

Breathing with Styrofoam

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Abstract

I am interested in the conditions of an emergent understanding of the self: one that has departed from sovereignty yet has not completely lost a sense of self. It is fleeting, always in motion, and cannot be fully grasped. I use the lens as a kaleidoscope, searching for moments of oscillation, hovering along the ontic spectrum of 2 and 1, neither 2 nor 1. Through my work, I aim to visually lodge a fissure between these two states of being that satisfies neither position, but offers an expansive realm where one can dare to reimagine the web called ecology that intertwines them. As the moving image fractures, distorts and reassembles, I hope to expand this liminal subconscious into something one can occupy and see anew within the space of the work.

I have been developing an ever-evolving methodology throughout this project that is led by a certain kind of posture towards the non-human, creating work from understanding my position within ecology as something embedded and non-hierarchical. This text focuses on my relationship and work with Styrofoam, as it lends itself well to this examined format and reveals the political dimension of the fundamental ideas in my practice. I first encounter it stark white against the dark sea mulch of Trondheim, Norway. What began as a futile habit of collecting “trash”, became a relentless inquiry into the very impulse. I developed the practice of gazing at Styrofoam for 30 minutes every morning. The Styrofoam project unfolds under the suspension of judgment and association that this daily practice brought.

Key Terms

Styrofoam: The proper scientific name for Styrofoam is Expanded Polystyrene (EPS). Styrofoam is, in fact, a particular brand of EPS characterized by its blue colour. For the purposes of this non-scientific paper, I have chosen to use the term Styrofoam anyhow, as it is normatively understood to denote EPS and will be more broadly understood than the alternative.

New Materialism¹: I draw on this discourse for its radically horizontal positioning of human and non-human matter. Also for the way it highlights the important role that non-human matter plays in human life, from omega-3 fatty acids, which can affect mood, to trash in landfills “generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane,” (Bennett, vi).

Zen: My understanding of Zen comes from the Soto School, considered to be the most minimal form of Zen practice. It is a self-observational practice that seeks to dissolve subject-object duality, and be attentive to the present moment in a physical, embodied way.

I. Styrofoam and I

¹ I am interested in these bodies of knowledge as much as they shape the basis from which I live and produce work, rather than reproducing the ideas in another form.

² drawing on Donna Haraway’s concept of Companion Species, in particular the literary tactics used in the

a. Thinking with Haraway Through Our Cohabitan²

Styrofoam and I have conspired together in the scandalous collaborative act called breathing. Microscopic Styrofoam bits are agitated by the air circulation system in the room, and sent afloat in its streams. As I inhale in its presence, particulate traces of Styrofoam dance through the tender detour of my lungs. As I exhale, I propel a host of bacteria and cells from my body, into the same micro atmosphere that occupies Styrofoam's pores. Although Styrofoam does not breathe, as we know it, its structure is 98% air. As long as I remain in the room, we are entangled in this steady cycle of cross-pollination.

My genome only exists in approximately 10% of cells within the epidermal boundary of my body, what I would by default consider to be "me." The rest are marked by genomes of bacteria and other "foreign" matter, much of which my life depends on (Haraway, 3-4). Similarly, moss and algae species take root in the Styrofoam blocks that have washed up on shore. Sea flora elbow their way through the interstitial labyrinth, slowly wedging cracks wider to make way for ongoing growth.

One Styrofoam block carries the scar of an automobile having run over it. It holds the tire pattern in its facade. I too bear evidence of past injury on my skin.

Here we meet, with our inherited histories. I come from a scattered Northern European heritage called "white." My ancestors immigrated to North America in pursuit of farmland, a pioneering tale that nationalism sells as heroic. However, it was a colossal colonial gesture toward the indigenous people and land whose deep-seeded ramifications persist today in climate change and social injustice. Styrofoam is a part of the lineage of Plastics. Once thought to be a savior to our way of life, a celebrated invention, now an object of embarrassment— a visible reminder of the ominous catastrophe known as climate change.

In Trondheim, Styrofoam is collected by the city³, where the vast majority⁴ of it is combined with general waste and incinerated. The remaining ash⁵ is used in road construction. This would be a perfect narrative, but this is only part of the materials story. Plenty escape and continue on a journey of their own. This is where my story with Styrofoam began.

² drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of Companion Species, in particular the literary tactics used in the opening pages of Companion Species Manifesto (1-3)

³ Much of this information comes from my site visit of Trondheim Renholdsverk, the municipal waste management centre, and interview with Dragana Skjøstad, head of Recycling Operations Station.

⁴ Some of the untarnished Styrofoam is recycled by a third party, Greenmax, where it is pulverized and reformed into new consumer products.

⁵ If burned at the proper temperature, the combustion process yields water vapor and ash, a material amounting to 10% of the original input.



Above: Taken on site visit to Trondheim Renholdsverk, the municipal waste management service.

b. Acquaintance

When I first arrived in Trondheim, I had the ambition of developing a series of site specific performances along the coastline arising out of a collaborative relationship with the non-human inhabitants of the area. I wanted to find ways of entering with the body into conversations that precede and post-date me, like those between the patches of sea plants and waves, for instance. I wanted these happenings to highlight the agentic capacity of non-human matter and, by virtue of submitting the performing body in a posture of non-dominance, flatten the hierarchy of all constituents in the work.

My first step was attempting to shake hands with the place; for I needed to learn its language before imagining how my body might enter into it. I would set out on the same walking route nearly every day, visually scan the area, allowing my focus be guided by intuitive interest. Once I stopped at a particular place for a while, I would first gaze with the unmediated lens of my eyes for about half an hour, and then through the lens of a camera. Sometimes I would record, but often I would simply look through the viewfinder as a framing device.

The frequency of my visits was an intentional commitment. In periods where I went less, I felt as though I was hunting, and needed to return with visual bounty for my project. This is not the kind of process I wanted to claim. To the contrary, I wanted to be present to the site with such a sustained attention that I would begin to recognize things without my willing them, to witness the play which is always already happening. As a precautionary measure, when I noticed myself hunting, I set the rule to return the following day without recording devices in order to relax into seeing the site on its own terms, rather than according to my own ambition.

As I began to spend more time filming at particular locations, I developed the ritual of cleaning them. I would pick up hundreds of Styrofoam bits, but it's impossible to collect everything. The polystyrene beads separate as they are exfoliated by the stones with each rhythmic wave and tide cycle.

Ironically, much of the Styrofoam washed up on shore comes from the Aquaculture industry, a venture marketed as Norway's ticket to a sustainable future⁶. This is a part of one of the most significant groups of pollutants in oceans today: plastics. They are ingested by sea life. They bob at the water's surface, swirl and form conglomerates with other plastic migrants⁷. Other bits wash up on shore.



Above: Image of BioMar Billboard located directly outside the arrival section of the Trondheim Vaernes Airport, Norway.

Styrofoam in particular is a robust structure, impervious to biodegradation. Literary theorist, Timothy Morton, includes Styrofoam in his list of material exemplary of his term “hyperobject,” which he coins in 2013 to describe objects that radically outlast a human time scale.

A few bags of Styrofoam accumulated in my studio. One morning, a piece caught my gaze. I was struck by it on an aesthetic level, momentarily detached from the name and baggage of Styrofoam. Some days later, I was taking a durational shot of this patch of seaweed reappearing with the outgoing tide. Part way through, a Styrofoam cup edged its way into the frame, on the shores of my production. Instinctually, I reached out to pan the camera away. I thought the cup had ruined my shot. Perhaps because of the aesthetic reevaluation I had of the material earlier that week, I resisted my urge to move the camera. The second guessing of this impulse triggered a long line of questioning. This action of exclusion now seemed irresponsible. What image of the site was I trying to relay? It was there. Toxicity aside, it was just as much a part of the present constellation of seaweed, water, stones and sky that inhabited that frame.

⁶ Styrofoam is used as an isolative packing material and often strapped beneath dock appendages for buoyancy. In rough storms, bits or entire blocks can be set loose into the open ocean.

⁷ ...forming large lily pad like structures, even islands. These cumulative entities block UV light, in turn, suffocating plankton and many other sea flora below.



Above: Still from durational video, when the Styrofoam cup floated into the frame.

