital importance for the interpretation of contemporary art that the *context* had now become *content*. Consequently, the white walls sanctified the singular artwork and thereby increased its market value. Not only contemporary art but also architecture and design can be said to exist in the realm of such a 'white cube' that sanctifies its content and thereby increases its value. Yet, in light of the recent climate crisis, perhaps we must update the 'white cube of modernism' and instead talk

3 Bjørvika Utvikling is owned by HAV Eiendom AS and Oslo S Utvikling AS (OUS). On their website, OUS writes: 'The real estate company Oslo S Utvikling (OSU) was established in 2001, and is owned by Entra ASA, Linstow AS and Bane NOR Eiendom AS. The company has an ambitious vision to make Bjørvika Norway's most attractive residential and commercial area.' [https://osu.no/om-osu/informasjon-om-osu].

about a 'green cube of sustainability' in which art, architecture and design become sanctified creative agents working for the European Green Deal—as, for instance, in the *Future Library* project that is sanctified in the name of ecology to promote urban development. Today, Næss' two notions of deep and shallow ecology might be hard to tell apart—especially in relation to the creative economy.

Apart from discussing how Nordic arts relate to notions such as ecology and anthropocentrism, this book also proposes that the Anthropocene inaugurates new kinds of phenomena as sacred, and thereby sealed off from critical approach. As discussed by Riccardo Biffi in Chapter 3, philosopher Giorgio Agamben proposes that we need to *profane what is sacred*, in order to, in Biffi's words, 'open up to new and heterodox uses of something that is originally separated from common control, something "sacred" that can be looked at but not modified.' *Ung Uro* attempts to profane the green cube in order to 'stay with the trouble' as Haraway (2016) suggests is a way to cope with the troubling entanglements—or, in other words, the unsettling climates—of the Anthropocene.

## Confronting *Uro*

The book is divided into four parts in which the chapters explore connected topics: 'Unsettling Climates' discusses three cases of Nordic art, architecture and design, and respectively shows how notions such as pristine nature, sustainable design and green architecture become troublesome in a time of global crisis. The second part, 'Restless Resources,' presents three artworks which utilise natural elements as their primary material. The artworks are interpreted as opening up for three different ways of understanding and responding to the environmental crisis. Then, 'Entering Darkness' brings the reader into discussions of the uncanny and the unknown: the works discussed in this part open up to different ways of sensing, touching and hearing. In the book's final part, 'Deep Relationalism,' four artworks that ethically aim to destruct human exceptionalism are analysed and critiqued. Taken together, all the chapters in this book attempt to tell heterodox stories of the Nordic *natureculture*.

*Ung Uro* explores how various artistic and philosophical strategies confront our unsettling climate and the authors do this by unsettling traditional interpretations and modes of thinking: engaging in ethical criticality and hoping to change the course.

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# Part I
# Unsettling Climates

CHAPTER 2

# Changing Atmospheres: The Proto-Ecological Landscapes of Nikolai Astrup

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**Abstract:** The innovative artist and smallholder Nikolai Astrup (1880–1928) spent most of his career devoted to portraying variations of his home village of Jølster. The early reception and framing of Astrup's work as 'national' was, by large, a result of the budding national art institutions' efforts towards unifying the diverse regional cultures into a single national identity. This chapter questions to what degree Nikolai Astrup's artistic project adhered to a national agenda. Through the lens of ecocritical art history, Astrup's art can be seen as an expression of proto-ecological sensibilities and a reaction to the environmental changes of his time. His landscape paintings often include humans working on the land, and appear to represent an opposition to the nature-culture dichotomy and the increasing separation between humans and their environment that occurred during Astrup's lifetime. His representation of his surroundings was that of the place-specific, cyclical and particular. In this chapter, these characteristics of Astrup's artistic project are discussed in light of Arne Næss' notion of deep ecology.

**Keywords:** ecocritical art history, literary ecocriticism, deep ecology, national landscape painting

## Introduction

Henie Onstad Kunstsenter (Art Centre), 2016. On the floor, a group of school children are sitting in a circle with pieces of paper, drawing pictures of wild bonfires. Now and then they stop to tilt their heads and gaze at the intense swirls of yellow, orange and green in the painting in front of them. Hanging on the white wall is one of Norway's quintessential national treasures, *Midsummer Eve Bonfire* [figure 1], by Nikolai

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**Figure 1.** Nikolai Astrup. (1915). *Midsummer Eve Bonfire*. Collection: Sparebankstiftelsen DnB. Photo: Dag Fosse/KODE. Reproduced with the permission of KODE. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

Astrup (1881–1928). The innovative artist and smallholder spent most of his career devoted to portraying variations of his home village of Jølster. *Midsummer Eve Bonfire* depicts an emerald green valley with women and men dancing around a smoky, crackling bonfire under clouded white mountains and the hue of the northern summer night sky. All but one woman, who is standing near the edge of the frame, observing the dance and resting her hands on her belly.

As the children at the Henie Onstad focus on drawing a circle of flames on the floor, the occasional art connoisseur or group of spectators step around the small brush fires to catch a closer look at the painting, sighing, 'How marvellous, *how completely Norwegian*!' Yet, as Tove Haugsbø's research shows, Astrup's influences stretch far beyond national borders (Haugsbø, 2015). The early reception and framing of Astrup's work as 'national' was largely a result of the budding national art institutions' efforts towards unifying the diverse regional cultures into a single national identity.

*Ecocritical Art History* is a recent development within the field of Environmental Humanities, rooted in literary ecocriticism from the 1990s. In much the same way as feminist or postcolonial critique uses an artwork or literary work to shed light on gender/racial power structures within a

culture or society's historical context, ecocriticism uses cultural legacies to discuss historical environmental consciousness and the power structure within nature/culture. As Professor Alan C. Braddock explains in an interview for the podcast *Edge Effects*, ecocritical art history 'in many ways expands the meaning of historical context to include not just human social institutions and conditions but the larger environmental context in which these human activities have unfolded over time.' (Slaby, 2019). Furthermore, the enclosed biographical self can transform into a materially entangled self, where the specific environmental conditions can co-narrate the aesthetic and literary form. In a sense, philosopher Roland Barthes' notion of author is now brought back from the dead, albeit this time with worms, mud and all. So, let us step back in time to search for the larger environmental context in which Astrup's life and work in Jølster took shape.

## A Collective Uniformed Time

Oslo Central Station, July 1922. The painter Ludvig Ravensberg and the writer Hans E. Kinck step aboard the Bergen train heading to Western Norway to visit their friend Nikolai Astrup. After a restless night's sleep, the two friends get off at Myrdal and hike through the landscape made of deep valleys and purple heathered highland. Kinck scoffs at the farmers' replacements of their old sod roofs with corrugated iron, and complains about the decline of traditional culture in Norway. The conversation leads to the ironic remark that while local cultures are slowly disintegrating, the reconstructed folk costume *bunad* is gaining in popularity. The next day, Ravensberg and Kinck arrive at the fjord village of Balestrand, a popular travel destination for the German Emperor Wilhelm II. They pass the 'dragon style' villa of painter Hans Dahl, whose grand landscape paintings are populated by young women in *bunads* to appeal to the taste of his German benefactor. They soon head for Jølster, to get away from 'all the fakeness'.

Steeped in harsh statements, the diary entry of Ludvig Ravensberg's trip to Jølster in July 1922 points out that the abstract idea of Norway as a unified nation, combined with industrial development, was replacing regional independence and local identity. The National Gallery, established in 1836, played an important role in the construction of this national narrative. As

the pictures of traditional country life made their way onto the walls of the national museums, and the vernacular building traditions of Norway were collected in open air museums, the reality was that this form of life was rapidly dying out. In the period between 1860 to 1960, the percentage of Norwegians engaged in primary production fell from 90% to 10% of the population. Farming and fishing went from being a collective project—in which one generation taught the next—to become marginalised, mechanised and school-taught professions. After WWII, a significant amount of people no longer produced their own food (Sandvik, 2015). Today a mere 3% of Norwegian soil is farmed land (Norwegian Government, 2018).

Amid agricultural change, disintegration of place, change from cyclical time to mechanical time, and vanishing superstitions and folklore—where trolls and goblins were chased out of the forests and mountains and put into illustrated storybooks for children—Nikolai Astrup built a unique farmstead in Jølster [figure 2]. Here, he painted lush landscapes of mountains, birch trees and meadows. In his pictures we find the presence of humans engaged in contemplative and habitual activities on the land, such as harvesting, planting or picking berries. The almost ritualistic and spiritual emphasis on the repetitive bodily motions echoes the cyclical

**Figure 2.** Two of the cabins at Astruptunet, Jølster. Photo: Siri Katinka Valdez. 

**Figure 3.** View from the top of Astruptunet, Jølster. Photo: Siri Katinka Valdez. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

and mystical atmosphere in his repetitive, yet varied, landscapes—often infused with mythical creature-like shapes. In a sense, the viewer is visually narrated by a form of oral storytelling of the relationship between humans and place over time.

When Ravensberg and Kinck arrived at their final destination on 12 July 1922, they were bewildered at the all-encompassing devotion that Astrup had towards painting, shaping, cultivating, and building in the environment [figure 3]. In Ravensberg's words:

> Astrup, this peculiar man, has put spirit into everything in this place, built the houses, fertilized and crossed the plants, shaped the terracing landscape, fought the harsh nature and built stone grottos and ledges. Here he is alternating between being a carpenter, a farmer, a man of nature and a man of culture. Kinck and I are walking around completely bewildered … To think that something so original and strangely personal exists in our collective uniformed time … In all

> areas, Astrup is at home. In chemistry, [making natural paint] color, plants—Astrup is a philosopher of nature that has observed everything … To understand Astrup, one must go to his farm Sandal … (Gløersen, 1958, pp. 82–89)

## 'I actually saw it when I painted it'

Sandalstrand, Jølster – November 1917. Nikolai Astrup is sitting in his cabin at his farmstead in Sandalstrand, writing a letter to shipbroker Hans Jacob Meyer. The shipbroker had requested that Astrup remove some cows from one of the paintings he had bought from him (*Stardalstøylene* (1917)). Astrup, being financially burdened, gives in to the request, but finds it necessary to explain why the cows are central to the work. Thus, he replies:

> Nikolai Astrup to Hans Jacob Meyer – Sandalstrand 28/11/1917
>
> Mr. Meyer
> Yes, I will indeed remove the cows—after your request—however, I will not refrain from mentioning that these cows were to a degree the point of—and a necessary part of—the mood, which made me choose to paint the motif at precisely that time of day. It is, in fact, characteristic of the mood on a mountain grazing farm; when the creatures return home after sunset they most often stay in a single line on ridges and hilltops. Why, you may ask, well, probably because they are easy to spot, so that their friends—the other creatures—can see that they are on their way home and can join them. That the creatures do this is, hence, almost for the same reason that one puts bells on cows; I have often seen this and noticed this in particular at Bakkestöilen this summer. When one does not see this more often, it is perhaps because the cows do not always have such easy access to heights or ridges that can be spotted from all angles of the valley, but then, as mentioned, the cowbells do the same service (to gather the animals home at night). When I mention this, it is to explain that it was not a 'contrived' whim of mine—this thing with the cows—I actually saw it when I painted it. (Astrup, 1917a)

Astrup's letter reveals a distinct environmental awareness and sensibility. Firstly, Astrup draws similarities between humans and animals – devaluating the human/nature dichotomy. Both cows and humans use tricks to

gather the herd at dusk; while humans use cowbells, the cows themselves form a line on top of ridges and hilltops to draw attention to their wandering 'friends', so they will not get lost in the dark. Also, Astrup uses the nouns 'creatures' and 'friends' when speaking of the cows, as a way to emphasise their significance; not objectifying them as 'cattle' that could easily be removed from the motive. Lastly, Astrup explains that the choice to paint the scenery at dusk was because of the behaviour of the cows at precisely this time of day, something he had experienced and seen himself. He emphasises that the formation of the animals on the ridgeline is a direct response to the sun's movement across the sky. Removing the cows from the work would remove the 'mood' or the 'feeling' that Astrup was trying to convey, that is, the interrelations between animals and their environment.

The narrative that Astrup reveals in this letter shows ties to an environmental attitude Arne Næss later developed as *deep ecology*. According to Næss, all life has inherent value, and the symbiotic relationship between organisms is crucial (Næss, 1973, pp. 95–100). In other words, deep ecology is systemically and ethically oriented, meaning that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is only through maintaining this symbiosis between organisms that ecology can exist. A deep ecological approach that emphasises place-specificness, diversity and symbiosis within the ecosystem at large seems applicable to Astrup's place-specific and particular landscapes. In nearly all of Astrup's paintings, there is a definite emphasis and fascination with *place*: a fascination that coincided with the disintegration of place in society at large. While the Norwegian art discourse was preoccupied with classifying his landscape paintings as representing the whole of Norway, Astrup was more concerned with tending the ten types of rhubarb he grew in his garden.

## Returning to the Source

In light of this, let us return to the primal fire at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. The giant fire ignites the whole room. But ignites it with what? An atmosphere of abstract nationalism or an atmosphere of humans in connection with their environment? The latter is exemplified in the ritualistic celebration of fire, a vital source of nourishment and life. The children on

the floor certainly seemed to be focused on this vitality. The fire is indeed the central 'character' of *Midsummer Eve Bonfire*, while the humans circle the flames in devotion and celebration. The steep mountains and the lake create the atmospheric mood in the painting, typical to Western Norway, specifically the mountain valley of Jølster. It is not the flat and open landscape of Eastern Norway that is portrayed, not the salted, crusty seascape of Lofoten, but a specific location in Jølster. The exploration of humans in place, as well as the emphasis on cyclical and seasonal rhythms, were central in Astrup's body of work. Instead of defining Astrup's motives from a nationally oriented perspective, the artist's landscapes can be seen as a proto-ecological contemplation of the environmental changes of his time.

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CHAPTER 3

# Exhibiting Nordic Values: A Critical Look at the IKEA Store

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**Abstract:** IKEA proposes a distinct showroom experience for its stores globally—a successful model that is frequently imitated by competitors and widely analysed by academics. In this chapter, the IKEA showroom is considered as a cultural institution rather than a store: a museum of modern living. The 'IKEA Museum' is evaluated for its cultural impact, focusing mostly on the narrative that it offers to the visitor regarding his/her own role and agency in the Anthropocene. Drawing on authors such as Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, Carol Duncan and Naomi Klein, it is argued that the choices in showroom design and brand messages portray many known tropes of neoliberal culture, reducing the citizen to an individual consumer rather than empowering his/her political awareness. The chapter ends with a suggestive subversion of the current situation, as the IKEA showroom is briefly re-imagined as a more ethical and culturally responsible version of itself.

**Keywords:** IKEA store, product design, individualism, public discourse, corporate social responsibility

## Introduction

It can truly happen to anyone: it is a Saturday morning in Oslo, you have nothing planned and just enough energy to do something pleasant and relaxing to leave the working week behind. So, you decide to visit the National Gallery once again: why not? It is nice to exchange looks with the same old masterpieces every now and then. In about two hours, though, the tour among the paintings is complete, and so is your morning. Now

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what? Well, it is kind of too soon to go back home: maybe you could check out what is on display at IKEA, just to spend some time, see if you need something (you always do), and then eat a snack in the cafeteria afterwards—it is so cosy.

## A Museum of Contemporary Living

The IKEA store is one of a kind when it comes to retail strategies. The visitors are first met by the showroom section, with all the furniture well-arranged to stage possible living spaces, and only eventually does one find oneself in the more 'commercial' section, with the high shelves storing the products and the cash registers. The two spaces are clearly kept apart, usually on two different floors. Whereas the second part shares most of its aspects with any other store, the first one gives visitors a unique experience that cannot be described as mundane shopping. The products' showcase is designed—or rather, curated—to convey significant messages through classic means of aesthetics. Like in a true exhibition, here you can see how your home would be if you lived in southern France; in the very next booth you can find the interiors of your small, yet optimally arranged condo on the docks; and hereafter, you are inside the spacious and glorious kitchen of your cottage on the fjord—you can already feel the warm atmosphere of the many guests you will definitely be having for dinner at this (your) place, while the children play upstairs. Like in a proper museum, the visitor follows the designed path from room to room, space to space, as the curator structured it with consistency and coherence, to prompt imaginative immersion and to build up meaning. The spectator's gaze is more like that of a visitor than a buyer at first, as the experience is crafted to capture the attention and interest in understanding and being inspired by possible ways of contemporary furnishing. Moving from one diorama to the other, the product itself is not the protagonist. Rather, the showcase of opportunities to inhabit and the inspirational value they convey is. The act of consuming, although very relevant, is not directly addressed as the primary concern. Above all, what one finds is a soothing, reassuring feeling that there is a simple and nice solution to improve *your*, and mostly *your family's*, life today, while the world mainly goes on outside of the safe space and the intimacy of your home.

Therefore, one could try to imagine the product showroom in IKEA stores around the world to be akin to the exhibitions of the museum tradition, just to see where this (not so) odd idea might take us. In short, any exhibition is crafted to convey a message, to create a narrative, and to persuade the visitors through the possibilities offered by visual rhetoric, material choices, space design, and textual information. But before hypothesising what the IKEA store exhibition is designed to tell us, and what its role is in the culture and public discourse today, one should ask what kind of exhibition it could be considered to be, given that it contains no unique or valuable work of art, but rather, some of the most commonplace and mass-produced objects one can think of.

On this matter, a reference to Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* is due, especially regarding the distinction between the cultic value (*Kultwert*) vs the exhibition value (*Ausstellungswert*) of an object (Benjamin, 1968/1935, introduced in §§ 5–8). As a result of their absolute reproducibility, the rooms, the furniture, and the many 'smart' gadgets for your 'smart home' in the IKEA showroom find themselves entirely on the *Ausstellungswert* side of this opposition, lacking any cultic value and therefore any *Aura*, which characterizes original artworks. This indicates a remarkable difference to the way that visitors experience their own presence in an ordinary museum filled with unique works of art, where they would be invested by the aura of such pieces that still retain cultic value, while in a showroom like IKEA's, the visitor-object dynamic is not developed on this level but rather shaped around other ways.

Indeed, it could be argued—borrowing quite liberally from Carol Duncan's chapter 'The Art Museum as Ritual' (Duncan, 1995)—that as the visitor is wandering through the IKEA showroom, moving along the designed path, slowly advancing with the crowd, there is a feeling of some sort of ritual procession taking place. The experience comes across as something different from everyday shopping, as one cannot and will not rush for the item one needs, but rather feels one's gaze almost magnetically attracted by the different furnished booths, while one's imagination is hijacked and cannot help but picture the possible alternative lives one could have, for each style of furniture—as cited in the examples above.

An experience that could be genuinely considered as a public, artistic ritual, since it takes place in a space specifically designed to elicit this kind of *liminality*, as the visitor is both physically on the showroom floor and, at the same time, transferred by their own imagination to the fjord cottage, the condo by the docks, etc., while being in neither of these places. Moreover, it could be considered a ritual that is lived individually in the visitor's imagination, while also being truly collective, as all the visitors, day after day, go through similar imaginative processes, like different readers of the same novel. Even though the lack of cultic value makes visiting the IKEA showroom clearly different to wandering through the halls of a national gallery, it still feels like the visitor is walking around in what could be compared to a natural history museum, where the aura of unique works of art is usually weaker (or absent), but one is still exposed to a coherent narrative and, in this case, educated about a set of specific ways of living by the objects or reproductions on display. Indeed, this would not make the IKEA showroom any less significant as a means of cultural public elaboration—rather, it makes it a more pervasive and widespread one because of its constitutive reproducibility, in pushing forward, among other things, what are proposed to be 'traditional Nordic values', such as attention to functionality, form, and accessibility.

