

EXPERIMENTAL MEREOLOGY

— activity report and vision for theory at the Design dpt. KHiO

In our history, the school's scientific staff has contributed with knowledges with importance for the development, and manifestation, in the understanding of art&design. We observe a change of professional focus from technical and natural science to an historical humanities oriented expertise among the scientific staff. The newest offshoot is anthropology. Internationally, the developments in Science Technology Studies invite focussing on environmental humanities. Cf, below.

The objective of the intervention is to invite a foundational reflection on the relation between whole and part (mereology) in the discussion of creative work: both its results and process. The proposition is that the relation between whole and part—in creative work—is often experimental. Models to investigate such processes across projects (whether defining individual or collective artistic ventures) may contribute to increase the attention to provenance in creative work.

I.e., to mature a focus on the pervading questions developing across the variety of projects, with which artists and designers are working. The intention is not to make recommendations to the professional milieus, but to indicate possibilities appearing on a common horizon. It builds on my own collaborative experience on projects and teaching round about at KHiO, and my role as a professor of theory and writing at KHiO's Design department. AR = Artistic Research.

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Introduction

(the red numbers indicate the sequence in the adjoined slide-set)

1) Recently I have been giving some thought to what I have been doing over a 10-years period that may be *AR related*. 2) Monday afternoon, this week, I was in the *model- and prototype-workshop* discussing with Nicolai Fontain and Bjørn Blikstad. Entering that space increasingly reminds me of something like Albrecht Dürer's workshop. *What it must have been like*, thinking of his prints of animals, machines and dilemmas on art-contents. It feels good being there. 3)

For my part I have been thinking that when going through my own materials—reflecting on AR—it is more important than ever to understand *where one's at*. I have struggled to understand KHiO, and before that SHKS. Then I am not talking about the ephemeral nature of art, nor the broader cultural assertion in Norway that you should '*stick your finger in the ground to see where you are*'. Even it is a striking/interesting statement. I have understood something quite different from that.

For me 2020 was an *annus terribilis*—it can be named after Corona and otherwise. It led me to a situation where research questions with a provenance from a variety of different projects was arrested. 4) The [SAR conference](#) was cancelled, a book project on *diary entries under the state of exception* and the *social conditions of video-contact* (conferencing systems like Zoom) was rejected. I was left with a documentation from a 22 week long diary project with 2 GI-alumni. 5)

There is a lateral drift in organisations, also during pandemics. New roles and positions have hatching in the twilight of health security regulations. But is it dusk or dawn? Too early to tell. My role is to articulate and integrate theory at the department; follow up the *longer lines*. So, I have had some questions about how we can include history—our own and the school's—as we share this rare occasion of gathering and discuss results and process in AR, with a sense of direction. 6)

Background

One of the first things I experienced as I started to teach at our [our old address](#) was when I was taken on a tour by Karen Disen, who showed me the *contents* of big flat archive-drawers, where she had kept the old students' *drawings*. At the time, I thought it was a smart way of showing me what they were busy with at this school. After some years, I realised that this more a rule than an exception: teachers who publish something refer to, show and display students' work. 7)

Which also was done by people like Colonel Eyolf Glent, who taught *perspective drawing* and *descriptive geometry* at SHKS. The examples shown in the book explain the theoretical principles are all students' work. From this I inferred that the teachers at this school never can claim more knowledge than what is demonstrated in the students' work. They *document* an ongoing inquiry that we call *teaching*. The school is this inquiry *multiplied*. The students' work is *documentation*.

When I took this understanding to heart, I began thinking that the whole is *not* a bounded and ambient *entity* within which we work, but one that comes to us in *glimpses* when an ongoing inquiry meets the odd ends of documentation. The idea that the buildings we work & live in are hives of inquiry on a variety of 'things meant to be'—including the facilities and their arrangements—I think might bring some attitude when we muster to think environmentally and to work for it.

8) I have gone through a small revolution after I went to my basement, and assessed the developments: I have seen the school as an unstable *tundra* where all that was 'meant to be'—in the course of history—left the school to start up on its own: as it was with NTH (1910), the State architectural school (1968), Industrial design (1996). While the background emphasising technical possibilities still is the school's unique hallmark. And we still teach architecture and design.

