

The Ethic-Aesthetic Way of Wonders

by Boel Christensen-Scheel, *in print* in In Formation – Nordic Journal of Art and Research



Opening of Alexandre Perigot's 'Elvis' House' at 'the land', Sanpatong, 2006.

The connotation of ecology should cease to be tied to the image of a small minority of people in love with nature or to (self-)defined specialists.¹

Félix Guattari

The concern for the environment and the climate, for the sustainability in human actions more widely, is now no longer a romantic longing. It is a political fact as well as an aesthetic matter. In the field of and surrounding contemporary art, there has in the late 20th and early 21st century been a development towards different forms of experimental and experiential (art) organization. A central goal has been the production of knowledge or reflection in relation to various aspects of sustainability, and to establish clusters of collaborating institutions and individuals have become an ethic-aesthetic approach. Artistic practices unfold as combinations of ethics, science and sensuousness. By assembling a range of participants from friends to specialists, and by using an array of different methods in order to deal with different social, mental or environmental tasks, contemporary art has become practice-based

¹ Félix Guattari, *Les trois écologies*, Paris, Galilée, 1989, p. 48. My translation, original text: “La connotation de l’écologie devrait cesser d’être liée à l’image d’une petite minorité d’amoureux de la nature ou de spécialistes attirés.”

research and research-based practice. Thus, it has the ability to (re)activate and (re)focus important issues and to propose alternative ways of wondering.

Developments in the theoretical field of *ecosophy* have shown us the co-dependence of different human and natural factors, as well as connections between societal organization, natural sustainability and individual experience. From the ‘deep ecology’ of Arne Næss, through Gregory Bateson’s ‘ecology of mind’ and to the ‘three ecologies’ of Félix Guattari, we have acquired not only a co-thinking of human and nature, but also an acknowledgement of the importance of mind and sociality for the human environmental and aesthetic (inter)action. To explore these complex and organic relations between the social, the mental and the environmental, becomes an important task for contemporary research. A central question is *where* and *how* such research can be undertaken. In the following I will trace some central ecosophical lines of thinking, link them to ethic and aesthetic theory, and show how these theories stand in a direct relation to three contemporary, on-going art projects. Further, I propose ecosophy as a relational and practice-near research ideology, depending amongst others on the complexity-oriented principles of relationality, ethicality and immediacy. Finally, aesthetic research and research through art emerges as field-merging and practical-theoretical approaches, which should be given more attention and resources in current science and education politics. As an alternative field of knowledge production, referring to Jacques Rancières ‘distribution of the sensuous’ as well as phenomenological epistemology, ethic-aesthetic research constitute not only new ways of sensing, but acknowledges larger parts of what we already know. ²

² This article is partly based on passages from the Ph.D. dissertation *Mobile Homes – Perspectives on Situatedness and De-Situatedness in Contemporary Practice and Theory*, Acta Humaniora, University of Oslo, 2009, chapter 5 “Ecology: Environment, Relation and Sustainability”



The nord land, Kjellingvann, 2005. Foto: Sørfinnset School / the nord land

Ecology as Relational Principle

Biology stems from the Greek word for life, *bios*, and ecology stems from the Greek word *oikos* which means *home* or *household* – biology is thus the study of life and ecology can be thought of as the study of ‘home life’ or *conditions for life*. Ecological research can be said to focus on three main areas: individual organisms, species interactions and communities/ecosystems.³ The object of study more widely is life and different *relations* between life and its environment – these are studied in order to find out what enables or hinders certain life forms under certain conditions at certain times. This of course includes the relation to other organisms; organisms influence the life, distribution and abundance of other organisms. The relational wholes of nature and organisms (biotic/living and abiotic/non-living environment) can be seen as communities or *ecosystems*. The term ecosystem describes the “biological community together with the abiotic environment in which it is set”⁴ – an ecosystem thus

³ Ed. Begon, Michael, Colin R. Townsend & John L. Harper, *Ecology – From Individuals to Ecosystems*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

⁴ Op. cit., p. 499.

includes both living and non-living elements – atmosphere, rocks, plants, animals and humans, all that is “a source and a sink for energy and matter”.⁵ An ecosystem also follows the flows of energy and matter around the system, the relatively constant consumption and release of energy constitute the sustainability and longevity of the system. Transferred to the human sphere this includes the human physical environment such as cities, houses, things, clothes, art, etc., as well as social and psychological issues and dynamics.

Using ecology and sustainability as theoretical and philosophical principles is becoming obvious in these times of climatic instability and over-consumption, but the use of these concepts stands in a longer *eco-philosophical* or *ecosophical* tradition related to organically-inspired and environmentally-conscious theoreticians.⁶ Ecology is a biological field of research with a particular concern in the relations between organisms and environment. It has since the 1970s and 80s become associated with various movements that have worked for the preservation of these relations and environments in nature. Many of these could be labelled under what Arne Næss calls *shallow ecology* – that is, the concern with simple environmental causes and issues without relating this issue to other chains and relations, and further the omission of humans and sociality in this ecology. The *deep ecology*, however, is Næss’ conception of an eco-philosophy or ecosophy. It designates ecology as a fundamental way of thinking relations to nature, humans, animals, not only the act of not throwing toxic garbage in nature:

So an ecosophy becomes a philosophical world-view or system inspired by the conditions of life in the ecosphere ... A philosophical system has many components. Logic, general methodology, epistemology, ontology, descriptive and normative ethics, philosophy of science, political and social philosophy and general aesthetics are among the most well known. Ecosophy ... says of this diversity: all are intimately connected!⁷

Ecology then represents the deep connection and interrelatedness between the many elements, where there is a focus on the relation and the necessity of the relation itself. The relation always indicates a certain power structure, but ecology shows how the power structures are also co-dependent or inter-dependent – indicating the dependency between the parts *both ways*, and thereby strengthening the “weaker” parts by emphasizing their “relational power”.

