

ACTIVE FORMS: THE ARTWORK AND ITS INFRASTRUCTURES

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Entries

The text you are now reading, *Active Forms: The Artwork and Its Infrastructures*, forms one of the main components within my doctoral thesis, which shares the same title. The text was initially planned—or rather, half written—as three main essays focusing, respectively, on artworks, their contexts, and what I at certain times throughout the writing process called “infrastructural solutions” and “consequences.” Originally, these essays were to be accompanied by a dictionary, where I would define key concepts and provide personal accounts and information. I wanted the dictionary to have a form the reader could easily recognize and use as a guide for reading the main essays while simultaneously breaking with expectations of the dictionary as a rigid authority. However, as I was describing artworks and laying out arguments, more and more sections escaped from the essays’ frameworks and into the dictionary. It was as if the dictionary swallowed larger and larger chunks of text until it no longer could rightly be called a dictionary. Simultaneously, the essays were losing content, fragmenting, and becoming shadows of themselves. What emerged was a collection of entries that, in turn, started to multiply.

My research topic doesn’t easily lend itself to limits. Infrastructure is, by definition, endless. As architect and writer Keller Easterling articulates, infrastructure is “too big and not at one and the same place. It cannot be addressed through its shape or outline.”¹ Neither is there a unifying form to be found among infrastructural elements. Some are physical, others are digital, some are pieces of regulation or software, others are human relations, some move around, and others are static. Using the format of entries, I can draw a network of connections between disparate topics—or elements big and small—that I have touched on in my research. It follows my working method’s logic of delving deep into core aspects while stopping more briefly at smaller discoveries that nevertheless contribute something significant to the whole. As a result, the texts in each entry vary in length and in their form.

¹ Keller Easterling, “How to redesign the infrastructure? FAQ by Keller Easterling,” *Strelka Mag*, 19 June 2017, https://strelkamag.yc.strelka.com/en/article/how-to-redesign-the-infrastructure-faq-by-keller-easterling_2.

This turned out to also be a good choice for juggling childcare and writing. The writing process accommodated erratic work hours. The substantial texts were written when I had the possibility for consistent focus. Other times, in transit, on a short break between care duties, or in the bathroom while my daughter was taking a bath, I wrote smaller pieces that interrupted or connected with the surrounding texts. In this way, the form of the text also became a consequence of my working situation as a parent of a small child. There is an order through which the entries build on each other, but in the process, it has grown in all directions. As a result, it can also be read in shorter or longer stretches as time allows, in the laid-out order, separately or shuffled. Sometimes, an example, side note, or new topic logically follows the previous entry, but there is also a network of connections drawn across larger distances. To help with the navigation, I have created a network of cross references between some of the entries.

As research goes, there are circles and half-circles, intersections, roundabouts, detours, crooked paths, and occasionally, a direct line. The order of topics reflects this meandering path, but still, it can be loosely organized into three sections, though with a fussy border between them. In the first part, including this text, I speak from the territory of the artwork (or reflection text). I give a brief introduction to the concept of infrastructure, what the artworks might be, the importance of form, and some of my artmaking strategies. In the middle, the perspective shifts to context, what this means today and for me, and how it shapes my work. The last part, growing out of the draft for the essay on an infrastructural perspective, is concerned with the shift that has happened in my work and the strategies I developed. The entry “Loosening the Object” is key to this part as it also describes my personal experience of this journey. This organization is, however, a porous structure in which information and ideas repeatedly cross into other sections.

With this, my writing is also reminiscent of the way I construct exhibitions, and particularly, my upcoming exhibition (at this time of writing) *Infraaktiv* at Nitja senter for samtidskunst, Lillestrøm, which is the spatial companion to this collection of entries. It consists of artworks that are remnants, artworks that are tools, a video about a sculpture, a sculpture that grew out from under another sculpture, information, workshops and the beginning of a longer-term project in Lillestrøm.

The duration of the exhibition is short, but most of the works continue to live on in different forms. Several of the works are collaborative, which means that the exhibition features other voices, together with mine. Multiplicity is considered more important than cohesion, and this notion is echoed in my writing. Like a network of infrastructures, I like to imagine that this collection of entries could also add up to be a space to interact with—laying the foundation and providing function, navigating existing systems, and growing new forms.

Infrastructure

“Infra” means below or beneath. “Infrastructure” means, therefore, literally “below” or “beneath structure.” The term infrastructure originated in the field of transportation. Adopted from French to English in the late nineteenth century, it was a technical term to differentiate between aspects of railway construction: the work done below the tracks, or the organization prior, was the infrastructure; the stations, roads, and workshops that comprised a superstructure were built above or after the tracks. From this specialized beginning, the word is now a ubiquitous term, widely used across the organization and analysis of societies.

Infrastructure is sprawling and uncontainable. The term shares characteristics with the words “system” and “network,” referring to a complex whole consisting of connecting parts. Like these words, the meaning of infrastructure is open and flexible. It moves with ease through time and space, steadily diversifying in its use value. But whereas system and network do not refer to a specific position, infrastructure additionally implies depth or a hierarchy. It places the complex whole beneath or prior to the structure and the superstructure. It is thereby easy to be taken for granted—until it fails or is made to fail. As individuals and citizens, we mostly interact with minor parts of one such complex whole, and grasping its full scale is an almost impossible task. The structures and superstructures are by nature easier to relate to and understand. When traveling by train, for example, our immediate experience is of its punctuality, the comfort of the seats, the stations we use, the service, and the information given by the provider. Below and prior lies a complex and overlapping whole of engineering, ownership, programming, energy networks, waste management, cleaning, labor and labor rights, regulation, steel production, and so on.

After having remained a technical and specialized term for the first part of the twentieth century, infrastructure gained traction in the post-Second World War era. As nations affected by the war began to restore their functions, expanding their military powers and rebuilding their economies at a dramatic speed, the word was at the center of their developments. The anthropologist Ashley Carse describes infrastructure

in this period as “more than a word. It was world-making.”² There was nothing new about the construction of tunnels, bridges, pipelines and other physical installments. What was different in this new era was the supranational orientation and the level of organization. Infrastructure became a tool to reach into areas and discover new ways of global trade and communication. Simultaneously, global NGOs and finance organizations began ordering the world according to levels of development. Describing poor countries as “developing” inserted the idea that the way out of poverty was through building transportation systems, energy networks, communication networks, road access, etc. Modernization was synonymous with infrastructure, which could only be provided by developed countries. The same roads that created the possibility for participating in international trade also left countries vulnerable to exploitation. With infrastructure in place, the groundwork was laid for the extraction of resources by dominant powers. Policy ideas and the outfitting of the structures that made it possible to put them into action thereby can be described as a feedback loop. Seeing the ideas realized triggers more ideas, and “progress” is made. It turns out that infrastructure often is a double-edged sword.

Today, after more than a century of this word’s usage, we are continue to be entangled in multiple layers of far-reaching infrastructure and be deeply affected by it—either on the receiving end, extracting end, or both. Buried below and floating beyond the city’s materiality, cutting through the landscape, stretched under the seabed and permeating bureaucratic processes, infrastructure’s immense power provides and withholds life for both human and non-human beings. However, in our current era of extractive capitalism and climate crisis, it carries an expanded application and meaning, covering the material and immaterial, the social, political, and technical, while its superpower is its stealth and the ability to go unnoticed.

² Ashley Carse, “Keyword: Infrastructure. How a Humble French Engineering Term Shaped the Modern World,” in *Infrastructures and Social Complexity*, ed. Penelope Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen, and Atsuro Morita (New York: Routledge, 2016), 31.

Artworks

Artworks are generally considered at the far end of the spectrum from the category of infrastructure. They do not tend to go unnoticed or wield their power in secrecy. On the contrary, they are displayed within special conditions and often sought out for their unique social and cultural value. Even though it is now commonly accepted that artworks can be almost anything, or not even something at all, we tend to know when we're in the presence of them. They are often recognizable by being something different from their surroundings. They can therefore be said to stand out or be extraordinary. At this point in history, there are no material restrictions for what qualifies as art. But it has an entity, often described as its form, which is determined by the artist, set within physical borders, or indicated through information. It can be spatial and temporal, both of which might be flexible. Because of this wide-open definition, it is easy to operate with an inherited or go-to framework. It therefore felt appropriate to lay out the foundation or an approximation of what I am working from. The European-American art history in which I have been educated is often talked about as *the* history of art—which of course, it is not. But as it is my background, it still serves as my initial framework of reference. My aim is to expand this framework into other territory, while recognizing that the perspective I am operating from is just one of many.

One could say that an artwork is something made by one or several artists or by an artist in collaboration with non-artists. (See Collaboration.) It does not, however, have to be handmade by the artist themselves. But artists also make other things that are not art, as very few artists can support themselves with their artistic practice alone. How many non-art things are made by artists in a society can be seen as a (unreliable) measure of the value placed on art in that society. (See The Berg.)

A video artist can, for example, make commercial videos for a living without it being art. At a different point in time, they might make videos with the same visual language and frame them as art. What separates these instances then, is the intent. Sometimes, artists make art for a long time in their own home or studio, without it being known about or accepted into what the consensus sees as art. Over time, things can gain

or lose value as art. There are endless examples of artists who have been “discovered” at the end of a long working life or after death. This is particularly true for many women. A person can also become an artist and then stop working as an artist. They can disown their previously made artworks, such as Cady Noland famously did based on unapproved conservation work done to her pieces by collectors. An artwork can require participation by the audience to be completed, or the interference with an artwork by the audience can destroy it. Sometimes, members of the public participate in artworks without their knowledge, which would be seen as unethical. Interference can also temporarily give an artwork a different cultural or political meaning, as arguably happened to *Sunflowers* (1888) by Vincent Van Gogh at the National Gallery, London, when the Just Stop Oil activists Phoebe Plummer and Anna Holland threw canned soup at it in 2022.³

Artworks can be extraordinary, trigger unique feelings, draw attention to their ordinary surroundings, or reveal what lies beneath. But often—or simultaneously—they also act as a deflection or provide cover through their display or their value. In the Geneva Freeport, a tax-free storage facility, around 1.2 million artworks are kept in a climate-controlled, high-security repository.⁴ As long as the works remain on site, they don’t have to be declared, and no taxes have to be paid. Art that is never seen is used by billionaires and oligarchs to avoid tax bills and escape sanctions.

Other artworks are kept away from light due to the fragility of their materials. Artworks belonging to private and public collections can be lent and borrowed and shipped around the world to be displayed in group exhibitions and artist surveys. They rely on specialized art handling, transport, and often, on the work of conservationists to stay in shape.

³ The protest took place at the National Gallery in London on 14 October 2022. Plummer and Holland threw two cans of Heinz tomato soup at the painting and then glued themselves to the wall in a demand that the government stop issuing new licenses to extract fossil fuels. The painting was behind glass and damage was only caused to its frame. Plummer was sentenced to two years in prison and Holland to twenty months for criminal damage.

⁴ “Unlocking the Secrets of the Geneva Freeport: A Haven for Priceless Art and Tax Evasion,” *Swiss Times*, 27 July 2023, <https://theswiss-times.ch/unlocking-the-secrets-of-the-geneva-freeport-a-haven-for-priceless-art-and-tax-evasion/>.

An artwork can be repeated at regular intervals and then be simultaneously the same but different. For example, Michael Asher participated in the Skulptur Projekte Münster exhibition for the first time in 1977. His work was a camper van, which was moved to a new location each week of the nineteen weeks it was on display. The work was also included in the next editions in 1987, 1997, and in 2007 with a camper van of the same model.⁵ When possible, it was placed in the same locations. When the location was no longer available or it had changed too much from the previous edition, the van was placed in a garage to wait out the week.

Artworks outside of the gallery space can interrupt, blend in, reinforce the current state, or be a catalyst for change. But the planning, realization, and exhibition of most artworks, inside or outside, rely on much of the same infrastructure as the rest of society in financing, production, logistics, and care.

⁵ Michael Asher died in 2012 and could therefore not participate in the 2017 edition of Skulptur Projekte Münster.



Michael Asher, *LWL-Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte*, Münster, Germany, skulptur projekte münster 07, 17 June–30 September 2007. Trailer in various locations. Parking position, 1st week, 16–24 June, Siegelkammer and Pferdegasse.

Photo by LWL / Roman Mensing. © Michael Asher Foundation. Accessed February 2025.
<https://www.skulptur-projekte-archiv.de/en-us/2007/projects/91/>.

Michael Asher

I completed my undergraduate degree in fine art at the California Institute of the Arts in 2002, where Michael Asher had by then taught his Post Studio Art critique class for twenty-five years.⁶ During my first meeting with Michael outside of class, in my small on-campus studio, I showed him an installation I was working on. It involved a group of cardboard boxes that I wanted to distribute on the floor of the gallery space, like generic structures alluding to both suburban housing (which was the direct context of the CalArts campus) and sheds for pets. The installation would later also include a temporary freestanding wall with an exposed support structure, where I mounted line drawings of different weather conditions. It also had an audio component referencing an animal presence in this environment (a loop of a voice every now and then shouting, “Hey Squirrel!”). Although layered in content, it was a work of pared-down expression, as much a result of my then interest in conceptual and minimal practices as a fear of accidentally saying something that would exceed my knowledge of the place I was living in or my position within contemporary art. Prior to studying at CalArts, I studied at the Environmental Art department of the Glasgow School of Art from 1998 to 2000, where I learned more about observation than making. There, I developed a process of critical self-reflection regarding the artwork-context relationship, but having just recently left the Norwegian countryside for Glasgow made me uncertain about how to engage with the context in which I found myself. In Valencia, California, I was even more of an outsider. I knew the everyday materials I found were loaded with meaning, but I wasn’t in a particularly good position to make sense of them.

At the time of Michael’s studio visit, I was contemplating how to best give the cardboard boxes I was working with a uniform, neutral appearance by covering up the different product info and labelling printed on their surfaces. “Why would you do that?” Michael asked, when learning about my plan. He pointed out the richness of these

⁶ Michael Asher took over the Post Studio class from John Baldessari when he started teaching at the California Institute of the Arts in the 1976/77 academic year. Under Baldessari, the class was focused on developments in art and visiting artist lectures. Asher changed the focus of the class to the concern with the students’ own work. For more info, see Thomas Lawson, “Michael Asher: There Is Never Enough Time to Get Everything Said,” *East of Borneo*, 24 May 2022, <https://eastofborneo.org/articles/michael-asher-there-is-never-enough-time-to-get-everything-said/>.

graphics and how hiding them would remove both depth and meaning from the work, thus isolating the boxes from the situation that had produced their forms. I didn't want the work to be about logo design, consumerism or mass production, or what else I saw in these surfaces. I remember thinking that reducing my cardboard boxes to their most neutral and uniform state would create an open form—a form that could hold varied meanings for different people, and therefore, not be exclusive. Instead, what Michael Asher taught me was that these designs were the points of connection beyond the walls of the gallery to the products these boxes were made to distribute. Erasing them and neutralizing the boxes turned them into empty metaphors. They could stand in for houses, dog shelters, moving boxes, or any other types of boxes. The specificity of the logos however, provided a context, and through this, gave them the ability to connect.

Form

When used to describe art, form generally refers to the visual aspects or compositional qualities. The *Britannica Dictionary* states: “In sculpture and other plastic arts, form (or shape) is both tangible and visible and thus is the chief element of organization.”⁷ Historically, it was in modernism that a separation between the form and content of the artwork emerged: the form being the composition and arrangement of elements and the content being the matter that is communicated through this arrangement or composition. The form is what makes and holds the matter together as a work of art. Out of this understanding, the idea of formalism developed, which is the position of interpreting and evaluating the work based on its formal quality. More important than it being a painting of a dog are the colors, brush strokes, composition, and scale conveying this representation. For great parts of the twentieth century, formalism thrived in both Europe and the United States. Form was a tool to generate value and uniqueness, which set art apart from life: this was the autonomous artwork, ideally created in isolation from the social and political forces playing out in society. Form bound art to value through being reduced to aesthetics.

Instead of this narrow reading, literary critic Caroline Levine has made a case for expanding the usage of the concept of form to apply equally to the sociopolitical experience as to art or literature.⁸ She writes: “Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference.”⁹ (See Infrastructure Space.) She points out that within the fields of culture, great attention has been and continues to be paid to ordering principles at stake in political struggles, such as exclusion and discrimination, voting rights and colonialism. But typically, she writes, aesthetic and political arrangements are treated as separate, and the language of form is not applied to both. Form as used in art or literature is often not understood to refer to something outside of the field, and a word like “structure” is instead used to describe politics. Resistance or critique of political

⁷ “Form,” *Britannica*, accessed 9 March 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/form-philosophy>.

