

## THE GREENWASHERS OF THE YEAR— a collaboration between the Consumer Council and KHiO

Greenwashing is *fake* 'green marketing', based on false or misleading claims. The idea of contacting the Consumer Council came in the wake of the *Covid 19 pandemic*: people didn't travel so much and spent a good deal of time outdoors, in an attempt to escape the long-term effects of confinement.

Some of us asked: what will we all do, where will society move, *after* the pandemic? Being creatures of habit, would we make a desperate attempt of going "back to normal"? Forgetting about the UN environmental objectives and reports on the state of the climate? The war raging in Ukraine, and all...

Or, would we work our way to a new, preferably *sustainable*, "new normal"; beyond the sectarian environmentalism of the past and where *real* green marketing *can* exist? If we had made it through the pandemic—an event at the planetary scale—why not change our contract with the earth? Can we do that?

Greenwashing evidently is a symptom more than a cause: a tiny phenomenon with a huge diagnostic range. What is a good *focus*? The *producers*? The professional *communicators* making ads for them? The *consumers*? Global *digital utilities* and *algorithmic* marketing? All these factors in *combination*?

To tango with the tangle of *complexity* our method has been to start with our *questions*. Questions can be asked without fear of polemics, and the more the merrier. Questions are *not* conspiracy theories. *Neither* are they stigmatising. Opening by the question is likely a major democratic tool.

Raising a good question is a *hallmark* of the professional liberty of expression (NOU 2022 2) in *design*. By exercising this liberty radically we can discover and clarify how the problem of *Greenwashing* is set. And we can be of help to producers and consumers, ad agencies and designers alike.

In sum, the *Greenwashers of the year* is a school project with the assignments of MA1 students in design, operating in the *twilight-zone* between production and advertisement from the vantage point of the consumer (Consumer Council<sup>1</sup>), the consumer in the encounter with visuals (SIFO<sup>2</sup>).

## IMAGES

Images are not *merely* sensorial contents communicated differently than in verbal language. Images can be something *else*: they convey and partake of *agency*, they can be part of *operations*. When used in commercials, the advertiser is saying to the world: *we are doing something...and here you have proof*.

In our media-culture we accept ads as a sub-genre of acting. Very often as bad acting, and connected to a dark/cynical humour we develop for bad or worse advertisement. We accept them nevertheless because, after all—in life as in advertisement—you don't get it right immediately. You have to *rehearse*.

From this vantage point commercials are channels for rehearsing cultural scripts, and come through as play-acting. Rarely as channels for precise and accurate information. But within the framework of *consumer rights* this is precisely what we ask of advertisement. Promises given should be kept.

Particularly, in the area of green marketing. We want it to be kept clean from cynicism, to be a beacon for businesses that seek to improve themselves. The FutureBuilt<sup>3</sup> programme six municipalities in Oslo region, for instance, aim at including 100 pilot projects to reduce the carbon emissions by 50%.

What does it take for designers to thicken the ranks of the *facilitators* that can help companies improve their practices? In the commercial sector, everyone wants to *look good*. How to make it consistent with *doing good*? If looks are earned from lessons learned, what are we asking from corporate image?

Clearly, we cannot be content with an image that is functionally pledged to establish a place in the world for a corporate presence, as though it was an *island*.

We want images that *connect* corporations with their *outside*. And we want such connections to be reliable, and not the products of wishful thinking.

Which means that for each 1) advertisement *idea* there must be 2) *research* to support it, 3) *critique* of this research and 4) a hands-on *knowhow* of where we can go from there. In *Greenwashers of the year* the students have been drilled in this foursquare method of Latour's for *floating statements*<sup>4</sup>.

Bruno Latour proposed this foursquare method to a class of freshmen at SciencePo in Paris: the method was devised to deconstruct Twitter statements and make them more earth-bound, in an attempt to invite a generation of *global* extra-terrestrials—in Latour's<sup>5</sup> language—to learn *terrestrial* grounding-techniques.

## COMPUTING THE INTERNET

The word *computing* is perhaps a good example of a floating signifier: it has come to denote the expanded field of *computer-usage*. The giant network of interlinked computers—feeding on big data—is in fact a giant calculator that has grown abnormally to become a matrix of calculated acts and their risks.

If viral—and even pandemic—in its proliferation, its success both in terms of sustainability and extended agency has now become public matter: *res publica* (which it was not 10 years back, remember). It has veiled/floated the hidden electricity bills from our daily use of smart "solutions" at home and work<sup>6</sup>.

The digital mercantile *algorithms* trolling the internet are deceptively simple: whatever products are cropped in the *cracks* of opportunity, are conveyed to the user through the browser by offerings of this type—if you like this product X, you may like this other product Y. A *noisy* vending machine.

The *location* of production and consumption have are communicated as though they were *immaterial*. Which, of course, we know that they are *not*. Just the digital equipment itself—the *floating* space of sales in the affluent parts of the earth—takes its toll on *rare earths* assembled from less fortunate places.

In a paradoxical way, the Covid 19 pandemic literally *grounded* us. Mobility was drastically reduced, and whether the climate-developments will permanently slow down international mobility, or not, is still an open question. But we have had to ponder on the *alternatives* to human mobility in the period 2020-22.

Things are not valuable because they are *local*. But they may be local because they are *valuable*. Asking what is valuable to us and setting the problem in local terms, can help to clarify *greenwashing*. This approach features Arne Næss' idea of *precisation*<sup>7</sup>: interpretation feeding back to the problem.

