

...“wheeling” environmental...

...humanities in excess...

...of what designers do...

1

What I am proposing here today is *not* a demonstration and an argument of *fact*—or, or logic—but an experimental demonstration and argument of *possibility*: a *modal* proposition, complementary of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, which proceeds from *necessity*. The counterpart of possibility is *contingency*. The likes of which one will find in Tim Ingold’s [4As](#): anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture.

2

At art-school we take interest in reality from a *fictional* vantage-point: we take fiction as our ally in our investigation of the real. Which means that as *makers* we often explore the real, in a process of fictional creation. That is, an altered mode of field-search and theory-development in which knowledge is second to aesthetics. Where knowledge is somehow *preceded* and *mirrored* by [aesthetics](#).

3-4

What I find at the art school—where I work as an anthropologist—are environmental positions, often guided by knowledges ranging from the STEM sciences to the humanities, with a dash of social science, in an attempt to keep odd ends together. But the affordance of fiction to receive *markings* of the real may yet have unexplored possibilities in store: of holding the environment in pattern.

5

The possibilities that may open, as fictional [holding patterns](#) going out of hiding from art schools are revealed & argued in *public*, is a potential that I personally seek in *design* as a field. The reason is that the common denominator of the design disciplines we have at KHiO—fashion-costume, graphic design-illustration, furniture-interior—attempt to *wed* fiction to manufacture in our public *culture*.

6

We may ask: what is *then* the difference between *design* and *advertisement*? Well, designers would be able to claim that their work is put to a variety of *tests*, other than the test of the market. To the extent that they are successful at proving this point, designers will resort to *humanities* to account for the [critical](#) dimension, and *STEM* for the technical. But what is specifically the *design* point?

7

We could turn it around and ask, could the *public window* of environmental humanities allow us to work pervasively with environmental developments *beyond* the logistics of taking care of waste and energy, at a school with a high running-expense. A pledge to realities that must necessarily be *public* to be a window for environmental humanities. Cf, Sissel Furuseth in the [petroaesthetic project](#).

This possibility may have evolved to become more than a pious hope. Of course, the sense of fiction as *reactive* to the real—rather than simply removed from it—is a bet with low odds in the scientific community. Yet, when the multiplication of knowledges is such that they appear in *conglomerates*, we are challenged to come up with [minor literatures](#) of local purchase—[situated and positioned](#).

8

Which is why we may find a scaffold in Francois Laruelle’s [non-philosophy](#): here, fiction is not a *time-out* from the real, but *transcends* the real by a factor X. This unknown X is *also* a connection. But the difficulty of this connection is that it is *unilateral*. To the real, *fiction is not*. To fiction, *the real is*. This problem has been overlooked by a *discerning* philosophical tradition: the problem of *identity*.

9

If we take Andrea Wulf’s query on the [invention of nature](#)—Alexander von Humboldt’s new world—our knowledge of nature, in disciplines vested in *field-studies*, clearly knows this duality: it features a query of *nature*, in the *tension* between what is *discovered* and what is *invented*, with all the risks of unrequited love. In Laruelle’s framework it can instead be claimed as an immanent *vectorial sum*.

That is, *head on*. Not obliquely as in Spinoza, Simondon and Deleuze. Laruelle ventures a development of a *practice of knowing* —featuring his peculiar [style](#) of writing—in which *scientific* and *philosophical* knowledge are *summed*. A 1st Science *preceding* both philosophy *and* science. My question is then: does [artistic research](#) articulate and obviate 1st Science beyond Laruelle?

Teaching theory at the MA programme at the design department of Oslo National Academy of the Arts (KHiO), [formulating a possible attribute of the artistic query in writing](#) is a game-changer. It means that the project of non-philosophy—as a 1st science—is *not* implicit and enfolded into art-work where it is to be sought *without* lock and key. With Laruelle we may *have* a lock and a key.

This is something I am in wont of taking into consideration, as the design-disciplines have been in crisis for quite a while. Its wedlock to industrial production and sales-promotion have in time overshadowed the Goethean legacy of design in the Bauhaus tradition. And its legacy from the Italian Renaissance has arguably laid [dormant](#): as the *animating principle of all creative processes*.

10-11 A practice presently *en route* among the first year MA students in design at KHiO, drives us onward. In counter-point to the book-presentations they did in class last term, they are currently making *media presentations*—often featuring an object as media—to query it both as a *personal idea* and a *research document*. The latter with an APA-style reference. The sum is a *documentary narrative*.

12-13 [APA-referencing](#) has not been developed to reference *object-items*. But it has sought to expand and simplify referencing to a range of media *beyond* the book. By including objects within the APA-range we are experimentally *taking it one step further*. In this way, we try to connect *items* selected by the students with a *narrative*—visual, audio, sometimes video-clips—and a *documentary script* in APA.

