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*“REFLECTIONS I OSLO OLSO I SNOITCELFER”*

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an essay by Jp Lasco  
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## *PART I*

We can see parts of our bodies like the hands and feet, and recognize other people through their facial features, yet we can never see our own face with our own naked eyes. I just learned about this thought recently and it is quite unsettling to think about.

Our face, the primary source of our visual identity, vital for communication, a vessel of our emotions and expressions.



*Figure 0: mirror selfie on a glass roof at KHiO*

Mirrors are natural occurrences until man discovered that polishing objects could achieve a reflective property. Materials such as obsidian stone were found in Anatolia, and polished copper was soon made in Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. The Egyptians as early as 2900 BC used round ornate bronze mirrors with handles made for religious rites and as a tool for applying makeup by both men and women. This usage as a tool for self-inspection and personal grooming predates the application of mirrors in other methods, such as in design and architecture. The invention of these handheld mirrors, a tool specifically developed for enhancing one's appearance, must indicate civility and show us that projecting the desired image of oneself is an innate human trait. Seeing our reflection enables us to appreciate ourselves or correct what is undesirable, such as fixing the hair or removing a blemish on the face. This act sets us apart from other species because only humans understand and identify what they see in the mirror. Today we simply use ordinary mirrors and hi-tech gadgets to see ourselves, these are artificial mirrors, yet it renders very accurate images.

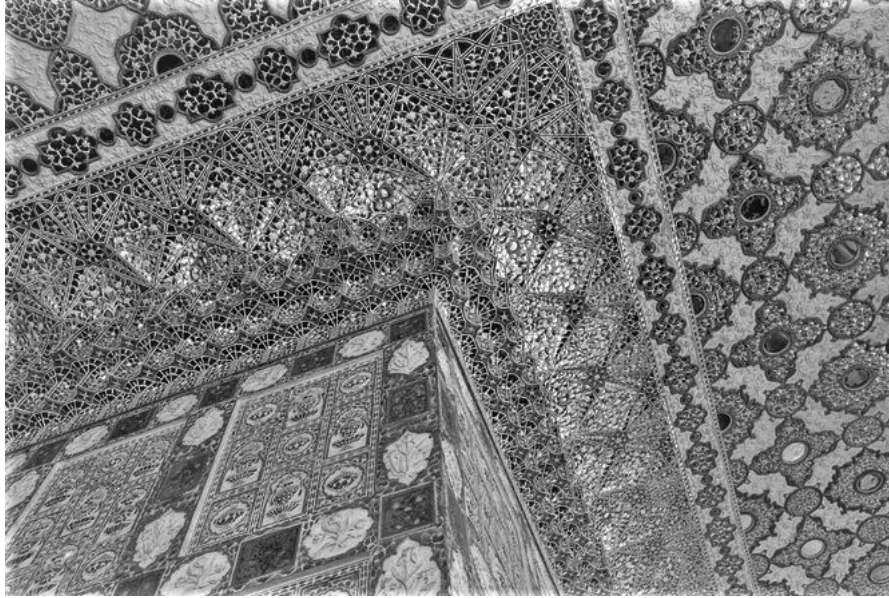
Before man started to develop reflective objects by polishing them, man must have used the water's surface to perceive his image and the surrounding, like seeing his reflection on a still pond. Water has played essential roles in many religions where its cleansing and purifying properties have taken religious meaning and symbolism. Water is a living spiritual matter, working as a mediator between humans and gods, often represents the border between this world and the other (Pabon, 2021). In Hinduism, sacred rituals such as cremation and bathing take place in the holy Ganges river believing its flow would take the mortal body from this world towards Nirvana. This idea of "the other" can be taken from this religious context to further thoughts and ideas in other situations. Water through its reflective property creates this duality of things thus creating this "otherness" that influences our way of life. When we see our other selves in the mirror, we recognize our identity. When we see the other sky in the river's reflection, we become more aware of the space surrounding us. Therefore, water is a fundamental element, it does not only nurture life but as a natural mirror it helps man understand himself and the space he dwells.