II. Neither Styrofoam nor I

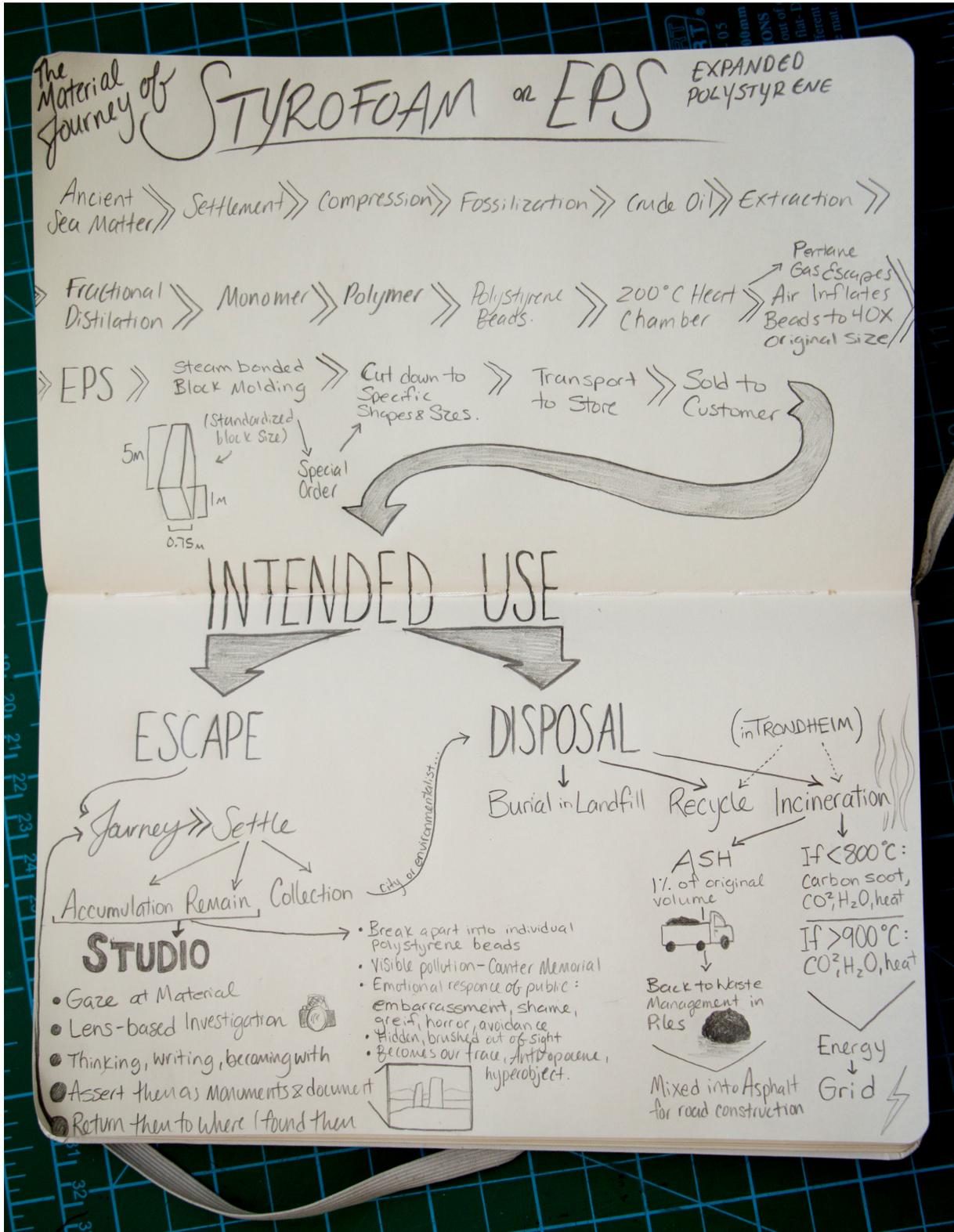
I committed to staring at Styrofoam for thirty minutes each morning in the studio before I started my day's work. A peculiar visual phenomenon occurs when one stares at something for long enough: it starts to move. This phenomenon challenges the way I see the nature of reality. Normally, I trust my ocular senses, but when my visual field signals something contrary to what I know it should, I am reminded of the unreliability of the sense, and hold the information I receive from my surroundings with a loose, more humble grip. This *trompe l'œil* characterizes the practice of Magic Realism; they used it as source material for their artistic work.