14 The **a)** object-selection and the **b)** APA-reference are *coordinates* of a vector of *investigation*: an environmentally *implicated* documentary narrative; which is neither to instruct nor entertain, but to *level* with reality. Here the medium is a reflective device of a certain *range*, that does not extend the human body to the environment. But it reflects the human body *and* the environment *conjointly*.

15 In their *instrumental* aspect media reflect the *environment*. In their *methodological* aspect media reflect human *use*. Media connect *these* reflections *within* a certain range, but are disconnective *beyond* that range. In this line of investigation, it is tempting to understand media as *mirrors*. That is, reflective in aspects that are connective—within a certain range—and disconnective beyond.

16 Electronic devices, such as computers, are in this sense disconnective. In what they mediate, there is no original and copy, computing is based on *replication*. Computers are dependent on electricity—which is always connective: as are electrical appliances. The electrosphere is a vectorial field in which *human bodies* and *singular events* are mirrored by the intermedium of [replication](#).

Which is how we can foresee that media-referencing can prompt a [deep ecological](#) way of working and thinking. Even as reflection is focussed on ‘composed analog media’—as the MA-students are working on in logbooks—it unfolds on the backdrop of computing: as a cultural techno-practice in which replication is a *basic assumption*, and massages our *understanding* of every singular event.

17 For this reason, theory in an *abstract* sense, becomes obsolete; in a context where the use of digital media—according to Bruno Latour—has hatched an *extraterrestrial* sense of self & realities. Of course, this is not new: since inflections of more *immersive* styles of theorising have been the name of the game in anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture for years. The same is true of STS.

Of course, *social media* is a prime example of this. Life is—as it were—replicated in real time. Life is posted continuously, and our understandings are of course affected. Though social media are banned from class, we have *other ways* of phasing in with computing. Projectors, laptops, cameras, slide-shows, searches, images, pdf-copies and ebooks. The electrosphere has a [variable geometry](#).

18 The footprint of the *lockdown* is a case in point. While entire organisations worked in *disseminated* video-conferences, the connective assets *on location* fell apart. Upon returning, maintenance, ailing finances, rusty routines and people revealed post-crisis zones in need of reconstruction. During the lockdown the workshops at KHiO were evacuated, save from some stray diehard “zealots”.

19 In the electrosphere, the *analog* and *digital* are coordinates that will co-vary with the geometry of *intimate* experience, machine-*proxemics* and remote *perimeters* of servers (featuring hidden electricity-bills of the internet paid for by advertisement and meta-data sales). In the environmental geometry of the electrosphere these variables are made up by *both* analog and digital coordinates.

Even with this simplified scenario our challenge is quite complex: since the *impact* of replication will manifest itself at the level of *personal* scale, the *machine-operative* scale and the *remote* scale of internet usership monitored by algorithms. This is the cost, if we want to stick to the idea that the electrosphere is an *ecosystem*. Will it [individuate](#)? How? And how does it impact teaching?

At the level I am discussing here, [intersectional](#) theory features *individuation* in a field of tension: since our MA classes often have had 10+ nationalities from over the world, with an age-span from mid 20s to 40+, our basic conditions to develop individuation at a *conjoint* level of a class of 26, means moving beyond the comfort-zone into what [Mary Louise Pratt](#) described as the *contact zone*:

“I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. Eventually I will use the term to reconsider the models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing and that are under challenge today.” (1999)

Under such conditions how do we reflect that *who we are* to ourselves, *is not* to our environment? Are we satisfied by stating the obvious—that we are all subjective—or, will finding ways of *phasing in* with the vectors of *connection* and *disconnection* that define our contact-zone, not only help teachers to level with a class-situation, but help MA-students level with environmental realities?

Evidently, when dealing with this sort of complication we have to establish *good reductions* with *elementary properties* that allow us to move *from* the complex *to* the simplex. So, if we are to turn the page with François Laruelle—in this sense—we may have to go a bit deeper into the design of vectorial thinking in environmental humanities; since it is [transposed](#) from mathematical thinking.

Whether we are *writing*, working with *images* or *making* something there is a delay between making a *hit* and spanning *its impact*: as it leaves us, the work of our hands has a knack of turning its back to us. Which is why work of this kind often is layered like a *palimpsest* with several attempts, oblique searches, regrouping, unlearning and cross-connections all supposing the *work of time*, and *latency*.

When, in this *layered* process, we turn to our work with the questions—*what have we here? where is it going? how much is already achieved?*—we have disconnected *from* our work, moved *with* it, and *reconnected*. Designers do this *implicitly*. In the MA-programme, we are working to do this *explicitly*. Which is somehow to wake the *genie of design* in the contact zone: industry is no longer our limit.