⁵ Begon, Townsend & Harper, op.cit.

⁶ Used by for example Félix Guattari, Arne Næss, Rosi Braidotti, Anthony Giddens, Kisho Kurokawa.

⁷ Næss, op. cit., p. 38.



Free yoga class in the art gallery at Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo 2010.

Courtesy of 'Gente Actions', Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit

Guattari's Three Ecologies

More specifically, the concept of ecology that I suggest here is based on the ecosophy of philosopher and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. In his *Three Ecologies* he suggests there are three important aspects that must be included into the concept of ecology or ecosophy; *the environmental, the social and the mental*. The tripartite ecological perspective of Guattari provides a further analytical perspective: situations, projects, spaces and places, can be seen as mental (psychological), social, and environmental (physical/geographical) at once. Guattari thus makes a further pronouncement of the dynamics of Næss' deep ecology: An ecosophy can be considered from the basis of balance and mutuality between the different relations to the self, the human community as well as the larger environment, nature and animals. What characterizes ecology is, as suggested, precisely this fine balance between the many parts, and that a displacement on a micro-level can easily have consequences on a macro-level, and vice versa. It is a relation between the many parts based on conflicts of interest and the fight for

survival, rather than direct causal explanations: Structures made up by a finely-tuned and complex symbiosis makes it impossible to define “the best” solution, as for example in system theoretician Niklas Luhmann’s definition of ‘hypercomplexity’⁸. Still, there is an ethicality in the ecological perspective, and to Guattari it is not a matter of indifference which solution we choose. I will now sketch some notions that can be attached to the three ecologies, before we turn to the contemporary ethical-aesthetical art projects and their ‘mode of research’.

Social ecology

Social ecology deals with social communities and relations mainly between humans, but also with political, social organizations that necessarily relate to nature and all forms of environment. Human (social) organizations have a deep impact on nature and the eco-system, and must therefore be seen in relation to it. Likewise, humans are influenced (made apparent by recent natural catastrophes) by their biotic and abiotic environment. Ecology is a “reactional” theory that focuses on the existence of organisms as co-existing in a milieu with other organisms, and the benefit or risk of this co-existence; this has many similarities with social theory. Traditional ecological research describes different forms of interactions or relations such as symbiosis (mutual benefit), predator-prey-relations or parasitic relations, which record the benefit or loss for the organism in the relation, is the nature of the relation exploitative, mutual, neutral, competitive, fatal or benefiting.⁹

In the ecosophical relation a “life-sustaining” balance is sought, though *not* indicating that nature itself is always sustainable. Balance and mutuality are seen as ecological principles, but this does not mean that balance always occurs by itself. To seek sustainability in the human community on the basis of *balance* and reciprocity is thus not a ‘natural phenomenon’; it often has to be made, at least in the short term. Thus, ecology, sustainability and mutuality are here importantly not about a one-sided “turn towards nature”¹⁰ and away from human control. Sustainability is about an *active, continuous balancing* of the three ecologies; this could be the natural adjustments within an eco-system, or it could be the economical

⁸ “We term hypercomplex a system that is oriented to its own complexity and seeks to grasp this complexity, because the attempt – since it occurs within the system and must be established as selfdescription – produces more than itself. It also creates new kinds of possibilities for unforeseen reactions.” Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, Stanford University Press, California, 1984/1995

⁹ Ref. Begon, Townsend & Harper, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ref. Næss points out “the dangers of ecologism”, where ecology is seen as “the ultimate science”, op. cit., p. 39.

balancing we seek in social systems through taxes, social welfare, etc. The balancing can thus happen by itself through change in physical (and other) life grounds, or it could actively be sought in the human sphere through principles of inclusion and democracy.

Mental ecology

Mental ecology indicates that the human personal psyche and mental health is seen as part of the eco-system. The human mind distinguishes itself from the rest of nature, but nevertheless is an important part of the ecosphere. To comprehend this interdependence between the different levels of the ecosphere, one must relate to the individual subject as acting force, as well as political and environmental changes and ideas. Guattari thus broadens the idea of ecology to include a vaster and more complex idea of the relation as a balance between physical, abstract and psychological parts; not only designating specific relations in nature, or relations between “humans” and “nature”, but including relations *between* and *within* humans as well. Guattari, who was a psychoanalyst trained by Jacques Lacan, searched for an alternative to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis which was based on more clearly defined subjects and diagnoses.

Guattari together with Gilles Deleuze developed a more fluid and un-defined idea of the subject as constantly changing, defined as much by present and future as by past. The subject is understood as the combination of vectors of subjectivation (such as space, inheritance, genetics, family, friends, lovers, society, milieu, personal inclinations, memories, influence, intuition, and more), a situational constellation in a certain room at a certain time.¹¹ This can be said to make the human psyche, as well as the way it is treated, more complex, but also more hopeful: You are not what you always have been; you are a mix of self and others, possibly changing in the present and the future.