Figure 1: *Narcissus* (1599) by Caravaggio

In some cases, water could be an agent for a tragic ending, such as in the story of Narcissus as told by Ovid. A boy of extreme beauty admired by all men and women, but Narcissus never returns this affection to any of them. While drinking from a pond to quench his thirst, Narcissus saw his own reflection for the first time and fell in love with it. He was madly in love with his own image that he could not see other things; he stared at his reflection for days and nights until he drowned in the water. In psychology, narcissism is a personality characterized by self-centeredness and vanity that could lead to an obsession that is often detrimental to oneself. Although the story of Narcissus is on the extreme side, Freud suggests that we all have a level of narcissism since birth and that it is healthy and vital for our development.

Psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, a longtime friend of Freud used the term god complex as "a psychological illusion and is exactly what the name suggests personality flaw in human beings, especially those with great power, who perceive themselves to be omniscient and omnipotent, and treat others as mere mortals". Although this has many similarities with narcissistic personality, god complex is not considered a mental disorder.



*Figure 2: Amber Palace, Sheesh Mahal, Jaipur, India (1727)*

Vanity or the admiration of one's own appearance can be linked to mirrors. The word mirror comes from the Latin word "mirari" which means to admire. In the halls of the Sheesh Mahal in Jaipur, India, the intricate mirror works adorning its walls and ceiling does not only serve as beautiful embellishments. These thousands of tiny mirrors meticulously put together in different patterns and geometry, bounce back light from a single lamp making the space brighter and warmer. The multiplication of a few light sources above the mirrored ceiling creates a cosmic spectacle mimicking the stars and galaxy in a clear evening sky, a remarkable sight especially for the queen who dwells in this palace and was believed to be forbidden from sleeping outdoors. Beyond these spatial applications, it is said that the maharaja desires to see his image being multiplied in thousands feeding his vanity and further glorifying his social status. The maharajah who commissioned the building of this magnificent palace was regarded by the commoner to be of the same level as God, and to see his image reflecting and bouncing in infinite kaleidoscope must have been akin to a spiritual experience. Sheesh Mahal, which means mirror palace, is an excellent example of how reflections can be applied as both design and art depicting the rich cultural heritage of the place.

In the western world, the famous hall of mirrors in the palace of Versailles exudes grandeur and opulence in many ways. The large mirrors not only serve aesthetic functions but it is supposed to depict the wealth and power of France during that time as mirrors were considered luxury items. In addition, the French-made mirrors bedecking the walls of the interiors in vast numbers and sizes further demonstrated the French economic power challenging the Venetian's long held monopoly of its manufacturing.