⁸ I am indebted to Keller Easterling for introducing me to Caroline Levine’s writing. See Keller Easterling, *Medium Design* (London: Verso Books, 2021), 63.

⁹ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.

systems and oppressive structures is expressed using forms that have developed within the history of art. Thereby, the politics becomes the content or materiality to which the artistic form is applied.

In Levine's understanding, a new kind of formalist reading can be applied to both the social, the political, the technical, and the aesthetic. Whether in art or in road construction, there is a physical materiality or ideas that need a form in order to operate in the world: "Precisely because they are abstract organizing principles, shapes and patterns can be picked up and moved to new contexts."¹⁰ That organizing principle—or form—can be simple, complex, multi-layered, or even paradoxical. In this way, she also raises the possibility of form as a tool to bring art closer to the world in which it exists.

Levine explains her open understanding of form in terms of "affordances." An affordance is not a property of a material or a design; it is a potential as seen by the individual user or its latent action. Design theorist and cognitive scientist Don Norman first introduced the idea as "the actionable properties between the world and an actor [user]."¹¹ It describes the relationship between humans and their surroundings. Through this lens, it becomes clear that something can have multiple, diverse, and sometimes even contradictory qualities and purposes depending on who or what is seeing or interacting with it. An enclosure affords control for the owner of a horse, but for the horse, it affords entrapment (or possibly security). A salad bowl affords containing and serving of food to a person in a kitchen preparing food. To a toddler, it might afford sitting in or wearing. This can be described as a simple interplay between the object and the user, through which the potential gets realized. Levine transfers this understanding to reading forms, namely that forms, too, can be seen as qualities that come to life through the imagination, skill, or need of the user (or viewer). She states: "Although each form lays claim to different affordances, all forms do share one affordance. Precisely because they are abstract organizing

¹⁰ Caroline Levine, "Forms, Literary and Social," *Dibur Literary Journal*, no. 2 (Spring 2016), Stanford Humanities Center, <https://shc.stanford.edu/arcade/publications/dibur/form/forms-literary-and-social>.

¹¹ "Affordances and Design," *Interaction Design Foundation (IxDF)*, 13 December 2015, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/affordances-and-design>.

principles, shapes and patterns are iterable—portable. They can be picked up and moved to a new context.”¹²

It is because of Levine’s analysis of form through the idea of affordances that I have chosen this as a field of reference. In challenging the notion of a stable idea of form, theorist Donna J. Haraway, for example, proposes another horizon—that of the complex understanding of matter and the interaction between human and non-human agents.

Affordances speak of the potentials that lie in both artwork and context and thereby aligns with infrastructural thinking. It also provides a new understanding to what the boundaries of an artwork might be. As something that moves and reproduces, an artwork is not limited by its original body or entity. It can develop and reproduce to create connections across time and space. (See Circulation Realm, Public Hygiene (used).) Sometimes, a form is a meeting point for differing or opposing intentions, and it often carries an ambivalence or has a different meaning or experience for different users or viewers. (See Occupy Wall Street.) Form is therefore both political and malleable. It is powerful in that it can have divergent or even contradictory implications to whom or what it is applied.

¹² Levine, *Forms*, 7.

Formless

FORMLESS—A dictionary would begin as of the moment when it no longer provided the meaning of words but their tasks. In this way *formless* is not only an adjective having such and such a meaning, but a term serving to declassify, requiring in general that every thing should have a form.¹³

Georges Bataille first introduced the idea of the “formless” (*l’informe*) as an entry in the “Critical Dictionary,” published between 1929 and 1930 in the magazine *Documents*.¹⁴ At a time when fascism was rising in Europe, *Documents* positioned itself against both academia and a field of art preoccupied with aesthetics and order. In the “Critical Dictionary,” Bataille listed and provided “definitions” of an eclectic selection of words. Acting like a critique of the dictionary itself, the entry titled “Formless” became its core text: “A dictionary is never critical, any element of subjectivity would allow in the formless, that heterological gob of spittle.”¹⁵

That “heterological gob of spittle” was a form of “base materialism,” an understanding of matter liberated from categorization and hierarchies. When used to categorize and organize, form becomes a tool for oppression—one that could also be instrumentalized by fascists to impose their totalitarian structure on society. As a resistance to this, formlessness can be thought of as the “negation of definition.” The structure of a dictionary became for Bataille a way to present paradoxical ideas and the absurdity of life. With this, he wanted to define formlessness as not just an adjective but a tool to show that the world itself has no form.

¹³ Georges Bataille, “Critical Dictionary,” in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica: Comprising the Critical Dictionary & Related Texts*, ed. Georges Bataille, Robert Lebel, and Isabelle Waldberg (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 51.

¹⁴ *Documents* was founded in 1929 by Bataille and Pierre d’Espezel and also involved a long list of people. Both artists were involved with Surrealism, Dada, and fields of academia.

¹⁵ Alastair Brotchie, “Introduction,” in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica: Comprising the Critical Dictionary & Related Texts*, ed. Georges Bataille, Robert Lebel, and Isabelle Waldberg (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 23.

Active Forms

To be active, to take action, to be an activist: these are capabilities associated with living beings rather than an artwork. My use of this term in the title of this research project grew out of an urge to find ways the artwork can be more active. As an artist and a human, I am increasingly anxious about the imminent threat of a climate crisis and all its consequences. This omnipresent condition and the lack of action to tackle it has been a determining factor in my search for strategies and (im)materials that can result in active forms. I also base my research on several historical and contemporary approaches to the artwork-context relationship.

Site-specific or context-based artworks are often described as activating a place. This might refer to transforming how a place is seen or used. In one simple example, an artwork could be an attraction, transforming a “dead site” into a place for gathering in. Urban developers speak of “placemaking,” which, instead of just erecting buildings and laying out an urban grid, also takes the social aspect of a city into consideration. Art is an obvious tool in this approach, to varying degrees of success. Conversely, in the case of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* from 1981, for example—which set out to “redefine” the plaza it was created for—the work instead brought a community together to fight for its removal. To Bataille, the idea of the formless was a way to oppose or resist fascist aesthetics and bourgeois order. Decades later, in 1968, the theorist Jack Burnham proposed the concept of systems esthetics, where he argued for artwork that stretched beyond their material frameworks. At the time, he observed a “transition from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented culture*” and argued that art should take an active part in this development.¹⁶ As Burnham saw it, a true artistic response to the times occurs through living systems capable of responding to their environments. “In a systems context, invisibility, or invisible parts, share equal importance with things seen,” he wrote.¹⁷

¹⁶ Jack Burnham, “Systems Esthetics,” *Artforum*, September 1968, <https://www.artforum.com/features/systems-esthetics-201372/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

According to Keller Easterling, the most consequential elements of infrastructure are also often invisible. These are what she describes as active forms, as “bits of code in the software that organizes building.”¹⁸ My use of the term “Active Forms” thereby refers to both artworks and the contexts they exist within. It is, to me, a term that binds these two entities together. The artwork as an active form is an expansion of its framework—a stretching out in time and space. It is active in the sense that it activates but also that it can change; it can grow into its context. Whatever the context of a particular artwork is also in itself a changing entity or condition. As a connecting term, “Active Forms” acts as a tool of criticality aimed both at the world around me and my own practice. Can the artwork’s form(s) be a challenge to my understanding of the potential it holds?

In this research project, I have explored this set of potentials in different contexts. It comprises the exhibitions *Circulation Realm*, *Infra*, and *Infraaktiv* and the two related artworks *Vekselvirkning* and *Kunstneren Marte Eknæs forteller om Vekselvirkning*.¹⁹ It also includes a status report on the longer-term project *Transformasjon*—which, at the time I hand this in, has only taken the form of information, communication, intention letters, and meetings. Through this process, it marks the continuation of my research beyond the end of my PhD fellowship and into the territories of urban development and dealing with the effects of climate change. Between these artworks and exhibitions, a range of activities has taken place—including network-building, the development of borrowed and learned strategies, collaboration, financing, recycling, multitasking, and logistics planning. At times, the process has also led me away from the artwork altogether and moved into the territory of activism in the search for the best ways I can contribute to the fight against the climate crisis as an artist and a human.

The exhibition *Circulation Realm* at ROM for kunst og arkitektur in Oslo, 2023, was the first project I completed as part of this research soon after I returned from maternity leave. This was done in collaboration

¹⁸ Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 14.

¹⁹ *Vekselvirkning* and *Kunstneren Marte Eknæs forteller om Vekselvirkning* can respectively be translated as “relationship of mutual influence” (see also the entry [Vekselvirkning](#)) and “The artist Marte Eknæs talks about Vekselvirkning.”

with Michael Amstad and Nicolau Vergueiro, frequent collaborators in my practice. Michael is a Swiss filmmaker and animator who is also my partner and the father of our daughter, Utu. Nicolau is a Brazilian-American artist and writer, who I have worked with since 2013. He has also contributed to two entries in this text. Collaboration has been central throughout my research as a strategic choice in expanding the understanding of the artwork and “artworking.” At the time of *Circulation Realm*, the public commission *Vekselvirkning* (2023) had been ongoing for a year. It was installed just after the opening of *Circulation Realm*. I continued working on *Vekselvirkning*, and at the end of 2023, I made the first (and so far, only) installment of the temporary version of *Kunstneren Marte Eknæs forteller om Vekselvirkning* (2023).²⁰ These two projects, including collaborations, led directly to my exhibition *Infra* at Efremidis in the spring of 2024. Efremidis was a commercial gallery in Berlin that shuttered shortly after the end of my exhibition. The context of a commercial gallery at the end of its mysterious life provided some restrictions and highlighted other aspects of the work. The final exhibition, *Infraaktiv*, at Nitja senter for samtidskunst, in 2025, is therefore the more active realization of these ideas, as it brings this project to a temporary conclusion.

²⁰ For the translation of this title, see footnote 19.

Collaboration by Nicolau Vergueiro and Marte Eknæs

The aggregation of two distinct languages in the same expression or action should consider the useful and non-useful aspects of each: What can be retained? What is to be refused? What is then made anew? What can be cannibalized?

- Collaboration is an infrastructure, as it makes things possible.
- Infrastructure is collaboration.
- It is (or can be) a form of art-working that relates to organizational forms elsewhere in society.

An active infrastructure is aware and enables collaborative forces to play, share their nature, and identify their optimum stance/function.

- Could we call our collaborative practice our infrastructural practice?
- But your practice also has an infrastructure.

We connect through our individual infrastructures, and we share infrastructure and build a combined infrastructure.

- We grow our collaborative pieces from materials, ideas, and sites.
- Materials and sites are stubborn. We can manipulate and alter them, but they come with agendas.
- We can learn and expand from their agendas.
- Accepting and encouraging blind spots and the instructiveness toward one's blind spots. They are also collaborators.
- When making art in a collaboration, priorities and plans will shift, and the forms produced will result from a more complex set of factors: communication logistics and production and dynamics in working relationships when distinct languages merge in different time zones, leading to extra-large digital files.

Digital file management. Unruly materials.

Piece 1 (2013)

→ First, you pair two things: let's name two of our basic idea-tools:
trash can icon + cannibalism action

We feed trash or ideas into receptacles, and at some point, they start eating, out of their own free will. And they grow.

Those two things become a third thing; a tableau, a dynamic; together, they can talk about a new possible thing.

“Trash cans eating each other”!

—a narrative is articulated.

An Orgy.



Marte Eknæs and Nicolau Vergueiro, *Orgy*, 2013.
Custom printed fabric, latex, cast aluminum. Photo by What Pipeline, Detroit.

Cannibalism by Nicolau Vergueiro

Brazilian culture was founded from each bite its Indigenous peoples took from the European flesh of explorers, catechizers, and soldiers. With each bite, the Tupinambás chewed off a part of Portuguese missionary Frei Sardinha, as taught in history books. Teeth sunk into the structure of the opposing actor: muscle, bone, psyche, power. Systems gurgitating the systems of others, digesting their forms and ideas with critical enzymes, breaking down, assimilating, and rejecting violence and aesthetics, transmuting into something authentic. In the act of cannibalism, the oppressor is reorganized while being consumed into (meta)physical parts in a rite of agency; a clash of belief systems that calls out colonial indoctrination through the vital power of an entirely different technological order.

The journals of new world travelers became a popular genre in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, which fantasized the act of cannibalism through a range of tales and imagery that popularized the “violation of moral colonial codes.” The decapitated head—an indispensable icon in the many etchings depicting allegories of America. Needless to point out, European empires continued for centuries to massacre hundreds of thousands across new worlds. Yet, the deeper delirium lay in their failure to recognize the Other’s transgressive assertion of agency through intimate acts of consumption—rather than through imposed systems of dominance. In monarchical logic, cannibalism was the ultimate marker of barbarism—and a further justification for conquest and conversion. But the cannibal became a mirror, reflecting the Europeans’ anxieties about identity, morality, and the cliffs of their progress, which relied on mass dehumanization for its structural foundation. The fetish of the Other, as we know it, might have been invented in the Age of Discovery.

The most famous and valuable painting by a Brazilian artist is *Abaporu* (1928), by Tarsila do Amaral. The painting depicts a solitary, naked, genderless figure, gigantic in forced perspective, paired with a tall cactus blooming a round yellow flower which, in scale-play, doubles as the sun. “Abaporu,” from the Tupi-Guarani language, translates as “people-eating person.” The painted figure is pensive, head resting on hand, brow slightly frowning, with awkward proportions, as if Tarsila started

painting the feet too big for the height of the canvas and had to gradually rescale and curve the rest of the body, force-fitting the lonely cannibal into the frames of a modern new world.

Tarsila painted *Abaporu* as a birthday gift to her then-husband, Oswald de Andrade, which in turn inspired his *Anthropophagy Manifesto*—both seminal works in Brazilian modernism. The movement adopted narratives of the Indigenous cannibal as a strategy to reclaim a national cultural identity in reformulating the intrinsic (postcolonial) conditional relation to European customs and ideology. Tarsila rescues Abaporu as the earliest representation of a Brazilian anticolonial figure, locating the existential angst of the (post)modern cannibal as a genderless figure.

As a strategy for progressive survival, De Andrade urges us to consider cannibalism and the cannibal, and its interaction with the Other, as a manifesto for cultural ownership: “Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question. ... Only cannibalism unites us. ... Socially. Economically. Philosophically. ... I am only interested in what is not mine.”²¹ The rhetoric does not negate the Other, nor does it define it as Other. It uses the Other as a resource for an interactivity of systems that the cannibal reconfigures. There is no Other.

²¹ Oswald de Andrade, *The Manifesto Antropófago*, 1928, available in various editions and translations.

Ethics

There are several layers to an ethical art practice and to the ethics of artistic research. The most rudimentary level includes proper referencing of sources and crediting of contributors, fair pay, and good conditions for work carried out in the project's name. Although a little more abstract, the use of resources and the responsibility for waste and emissions associated with projects also fall, as I see it, within the basic understanding of an ethical practice. To some extent, these factors hinge on societal structures, and how they are tackled must also be understood within these structures. As an example, my commute between Berlin and Oslo by air travel is cheaper and easier to access than by train. The train would typically be at least twice as expensive and take between seventeen and twenty-two hours versus roughly five hours door-to-door when traveling by air. Additionally, the travel agency used by the National Academy of the Arts does not make bookings for international train travel. My solution for this has been to make fewer trips. As I cannot be away from my three-year-old daughter for too long, I have therefore not been able to be present at the academy as much as I would like. One could say that this causes another ethical problem, as I have certain commitments to the academy as a colleague and faculty member.

Beyond and including these basic considerations, the foundation of my research project is one of ethics. At the core of the investigation into how an artwork can be active and how it is shaped and can influence its environment through infrastructure lies the question of how a practice can participate in the fight for a just and livable society. These are not two or three big questions to answer but a process of continuous response, positioning, and decision-making at all stages of a project and in engaging with different contexts. Another way of framing a question of ethics could be how to take responsibility for consequences of the work and its process. With this, form is also a question of ethics. Considering the consequences of an artwork's production is likely to involve some sacrifice. (See Loosening the Object.) These sacrifices, of prioritizing ethics over aesthetics, will require different infrastructural solutions and result in a different form.

Collaboration is an important factor in several of these sub-projects. As a way of working, it can be considered ethical because it fosters dialog

and shared problem-solving. However, it requires mutual care, a structure of equality, and a balanced share of workload. I discuss several of these situations and strategies and their outcomes throughout this reflection text. (See Entries, Vekselvirkning, Circulation Realm, Direct Action, and Committee of Culture and Society.)