The idea of *precisation* stems from Arne Næss' study of a broad but *specific* account of readings among lay people and experts. However, they differed in the *next* step: when clarifying the first account, and digging deeper into the *substance*. Hence the meaning of the term *precisation*.

*Precisation* brings clarity to the terms by which *the problem is set*: in the present case, what *greenwashing* might be, different from *green marketing*. This is of great avail when a problem is *complex*: and we are all—students and teachers—hampered by never knowing enough! An *exceeding* problem.

If the students have pitched each their perception of *greenwashing*—with each a specific proposition (**T<sub>0</sub>**)—they are expected, as a group of lay people, to get a *high* score of relevant *specific* aspects of *greenwashing*. Then we can use the lineup at KHiO to *crowdsource*, and *mine* it for *precisation*.

Seen as an ecosystem, the class members have worked at finding and testing out their niche. No one wants to do the same, yet they are eager to test their ideas. The students have been drilled at this by joining rotating groups of 4, weekly (7 times): at the end of the course *all* have discussed with everyone else.

By proceeding in this way, the students have acquired what could be called a depth of *path* (**T<sub>1</sub>**).

The depth of *intention*, in their own contributions, they are likely to gain at/from the lineup (**T<sub>2</sub>**). So, it is not an exhibition saying: "these are our results". *The lineup is a method of investigation in public*.

Our method of *investigative aesthetics* is inspired from Matthew Fuller & Eyal Weizman (2021)<sup>8</sup>. In this course-project on *greenwashing*, the proposition of the lineup is this: can *forensic design* make a bid on *investigative aesthetics* in our professional domain? With this in mind consider a system of 4 axes.

## AXIS 1—SOBRIETY

Rather than a virtue, *sobriety* is part of the rhetorics of public relations. *Sobriety* can be a value and pitch an atmosphere, colouring it with a certain tone, while inviting the public to cherish it as a *value*. Relevance and objectivity are part of this deal. And it can be a cultural construct of gated communities.

## AXIS 2—EROSION

Rather than a problem to be solved, *erosion* is both a natural and cultural fact: past a certain threshold, states that were optimal—even if just *seconds* before—begin to degenerate. Often at an exponential rate. What can seem full of promise, at one point in time, goes down the drain in the next. Irreversibly.

## AXIS 3—AWARENESS

Awareness can be *both* cheap *and* profound. Both commercial and political campaigns will tap into awareness, but differently from mindfulness. As mindfulness will be different in a *workshop* concept than in *life-long practices*. Awareness adds something to *sobriety* that exceeds it (*big time*).

## AXIS 4—CIRCULARITY

*Circularity* can both be stifling and repairing. *Stifling* when the circle is an island. *Repairing* when joining processes that have fallen apart, and are in this sense *re-paired*. *Circularity* adds something to *erosion* that it does not itself possess. Therefore the lineup concludes and rounds up with *circularity*.

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*The Greenwashers of the Year 2022* could be a selection from the students' pitches, which together work for a *conjoint* *precisation* of the 4 categories above, and of help to distinguish between *greenwashing* and *green marketing* in the sector: commercial, governmental and the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector.

From KHiO a warm thanks to the Consumer Council for having joined us, in this collaborative project, with an open mind. Providing us with an opportunity to involve the school, the department, students and teachers in a exercise of direct—and possibly—*radical* democracy (by contemporary standards).

<sup>1</sup> Guide against Greenwashing: <https://gronnvasking.no/en/home/>

<sup>2</sup> SIFO: «Why can't all products just be sustainable?» How consumers perceive and are influenced by marketing with sustainability claims, ISBN 978-82-7063-536-8

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.futurebuilt.no/English>. The participant architecture studios are ones wanting to improve.

<sup>4</sup> A floating statement is a parallel to the floating signifier in linguistics: with no clear agreement on what the referent is nor what the term means. Such as *democracy* and *freedom of expression*. This question was asked in the wake of a lunch talk at Oslo School of Environmental Humanities.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbzzyVnGLsE> se also: Latour, Bruno. (2018). *Down to earth: politics in the new climatic regime*. Polity.

<sup>6</sup> By governmental invitation (regjeringen.no Datasentre i Norge, Implement Consulting Group, the Ministry of municipalities and modernisation), Norway has—on account of its vast resources of renewable hydroelectric power—become an attractive location for mega-servers. The impact on local development is minimal as are the tax incomes from it.

<sup>7</sup> Grimm, Laura. (1953/1955). On the application of the concept of *precisation*. *Synthese*. Springer Verlag. The nomenclature of **T<sub>0</sub>**, **T<sub>1</sub>** and **T<sub>2</sub>** is from Arne Næss: **T<sub>0</sub>** the specific (Tvergastein), **T<sub>1</sub>** first *precisation* (walking up the building materials to Tvergastein), **T<sub>2</sub>** second *precisation* (deciding to live at Tvergastein as much as possible, in fact 14 years straight). The two *precisations* feature the depth of path (**T<sub>1</sub>**) and the depth of intention (**T<sub>2</sub>**). Echoing *disegno* as drawing and *disegno* as purpose, and the definition of design in the Italian Renaissance.

<sup>8</sup> Fuller, Matthew & Weizman, Eyal. (2021). *Investigative aesthetics. Conflicts and commons in the politics of truth*. Verso.