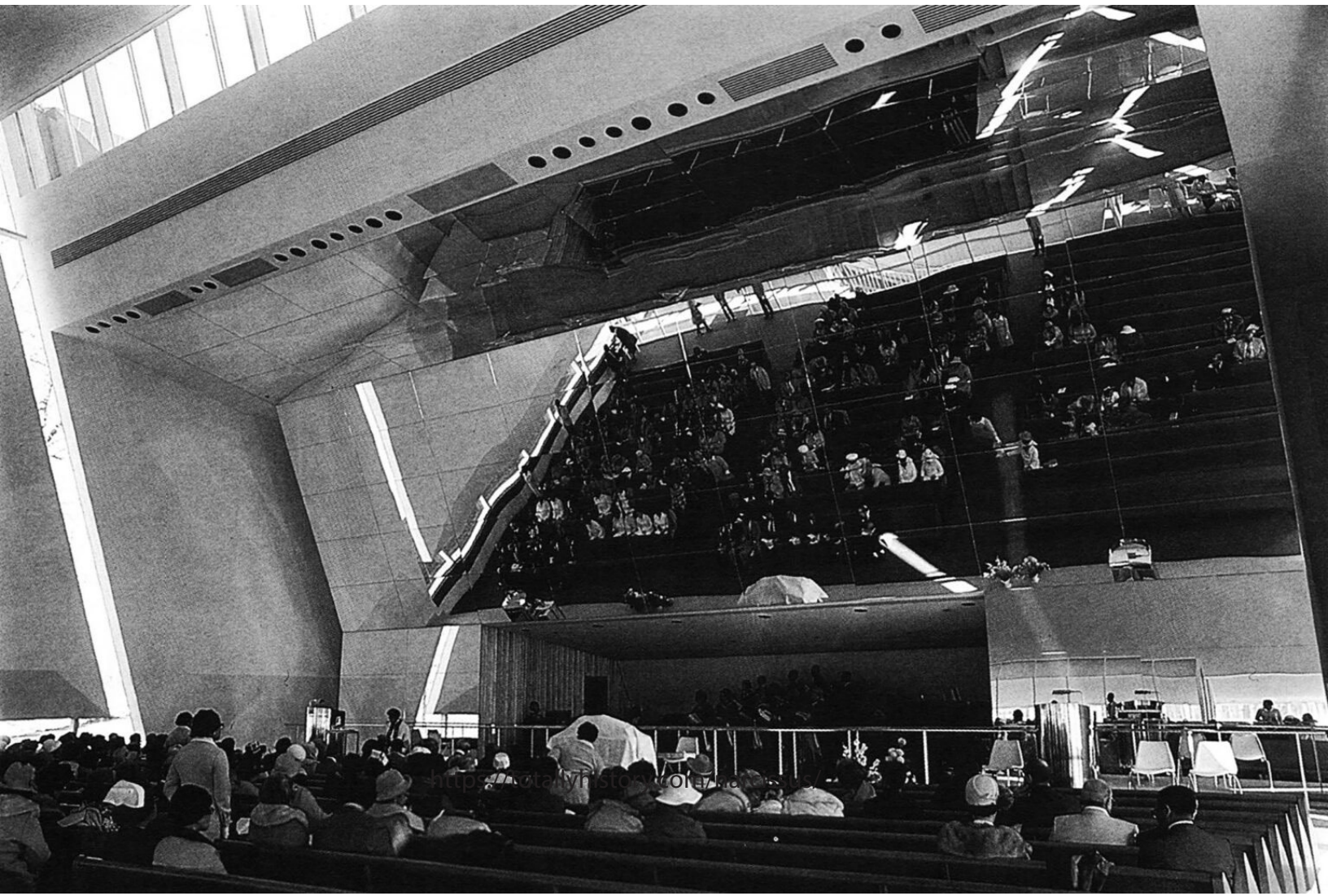
The Venetians in the 16th century perfected the art of making mirrors, particularly on the nearby island of Murano, which was the center of glass manufacturing for centuries. The artisans of Venice were able to develop revolutionary techniques that made glass sheets so clear that it still allowed pure light to pass through. At the same time, they refined the tin-mercury mixture by adding gold and bronze metals, enhancing the quality of the reflected image.

Venetian mirrors were prized possessions highly coveted by the wealthy upper class and were known for generating clear and accurate reflections compared to other mirrors developed during that time. The polished mirrors developed by the Indians and Chinese can only produce a blurred image with the slightest bulging on the surface affecting its quality. This Venetian invention is believed to have had many profound effects on the development of western society as seen in the resurgence of artistic and scientific activities in the renaissance period. In an interview, British anthropologist and historian Alan Macfarlane said "as to why the west is so individualistic, one possibility is that for the first time humans could examine to see himself in the mirror and painters used this technique in painting portraits." Perhaps it was the mirror that helped man further understand the human concept of an "I" separate from the others. Furthermore, Macfarlane theorizes that mirrors influenced Renaissance painters by enabling them to see a different perspective of the realities surrounding them. Through looking at a mirror, a large space can be compressed into a small framed panel and painters can paint by looking straight into this curated vision. It is often said that art imitates life, but it is the mirror that gave the artist a different perspective of seeing the realities. Soon enough, the Venetians manufacturing secrets leaked onto neighboring nations like France, Germany and Belgium. The French built the halls of mirrors using their own mirror and the maharajah imported mirrors from Belgium to adorn his palaces. Eventually, the mirror has found its way all over the world as a household item.