On this topic of showroom design and public communication, a few scholars have examined the matter by analysing IKEA's marketing and PR strategies. For example, according to Ursula Lindqvist, the IKEA showroom is an *archive* as defined by Jacques Derrida, that is, by referring to its origins in ancient Greek: a house for the documents that define the city. Or 'a space that is both public and private and that signifies both political power and cultural authority' (Lindqvist, 2009, p. 44). The 'documents' are replaced here by IKEA's products, which serve as models for possible lifestyles, while the exhibition design would be the intrinsic instrument of interpretation given unilaterally to the visitor. In Lindqvist's view,

> The IKEA store helps construct, reproduce, and disseminate a narrative of Swedish exceptionalism worldwide. This narrative showcases Sweden's image as a peaceful, homogenous, and industrious little nation, exemplifying Enlightenment ideals of social and economic progress while avoiding implication in the Enlightenment's more violent aspects. (Lindqvist, 2009, p. 43)

One could argue that IKEA's exhibition speaks more generally to a globalised Western-oriented consumer, proposing once again a reassuring narrative: your individual right to make free choices in consumption regarding your own private life as independent, singular acts in the world. Join our values in 'The IKEA Concept of Life', which are embedded and reified in our products and, by doing so, you can not only improve your life personally, but also bring about social progress 'for the many', as in IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad's famous motto (Morsing & Roepstorff, 2015, p. 400). How? We are left to conclude that this will occur through a collective but disorganised action of consumption, a sort of 'invisible hand'-like social effect. So, on the other, darker side of this typically anthropocentric coin, 'the implications in the Enlightenment's most violent aspects' are not addressed, insulating the visitor's imagination from the harsh environmental and political realities of the Anthropocene.

## Two Underlying Trails

This very last tendency goes hand in hand with a practice that is common with most global brands and the way their public image strategies play out. Although it must be noted that IKEA has recently been shifting towards embracing more direct responsibility and presenting itself as a front runner in the field of sustainable innovation, one still notices a distinct effort to reduce the environmental question (as with any other critical question of social justice) to the dimension of the individual consumer, leaving the social and collective nature of contemporary, highly interconnected crises out of the picture, and, more importantly, out of everybody's imagination. This trope has been widely studied, and different critics have concluded, as Naomi Klein pointed out, that 'for so many people it's so much more comfortable to talk about our own personal consumption, than to talk about systemic change, [and this] is a product of neoliberalism, that we have been trained to see ourselves as consumers first. […] we've been trained to think very small' (Hanman, 2019). Thus, this common element reoccurs, as the denouncement of neoliberal ideology, in its various forms, once again enters the stage. While we ask why

the more systematic and comprehensive analyses of our anthropocentric times are not as widespread as they should be, these strategies and communicative choices come under the spotlight. In this regard, the IKEA exhibition can serve as an example of the pervasive conceptual practice of reducing the public discourse about the most poignant problems of the Anthropocene to a question of lifestyle and individual 'green' and 'sustainable choices', which can be useful and even individually necessary by themselves, but that are also evidently insufficient and inadequately self-exculpatory.

It is then clear, as one can infer from Klein's conclusions, among many others, that if we can imagine the IKEA showroom as the public museum that it actually is, it could be negatively criticised as quite a significant agent of a twofold subtle cultural commitment to the *removal* and *negation* of key elements in the political consciousness of the many. Firstly, the anthropogenic causes of global inequality and the economic system of exploitation of natural resources in its innumerable facets are wilfully removed from the picture assembled on display. The obvious reason for this is that they could impair the crucial psychological process of customer loyalty development and customer identification with the brand, sparking some cognitive dissonance instead, which would thereafter impact on sales negatively. This removal becomes even more relevant when looked for in other global brands that focus their public image on being lifestyle 'trend-setters', especially in the tech industry where production is significantly outsourced to third party companies operating on the basis of work ethics of dubious morality (to put it mildly).

Secondly and most importantly, the IKEA museum enforces a considerable *negation* of the actual potential of individual and collective political agency of ordinary people, which is instead reduced to only one acceptable public dimension: consumption. In this way, the reduction of the concealed conflicts and contradictions of life, pain, death and nature in the Anthropocene to an act of reassuring consumption *de facto* negates the actual political power that the many citizens living under democratic rule essentially retain. The institution reverses the spread of a key aspect of political democratic consciousness by negating the collective dimension of thought-processing, public discourse and action, confining

everyone to the operative level of the individual as a customer instead. That is, things are the way they are because the current political and legal measures allow them to be, while it is within the possibility of collective engagement in representative democracy to implement, through coordinated political action, the sets of laws and regulations that would change, perhaps drastically, the way in which current practices of production and consumption occur. Thus, it could be claimed that it is time to counter this narrative of the neoliberal reduction to individual action, and to 'think of change on a [big] scale' (Hanman, 2019); to reappropriate the meaning of political agency as the duties of democracy address and control the way we want our community (and not simply the individuals) to live as a collective entity.

## Is It Just a Matter of Design?

As noted before, IKEA has been implementing new policies to cope with its shortcomings in corporate social and environmental responsibility. Nevertheless, almost the entire focus of its exhibitions remains fixed on the consumer and his or her aspirations, not on our consumption and its place in the anthropocentric world. This is not surprising from a marketing standpoint, as, to quote Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, 'design has never been about giving someone or some group what they ask for but what they wish they had asked for and retrospectively pretend that they did ask for' (Colomina & Wigley, 2016, p. 103). So, the space for a wider representation of the social and environmental contexts of the products and our mindless consumption quickly becomes restricted, as it would be counterproductive to sales. Following on from this, the words of French designer Ora Ito are relevant. As Ito pointed out in a recent interview (J. De Missolz, 2017), it should be noted that in the 20th century (especially in the second half) design as a publicly relevant discipline has been a front runner agent in the promotion and global propagation of consumerism. It has been the cavalry of brand identity, of a model of production based on excess and sales targets in the millions. It has encouraged the idea of personal self-fulfilment through constant consumption. As for the 21st century, asks Ito, is design, instead, acknowledging its past role and readjusting its perspective? Are

designers today remedying the industrial excesses of the past by adopting a perspective in which producing better results means making the best with the least, rather than selling the most? Because Ora Ito thinks that they should, and at least some of them are, by coming up with innovative processes or products that improve existing value chains by implementing commendable practices of circular economy.

However, is this role in product design enough on its own to tackle the matters discussed here? Hardly, one could argue, as the topic at hand does not primarily concern the social and environmental sustainability of the product itself (which is, regardless, important in itself), but rather the ways in which it is presented, in showrooms or in advertisements, if we are to follow the premises set beforehand and consider these as a means to create a widespread, cultural, public effect. In fact, one could take as an example one of the innovative and sustainable solutions that IKEA's product designers have worked on in the last few years: the *Kungsbacka* kitchen. This product should be noted, as it not only uses recycled wood in its particleboard panels but is also covered with foil made from recycled plastic (PET) bottles, instead of the usual pristine, newly synthetised materials. Surely a brilliant technical result that, given IKEA's scale of sales, when globally adopted could and will have an impact on the economy of recycled materials. So, like many other 'green products' before it, the *Kungsbacka* kitchen is presented as one way in which IKEA is 'doing its part' to be a better actor in the multifaceted, global, ongoing economic and environmental crises. At the same time, it is not so subtly implied that the visitor, who is only engaged as a responsible consumer (whether in the showroom or via online marketing), should do his or her part by purchasing this new product, thus clearing him or herself of any residual, personal eco-guilt. The broader environmental, political, and socio-economical context that made the *Kungsbacka* kitchen a relevant product in the first place is, of course, strategically omitted from the showcased, curated corporate narrative. Why are one hundred billion PET bottles still used every year globally? (IKEA, 2021). Why are so many people still dependent on single-use plastic bottles? Why does only a privileged part of the global population have reliable access to clean tap water? Why are so many natural water sources worldwide polluted,

or privatised and inaccessible? Furthermore, one final question could be added: is this acceptable or should the current situation be changed? The inclusion of this kind of contextual information would serve as an honest wake-up call to the potential political agency of the visitor, once termed consumer, now called on to be an active citizen. Its wilful omittance, one could claim, is intended to carefully limit and control the visitor's level of awareness, thereby reducing, as argued, his or her status to that of a consumer without any political agency.

## Profane What Is Sacred

Therefore, if one wanted to apply these reflections to IKEA's showrooms, the temptation to invoke what contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls a 'profanation' is significant and unavoidable. According to Agamben, 'to profane' (*profanare*) is to open up to new and heterodox uses of something that is originally separated from common control, something 'sacred' that can be looked at but not modified, like IKEA's exhibitions. An act of profanation 'deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized' (Agamben, 2007, p. 77), which in this case might make us imagine what a 'profaned' IKEA store showroom could look like. Beside the polished panels and surfaces of the furniture, new elements, pictures, texts, and textures could inform the spectator about the often-unspoken sides of mass consumption in the Anthropocene, like the harsh realities of job outsourcing to developing countries with weak workers' rights, the impact of cheap products on various local design and craftsmanship traditions in furniture manufacturing, or our relation as a species to the use of timber, the diversion of waterways, land-grabbing and more. Now this could be a form of repurposing for the better of such a powerful cultural means that the IKEA exhibition becomes the refurbishment of a significant *archive*, separating it from its original aim of marketing interest to promoting a more comprehensive and possibly systematic awareness of what it means to live a globalised life in the Anthropocene.

On the contrary, one could argue that it is not among IKEA's responsibilities to develop a healthy public debate on the many conflicts,

contradictions, and negative impacts inherent to the Anthropocene; IKEA should be making good, sustainable, and affordable furniture for a profit, and that is all. Which, in a liberal, capitalistic framework might even be a fair point. Furthermore, one could add, given the freedom of speech we are all endowed with, IKEA, as a private entity, is also entitled to use its marketing budget and arrange the products in its showrooms however it pleases, and build the public narrative that best fits its ends. This last claim, however, is more problematic. As the well-developed debate about the extension of First Amendment rights of corporations in the USA shows, the freedom of speech of multinational companies can hardly be compared to that of the individual citizen, and thus a different set of responsibilities should be considered, according to the scope of its potential influence, reach and credibility.

## Structural Power Dynamics

Indeed, if looked upon as an exhibition, the IKEA store certainly is a very successful, relevant and influential one, as argued in these pages. With its hundreds of locations around the world (without including the impact of the catalogue and online contents) imposing their cultural presence, it is easy to recognise its dominant role in setting the pop-cultural standard for furnishing and interior design. For these reasons, one could conclude that those who are responsible for the showrooms and for building IKEA's corporate image and corporate public spaces should be held more accountable for the distortions and misrepresentations of our reality that are pursued in order to favour consumption while disregarding the vast majority of its consequences. After all, this is not only a question of educational opportunities. More importantly, it concerns addressing and taking responsibility for the ways in which the significant cultural means at the disposal of big corporations are used. Additionally, this is about recognising the central structural power that private entities have in the dynamics of public discourse.

In a democracy, in fact, the health of the public discourse is to be considered as one of the essential communal assets, and it should be kept in check and protected as one. Thus, this is not just about designing a

new, responsible IKEA showroom—even though an enterprise of this kind could achieve noteworthy results today, as Banksy's *Dismaland* proved.[1] Rather, this is about properly recognising the power of the influence of private entities in the public political discourse and, subsequently, addressing the respective responsibilities in order to protect and promote this public asset. Which, in turn, is fundamental to securing the cultural atmosphere needed to bring about the possibility of significant change regarding the environmental crisis and socio-economic inequalities worldwide.

Of course, this is no simple task, and clearly not one which can be solved with just a few changes in showroom design. In this chapter, indeed, only some particular aspects of a much more complex situation have been criticised, and the only semi-serious intervention proposed is certainly not unproblematic. In reference to the main issue that would arise, one could argue that the addition of data and information on the products on display might further push the individualisation of the problem and reinforce the cultural frame by which environmental struggles are just a matter of consumer choice, thus bringing us back to the challenging starting point.

However, by adding this last argument to the ones made earlier, it becomes even clearer that these matters of public narrative, rhetoric and discourse deserve all the attention and critique that they are given today, considering their current relevance. As of now, in fact, the furnished rooms in the exhibition still have no windows and neither, it seems, does the case for its narrative, offering a pleasant retreat into the dream of a decent private life, shutting the rest of the world outside our walls and our concerns—which definitely is not a sustainable way forward.

1 In *Dismaland*, a 2015 installation in Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, Banksy recreated a dystopic version of a Disneyland theme park, recalling many of the original's key features in a grotesque tone. With this creation, the artist offered an immersive monument of critique targeting the empires of influence held by private corporations, while at the same time providing the visitors with occasions for self-reflection.

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CHAPTER 4

# Form follows Environment: On Snøhetta's Powerhouse Brattørkaia

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**Abstract:** The ecological and social paradoxes of Snøhetta's Powerhouse Brattørkaia in Trondheim beg the question of what environment the developers are considering. By discussing 'the World's Northernmost Energy-Positive Building,' this chapter considers the intentions of green technology in architecture, such as: what are climate-favourable solutions; what may happen when our increasing need for sustainable power is realised through architecture; and how does this need dictate architectural form? The chapter discusses how technology is a presumed answer to the climate crisis, whether the power supply market is changing, and how nature and degrowth is interpreted.

**Keywords:** carbon form, degrowth, functionalism, solar power, sustainable architecture

## Introduction

She had barely had time for a breather since this morning, as the usual Monday briefing dragged on. She could have a lie-in tomorrow, though. Thank God for flexitime. And thank Snøhetta for creating a relaxing garden in the middle of the office building, where she had, more than once, practiced her mindfulness routine in-between the stacks of letters that had been piling up since last year. In their latest team-building session, the life coach had taught them that meditation was 'beneficial for productivity and overall health.' Breathing in sync with the app, she could hear both the waves hitting the rocks and the trains hitting the tracks from

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where she sat. The sun was reflected on the golden aluminium, heating up her neck more than she liked. She closed the app and added sunscreen to her shopping list. Sun-damaged skin was not in fashion this season. Back at her desk on the top floor of Powerhouse Brattørkaia, she took a final meditational breath while gazing out over the fjord. Thank Teekay Offshore for deciding to move their headquarters to the top four floors where nature enhanced the office landscape, gracing the employees with the changing moods of the sea.

Powerhouse Brattørkaia's self-proclaimed aesthetic philosophy, 'form follows environment,' bears witness to this real-estate development project's ambitious goals in terms of sustainability and green solutions. But when these solutions facilitate increased energy consumption, the environmental gain can quickly become reduced to the merely symbolic.

In August 2019, Powerhouse Brattørkaia, designed by the Norwegian architectural firm Snøhetta, opened as 'the World's Northernmost Energy-Positive Building' [figure 1] (Snøhetta, 2019). The Powerhouse Foundation writes on their website that the building 'is designed according to the principle *form follows the environment*' (Powerhouse, 2018b).

**Figure 1.** Powerhouse Brattørkaia – 'The World's Northernmost Energy-Positive Building'. Designed by Snøhetta, 2019. Photo: Erik Børseth. Reproduced with permission of Erik Børseth and Infinitiv AS. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

This catchphrase plays on the important principle of modernist architectural functionalism 'form follows function,' yet in the 2019 version, the catchphrase has been reworked and adapted to climate-favourable solutions. In this case, the need for a greater proportion of power generators from sustainable sources is realised through architecture.

## Optimised Form

Specific form elements of Powerhouse Brattørkaia, such as the incline and orientation of the roof, are, according to the developers, based on environmental considerations. The roof is oriented and angled in such a way that there is an 'optimal utilization of the sun' as an energy source (Powerhouse, 2018b). The same applies to the solar panels, mounted as an extension of the characteristic roof. In the café and ground floor of the building there is an info hub describing the real-time production of energy. It describes the benefits of using the sun as an energy source, even in Trondheim where from October until March sunlight is a gift, not a given.

As such, the sun dictates the design of the building itself, and the black facade panels on the roof surface also mean that the sunlight is not reflected away from the solar panels, as it would with lighter colours. However, the black panels have no energy-boosting effect, but have rather been chosen for visual purposes, as it is easier to hide the panels when constructed in this way. At the same time, hiding the panels should not be an end in itself. After all, it is the environment that controls the building's shape—if we are to believe the developers—and therefore it should be design-friendly to let the solar panels be an important form element. The solar cells become a visual definition of the building's function. Here, technology is literally *brought to the foreground* and thus indicates that this is how to cope with the changing climate.

Further, the building's stylistic elements echo functionalism and even echo functional elements originating as far back as antiquity. The central part of the building has been opened up as an atrium with a small garden in an oval shape. This both symbolises the zero-waste ideology the building proclaims and allows light to enter the office space and the underground canteen. Daylight replaces electric light and therefore saves electricity. The

recurring trope of architectural functionalism, 'light, air, and hygiene,' can here be read as 'light, air, and environment.' The atrium is clad in gold-coloured aluminium sinus plates and has built-in flower beds in wood, filled with local wildflowers, where the employees can enjoy the fresh air and green plants in between workshops and consulting meetings. This little, green patch is also open to the public during working hours and pops up as a small garden in an otherwise black and golden frame.

As stated by the developers, the building was intended to have an urban function: 'One of the main intentions is for Brattøra to become a more integrated part of the city centre, so that the city extends all the way to the fjord' (Entra, 2019). Yet in the public media, the building has been criticised for its size, location and colour. Trondheim's planning authorities consider it to be too tall for the cityscape and not well-adapted to its surroundings (Byggeindustrien, 2017). The statement 'form follows the environment' can further be interpreted as a pretext for—or justification of—a completely ordinary commercial building by the fjord blocking the public sea view.

Prior to the building's construction, there was a line of sight from the city centre and out to the fjord. What remains in the line of sight is the solar wall between the city and the fjord [figure 2]. Because of its central


**Figure 2.** Powerhouse Brattørkaia – 'The World's Northernmost Energy-Positive Building'. Designed by Snøhetta, 2019. Photo: Ivar Kvaal. Reproduced with permission of Ivar Kvaal. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

location, but also by placing areas such as the café, with its glass walls, facing towards the water's edge and Trondheim's nature reserve to the west, the building creates a greater distinction between the city and the sea. The building transforms the previous open sea area into a blockage. From inside the café, nature is reduced to visuality and aesthetics by the building's shiny facade, which frames it. Nature becomes something one looks at and enjoys, rather than interacting with it.

## Urban Batteries

According to the developers, Powerhouse Brattørkaia is presented as a solution to a future where people have to change their consumer habits: it is '… a building that produces more clean and renewable energy over its life cycle than is used for the development, construction, operation and disposal of the building' (Norske Arkitekters Landsforbund, 2014). The organisations behind the development of Powerhouse Brattørkaia are the real estate company Entra, project developer and contractor Skanska, the environmental foundation ZERO, the internationally renowned architectural firm Snøhetta and the consulting company Asplan Viak (Powerhouse, 2018a).