The choice of context also poses ethical questions. Sometimes, the context might make it impossible to operate within it ethically. This was a question that came up in relation to my 2024 exhibition *Infra* at the commercial gallery Efremidis. The gallery was founded and funded by one wealthy individual, and due to its opaque structures, it was never revealed to me how this money was made. The art market is famously unregulated. It also often operates in the shadows, with all the financial infrastructure not only hidden from the public but also often hidden from the artist involved. I was given the opportunity at very short notice, which reduced the in-depth investigations I could do beyond completing the work to be displayed. This highlighted the idea that time is an issue of ethics—and of infrastructure—as it opens and closes possibilities.

The change of context from being a freelancer to an employee at an institution added an additional layer of infrastructure to my practice. I was suddenly part of a department within a larger institution, a PhD program, and I became a member of the Norwegian Association of Researchers. It presented what can be called an ethical opportunity. There were networks of people and political influence that could be tapped into. I decided it would be ethical to use some of my salaried time and limited opportunity to try to have some influence within these structures. Mostly, this was spent on working with a group of people from other institutions to persuade the Association of Researchers to take an official stance against further oil exploration in the North Sea.

The work of determining ethics does not end with the completion of my doctoral thesis. It cannot be isolated from other aspects of artmaking—or life. Ethical actions or behavior take different forms, however. Whereas one decision is often easily understood as more ethical than the other, decisions need to be continuously checked. Some situations require resistance, others demand reflection or redefinition.

Uh Oh

In her talk at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, in January 2024, artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles discussed her work *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* (1976) and how it came together. The piece consists of 720 photographs of maintenance and service workers in the building where the Whitney Museum was located at the time. She took the photos throughout the duration of the exhibition, and therefore, the piece on display was incomplete at the time of the opening. In her talk, Ukeles expressed excitement over the shock and slight embarrassment she caused almost five decades ago: “Uh oh, the work wasn’t ready for the opening!”²² Instead, the work accumulated throughout the show. Each of the participants who were photographed was asked if they wanted to be indicated as making art or working. The photographs were labeled in different colors indicating each participant’s view, but Ukeles created no hierarchy between the different fields. Her choice in presentation was simple, akin to a school project. At the closing of the exhibition, when *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day* was finally finished, she organized a party for all the participants. With materiality, time, and care, she created an artwork that gave attention and visibility to the laborers she had invited into the art space that they normally worked to maintain.

²² “Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Touching Maintenance,” with Mierle Laderman Ukeles (live via video), Lisa Baraitser, and Bettina Knaup, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 14 January 2024.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*, 1976.

720 collaged dye diffusion transfer prints with self-adhesive labels, graphite pencil, collaged acrylic on board, and self-adhesive vinyl on paper (accessed February 2025, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/mierle-laderman-ukeles/i-make-maintenance-art-one-hour-every-day-1976>).

Vekselvirkning

The Norwegian word *vekselvirkning* translates to a “relationship of mutual influence.” It is also the title of a permanent commission I realized in Bærum, Norway, in 2023. Bærum is a municipality situated west of Oslo and is considered a suburb. It is wealthy and has been under a conservative government since 1952. The administrative center is the city of Sandvika, which has a town hall and a *Kommunegård* (the municipal administrative building), separated by the Sandvikselva river. Additionally, the *Kommunegård* houses spaces to be used by the public, including a large lobby with a café. My proposal for a fountain sculpture titled *Vekselvirkning* was selected in a competition that asked artists to create a permanent artwork in front of the *Kommunegård* as part of an extensive renovation of the building. The area where the artwork is placed can be described as something between a wide pavement and small square, where people pass through or go outside their offices for a break. The artwork is connected to the building and the building’s function and is also a marker of the public space in front of it.

My title *Vekselvirkning* first referred to the material components of the sculpture that formed the permanent commission, which are a piece of rhomb-porphry rock collected as by-product from a local road construction project, an uneven spiral from steel pipes in blue lacquer with water spilling out in both ends, and a yellow fiber-glass grating covering the basins collecting the water. In the basement of the building is a technical room with a 1,500-litre water tank and a pump and filters to operate the fountain’s circular water system. But as I started working on the sculpture, I realized the title describes not only the material components but also the process. Permanence denotes an enduring, unchanging quality, whereas *vekselvirkning* implies flexibility—a state open to influence and potential alteration. Yet, a work titled *Vekselvirkning* had won the competition to become a permanent physical presence in the city of Sandvika. Maybe these terms were not mutually exclusive after all.

On the commissioner’s part, one could imagine an attraction to have a permanent artwork that suggests or hints at openness and flexibility. I, however, saw these qualities more like challenges to each other. Possibly, the work could be both permanent and flexible, but if so,

permanence would have to give up some of its rigidity. The sculpture was to be erected to stand in its given position for the foreseeable future, but the society around it will not remain the same and thereby the meaning or role of the sculpture in that society will also change. Maybe there will be changes to the physical location it is in. Most likely, someone will scratch the lacquered steel or scribble on it. The surface will anyway change over time, but beyond the transformations that might emerge after completion, the concept of embracing mutual influence meant something wider to me than the sculpture it would produce.

Considering this, I decided that the work already existed, as it was conceived as an idea. I expanded what I saw as the temporal framework of my artwork to include the journey from initial plan to realization to potential scrap metal at some point far in the future. In doing this, the sculpture naturally also grew in space, spanning the geographical distances between production sites and material origins. The physical manifestation as a fountain sculpture, which is what most people will know as the artwork, can thereby just be considered one of its many forms. All the parts and stages in the process required discussion and interaction between people and between people and materials, and each one of these events conjured up a different version of the work. It existed as 3-D model and a document of intent, a budget, a piece of rhomb-porphry rock in a stern and foggy landscape of unfinished highways, a skeleton hose construction in the garden of the fountain technician, a collection of bent induction pipe pieces resting on the floor of the metal workshop, another collection of pipes in different blue tones temporarily serving as toys for my daughter, and a climate gas emissions report, to mention a few. All these moments and elements had their own form and some kind of audience.

If one were to think of the work as an octopus, these instances would be its tentacles, which reach into the artwork's context and communicates on behalf of the main body. They are connected but, nevertheless, act independently. In doing that, they establish relationships and transmit and bring back information. Through these relationships, the work can dig deeper into its context and grow in several directions.

One such tentacle of *Vekselvirkning* was the process of induction bending the steel pipes that would connect to form the spiral shape. The pipes were processed at NIRAS in Telemark, which is the only facility for induction bending in Norway. Eager to learn more about this technique, I went with my collaborator Michael Amstad to visit after the work was done. The facility consists of wharf-sized halls with bending machines positioned far apart from each other. On the wall are templates that have been produced for previous jobs and that can be re-used if needed. Induction bending is done slowly by heating and cooling down the pipe as it is given its precise shape. It is utilized for curving large-diameter pipes, which wouldn't be possible with cold bending techniques. It is therefore often used in the construction of bridges and other large structures, but NIRAS's clients are overwhelmingly from the oil and gas industry.

Not all tentacles lead to pleasant discoveries, but they can still prove useful, as was the case with uncovering this work's second-degree entanglement with the fossil fuel industry. It did not alter how I understood the expression of the sculpture, but it changed what I considered its task. My production process was based in environmental awareness. Rhomb-porphry was used because it was a by-product of local road construction. I inquired about using steel with the shortest possible transport distance. The water is a circular system. Most meetings were digital, and I cut my air travel down to a minimum. All the information about the production and running of the fountain was collected and analyzed by the climate think-tank Cicero, which I commissioned to generate a climate emissions report. This report caused great excitement among the city council of Bærum. They now had a sculpture highlighting environmental concerns outside their newly renovated *Kommunegård* without needing to change any actual policies. Did I accidentally stage my own act of artwashing? (See [Context-based](#).)

In the face of this, the artwork's many tentacles—particularly the unpleasant ones—opened its potential and proved it necessary to address the entanglements. Already challenging the rigidity of permanence in my approach, I tried to find a way for the piece to come out in public as an expanded artwork.

The sculpture maintains permanence by essentially preserving its given form within its given spatial setting, as long as that equation lasts. But durability can also be manifested through repeated temporal events. As Caroline Levine states when analyzing the stability of institutions:²³ “One of the crucial affordances of temporal rhythms—repetition—is thus essential to the endurance of institutions.”²⁴ (See *Form*.) To the stability of a church or a school, the predictability of events—mass or lessons and lunch breaks—is as important as the building where these are housed.

In the case of an artwork, permanence normally associated with material form can be challenged by the predictability of repetitive events. My plan was to hold annual events on the site of *Vekselvirkning*, which would become temporal markers of a similar inevitability. Playing out in time, the events would have the benefit of being responsive to changes in both the physical artwork and its context. The format would allow for public self-reflection, discussion of failure, alternative solutions, and other aspects excluded from a sculpture made from stone and steel. I held one event in November 2023 titled *Kunstneren Marte Eknæs forteller om Vekselvirkning*.²⁵ The event could be described as a multi-media lecture where I presented the artwork as a center for connections and relationships, or octopus, if you will, through processes and topics. Here, I could use my interaction with the oil industry as a way to make a statement about Norway’s aggressive politics on fossil fuels. Through the stories I told, I made visible the artwork’s other forms. It became clear, however, from the questions I received from the few people who had showed up, that their interest was more focused on my intention behind the physical form of the sculpture they encountered daily.

The temporal stability of repetition, like solid material form, also requires resources. Therefore, the idea of a long-term program has only been briefly interrupted; it lives as a potential to be realized in the future.

²³ Generally, in this text, “institution” narrowly refers to organizations dedicated to the display and dissemination of art. Levine writes about it in greater terms, referring to organizing society: “Conventionally, the word refers to government, churches, prisons, and other official organizations, but it also carries a broader sense that encompasses all regulative practices, all orderly and established customs and usages.” See Levine, *Forms*, 57.

²⁴ Ibid., 58.

²⁵ For the translation of this title, see footnote 19.



Installation of *Vekselvirkning*, Sandvika, 2023.
Photographed by Marte Eknæs, 27 February 2023.

Octopus

An octopus's brain is separated into one main brain center, located between its eyes, and eight "satellite brains" located at the end of each tentacle. These are individual nervous systems that can pick up information independently. For the central brain not to be overwhelmed by all the smells, tastes, and sensations coming in from each tentacle, the octopus has a neural ring system to communicate directly with each other. The different tentacles of the same octopus can both work together on a task or solve different tasks simultaneously. As these tentacles are boneless structures, they can bend at any place, making the octopus a completely flexible being.

The central brain is donut shaped, with the esophagus going through it. An octopus, thereby, needs to chew its food well so it doesn't inflict brain damage on itself simply by getting nutrition into its system.



Michael Amstad and Marte Eknæs, *Lifeworld*, 2025.
Footage from GEOMAR, Helmholtz-Zentrum für Ozeanforschung Kiel.
Video still.

Climate Emissions Report

The climate emissions report for the sculpture *Vekselvirkning* (2023) by climate think-tank Cicero consists of a detailed document that breaks down and translates my artistic elements into calculable units of CO₂-equivalents. The sculpture and calculation are two versions of the work, but they are not unconditionally tied to each other. The report speaks of the amounts of each material used, production methods, energy use, travel, and transport. It lays out the very idea of a *vekselvirkning*, or a “relationship of mutual influence,” in diagrammatic language, but it does not account for things like color, shape, positioning, and other decisions that led to the sculptural form of the piece.

From another angle, a different set of possibilities and decisions that would not necessarily have impacted the sculpture’s appearance could still have changed the outcome of the report. For example, if it wasn’t for the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, we probably would have been able to procure steel from Finland instead of China, which would have lowered the emissions caused by transport. The number of hours the fountain is running per day and throughout the year, which is decided by the city council, also impacts the result.

In thinking of the climate-emissions calculation as a different version of an artwork, I decided I wanted to also calculate the carbon footprint of my exhibitions. I found an online emissions calculator called the Green Producers Tool (GPT), which is created for the culture sector by the Green Producers Club in Oslo. In 2023, this tool was primarily made for the fields of theater production, film, TV, and concerts. To make it relevant for my needs in an art context, I hacked it to make an approximate calculation for my 2023 exhibition, *Circulation Realm*, and included the results as a print mounted on the wall. Since then, a specialized version of GPT has been launched for the art field. As one artist among institutional representatives, I was invited to be part of the focus group for this pilot version, and I learned more about its intention and priorities. GPT is a subscriber service that institutions pay to use. It is a helpful and well-functional tool for calculating and thereby reducing the climate impact of art- and exhibition-making. But it does so without any considerations beyond this narrow task.

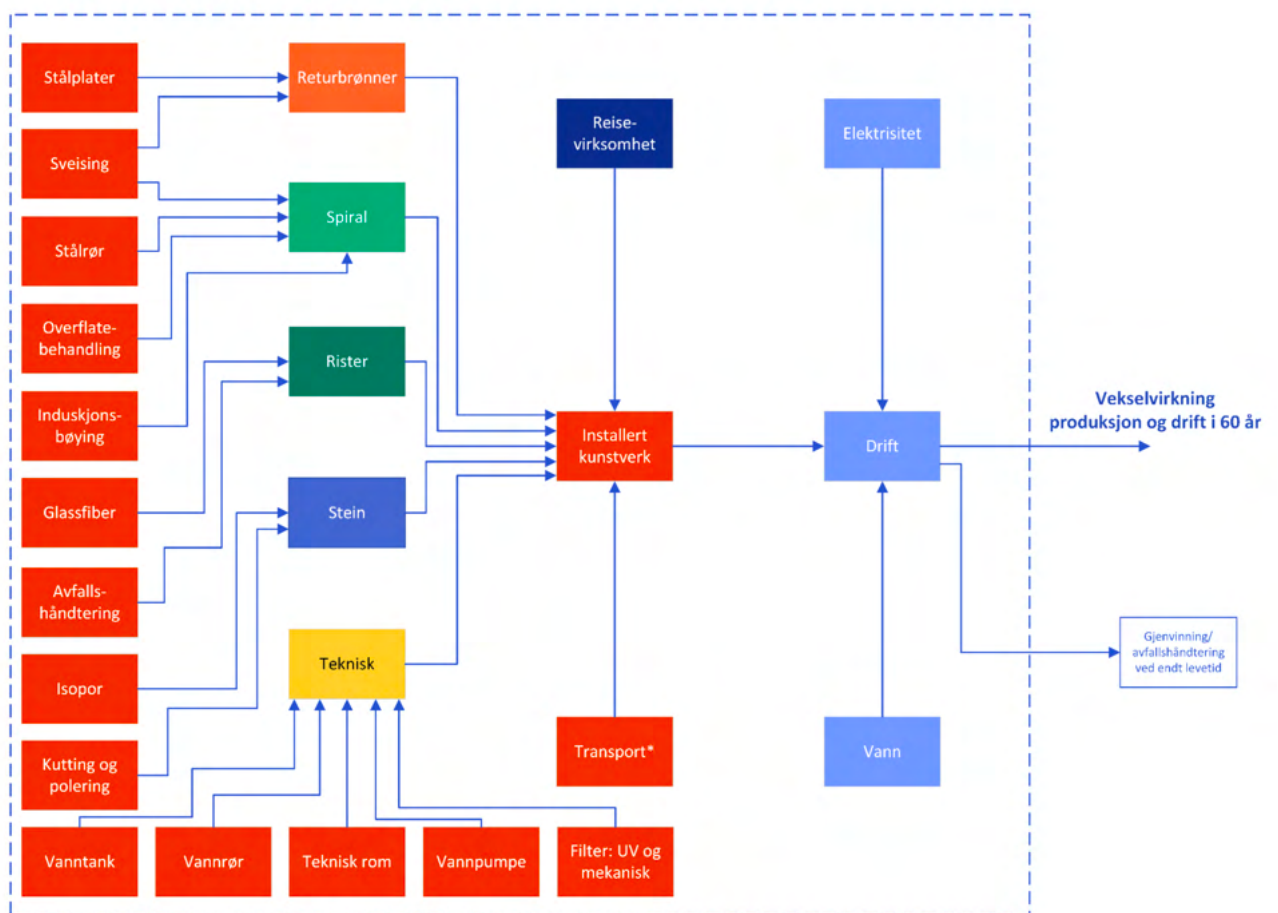
The original carbon-emissions calculator was, ironically, launched by British Petroleum, or BP, the second largest non-state-owned fossil fuel company in the world. In the early 2000s, BP sensed that knowledge about the damaging effects of burning of fossils could have a negative impact on their business. They hired the public relations company Ogilvy & Mather “to promote the slant that climate change is not the fault of an oil giant, but that of individuals.”²⁶ Instead of making the carbon-emissions results from its own production public, BP gave individuals access to its newly developed carbon calculator so they could track the emissions of their everyday lives. (See Form.) The term “carbon footprint” was born, and the fossil fuel giant had managed to shift focus away from itself and onto the consumer while they continued their production as normal.²⁷ The problem is that in a fossil fuel driven society, everybody’s lives have a carbon footprint. A test was made calculating the climate impact of a homeless person sleeping in shelters and eating in soup kitchens in New York. Indirectly, this person will have emissions of around 8.5 tons of carbon dioxide each year. The genius of the carbon footprint standard is that it gives people a tool that they can use to make small reductions and see a noticeable change in the numbers. With this, they have a feeling of doing something for the environment. The climate crisis is overwhelming and abstract, so this seemingly tangible result might make us feel a little better (even if it has no real effect in the bigger picture)—while avoiding coming into confrontation with the dominant structures of society.