In 1903, when the school that became SHKS (1911) opened its doors in Ullevålsveien 5, it was already well on way: first the Interim Drawing School started in 1818, then the Drawing school 1822, which has been its informal name well into our time. A school offering education ranging from engineering to art. It is in this connection I think it has been interesting to reflect on artistic research: *what does it mean* when the professional staff is to show and publish work? *To us?*

9) What does it mean *to the school?* For my part publishing has always been synonymous with *collaboration*. Whether assigned or self-initiated. It has been based on the principle of mutual benefit: the people I have worked with have a competence I lack, I have one they lack. Finding out together has been educational. The collaborative ventures have been with colleagues in and outside of school and its departments, and sometimes with *alumni* from the MA/PhD programme.

In this regard I have broken with the old custom—what the scientific staff occasionally has done at previous occasions—while I have also have worked with an *alternative* model: that it is possible to collaborate on AR projects. Sometimes this has had an unpredictable bearing on who gets their name on what/when. I have sensed that the protocols of the project-world's *who? what? where?* have been unnecessary strict/lax in emphasising the singular contributions of individuals.

This is linked to the custom at our school to separate between professional and scientific staff. The scientific staff have been grey eminences at school. Which has implied that their contributions often unclear both from artistic and academic criteria. On the one hand, they have not been sufficiently discerned, to appear in the landscape. On the other hand, their contributions to professional projects they have facilitated have been difficult to trace at the discursive level.

To the school's scientific staff it is important *both* to be discerned and involved, as often expressed in varieties of collaborative designs/scenographies. The role of the scientific staff—house critics—is often *dramaturgical*. If there indeed is a holistic relation between professional and scientific contributions at school, it is never at any point *given*. Untimely demands in a *time-scape* where way-finding and the signage of roles, mechanisms and ownerships is challenging.

In the this sort of exercise in signage and way-finding, it becomes frequently more accessible as the distance between decision-making and implementation/action is made as *short* as possible.

Collaboration

10) Perhaps it is successful teamwork that deserves a signature. I think that it is though collaboration that can distinguish oneself in a good way. As an example, I could mention a couple of situations with Nicolai Fontain at the *model- & prototype workshop*. His latest initiative relates specifically to teamwork. It is a clustered seating-arrangements, with 6 seats centring into a sphere. An example of furniture as *micro-architecture*. Concept: all seated, till all have tasks.

The arrangement does not depend on a common understanding—or consensus—it is enough that everyone determines what their task is. Then the meeting can end. I do not think that this rolling 6-seat cluster illustrates or represents anything (other than itself). The object is not based on previous inquiries, but is itself the inquiry. By making the object Nicolai wanted to inquire on management. Please notice it is empty in the middle—who can be there—and there are 6 seats.

In the workshop we thought of this mobiliary as a *storm-room*: it is about making the path between decision and implementation as short as possible. A situation has emerged, a decision is made on how to proceed, tasks are identified and allocated: the participants leave. What then is done—professional, administrative, practical and theoretic—documents the inquiry. Eventually, the activity as a whole will emerge in glimpses, whether behind the scenes or in the heat of action.

Most of the AR-projects I have contributed to have worked in this way. Getting a circulation for these projects has been rather unproblematic. The great adventure this spring—for my part—hatched from the notion of *mereology*: the study of the relation between whole and part. I am attempting to tread unbeaten ground. The idea is as follows: if the whole is intercepted and indicated in *glimpses*, the number of these will *increase* as activities diversify and are inclusive.

11) That is, a way of working in which the idea does *not* fall apart, as people and the environment are brought to bear. Can we imagine something like this? The flyer-sets I make and publish, are based on the idea that they can *sustain* people and situations that are guided their own *resident principles* (work and content). It of course depends on something looking through and reading them. The point is not for how long or how many, but their situation and what they are working on.

My hypothesis is that the flyer-sets I make will *not* fall apart when submitted to such diversity, but *tighten up* (not taut). What affects us: imaging—whether drawing or other remedia—impacts what we can find. The flyers are based on images organising text-contents. **12)** While the *signatures* I have been working on for 3-4 years: here the images are the entities to be organised, minding what it is possible to learn from them in a visual analysis resulting the text as an organising entity.

Environmental humanities

The signatures are based on a reworking of the same theory to which Rosalind Krauss refers quite extensively in [Sculpture in the Expanded Field](#). **13)** That is, the application of *Klein's groups* to how we understand and organise *fields*. In the present case a collection of annotated *drawings* from a mountain journey in 1820—at the National Library—there are two main two main groups, done and annotated by Keilhau and his friend Boeck. The rest has been added. One image sticks out.