According to the Research Centre on Zero Emission Neighbourhoods in Smart Cities (FME ZEN) (led by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and SINTEF), the goal of sustainable architecture is that buildings should '… produce more renewable energy than the building itself needs [through] the use of solar panels, heat pump solutions, geothermal heat, district heating, batteries, heat storage and smart management' (Sandberg et al., 2019). In other words, the building should not only be energy neutral in total, but should also have a collective function by being a local power generator (Stene et al., 2018, p. 9). It should supply energy to the energy market, as the demand for electricity is increased through the use of electric buses and ferries or power-based heating systems, such as heat pumps.

There is a market for and therefore *power* in supplying energy. The Powerhouse is thus not only self-sufficient with electricity, but it is also a supplement to electricity production in the city. As a result, power

production is decentralised and, over a longer period of time, one imagines that the entire power grid could be privatised through sustainable architecture. Is this democratisation or the capitalisation of a basic need? The Small Power Association in Norway already has 400 private member power plants, and 200 new producers were under development in 2019 (Småkraftforeninga, 2019). Imagine privatised power plants taking control over how people live their lives if the demand for clean power is greater than the public grid can provide. Will green energy generated by architecture then become a question of social differences?

A larger market can at the same time facilitate democratisation, and it is easy to imagine a system where everyone contributes to an open market where electricity in and out of the network is measured—you provide what you can and get what you need. The energy that is not used is sold to electricity companies, where the income is used to pay for the solar panel investments. The direction this development takes may depend on legislation. In other words, green energy generated by architecture might then become a question of politics.

The Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019 tackled the issue of architecture and growth. It discussed how 'urban and architectural solutions [may work] for a world where quality of life and the environment are placed above economic growth' (Oslo arkitekturtriennale, 2019). The curator team of the Triennale also emphasised how an average skyscraper has a lifespan of 30 years. In the case of Powerhouse Brattørkaia: what will the sustainability consequences be when the building is unable to fulfil its current functions?

Another question is whether the decentralised energy hub will compensate for the use of materials in renovations and—considering the average lifespan of an office building—a new construction when the time comes. It is indeed a goal within the Powerhouse philosophy to reduce the carbon footprint in terms of materials. But when the building or materials need an upgrade, how will one solve the upkeep and sustainability calculation when solar panels are produced using fossil power and non-sustainable materials, as well as being notoriously hard to recycle? The cement industry is one of the main producers of $CO_2$ and the heavy construction equipment runs on fossil fuel. According to the curator

team of the Oslo Architecture Triennale, green architecture needs to be a question of *not* building—in other words, of degrowth.

Powerhouse Brattørkaia paves the way for using buildings as decentralised urban batteries and *adapting* the surroundings to an increasing need for sustainable energy production—what Elisa Iturbe calls *carbon form*. Iturbe writes that our society and built environment 'replicates the myth of a limitless supply of energy and resources that is characteristic of a carbon-fueled [sic] culture of abundance' (Iturbe, 2019, p. 13). In Powerhouse Brattørkaia, our current energy consumption needs are *sustained* by solar panels, but this form shows no inclination towards degrowth in energy supply. However, if the United Nations goals of supplying clean energy for everyone and building sustainable cities are to succeed, and thus stop climate change within 2030—is it not better to use our buildings and cities as power generators? (FN-sambandet, 2020). Instead, we now intervene in nature itself, by building windmills in nature reserves, building dams, and diverting waterfalls into pipes to meet our increased need for sustainable energy. We change nature instead of changing our cities. Can degrowth not only relate to *how* humans build, but *where* humans build? Our collection of buildings can be the answer to our common problems, with Powerhouse Brattørkaia as a leading example.

If our collective energy consumption increases at the same time because the energy is 'green', what environment do green technology and our buildings serve? Technology and adapting to the increase in energy consumption will be the developer's solution in the face of the climate crisis, rather than a deep change in behaviour to cut down on the *use* of resources, whether they are financial or natural. If form follows environment, which environment does this building follow and thus facilitate: the ecological, the social, or the economic environment?

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# Part II
# Restless Resources

CHAPTER 5

# Ice Art Ethics: On Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch*

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**Abstract:** On the occasion of the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change in 2014, a rather unique clock was installed in front of the Copenhagen City Hall. Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (2014–2019) is an ecological artwork that aims to raise awareness about climate change by engaging its audience. The artwork consisted of twelve enormous ice blocks installed in the shape of a clock. Drops of water slowly dripped to remind the audience of the precarious situation that our planet is currently in. This chapter addresses and explores the paradoxical nature of ecological artworks, with Ice Watch as a case study. By drawing on Arne Næss' concept of deep ecology and Donna Haraway's call for 'staying with the trouble', this chapter explores whether anthropocentrism can truly be criticised by ecological artworks.

**Keywords:** deep ecology, installation, ecological art, anthropocentrism, climate change

## Introduction

'The clock is ticking' is a phrase often used when referring to climate change. This phrase reminds us of the precarious situation that our planet is currently in. Each second in which we can make a change in order to save our planet counts. In front of the Copenhagen City Hall, a rather unique clock was installed in 2014 [figure 1]. The ticking of the clock was not due to the actual ticking sound produced by the clock workings, but rather the passage of time was represented by drops of water slowly

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**Figure 1.** Olafur Eliasson. (2014). *Ice Watch* [twelve large ice blocks installed in front of the City Hall in Copenhagen]. neugerriemschneider, Berlin. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles © 2014 Olafur Eliasson. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

dripping from twelve ice blocks which were installed in the shape of a clock.

Each person passing by was invited to touch or taste the cold and melting surface of the ice blocks [figure 2]. This haptic sensation brought the audience in direct contact with the decay of large ice blocks, which were removed from their natural habitat in Greenland and transported to Copenhagen [figure 3]. On the occasion of the installation of this conceptual clock, the following was uttered: 'Art can engage people, far better than science can. Science is fascinating, but art can touch something inside us which is hard to describe' (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014c).

Those were the words of geologist Minik Rosing, who created the artwork *Ice Watch* in cooperation with Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson. The 12 ice blocks represent, as Eliasson describes, an 'ice parliament. A little parliament of ice, who [sic] needs to agree on something' (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014c). *Ice Watch* was installed on the occasion

**Figure 2.** Olafur Eliasson. (2014). *Ice Watch* [twelve large ice blocks installed in front of the City Hall in Copenhagen]. neugerriemschneider, Berlin. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles © 2014 Olafur Eliasson. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

of the publication of the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014b).

The power of art to engage people is supposed to be articulated in *Ice Watch* by the fact that the spectators can experience the melting of the ice with their senses and should thereby be engaged to gain an increasing awareness of climate change and of the decay of the Greenland ice sheet.[1] The decay of this ice sheet due to our current climate crisis is something that can rarely be experienced first-hand; our knowledge of this situation is mostly constructed by scientific publications, photographs, digitally generated images and the news. By confronting the public directly with

1 *Ice Watch* was also installed in Paris in 2015 and in London from December 2018 to January 2019. Both instalments took place within the realm of important happenings in relation to climate change, such as the UN Climate Conference COP21 in Paris.

**Figure 3.** Spread from Ice Watch Paris newspaper, published by Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles © 2014 Olafur Eliasson. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

the melting of the ice, Eliasson hopes to transform climate knowledge into climate action, as he stated regarding the instalment of *Ice Watch* in London in 2018 (Yalcinkaya, 2018).

The public interaction with the ice was the main purpose of installing the artwork in a public space, and engaging people—as Minik Rosing described the effect of the artwork in Copenhagen—was something that the artwork certainly did: the ice was gazed at, touched, sniffed and even tasted. However, despite Eliasson's intentions, this rather utopian motivation arguably conflicts with the production process of the artwork and the deeper philosophical considerations that this artwork can be connected to. Even though the effects of *Ice Watch* on its audience can never be measured exactly, the confrontation of enormous melting ice blocks in a politically charged location would undoubtedly raise awareness, or at least remind people, of the hazardous condition of the Greenland ice sheet.

However, despite Eliasson's intentions to foster a more critical ecological consciousness, *Ice Watch* doesn't seem to overcome the manifold paradoxicality that is almost inherent to eco art or environmental

art. An important example of this paradox is the carbon footprint of the production of artworks that aim to criticise the carbon footprint of society.[2] In this case, artworks that aim to critically address unethical choices that lead to environmental destruction merely mimic unethical behaviour and contribute to climate destruction. Nonetheless, art, as something that is predominantly human-made, can hardly escape anthropocentric unethicality. Still, this does not necessarily mean that artworks cannot succeed in pointing out and stressing the dangers of human impact on the environment.

Even though I do not aim to entirely situate *Ice Watch* in the broad discussion of environmental art, this text will deconstruct the paradoxical nature of *Ice Watch* as an environmental artwork. By drawing on the philosophical value base of deep ecology, as well as implementing arguments from Donna Haraway's notion of 'staying with the trouble', I aim to situate *Ice Watch* as an artwork that was produced with questionable ethical values similar to those that brought us into a climate crisis, while at the same time being able to raise awareness about those exact same values.

## Natural Interventions

It is important to understand *Ice Watch* in relation to other environmental artworks by Eliasson. Like *Ice Watch*, his artworks' stimulating environmental consciousness are all a result of environmental intervention. These interventions consist of interruption and claiming of space, and secondly, of an interruption and claiming of nature and ecological processes.

*Green River* (1998), a relatively early artwork in the oeuvre of Eliasson, serves as a clear example. This artwork could be signified as an intervention due to the fact that here Eliasson claimed and interrupted the appearance of rivers in different cities. The colour of the rivers was transformed into green by using water-soluble dye. According to the artist, the sudden green colour of the river would serve as a catalyst to trigger heightened awareness of one's surroundings (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014a).

2 The carbon footprint of art, not solely ecological or environmental art, and methods to battle the carbon footprint of the artworld were discussed at Art Basel 2019 during the talk *The Carbon Footprint of the Art World*.

For the installation of *Riverbed* (2014), which was created by Eliasson for the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, the artist collected enormous amounts of stones and sand in order to install a landscape including a water stream inside the museum space. The production process of the artwork, for which Eliasson extracted his material directly from nature, could once again be regarded as claiming, and therefore intervening in, nature and natural processes. The contrast between the walls of the white cube museum building and the floor covered by stones and water is again supposed to heighten consciousness of one's natural environment (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014d).

However, if we develop the connection between the concept of an intervention and the nature of an artwork like *Riverbed*, the act of extracting the material directly from nature by the artist could also be regarded as an intervention in nature itself. A similar type of intervention underlies an artwork like *Ice Watch*. This becomes apparent in a video in which the production of Eliasson's artwork *Your Waste of Time* (2006) is documented.

*Your Waste of Time* is similar to *Ice Watch*, but here Eliasson placed ice blocks from Iceland in an exhibition space at MoMA PS1 in New York City. In this video, a local Icelandic farmer, who was commissioned for the job by Eliasson, removes ice blocks from their natural habitat on an Icelandic beach (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2016). By creating these artworks, Eliasson is claiming nature and intervening in natural processes. It can be argued that, by bending nature to his will, Eliasson exploited the ice blocks for the benefit of museum visitors and his own artistic practice. Eliasson's artistic interventions could be regarded as acts that are deeply rooted in anthropocentrism.

However, it is important to provide this analysis of a part of Olafur Eliasson's oeuvre with nuance. While intervening in natural processes, Eliasson does not necessarily resort to destructive behaviour that influences the natural environments that he works with directly. By using water-soluble dye in *Green River*, Eliasson made sure to respect the ecosystems of the different rivers that served as the location for his artwork. In the case of *Ice Watch*, the artist merely transported giant ice blocks that were already melting in Greenland, and would only continue this process while installed in Copenhagen. Eliasson's artworks that could

be signified as interventions, including *Ice Watch*, thus interrupt natural processes, but do not necessarily destruct them. The interventions raise awareness of our natural environment and lay bare different processes of climate change, which were preceded by destructive human behaviour.

## Deep Ecology

In the 1970s, one of the foremost Norwegian philosophers of the 20th century and the founder of the eco-philosophical movement, Arne Næss, considered human behaviour to be a catalyst for the deterioration of the biosphere. Næss' article 'The Shallow and Deep Ecology Movement'—which he presented at the 3rd World Future Research Conference in Bucharest in 1972—later became one of the most influential articles for environmental ethics (Anker, 2008, p. 56).

In this text, Næss argued that there are two movements connected to the new powerful catchword 'ecology,' one shallow and one deep. According to Næss, the only correct movement in order to fight climate change is that of deep ecology, in which researchers aim to combat depletion and pollution by addressing the causes on a larger and deeper scale. This deeper scale refers to, for example, addressing power structures as well as different lifestyles that cause acts of pollution and depletion. It means that the complete societal structures that lie at the base of human behaviour have to change drastically. The *shallow* ecology movement, on the contrary, is merely focused on combating depletion and pollution without paying attention to the underlying ethical value base (Næss, 1972/2008, pp. 59–60).

The two movements (in the way that Næss addressed them in his iconic text), differ in their approach towards organisms other than humans. Namely, a central keyword in deep ecology is *systemic orientation*. This notion relates to thinking in larger biological systems, in which all organisms are related to each other and dependent on each other. Systemic thinking functions in ecology as a way of understanding that all organisms take part in a greater whole. According to Næss, all organisms bear intrinsic relations to each other, which means that one organism is not able to exist without the other. Organisms do not exist as independent entities, Næss concludes (Næss, 1972/2008, pp. 59–60).

Moreover, Næss coins the idea of *biospherical egalitarianism*, which refers to the belief that an ecological fieldworker should bear a deep-rooted respect for every form of life without any hierarchical presumptions. The eco-philosophical ideas of deep ecology claim the 'equal right to live and to blossom' (Næss, 1972/2008, p. 61). Yet Næss radically stressed the following:

> Restricting this right to human beings is an anthropocentrism with damaging effects upon the quality of life of humans themselves. This quality depends in part upon the deep satisfaction we receive from the close partnership, the symbiosis, with other forms of life. The attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master–slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself. (Næss, 1972/2008, p. 61)

The eco-philosophical movement of deep ecology breaks with so-called anthropocentrism, that is, the idea that the human species has a superior position in the ecosystem (Næss, 1972/2008, p. 62). The deep-rooted respect that Næss advocates is also manifested in the importance of diversity in forms and ways of life to which the deep ecology movement assigns great importance. Diversity in ways of life is of great benefit to the lives of all organisms including human beings, and thus of benefit to our natural environment.[3]

Since the writings of the Norwegian philosopher are predominantly philosophical, the idea of *deep ecology* does not provide a scientific model that tells us which exact actions would result in combating the climate crisis. It does, however, provide philosophical grounds for a change of attitude towards our natural environment. An attitude that radically breaks with anthropocentrism could consequently lead to less destructive and more eco-friendly human behaviour.

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3 Although deep ecology was first articulated in 1972, it could still be regarded as being highly relevant for eco-philosophy. For example, Næss' thoughts regarding biospherical egalitarianism have been of great influence on post-humanist theories. Jane Bennett's influential book *Vibrant Matter*, which was published in 2010, adopted Næss' rejection of anthropocentrism by ascribing agency to the lives of inanimate beings. Post-humanism also distances itself from anthropocentrism by blurring the boundaries between humans, animals and technology. Bennett advocates in her book for a change in the way humans regard inanimate beings; this, according to Bennett, should shift to a state of consciousness in which 'lifeless' organisms and inanimate beings are regarded as subjects rather than acted upon as objects. It dismisses humans from their superior position, just as the concept deep ecology levels out the hierarchy between humans and nature to a more equal status.

## Ecological Consciousness or Destructive Anthropocentrism?

Advocating deep ecology and therefore rejecting anthropocentrism could be a major asset in the goal of ecological art to make an audience hyper-aware of the climate crisis while similarly presenting a different, deep ecological attitude. However, Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* demonstrates that rejecting anthropocentrism entirely is almost an unreachable goal for ecological art. Since art can be seen as something that is predominantly human-made and is also meant for humans, eco art is almost placed in an anthropocentric trap that it cannot escape from (as further discussed by Trydal in Chapter 11). This anthropocentric trap that *Ice Watch* can be found in gives the artwork its paradoxicality: even though it aims to heighten awareness around climate change, it does not display deep-ecological ethics because *Ice Watch* relies on an anthropocentric attitude in order to advocate for a less destructive and perhaps more deep-ecological attitude towards the environment. Disrupting Greenland's glacial ecosystem by removing ice blocks from their natural habitat in order to deliver an experience to an audience is a highly anthropocentric act—but this does not mean that Eliasson's *Ice Watch* cannot stress the benefits of an ethical reorientation towards our natural environment.

Eliasson seems to be 'staying with the trouble' of disruptive and intervening anthropocentric behaviour, in order to be able to confront the audience with the consequences of placing human beings at the top of a hierarchy of all organisms. This might make *Ice Watch* slightly paradoxical as an ecological artwork, but it does not have to mean that it failed to affect people that haptically engaged with the ice blocks in front of the City Hall. Donna Haraway's book advocates 'staying with the trouble,' which calls for learning to live with trouble in times of climate emergencies instead of focusing on a trouble-free future (Haraway, 2016, p. 7). Haraway's term *Chthulucene* refers to the age in which we live right now. As she explains, this is 'the timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth' (Haraway 2016, p. 8). Part of the *Chthulucene* is the *chthonic ones*: the ones who expose and demonstrate the consequences of Anthropocentric living (Haraway, 2016, p. 8).

Understood according to Haraway's framework, *Ice Watch* stays with the trouble. By creating an artwork that lets the audience physically engage with melting ice blocks, Eliasson is a *chthonic* in the words of Haraway: he cannot escape from anthropocentrism by demonstrating the damage that has been done to the planet by humans. However, *Ice Watch* can still confront its audience with the enormously close-up experience of the melting of an enormous ice sheet. This does not make *Ice Watch* a deep ecological artwork that conforms with the ideas of Arne Næss, but it can still advocate for a change in attitudes towards our natural environment by connecting our sense of touch and taste to *feel* the ticking clock.

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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. 

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 Gjerdelöa: Tafjord – Paris – Oslo – Tafjord* (1984). Photo: Marianne Heske. Reproduced with permission of Marianne Heske. 