What did become clear through my carbon-emissions reports, however, was not only that the materiality of the artwork stretches far beyond its physical limitations, but that the different aspects of the artwork were there, free to be utilized by other people for their purpose and outside my intentions (See Loosening the Object.) It also produced an interesting form of the work, manifested in emissions that would otherwise be invisible. Like a negative space of the production process as well as its upkeep, it provides a material reading of the full process

²⁶ Mark Kaufman, “The Carbon Footprint Sham,” *Mashable*, 13 July 2020, <https://mashable.com/feature/carbon-footprint-pr-campaign-sham>.

²⁷ The concept of a carbon footprint grew out of the older idea of an ecological footprint, which was conceived in the early 1990s by ecologist William Rees and regional planner Mathis Wackernagel at the University of British Columbia. “Carbon Footprint,” *Britannica*, last updated 21 March 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/science/carbon-footprint>.

through the waste. Furthermore, this particular kind of waste serves as a connection point between artwork and context, as it speaks as much of our fossil fuel driven society as of the sculpture itself.



Excerpt from Greenhouse Gas Emissions report related to *Vekselvirkning* by Cicero. 2023.
 The full report is included as part of the documentation of *Vekselvirkning*.

Non-Site

In 1970, the artist Robert Smithson described his method of working between the landscape and the gallery as a dialectic of sites and non-sites: "...my art exists in two realms—in my outdoor sites which can be visited only and which have no objects imposed on them, and indoors, where objects do exist..."²⁸ Through this, he created a relationship between the art space and the outdoor site, where the gallery held information and evidence gathered from the site outside. The site itself bore no trace of the artwork's existence. (See Active Forms.) In the gallery, Smithson built what he called a "three dimensional logical picture that is *abstract*, yet ... *represents* an actual site."²⁹ It would consist of photographic documentation, maps, and debris or rocks gathered from the site and arranged within a (built) structure. This framework has enough information to imagine the site and to visit it in one's mind. But it remains in the fictitious realm between the aesthetic and the socio-political. The gallery space is used to imagine the outdoor site and to let it unfold through layers of different information and aesthetic arrangements that don't appear in an outdoor landscape. He recreated it as a structure that simultaneously directed the viewers' thoughts and provided spaces to think. In relation to the site, the non-site can be said to be located beyond or below, but slightly off axis.

Smithson emphasized the "non" in that it directs us to the imaginary, rather than something that has to be real. This is a notion that underscores several of my works, as they focus attention on places or events outside of the gallery space. In the series titled *Public Hygiene (used)*, for example, the brush can be considered a non-site, pointing to the streets that it has been used to cleaned. (See Public Hygiene (used).)

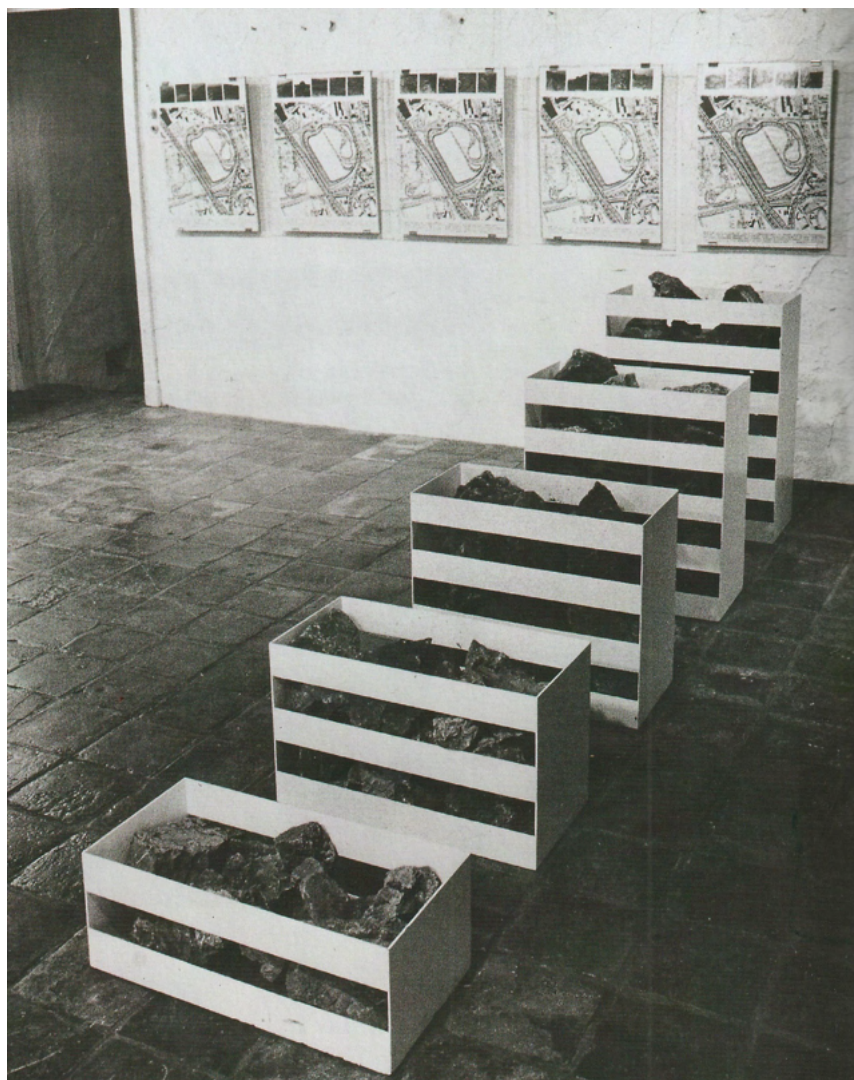
In *A Provisional Theory of Non-sites*, a text from 1968, Smithson writes, "This little theory is tentative and could be abandoned at any time."³⁰

²⁸ Robert Smithson, in "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," *Avalanche*, Fall 1970, quoted in Phyllis Tuchman, "Robert Smithson, 'A Nonsite (Franklin, New Jersey)' (1968)," *Holt and Smithson Foundation*, 2020, <https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/robert-smithson-nonsite-franklin-new-jersey-1968>.

²⁹ Robert Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Nonsites," *Holt and Smithson Foundation*, 1968, <https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/provisional-theory-nonsites>.

³⁰ Ibid.

Like monuments and “permanent sculptures,” theories are also created in a context that will most likely change and, in turn, impact the theory put forward.



Robert Smithson, *Nonsite (Oberhausen, Germany)*, 1968. Installation view.

From *Robert Smithson*, ed. Eugene Tsai and Cornelia Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 158.
© Robert Smithson Foundation.

Context-Based

As a term and notion that is not synonymous with place or site, “context” stretches beyond a physical location in several ways. It refers to a site within a set of conditions: an environment as it is experienced at a certain time, including the artist’s personal framework. It is therefore a sum of the physical, social, and temporal conditions in which the artwork is created from and in.

In a context-based practice, the two parts of artwork and context cannot be separated later without impacting the integrity of the artwork. It is a recognition that the context that allows the work to exist contributes to both the form it has been given and how it is experienced. In my research, I have focused on the urban environment, the globally unfolding climate crisis, and my personal situation of becoming a parent as aspects of the context I work within. These realms do not only overlap but also shape the experience of each other. They reflect both the world we are all part of, as well as my specific situation—my lifeworld—within this space and time.

This way of artmaking is a development and expansion of the site-specific strategies of institutional critique, which emerged in the 1960s. The critique of the institution took many forms, including breaking away from its physical framework. The museum or the gallery was seen to create artificial boundaries of exclusion. In the landscape and in the city, the artwork could be an integral part of the world from which it was made. But as this idea developed, museums and galleries caught up. It was clear that institutions were not restricted by a physical framework. Their funding and influence were woven into the fabric of urban developments, and institutional programming spilled into the city. (See Vekselvirkning.) With this, the original intentions of site-specificity were watered down. As curator and art historian Miwon Kwon states, “The various agencies’ programmatic enforcement of a continuity between the artwork and its site, however, was predicated on a kind of architectural determinism endemic to most urban beautification efforts.”³¹ In other words, while artists developed strategies to address and occupy alternative sites, art institutions—often with support by financial actors

³¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 67.

—extended their reach into the city. As the relationships were formalized, rules and regulations were applied, and the artist was no longer free to determine the terms of that specificity. The artist's intention ends where the motivation of investors begin.

Lifeworld

Writing about infrastructure, cultural theorist Lauren Berlant evokes the idea of “lifeworld.” She writes that “[Infrastructure] is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure. Roads, bridges, schools, food chains, finance systems, prisons, families, districts, norms[—]all the systems that link ongoing proximity to being in a world-sustaining relation.”³²

Maybe the artwork can also have its own lifeworld? This would describe the shared world we conscious beings inhabit; yet, it is pre-reflective. It is the world as it appears to each one of us, as we go through our daily lives. To the artwork, it would be the shared world it appears in—its context—that which is there before the reflective and analytical processes that produced it. To say that the artwork can have a lifeworld of its own assigns it the imagined quality of assembling an experience of being in the world—that it essentially has a hand in its own making as it comes into contact with a context. Its task as an artwork, as it follows then, would be to reflect on and respond to this assembly of experiences over time.

Building connections between peoples’ and objects’ lifeworlds helps to build communities in times of crisis. This takes into account differences, experiences, and inconveniences rather than merely the dominant imposed forms. These connections are established in multiple ways in how we organize life: “infrastructural objects are communicative in a life-world sense, at once shaped and shape-shifting.”³³ (See Loosening the Object.)

³² Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (May 2016): 393.

³³ Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 21.



Marte Eknæs, *I want to communicate with you*, 2017.

Inflatable PVC fender, rope, anchor.

Installation view, Rake Visningsrom, Trondheim. Photo by Rake Visningsrom

Inflatable

In 2017, I had an inflatable sculpture produced by a company that makes boat fenders. Its color combination of blue and yellow is taken from nautical flags and means “I want to communicate with you,” which therefore also became the title of the sculpture. For its first exhibition, I left it floating on the Trondheim fjord in Norway. Since then, it has mostly been shown indoors in gallery spaces, in different states of inflation and somewhat displaced from its original intention. I always felt that how this piece was made, and its functional quality, were more interesting than what it looked like. Its form is a result of the restrictions of the fender production, as they could only make cylindrical shapes. It is made from PVC, a petroleum-based material, giving it an entanglement with the fossil fuel industry on the same level as a gym mat, a raincoat, a bucket, or a credit card. When this work is flat, it can be folded inside a cardboard box. When it is inflated, it is just mostly air. It is an unfulfilled artwork, one of doubt but also of potential.

During my research, I felt *Inflatable* could grow from being part of the process, and I took it out to explore the city. Mostly, I brought it into new urban developments that are homogenous and orderly, such that it could stand out and possibly run into problems with security. I needed to see these places, and I felt that *Inflatable* would be enriched by having some tough experiences. Once, I also took it to a climate march in Berlin. Its large body was useful in adding to the masses in the streets, but its being was a confusing presence for some of the other participants and thereby awkward for me. It seemed a difficult idea to grasp that a sculpture could be doing anything else than just being an object on display.

I recorded all these outings, and throughout the experience, it seemed that the artwork gradually expanded and outgrew its role as a displayed object. This became the basis for the video work *Lifeworld* (2025), made in collaboration with Michael Amstad, which is included in the exhibition *Infraaktiv* at Nitja. Recorded in moving imagery, *Inflatable* could be shown in relation to many different contexts. Here, the simple cylindrical form became useful, as it allowed the focus to shift from this body to the different sites it traveled through. Its surface also changed, as scratches and dirt built up, reducing its value as a sculpture while it

gained life experience. I felt that it developed into a richer, more complex being outside of the gallery space, serving both as a companion and a tool for exploration. But as complexity grew, doubt crept in. It was as if *Inflatable* had developed the ability to have its own lifeworld, and from there, question its very purpose as an artwork.

Infrastructure Space

A city is in constant change. It is not just a place but layer upon layer of interacting networks stretching far beyond its geographical location. To the many inhabitants and visitors of a city, it has different meanings and functions. In the state of extractivist capitalism, the city is a site of accumulated, unequal power and wealth, always threatening to cannibalize more of its land and heart. In a conversation Michael Amstad and I had with philosopher Joseph Vogl in 2017, he described the urban condition as follows:

What we see happening in cities is, on the one hand, the destruction of habitat, of the biotope, by property prices, by the homogenisation of towns and also, if you like, by a production of confinement, of density. Moreover, it seems that cities are arming themselves, that in the service of flexibility they're becoming militarised.³⁴

This militarization that Vogl describes is manifested through urban planning (bollards, railings, gates, and curfews), as well as through people's tools for traversing the city (four-wheel drives, navigation systems, bike helmets to protect oneself from the four-wheelers). It is an unresolved spatial battle where we're never quite sure who we are up against. Sociologist Saskia Sassen speaks of the city as "a complex, but nevertheless incomplete system." She continues: "In this mix of complexity and incompleteness lies the capacity of a city to outlive other, more formal and powerful but closed systems: a mega-corporation, for example, or a government, an office park, or a gated community."³⁵ Another way of saying less formal is to say less coherent in form or having many overlapping or even conflicting forms. A myriad of organizational forms are laid down, engaged, imposed, and utilized: road networks, work hours, governmental buildings, restaurant menus, bus schedules, schools, taxi fleets, key cards, art exhibitions, trash cans.

³⁴ Joseph Vogl, interview by Michael Amstad and Marte Eknæs, Berlin, 16 June 2017.

³⁵ Saskia Sassen, "The Possibility of Life at the Systemic Edge: Three Questions for Saskia Sassen," *Texte zur Kunst* (March 2015), <https://www.textezurkunst.de/en/97/sassen-systemic-edge/>.

Keller Easterling has written about the city in terms of “object forms” and “active forms.” Buildings, squares, urban furniture, and other built features are object forms, while the bits of code that shape these, such as regulation, planning, access and software are active forms. Her understanding of form hinges on their potential, or their affordances, as described by Caroline Levine. With this, the fundamental forms of the city are those that we don’t see, that are not restricted to time and space, and that we might not even know are there. (See Form, Active Forms.)

Infrastructure space is a form, but not like a building is a form; it is an updating platform unfolding in time to handle new circumstances, encoding the relationships between buildings, or dictating logistics. There are object forms like buildings and active forms like bits of code in the software that organizes building. Information resides in the, often undeclared, activities of this software—the protocols, routines, schedules and choices it manifests in space. [Marshall] McLuhan’s meme, transposed to infrastructure space, might be: the action is the form.³⁶

The active forms that organize this space operate in the dark or through channels out of reach as one interacts with the city. The distance between the ground we stand on and these chains of undeclared activities grow in mysterious ways, as they are utilized for extraction and expansion. As Easterling states, “Contemporary infrastructure space is the secret weapon of the most powerful people in the world precisely because it orchestrates activities that can remain unstated but are nevertheless consequential.”³⁷

In infrastructure space, both private and public actors operate, sometimes in hybrid constellations, utilizing its tools of protocols, routines, and “repeatable formulas.” One example is the stealth erosion of public space through private-public entanglements, as city councils see ways of making money (or are left with little choice) and let go of responsibilities for their land. Object forms that used to be markers of public space—such as pedestrian zones, benches, trash cans, information signage, and the absence of fences and gates—now just mean that space

³⁶ Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

is only “publicly accessible.” Their ownership and operation are likely to be in the hands of private (and sometimes multi-national) companies.

It is in the interest of these powerful actors that surfaces we inhabit and interact with are inviting but impenetrable. Presentation becomes synonymous with place. Hidden within or below is a complex and heavy infrastructure, from advanced supports and systems making building possible (and marketable as sustainable) on challenging sites, to multinational funding schemes, special regulation to satisfy investors, and branding in the digital sphere to attract them. When visiting for-profit urban developments, we are not just wanderers, observers, shoppers, or guests in a restaurant or a museum; we become part of the picture they try to create.