Biologist and system theoretician Gregory Bateson combines ethical and ecological dimensions in what concerns the ecology of ideas and of the mind – structures of influence between humans are part of “the ecology of ideas” in relationships, and, further, these structures are “part of the larger ecological system within which that relationship exists.” Bateson also places the concept of ecology in a further “mental” relation, pointing out that our ideas about ourselves, ecology, and the ecosphere always include ourselves: “Herein lays the

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, ref. for example *A Thousand Plateaus*, London, Continuum, 2004

charm and terror of ecology” he says “ – that the ideas of this science are irreversibly becoming a part of our own ecosocial system.”¹² The human mind is thus one of the most important features of a deep or expanded ecosophy, and perhaps represents the greatest challenge.

Environmental ecology

Environmental ecology is the perspective we usually perceive as ecology. The environmental is tied to the *physical surroundings*, however, the physical surroundings are both natural and (wo)man-made, both nature and culture. The physical surroundings also influence the social and individual behaviour, all from indicating or deciding movements (streets/roads/paths, walls, hills, rooms, fields, mugs with coffee) to creating settings and potentialities (comfort, discomfort, refuge, sensations). But, the environment is also thought of as being something unto itself; nature is not necessarily seen from a human or anthropocentric perspective, it both exists and has a value without the human perception or use of it. As humans we will however always speak from our point of view, and a total egalitarianism with all animals, plants and insects, is neither realizable nor wished for.

Further, sustainability is always a matter of choice, and can be viewed differently from different perspectives. To *identify* the different forms of relationality and mutuality thus becomes a central ecosophical perspective. Following, our relations to animals, products or services could be made more tangible. For the most part not knowing how the material world around us is produced and organized, this makes our relation to our environment as material and resources almost non-existent. From the ecosophical perspective, the environment as physicality is in a constant relation to us. In the urban city-living however, we are distanced from almost all material and physical production processes that we consume.¹³ This, one could argue, makes us socially and mentally more distant as well. To *reactivate* and *re-physicalize* the relational processes is thus a central ethical and ecosophical goal with social and mental implications – based on both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric arguments.

¹² All citations on this page are from Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 512.

¹³ Ref. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, London and New York, Penguin Books, 2009



Opening buffet at *the land foundation*, Chiang Mai, 2006.

Necessarily Ethical

Environment, nature and physicality are necessarily given particular weight in the ecosophical perspective, because they are seen as valuable in and of themselves. Our concern here, drawn from Guattari, is how we can connect this physicality to all the social and mental processes we normally are tied up in. The ethic dimension of life, here connected to relational and ecosophical ideologies, must be made to include a more social and personal relevance. In the Oxford English Dictionary online *ethics* is defined as “The science of morals; the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty.” Ethics in this way has been, and still is, to a large extent, treated as a duty or an obligation. Something often applied involuntarily to humans with negative consequences, such as control and notions of shame. Moral philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen points out this aura of negativity or primary concern with the negative aspects of ethics, where ethics is seen as obligation or as something needed in case of offence.¹⁴ Ethics, as rules of conduct, as prohibitions, are made to hinder, seldom to enhance. The accusation of *moralism* is then also one of the most common objections to ethical principles.

¹⁴ Vetlesen, Arne Johan, *Hva er etikk?*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 2007. Following Vetlesen, we will not differ between moral and ethics as is done in other moral philosophical works, rather praxis is used to indicate actions or concrete behaviour, ethics designates reflections on this praxis, but also the praxis itself – as ethics here are tied to the specific and live situation.

Several philosophers have however presented an alternative where sociality and inter-humanity is more a fact, a point of departure, than an infliction or a discussion¹⁵. Existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's is one of them – her philosophy is based on the singular subject and her fight for freedom. Nevertheless she says that the other's "appeal" necessarily concerns us, because our individual projects become meaningful only through others. This however, requires that the other individual is free to appeal/respond and that we are likewise. The freedom of subjects as an ethical dimension, as a condition for being able to engage, motivate and help, is thus not only an individual matter, it is a common and collective matter indicating the always ambiguous, paradoxical relation between self and others. This ambiguity constitutes the essence of Beauvoir's ethics, and makes the subject fundamentally social and fundamentally ethical.¹⁶ If the subject is defined as social and ethics as a necessity, the marginalized existence of others concerns each subject directly. Arne Næss says: "Equal right to unfold potentials as a principle is not a practical norm about equal conduct towards all life forms. It suggests a guideline limiting killing, and more generally limiting obstruction of the unfolding of potentialities in others."¹⁷ This is an ideal, but it also stands in a direct relation to practice. And as we now turn to three ecosophical art projects, it is with the basis of a non-moralistic ethicality that is fundamentally relational.

Ethic-Aesthetic Projects

Several contemporary art practices or experimental projects work actively with the relations or tensions in the tripartite ecology, as well as with the reintroduction of different physical dimensions as part of their ethic-aesthetic strategies. *The land foundation* (Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert) in Thailand, *Sørfinnset school/the nord land* (Geir Tore Holm and Søsja Jørgensen) and *Gentle Actions* (Eva Bakkeslett og Anne Karin Jortveit) are all processually organized art projects with an ecological focus.¹⁸ *The land* was initiated in 1998 in Chiang Mai by the two Thai artists Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija, and though the two initiators from the start have sought to move away from the idea of ownership,

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas and Knud Ejler Løgstrup both see ethics as something existential, as an undeniable part of sociality and of being human.¹⁵ They speak of an essential inter-humanity that demands engagement – co-existence as co-commitment. It is not a choice or a rule, it is fundamental to existence. Levinas further discusses whether this affects human freedom, not to be able to avoid responsibility, but then also says that that "[t]he free human being is dedicated the Other, no one can be saved without the others." Ref. Emmanuel Levinas, *Den annens humanisme*, Oslo, Aschehoug, 2004, and Knud E. Løgstrup, *Den etiske fordring*, Oslo, Gyldendal, 2008.