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

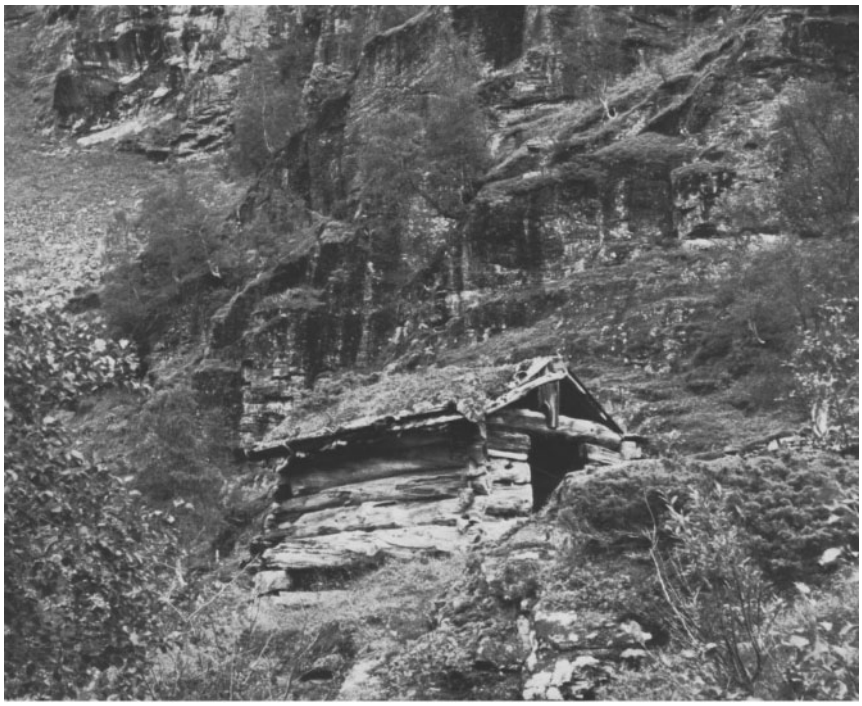

**Figure 3.** Løa i Tafjord (1980). The hut placed in the steep terrain of Tafjord, Norway. Image from *Project Gjerdelöa: Tafjord – Paris – Oslo – Tafjord* (1984). Photo: Marianne Heske. Reproduced with permission of Marianne Heske. 

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.

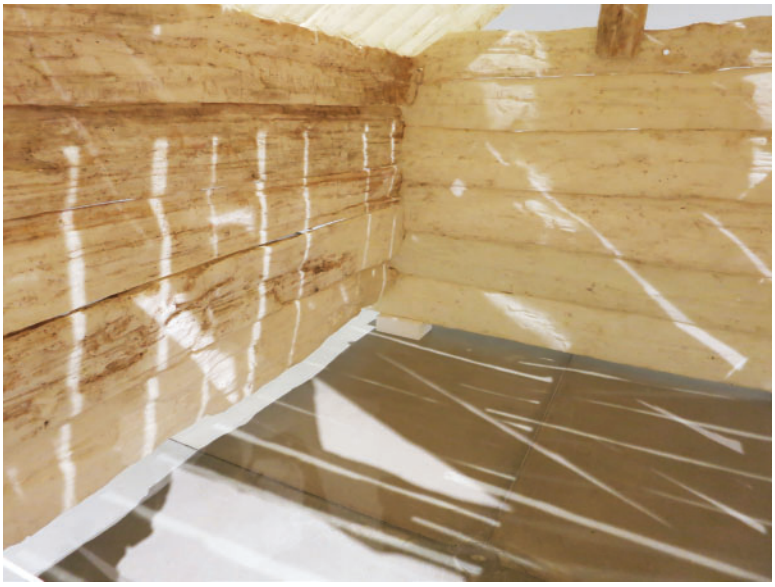

**Figure 5.** The white lights of the museum shining through the walls of the resin replica, displayed in the exhibition *Far From Home* at ARoS, 2019. Photo: Sigrid Stenerud Steien. Reproduced with permission of Marianne Heske. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot 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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CHAPTER 7

# Solar Reflections: On the *Sun Mirror* in Rjukan

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**Abstract:** The *Sun Mirror* (2013) by Martin Andersen is a mirror machine placed upon a mountain top. It reflects sunlight down to the town square in Rjukan, a small Norwegian town that is located in the shade for almost six months each year. Based on a century-old idea, the mirror realised the dream of Rjukan's inhabitants to see the sun in wintertime. What makes the idea of a man-made sun mirror still relevant in the 21st Century, 100 years after its first mention in the heyday of the Second Industrial Revolution? This chapter contextualises the *Sun Mirror* by discussing ecological aesthetics and argues that despite its technological structure, the mirror opposes treating nature as a recourse for human exploitation. Rather it makes visible the properties of the sun (the sun's temporality and rhythm) and promotes the sun in itself as life-giving and vital for us humans.

**Keywords:** solar power, industrialisation, technology, ecological design, natural rhythms

## Introduction

In a small Norwegian town called Rjukan the sunlight is completely absent from October until March. Unlike further north, where the sun does not reach over the horizon in winter, the sun's rays in Rjukan are blocked by a high mountain peak [figure 1]. One of the first industrial towns in Norway, Rjukan is located in the Vestfjord Valley in the southern part of the country. Because of its location, the sun has held a great symbolic presence and affected the lives of the inhabitants of Rjukan since the town was founded in 1905. In this town there is no horizon in sight, only a strip of sunlight

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**Figure 1.** Photograph of Rjukan in wintertime shade. The shadow line on the mountain is visible. 2019. Photo: Liv Gunhild Fallberg.

creating a physical division across the mountain ranges. The closer it gets to October, the higher the separating line between light and shadow moves up the hillside. The opposite happens in spring. Houses placed higher up in the valley can enjoy the sun for approximately a month longer than the houses built at the bottom of the valley (Taugbøl & Andersen, 2015, p. 74). The inhabitants know very well when the sun hits their own window edge (Fjeldbu, 1995, p. 5). On March 12, the sun's rays finally reach the old workers' bridge after a long winter. This is one of the annual highlights for the inhabitants of Rjukan and each spring a grand celebration called *Solfesten* [the Sun Festival] is organised to pay tribute to the sun.

When artist Martin Andersen moved to Rjukan in the early 2000s and saw how the sunlight disappeared behind the mountain in late autumn, an idea came to his mind, and in October 2013, the *Sun Mirror* was officially inaugurated. The structure consists of three rectangular mirrors connected to a machine that rotates them to the exact angle of the sun throughout the day (Visit Rjukan, 2018). The mirror is located 450 metres above the town and reflects 80–100% of the sun that hits its surface [figure 2]. The sunlight is reflected down in the form of a carefully composed circle of light into the middle of the town square and covers around 600 $m^2$. All three mirrors focus on the same spot, making the circle of light as bright as possible [figure 3].

**Figure 2.** Martin Andersen. (2013). *The Sun Mirror*. Rjukan, 2019. Photo: Daniel Larsen. © Martin Andersen/BONO 2021. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

**Figure 3.** The *Sun Mirror* lights up the Christmas tree in Rjukan, 2019. Photo: Liv Gunhild Fallberg.

## The Town of Modern Industrialisation

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was general optimism related to technology and Rjukan was the centre of industrial advances in Norway: between 1907 and 1911, Sam Eyde's company 'Norwegian

Hydro-Electric Nitrogen Limited' (today Norsk Hydro) built the world's largest hydroelectric power plant for the production of the newly invented fertiliser 'Norwegian saltpetre.' Consequently, Rjukan was planned, built and placed in order to be close to the hydroelectric energy source, Rjukan Falls. Thus, the town was built in the shade.

The idea of a technologically advanced sun mirror may seem adventurous and progressive but, in fact, Andersen's idea was not new at all. Already in 1913, a local man named Oscar Kittelsen proposed to build rotatable mirrors on the north side of the valley, in order to collect the light and disseminate the beams throughout the town (Fjeldbu, 1995, p. 5). While the original idea of a sun mirror never saw the light of day, due to the lack of necessary technology to construct it (finding a way to make the mirrors move in accordance with the sun), Norsk Hydro built instead an aerial cable car, *Krossobanen*, to easily transport the inhabitants up to the mountains so that they could see the sun. By having the possibility to see the sun and the light, the workers' quality of life would increase, so they would be fit and healthy and therefore more productive at work.

The *Sun Mirror* solves a problem, which is to bring the sun to the inhabitants of Rjukan. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the idea of a sun mirror in 1913 and 2013. When Andersen re-introduced the idea of a sun mirror, the cultural and economic preconditions of the industrial town had changed. Today, Norsk Hydro has withdrawn from the site, but the town still remains. And today, inhabitants can take rather short drives up the mountain in their private cars to where the sun is visible in winter. A sun mirror in Rjukan is not necessary in the same way as before.

The world has changed, too. New industries and technology have been created, and humans have made an even greater impact on the Earth. Throughout the 20th century, the technological optimism of modern society was increasingly questioned, and today we realise the effects of previous centuries' mass exploitation of natural resources and ideologies of unrestricted growth as an economic premise. From our post-industrialist perspective, we see the consequences these changes have had on human life, including how we have had to adapt to the

rhythm of the machine. As many have argued, our mechanised society has led to a feeling of alienation (see, for instance, Ellul, 1970, p. 325).

## Ecological Design

In the 1960s, notions of ecology and protection of the diversity in the natural environment started to gain currency as a reaction to the simplified view of nature celebrated by industrialisation (Carson, 2012 [1962]). *Ecological aesthetics* is an umbrella term for different practices, including design, architecture and art, with a common theme to do something for ecological prosperity (Erzen, 2004, p. 22). Most importantly, ecological aesthetics values the artistic *process* rather than the result, and it values the identity of the site and the connection between nature and culture (Strelow, 2004, p. 11). In the words of Sim van der Ryn, 'Ecological design is a way of integrating human purpose with nature's own flows, cycles, and patterns' (van der Ryn & Cowan, 2007 [1996], p. 40). In addition to being ecologically consciously produced, ecological design has an ethical side: it widens our relationship to place and our knowledge about nature and its beauty. In a similar way, ecological art and aesthetics tries to convey a new understanding of the environment, which increases awareness of environmental problems (Erzen, 2004, p. 23).

At first glance, one might get the impression that the mirror *tames* the sun for the benefit of people; that is, humans have taken control over the sun. Our species has long made use of nature's resources for our own benefit and survival. What has changed since the Industrial Revolution is the over-exploitation of natural resources causing irreversible changes to the planet. By means of modern technology, humans have treated the earth as what philosopher Martin Heidegger calls 'a standing reserve,' that is, a never-ending supply linked to industrialised capitalism (Heidegger, 2003 [1954], p. 16). The hydropower plant at Rjukan is an example of modern technology that extracts energy from nature, stores and conserves it, so we can use it to our own advantage. Yet the *Sun Mirror* stands out from this kind of technology. The aim is not to extract energy from the

**Figure 4.** The *Sun Mirror* seen from the town square. Rjukan, 2019. Photo: Liv Gunhild Fallberg.

sun—but rather to promote the sun in itself as life-giving and vital for us humans.

The sunrays that shine on the town centre come from the real sun, but they are artificially brought there via a mirror controlled by technology [figure 4]. The mirror construction makes the sun visible as a primary element; it is not a physical thing you can hold or take with you. It is fragile, the light can disappear in a second, as it is affected by the weather: wind, rain, snow and cold. The *Sun Mirror* is dependent on the visibility of the sun, but the sun fluctuates. The mirror cannot work when the sun is not present, either at night or behind clouds. The mirror and the people who want to experience the sunlight rather become subject to the rhythm of the sun. In order to be operative, the *Sun Mirror* is dependent on fluctuating and contingent properties.

We can sense the primary elements, but they are not bound. By focusing on the elements, we become aware that nature exceeds humans and is therefore not reducible to something humans can control (see Boetzkes, 2010, p. 104). The mirror reveals the limits of our ability to use nature as a standing reserve.

## A New Rhythm

Already in the beginning of the 20th century, in the heyday of industry and technological progress, the inhabitants of Rjukan understood the importance of natural light. The sun rises and sets in the morning and in the evening. But also in a larger cyclical repetition every autumn and every spring. The *Sun Mirror* breaks away from our everyday rhythm governed by the mechanics of the clock and the regularity of the calendar and makes the rhythm of the sun visible. By stepping into the sunspot in the town square, you break out from the shade and your everyday rhythm. You experience the sun in a time and place you would not normally be able to, with a different base and point of view.

By synchronising with the rhythm of the sun, the *Sun Mirror* points to our relationship with nature: to how our rhythms work together, how we are dependent on following the movements of nature and not always a mechanical pulse. Thus, the mirror opens up for reflection on the sun as an essential need. In the tradition of ecological design, the *Sun Mirror* is made to meet a human need, but in doing so, it takes into consideration the natural rhythm of the sun, making the least amount of imprint on the earth, while still managing to solve this human need. By taking nature into consideration—as a necessity for the *Sun Mirror* to function—the design brings forth its vision in its everyday function. It conveys a message, an ethical attitude.

Rjukan's mirror displays the sun as it is: with its characteristics, volatility and temporality. The fragility of the mirror reminds us of the fragile relationship between humans and the earth; the need to re-connect with it and to re-think our interaction with it. The changes in the climate we are experiencing—and causing—cross the exploitation line. To avoid dark days ahead, we must work together with the properties of nature to change the way we see the world. Seen in the light of ecological aesthetics, the reminder invoked by the *Sun Mirror* sparks hope for brighter days [figure 5 and 6].

**Figure 5.** The *Sun Mirror* seen from the sunny spot in Rjukan's main square 2019. Photo: Liv Gunhild Fallberg

**Figure 6.** The *Sun Mirror* lights up the main square in Rjukan, 2019. Photo: Liv Gunhild Fallberg.

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# Part III
# Entering Darkness

CHAPTER 8

# Uncanny Drought: On Apichaya Wanthiang's *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines*

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**Abstract:** Apichaya Wanthiang's art installation *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* (2018) recreated a drought in Thailand by filling the gallery space in Oslo with soothing heat emanating from huge, dry, dirt sculptures. Visitors to the exhibition were encouraged to both touch and sit down on the dried clay sculptures. They were bone dry and felt warm on the skin. The recreated environmental event was contrasted with the freezing Oslo winter outside the gallery space, but the inside and the outside of the gallery were also connected through a synchronisation of the dim light in the exhibition space and the ongoing dusk outside—opening up for the sensorial aspect of climatic change. By describing a subjective experience of Wanthiang's environmental event, this chapter shows how an uncanny drought in an exhibition space can activate a mode of habituation when faced with the overwhelming consequences of the age of humans.

**Keywords:** installation, environmental event, habit, Kant, the sublime

## Introduction

After dusk fell, I entered an oasis. A narrow passage made of neon-green synthetic fabrics stretched across a wooden skeletal structure led me from the dark and cold everyday life of the streets of Oslo into a dark enclosed space [figure 1]. The room with the passage was brightly lit, yet the following rooms were dimly lit, and further into the darkness, the temperature increased and mimicked that of a land far from the cold north. Entering

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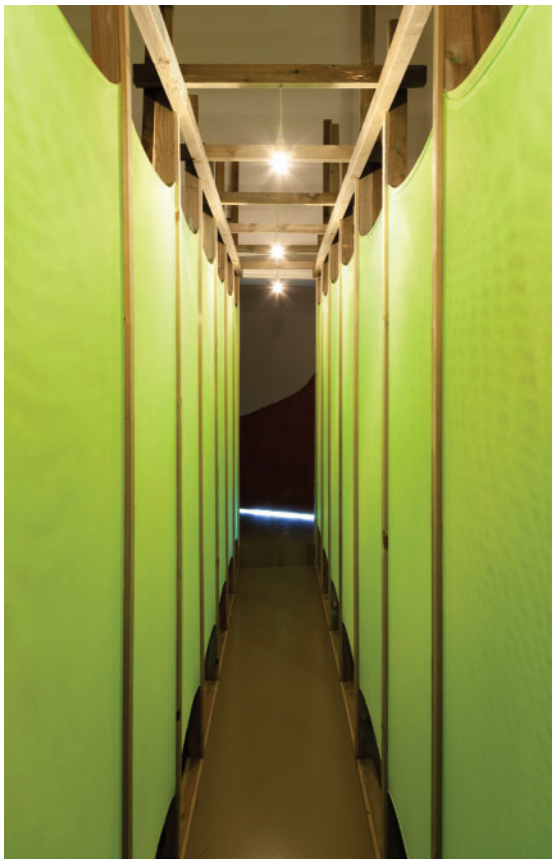

**Figure 1.** Installation image from the exhibition *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* by Apichaya Wanthiang at Unge Kunstneres Samfund, 2018. Photo: Jan Khür. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

the room at the end of the passage, I discovered the origin of the soothing heat: the warmth emanated from huge sculptures made of dried clay, filling most of the gallery space [figure 2].

Apichaya Wanthiang's sculptures from the exhibition *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines*[1] reminded me of one of the most terrifying encounters with nature I have ever had. When I was walking alone in a mountainscape just before sunrise, the pitch-black mountains were reflected in a lake, which stretched between the foot of the mountains and the road I was walking along. Merged with their reflection, the mountains

1 Apichaya Wanthiang (b. 1987, Bangkok, Thailand), *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* at Unge Kunstneres Samfund, Oslo, 2 November – 16 December 2018.

**Figure 2.** Installation image from the exhibition *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* by Apichaya Wanthiang at Unge Kunstneres Samfund, 2018. Photo: Jan Khür. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

gained an abstract form, and their silhouettes became increasingly discernable by the approaching sunrise—which was also reflected in the water. Because of the mountains' mysterious shapes and the growing amount of background light, the mountains became animated. They were almost like living beings and seemed therefore especially threatening.

Wanthiang's clay sculptures had the same effect, with a similar pulsating background light emanating from the point where the sculptures met the floor, making the sculptures appear to be hovering above the floor. Visitors to the exhibition were encouraged to both touch and sit down on the clay sculptures. They were bone dry and felt warm on my skin. Like the hottest days of summer when walking barefoot and feeling the burning ground with every step.

## Distance and Catastrophe

This dark, dry world appeared to be hostile to life, except for the constant sound of mayflies swirling in the background. In a similar manner to the passage at the entrance, wooden frames covered with green textiles

were also present in the room with the sculptures. Upon these textiles, atmospheric black and white video footage of the home of Wanthiang's grandparents, which is located in Thailand, were projected. The video projection showed the rooftop of a house during night-time and, above the rooftop, the camera captured the mayflies swirling around. The meditative still lives captured the calm atmosphere of a place so far away from where they were exhibited, thus strengthening the experience of having entered an unknown, different world.

The exhibition also had a comfortable atmosphere, which was a great contrast to the usual turmoil of the city. This comfort was also a strange contrast to the potentially dangerous *drought* that was recreated in the exhibition space by the means of the hot and bone-dry sculptures. Because of this calming atmosphere, I did not respond to this extreme drought with a desire to escape the room. Instead, I responded with indifferent laziness. The exhibition was like a time capsule: it was like being in a spa or a sacred temple, a place where time disappears and no one wants to leave.

When reading news about extreme drought, it may seem too abstract and too distant to really comprehend it. Oslo's cold winters combined with well-managed resource infrastructure make weather-related issues rarely a problem in this corner of the world. Considering that Wanthiang's previous artistic project has been described as a portrayal of a distanced relationship to natural disasters, *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* can be interpreted along the same lines as addressing issues of distance and catastrophe.

When entering the dark, uncanny space it felt like entering a surreal bubble, but by transporting the visitors from cold Oslo to a hot, dry climate, the display also captured local realities of a place far away—which one could physically feel when sitting on the hot clay sculpture. This particular environment was far away, but Wanthiang created a link between the environments in Thailand and in Oslo by means of the dim light in the gallery space, which resonated with the dusk outside. The opening time of Wanthiang's exhibition changed from day to day, as it was synchronised with the darkest stage of twilight. The doors opened at dusk, and the lighting inside the exhibition reflected the dusk outside. The

atmosphere of the exhibition thus captured the temporal conditions of nature's recurring rhythm. When I left the foreign atmosphere of the exhibition and returned to the streets of Oslo, the mystical light from the exhibition space continued. The sensation of the exhibition therefore had a continued presence and reminded me that the climate around the globe is intimately connected.