Even though in earlier times, designers and builders were able to harness mirrors' unique power blurring the line between spatial reality and illusion, the standard mirror was still primarily viewed as a domestic object confined indoors. But as technology improves, the production of mirrors and other reflective surfaces have been innovated on a much bigger scale with a broader range of applications. Contemporary architects began utilizing mirrors as construction materials since the beginning of the modernist movement. It is rather easy to find examples of these, a simple googling using the keywords "mirror architecture" would yield images of structures clad in either glass or mirror, it could be a glassy skyscraper in a financial district or a tiny house camouflaged in its surroundings, and they all exude that modernist sensibility. Thomas Schielke wrote in Archdaily, "accompanied by the belief that light and brilliance could help in creating iconic architecture and a better human world, glass and metal have been innovatively transformed to create crystalline images. As a result, the locus of meaning in architecture has shifted from the internal space-form towards the external surface." Modernism celebrates the innovation of glass and other reflective materials as construction elements. We see this example in the iconic titanium cladding facade of the Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry. As these modern buildings sprouted worldwide in recent decades, we also noted a shift of society's attitudes towards these built structures; possibly a critical sense has been developed. This period in architecture could be its "mirror phase" a concept by Jacques Lacan where the young child sees himself in the mirror and identifies it as a separate being. It was at this moment that modernist architecture became aware of itself as an object of desire and reified this awareness into anxiety and aphasia. Architecture was looking at itself, and it didn't always like what it saw (Abrahamson, 2021).

Going back to the internal space, massive mirrors and reflective sheets that can wrap uneven surfaces are beginning to appear more often in the post modern era, an example is The Cavalry Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, designed by Latvian born architect Gunnar Birket. What is notable in this architecture is a vast mirror panel mounted just above the main altar and tilted at an angle, reflecting the churchgoers below. It is a somewhat symbolic element considering that mirrors have always been associated as a portal to other spiritual dimensions and reflections as the embodiment of souls throughout time. Michael Abrahamson further writes that the church's design "is intended to make the group reflect on their membership in a faith community and participation in the work of worship ." Alternatively, one could interpret the big mirror as a God whose omnipresence and eyes watching over us like Big Brother hiding somewhere.





*Figure 3: Interior of Calvary Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan (c.1974–1977.) by Gunnar Birkerts and Associates*

The Holy Bible says in Proverbs 15:3, "the eyes of the lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good."





*Figure 4: Donald Trump photographed by Patrick Semansk*

In this age of digitalization, the mirror has gone a long way from its primary form and meaning into a pixelized world composed of ones and zeroes. The social media phenomena have become a repository of our other selves, thus creating a parallel world that can be both a simple representation or an illusion of the true self. Social media is designed so that users can construct the desired image of themselves projected to others. Moreover, this desired image, whether a filtered profile picture or a curated Instagram page receives validation and approval quantified through the number of likes and followers, creating a toxic cycle that feeds narcissistic behavior among its users. Taking a selfie, for instance, has become immensely popular prompting technologists to develop specific tools such as filters and high-resolution front cameras for such purpose. In the olden times, a gallery full of portraits and bust sculptures represented an idealistic interpretation of a person through the eyes of the artist. Today, a simple click reveals a gallery of profile pictures uploaded with a greater degree of control by the users themselves. Although social media has inherent benefits, its harm is evident as it creates this culture out of touch with the realities of life, Sonia Sodhas of the Guardian says that "social media is the narcissist's playground. Through likes and shares, it re-engineers their social feedback loop towards the superficiality they thrive on, fueling a sense of superiority and rewarding manipulative tendencies". The internet screen has become like the pool of water where Narcissus drowned while obsessing with his own beauty.



*PART ii*

Reflections are details in space that we can use to describe and experience the city differently

When I first arrived here in Oslo more than a year ago, one of the first memorable things I did was to climb the opera roof. My first sight of the opera left me in awe and as I ascended on the inclined roof, I paused midway to admire at my self reflected on the glass wall. I love everything that I saw: myself standing at an angle, the samurai inspired outfit I was wearing, the Deichman library in the background etc... and I vividly remember my thoughts then saying, "boy! I'm finally here fresh off the banana boat!". I will never forget that moment.