I wanted to address Styrofoam within the framework of Zen meditation as a way of meeting it nameless and faceless. Within that format, I endeavor to rid myself of all judgment towards a thought, thing, person, event, etc. and meet what is presented to me without this baggage. In other words, to forget that it is Styrofoam, to forget that is rampantly polluting, that it comes from crude oil deposits and that my species produced it, but rather face it as an assemblage of matter, as I too am an assemblage of matter. One of the aspirations of sitting in Zen practice, is to erode the barrier between subject and object. Zen philosophy poses the notion of neither two nor one. Zen practice is certainly not the only way of getting there, but I think the ability to hold two contradictory ideas at the same time is vital to a healthy and accurate understanding of our role in climate change. It means the ability to say yes, I am the perpetrator, AND. To not stop there, but continue in the web of curiosity of investigating the state of things, what the issues really are and what an appropriate action means in this moment.

To be clear, I do not have a position of neutrality towards the production, use, and disposal of Styrofoam. The consequences of this anthropogenic waste are far reaching, and a great deal of research and development would be well spent addressing it. However, I have found a practice of suspending moral judgment, as outlined above, to be the most effective method of learning what the material is, much more about its story and my reaction to it than I otherwise would have while being clouded by shame and all the baggage I attach to the semiotic symbol of Styrofoam. When we have a more accurate understanding of both what we are dealing with and our reaction towards it, we can then respond with greater accuracy. But as long as we avoid really looking at the issue, remain in the drama of guilt, then we will know a fiction and respond to that fiction with a response suitable to the fiction. This practice helps me maintain curiosity, even about the greatest disasters. Haraway has both affirmed and extended my thinking in this regard. While it can be a necessary part of one's processing, she expresses how "shame is not an adequate response to our inheritance of multi species histories" (22), and how shame has a way of blocking curiosity, which in itself is a major consequence, as it corresponds to care. "Caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning" (36).

Zen philosopher Charlotte Joko Beck speaks to the dissolving boundary between subject and object that comes through sitting practice, "the more we sense that everything is ourselves, the more we feel responsibility for everything. When we sense our connectedness, we have to act differently" (256). This is precisely the kind of expanded sense of the self that much of New Materialist scholarship centers around. When an understanding of the self shifts to account for an embeddedness within a complex interplay of matter, then what it means to act out of self-interest also changes. What if cleaning up the ocean was seen in the same light as personal hygiene? How do a higher frequency and duration of such radically horizontal and self-effacing moments affect our enduring ontological paradigm? And how does this affect us as political agents within this ecology?

III. The Styrofoam Project



Above: I mapped out much of the life cycle of Styrofoam and understand my projects as yet another detour on the materials journey



Above: Studies from lens based investigation of Styrofoam.

I began working with Styrofoam as a part of my artistic practice by investigating the blocks through the lens of a camera in order to learn both their inherent qualities and my interest within them by framing. Later on, I took the large blocks of Styrofoam back to the coast from which they came, and asserted them vertically to facilitate a confrontation with the material. This gesture is effectively doing the opposite of panning away from the Styrofoam cup. I photographed the set up with an analog large format camera within the visual cannon that monuments are traditionally composed. These monolithic blocks are often mistaken for stones, but upon close examination and through the label, it becomes clear that the material is, in fact, Styrofoam.

The document pictured can be read in relation to memorialization. Memorials traditionally function as a public architecture that facilitates a space of grief and remembering. The counter-memorial, first seen in Germany after WWII, is typically commissioned by a government in order to display recognition for an occurrence publicly and serves as a reminder for future generations of the grave consequences of such actions. Often, however, there is an undercurrent of the commissioning institution distancing themselves from their actions. The event is effectively historicized, despite its ongoing ramifications.

Styrofoam has a way of accumulating in the underbelly of cities, flanking ditches and coastlines. When people stumble across it, the material functions as a found counter-monument to our role in climate change, a ghost of our resource and waste mismanagement. The photographic document can ironically be seen as harkening back to the history of plastic, a monument that celebrates human ingenuity, a motif that persists in EPS manufacturers' online representation today. Within the concept of Anthropocene, it could be read as the mark that we leave behind, a part of the memorial to human civilization for the post-human world. The predominant way this photograph functions for me, however, is a sober acceptance of Styrofoam's material presence. I refuse to avoid their existence any longer by dragging them out of the ditch and erecting them upright in the stubborn pursuit of becoming well acquainted with the current reality we inhabit.