By visiting *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines,* I travelled to a dry landscape where I could physically feel the heat, but the comfort of the heat and the clay sculptures I was sitting on simply made me want to rest while watching the mayflies projected on the screens. It was as if I was sitting on my sofa at home watching the news. I see extreme weather events from around the globe but I remain passive. Likewise, although I interpreted Wanthiang's exhibition as a portrayal of a gruesome scene of a natural disaster, my only response was one of passivity. It was even tempting to fall asleep. This temptation, I believe, reflects the numbness one can feel when confronted with the scale of the climate crisis.

## Fear and Comfort

Philosopher Immanuel Kant described the *sublime* as a movement of the mind with an alternating repulsion and attraction (Kant, 1995, p. 81). According to Kant, towering mountains—which Wanthiang's sculptures give associations to—give the beholder a sublime response. They are pleasurable to look at but are at the same time frightening. Unlike positive pleasure, the pleasure we get from the sublime is, according to Kant, closer to admiration and deference (Kant, 1995, p. 76). The sight of a tall mountain is an admirable view, yet also threatening and therefore evokes a fear which makes us cautious. Kant described the sublime as something which evokes fear, but he qualified this by adding that not everything which evokes fear can be described as sublime (Kant, 1995, p. 80).

According to Kant, we are more attracted to something the more terrible it is, as long as we are not in serious danger (Kant, 1995, p. 81). Kant argued that when someone is faced with a challenge, like a storm, and responds with courage, they find themselves in a sublime state. In this case, the storm would be perceived as sublime because it provokes

an active imagination (Kant, 1995, p. 82). In *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines,* the legitimate fear of the drought was not toned down and it was a pleasant setting to be in, but the dissonance between the fear of the drought and the comfort of the exhibition did not directly give me a sublime experience either. Instead, I experienced neither a feeling of having the ability to act nor despair over not being able to. I was simply relaxed, which is perhaps more frightening.

*Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* was a really comfortable exhibition, but the presence of the sublime in the clay sculptures created a disturbing feeling. When entering the gallery space, I entered a scene of the local realities of a natural disaster, or at least a threatening drought, yet my response was laziness. The comfort of the exhibition space was therefore disturbing in itself. When leaving the exhibition and coming back out onto the streets of Oslo, the lighting of the continuing dusk gave the single environmental event a continued presence and left me with a feeling of unease which was difficult to place because of the exhibition's sensorial quality.

Wanthiang brings forth the aesthetic in the disaster, and the combination of the comfortable and the gruesome creates a fascination in its dissonance, but instead of resulting in a will to act, it left me feeling calm. Yet, after reflecting further on this, I arrived at an even more uncanny sensation, a feeling of familiarity. The exhibition made me think of images I have seen many times before on the news which I have gotten strangely used to: images so overwhelming they often leave me apathetic. Few people in Oslo have experienced the consequences of extreme floods or droughts; it is difficult to comprehend the brutality of yet another image of natural disaster. To me, *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* captured this strange sensation of not being able to react when disasters occur in places far away. Although extreme weather instigated by the climate crisis is dramatic, the changes are gradual and to a large degree unnoticeable. The amount of extreme weather around the globe is accelerating, but since this happens gradually, privileged people like myself, who have never lived outside a city full of resources, *get used to it.* When going on living our lives in a habitual manner, we might get used to the strangest things.

Viktor Shklovsky said in his influential essay *Art as Technique*: 'Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war' (Shklovsky, 1965, p. 12). If we do not have anything to pull us out of the habitual course of everyday life—in which we only look at weather conditions on a day-to-day basis—we might overlook the fact that the warming of the planet is causing sea levels to rise, extreme droughts, and glaciers to melt. Shklovsky argued that 'art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*' (Shklovsky, 1965, p. 12). Wanthiang made it possible for those who visited *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* to feel the environment in Thailand; she had created a space where I could sense the stone, but the stone was not made stony. I only sensed a disturbing habituation and wanted to be lulled into sleep by the comfort of the heat, dimmed lighting, and soothing sound of mayflies. In other words, it made me conscious of my response to the overwhelming consequences of the age of humans.

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CHAPTER 9

# Touching the Unknown: On Marte Johnslien's Ceramic Presences

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**Abstract:** Touching is never a unidirectional event; what you touch will always touch you back. 'How can the way we relate to the world around us take shape as sculpture?' Norwegian artist Marte Johnslien asks. In the 2018 exhibition *A Square on a Sphere* at Lillehammer Kunstmuseum (Art Museum), Johnslien showed, amongst other works, a sculpture consisting of ceramic shapes stacked on top of each other with glass plates between. In this work, Johnslien explored a new technique of reinforcing ceramics in which she put steel mesh underneath the clay. By strengthening the thin ceramic shapes with iron, Johnslien changed the material and thus changed the texture. This chapter elaborates on how artistic presence can provide a way to access the glitch between the visible and the invisible, by exploring the ceramic works by Johnslien in light of Barad's essay on touching, esotericist Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky's view on the fourth dimension, Eastern philosophy, and relativity theory.

**Keywords:** ceramics, esotericism, touch, the fourth dimension, artistic presence, eastern philosophy

## Introduction

Upon approach, the sculpture looks fragile. Like it might fall apart. The surface of the ceramic looks crackled, divided into many shedding pieces, reminiscent of sunburnt skin or a dried-out plateau. The palette, consisting of different nuances of white, rust and dark grey, adds to the feeling of something dried out, burnt, about to fall apart. Within, the shapes are strengthened by grid steel mesh sheets, but from the outside the sheet

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**Figure 1.** Marte Johnslien (2018). *A Square on a Sphere* [A series of sculptures in steel-reinforced ceramics on platforms of wood and glass]. Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Galleri Riis.


is hidden. A glass plate separates the forms; three shapes underneath, two on top [figure 1]. The largest ceramic shape stretches upwards, like a spire on a cathedral, its colour a mix of browns, orange, and white patterned like tie-die. Its body forms two round, rippling shapes. The second ceramic shape curves like a white sheet of paper, lying sideways on the glass. The three shapes underneath the glass are in dirty white, rust and dark grey. Their forms vary, from round to square. The three ceramic pieces stand on a glass plate; they exist between glass plates. With their bodies, they carry the weight of the two others, but they do not touch.

In artist Marte Johnslien's (b. 1977) ceramic sculptures, we can explore the space between objects and dimensions, our connection to our surroundings and the history of matter, in order to acquire a different view of the world in which we exist. Many of the works in Johnslien's *oeuvre* investigate topics

**Figure 2.** Marte Johnslien (2018). *A Square on a Sphere*. Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of Galleri Riis. 

connected to scientific fields such as physics or chemistry, spirituality and philosophy, and material properties. In the exhibition *A Square on a Sphere* at Lillehammer Kunstmuseum in 2018, in which the described sculpture installation was on display, Johnslien investigated modern physics, Eastern philosophy, and Einstein's theories of the fourth dimension, in order to explore the unknown beyond our limits of perception [figure 2].

In this chapter, Johnslien's artwork is analysed by activating the term 'glitch,' which can be described as a mode of non-performance, malfunction, or a 'bug in the system.' The etymology of the word 'glitch' is deeply rooted in the Yiddisch 'gletshn' (to slide, glide, slip). As such, glitch is an active word that implies movement and change. In recent developments of cyberfeminism (Russell, 2020), the glitch is suggested as an opportunity to embrace what is not perfectly ordered.

## Deep Dimensions

In 1905, Albert Einstein presented his theory on special relativity, proving that time and space are linked, thus radically challenging the established scientific worldview. He also elaborated on 'the fourth dimension,' a theory that had circulated since the late 1800s. The idea of something existing outside of our physical reach has inspired many to search for this other,

dark and unknown dimension ever since. According to art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson, the fourth dimension 'possessed mysterious qualities that could not be completely understood, even by scientists themselves' (Henderson, 1983, p. xix). Henderson shows how many artists, writers, and musicians tried to express higher spatial dimensions in their work. A few even believed that the fourth dimension could answer the mysteries of the world. Amongst them was the Russian esotericist Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky (1878–1949), who wanted to find evidence from natural science for a spiritual-mystical worldview and tried to create methods for developing the potential in human consciousness. Ouspensky's belief was that he 'had found an explanation for the "enigmas of the world,"' and with this knowledge he 'offer[ed] mankind a new truth that […] transform[ed] human existence' (Henderson, 1983, p. 246). Many of these beliefs came to an end when Einstein later redefined the fourth dimension as time instead of space.

In an interview with *Kunstkritikk* in 2014, Johnslien said that art experiences have always appealed to her *spirituality*, meaning that they enhance her affiliation to the world around her. 'Eventually I discovered that this experience is reminiscent of Buddhist thought and forms of meditation that exercise the ability to understand the situation of others' (Liven, 2014). Finding inspiration in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa, she experienced some of his writings of what she defines as 'artistic presence' as fundamental. In her exhibition *A Square on a Sphere*, Johnslien explored how our understanding of reality can translate to spatial structures (Lillehammer Kunstmuseum, 2019). As the name of the exhibition indicates, Johnslien explored the impossible notion of drawing a geometrically correct square on a circular sphere. It is just not possible for the angles of the square to meet up, and this produces a *glitch*, or in other words a mistake or a bug in the system. The image of the square on the sphere can be used to illustrate the problems that occur when you try to translate something from a two-dimensional space to a three-dimensional space. Moreover, the glitch can hint at the possibility of yet another dimension. It represents something unknown: that which human beings cannot really grasp within the physical limits of our perception of the world.

## Mystical Physics

The gaps that Johnslien explored in the work are relatable to the mystic cult of the fourth dimension, Einstein's relativity theory, and contemporary physics, as these fields try to address what is not possible for us to grasp. For the sculpture series, Johnslien drew inspiration from physicist Fritjof Capra's 1975 book *The Tao of Physics*. In this book, Capra explores the parallels between modern physics and Eastern spirituality, giving particular attention to the relationship between quantum mechanics and Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. Capra claims that the common link between Eastern philosophy and modern physics is a desire to find truth and reality.

In the chapter 'The new physics,' Capra explains Einstein's relativity theory in relation to gravity, using the square on a curved sphere as an example. Capra writes that '[t]he force of gravity […] has the effect of "curving" space and time,' saying that three dimensional space is curved, 'and that the curvature is caused by the gravitational field of massive bodies' (Capra, 1985, p. 59). In the chapter 'Space-time,' the readers are introduced to the fourth dimension. Einstein's equations can be applied to determine the curvature of stars and planets, and the structure of the universe. Cosmology studies the correspondence between different answers to the equations and the actual structure of our universe. Capra explains: 'Since space can never be separated from time in relativity theory, the curvature caused by gravity cannot be limited to three-dimensional space, but must extend to four-dimensional space-time and this is, indeed, what the general theory of relativity predicts' (Capra, 1985, pp. 156–157). To explain it simply: when driving a car very fast, vision lags and it feels as if one is experiencing time. Just as, for example, when an object is about to hit you, you feel as if it is happening in slow motion. Such lags, delays, and blurs—in other words, glitches—are the gravitation of time.

Glitches are also fundamental in contemporary physics. In philosopher and physicist Karen Barad's essay 'On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,' she explores the act of touching as it takes place in physical matter. When hands touch, the flesh is sensually graced, it is warmed, lightly pressured, and it senses the presence of otherness. 'So much happens in a touch,' Barad writes, 'an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused' (Barad, 2012, p. 206).

What happens when objects touch? Or, as in Johnslien's sculpture, only appear to touch? The touch can, as Barad writes, take you away to 'other spaces, other times,' perhaps even to other dimensions.

In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of 'us' is constituted in response-ability. Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other, Barad writes (Barad, 2012, p. 215).

However, touching is not always what we think it is. In physics, touch is an electromagnetic interaction. The glass plate that separates, or is perhaps caught between, Johnslien's ceramic sculptures [see figure 1], might seem to touch the forms of burnt clay. But in reality, as Barad explains, 'there is no actual contact involved' (Barad, 2012, p. 209). What is actually happening, 'is the electromagnetic repulsion between the electrons of the atoms that make up' the ceramic shapes and those that make up the glass plate (Barad, 2012, p. 209). Like two magnets, it is impossible to get electrons to touch, as the electrons are 'negatively charged particles that surround the nuclei of atoms and having the same charges they repel one another' (Barad, 2012, p. 209). When we feel someone touching us, it is the electromagnetic force that we sense (Barad, 2012, p. 209). The ceramics and the glass are indeed separate from one another. But even though in physics nothing ever really touches, it is not what we experience. Barad writes that 'touch moves and affects what it effects' (Barad, 2012, p. 208). How we approach our surroundings reflects on us. In other words, although contemporary physics has established that even our touch is located outside the physical limits of our perception of the world, touching still moves us.

## Poetising Glitches

'How can our world view be translated into something physical,' Marte Johnslien asked in a talk in 2018. She continued, 'How can it be translated into something sculptural, spatial? How can the way we relate to the world around us take shape as sculpture?' In her work, Johnslien searches for other perspectives to understand ourselves, objects and materials. Or,

in Ouspensky's words, she seeks a 'broadening of our conception of the world' (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 72). 'All that I am discovering is so wonderful and so miraculous that I become more and more enraptured, and am grabbed by a certain presentiment of further revelations awaiting me. It is as though I already feel the *unity of all* and am overcome with awe at the sensation' (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 2).

In the sculpture series *A Square on a Sphere*, Johnslien explored a new technique of reinforcing ceramics: by wrapping clay around steel mesh sheets in order to embrace the steel. In return, the steel gives the ceramic forms a new inner stability. Moreover, Johnslien explored the way a two-dimensional diagonal can be transformed to a three-dimensional object by cutting the diagonal in two and *curving* the two new pieces to become one. Stacked on top of each other, with glass plates placed between them, the two-dimensional diagonal curved into a new form and a new space.

The glitches that Johnslien explored in the work are relatable to the studies of both Capra and Ouspensky. In the essays collected in the book *A New Model of the Universe*, Ouspensky asks questions about the various ways humans have tried to find the fourth dimension and whether or not it is possible. He writes that the idea '… must have arisen in close connection with mathematics, or, to put it better, in close connection with the idea of measuring the world,' and that '… besides the three known dimensions of space—length, breadth, height—there might also exist a fourth dimension, inaccessible to our perception' (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 73). What exists in the glitches are perhaps inaccessible to our perception as well. Continuing, Ouspensky writes that '… people have always divided the world into the *visible* and the *invisible*' (Ouspensky, 1997, pp. 67–68). Traces of this can be seen even in ancient cave paintings. This division of the world is the foundation of our world view (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 68). The invisible has long been connected to the *mythical* realm. Capra links mathematics and physics to the mystical philosophies of the East. According to Ouspensky, 'the fourth dimension [generally] is used as the synonym of the mysterious, miraculous, "supernatural", incomprehensible and incognisable, as a kind of general definition of the phenomena of the "super-physical" world' (Ouspensky, 1997, p. 72).

In Eastern philosophies, physical laws, matter, time or space *glitches* seem to play a pivotal role. Something may exist in the glitches of the world that humans cannot grasp. As part of her ceramic work, Johnslien collects a wide range of references, reads scientific theories, researches new techniques and understands material processes so that the artwork itself becomes 'the reaction to the research process' (Johnslien, 2018). In her own words, Johnslien's working method 'activates the use of both the intellectual and the intuitive, hence operating between the "knowing" and the "non-knowing"' (Johnslien, 2018). In the space between these two, art emerges. Not as something visual but as something sensed, as something that touches us. Between the felt touch, that we perhaps only imagine, and the impossible touch, that is due to the laws of physics, there might be a gap, a secret space we do not have physical access to. Yet *artistic presences* might bring us closer to the unknown.

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CHAPTER 10

# Becoming Bear: On the Sami *Yoik*, Music, and Human Involution

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**Abstract**: Can a human become a bear? Starting from an analysis of Sami *yoik*, this chapter suggests how the notion of *becoming-animal* could shed a light on this musical practice and bring out some relevant ethico-aesthetical implications. The concept of *becoming-animal*, as theorised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, emphasises the proximity of the human and the non-human realm and, along with the *yoik*, shows the illusory nature of their division. The chapter discusses this theoretical-practical nexus and examines the potentialities of music and sound worlds in fostering a different arrangement of the way we perceive the world—freed from anthropocentrism's chains and contiguous with a non-human sensitivity.

**Keywords**: *yoik*, becoming-animal, soundscapes, *The Great Animal Orchestra*, non-human sensitivity

## Introduction

Imagine hearing in the distance a chant that crosses the air and the trees while you are walking in the forest. It sounds like a human voice but, at the same time, you are not sure. It has a sort of melody, accompanied by meaningless noises or words that come from an unknown language. And slowly you start to believe that it is an animal—it seems to be a bear. You are invading its territory and you should have listened to the advice of not venturing alone in the woods. Indeed, it *could* be a bear; nonetheless, you are listening to a *yoik*, a traditional Sami chant.[1]

1 Here I am assuming the point of view of a person who is unfamiliar with Sami culture.

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The Sami are a people who inhabit the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. They have their own languages and old customs, which they try to preserve. One of the features of their musical traditions is the *yoik* that, in absence of a proper word, we could reductively define as folk singing. Yet, in many ways, *yoik* differs from the modern Western conception of a song. Its short, circular melody directly evokes the *presence* of what it is connected to. In fact, there is a *yoik* for each person and every animal or natural element, for instance, a river, a forest or a mountain. By performing this refrain you make the thing present; in a certain way, you call for its essence. *Yoik* can be performed in various situations, whether individual or collective, and it can intersect different dimensions, such as the biographic, relational, narrative, artistic, or ecological. The *yoik* also has a religious, shamanic valence for the Sami people. Because of its usage in pagan rituals, it was prohibited during the Christianisation of the Sami.

The *yoik* is not considered by the Sami as a sign, a reference for a meaning, as if it were a word or a metaphor: 'this is not sound as mediation between people and environments […] but a different understanding of the environment in which humans are a part' (Ramnarine, 2009, p. 205). *Yoiks* are modelled on the character—the nature—of the person or the animal they are. *Yoiks* are not representations or ways of referring to something which remains inescapably absent. If you sing the *yoik* of one of your friends, you make him or her present with you, in you, around you.

More than a mere artistic expression, the *yoik* is a way of connecting to the environment, an immediate and a-signifying form of communication where music, existence and nature converge until they merge into one another. A process which refers to a logic completely different from Western rationality (Somby, 2007). Through *yoik*, sound-centred thinking and sensing is elicited along with a sympathetic disposition towards the non-human realm. Through *yoik*, animals acquire a new philosophical value as being something more than a mere piece of meat to be intensively bred and slaughtered.

The configuration disclosed through these practices relies on the Sami conception of world and life (see also Aamold et al., 2017). As musician and

anthropologist Tina Ramnarine underlines: '*joik* [sic.] performance […] points to a complex set of relationships between music, environment, and the sacred' (2009, p. 189). Humans, animals and lands constitute a whole that overcomes the distinction between nature and culture (Aubinet, 2017). *Yoik* itself has a sort of autonomy which can captivate you with its force. There is no dividing line between the subject and the object uttered; they become one and new connections emerge. *Yoiking* a wolf, for instance, creates a new relationship with nature, to which a human, in that very performance, is adding the 'wolfness' to his or her being. The human, in this sense, has entered into the process of *becoming-animal*.