POPS

The history of privately owned public spaces, or POPS, goes back to 1961, when it was introduced as an incentive in New York's zoning regulations.³⁸ In negotiations of building permits, a program was developed to allow private developers to build extra stories on high-rise buildings in exchange for creating adjacent publicly accessible public space, such as plazas and squares, and taking responsibility for their maintenance and order. What started as a small-scale program to ease the city's maintenance and security responsibilities has now grown into a significant method of defining and developing a large portion of the city's publicly accessible spaces and has become a global phenomenon. These privately owned public spaces are not demarcated or labeled with their (often complex) national or international ownership structures. However, one might spot some changes to the object forms when finding oneself within their unmarked borders. Maybe the signs have another font, or they have an obscure corporate logo in the corner. The design of the urban furniture differs from that which is commissioned by the city and, most certainly, the streets and plazas are cleaner, rubbish-free, and exhibit a total absence of graffiti (possibly replaced by commissioned street art). Less obvious is the fact that the owners can impose their own acts of conduct, differing from the general rules of public space in a city, where common activities considered unpleasant or threatening, like protesting, begging, or sleeping outside, are banned. Furthermore, the rules are implemented by private security rather than by the police.

From ownership of small corporate plazas, private actors are now frequent owners of large mixed-use developments, which have often come into their control through opaque processes. Their foundation also generally includes stricter rules and a much higher level of surveillance than early POPS. Such revitalization projects are now a global phenomenon and tend to sprout out of an infrastructure-rich ground. In a profit-driven urban area, groomed surfaces and the absence of waste have the dual effect of attracting investors while also deterring people from unwanted behavior. Here, levels of hygiene also become a way of organizing people. What is perceived as unkempt creates grounds for exclusion and, subsequently, the upkeep of good hygiene becomes an

³⁸ "New York City's Privately Owned Public Spaces," *NYC Planning*, accessed 21 February 2025, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/planning/plans/pops/pops.page>.

enterprise managed by the higher classes and done by the lower ones. Art is often added to the surface as a fertilizer for investment growth. It can also be strategically placed as control devices. A large steel sculpture does the job of a row of bollards, while giving the development an edge. The presence of art also enforces the surface it is anchored to. It holds people's gaze and disguises or deflects from underlying politics in acts of "artwashing."

Occupy Wall Street

In some instances, the private ownership of publicly accessible land can have surprising or paradoxical results. In 2011, when Occupy Wall Street set up their protest camp, they landed on Zuccotti Park, New York, which was established as part of the first phase of POPS regulation in the 1960s. The parks that were developed under the original zoning rules are open twenty-four hours a day.³⁹ This is unlike more recently established ones and, crucially, unlike city parks, which, in New York, all have curfews. This made it possible to use it as a camp site. And whereas smaller acts and objects of disorder are easily handled by private security, a large encampment with transformational activities doesn't fall under the rubric of regular "management." Additionally, as it is private property, the city cannot block the site or in other way prevent people from entering unless they are asked to do so by the owners. Eventually, after some two months, "on November 15, 2011, the New York City Police Department gave protesters notice from the park's owner to leave Zuccotti Park due to its purportedly unsanitary and hazardous conditions."⁴⁰

³⁹ Lisa W. Foderaro, "Privately Owned Park, Open to the Public, May Make Its Own Rules," *New York Times*, 13 October 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/14/nyregion/zuccotti-park-is-privately-owned-but-open-to-the-public.html>.

⁴⁰ "Occupy Wall Street," *Wikipedia*, accessed 20 February 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Wall_Street.



Zuccotti Park, Occupy Wall Street campground, 24 October 2011. NYC loves NYC, Photo by Noel Y.C. © Noel Y.C. (accessed April 2025, <http://nyclovesnyc.blogspot.com/2011/10/zuccotti-park-occupy-wall-streets.html>)

Tjuvholmen

Tjuvholmen is a fifty-one-hectare development situated directly on the Oslo fjord. The area was bought in 2003 from the municipality of Oslo by the developers Selvaag Gruppen and Aspelin Ramm, as the consortium Tjuvholmen KS, after they won what social anthropologist and urbanist Sverre Bjerkeset describes as a “controversial so-called concept competition organized by the municipal enterprise Port Oslo.”⁴¹ What made this architecture competition unique, according to the organizers, was that the architects and developers would work together on a proposal for a complete city district that was to include space accessible to the general public. And according to a report in NRK on 19 August 2002, “If one of the developers presents a project so outstanding that the jury practically goes wild, the land price could end up being significantly lower than the actual market price.”⁴² Tjuvholmen KS won with their plan *Utsyn*. As an award, the consortium could buy the area for a price discounted by approximately 400 million NOK.

For artists working in the realm of commissions, it can feel familiar to sense the influence exerted behind the scenes of an otherwise public process but not be fully informed about it. Since the construction of this development, Tjuvholmen KS has dissolved, leaving Aspelin Ramm to take over sole ownership.

The Tjuvholmen development is repeatedly promoted as a gift to the public of Oslo. As with many gifts from rich, out of touch relatives, the pleasure might be bigger on the side of the giver. The public had no input in the development phase. And, despite the focus on diversity in the promotional plan, the result is that “[a]ctivities and users who are deemed as not contributing financially or enhancing the appeal of the area will be marginalized or excluded.”⁴³ The same is true for inanimate objects, according to the former manager of Tjuvholmen KS: “Yes. Tjuvholmen has zero tolerance for trash. Not a single ice cream stick is

⁴¹ Sverre Bjerkeset and Jonny Aspen, “Private-public space in a Nordic context: the Tjuvholmen waterfront development in Oslo,” *Journal of Urban Design* 22, no. 1 (2017): 116-132, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2016.1240010>.

⁴² Birger Kolsrud Jåsund, “Unik arkitektkonkurranse om Tjuvholmen,” *NRK*, 19 August 2002, <https://www.nrk.no/kultur/unik-arkitektkonkurranse-om-tjuvholmen-1.529974>.

⁴³ Sverre Bjerkeset, “Et Byrom for de få,” *Aftenposten*, 6 August 2014 (my translation).

allowed to devalue the buildings and the space”⁴⁴ This high attention to cleanliness, or public hygiene, has, perhaps in combination with the frequency of surveillance cameras and private security, an impact on visitors’ interaction with the place and each other. (See Form.) Bjerkeset observed during his onsite research:

At Tjuvholmen, street furniture and other physical arrangements are almost exclusively used as intended. Generally, the use of the space is compliant and disciplined. Transgressive use was very seldom observed. All this suggests a lack of appropriation. A certain aloofness in people’s physical and verbal conduct points in the same direction. Among adult users, bodily movement and activities in general seems to happen at a moderate pace and in a controlled and disciplined way. People’s body language and ways of interacting have a fairly tempered character. Emotional outbursts or open quarreling were rarely or never observed. Furthermore, many users appear to approach the area with a combination of curiosity and a certain insecurity.⁴⁵

The full report by Bjerkeset on the organization of material goods and the behavior of the people gives the sense of restriction through aestheticizing. The Astrup Fearnley museum and the commercial galleries that reside in Tjuvholmen are considered main attractions and actively used in the promotional material. “A certain aloofness in people’s physical and verbal conduct” could well be the description of the visitors to an opening at any of these establishments. It is as if the rigidity and self-imposed discipline that protect the precious goods in the art spaces have seeped into the streets. Freedom is a quality located in the objects we observe, and as a visitor, the best one can hope for is access—on limited terms.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Bjerkeset and Aspen, “Private-public space,” 123.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 125.

The Berg

“It’s like he wants to privatize ethics,” Laura said, nearly shouting, rising out of her chair. She pushed the chair back with her foot and started to pace around the table. “He’s fully given up on solving structural problems. He just wants to fix each person, one by one.” She laughed a bit crazily.

Anja nodded. “Or maybe it’s more like he’s gone from structural to infrastructural. Like dumping fluoride into the water supply.”⁴⁶

This scene plays out toward the end of *Oval*, a novel by Elvia Wilk set in Berlin in an imagined near future. Anja, the main character, and Laura, her friend, discuss Louis, Anja’s soon to be ex-boyfriend. Louis is an artist working—as all successful artists in this fictional Berlin—as a paid consultant. In Anja and Laura’s exchange, Laura reveals that Louis’s new art project is a “generosity drug.” His consultant position is for an NGO, and he styles himself as an artist who wants to create “real change” in the world. In *Oval* Berlin, the weather is always weird, and the control of the city has fallen completely into the hands of property developers. (See [Infrastructure Space](#).) The real estate company Finster has rendered the city almost unlivable, and young people are left trying to navigate rents, jobs, and the weather through a creative use of apps.

Louis and Anja had signed up to be part of an eco-living project called The Berg, which, it turns out, has faulty infrastructure by design—and is something nobody intends to fix. As the recycling, heating and cooling system, and electricity fail, the natural environment of the artificial hill where the neighborhood is located slowly infiltrates the buildings and makes them inhabitable. In Anja and Louis’ house, the domestic scenes that play out against this backdrop have been filmed by the security cameras supposedly installed to monitor the smartness of the smart house. To fund his “generosity drug” project Louis has signed away the rights to this footage to Finster without Anja’s knowledge. It is revealed that the NGO he works for is just another corporate wing of this conglomerate.

⁴⁶ Elvia Wilk, *Oval* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2019), 241.

Louis, who is now planning to get it into the city's dealer circuits, is trying to convince everybody—including himself—that this oval shaped pill will be the solution to find goodness in a bleak-looking future. This doesn't go quite according to plan, or does it? In the clubbing scene of Berlin, the dealing circuit offers an informal service for distribution. Through chemical substances, atmospheres are created, and moods are changed. Transactions are mostly hidden, but the effects rise to the surface through people's behaviors, which dramatically changes the city. Louis's idea of fixing society through the mass-alteration of individual chemical brain balances leads to chaotic scenes where people's behaviors are governed by misconceptions of goodness. The shift from structural to infrastructural, as Anja observes, reflects the brain activity that collectively forms the city's communal unconsciousness. In the end, the housing project serving as greenwashing of a property conglomerate and the drug-triggered generosity represent similar tactics of deliberate deception within an unchecked capitalist system.

Hudson Yards

Hudson Yards in New York City is described as a city within a city.⁴⁷ It is the largest private real estate development in America and is developed by the real estate firm Related Companies. Before the development started, around three billion dollars in taxpayer money was spent on infrastructure improvements in the area to entice investment.⁴⁸ The total cost of the development was around twenty-five billion dollars, which makes it one of the most expensive private developments in history. In order to raise money for the project, Related Companies, which already had offices in Shanghai and Abu Dhabi, opened factories in China. Through this presence abroad, Related could access a government-run investment scheme for immigrants meant to boost business in lower income areas.⁴⁹ These factories later produced curtain walls and other materials that were used in Hudson Yards's construction.⁵⁰ The appropriation of government schemes by mega-corporations, claiming of subsidies, and tax evasion by big earners are all versions of infrapolitics: politics that happens under the radar, away from the political forums, through the medium of infrastructure. As described by the Center for Spatial Research at Columbia University:

We understand infrapolitics as those political actions and consequences that occur below or besides the threshold of political legibility, often—but not exclusively—through the physical, political and social infrastructures that underpin urban life.⁵¹

Several green areas are incorporated into Hudson Yards, including a public plaza referred to as the “smartest park in town.” Hudson Yards is built on a platform on top of the LIRR railways with careful precision so that the trains can keep running. The developers took particular pride in

⁴⁷ C.J. Hughes, “Hudson Yards: A City Within a City,” *New York Times*, 5 April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/05/realestate/hudson-yards-a-city-within-a-city.html>.

⁴⁸ Nicole Lambrou, “Hudson Yards: a Sustainable Micropolis,” *Avery Review* (March 2017), <https://averyreview.com/issues/22/hudson-yards-a-sustainable-micropolis>.

⁴⁹ Lambrou gives a full account on how this scheme is utilized in the text quoted above.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “Infrapolitics Seminar,” *Center for Spatial Research, Columbia University*, accessed December 2024, <http://infrapolitics.c4sr.columbia.edu>.

the inclusion of green space, but it is an artificially created natural environment, akin to The Berg in *Oval*. According to Lambrou, “it is estimated that the heat from the trains below will raise the temperature of the plaza soil up to 150 degrees [65 degrees Celcius], which will then need to be cooled off in order for the plants to stay alive.”⁵²

⁵² Ibid.



Hudson Yards, New York.
Photo by Marte Eknæs, September 2022.

Climate Crisis

As my work has been focused on the forms of urban environment, my fear of the unfolding climate crisis has been growing. As a context, the climate crisis is difficult to grasp. It is a rapidly changing situation, and like the omnipresence of infrastructure, we are all implicated in it. For most people in Northern Europe, where I am writing, it has so far manifested through milder winters, hotter, drier summers, and the abstract fear of what is to come. Gradually, the effects have been escalating, with more floods, droughts, wildfires, and hurricanes of increased strength all around the world—and all the socioeconomic consequences that follow.

Climate research is nothing new. The fossil fuel industry has known about and suppressed the consequences of their actions for decades. Already in 1938, the British coal engineer George Callendar connected rising global temperatures to increased CO₂ in the atmosphere.⁵³ For many years, oil companies have done internal studies that demonstrated the climate impact of their product, while they publicly opposed the very same science. Scientists at Exxon, for example, accurately predicted the future climate impacts of fossil fuels already in the 1970s. A study published in 2023 by researchers at Harvard University and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research found that “most of their projections accurately forecast warming that is consistent with subsequent observations. Their projections were also consistent with, and at least as skillful as, those of independent academic and government models.”⁵⁴

By now, the influence of the fossil fuel industry has made much of the world’s population reliant on the convenience oil and gas and the derivative products they provide. Various degrees of dependency have been internalized, from everyday use of single-use plastics to the understanding of job security. The result is that we are likely to exceed a temperature of 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels already in the next

⁵³ “History of Climate Science Research,” *UCAR Center for Science Education*, accessed 13 February 2025, <https://scied.ucar.edu/learning-zone/how-climate-works/history-climate-science-research>.

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Supran, Stefan Rahmstorf, and Naomi Oreskes, “Assessing ExxonMobil’s Global Warming Projections,” *Science*, 13 January 2023, <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abk0063>.

five years,⁵⁵ with disastrous consequences. The so-called natural disasters devastating increasingly more communities and habitats worldwide are not truly natural, as they could have been prevented through changes in human behavior. These catastrophic events are, in fact, the direct consequences of structural violence.

This is not the kind of direct violence of a gun going off instantly, causing bodily harm or death. Nor is it the disruptive violence carried out by an individual or a small terrorist group. Instead, it takes place through legitimate companies, subsidized by states, creating products used by almost all. The principal founder of the field of peace and conflict studies, Johan Galtung, introduced the concept of structural violence in 1969, leading to a wider understanding of how violence is enacted in our societies. In accepting the definition of peace as the absence of violence, Galtung went on to identify an understanding of violence broader than that simply inflicted by individuals with weapons upon others; he stated that “violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.”⁵⁶

Thinking from a framework of people’s sense of being and “realization,” Galtung conceives of violence as the effort to create a distance between what could be (their “potential”) and what their circumstances actually are (the “actual”), or in other words, the greater the difference between people’s circumstances of potential and the actual, the greater the violence.⁵⁷ Thus, the failure to provide lifesaving treatment to a person in need of it—if this is available and known—or blocking the lifesaving efforts by someone else is an act of violence in the same way as actively taking the life of a person.

In other words, the fossil fuel industry (state or privately owned) is committing acts of violence, as it is beyond doubt that burning fossils is causing the rise of global temperatures, with consequences that are

⁵⁵ “Global Temperature Is Likely to Exceed 1.5°C above Pre-Industrial Level Temporarily in Next 5 Years,” *World Meteorological Organization*, 5 June 2024, <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/global-temperature-likely-exceed-15degc-above-pre-industrial-level-temporarily-next-5-years>.

⁵⁶ Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 168.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

resulting in the loss of livelihoods, the quality of life, and life itself in many areas around the world. Individuals and individual states are profiting from these actions, but it is still different from acts of personal violence in that it is carried out through and perpetuating existing structures. Personal violence stands out as outbursts in a static society. “Structural violence is silent, it does not show—it is essentially static, it *is* the tranquil waters,” Galtung writes.⁵⁸

The climate crisis is everybody’s context. For artists working in Norway, like for myself, it is also an art-making context difficult to get away from. Norwegian art production and exhibition-making is mostly funded by the state. But the country is one of the world’s leading exporters of climate emissions with its company Equinor (previously Statoil), where the state is a majority shareholder.

As income is a shared good through the national pension fund (colloquially known as “the oil fund”), the industry has become anchored in the national identity and directly connected to the upkeep of the welfare state. Building on the population’s trust in the country as a force of good and its international image as an environmental leader, the story told at home and abroad is that Norwegian oil and gas is green. (See [Climate Emissions Report](#).) This amounts to “petroganda”: “The fossil fuel industry’s deliberate manipulation of both children and adults’ emotions, thoughts and understanding of energy, climate, the climate crisis and potential solutions.”⁵⁹

In Norway today, we inhabit the tranquil waters of climate negligence, as all large political parties and a majority of the population still support continued exploration and extraction of more oil and gas and investments in a future of this world-wrecking industry. What is perceived as violence is what disturbs the calm, often in the form of protest. A climate activist thereby faces the challenging dual responsibility of persuading the public both of the truth of their claims and that their disruptive actions are essential to stop environmental violence—rather than that they themselves are the ones causing harm.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁹ “Petroganda” is a term of unidentified origin. The definition here is given by Julie Forchhammer of the non-profit Klimakultur, with reference to Amy Westervelt of Drilled Media.