¹⁶ Ref. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, op. cit., and Tove Pettersen, "Simone de Beauvoirs etikk", in de Beauvoir's *Tvetydighetens etikk*, Oslo, Pax Forlag, 2009.

¹⁷ Næss, op. cit., p. 167.

¹⁸ All artists in these projects participate in other projects and also have separate productions.

their names remain tied to the project. In addition to a “land” or rice field near the village of Sanpatong, the project consists of a sort of cultural centre in Chiang Mai, where we find an outdoor kitchen, a meditation house, an administration and an exhibition/workshop hall. However, these physical installations are perceived as functions, and can be moved/alterd to whatever need or idea the project has – the cultural centre is thus to be thought of as a concept, a function, more than a specific place. Further, *the land* has had a tripartite focus on ecology, meditation and cultural activity since its inception. Within the project frame, they are involved with ecological farming, exhibitions, humanitarian work, workshops, yoga, meditation, seminars, alternative education, cultural exchange, cooking, writing, documentation, and more. Participants are primarily volunteers, art students or guests – there are also some employees within the administration. *The land foundation* develops through its activities; it continuously plans and executes new projects, seminars, workshops, and exhibitions, as well as engaging in different types of environmental, social and mental work.



Stage and buffaloes at the land, Sanpatong, 2006.

Sørfinnset School / the nord land began its activities in 2004 at Sørfinnset in the North of Norway, under the direction of Søsja Jørgensen and Geir Tore Holm, and it is as varied as *the land foundation*. The project was directly inspired by *the land foundation*, and began as a part of a local governmental art funding called “Artistic Interruptions”, curated by Per Gunnar Tverbakk. “Artistic Interruptions” was a project that sought to develop socially ‘site-specific’

projects, as a continuation of the sculptural ‘site-specific’ project “Artscape Nordland”. *Sørfinnset School / the nord land* is based on collaboration with the local community in the North Norwegian village of Sørfinnset, a small place with about 70-80 regular inhabitants (around 150 in summer). The village is typical of northern Norway. It is surrounded by spectacular nature and has a rich cultural history, but today there are relatively few activities and few new jobs available – the basis for life is growing meagre. The artists have sought to contribute through what they call ‘culture service’ in the local setting - meaning that they offer their cultural expertise, drive and energy to the local community in order to make something that is valuable to both the local community and themselves. The collaboration with the local community is a precondition of the project, which is based on events, dialogues and activities that require their interaction and participation, and the sense of local ownership that has been established is therefore crucial.

Sørfinnset School / the nord land is a living project, on-going and with an unlimited time span, and like *the land foundation* it becomes more and more composite as time passes: It consists of, amongst other things, a piece of land with artist-built living units, built preferably using local materials according to ecological standards (a Thai house adjusted to North Norwegian weather conditions and a Sami gamme built with local materials. A tent sauna (“Hikki”) is also planned, as well as a kitchen, a toilet and other facilities.) The local school, which is in disuse, is inhabited by the artists when they are at Sørfinnset, and functions as a sort of cultural centre from which activities are organized (cafés, parties, performances, concerts, debates, lectures on local history, cooking, hiking trips, and more) and as a place where guests may stay. There is a space at the school for tents and caravans in the garden, and there is an outdoor bonfire place and a herb garden. They also have a local radio project transmitting from the school’s loft during certain periods, Radio Kongo, and they serve free coffee in summer – indicated by a sign placed near the road, saying “Free coffee – 250m”. The properties associated with the project, Sørfinnset School and the area around Kjellingvann, are both owned by the local authorities, the municipality of Gildeskål.



Free coffee, Sørfinnset, 2006. Foto: Sørfinnset School / the nord land

Each summer an activity programme is set up, and though events are added, changed or cancelled, this serves as a plan for action. In the following, the programmes from 2006-2008 are rendered¹⁹:

Programme for 2006:

- 1 July: Activity day – Samis in Gildeskål, lecture near 'gamme'.
- 8 July: Activity day – Debate on art and tourism, serving local food.
- 15 July: Fish(ing) festival by UL Vårsol.
- 22 July: Tsunami memorial with Thai guests.
- 29 July: Olsok party (in remembrance of St. Olav who christened Norway) with artists, food and dance.
- Inauguration of flag monument by the cross section at Sørfinnset (by artist group aiPotu).

Programme for 2007:

- 7 May: Making local Radio Kongo with artist group Rakett at the MC Fair, BIT Teatergarasjen, Bergen
- 26 May: First Saturday café: Where do we stand in the project? Potato planting, spring preparations and brewing beer.
- 29 June: *Sørfinnset School / the nord land* at Transborder Café, Festspillene i Nord-Norge
- 30 June: Saturday café at school: Food from wild growing plants. Information.
- 7 July: Activity day; Samis in Gildeskål - the 'gamme' is 2 years old.
- Lecture about Sami place names and reindeer husbandry. Maintenance of the 'gamme'.