## Philosophy of *Becoming*

If considering the Sami *yoik* from a philosophical perspective in the tradition of continental philosophy, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of *becoming-animal* might be a fruitful perspective. The two French authors define their notions of philosophical *becoming* as follows:

> Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfills, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 272)

In short, *becoming* means reconfiguring your own body according to the world around you, which is continuously changing. This is not some abstruse claim, but rather the simple description of a life submerged into nature—of a living being into its environment. Both the world and the body *become*, since there is nothing fixed and immutable but an unstoppable work of building connections between them. Seen from this perspective, humans cannot be isolated from the environment and nature cannot be reified as a pure object of knowledge within which human rationality deploys.

Of the different types of *becoming* described by Deleuze and Guattari (*becoming-woman*, *becoming-child*, *becoming-music,* etc.), *becoming-animal*, as it suggests, is related to the animal realm and, in general, to

nature. It does not have to be confused with a process at the end of which your substance is changed and you are eventually turned into an animal. Neither is it a question of mimicking the animal, like barking or walking on all fours, and we can observe to what extent its description is consistent with that of the *yoik*. *Becoming-animal* means to create assemblages that enter into contact or proximity with animal molecules (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 273) and, precisely through *yoik*, humans can undertake or be undertaken by this process, attuning themselves with the animality they go through: integrating their voice harmonically into the environment's sounds and letting their hearing embrace all its richness. A practice that is ethically and aesthetically driven, since it is a certain way of positioning in, and of being affected by, the world that changes the way we perceive it and consequently our acts.

From the rational Western point of view—soaked with the positivistic dream of progress and based upon a pyramidal structure of reality—this process might seem to be a sort of involution. Deleuze and Guattari are not afraid of addressing it in these terms: 'involution is in no way confused with regression. Becoming is involu-tionary [sic.], involution is creative' (1980/1987, p. 238) To *involve* has to be comprehended as a rediscovery of the non-humanity that lives within us. To involve means to overcome the human/non-human separation, in order to let emerge what we have in common with the organic and inorganic world and realise that we are inseparable from it. To involve is a matter of 'making kin' (Haraway, 2016; see also Haraway, 2007, pp. 27–42 and Williams, 2009) between species, rather than one dominating or exploiting the others.[2] In short, it demands a movement towards nature[3] in favour of the creation of new connections and communications capable of operating in both directions between what is human and what is not.

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2 The notion of species itself should be problematised, given that it is a human category useful for scientific research and not something that rigidly divides living beings in nature. For this purpose, it might be of some help to bear in mind Darwin's words: 'I look at the term species as one arbitrarily given, for the sake of convenience, to a set of individuals closely resembling each other, and that it does not essentially differ from the term variety, which is given to less distinct and more fluctuating forms. The term variety, again, in comparison with mere individual differences, is also applied arbitrarily, for convenience' sake' (Darwin, 2009, p. 42).

3 It has to be stressed that the point here is to consider our species as one of many and not to return to a sort of primitive form of life.

This step seems more and more necessary since we entered the age of the Anthropocene, which asks us to invent new models for our actions. We must abandon a unidirectional approach based on our godlike attitude in relation to the non-human, as if the prefix *non* stood for a sort of lack or weakness. Along these lines, a new, reinvented human behaviour could be similar to Deleuze's interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the superman (*Übermensch*).[4] Deleuze writes:

> The superman […] is the man who is even in charge of the animals […]. It is man in charge of the very rocks, or inorganic matter […] the superman is much less than the disappearance of living men, and much more than a change of concept: it is the advent of a new form that is neither God nor man and which, it is hoped, will not prove worse than its two previous forms. (1986/1988, p. 132)

Submerged and cohesive with the non-human realm, a new form should be able to avoid all the atrocities perpetrated under the name (or taking the place) of God and, simultaneously, to abandon the adage 'the survival of the fittest' as the guiding principle for its actions, in so far as it arbitrarily poses brute force as the only criterion to decide what fits and what does not.

## Becoming Musics

Given that the *Übermensch* looms also as a deep reconfiguration of human life according to nature, the question right now is about how to initiate this *becoming-animal*, how to embrace our non-humanity in order to dismiss an illusory awareness of superiority, how to take the first, small step in a process from which one comes out transformed. For this purpose, I think *musics*[5]—following the example of the *yoik*—play an essential

4 *Übermensch* is a key concept of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy and it indicates the overcoming of the human form. For this reason it has also been translated as 'beyond-man' or 'overman', which are closer to the original meaning. The concept has been subject to numerous interpretations. The original reference can be found in Nietzsche, 1885/2006.

5 I use the plural on purpose, in order to point out the richness of sound worlds and the most disparate forms of music that can be perceived and produced by human, as well as non-human, beings, namely *musics* in charge of the organic and inorganic matter. For an original philosophical contribution on thinking sonically and on sound as a material flux, see Cox, 2018.

role, since they touch and rearrange our sensibility, and since our senses are the means that allow us to experience the world. Through new combinations between the senses and nature, we might initiate a change that merges our relations with what surrounds us, because different sound worlds could provide for different ways of feeling—of being with the environment—and at the same time, reconfigures our attitude. New perspectives on the same experience, sounds from the past and the future, from the land, the air, and the water, showing unexpected portions of reality with all the potentialities they disclose in the present. *Becoming other than what we are, and what we seem doomed to be*. In short, *musics*, in all their various forms and not necessarily as artistic expressions, challenge the 'human, all too human' rationality which privileges the eyes and a supposed neutral vision, which trusts what it can see and that often looks only at what it wants to subject, exploit or prey on (see also Seeger, 2016).

To this end, *musics* themselves have to come from a process of becoming, where human willingness and interiority would step aside to let non-humanity work. Indeed, also 'in traditional yoik performance, the notion of composer is not prominent' (Ramnarine, 2009, p. 196). The focus, instead, is centred on the *yoik* and on the being it recalls. Traditional categories of artistic and cultural production are not sufficient, since they stem from the same rationality which finds its main support in sight and in creativity-conscious subjects. Arguably, we need something that we would not even define as art, at least in conventional terms. Instead, we require a practice capable of bringing into play our senses in different ways and, with them, other components of reality. Communication is not strictly signifying and linguistical, and perception can be more than a matter of sight. There are other manners of vocalisation that contemplate gestures, refrains and meaningless syllabising, and that are inextricably linked to the situation and environment in which, for instance, the *yoik* is performed. The world touches us by many different means, all equally relevant. It is up to us to be receptive, to feel, to hear, to see, to taste, and to smell them. Such a posture is the minimal requirement to embrace a process through which we become *with* the world, being a singularity among other singularities, aware of what constitutes

us, of our proximity—which is nothing more than an ontological equivalence and interdependence—to the non-human realm (see also Abram, 1996, 2010). In any case, as with *yoik* and *becoming-animal*, the lack of proper definitions for a practice reveals the novel logic that lies behind it and, as a consequence, the whole universe of virtualities and ethico-aesthetical possibilities it carries with it.

## New Sound Paradigms

A valid example through which we can understand this kind of suggestion, together with relevant conceptual tools, is represented by the multimedia installation *The Great Animal Orchestra*, created by Bernie Krause and United Visual Artists.[6] This artwork combines the soundscapes shaped by the American bioacoustician from his audio recordings of natural habitats with their visual transcriptions created by the London-based studio. Throughout his life, Krause collected more than 5,000 hours of recordings from the most varied environments all around the world, including at least 15,000 terrestrial and marine species: an incredible effort which testifies to the richness and complexity of the seemingly nonsensical animal noises. This gives an account of their harmonic arrangement, inseparable from the ecosystem in which they are nestled. With his work Krause played a crucial role in the development of a new discipline, bioacoustics, and in highlighting the hidden structure of these soundscapes, which consist of 'all of the sounds we hear from every source within our range of hearing at a given time' (Krause & United Visual Artists [UVA], 2019, pp. 25–26). Soundscapes contemplate different ensembles of sounds: *geophony* (non-biological sound sources), *biophony* (non-human sounds from living beings) and *anthropophony* (derived from human activities) (see also Allen & Dawe, 2016). Within this theoretical framework, the *yoik's* ambivalence emerges: human sounds that are harmoniously incorporated in biophony's variety, vocalisations that find their acoustic niche without encompassing or silencing the others.

6 I heard and saw this work at XXII Triennale di Milano, *Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival*.

On the other hand, through the audio-visual display of the orchestrated equilibrium of animal vocalisations, *The Great Animal Orchestra* creates an immediate connection between human beings and the incredible biodiversity of the non-human realm, likewise making it clear that anthropophony is simply a variety of biophony's infinite heterogeneity. Conceived as a performative space,[7] the artwork itself is designed to produce real effects in the audience—to affect its perception (see also Ribac, 2016). The listeners start to think of themselves as a small part of the biosphere, rather than separated or predominant; they can feel their non-humanity by rediscovering the consonance between their sensations and the succession of these *musics* from a non-human score. As Krause wrote:

> The fabric of these sounds, sensations of vibrant domains of living organism, leave an impression of humidity on the surface of your skin – a sense that typifies the presence of tropical rainforests; the varying intensities and pitches of Arctic wind will send a chill through your body; while other sounds will suggest the piquant aromas given off by the soil and vegetation; and, if you listen carefully, they will evoke in your mind's eye an image of the landscape through the expression of the acoustic textures. (Krause & UVA, 2019, p. 34)

In both *yoik* and *The Great Animal Orchestra,* a process of *becoming-animal* occurs by means of sound worlds. This involutional movement, considered in its effects, lets common elements emerge, go through and dismantle the binary separation that constitutes and hierarchises the human and the non-human and, in doing so, deposes any pretension of anthropocentrism. Here, as well as in the Sami *yoiks*, *musics* are produced by, and simultaneously produce, a *becoming-animal* for a reconsideration of our role in relation to the environment. They encourage a process of involution in favour of new affections and connections within the living

7 Krause focused in particular on non-human sounds and, for the purpose of this installation, he moulded seven soundscapes taken from different natural habitats that cover diverse world regions, ranging from the Amazon to central and southern Africa, passing through the Pacific Ocean, the Yukon Delta, the canyons of California and the forests of the western part of Canada. On the occasion of its exhibition, a selection from his soundscape ecology project was supported by a software algorithm elaborated by UVA, which translates and shows through lights the environment sound signals and the animal noises. UVA intended the installation to be a performative space where 'the architecture, the people, and the work coexist to create the experience together' (Krause & UVA, 2019, p. 21).

world, ultimately, in favour of new forms and ways of life which, it is hoped, will not prove worse than the previous ones.

A sort of crossroad, hence, arises in our foreseeable (and, why not, fore-*hear*able) future. If exposed again, alone in the forest, to the *yoiking* of a bear, we might not become concerned about the human origin of these sounds. Two paths seem conceivably to be able to lead us to this acknowledgement. One, which I would rather cross, could let us recognise the different nuances of soundscapes, their specificities, in a renewed stance of human beings in the environment in which they are nestled—neither reducing the non-human vocalisation richness, nor restricting it in dedicated spaces, but rather integrating anthropophony as one part among others in the biophonic complex. The needed process would imply a radical turnabout, an ecologically driven reconfiguration of our thoughts, acts, and senses; an ontological rearrangement carrying interspecies kinships capable of making the human/non-human distinction look like a distant memory. The other, which seems to me—not without great disapproval—more realistic, could conduct us to the awareness that bears simply do not exist anymore and that those sounds we hear are only a relic of extinguished life forms and of the fruitful nexus few of us succeeded in establishing with them. We can already see what the latter path is filled with: delusions of grandeur, nothing more.

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# Part IV
# Deep Relationalism

CHAPTER 11

# Bioacoustical Ethics: On Joakim Blattmann's *Treverk (9)*

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**Abstract:** Based on the artwork *Treverk (9)* by Norwegian artist Joakim Blattmann, this chapter discusses whether it is possible to exhibit a tree in a gallery space and still respect the tree as having inherent value, in accordance with Arne Næss and George Sessions' 'Principles of Deep Ecology'. Aspects such as the artist's intention, the origin of the materials and the installation of the final artwork are put into question and analysed from a deep ecological perspective. If the tree's desire is to live, then chopping it up and presenting it as a human spectacle in a gallery space is not to respect its inherent value. Yet the chapter argues that *Treverk (9)* can still inspire ecological thinking by disturbing the anthropocentric world view and displaying a deep relationality between the artist and the tree.

**Keywords:** sound art, deep ecology, anthropocentrism, trees

## Introduction

The basic principles of deep ecology, formulated by Arne Næss and George Sessions in 1984, attack the anthropocentric world view by acknowledging the inherent value of other life forms. In their first basic principle, they state that 'the well-being and flourishing of human and non-human Life on Earth have value in themselves' (Næss & Sessions, 1986, p. 14). A tree is one such non-human life on earth. Its existence has value in itself, beyond providing paper for a book, beyond becoming cladding for a house and beyond being material for an artwork. It has value regardless

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of its usefulness to humans (Heidegger, 2013, p. 16).[1] Is it possible, then, to create an artwork out of a tree and still respect the tree as having inherent value? This conflict appears in artist Joakim Blattmann's artwork *Treverk (9)* (2018), exhibited at the National Annual Autumn Exhibition in 2018.

Naturally, exhibiting a real tree in an art gallery space means removing it from its natural habitat. It means detaching it from the earth in which it has developed its roots, maybe over hundreds of years. The weather to which it has adapted—changing from rain to snow to storms and sun, maybe gradually, maybe unexpectedly, is not transmissible. The art gallery is made for humans, by humans. To behold a painting, or a sculpture, or an installation, is not in the interest of a tree. Nor does it have an interest in being exhibited, probably. To exhibit a tree in a gallery space is to surrender it to the human senses for the sake of art. Which artistic strategies could be employed in order to ethically respect the inherent value of a tree—in accordance with Næss and Sessions' principles—at the same time as creating artistic value?

## Killing the Tree

Five pieces of a tree were laid out in a composition on the gallery floor [figure 1]. Two of the pieces were branches and three of them were logs, probably stemming from the same tree. A black cable had been placed on each of the logs, connecting them to one main log placed furthest back, which was plugged into an electrical outlet. In the meeting between the cables and the logs, the audience could hear unrecognisable noises: irregular crunching, rattling, and pecking noises, creating what appeared to be an organic orchestra playing its biological symphony on a low frequency. It was as if the cables extracted the life-sound of the tree, although it was obviously dead.

The logs and the branches in *Treverk (9)* were cut off perfectly straight, like they usually are when cut with a chainsaw—this mechanical tool

1 The mode of thinking that considers the material world as an unending resource for humans has been analysed by the philosopher Martin Heidegger in his term 'standing-reserve.'

**Figure 1.** Installation image of *Treverk (9)* [Sound installation] by Joakim Blattmann during Høstutstillingen 2018. Photo: Vegard Kleven/NBK. Reproduced with the permission of NBK. 

made by humans to cut trees, usually for human interests, such as: the purpose of providing wood for a cozy fireplace; exploiting the ground where it stood for a real estate development project; or removing it because it blocks a nice view. The logs in the artwork were cut off by a human with a human-made tool, presented for human eyes, in a human-made exhibition space. Quartered, on the ground, the tree lay on the gallery floor, taking its final breaths as an artwork. It is clear that if the tree's desire was to live, its interest has already been violated in the bare description of the artwork. The tree in a gallery space has value as art, but not inherently.

However, the crunching, rattling, and pecking sounds emanating from the logs opened up the inaccessible world of a non-human life. To create this artwork, Joakim Blattmann had recorded the sounds that exist inside a tree: the sounds of the wood twisting, changing humidity and of insects crawling around in their home. Because of their high frequency, these sounds are normally inaudible to human ears. The artwork reveals that trees have a life of their own. They live and have inherent value. They

have abilities and capacities that are beyond human sensory experience and understanding. With this as its purpose, it seems in line with Næss and Sessions' principles, but then again, the artwork is a quartered tree.

It is important to notice that Blattmann stresses that he does not kill trees for the *Treverk* series himself (Blattmann, 2018).[2] For *Treverk (9)*, he made agreements with landowners and acquired the logs and branches after they had already been cut. This means that he did not sacrifice any trees for the sake of the artwork. The tree was sacrificed for other reasons, then turned into an artwork. One could say that Blattmann is a mere collector of trees, and then he exhibits the trees together with their sounds. Seen from this perspective, Blattmann gives new life to the logs, as they had already been robbed of their status as a living tree before they ended up as an artwork. Yet, returning to the crunching, rattling, and pecking noises presented to the audience, the new life given to the tree is somewhat strange and eerie.

## Life Illusions

The placement of the cables upon the logs resembled a stethoscope gently listening to a patient´s heart, trying to locate their heartbeats [figure 2]. The seeming lack of a logical pattern in the heartbeats of the trees made *Treverk (9)* appear to be an *interactive* sound installation. The sounds, however, were not live transmissions originating from the logs on the gallery floor, but were pre-recorded tree sounds from Blattmann's personal sound archive.[3] What seemed to be a pure reflection of the inner life of the tree had, in fact, a mediator, making the work less vibrant and flourishing than the sounds gave the impression of. It might seem like Blattmann had the idea of presenting the hidden phonic life of the tree, but as it was not possible to do so inside an art gallery without bringing the tree inside and

2 On his website, Joakim Blattmann states: 'The trees used in these works were already cut or had fallen as a result of strong winds (found material) before I started working with them. No trees were cut by me to make these works.'

3 With the help of a recording device, Blattmann records and collects sounds that humans are normally unable to hear: insects crawling in the bark or crackling and clicking sounds resulting from moisture in the tree.

**Figure 2.** Detail of *Treverk (3)* by Joakim Blattmann at Oslo Prosjektrom in 2015. Photo: Joakim Blattmann. Reproduced with the permission of Joakim Blattmann. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

effectively killing it, he managed to find a way to convey the idea of life nevertheless.

From this perspective, the logs appear to have no function beyond being an aesthetic backdrop to the recordings. But the main log in the artwork—the one connected to all the cables—had an active part in the wood concert nevertheless. The sequences and order of the crunching, rattling and pecking noises were determined by the main log's humidity; sensors registered biosignals from the main log and sent them to a computer, allowing the tree to influence which pre-recorded tree sounds the audience could hear. As an uncanny orchestra conductor, the dead log used its remaining life to orchestrate a complex composition, animating the rest of the cut-off dead logs in the gallery room.

When 'humanising' the tree's sounds, that is, when transforming the sounds into something audible to the human ear, technology participates to some degree; however, the organic processes *inherent* in the tree do the rest. To let the humidity of the tree trigger the recordings in *Treverk (9)* means that the life inside the dead tree actually was the *creative force of the artwork*. Although the tree was mutilated, it took the

place as sovereign within the frame of the artwork set up by Blattmann, as if it still had some control of its ghostly existence. The tree's desire to live had been violated, it was placed in a human context, but still, it became an active participant in the creation of the artwork.