As a context, the climate crisis is given, not chosen. It is also not a definite framework but in a continuously evolving (read worsening) state. Like the sprawling nature of infrastructure, it can be difficult to see even as it entangles life both as a cause and consequence. But, also like infrastructure, it carries potential for movement. Its presence highlights the idea that not all contexts are there to be worked with. Some should rather be fought against with actions and artworks as resistance.

The need for direct action is dire. Seeing the ties that often bind art institutions and the limited reach of an artwork beyond these institutional walls has made me question the possibilities that lie within this field. I have tested and continue to develop different strategies in response to this situation—both in addressing the art field and the climate crisis directly. My video work, *Lifeworld* (2025) made in collaboration with Michael Amstad, shows the doubtful artwork. (See Inflatable.) The climate emissions report of *Vekselvirkning* (2023) was an early response, which really is a codifying of what can be called a “climate-friendly practice.” But friendly doesn’t seem to be a strong enough tactic to counter structural violence, and as my experience proved, it is easily absorbed into the language around climate change—without resulting in real action. This process led me to getting in touch with the climate activists of Extinction Rebellion Norway and learn more about their work. Extinction Rebellion describes themselves as a “decentralized, international and politically non-partisan movement using non-violent direct action and civil disobedience to persuade governments to act justly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency.”⁶⁰

With their involvement, I am holding a course in non-violent direct action as part of the program of my exhibition, *Infraaktiv*. This exhibition also features sculptures that are functional lock-on devices for protests (see Lock-On) partly comprised of leftover materials from the steel spiral in *Vekselvirkning*. After the exhibition is over, these will continue their life outside the gallery as tools in climate protests.

⁶⁰ “What is XR?” *Extinction Rebellion Global*, accessed 12 March 2025, <https://rebellion.global/about-us/>.

Direct Action

On 16 March 2024, I participated in an Extinction Rebellion direct action against the Rafnes petrochemical processing plant outside of Porsgrunn in Norway. Some activists went out in small boats in an attempt at stopping tankers from docking, while other activists blocked the entrance to the site on land. The action was carefully planned by the XR organizational team and coordinated with other actions against oil infrastructure internationally. We didn't know until the day before what the target would be, and the whole process had an air of excitement and tension about it leading up to the day of blockade. On the day, we drove out in cars. As we got closer to the area, the weather got worse. It was cold and snowy. All the cars stopped at a nearby gas station to wait for the signal to get into positions. While waiting in the car park and using the toilets, nobody communicated directly to avoid attracting attention. When instructed, we all drove off and took up our designated positions.

I had not been through a course in non-violent direct action, so I was restricted, taking on a background role on the day. Together with three other members of XR, I prepared and served sandwiches, coffee, and tea to help the activists at the blockades through their ordeal in the windy, snowy conditions. In this way, I became part of the infrastructure.

The experience had similarities with assembling and finalizing an exhibition, in the preparation, planning, and build-up toward an event day. However, the event was not focused on the achievements of individuals but on the manifestation of a group. In a blockade, people lend bodies to the service of the cause and support each other in doing so. They become disobedient bodies.

I have in the past often spoken of the idea of sculptures as disobedient bodies. Materiality is an important part of protesting, both to create barricades and to protect protesters, such as the now-famous images of the pro-democracy protesters of Hong Kong, with their colorful umbrellas against tear gas. Art has also been used in barricading, such as Tools for Actions's *Inflatable Cobblestones* (2012), which have been

used in several protests around Europe in the last decade.⁶¹ The artist Ahmet Ögüt's created the installation *Bakunin's Barricade* (2015–22), based on the anarchist thinker Mikhail Bakunin's idea of using valuable paintings as part of barricades in the Dresden socialist uprising in 1849. The piece is now owned by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and "it now incorporates works by Nan Goldin, Kazimir Malevich, and Käthe Kollwitz, among other artists,"⁶² as well as fencing, car wrecks, and construction materials. The acquisition contract between the artist and the museum states that "the barricade may be requested and deployed during extreme economic, social, political, transformative moments and social movements."⁶³ This request was however declined by the Stedelijk when the Not Surprised Collective asked to use the barricade to protect students protesting the genocide in Gaza against police brutality.⁶⁴ The counter offer from the museum involved staging a conversation in relation to the work inside the museum and using reproductions rather than original artworks of historical and financial value. According to the Not Surprised Collective, this would "make Bakunin's Barricade purely performative, contributing to the aestheticization of politics without putting the actual art pieces at risk."⁶⁵ As a response, Ögüt requested that the work be removed from display at the museum, which the museum declined. In other words, the museum holds on to its understanding of politics in art as performative.

⁶¹ "What Is Protest Architecture and Why Do We Need It?" *RIBA Journal*, 21 August 2024, <https://www.ribaj.com/culture/opinion-book-protest-architecture-climate-action-colonialism-equality-inclusion>.

⁶² Gareth Harris, "Artist Demands Stedelijk Museum Remove His Work amid Row over 'Refused' Loan Request," *Art Newspaper*, 5 November 2024. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/11/05/artist-demands-stedelijk-museum-remove-his-work-in-ongoing-row-over-loan-request-for-gaza-protest>.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Not Surprised Collective, "Stedelijk Museum Fails to Loan Artwork by Ahmet Ögüt to Protect Students in Amsterdam," in *Institute of Network Cultures*, 28 June 2024, <https://networkcultures.org/ourcreativereset/2024/06/28/stedelijk-museum-fails-to-loan-artwork-by-ahmet-ogut-to-protect-students-in-amsterdam/>.



Ectinction Rebellion, North Sea Fossil Free. Blockade of Rafnes petrochemical processing plant, 16. March 2024.

Photo by Marte Eknæs.

Lock-On

A lock-on device is a tool used by protesters to lock themselves together or to structures to create blockades. It can be made from chains or bicycle locks. A standard lock-on device, however, consists of one or more metal pipes with internal cross bars. Using a carabiner hook chained around their wrists, protesters can hook their arms into the pipes. The pipe needs to be tight around the arm to make it impossible to reach in with another object. The points where the cross bars are attached should also ideally be hidden to make it difficult for the police to safely cut into the device to release the protester.

A lock-on is a tool intended to make it difficult to remove protesters without causing harm. Additionally, it is also a true non-violent tactic, as someone with one or both arms stuck in a metal pipe can hardly engage in any aggressive behavior.

Kids

Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work demonstrates that a context does not necessarily need to unfold beyond the domestic sphere to reflect societal structures. When Ukeles became a mother early in her art career in the late 1960s, she experienced what she has referred to as an "absolute crisis" trying to combine the life of an artist and motherhood. Her interest in art was closely linked to freedom, while the duties of motherhood kept her at home, swamped with repetitive maintenance work. She desperately tried to combine these two different "identities," but found the one part was completely invisible when she left her home. "Do you do anything?" she recalls people in the art world asking her, when she had never worked this hard in her whole life. Through the anger this generated, she realized that freedom is not just an expression. She realized "that if I'm the artist, then whatever I say is art." She started documenting her everyday environment and the often-mundane activities of feeding and dressing her children, cooking, and cleaning the house, and she wrote the now iconic Manifesto for Maintenance Art for the exhibition *CARE*. The exhibition, which would consist of several parts, involved turning the museum into a home for her and her family. Ukeles would care for her family but also for the staff, museum visitors, and the building itself. The exhibition remained in the imaginary, but the concept of maintenance art became the pillar of her practice. She states: "The exhibition Maintenance Art 'CARE' would zero in on pure maintenance, exhibit it as contemporary art, and yield by utter opposition, clarity of issues."⁶⁶ To Ukeles, it was the limitations of her context that revealed the greater societal structures in her work.

More than fifty years later, house- and care work is still undervalued in society at large, and particularly, in the unregulated art market. The artist Ghislaine Leung highlighted this in her exhibition *Balances* at Maxwell Graham in 2022. As a mother of a small child, Leung shares a similar sentiment to that which was experienced by Ukeles. The press release for the show is formulated as a message from the artist to, presumably,

⁶⁶ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto for Maintenance Art," in *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art*, ed. Patricia C. Phillips (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2016), X.

the gallerist, with the opening line stating, “I write to you at a point of crisis, probably a necessary one.”⁶⁷

Press releases are an important part of the support material of exhibitions. Mostly written by the gallery or a hired writer, there is a recognizable formula that serves the purpose of describing how great the exhibition is using background info and interpretations littered with adjectives. With one of the most common opening lines being a variation on stating the obvious, “We (the gallery) are pleased to announce an exhibition by...,” the press release is an infrastructure camouflaged as shiny wrapping paper. Together with an elegant front-of-house, a smartly dressed gallery attendant, and a cool breeze, it serves to contain the messiness, personal struggles, financial hardships, and crisis that might have gone into the exhibition-making, while focusing on a successful result. Leung and Maxwell Graham’s use of the press release format does something of the opposite and instead sheds light on (often oblique) relationships between the artist and the gallery and the artist’s difficulties in producing the work.⁶⁸ Leung goes on to state:

I feel unable to make the new works requested of me because I do childcare evenings and weekends, and weekly. I do this childcare not in spite of my work as an artist but as an active and empowered choice to be a mother. As a mother and artist, committed to my child and committed to my art, I am able to work a fraction of the time assumed by societal models that preclude care work.⁶⁹

Describing this as part of a “necessary crisis,” it becomes clear that this is something she wants to be seen as an integral part of the show. Her struggles are structural rather than personal. Her sculptural objects look like they can be made under time pressure, or at least with little studio time. They are mostly ready-mades, appropriated ready-mades, or pieces made directly in the gallery space. One of the works, *Times* (2022),

⁶⁷ Ghislaine Leung, *Balances* (New York: Maxwell Graham, 2022), <https://maxwellgraham.biz/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Balances.pdf>.

⁶⁸ I am reading this here as an actual piece of communication between the artist and the gallery. There is no evidence of this, and it might also just be a chosen style of writing. Nevertheless, it communicates the same sentiment.

⁶⁹ Leung, *Balances*.

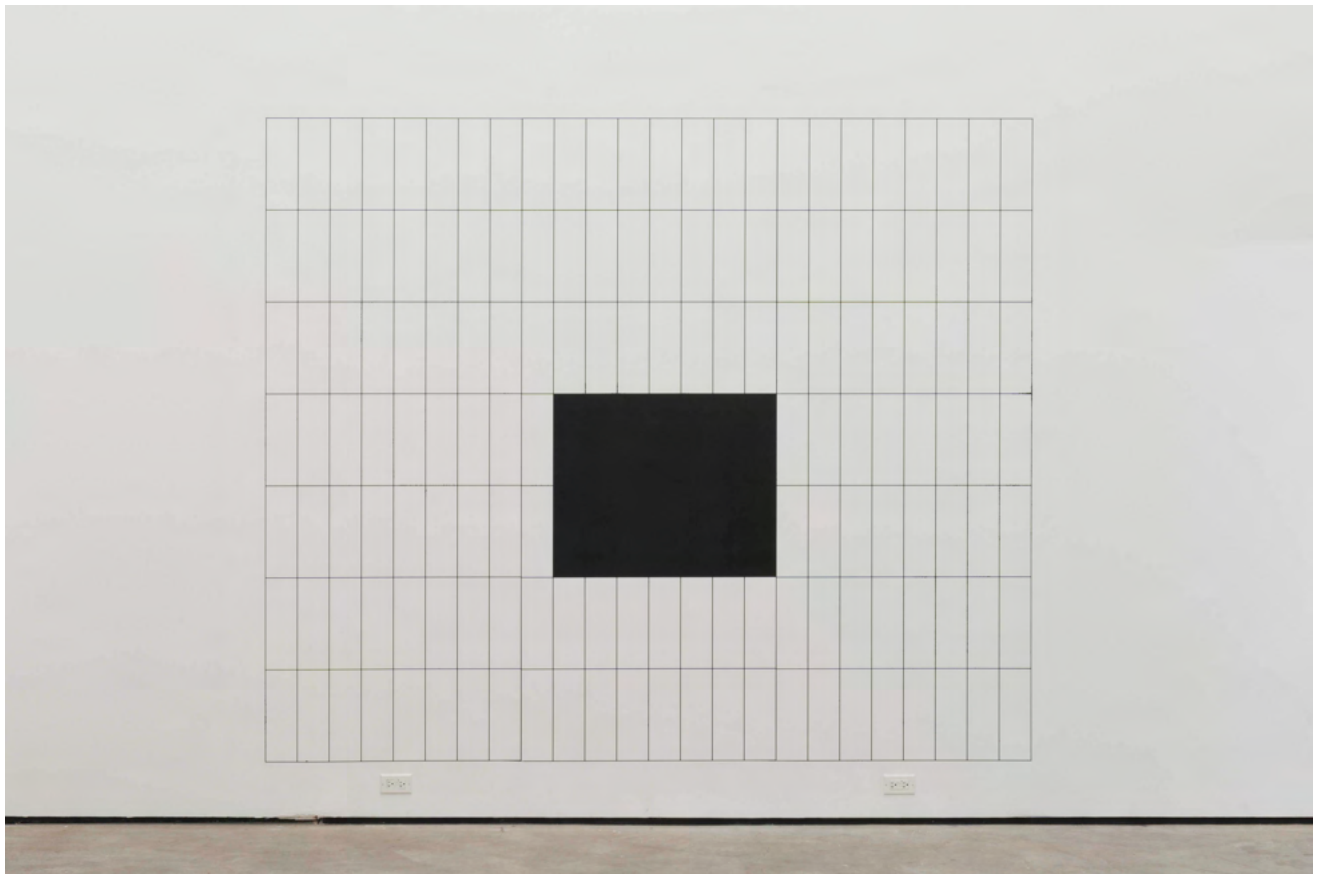
which I consider the main piece, acts as a framework for viewing the rest of the show. It is described with the following score:⁷⁰ “Access to exhibited works is limited to the studio hours available to the artist. Thursday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Friday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The exhibition space may remain open during regular hours.”⁷¹ The physicality of the work consisted of removing or covering up the other pieces in the gallery outside of these hours, as regular exhibition viewing hours are thwarted by “Leung time.” As Caroline Levine points out, “Reading the rhythms of the world in a formalist fashion, alert to the temporal organizing principles that govern social organizations and institutions, we find a social world where temporal structures often thwart or compete with one another.”⁷²

Leung highlights the inequalities built into a society structure, which is controlled through a constellation of time and capital. In her own constellation of available working time, objects, and available viewing time, she re-introduces time as a precious and vulnerable aspect both imposed upon and co-existing with the physical forms.

⁷⁰ Leung uses the term “score” to define the elements or the instructions for a piece.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Levine, *Forms*, 51.



Ghislaine Leung, *Hours*, 2022. Score: A wall painting the size of the artist's home studio wall divided into all the hours of the week with the portion of studio hours available to the artist marked in black. Thursday 9AM-4PM, Friday 9AM-4PM.

Maxwell Graham, New York, 8 September–15 October 2022. © Ghislaine Leung / Maxwell Graham (accessed February 2025, <https://maxwellgraham.biz/exhibitions/ghislaine-leung/>).



Ghislaine Leung, *Times*, 2022. Score: Access to exhibited works is limited to the studio hours available to the artist. Thursday 9:00–16:00, Friday 9:00–16:00. The exhibition space may remain open during regular hours.

Maxwell Graham, New York, 8 September–15 October 2022. © Ghislaine Leung / Maxwell Graham (accessed February 2025, <https://maxwellgraham.biz/exhibitions/ghislaine-leung/>).

Circulation Realm

In 2021, I had a difficult experience with an institution, which made me question both my approach to institutional collaborations and my context-based method. It took place in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. Times of crisis can make the simplest thing complicated or the smallest event overwhelming. It can also make structures more rigid as we find things to hold on to in order to get through hard times. Nevertheless, the difficulties producing and installing the exhibition overshadowed my experience of it as a completed project. As I felt troubled by underlying conflicts, the show looked resolved and clean. In various ways, the artworks had ingested the tension, politely positioned themselves within the institutional structure (although one of them was breaking through its framework), and in one instance, secretly become an inverted version of its intended self.