¹⁹ The program for this year can be found on the *Sørfinnset School / the nord land* project blog <http://www.sorfinnsetskole.blogspot.com/>

11-13 July: 'Tove'-workshop (craft technique) with Kristine Dybwad
14 July: Fish(ing) festival by UL Vårsol.
21 July: Saturday café. Topic: Art and Ecology.
27 July: Seminar: Art and Critique.
28 July: Summer party at the Thai house with entertainment, food and dance.
30 July-2 August: Participation at seminar/exhibition, Sparwasser/ Umwetter, Berlin
23 August-30 September: Sørfinnset School at 'Cross Talking', Christiansands Kunstforening.

Programme for 2008:

17-18 May: Potato planting, spring cleaning and maintenance of the school.
– Bonfire party at school on the 17th.
– Meeting about building of toilet at *the nord land*.
28 June: First Saturday café from 12-16, food from wild-growing plants.
5 July: The 'gamme' is three years old – celebration with serving of Sami specialities, lecture and maintenance.
19 July: Fish(ing) festival by UL Vårsol.
26 July: Summer party with stage acts and surprises.
28-30 July: Time for trips and excursions. Hiking in the mountains East of Sørfinnset, focus on philosophy and wild plants.
2 August: Last Saturday café of this season.
20 September: Potato-day in relation to harvest.

Other on-going and more long-term activities:

– Finish building the Thai house near Kjellingvann (finished 3. of August 2008)
– Build an "earth cellar" (room made of dirt and stone with wooden roof, made to preserve fruit and vegetables) at Gjelseth, near the school, for preservation of the grown potatoes– focus of summer 2008. There are also plans for making such an earth cellar at *the land* in Thailand.
– Put up a "tent sauna" – Hikki - designed by the artist Per Enokson (picture on first side).
– Make local radio at the school's loft.
– Better conditions for fish in Kjellingvann - by Talleiv Taro Manum.
– Continue to grow and enhance the herb garden at Sørfinnset School.
– Organize various presentations, exhibitions, debates, excursions, etc.
– Run and repair the school building.
– 'Skolekjøkken' (cooking in the school's kitchen) by Marius Notvik
– 'Potato Perspectives' by Åsa Sonjasdotter.
– Presentations of artists and other guests at the school.
– Plan toilet at the nord land/ Den glömda staden near Kjellingvann, by Liv Fjerdingsrein (to be realized during the summer of 2009).
– Plan and develop other buildings, for example a kitchen, near Kjellingvann.

Conceptualizations of the Sensuous

Arranged around activity programs, but built up by everyday social situations between participants, the ethicality of these projects relates to 'ways of doing' and the tensions of this actual unfolding. This is also where ethics and aesthetics combine; philosopher Jacques Rancière has written on the distribution of the sensible or sensuous as a political or ethical matter in itself. Rancière firstly expands the conception of aesthetics to include all

sensuousness and secondly to include relations to and within this sensuousness. He further ties aesthetics to politics through the distribution or sharing of this sensuousness: What, in a society, do we hear and see, and what remains invisible and inaudible? Being sensed has a social and political importance, and there is a ‘life constructive’ or ‘deconstructive’ power in the creation of sensuousness. How we perceive “reality” through our senses is thus a deeply political concern, and it is in the production of different landscapes of the sensuous that “art” can work politically. Rancière further proposes that it is how we relate or create relations through sensuousness that constitute the political, meaning in the sharing of what is commune. Aesthetics is then understood as everything that concerns sensuousness and not as the more delimited notion tied to art, visibility and judgements of taste.²⁰

Rancière has what one could call a ‘conceptual’ approach; he does not reject or dismiss reigning theories or systems, but he shows how and why they are unstable and/or can be thought in several ways – he builds scenarios. Rancière both accepts and rejects art as a separate field, he speaks of parts of contemporary art as quite “secluded” and driven by specific people and a particular discourse, while he, at the same time, includes art in a broader conception of aesthetics, sees aesthetics as politics and politics as co-existence. Rancière suggests different divisions and regimes, but simultaneously makes clear that these are only *ways of thinking*, which at any time could be replaced by other perspectives that would result in other conclusions: different perspectives result in different conclusions. This very pragmatic way of relating to theory and terms like art can be a way out of disillusion, the death of utopias and the lack of motivation that have haunted the western late modern societies. At the end of *Le partage du sensible*, he suggests that we live the “impossibility” of utopia and instead think of *heterotopias*, thus moving from ‘non-place’ to ‘other-place’.

This way of thinking about art and conceptualizations about art is compatible with the practice found in several contemporary experimental projects, amongst them the above described ‘land projects’. Art can be broken down to particular people in particular networks with power or as a specific system or discourse, but these categorizations can also be

²⁰ In his argument Rancière takes the “original scenario” of aesthetics, the way he finds it described by philosopher Friedrich Schiller, as his point of departure: 1) art is a way to perceive/experience 2) aesthetic experience is heterogeneous and, 3) aesthetics are not just art. Further, he holds that the politics of aesthetics are undecidable; art and aesthetics cannot be isolated from politics, but neither can art be used to fulfill political ambitions, because sensual perceptions can never be steered. Ref. *Le partage du Sensible – Ésthetique et Politique*, Paris, La Fabrique Éditions, 2000. The book is translated to English with a preface by Slavoj Žižek, then given the title *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*.