## Advocating the Life of Trees

One way to interpret *Treverk (9)* is as a demonstration of ruthless human behaviour towards trees. The artwork might be interpreted as saying *look at what humans do to trees! They violate an inherent life-form just because it blocks the view!* If one believes that all forms of life have equal value, then viewing a quartered tree would be as brutal as viewing a quartered fish exhibited side by side with sound recordings from when it was alive, or a quartered horse displayed together with sound recordings from its lively whinnies, or a quartered human with her voice like a haunting ghost. The different levels of discomfort that one may feel imagining these artworks could reveal a hierarchy of life-value. To view *Treverk (9)* in this light gives the work an activist undertone, as a political statement highlighting the mass killing of trees for the purpose of being resources for humans.

The question of the purpose of the artwork changes as we consider another work in Blattmann's *Treverk* series, *Treverk (13)* (2019) [figure 3]. In *Treverk (13)*, the artist wired up a living tree growing in the backyard of the Oslo gallery Atelier Nord, connecting it to cables that transmitted its biosignals to a computer (Atelier Nord, 2019). Here, the dilemma with regard to the act of killing has changed. The tree has not been detached from the earth in which it had developed its roots; it is not dead. Although the concept of the recordings being activated by the humidity within the tree is the same in the two artworks, the wood has a different life-status, and thereby the focus shifts from the act of killing trees to the creative interaction between logs and technology. *Treverk (13)* thereby has more of an investigative rather than activist undertone. Considering the more activist undertone in *Treverk (9)* than in *Treverk (13)*, number nine in the series can be interpreted as encompassing multiple meanings: as being about the life of the tree and as being about the tree as a tool to trigger

**Figure 3.** Part of the sound installation *Treverk (13)*, an 8-channel site-specific sound installation based on audio recordings of minuscule movements in an 200 year old maple in the backyard of the gallery Atelier Nord, 2019. Photo: Istvan Virag. Reproduced with the permission of Joakim Blattmann and Istvan Virag . All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission

sound. Yet, as art is not obligated to portray reality *correctly*, compared to journalism, for example, it is harder to ethically judge how correct an ecological message is conveyed.

## The Deep Ecology of *Treverk (9)*

Let us return to Næss and Sessions' first basic principle of deep ecology and consider it in relation to Blattmann's *Treverk (9)*. The tree is an example of non-human life. As it is quartered and placed inside an art gallery,

the criteria of the well-being and flourishing can hardly be said to be fulfilled. *Treverk (9)* thereby does not fulfill this first part of the principle. Then there is the question of purpose: Næss and Sessions write that the inherent values of other beings must be 'independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.' Here the dilemma of art as a concept appears, as art is usually made by humans for humans.[4] It is frequently based on, or partly mediated by, written or verbal language—skills that only humans possess. Placed in the framework of contemporary art discourse, *Treverk (9)* can barely be said to fulfill the principle of independence from usefulness for humans either. It is an artwork and it has value as art.

Based on this synthesis, it would be reasonable to dismiss Blattmann´s work as not having a deep ecological base. But perhaps it can still inspire ecological—or relational—thinking. In this artwork, non-human life is presented to the human senses. The artwork creates awareness of the shortcomings of human perception: there is an entire bioacoustic world in which humans do not have access. Realising this disturbs the foundation of the anthropocentric world view. Humans only record parts of the world, as author Mandy-Suzanne Wong highlights:

> Alongside people and their descriptions and discussions, nonhumans do historical work, recording and remembering history. This means that history is felt, heard, seen, tasted, smelled, and done, as much as it is written and spoken. It means that accounts of history are always incomplete, especially discursive ones, and that some aspects of history are beyond human understanding. Sound art can do some historical work that language can't. (Wong, 2016, p. 363)

Becoming aware of the abilities of non-human life and its participation in the earth's own history and existence might inspire a deeper care for non-human life, which is a crucial step towards a redefined relationship between humans and their surroundings. Not only with the goal of saving humanity from the consequences of a long-term violence towards

4 I write usually because there have been cases of art created for non-humans. Take, for example, the projects of Oslo Apiary and Aviary as discussed by Emma Karlsen in Chapter 14, 'Future Stories.'

non-human life on earth, but simply because non-human life has inherent value, in and of itself.

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CHAPTER 12

# Sensing Algae: On Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen's *Reclaiming Vision*

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**Abstract:** This chapter explores questions of ontology and non-human life in the site-specific screening of Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen's film *Reclaiming Vision*, shown at the point where the river flows into the fjord in a recently developed area of downtown Oslo. By filming water samples through a microscope, the artists have magnified the rich, microbiotic life of the Aker River and the inner Oslo Fjord, making actants such as algae, bacteria and fungi visible to humans. The chapter claims that by presenting life from the position of the microorganisms in the water, *Reclaiming Vision* presents a radical and flat form of ontology that brings up important ethical and political perspectives that are vital for developing ways of living together with the non-humans that surround us.

**Keywords:** microorganisms, coexistence, film, object-oriented ontology, perception

## Introduction

An incoming train is approaching Oslo Central Station. The squealing sound of the brakes fills the surrounding area as it glides towards the platform. As the train comes to a full stop, a sigh of relief goes through the daily commuters who are ready to board the train and to be liberated

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from this week's duties at work in the city. *Chaetoceros decipiens*. A number of screensavers from the offices of EnterCard Norway—a supplier of credit cards and private loans—light up the windows of one of the nearby Oslo Barcode buildings, as they are left in standby mode for the weekend. *Prymnesium parvum*. Cars and buses are passing by, enjoying the asphalt of the newly constructed Dronning Eufemia Street. A motorcycle turns onto the bridge over the railway station and makes its presence heard. *Rhodomonas salina*. Under this bridge, amid all these high-rise buildings, construction sites and transportation facilities, the Aker River reveals itself. After floating through the city for about 10 kilometres, the river ends and merges with the Oslo Fjord here.

This was the place of the screening of Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen's film *Reclaiming Vision* on a warm evening in the late summer of 2018. The screening was organised by *The Munch Museum on the Move,* a temporary project connected to the Munch Museum's relocation from its old building at Tøyen to the new building close to the mouth of the Aker River [figure 1].

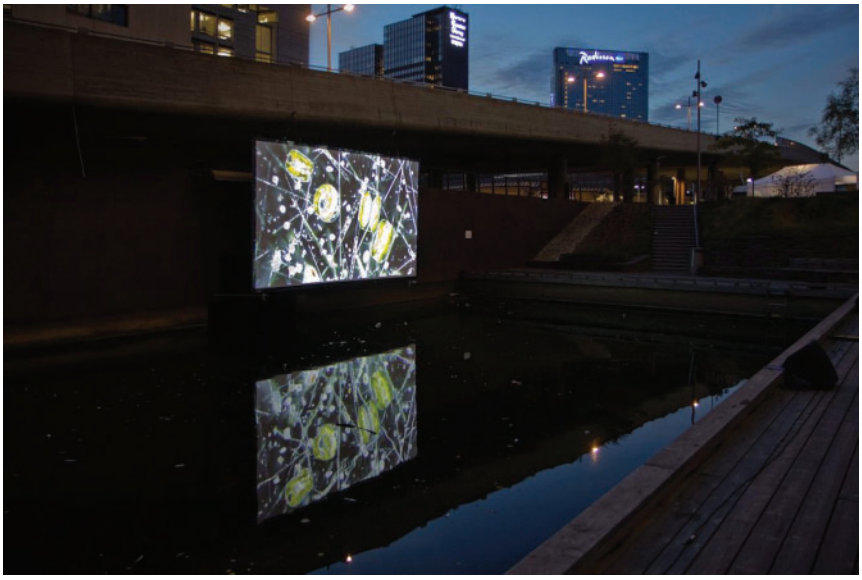

**Figure 1.** Installation image of *Reclaiming Vision* (2018) by Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen in Bjørvika, Oslo. Commissioned by The Munch Museum for Munchmuseet on the Move. Reproduced with permission of Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

## Narrating the *Rhodomonas*

Starring in Dijkman and Johannessen's 27-minute film are actors like *Alexandrium tamarense*, *Dinophysis norvegica*, *Eutreptiella braarudii*, *Rhizosolenia hebetata* and *Skeletonema costatum* [figure 2]. On the screen, these actors dance around in captivating movements, accompanied by a dramatic soundtrack consisting of string instruments and various backdrops in different colours, spaces and textures. All of the performers have different shapes and sizes, some being thin, tall and rod-shaped, while others are round or spiral-formed. Some of the actants in *Reclaiming Vision* have arms, legs or tails; others have something that looks like feelers or antennae.

The film's actors are algae, bacteria, fungi and other microorganisms that in fact originate in the very water that runs between the viewer and the huge screen. Together with scientists from the Department of Biosciences at the University of Oslo, Dijkman and Johannessen filmed water samples collected from the Aker River and the nearby Oslo Fjord through a microscope and created a cinematic narrative.

While sharing some aesthetic similarities to nature and wildlife documentaries, *Reclaiming Vision* uses elements of fiction in the portrayal

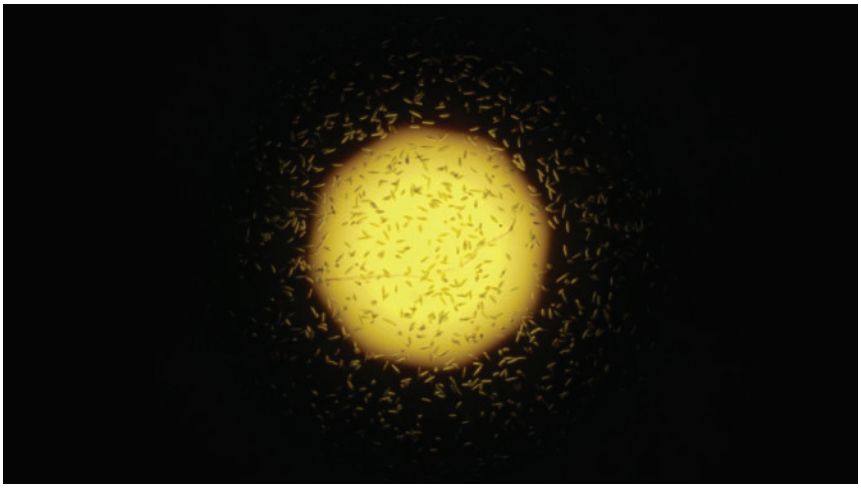

**Figure 2.** Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen. (2018). *Reclaiming Vision* [Still from film]. Commissioned by The Munch Museum for Munchmuseet on the Move. Reproduced with permission of Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

of the microorganisms. At the start of the film, the microorganisms float around on the screen seemingly acting on their own, fascinating us with their shapes and movements. Later, it becomes clear that the microorganisms are not purely observed in their habitat in a documentary manner. They are in the alien territory of Petri dishes—in a lab—observed outside their natural ecosystem and domesticated through experiments. The latter part of the film reveals the source of the microorganisms' vital movements: pipettes make the algae and bacteria dance around as the lab tools suck the microbes towards them or disperse them away.

The experimental nature of the project resembles the scientific research that is usually conducted in these laboratories. Artistic exploration of scientific experiments is a clear tendency in Norwegian contemporary art, and in *Reclaiming Vision* the scientific research is extended by focusing on the more visual aspects of these practices.

Towards the end of the film, the microbes are found in a cinematic space, a dramatic scenery where the texture of the water is more opaque. Thick, foreign fluids are flowing in, as if a nearby octopus had just been escaping a predator. However, these fluids are not part of the water sample from the Aker River. Ink, oil, pigments and microplastics are injected into the water by Dijkman and Johannessen. These are materials that alter the microorganisms' natural ecosystem. Played out in front of the camera, microbiological life encounters human interaction—as has been happening for as long as there have been humans in the area. The injections mirror human activity, such as the historical leaking of dyes from the clothing industry up the Aker River and, more recently, oil spills in the Oslo Fjord.

By bringing the microorganisms into a dramatised narrative, the artists point to how humans orchestrate the natural environment both deliberately and unintentionally. Dijkman and Johannessen portray current and historical processes in which human impact on the aquatic life is presented in a poetic and imaginative manner, compressed within a short time span. When the environment of the microbes is slightly changed, the effects are profound. In *Reclaiming Vision*, microplastics and oils dramatically change the conditions of algae and bacteria in a way that is perceivable to a human audience.

## Decentring the Human

The fictional aspects of the film are a strategy to speculate on the life of the entities in the water which we cannot fully perceive or understand. Through the algae and bacteria, the foreign and unknown are magnified for us to marvel at, develop empathy for and gain an understanding of. *Reclaiming Vision* is a collaborative performance by human and non-human actants, where the microorganisms are left to unfold in a way not completely controllable for the artists. Dijkman and Johannessen set the boundaries of the space that the microbes are allowed to move within and they are in various ways conditioning their activities, but the properties of the algae and bacteria are reacting to the artists' input in particular ways. By being highly site-specific, connecting the microbiotic life in the Aker River to the newly restored area of Bjørvika, *Reclaiming Vision* interferes in the actual and ongoing situation of urban development and our relationship to the other beings around us.

In comparison to the deep time of the Earth, humans have been on the planet for a relatively short period. Yet we have affected the planet to such a degree that our presence has become a geological force, leaving traces of ourselves not only in cities, but also in geological layers, in the atmosphere, in the oceans and in the most remote places some still think of as nature. Considering the failures of the anthropocentric organisation of the planet, causing ruthless over-exploitation of natural resources to the point of catastrophe, another world view—a new ethics—seems to be a way forward.

The work echoes movements in contemporary philosophy grappling with a radical restructuring of how we understand other species, things and the human; in particular, the direction in philosophy called object-oriented ontology. Although object-oriented ontology is a heterogeneous framework of thinking, a common trait is to challenge anthropocentric hierarchies of existence, by introducing a so-called flat ontology,[1] insisting that all things equally exist (Bogost, 2012, p. 11). As a result, this direction in philosophy acknowledges that every single entity

1 The term 'Flat ontology' originates from Manuel De Landa, see his *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy.*

in the universe possesses a particular perspective and agency, and that the multiplicities of experiences of the world and its countless relations cannot fully be understood by human cognition (Bryant, 2011, pp. 18–19).

*Reclaiming Vision* expands our perception by changing the perspective to beings other than humans. The film opens up the importance of the algae and bacteria in the water so that we can develop empathy for them. Dijkman and Johannessen show that these indiscernible beings indeed are here, we share the planet with them, and they have properties that are of essential importance to us. How do these living beings react to foreign substances entering their world? Do they become dizzy or perplexed by the microplastics? By entering into this aquatic world, the human is seen from another perspective, and it becomes evident that our activities have serious negative effects on other beings.

## Approaching the Imperceptible

Dijkman and Johannessen present a different way to think about cities and urban development on a local scale, but also of how to understand other species and our role on a global scale. Most animals have been actively driven out of the areas where humans have settled and constructed cities. They are considered to be found in the countryside and in 'nature', but cities are actual ecosystems full of animals that have found their ways of living here, like insects, rodents, birds, and fish, even though they are far from prioritised in these urban areas. The same applies to micro-organisms—that are everywhere—and even make up large parts of our bodies. When watching *Reclaiming Vision* by the Aker River, I felt pulled out of my habitual mode of thinking, where everything is measured on my own, human-centred terms. I was mesmerised by the algae and bacteria, and I became a little more aware of the existence of the beings around us.

According to Dijkman, every second breath we take is produced by algae in the oceans (Tampere, 2018, p. 10). Yet the microbiological life of the water typically only enters our consciousness when it poses a threat to humans, such as the summer of 2018's higher-than-normal sea temperatures provoking an outbreak of the vibrio virus that infected some

open wounds and oysters. Even in the microscopic existence displayed by the microscope, the human is still present, but we are dethroned from our privileged position. Recognising the limitations of the human eye and cognition in approaching our all-too-neglected, coexisting species, Dijkman and Johannessen offer a glimpse of their situation in a very fertile attempt to do them justice.

Human vision is not only constructed by interpreting the world through our eyes, but it is also built up by ways of seeing, of culturally learned conventions of how to see the world and how to think about seeing. *Reclaiming Vision* presents a form of vision that differs from the one dominated by politics, economy and ideology, and steers the priority of the visual system towards also including other beings. The climate crisis forces us to see and think differently, as its slowly accelerated effects are only partially available to us, predominantly through a few, dramatic events. Our human capacities limit us, both temporally and visually, to experience the crisis through the rare glimpses that we can perceive of its consequences. In Dijkman and Johannessen's work, the usually undetectable and neglected microorganisms in the water are brought to our attention. To watch the film is a transformative experience, where the captivating movements, narrative and soundtrack give a perceptual revelation of the world's chaotic nature. I am moved, not just visually, but I have also acquired a new sense of belonging in the world. I am reminded that our surroundings are largely ruled by contingency and the interconnected actions of all the entities on the planet, in processes that we might be part of, but that always have consequences that operate outside of our sensory apparatus.

As the familiar sounds and movements of the trains, cars and motorcycles continue to echo between the high-rise buildings, the sub-aquatic perspectives offered by the film have changed how I perceive the area that I find myself in. The river flowing through the area now stands out as potent and full of life. I imagine how the *Prymnesium parvum* and the other microorganisms are living their lives in the water, and I recognise that they are a part of this constructed landscape that now appears less exclusively human than first assumed. Steel, concrete, algae, engines, microplastics, screensavers, grass, water, bacteria, people, corporations,

pollution, brakes and wheels. The sensory experience of *Reclaiming Vision* has unveiled to me how non-human actants are constantly developing around me. The film has shown the unique power that artworks can have in altering our state of mind by creating new ways of being-in-the-world. For the moment, *Chaetoceros decipiens* feels as familiar as the cars and trains on the motorway and as distant as EnterCard Norway.

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CHAPTER 13

# Creative Fungus: On Fredrik Værslev's *Mildew Paintings*

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**Abstract:** Fredrik Værslev's *Mildew Paintings* cannot be defined as paintings in the conventional sense. They are the result of mildew growth developing over the course of a year on canvases stored inside humid plastic tubes. As such, their exact nature eludes us, not being straight-forward painterly objects, nor simple pieces of fungus-eaten material. This chapter aims to define the *Mildew Paintings*' hybrid identity through the theories of interspecies entanglements of anthropologist Anna Tsing and Gilles Clément's approach to what he refers to as the third landscape in urban gardening. The paintings are regarded as the result of a new-found collaboration between human and non-human processes, pushing the artist into the background while introducing other creative entities, leaving us to question our hegemonic role as this world's sole active designers.

**Keywords**: third landscape, interspecies entanglements, abstract painting, Anna Tsing, Gilles Clément

## Introduction

At some point in 2012, artist Fredrik Værslev found himself quite dissatisfied with the priming operation carried out on some of his canvases. Having tried to alter the initial appearance of the priming in various ways and still failing to achieve his desired result, Værslev decided to roll up the canvases in plastic tubes and simply place them outside. The canvases were then left there, forgotten by him and the world, for twelve months. These were the canvases that would later become known as Fredrik

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Værslev's *Mildew Paintings* (2013). The works consist of a series of primed canvases upon which mildew (the pale, mould-like filaments that develop on the surface of damp organic material) has given life to its own visual expression, by covering the canvas in shapes and patterns of cloudy hues as a result of the spreading of fungus in the humid climate of the storage tubes. These accidental and autonomous processes by the 'hands' of the fungi were given aesthetic and artistic value by the artist only at the end of their spontaneous creation. Værslev recovered the canvases, removed them from the tubes and—as the fungus that had developed was particularly poisonous—he treated them with fungicide to stop the decaying process. Not having directly sprung out of the artist's initial intention, strictly speaking, nor having developed through the trace-making activity of the artist's hand—actually barely relying on a gesture of his of any kind—the works leave us questioning their exact nature as artistic objects. Despite their seemingly painterly appearance, they seem to linger in a definitional limbo, as they subtly slip away from standard painting categories. The lack of a solid ground to stand on in order to regard these works as conventional paintings has led to the works being given other kinds of definitions over time, such as the one given by Peter J. Amdam, who referred to them as Værslev's 'painterly non-project' (Amdam, 2013). Rather than being paintings, what they can more accurately be described as is, indeed, a series of unprompted collaborative processes between human and non-human actors, humans and fungi, converging only at the end in a seemingly painterly form.