It was with this experience fresh in memory that I started working on the exhibition project at ROM for kunst og arkitektur. ROM is a medium sized institution in Oslo, which has a minimum basis of public funding to keep it running. To finance projects, ROM and the invited artists need to apply for grants. The working process started with in-depth conversations with the director, Gjertrud Steinsvåg. The exhibition planning, institutional organizing, and making of the artworks were seen as entangled activities, and I credited the ROM team as a collaborator in the project. As the work went on and applications got rejected, lack of funding had a direct impact on several of the original plans.

This was also the first exhibition I worked on after I had become a mother, and my time was still, to a large extent, governed by the needs of my daughter. With my energy spread thin and my creative process interspersed by toddler demands and ideas, I decided to invite my regular collaborators Michael Amstad and Nicolau Vergueiro to share both creative and childcare responsibilities. Resolving the situation by expanding it also meant that I found myself in the combined role of being both a guest and a host.

This combination of experience and resources, personal and institutional, provided the framework for the exhibition. As it was

utilized in the process, I felt it was important to make public. The short exhibition text reads as follows.

The exhibition's budget, use of resources, social conditions, politics and the climate crisis are directly affected by the same mechanisms that govern the rest of society. The works reveal how technical, material and social conditions have created each of their own form.

With this statement, we addressed the institution, not as an isolated space but more like as an area demarcated by a dotted line. At times, it was as if the exhibition making was merely a reason to come together, and the aim was to learn from each other and to communally work out a situation. We started referring to the working process as “growing an exhibition,” where the obstacles we encountered contributed to a fertile ground. The roles involved in making this exhibition grow were many, and we often had to fill several of these at the same time: artist, collaborator, researcher, technician, institution, documentarian, host, guest, cook, organizer, writer, editor, designer, accountant, daughter, mother, father, carer, audience, participant, grandmother, machine, service provider, director, ghost, moderator.

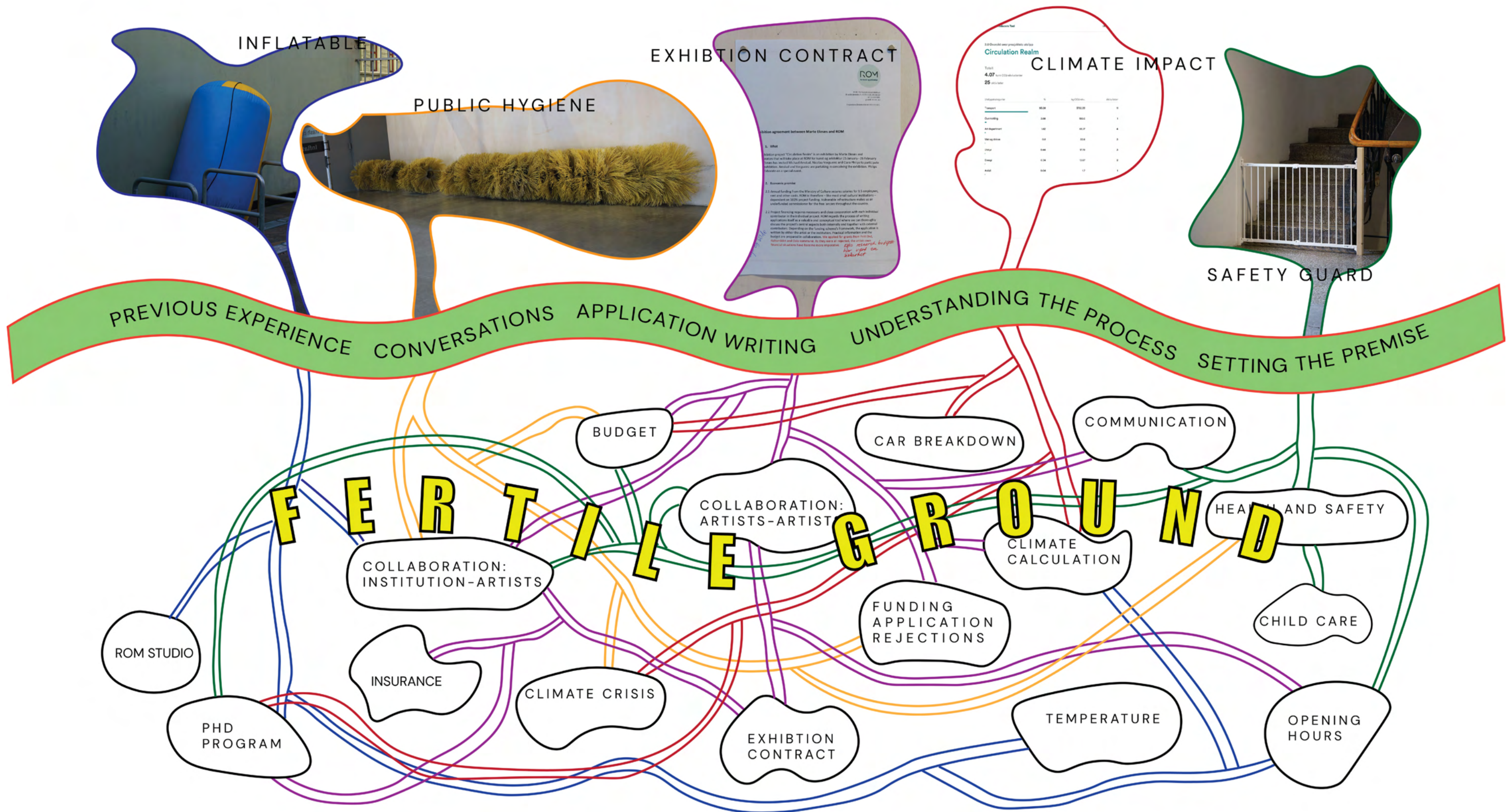
Upon seeing the show, a friend I trust for feedback asked critically: “But what’s in it for me?” referring, I think, exactly to this emphasis on the shared collaborative experience between artists and institution rather than final artworks that could be experienced as ends in themselves. There were several objects in the exhibition. We decided to describe these as elements to not limit them purely to the potential they held within an art definition. As with all the people involved, most of these elements also played multiple parts, either at the same time or throughout the process. In other words, they were not displayed as conclusions. A baby gate, for example, was installed at the bottom of the stairs to keep my daughter safe during the installation. When the exhibition opened, it was titled *Safety Gate* (2023), and it became more sculptural and less functional—although it was still available to be opened and closed according to need for the exhibition period.

The role of some of the elements was to provide information about the rest of the exhibition. *Signpost* (2023), for example, was placed in the

middle of the room. With titles spelled out on the sign arms, it provided (somewhat unreliable) directions for experiencing the show. In between were names of places, creating anchor points beyond the walls of the gallery.

Contract (2023), which was both hung on the gallery wall and made available as a downloadable document, gave another insight into the exhibition, laying out the framework, resources, demands, and responsibilities of the parties involved. As a strategy, the focus of the exhibition was a shift from what we made to how we made it.

At this stage in my project, I was describing the working method as a “productive institutional critique.” As this implies that institutional critique cannot be productive, it is, however, a little misleading. My aim with this description was to focus on the relationship between the artist and the institution rather than the institution becoming an object of critique. Whereas an organization has (to various degrees) to be permissive to allow institutional critique to be shown within their institution, its role would end at being a host. In the shift from *what* to *how* that took place in *Circulation Realm*, there was also a re-evaluation of the idea of “critique.” Our collaboration was a critical response of the context we were working in, rather than a display of critique. After this project was completed, I came upon writer Marina Vishmidt’s description of infrastructural critique, and I found a language for something close to what I was trying to do.



Marte Eknæs, *Fertile Ground*, 2023.
Digital collage.

Cuts to Let in Air

Writer Marina Vishmidt describes the drift from institutional critique to infrastructural critique as a change in both where the criticality is located and what the act of critiquing entails. In what is described as institutional critique, the critique of the institution is framed within that institution, and it remains a closed circle. The artist will appear as the antagonist, but the critique is often muted within the institutional framework, as these are often power centers insular to the field.

Vishmidt does not dismiss all the practices that have been described as institutional critique but suggests instead a re-phrasing or a reorganizing of elements that decenters the institution. I have always understood the idea of institutional critique as stretching beyond the walls of the museum in intention and implication. But reading Vishmidt's analysis, I see a deeper dislocation of these two terms, or a shift in how to understand their affordances. Rather than a confinement, through architecture or definition, the institution can be viewed simply but importantly as a "site for resources." The critique is one "that makes cuts and lets in air, a critique that takes it upon itself to find or make the holes through which this infrastructure comes into view"⁷³

Infrastructure is interlinked with temporality, mobility, and continuous production. A critique operating in the infrastructural can cut into these motions, routines, and relations and either amplify ideas that are already taking shape or disrupt and change a course. Through collaborations between artists, art workers, technicians, activists, researchers, and caretakers (to mention a few), the resources of the institution can be utilized productively. "Platforms can be built, and they can be negative, affirmative, or simply indifferent to the pressing questions that pose themselves in and through the field of art."⁷⁴

⁷³ Marina Vishmidt, "A Self-Relating Negativity: Where Infrastructure and Critique Meet," in *Broken Relations: Infrastructure, Aesthetics, and Critique*, ed. Martin Beck, Beatrice von Bismarck, Sabeth Buchmann, and Ilse Lafer (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2022), 32.

⁷⁴ Marina Vishmidt, "Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Towards Infrastructural Critique," *Goldsmiths Research Online*, accessed August 29, 2023, https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/23935/1/C3.VISHMIDT_Between%20Not%20Everything%20and%20Not%20Nothing_FORMER%20WEST%202016.pdf.

The shift in my own practice to thinking through the infrastructural was also not a clear case of before and after. Instead, it is an ongoing, fluid, and messy transition. My own understanding of the work expands as the work is going through an expansion.

Loosening the Object

My context-based sculpture practice used to be centered around strategies of studying a found or given place, often in terms of its visible characteristics or materiality. I saw a freedom in being able to take, appropriate, or sometimes steal⁷⁵ these materials and to make them into sculptural form—a freedom to use materials the way one wants, liberated from their function and their agreed-on affordances. Materials no doubt provide connections between the context and the artwork, and seeing these materials up close in new formations and compositions—away from their duty in the “real world,” in the specialized viewing conditions provided by an art space—can be both interesting and satisfying. Some of the work I consider fundamental to the development of my practice and of many of my contemporaries has been created through a radical approach to this kind of process. Isa Genzken, for example, is a master of transforming identifiable and commonplace objects and materials into her own formal language while maintaining their original recognizability. It is as if the sculptures are filters that she lends us, through which we can look at the world—or rather, an overlapping parallel universe.

But as much as Genzken’s sculptures provide new entry points, the immediate context in which they are shown keeps them protected or even isolated. The infrastructures of the art institution are tasked with multiple functions, like upholding the artwork’s condition, providing a favorable setting for viewing it, and giving information about the artwork and the artist. It is inherent to the task of the art infrastructure to safeguard or even increase the artwork’s value. But this also leads to the exclusion of members of the public. The freedom in the art-making process is attainable because of some of these protective measures, while it is restricted by other ones. The same infrastructure that is used to provide an environment to keep the artwork safe can, in another instance, be used to render the artwork harmless or silence it, if necessary.

⁷⁵ I use the term “steal,” as things were taken without permission. It was most often bollards taken from the street, and they were always broken, displaced, or out of service. “Clean up” might therefore also be appropriate.

Genzken's sculptures can be particularly demanding of this infrastructure. Her way of loosely assembling materials, sometimes even with tape or DIY adhesives, requires advanced crating for transport and fine-tuned technician work for installation. The materials are often a mix of solid structures and flimsy—at times organic—elements, making the inevitable repairs require specific yet diverse knowledge and technique. The sculptures wear these requirements on their sleeves, insisting on being well looked after. However, as a sculptural quality, being materially difficult translates into having an attitude or even rebelliousness. But as long as this is a demand of the art-technical infrastructure, it can all be taken care of in financial terms. Resourceful museums and galleries can offer the highest standards for display and storage conditions. For a good rate, the most qualified people can be hired to handle the works. But what if the care, repair, and challenge that is performed through this infrastructure to the benefit of the artwork was an aim in itself? What if this was defined as an artwork, rather than the necessity to keep another piece of art intact?

Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant speaks of the importance of a focus on infrastructure in difficult times. If communities are abandoned by governments or exploited by companies, their resistance starts with mending and building their own infrastructures. The infrastructures of the artwork reside in the same space as the infrastructures of the rest of society. Traversing this space for the purpose of making and exhibiting art is bound to lead to entanglements beyond our intentions. But traversing it also opens opportunities for a deeper engagement and contributions. Artmaking strategies can break through their protective structures and grow into their context and infiltrate the world beyond the gallery walls. Firstly, this requires an expansion of the understanding of the artwork to stretch beyond its life on display and exercise impact through its production and afterlife. Secondly, there is a need for a shift in perspective to the infrastructural in the artmaking process. An infrastructural perspective directs this focus below and beyond the surface. It gives the artwork a different task in the world or a different scope of affordances. Its form will be active: instead of it describing what it is, it will describe how it enters into the world. With this, it might be capable of a different impact.

One example of an artwork that engages its infrastructural foundation is Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*—a site-specific project that unfolded at the Forest Houses housing estate in New York in 2015. Hirschhorn approached the residents of the estate for help assembling the wooden pavilions comprising the physical structures of the work. Within these structures, a library, bar, and an exhibition space were installed, and workshops and lectures were held—all of which was managed by the residents. The program was announced on handwritten banners and posters, updated throughout the project. The monument was a living thing, where each participant had their own experience and the efforts making it happen were of equal importance as the resulting forms. The artwork was therefore already meaningful in its production. As a temporary monument, it was held together by DIY construction methods and human relations.

Another example is the Nalpar project by the Dialogue Interactive Artists Association from Bastar District, Chhattisgarh, India. The project is based in collaboration and interaction with the community. DIAA state on their website: “we had to coin terminology and the language to have a deeper dialogue between us which also questioned our visual and cultural literacy.”⁷⁶ Nalpar is a public place in the community where people of all ages come to fetch water. This ongoing project builds on water wells provided by the municipality. Problems such as unhygienic conditions, physical challenges in fetching and carrying water, and lack of shade are addressed. Drainage systems and hand pumps are integrated into concrete sculptural forms that also add some joy to this mundane task. As different as these projects are, they both provide a function for the community in which they take place. They are developed in dialogue with the people who are contributing to making them and will be experiencing them or using them. They infiltrate their environment and break down the metaphorical walls around the artwork. Their forms are thereby results of a multifaceted process—whether it's the ideas and hands of many people or the multiple requirements they must satisfy.

Such a process is far away from the free assembly of materials and objects by the artist alone in the studio aiming for just that radicalized recognizability. In my own practice, seeing the need for this shift in

⁷⁶ DIAA Dialogue, “Nalpar,” accessed 19 February 2025, <https://www.dialoguebastar.com/nalpar.html>.

perspective comes with mixed feelings. The formal language I have developed through making art objects over years feels familiar and close. It is the expression of my artistic identity, built on inspiration from predecessors, theory, and observation of my environments. The uselessness of the art object is also a personal protective shield. If it doesn't have to function, there are no health and safety regulations to satisfy. It doesn't have to fit anyone or fulfill anyone's needs. If it is appreciated as an art object, even by a small number of people, it feels like a worthwhile endeavor. The artwork can almost serve as a continuation of the artist, and the protection (and exclusion) present in the art space can be a harbor for fragile minds. There is, in other words, an aspect of self-care in the production of artworks with no strings attached, as the artwork can be both a tool of communication and a personal structure of support. Letting the artwork grow into its context, however, gives up on some of these comforts and trained strategies, placing them with uncertainty and responsibilities. (See Inflatable, Circulation Realm, Public Hygiene (used), and Leaks.)

This experience reminds me of what Berlant describes as “loosening or unlearning the object.” To paraphrase her argument: we often construct our lived experience from familiar objects or habits, even if they hold us back or keep us within an unsustainable structure. As we rely on our understanding of the environment to hold on to an identity, this cannot be easily discarded. But, she says, they can be loosened and reconfigured through utilizing the contradictions they contain. Shifting the perspective to the infrastructural and expanding the understanding of the artwork is to me such a loosening. It is to recognize that the form is a temporary state (See Forms.) as Berlant writes, “a transitional pattern on the move—a proposition for an infrastructure.” In showing that the object can expand and change form, it can also move and change us—both the artist and the viewer.

Berlant's fluid use of the word infrastructure works as a connector. Following her on this journey from life-sustaining networks and systems to the artwork's ability to mobilize shows the value in working from the perspective of responsibilities or consequences.



Isa Genzken, *Leonardos Katze*, 2006.