And for some strange reason, I found myself taking more mirror selfies during my first few months as seen in my phone archive. Maybe my narcissistic tendencies have been awakened by Oslo, or perhaps the ubiquity of these modern things made of mirrors and shimmering surfaces provoking it. Oslo is a wealthy city and I see this manifested in the materiality of some of the city's districts. Glass reflects the surrounding during the daytime, and at night it emits that cozy warm light. As someone who grew up obsessing skylines and skyscrapers, I observed that skylines in developing countries tend to be made mainly of concrete with smaller glass windows. More affluent cities on the other hand exude economic prosperity through their 'glassy and gleaming' skylines. So, to ponder on my selfies, I thought that maybe I was experiencing a mirror phase. Perhaps I was slowly getting to understand myself as a new specie, the other version of me plucked out from the familiarities of the tropics.



*Figure 5:  
Arrival, mirror selfie at the Opera*



In the succeeding months that followed, I began to slowly get to know Oslo even better, discovering new things that fascinated me as a newcomer from a totally different culture. One of the things I truly enjoy is my regular walks along the Akerselva, either to simply enjoy the scenery or to do an activity which I call "reflection spotting". I always consider the river as an art gallery where one uses a little imagination to see beyond the mundane. The things reflected on the river are pretty much constant: buildings, light, trees, bridges etc... But the river is everchanging from season to season, the water rises and falls, sometimes it freezes, it was flowing rapidly last week but today it is somewhat calm. The river changes and so are the qualities of it's reflection. On a tranquil overcast autumn, the shallow part of the river reflects the surroundings very clearly as if seeing on a real mirror. On rainy days, the Maridalsvannet which is the origin of the river, would release more water creating torrents downstream, and during nighttime, these undulations on the surface abstracted the reflections of light. Different intensities of yellow and white light seem to move with the current and I find it mesmerizing as if I'm seeing light being woven into a tapestry.

For my masters work here in KHiO, I have decided to devote in the investigation of Reflections from my artistic point of view. My initial experiment in the early semester was to observe what happens if a piece of mirror is placed in unexpected outdoor settings. And so, I bought a rectangular mirror from Biltemma and lugged it everywhere I go in the city. The first site of experimentation was the river where I submerged the mirror in different ways and see if something would happen. Interestingly, if I propped up the mirror vertically with the reflective side against the current, the whole setup visually alters the order of things. The mirror appears like a window that opens up to the opposite direction, with the actual current flowing against it. It is a trippy sight. This made me realize that reflections give depth to space even though it doesn't belong to a Cartesian dimension.



*Figure 6: Mirror experiment in Akerselva*



Figure 7:  
Reflection of a sculpture's face in Vigelandsparken

My mirror activities continue from the Akerselva to Vigelandsparken. I chose this place because I was inspired by the works of greek photographer Kostas Fokaki's who sometimes use mirrors in exploring the human body. His nude photographs of men instantly reminded me of this park. So one late evening when the park was empty, a friend helped me photograph the reflections of the sculptures with the mirror placed in strategic spots. It resulted in body forms becoming symmetrical and distorted. One image I like is the sculpture of a man crouching with his face turned down away from the public's view. This man has been a public figure for many years, yet nobody really knows what he looks like. And so I put a mirror below revealing his full face for the first time and I thought there was nothing significant about how he look, it was just like all the others in the park. But its not important, the face is meant to be seen, it exists when it is seen.

The image is a being whose essence is to be a species, a visibility or an appearance. A being is special if its essence coincides with its being given to be seen, with its aspect (Agamben,2005). The word species is a Latin word that means "outward appearance", it is derived from the term "specere" meaning to look. Words such as spectacle, spectrum and specimen have the same etymology.. perhaps I could also add "speil" pa Norsk.