## Interspecies Entanglements

Upon the organic material of the human-made canvases and inside the synthetic material of the plastic storage tubes, the fungus thrives undisturbed. As a year-long process of intertwined human and non-human elements, it is tempting to see the works as the perfect visual representation of interspecies entanglements, such as the ones between fungus and humans that have been brought to our recent attention by the anthropologist Anna Tsing (Tsing, 2015). In her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing takes her cue from the Matsutake mushroom—a Japanese

delicacy found mostly in North America, Europe and some parts of Asia. Tsing tells stories of how fungi, pine and humans are tied together in collaborative conglomerates, building landscapes around mutual disturbance while blurring the lines between human and non-human domains. Whereas humans seem to be unable to intentionally grow this mushroom, the Matsutake is in fact the perfect example of an element that is still greatly tied up in human actions, as it flourishes in the forest areas where human presence has made itself most known in even the most aggressive manner. Under the layers of timber production and overproduction, under the layers of impoverished soil and even, it is said, under the layers of the ruins of Hiroshima, Matsutake grows on the verge of a paradox, deeply entangled in human disturbance and, at the same time, escaping its control. As nature-made objects in human-made frames, existing at the same time inside and outside of human boundaries, the *Mildew Paintings* seem to give life to a similar pattern.

It is not the first time in Værslev's *oeuvre* that he incorporates nature's activity into his own practice. Værslev is in fact known for having let nature influence the final outcome of his painterly process by placing his finished canvases in the open air, exposing them to the erosion of the elements over longer periods of time (Sandqvist, 2012). Now, instead of having sun, rain and snow act as a final painterly layer, the *Mildew Paintings* witness nature significantly (and literally) stepping forward into the picture frame. No longer the last polishing, or rather de-polishing, phase at the end of a more or less standard human painting-making process, nature now actively takes on the role of a core creative agent in the artwork itself.

As the uncontrolled and unpredictable fungus development suddenly turns out to make up the very key process behind the artwork, pushing the artist further and further back, one therefore notices the entanglement between man and nature already present in Værslev's practice, taking a turn to new, unusual patterns, introducing a sudden role-shifting between foreground and background creative elements.

In this particular intertwining of human presence and natural processes, human disturbance limits itself to the extremes of the process: it is merely present to build the foundation and set the boundaries for the

works by marking their beginning and end. Initially showing up through Værslev's originating priming process and consequent aesthetic dissatisfaction, it is then suspended for twelve months, only dwelling upon the work in the fossilised shape of the man-made plastic making up the storage tubes. It is then reintroduced at the very end through the artist's finding, physical removal and recovery of the canvases, through the chemical stopping of the mildew's spreading and, finally, through the artist's active investing of the mildew-covered canvases with autonomous artistic value.

As a newly appointed artist, mildew in the meantime works freely, slowly and steadily, eating up the canvas bit by bit, corrupting shapes and colours: the result is a subtle progression of greys and greens meeting on the canvases in cloudy, dream-like scenarios. The visual traces that still mark their year of storage in plastic tubes thus become blurry lines stretching across the surfaces of the works as a multitude of horizons, appearing and disappearing through a distant fog.

## The Third Landscape

Through the entangled mazes of mildew filaments, the project turns the bordered zone of the painting into a form of two-dimensional landscaping, making up vertical, flattened-out gardens out of untamed natural processes. By doing so, Værslev's forgotten corners of organic wilderness seem to echo the particular kind of gardening processes that garden designer, theorist and botanist Gilles Clément has advocated for the past twenty years. In fact, there is something about the poetic and wildly liberating aspects of Værslev retracting from the role as the works' creator and letting nature instead build itself within the artwork while removed from human intervention that bears a resemblance to what was stirring in the fields of landscape architecture and urban gardening in the early 2000s. New directions developing at the time within this field, the very field that traditionally could be associated with the most blatantly nature-constricting aspects of humans' art and design practice, might actually offer a useful lens through which we can unpack Værslev's approach.

In 2004, Gilles Clément published a manifesto that would make a significant contribution to the pushing of nature towards the front row

of our world's creative processes. He recognized nature as designer of its own expression even in its most seemingly undesirable and neglected aspects. At the core of the manifesto stands the concept of the *third landscape*, defined as all the forgotten, abandoned or inaccessible corners of natural wilderness that are present in our urban landscapes, where man's activity is for one reason or another suspended and weeds, wild and untamed greeneries are left alone to unfold: from swamps, moors, roadsides and railroad embankments to institutional reserves, mountain summits and deserts (Clément, 2005; Gandy 2013). Recognising the tangible worthiness, inventive force and aesthetic beauty of such wilderness on the basis, amongst other factors, of the biological complexity and biodiversity that exists in areas where man has stepped back (Clément, 2005), Clément suggested a new approach towards our present relation to our natural surroundings. The *Mildew Paintings* can be seen as minimalistically reproducing this new approach, suggesting an alternative to the current reigning split between human subjects as the sole sources of active and creative power on the one hand, and natural objects as the surrounding world of passive, ever-shapeable immobility on the other.

In such an alternative outlook, the urban gardener is invited to release his or her controlling role within the human and non-human entanglements, restraining from taming them into composites of perfect urban landscapes and instead 'work *with* nature' (Clément, 2005; Lanzoni, 2007), revaluating its ability to creatively design its own space. To shed light on a concrete example of such an approach one could mention Clément's own design for the Henri Matisse Park in Lille, completed in 1995, where a central portion of the park was made to consist of an inaccessible and enclosed 'island' of wilderness, where natural processes and biodiversity are treasured, closely monitored though left untouched, and human presence is physically banned (Gandy, 2013).

As the *Mildew Paintings* similarly withdraw from human control while the fungi proceed completely undisturbed inside the storage tubes, nature can be seen here to reclaim its own creative space through the very making of a two-dimensional 'third landscape' on the canvas. As such, Værslev's non-paintings can be thought of as a subtle invitation to let go

of our compulsively human desire to shape, change and control our natural surroundings, while going from subjects to respectful observers. At the same time, by elevating mildew from its usual and heavily frowned upon role as the disastrous consequence of poor storage to the role of protagonist in the work's artistic narrative, the series also resonates with Clément's conceptual repurposing of nature's waste areas, by making us witness nature's own way of visually, biologically and creatively unfolding itself, investing even nature's most unattractive by-products with a new-found dignity.

Still, compared to Clément's ideal of complete human exclusion from the beauty of these untamed urban gardens, there is admittedly one aspect of Værslev's work that somehow lingers within the limits of human control: after the year of mildew's autonomous self-shaping process, it is the artist himself that intervenes, nevertheless, putting an artificial end to the natural process by chemically stopping the spreading of the fungus and freezing the shapes of the mildew in a deliberately chosen moment. Is this a symptom? A small but telling detail, revealing the outlook of the intrinsically controlling aspects of human nature? A sign of our innate reluctance to completely let go of our desire to shape and define the boundaries of natural processes? Or is it enough to state, as Værslev himself has done (Værslev, 2014/2015), the extreme health hazard this particularly poisonous mildew would cause in a museum environment if left in a totally uncontrolled state? One might even argue that Værslev's final involvement can be identified with the very fine thread of artistic intention that binds this work to its artist: making up a minuscule, yet fundamental, grain distinguishing the *Mildew Paintings* from any other forgotten mould-covered object one might find lying around in the garage. Overall, it may be said that the paintings spring out of an overlap between species, building on the cooperation between human presence and undisturbed natural phenomena as multispecies hybrid objects of a new kind of 'third' landscape.

By both connecting us with nature's own pace and, at the same time, keeping us at a distance, Værslev's *Mildew Paintings* can be considered a small push, dressed in minimalistic greenish robes, towards rethinking the current all-engulfing mass of our creative egos and, by doing so,

contributing to balancing out the anthropocentric hierarchies that build the foundations of our unsettling era.

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CHAPTER 14

# Future Stories: On Oslo Apiary & Aviary 2014–2018

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**Abstract:** At the core of Oslo Apiary & Aviary's artistic practice during the years 2014 to 2018 is ecological intervention performed in urban areas. Taking their work from this period as a point of departure, this chapter explores how 'ecoventions'—such as facilitating for birds, moths and insects in the city—can challenge common perceptions regarding urban spaces and allow for reflection and re-thinking about ontological co-existence in the city. It is argued that Oslo Apiary & Aviary are storytellers that enact new futures that point towards a more sustainable life in the city, both for humans and for birds, moths and insects.

**Keywords:** ecovention, multi-species, urban life, ecological awareness, storytelling

## Introduction

Surrounded by stinging nettles and wild growing plants lies a structure made from concrete, wood, bricks, stones and sticks. Wooden planks are layered to form what can be recognised as a roof or boat hull turned upside down. Inside this strange shelter, four sections are filled with sticks, bricks, logs and stones [figure 1]. These materials make up a perfect site for ants, beetles, spiders and rodents. It is a hibernaculum; it is *The Lifeboat* (2019)—a part of Oslo Apiary & Aviary's artistic practice.

*The Lifeboat* was until late 2019 located in downtown Oslo, on a little green space in an area otherwise characterised by heavy building construction and gentrified urban life. It offers shelter to a range of critters—*saving*

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**Figure 1.** Marius Presterud (Oslo Apiary & Aviary). (2019). *The Lifeboat* [Multi-species hibernaculum, various materials]. Reproduced with permission of Marius Presterud. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

them as the title implies—from a fragile existence in a city in which are humans rapidly expanding their territory, leaving less and less space for non-human others. A rope attached to *The Lifeboat* is moored to a little heap of gravel, as if insisting on the hibernaculum's belongingness to the city. While the mooring seems to have little or no actual function, the symbolic effect becomes even greater (it should be mentioned that the writer later learned that the rope accumulates moisture for bees and other insects, allowing them to drink water without drowning, serving in fact both a practical and symbolic function). Oslo Apiary & Aviary are telling us that non-human lives are as strongly connected to urban areas as human lives are. Thus, we should encourage and embrace them. This kind of intervention is characteristic for the artist group Oslo Apiary & Aviary's activities.[1]

1 An interview with artist Marius Presterud has allowed for valuable insight in Oslo Apiary & Aviary's practice and excerpts from Presterud's own records and reflections regarding the artist group's undertakings, runs alongside the text. All the following quotes by Presterud derive from a conversation between Presterud and Emma Karlsen, 25 October 2019.

*The Lifeboat* is part of a comprehensive artistic practice manifested in the artist group Oslo Apiary & Aviary (hereafter OAA), founded by Marius Presterud in partnership with Mikkel Dagestad in 2013. In addition to building hibernacula, OAA has engaged in activities such as beekeeping (keeping beehives on the roof of art galleries like Kunstnernes Hus and Henie Onstad Art Centre), butterfly breeding, raising dovecotes and tree growing. OAA's practice can be found somewhere between art production and urban husbandry, in which their different projects create the backdrop for various artistic expressions, such as performances, talks, videos and exhibitions. Their artistic practice can thus be identified with what Sue Spaid calls 'ecoventions,' referring to 'an artist-initiated project that employs an inventive strategy to physically transform a local ecology' (Spaid, 2002, p. 1). In OAA's artwork *Work Relief* (2018), all the above-mentioned activities can be detected. The work consists of a total of 16 reliefs made of beeswax (extracted from their own beehives) [figure 2] and upcycled thermoplastic [figure 3]. The yellow and black squares are cast from the same set of moulds, making two identical sets. Originally the plates made up two separate artworks, and when assembled

**Figure 2.** Marius Presterud (Oslo Apiary & Aviary). (2018). *Work Relief* [Eight-piece demi-relief in beeswax]. Reproduced with permission of Marius Presterud. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

**Figure 3.** Marius Presterud (Oslo Apiary & Aviary). (2018). *Work Relief* [Eight-piece demi-relief in upcycled thermoplastic]. Reproduced with permission of Marius Presterud. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

in accordance with what the frame suggests, they form a coherent motif. The relief depicts two persons (seen in the left and right lower corners) in beekeeping suits, supposedly depicting Presterud and Dagestad themselves. Amongst the reliefs one can also detect motifs like the construction of a dovecote, a set of top-bar beehives, and some stairs referring to a performance OAA held in 2014 at Kunstnernes Hus, where they poured honey down the main staircase. These beeswax reliefs can thus be read quite literally: what we see are pictorial representations of OAA's artistic practice.

By performing such ecoventions, OAA engages with what Donna Haraway calls 'multi-species complexities.' In her theories, Haraway is concerned with making a more liveable planet, not only for humans but for all other kinds of creatures as well. In her books, the notion of *storytelling* is a recurring trope and the ability to 'think-with' is emphasised. She writes: 'Telling stories together with historically situated critters is fraught with the risks and joys of composing a more livable cosmopolitics' (Haraway, 2016, p. 15). OAA's attention towards creatures that have no immediate value to humans and that are even commonly unwanted, testify to their thinking-with. To think-with enables OAA to explore how

'beings render each other capable in actual encounters' (Haraway, 2016, p. 126). In making this effort into an artistic practice, OAA become storytellers. By placing beehives on rooftops, breeding butterflies in the city and welcoming commonly unwanted pigeons, OAA questions the otherwise so anthropocentric cityscape.

In an interview with the Norwegian magazine *Billedkunst*, Presterud described OAA as a 'dark ecological service provider' (Håland, 2018, p. 132). The wording echoes Timothy Morton's concept of 'dark ecology' and suggests that OAA shares Morton's view on humans as an integral part of the natural world. Morton argues that 'nature' is a twelve-thousand-year structure (Morton, 2016, p. 5); a result of early humans separating themselves from (some) non-humans and labelling them as 'nature.' This, according to Morton, has been the predominant way of organising human society ever since, and it has proved to be a 'weapon of mass destruction,' causing Earth irreparable damage. Seen like this, nature is something we practice through our language and actions. In Norway there are even laws (the Outdoor Recreation Act) and interest groups (e.g. the Norwegian Trekking Association) unknowingly dedicated to practicing this distinction.

> *We have tried to return insects to the city—moths, bees, making hibernacula, we have tried to bring some birds back to the city—there's hardly any bird song here anymore. […] But we have also been working more theoretically, with how we practice the distinction between culture and nature, city and rural.*
>
> —Marius Presterud

In their practice OAA tries to bring similar attention to what constitutes the life of species living in the city. This inspection of how the city can, or cannot, be renegotiated can be read as a reaction to the urgency of our times. Presterud explains that the project started out as a sort of green entrepreneurship producing and selling honey before they started to question how to use this to work with social conventions and culture. The duo cultivated an artistic interest in things that have value but cannot easily be commercialised. Presterud describes this as 'a blind spot in our society, if it can be commercialized it can have room, if not it gets pushed

out' (Presterud, personal communication, October 25, 2019). The hibernacula, dovecotes and moth breeding have no commercial value. The beekeeping on top of Kunstnernes Hus became a way to explore whether unused commercial spaces could be used in new ways.

> *We have many ritualized, considerate acts in 'nature'. There is a sense of blasphemy in nature that we don't have in the city, and it would be nice to bring some of that into the city. But to have an interest in that, to understand the need for it, you have to be more relationally oriented, you must develop a more ecological self.*
>
> —Presterud

Presterud suggests that in order to understand the need to rethink the city's philosophical value, one must develop a more ecological self, which can be translated into 'ecological awareness.' This term appears in Timothy Morton's writings and denotes a sense of realising that everything in this world is interconnected. In accordance with Arne Næss, Morton claims that we need new ways of living.

In the article 'The Art of Urban Transformations,' Emma Arnold and Karen O'Brien explore how artistic practices like those of OAA can generate much needed 'transformation to sustainability.' They believe that artists, by using public spaces in unexpected ways, can both 'challenge conceptions and behaviors' and 'lead to a change in perspective' (Arnold & O'Brien, 2015). In OAA's practice there is no hierarchical privilege given to humans, that is, to themselves. Artistic expressions can function as gateways to inner spaces of reflection; spaces where matters can be re-thought and new considerations can be cultivated.

Nature might have its own agency, one that might differ from ours. When OAA tried to plant seeds on top of Kunstnernes Hus, seagulls settled down and laid eggs there. Consequently, a group of red listed seabirds occupied the roof; an involuntary ecovention. Or, as mentioned by Presterud, a built and raised dovecote stood nearly empty, inhabited mainly by spiders and occasionally visited by birds when he put out food. 'Nature' does not always bend to our will.

OAA's ecoventions are a response to the urgency of our time, a time Haraway refers to as 'a period of intolerable extraction, unequal human

deprivation, multispecies extinction, and blasted ecosystems' (Kenney, 2015, p. 263). The artist duo is showing others to care for other species. This is what Haraway calls 'response-ability,' which differs from the ordinary usage of the word 'responsibility.' Response-ability is about participating in a multi-species world. In Haraway's words: 'Response-ability is not something that you just respond to, as if it's there already. Rather, it's the cultivation of the capacity of response in the context of living and dying in worlds for which one is for, with others' (Kenney, 2015, p. 257).

> *We learned a lot about what it means to be relationally attuned. For example, how little I now believe in human agency, the idea to control and manage is naive.*
>
> —Presterud

Returning to *Work Relief*, this work depicts the practice of OAA and is therefore to be considered a story. A visual one, yes, but a story, nevertheless. And, if one cares to read it, a story about humans and other species co-existing in urban spaces is revealed. If we look closer into the practice of OAA, we see that it is a story of trying and failing. By 2020, OAA's ecoventions in Oslo had come to an end, but they are moving on, exploring new strategies with the same intentions.

> *I have found that I can change my perception. It is possible to challenge an individual self. I am starting to see some lines that can lead to a more ecological oriented self. And I can see that I don't find any solutions, but I find new why-questions. I find trouble. Maybe one take on the artist's role of today is to hold up the problems of the ongoing.*
>
> —Presterud

Haraway insists that we tell the story about the Anthropocene starting from the things we care about. Through *Work Relief*, Presterud conveyed a story about extinction and an alternative urban life in such a 'Harawayian' spirit. By executing their projects in public spaces and exhibiting artworks at accessible galleries, OAA's artistic practice has become a *collective* memory. The books we read, the movies we watch and the art we experience expands our inner worlds—they shape us and form our opinions. OAA enables us to think about the future the way that Timothy

Morton prefers: 'For this is what we should task ourselves with: thinking future coexistence unconstrained by present concepts' (Morton, 2016, p. 27). By facilitating for bees, doves, butterflies, moths and other critters, OAA offered a new perspective, a new way of being human in the city, telling stories with and for all creatures.

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