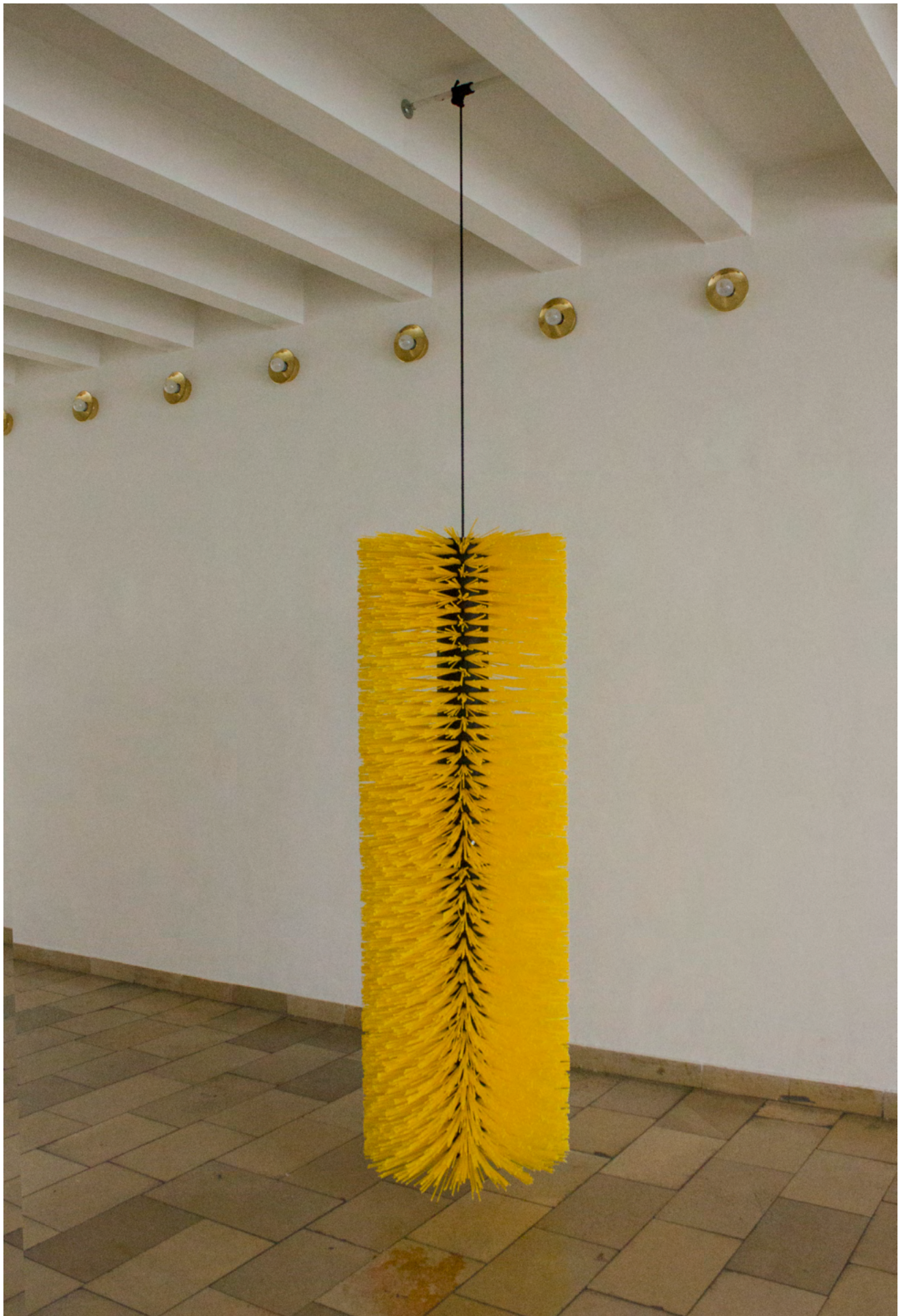
Wood, perforated metal sheets, plastic films, telescopic fishing rods, landing nets, polyester fish, polyester sea animals, plush toy lobster, plush toy fish, plastic apple branches, fabric, plastic, C-print, lacquer, spray paint. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, Sammlung KiCo. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2018. Photograph by Lenbachhaus, Simone Gänzheimer (accessed February 2025, <https://www.lenbachhaus.de/en/digital/collection-online/detail/leonardos-katze-30035553>).



Dialogue Bastar, *Nalpar Structure*, Kopaweda neighborhood. Bastar, 2004–2005.
© dialoguebastar.com (accessed April 2025, <https://www.dialoguebastar.com/nalpar.html>).

Brush

A brush is both tool and material. As a tool, it is used widely in production and maintenance of the surfaces we interact with daily, from interior and exterior architecture, furniture, streets, and our own bodies. In fact, almost ninety percent of the surfaces we might encounter are or will be touched by a brush at some point. As a material, a “brush” is not homogenic. There are many types, with different filaments depending on the area of use: polyethene, hair, steel, rubber—to mention a few. Because of this quality of filaments or bristles, it seems sensible to group them together. They form a mass, which, from a distance, can appear as a volume but which dissolves into multiplicity upon closer inspection. In personal hygiene, a brush can help disentangle hair, clean teeth, and offer a soft touch to the skin. And—as I learned when enquiring about used street cleaning brushes from public maintenance services in the area around Berlin to use in my ongoing series *Public Hygiene (used)*—this type of brush is sometimes repurposed by farmers to make back-scratching stations for their cows.



Marte Eknæs, *Public Hygiene*, 2018

Two new street cleaning brushes, rope.

Installation view, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne. Photo by Simon Vogel.

Public Hygiene (used)

The work *Public Hygiene* (2018), consists of two new yellow street cleaning brushes, bought and hung on a rope from the ceiling like a chandelier. When I got the idea for this work, I was thinking about the different notions of maintenance and cleanliness—from the invisible labor of the workers using the street cleaning brushes to the use of cleanliness as a mechanism of control in for-profit urban developments. But I don't know, and I don't know if it is important, whether the object contains and communicates these thoughts. I felt there was a disconnect in strategy; of investigating the context but not searching for ways the work could activate it.

Like *Public Hygiene*, *Public Hygiene (used, Oslo)* (2023) also consists of yellow street cleaning brushes. But these are, in contrast, used and ready to be discarded. The structure of the brush is also different. Instead of the bristles being attached to two long pipes, this brush consists of multiple wheels with one ring of bristles each. They are made to fit into each other to compose whatever length is needed to fit a range of different street cleaning machines. This piece was made for the 2023 exhibition *Circulation Realm* at ROM, and the decision-making process behind it was initially a practical one. As I write in the exhibition handout:

It was important for me to include this piece in *Circulation Realm* as it brings the topic of maintenance of the shared urban landscape into the gallery space. The economic framework of the exhibition didn't allow for shipment of a large scale sculpture, and thereby directed me to rethink the piece.

With the help of the ROM team, I got a brush donated from Malleus Maskin in Lier, who is the supplier to the communal street cleaning service in Oslo. The brush was picked up and arrived at the gallery as a pile of dirty discs of bristle. We learned from the handlers of the brush that each ring has a “tooth” that holds it in place. This informed the way the discs were installed—threaded on a tight wire at floor height and spread out to show the rings' core. The incentive of the exhibition to let its framework directly shape the artworks shifted the way I thought about this piece. Even though *Public Hygiene (used, Oslo)* consists of

the same components as *Public Hygiene*, everything else about it is different—from process to materiality and installation. Similar to a cardboard box with the logo removed, the original brush piece could read as a metaphor. (See [Michael Asher](#).) In the updated version, the material component of the work, what can be referred to as the sculpture, is not the whole or the final work. It is, rather, the material manifestation of an *active form*. On the site of the brush depot, the artwork lives through the idea as it is told. In the art space, this tool and the remnant of its activity are given attention as an artwork. (See [Non-Site](#).)

In a contradictory revelation, I found that this expansion of the understanding of the artwork rendered the object on its own insufficient. As it grew into its context and became an infrastructure in itself, its infrastructural demands also grew. It needed added details to convey its story, which cleared the way for it to integrate information as an exhibition element.



Documentation of the installation of *Circulation Realm*, by Marte Eknæs with Michael Amstad and Nicolau Vergueiro, ROM for kunst og arkitektur, Oslo, 2023.

Photo by Marte Eknæs.



Visit to STEP Potsdam for selection of brushes, April 2024
Photo by Marte Eknæs.

Circulation

The sculpture *Circulation* (2024) consists of two water tanks, transparent tubing, and one or two pumps to circulate the water. If the work is installed for a considerable amount of time, a small amount of chlorine is added to avoid the growth of algae in the system. It is a continuation and a shift to the infrastructural perspective of the fountain sculpture *Vekselvirkning* (2023). The circular water system has been elevated from below ground to become the entirety of the work. It is a diagram, which illustrates function. But it is also functional, with all its potential for errors and leaks. As function is displayed, it gains new qualities. The pipe system can respond to the architecture but also break through walls and stretch between floors. Its identity is to be a sprawling entity and, through this, to make connections between the functions of the rooms it occupies. As an extracurricular plumbing system, it has to navigate around structures and the building's existing infrastructure. Its route is thereby one created by both restrictions and potentials.

Earlier this year, between realizing the first and the second versions of *Circulation*, I came across Hans Haacke's sculpture from 1969, also titled *Circulation*. It also consists of water circulating in transparent pipes and a pump to push the water around. But it consists of only the amount of water that the thin pipes can hold, and the piece is restricted to a smaller area on the gallery floor. Haacke writes: "For *Circulation*, I was concerned with having a shape that didn't impose itself as something important. The shape is primarily determined by technical factors."⁷⁷

I share with Haacke the use of technical factors as the main director of the work's form. However, instead, I see this strategy as a way of bringing attention to the importance of the infrastructural. According to Haacke, change is the ideological basis for his work, and his works often have a built-in potential to transform over time. This is also a quality I have found to be important through this research, rather more akin to a person than to a system, I imagine that an artwork can have a flexible life, which includes doubts and the desire to grow into something else. This kind of change is not something that happens within the limited

⁷⁷ Hans Haacke, "Circulation, 1969," in *Hans Haacke: Retrospective*, ed. Ingrid Pfeiffer and Luisa Ziaja (Munich: Hirmer, 2025), 56.

body of the artwork, but rather, in the interaction between the artwork and its context. It is in this relationship that the work can become an active form.

Circulation is also a strategy in life and art. A sustainable way of life depends on a circular approach to resources. This is true of material and energy use in society, but it also applies to materials and energy in an art practice. The understanding that artworks are final and unique traps resources in a form frozen in time. If, instead, form is considered a portable quality, which can be picked up and moved to another situation, physical and digital material from one artwork can be dismantled and reconstituted for another one.

Leaks

Water outside of a container meant to hold it or beyond a river's banks usually means trouble. Just in the last week, I have had two leaky bottles soaking the contents at the bottom of my bag, causing immediate panic. Are my books damaged? Did it seep through my old laptop bag to reach my computer? Water as an art material takes this anxiety into the public realm. One weak joint will cause a continuous drip, overshadowing the experience of the work's totality. It is no longer a diagram, more just a faulty plumbing system.

When water spills over on a large scale, however, the leak will entirely consume its source. A river's original form is no longer visible if the water rises and floods above roads and into buildings. Tsunamis swallow land into the ocean. As water levels rise and the weather gets more erratic, water handling will not so much be about keeping water contained in pipes as it is to keep it at a distance. This can be done through hard shorelines, such as barriers, or soft shorelines, such as dunes or submerged aquatic vegetation to minimize under water erosion. Cities built on marshland particularly will need to create systems to deal with urban runoff, such as the construction of canals and other waterways.

Committee for Culture and Society

In January 2024, together with Nitja director Kathrine Wilson, I was given time in the weekly meeting of the planning committee for culture and society in the municipality of Lillestrøm to present my idea for *Transformasjon*, a new long-term project. With this project, I wanted to engage directly with the municipal structures with the hope and ambition to contribute to concrete local change.

The allotted time window was thirty minutes. I introduced myself and gave a short introduction to my idea of context-based art. Then, Kathrine and I explained that art could be a catalyst and talked about it in terms of use value beyond its artistic framework. We emphasized the focus on climate action and tried to find a common language using the terms used by the council: “climate challenges” and “climate adaptation.”⁷⁸ We referred to existing maps for a green structure, which was the starting point for our idea. These maps indicated that several areas are green spaces, but in reality, they are still covered in asphalt and mostly used for parking. Could, however, art be employed to accelerate a green transformation?

While we were in this meeting, trying to figure out how to work through bureaucratic channels, climate activists from Norway, Denmark, and Sweden were gathering in Sandefjord, a couple of hours south. They were here to protest the seminar for oil and energy policy, where the licensing for the Norwegian continental shelf, known as Awards in Predefined Areas (APA), took place. In total, fifty-three new licenses were handed out by the Norwegian minister of energy. I had intended to participate and was still in the Signal messaging app group, where messages of the developing action started trickling in. Activists’ needs, requests for back-ups, arrests, and links to press coverage were continuously shared. Sitting comfortably in the meeting room, I couldn’t ignore the stark contrast. The demonstrators were putting their bodies on the line in the cold winter, confronting oil-industry representatives and risking arrest. Meanwhile, I was engaged in polite talk conveying an intent but no clear statement. The difference in strategy left me uncertain if I had chosen the right place to be that day, bringing an ongoing

⁷⁸As described in the “Grønnstruktur. Klimautfordringer and Klimatilpasninger” Temaplan (Green structure: Climate challenges and climate adaptations theme plan).

dilemma in this research to the fore. Is the change I want to contribute to best served through the channels I choose?

The committee expressed interest in the project though. There were interruptions throughout the presentation with suggestions and thoughts—some more relevant than others. But as is often the case when people from different fields meet for the first time, the understanding we think we share might not quite be the same.

Maybe the most interesting point that was raised was some criticism of the property developers who are operating in the city. I am often under the impression that city councils are happy to work with private actors to revitalize a place. Instead, what was communicated in the meeting was that the municipality of Lillestrøm lacks the tools to reign these developers in and get some promise of commitment to the community. Instead of becoming an instrument of value-boosting, which is often the case, maybe art could provide the reflection needed to slow a process down.

I still felt my dilemma was unresolved when I left the meeting. My intention was now matched by an intention from the committee of culture and society, but I was no closer to an idea of how it could be transformed into an artwork of impact.



Nederlenderen, Lillestrøm. A site marked as a green space on the municipal map.
Photo by Marte Eknæs, August 2024.

Transformation

The project *Transformasjon* is in its early stages as my doctoral thesis concludes.

It developed out of an interest in creating a work for the public space in Lillestrøm as an extension of my exhibition at Nitja. It was when we were looking for a potential site for an artwork that we realized the municipal map indicated parks that only existed as plans. Rather than creating an artwork to temporarily sit in an existing park, I decided a more interesting site would be the space between regulation and reality.

Lillestrøm is built on marshland. Because of this, the area is particularly vulnerable to flooding and stormwater issues, which are exacerbated by climate change. As large quantities of carbon are stored in peat, marshes work to reduce the CO₂ content in the atmosphere. Integrating more nature and waterways into Lillestrøm's infrastructure is therefore not just a step for improving life quality in the city. It is both a measure against climate change and a protection against its consequences. But as I have understood, a plan to turn a parking space into a green space or to change a road structure to accommodate waterways can cause a lot of resistance. Apparently, there is also lobbying from the business community against realizing plans that change access to the city center. The convenience of parking close to the shops and following habitual driving patterns is immediate. Climate change is abstract and far away—until it is not.

Johan Galtung's describes violence as the effort to create a distance between what could be (potential) and what is (actual). The greater the difference between the potential and actual, the greater the violence. In the case of a green transformation, the space between known facts and action, or regulation and reality, is filled with old habits, fear, short term profit, and the shifting of responsibilities. These might not be acts of violence, but nevertheless, they are impediments to decreasing the distance between the potential and the actual.

In thinking of the artwork as a catalyst to work within the municipal structures, I exercise what I have come to understand as “thinking through the infrastructural.” Rather than imagining finalizing a piece, the

work is a continuous process that might yield some results along the way. In conversations, meetings, temporary interventions, and sharing of information, events take place that can interrupt old habits, give a space to air worries or suggest alternative solutions to short term profits. The task of getting to know the context happens at the same time as this work unfolds. In this way, they are inseparable.

The previous projects that comprise this doctoral thesis have prepared me for letting go of different parts of my own habitual patterns, while searching for new forms. As Easterling states: “The form is a change and the means to make a change. It is a theater of operations and actions – an explicit set of interdependencies that set up new potentials within the organization.”⁷⁹ In the end, the artwork might not itself be visible. Instead, it is part of an interplay of operations and actions that, together, can diminish that distance between regulation and reality. Inhabiting a changing form or even simultaneous multiple forms, the artwork can become more active. By accepting its own transformation, it can contribute to a greater social transformation.

⁷⁹ Easterling, *Medium Design*, 39.

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