It is here placed at the centre since it constitutes a relation between whole and part in the collection, even is not of core importance to the errand of the trip, and is added by Keilhau as an appendix. In this image the relation between the sinking valley and rising mountain has been *solved*: in the remainder of the collection one will observe that the problem of the vertical perspective has been solved in different ways, affecting our understanding of the collection.

Which is makes the collection interesting from the vantage point of design—the pristine and barren beauty of the mountains is topical, of course; but the drawings also have a *job to do*. Finally the journey is gathered and shared in a map of Jotunheimen, which is a lot better than others at that time. **14)** A certain duplicity in the dual need for precision and expression in drawing, pervades the collection. From P.A. Munch we know that Keilhau admired Albrecht Dürer.

If some of you are interested I will contribute at a seminar on this topic at the National Library on March 24th: **15)** a webinar. My point will be here, as it is in my broader contribution to AR, to study and develop the relation between structure and findings: that is types of structure that, within certain limit-values, tighten as they are submitted to the impact of a variety of activities and experiences, and spring from a type of systems in geology called *disordered systems*.

The model shown here does not require an advanced mathematical knowledge. It is enough with an ability to see and handle patterns: on each side of the diagonal [X] one sees the elements of a joinery creating a cross-pressure. The elements in the model [A] and [B] are perpendicular on each

other. The diagonal defines a triangulation of the whole [X]. It is not defined to encompass, but as an indicated phenomenon shown in findings resembling neither [A] *nor* [B], residing in their *sum*.

The approach is mainly to avoid looking at documentation as extending from the inquiry—often passively as a result—it is instead possible to consider an inquiry A and a documentation B as *two ongoing activities* that *triangulate*: if the ongoing inquiry and the ongoing documentation are juxtaposed and orthogonal to each other, one will in time discover a *third* element X which is the whole. It means that we approach the whole *experimentally* (triangulating its *indications*).

Experimental mereology

16) This is the background of my interest in *experimental mereology*: the study of the relation between *whole* and *part* based on *experiment*. In this way it is possible to turn from a view of process as a self-manuring tundra, to span the possibility for very specific elements of the process to be of interest (and not just anything). It could be a basis for precisations in the cross-pressure between building and dwelling one finds in design: an ecosophical approach (Næss).

I will close by announcing that I am collaborating with the library on a digital exhibition made up of 22 flyer-sets that I have produced from last summer till recently, in the wake of a *diary activity* that two MA alumni—Katarina Caspersen and Martin Asbjørnsen—initiated with me one year ago, that we sustained for 22 weeks and weekly video-meetings across the summer and into the autumn. Instead of a book-project on diary entries under pandemics and other states of exception.

17) At the very end some pictures from a children's theatre [Fellesskapsprosjektet å fortette byen](#) built on a tree in my neighbourhood. When Joar Nango visited KHiO (2017) to present at *design talk nights*, he shared some experiences from exactly this project. The team was fearing that the tree would split from the weight. What happened was the opposite. The tree tightened up. As I am sure you understand this prompts an idea for a relation between structure and findings in AR.

In my practice the flyer-production is an ongoing inquiry: it has a body and an architecture. This production is ongoing *alongside* another—whether it relates to projects of one's own/other's internal/external *projects*—and teaching. Together the *two activities* build a fieldworking situation (similar to site-survey and placement) that *triangulate* and contribute to my own ability to intercept elements that *neither* belong to the one *nor* the other activities, and thereby constitute *findings*.

Varieties of such engagements do not fragment, but makes the tree tighten up. The use of text and image is part and parcel of such a structure that makes the content *specific*, but still open enough for others to precise contents by their own means. That is, through things they build and inhabit, that also holds a potential for AR. This is a theoretical account: involving writing in artistic practice and thereby sample instances that will contribute to raise projects and their interlinkage.

18) My interest in experimental mereology owes to the reception that it has received at the department of Design. My impression is that it features a broad approach that is of real concern to our specialisations: whether we speak of Fashion & Costume (KK), Interior Architecture and Furniture Design (IM), or Graphic design and illustration (GI). It also has a potential for the ulterior development of portfolio work at the MA, as a tool for developing theory from practice.

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