overcome or transcended. Art does not have to be a specific set of practices or questions; it can be as wide as “praxis” or “project” related to a broad conception of aesthetics and history. Aesthetics is here understood as whatever concerns the senses and in the broadest meaning of the term – aesthetics is not particularly visual and it is not associated with “aesthetization”, that is, with judgements of taste and *good* or *right* visual form. However, aesthetics involves choosing a sensuous strategy or displaying particular sensuous matter, and thereby becomes ethic-aesthetic. *The land foundation* and *Sørfinnset School / the nord land* work actively with the different relations between sensuousness and ethicality; but even though their projects can be said to be ideological or ecosophical, they do not follow a particular ideology and it is a specific ambition for them not to censor or suppress different expressions. Their structure is based on the participation of persons, groups and networks, and if the people involved felt that they were without influence, they would be less likely to keep on participating. This is particularly relevant in the North of Norway, where the Sørfinnset project is based on the collaboration with a local community; if the local community felt that they were ignored or set aside, they would not participate in parties, discussions and events.

Another important implication of Rancière’s co-thinking of politics and aesthetics displayed in the ‘land projects’, is the *social* or *shared* aspect of the aesthetic as it is made ethic. Our sensuous environments constitute our common grounds for experience, our common or “agreed-upon” reality. This aspect can also be connected to the fundamentally social and ethical dimension of the subject as described by Beauvoir. Here, the ‘land projects’ can be understood as a critique of individualism and Western subject culture – the art project is no longer a solo project, the structure of the aesthetic project in itself is *shared* or multiple, both in ownership as well as in ideas, modes and media. This critique of individualism ties them to an avant-garde tradition: Many experimental art projects from the historical avant-garde (Constructivists, Bauhaus) in the early 20th century through the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s (John Cage, Situationnists, Fluxus,) have worked with community and co-existence as essential values in “utopian constructions”. *The land foundation* is not a Western art project²¹, however Tiravanija and Lertchaiprasert are both trained within an American art tradition and relate to the contemporary western art discourse in their work. Combined with

²¹ The term Western is problematic, as it vaguely refers to Europe, North-America and Australia. However, it is a term in common use, which indicates a certain cultural tradition and dynamic. It also used in *the land foundation*’s catalogue to indicate something that differs from the Eastern or Thai tradition/dynamic. I thus use the term, particularly to speak of a certain “Western art and avant-garde history”, that is, the art-history most commonly taught in the above mentioned regions. However, I am aware of the problems concerning such stereotypical categorizations.

their Thai and Buddhist background, the tensions between Western and Buddhist practice, as well as between western and Buddhist theory, are played out. The ‘land projects’ focus on the social or shared character of the projects, though they also emphasize the personal expression and the importance of the subject’s mental health. This perhaps because personal spaces in Buddhist thinking, are also seen *as* social spaces, and the constitution of the individual identity is fundamentally dependent on the sense of community. In Buddhism, meditation is a path to enlightenment and inner peace, meaning a way to control the “ego” in order to contribute more and better to a common community.²² Meditation and personal mental contemplation is thus considered vital to the community and sense of community.

Ecosophy as a Relational and Practice-Near Research Ideology

The reactivating of social space without closing the personal space, is a central aspect in the ‘land projects’ ideological navigation. In his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson discusses flexibility, that is, an ability to change or adapt in relation to human sociality, intellectuality and nature:

I suggest then that a healthy ecology of human civilization would be defined somewhat as follows: A single system of *environment combined with human civilization* in which the flexibility of the civilization shall match that of the environment to create an ongoing complex system, open-ended for slow change of even basic (hard-programmed) characteristics.²³

A problem for the ecosopher then, who has flexibility as her highest goal, is that she must insist, even tyrannically, on this flexibility in order for it to persist. Deleuze and Guattari were inspired by Bateson, and their insistence on becoming might be seen in relation to Bateson’s focus on flexibility. Bateson continues: “From all of this it follows that to maintain the flexibility of a given variable, either that flexibility must be *exercised*, or the encroaching variables must be directly controlled.”²⁴ We thus underline importance of immediate manoeuvring, of singular choice and action.²⁵

²² Ref. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990

²³ Gregory Bateson, *op. cit.*, p. 502.

²⁴ *Op.cit.*, p. 511.

²⁵ Philosopher Rosi Braidotti criticizes Arne Næss for displaying an in-the-end anthropocentric universalism through his deep ecology; by including all, she says, in a holistic and spiritual manner, man’s mind dominates nature even if it seeks the opposite. An ecosophy must thus be more actively manoeuvred and more willfully fragmented. Ref. *Transpositions*, Cambridge and Malden, Polity Press, 2006, p. 115-117.