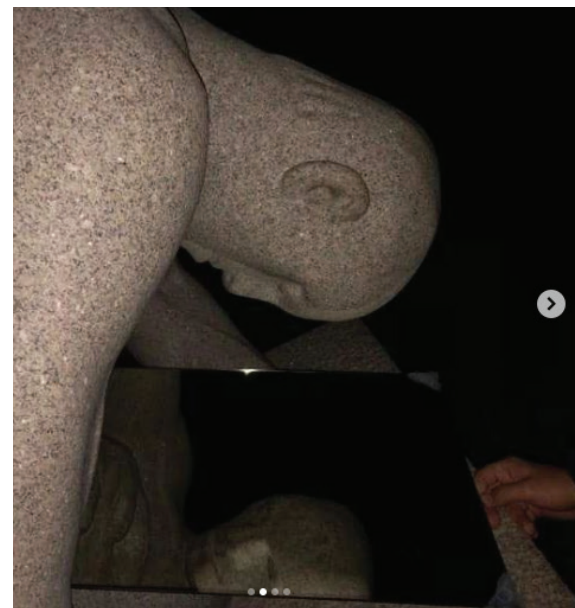


Figure 7.1: Reflection of a sculpture's face in Vigelandsparken



At some point doing these experiments, I felt a bit frustrated because nothing seems to make sense. So I changed my approach and took it easy. Instead of staging reflections, I left my mirror at home and decided to do what I love to do: spot reflections and harvest as many images as possible. One particular rainy week in autumn, I began my usual night walk and felt that the whole wetness renders the city differently. I started walking from KHiO and upon reaching the downtown area in Storgata, one cannot miss Gunerius' neon signage that bathes all the wet surface in hues of blue. That area does not always have the best reputation because of its illicit activities, but I think it is a fascinating place. While waiting for the traffic light to change color, I stared down at the wet pavement sparkling with red lights emanating from cars; I could not help but think of it as veins where blood and mind-altering substance flow. At the same time, Gunnerius' blue reflection gives a melancholic mood to the sad realities happening around.



*Figure 8: Reflection of the clock tower in Oslo Sentral Station*

A few minutes walk further down, I found myself in the transport hub of Oslo Sentral Station. This expansive station has a cobbled outdoor area where the uneven surface becomes a rich ground for puddles on a rainy day. A modern clock tower juts out from the Ruter's customer service center, it dominates the skyline with its dizzying spiral staircase and red lights. What was interesting for me is that one can look at the clock by gazing down at the puddles. On that rainy night, the puddles are constantly disturbed by foot traffic and rain fall, making the clock indecipherable to read. It reminds me of Dali's famous painting, it was beautiful and weird. I stood mesmerized while gazing at this psychedelic-like spectacle. At that moment, reading the clock becomes impossible and knowing the time becomes irrelevant.

As my library of reflections expanded extensively, I wondered how I would process all these data and where will this lead me. I look at the overview of my collection only to realize a recurring feature that I was not even aware of. Of the ten photographs that I like the most, all of them are puddles. I have become so intrigued by this discovery that I have decided to focus on it.

*Figure 9: Casting a puddle, Birkklunden (left)  
Diptycht puddle, Kuba Park (right)*



Puddles are these tiny bodies of water on the ground usually formed by rain. They are often regarded as landscape flaws but for some they can be a source of carefree joy. Vehicles and pedestrians would rather avoid it, while children would welcome it as a playground they can jump and splash on. For me, I like its ephemeral and reflective nature. They are like mirrors that appear and vanish. Similar to how the Renaissance painters used the mirror, puddles can filter space into a flattened and compressed image directing the viewer to focus on something. Walking around it gives me a unique perspective of the surroundings. In Kuba Park for example, I stumbled upon two puddles next to each other reflecting a pole that appears to be broken in two, it was a diptych expressed in nature or a reality that is fragmented.

I am also interested in how people view puddles. My romantic inclination may view a single tiny puddle with poetic meaning, but I am guessing that most people would instead regard it as nuisances that need to be fixed. I then asked myself, should all puddles be fixed? And if we do that, do we lose or do we gain something? These are just some of the questions that I am trying to find answers to. If puddles are mirrors, then seeing many puddles in a place gives us many ways to be aware of the space, but then again, having too many puddles is not a pleasant sign realistically.