Working *with* a purpose rather than working *for* it, extends to *other* working-relationships. Whether it is *with* the industry, the environment or an environmental industry. This shift from working *for* to working *with* may seem like a trifle, but to the practitioners it is more like a paradigm-shift. To work *with* means to investigate, and using dialogue as a vehicle to people with whom we do not agree.

Walking *up to* but *not* into conspiracy theories. Learning that critique is *not* an accusation. Talking *with* but *not* from theory, avoiding discursive foreclosure. Learning that theorising does *not* have to be adversarial. Stopping *before* ideas are “solved” in conversation, and leave *space* for practical investigation. It is at this level experience, machine-operations and basic assumptions can *wheel*.

The media that the MA-students develop themselves is an *experimental logbook* in which they venture to develop *narratives*, *format* a variety of media and put in enough work to take a stand on *scenarios* they develop for their work. A fictional framework matured by inquiry. Wise on actor-networks—their contact-points, transactions, opportunities and results: to inquire, critique & help.

When we have entered a collaboration with the Norwegian Consumer Council in a project selecting the *Greenwashers of the year*, it is *not* in a spirit of othering but to find out *more* about which platform designers have a chance of operating from in working *with* clients, 3rd sector organisations, methods from artistic research and environmental humanities as our *window* to public culture.

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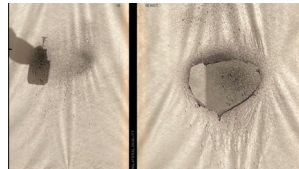
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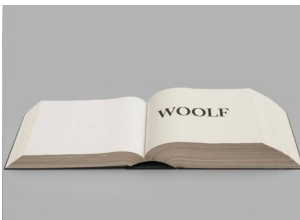
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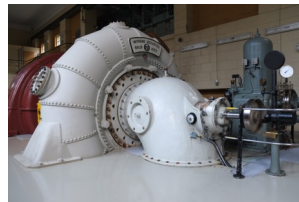
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Hammeren hydro-electric
plant
Photo: Unn Yilmaz/NVE



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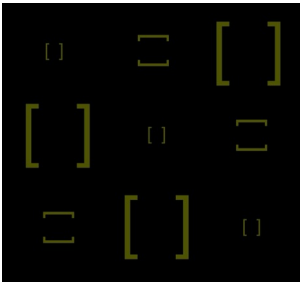


Hammeren hydro-electric
plant
Photo: Unn Yilmaz/NVE

...“wheeling” environmental...

...humanities in excess...

...of what designers do...



Gate-signature
Photo:
Theodor Barth/KHiO



Hammeren hydro-electric
plant
Photo: Unn Yilmaz/NVE



Hammeren hydro-electric
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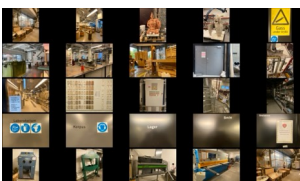
Hammeren hydro-electric
plant
Photo: Unn Yilmaz/NVE



Two hands in steam
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Credits Studio ^O^
Photo:
Theodor Barth/KHiO



Workshops at KHiO
during C19 lockdown
Photo and montage:
Theodor Barth/KHiO



Library of the future,
Credits: Katie Paterson
Photo:
anonymous



François Laruelle
Credits: Institute of
Social Sciences and
Humanities Skopje
Screenshot: Theodor
Barth
[https://
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watch?
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Petter Width
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...“wheeling” environmental...

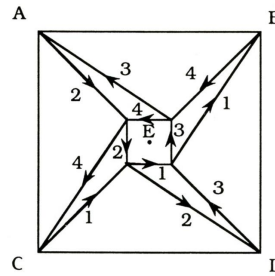
...humanities in excess...

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1) Swirl-signature:
Theodor Barth

2) TOT #141 Molecular
Ballet (Studio ^O^)



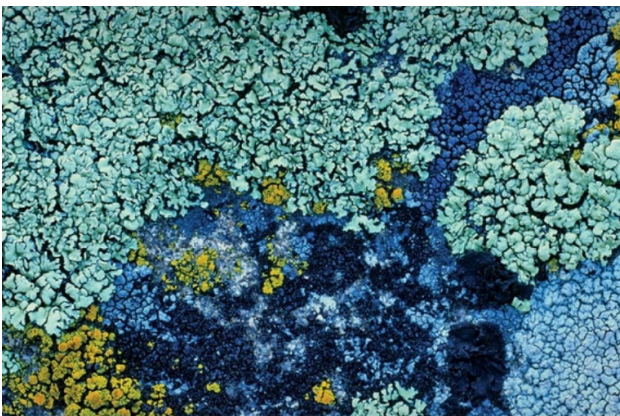
Choreographic score for
QUAD (by Samuel
Beckett, 1981)



Gyroscope
Photo: Theodor Barth



Gunstein Insteffjord & Kiti
Gjerstad at KHiO
Photo: Theodor Barth



Cover: After Lockdown (cf, reference list Bruno
Latour).