Returning to the ethics presented in the ecosophy of Guattari, we are prompted to connect and co-think mentality, sociality and environment. The concept of ecology indicates the organic character that any non-moralistic and affective ethicality must have, based on the *sustainable balance* of subject, community and nature/environment. This is implied in Guattari's work as well as in the ecosophy of Næss. Ecology is a given, not a choice, but ecology opens for many possible choices, many possible ethicalities. Ethics is not only non-moralistic, it is also affective and non-coherent or discontinuous. Despite the focus on ethicality and sustainability, I want to stress again that ecology does not indicate a harmonious zone or a conflict free whole, *collaboration and co-existence is always conflict of interests and negotiation*. It is the complex organization, the possible consideration of "everything" and the finely scaled balance that makes ecology a valid perspective, and that makes it a life perspective where a common work or project can be realized on the basis of, and not by the elimination of, difference: All relations have to be based on and consist of difference and disagreement.²⁶ In ecology one of the defined forms of interactions, *mutualism*, which actually means that both parties are profiting, is seen as reciprocal exploitation rather than cosy partnership.²⁷

Within the experimental praxis of the land projects, there are at least three ecologies at work – physical, social and mental. These are investigated and co-thought, in relation to ecology and to ethics. One could say that they organize their activities as *research*, as *ways of wondering*, about trivial, practical, theoretical and spiritual issues, with a particular focus on connections between perceived dichotomies such as the trivial and the spiritual, the practical and the theoretical. This ethic-aesthetic way of wondering, I would say, is becoming an artistic strategy as well a sign of our hybrid and multi-medial times. As knowledge and information travels fast from field to field, both interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary create larger grounds for acting, and the distance between scholar and artist, student and teacher are diminished.

²⁶ Ref. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London and New York, Verso, 2000, and Mouffe & Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Verso, 2001

²⁷ Begon, Townsend & Harper, op.cit., p. 381



Author and musician David Rothenberg playing in front of the Sørfinnset 'free coffee' sign at Kunstneres Hus, Oslo, 2010. Courtesy of 'Gente Actions', Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit

Aesthetic Research

In the Norwegian art exhibition hall Kunstneres Hus between the 23rd of October and the 14th of November 2010, the two artists Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit organized their 'Gente Actions' project as a series of lectures, talks, workshops, materials and interventions around the concepts art, ecology and action. The aim was to expand the possible artistic approaches on art and ecology, amongst others by including authorities from different fields (food, agriculture, literature, architecture, economy, art, and more) as well as mixing art and science, experience and research. In addition to an introductory conference and a multitude of discussions, they knitted a "reef", made sourdough, organized a concert, grew a garden from which they served vegetables during the project period, and in general made people meet and think, locally and internationally. They recorded and documented, wrote and listened. During three intense weeks they presented an *ethic-aesthetic way of wonders*, where different physical, social and intellectual strategies were employed to research and rethink aspects of ecology. Their aim was precisely to wonder, as well as to constitute a series of

“gentle actions” towards the public and society. The concept of ‘gentle action’ was taken from F. David Peat, physicist and founder of the Pari Center for New Learning, who also was a keynote speaker at the introductory seminar. In his book *Gentle Action – Bringing Creative Change to a Turbulent World* (2008), Peat describes the concept of ‘gentle action’ as: “...the creative sorts of activities and actions that could be taken when people are sensitive to the dynamics of their surrounding environment. It could be a form of minimal but highly intelligent activity that arises out of the very nature of the system under investigation... Gentle Action is subtle in nature so that a minimal intervention, intelligently made, can result in a major change or transformation. The reason is that such action makes use of the dynamics of the whole system in question.”²⁸

Peat thus opens for a sort of problem solution, either intellectual or practical, that combines scientific and creative capacities in the most appropriate ways. Peat particularly points out the often mechanical and rigid solutions that we rely on in almost all our societal systems. The results are well-meant, but often inappropriate actions, because people fail to grasp the complexity of the situations they are in. This, one could say, is valid for many bureaucratic systems, where the options made available for the system users are most often mechanical and pre-designed, leaving little or no room for creativity or tailored solutions. Peat instead suggests the use of ‘creative suspense’, that is a period of sensuous non-acting, a moment of orientation into current complexities where possible ways of acting are allowed to arise in and from the situation, not from a pre-rehearsed scheme. Medical personnel however, often have this moment of non-acting while they are evaluating the possible damages in an accident, with the primary guiding rule of ‘not doing any harm’. Peat thus invites us to act less and create more, that is, to allow for other forms of knowledge production than those which are already systemically established. Here, we can also connect the creative aspect to a higher degree of sensuous awareness – Peat writes: “Artists, composers, scientists and other creative people often describe how their work unfolds from a creative form of “listening”. These acts of listening and watchfulness have the effect of dissolving rigidities and rendering a system more flexible.”²⁹ The suspense, which is also a metaphor for allowing sensuous and instinctive information to emerge, calls for non-action in a time of frenetic action, but also suggests the importance of sensuousness and creativity to science and learning as a way to include other

²⁸ F. David Peat, *Gentle Action – Bringing Creative Change to a Turbulent World*, Italy, Pari Publishing, 2008, p.141

²⁹ Peat, op.cit., p.88.

and more complex notions. Intelligence is thus *relying on* creativity and sensuous orientation, and is a concern of practice. Further, the relations between practice and theory, practice and research, research and learning, become blurred or interrelated, because they not only depend on each other, but are all parts of the same ‘gentle action’.



‘The Oslo Reef’, knitted chorals, Kunstnernes Hus 2010. Courtesy of ‘Gentle Actions’, Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit

Acknowledging our sensuous existence and sensuous information is also a central point to another ecosopher who attained the Norwegian ‘Gentle Actions’ projects; David Abram draws on classic phenomenological research by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to remind us of the 1) necessity of attaching all knowledge and experience to a sensuous subject and 2) co-think the subjects experience and cognition with the sensing body and its sensuous environments.³⁰ Central here is the understanding of our *understanding* as completely reliant on our everyday, sensuous world and the fact that our cognition is a part of our experiential sphere.³¹ Art in this theoretial and ecosophical framework, represents a

³⁰ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, New York, Vintage Book, 1997.