In my inquiry into understanding the many facets of a puddle, I started to cast actual ones to examine it objectively. A puddle by essence is a body of water, but without the depression on the ground that holds water, it would not exist. I found one particular puddle in Birkelunden that I like, it is oval shaped and deep enough. I exhibited the casts in my recent studio course and I hope that it would further lead me into something.



*Figure 9: casted puddles of Birkelunden (2022) exhibited at KHiO*

And as most of the water leads to the sea, so did I.

I reached the fjord in Bjørvika where old and new buildings stand along the promenade casting interesting lights into the waters, revealing interesting visuals that intrigued my imagination. The National Opera and the new Munch Museum are two modern buildings that seem to have odd dynamics with each other. From what I've gathered, the former is generally well-loved by the people while the latter generated unpopular opinions from the public. Oliver Wainwright of the Guardian described the Munch Museum, "an ominous grey tower on the Oslo waterfront, lurching out at the top like a military lookout post, keeping watch over the fjord." However, when I photographed these buildings at night, I was surprised to find the image having a phallic resemblance. To elaborate, parts of the Opera form like the shaft and the Munch resembles the scrotum. I thought that this was a funny discovery. A psychologist interviewed by Vice magazine theorized that "when you think of the phallus in a metaphorical sense, and not as a literal penis, it's more about who has the power, who has the answer, who has what everyone is looking for." I want to think that if Oslo is a man, then this particular spot is its hidden penis glistening in the fjord; maybe through these architecture that cost a tremendous fortune to build, the city is subtly flexing its power and ego. Or maybe it's just me..

Bjørvika has seen rapid development in recent years, transforming the once container port into a cultural and urban hub, claims its developer. Strolling around the area gives me a different vibe than the rest of the city. As a waterfront district, it is one of the first sights that greets visitors when they enter Oslo from the fjord, therefore it is not far off to regard Bjørvika as the face of new Oslo: modern and exciting! But not everyone is enthusiastic about this development. The Barcode Project for example garnered criticisms over its row of midrise buildings that acts like a facade blocking the inner city from the fjord. This urban hub hosts expensive apartments, restaurants and retail establishments that seem to only cater the tourists and the few who can afford. I feel ambivalent about Bjørvika. I love the Opera and the Deichman library, they are exceptionally beautiful buildings that live up to its function, however Bjørvika as a whole feels superficial and contrived. This manifestation is somewhat narcissistic, it's vanity... The wealth of the city poured into its face, concealing it with expensive cosmetics. In the online realm, googling the word "Oslo" would generate many images from Bjørvika like the Opera and the Barcode. One would ask then if this is a rightful representation of the city.

Figure 10:  
reflections of the Barcode skyline



Figure 11: the vertical reflection of the Munch Museum and the National Opera

Construction developments are ongoing in the area, especially on the eastern part of Sorenga. Ironically, as new structures rise, the very ground they are built into is sinking. The Geological Survey of Norway reports that Bjørvika is not built on solid ground, and the recent construction activities is depleting the groundwater underneath affecting its geological stability. As a result, Bjørvika is experiencing subsidence at 2-3 centimeters per year, which could mean very high maintenance costs to avert this threat. If you think about it, this is like digging one's own grave. This manmade problem is caused by man's insatiable appetite to build more and more. This whole sinking process reminds me of Narcissus drowning in a shallow pool of water.



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## figures

(not by the author)

Figure 1: Caravaggio. (1599). Narcissus [Oil on canvas]. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.

Figure 2: Hall of Mirrors (Sheesh Mahal) [Photograph]. (n.d.). Viator. <https://www.viator.com/Jaipur-attractions/Hall-of-Mirrors-Sheesh-Mahal/overview/d4627-a27444>

Figure 3: Lin, P. C. (1989). Gunnar Birkerts and Associates, Interior of Calvary Baptist Church. Drawing Matter. <https://drawingmatter.org/architectures-mirror-stage/>

Figure 4: Semansky, P. (n.d.). Donald Trump [Associated Press]. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/>