³¹In the paper “The Knowing Body; Art as an Integrative System of Knowledge”, John Danvers traces different sensoric theories and points out that makins sense is a sensuous matter from an art educational perspective – Danvers concludes that the cognitive functions of the arts parallels that of the (natural) sciences. John Danvers, in Ed. Tom Hardy, *Art Education in a Postmodern World: Collected Essays*, USA, Intellect, 2006

more *experiential and experimental form of knowledge production and processing*, because it allows for such a practical-theoretical synthesis, creative suspense and sensuous knowledge. However, it is not indifferent how or what we see or hear, this is tightly interwoven with our ideological outset. We have now come full circle: To underline ethic-aesthetic dimensions is important because the connections and relations between the two are vast and many, however, to underline these dimensions also becomes a political or counteractive insistance, with reference to Jacques Rancière. As all aesthetics is in some way political, so is all science political. What we chose to see and hear, as what we choose to research, is a matter of prioritation, of choice, and of ethicality.

To more overtly include political ambitions in research, is problematic, as is any research that seeks a particular result or argument. Nevertheless, most research today is part of a country's research strategy and is thus a result of a political focus. As a major global challenge, environmental research is an overt ambition for most research strategies. However, a more sophisticated idea of what ecology is should be a further ambition: Environmental issues are not only physical and natural, they are social and mental as well. It is thus not only about driving a car, but also about *why* we drive it. The answer to this question might be very trivial, such as logistical challenges, but is also deeply bound to an entire lifestyle and identity – it is not only a matter of environmental constitution and preservation, but of subject constitution and preservation, and where the subject is seen as constituted in and of sociality.



Workshop with fermentation activist and author Sandor Ellix Katz, Kunstneres Hus, Oslo, 2010.

Courtesy 'Gentle Actions', Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit.

Concluding

Although multiple and disharmonious, the ecosophical perspective provides an ethic direction to the research practice. Further, turning to biology and nature we could find words and concepts that give more elastic, dynamic, and fluctuating theoretical takes on reality, but that nevertheless are visible, physical and concrete. *Ecology, mutuality, synthesis, symbiosis, rhizome, chaosmosis, and radican*³² are examples of such concepts that seek to grasp a natural complexity and organic character on paper, further moving them into the human everyday sphere, making them part of an ecosophy – an ecology of mind, as Gregory Bateson puts it. The ecological concept is used for many reasons, but key notions are its necessary 1) *relationality*, its focus on 2) *sustainability*³³, its opening towards 3) *organic thinking* and its 4) *ethic-aesthetic* dimensions. Ecology indicates a mutuality or relationality in a hyper-complex whole, where all the parts have their role and importance. Ecosophy is a way to think connectedness in an un-simplified, yet ordered way, and as an “ordering” of things, ecology implies a non-order. It is in a relation, but without ever really being pre-destined or predictable. The ecological perspective has an organic purposefulness; it can be completely unexpected, yet it is not necessarily random. In their study on ecology, Michael Begon, Colin R. Townsend and John L. Harper point out the difference between *random* and *chaotic dynamics*;³⁴ the main difference being that the random dynamic contains no differentiable patterns. The chaotic one contains certain discernable patterns, but is characterized by such fluctuation and multitude/variety that the prediction of future patterns or outcomes becomes impossible or inefficient. Chaos in this concern is thus not simply randomness and confusion, making phenomena impossible to understand, it is the impossibility of prediction and the possibility of a tiny movement causing a major change in the system or theory.³⁵ These two central aspects of not relying on pre-existing solutions and of aiming for minor actions that instigate major changes, was also pointed out by physicist and ecosopher Peat as current “ways of acting”. With the basis in relationality, sustainability, organic thought systems and ethic-aesthetic approaches, we could thus add the need for *immediacy* or the constant evaluation of the here and now, as a vital part of the ecosophic research mode. In addition we

³² Ref. Nicolas Bourriaud, *The radican*, New York, Sternberg Press, 2010

³³ Sustainable here means enduring or maintainable, meaning an overall balancing creating good or prosperous living conditions – that is, conditions that make something last or to enable lasting relations.

³⁴ Begon, Townsend & Harper, op. cit., p. 150

³⁵ Ref. also Edward Lorenz, “Deterministic Nonperiodic Flow”, *Journal of the Atmospheric Sciences*, 1963.

have to consider the interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary or holistic approaches used in most ecosophic projects, whether theoretical or practical, often both.

Concluding, we could say that art, particularly certain contemporary ecosophically based projects, represent a more experiential and experimental form of knowledge production and processing, because it allows for a practical-theoretical synthesis, creative suspense as well as sensuous knowledge. Suggesting a further relevance, the ecosophic perspective could constitute a relational and practice-near research ideology where the sensuous or aesthetic dimensions have a more natural or prominent role. This is also relevant for education and learning in general: As part of our ecological or environmental competence, the aesthetic strategies should be more prevalent in science and education systems – as design, production, craft and visual competence, but also as a fundamental part of our epistemology, our relation to the world, *as our world*. When seeking to act more gently in regard to our environment, we can bear in mind that ethics demand choices not only of action but also of sensuousness, then what you create, either mentally or materially, will be your ethic.



Working at the ‘artist’s garden’, Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo 2010. Courtesy ‘Gentle Actions’, Eva Bakkeslett and Anne Karin Jortveit.