Above: *Styrofoam, Erected*. Photograph, 112 x 139 cm, 2017.

IV. Detours



Above: Tarkovsky, Andrei. "Solaris." Film, May 13, 1972, p. 0:00 – 01:45 of 166 minute film.

Here I will expound upon directions I almost took in my project, which became informative detours. I will include examples of other artworks that round out each given tendency within a broader context. All art is already environmental art – this is my position. By the same token, I would prefer to say that there is no such thing as environmental art. Why designate it as environmental if this is an inherent quality of all art? Might as well just call it art. The very classification of environmental art conforms to the dualism of only certain things being deemed part of the “Environment,” and hence art that overtly deals with these things is considered “Environmental Art”. For this reason, I will give no thought to contextualizing myself within this genre, which others may or may not read me into. Rather I will situate myself with and apart from artists that share a common spirit within each given decision, thought, intention or detour.

a. Toward Tarkovsky

The late filmmaker, Andrei Tarkovsky, enters a metaphysical exchange of the self and non-human-other in the opening scene of *Solaris*. It is clear that as the main character, Chris, wanders through the wetland, he is in a different psychological state than in the following encounter with his father and colleague. The cinematography of this scene refuses the familiar notion of a passive landscape on to which the character projects their inner drama. Tarkovsky treats the foliage, water, fog, and light with the same sensitivity, affords a similar agency, as he does the human figure in the scene. There is a certain kind of reciprocity at play. The lens rhythmically enters into this mesh of distributed consciousness, pulling and retreating foreground and background, shifting subject and predicate, scanning, pausing, tracking. Christopher’s gaze is also familiar to me; I inhabit it often, both in my experience of the world and mediated by the lens.

b. Innocence

The impulse to exclude Styrofoam from the frame exposed many ways in which I was effectively putting fuel

on the fire I thought I was so valiantly stomping out. By cleaning the site, I could position myself as one who saves the environment, and distance myself from those that destroy it. This was a great illusion designed to uphold an idea of who I would like to be so I can rest at ease feeling as though I have done my part. Unfortunately, this is not how ecology works. We are all embedded in the system. Many of the goods I purchase have been packaged in Styrofoam, I live and work in spaces insulated by it and ride on roads paved with its remnants. The material surrounds us and there are no sides. Where I almost slid under the guise of an innocent environmentalist, performance artist Latai Taumoepeau positions herself in a similar way, but with the added claim of victimhood. In her 2013 performance installation I-Land X-isle at the Campbelltown Arts Centre she bound her body to a two-ton block of melting ice for two days “to parallel the experience of already impacted people of human-induced climate change to a form of water torture, that is imposed by developing countries⁸.” Demarcating people into such radically different camps is not only inaccurate, but results in a standstill on both sides. The innocent ones get to continue being innocent (“all indigenous communities from Australia to the Arctic”) and those cast as perpetrators (“all developed countries”) are bogged down with the blame of the Earth’s inevitable demise. There is no room for hope in the scenario. One blogger describes an overwhelming sense of guilt and helplessness after experiencing the live performance⁹. I imagine I would feel the same. Shaming is not an effective strategy in mobilizing real change. In fact, I think this is precisely the kind of dynamic that Haraway refers to where “shame trump[s] curiosity” (22). Here, I am more partial to Rosi Braidotti’s approach “to empower people to will, to want, to desire a different world.”¹⁰

c. Embarrassment and Horror



Above: Caulfield, Sean. "The Flood." Art Gallery of Alberta, 2016, pp. Ink on woodblock panels, public installation. (used with permission from the artist).

⁸ Statement by Taumoepeau quoted on The Centre for Sustainable Practice in the Arts webpage. See bibliography for complete citation.

⁹ Kirk. "I-Land X-Isle." *Towards the Morning Sun*, 2013.

¹⁰ Rosi Braidotti, Timothy Vermeulen. "Borrowed Energy." *Frieze*, 2014, <https://frieze.com/article/borrowed-energy>.

My rejection of Styrofoam is related to the long history of humans' rejection of their own waste. Plastics have become the new abject and our repulsion is even stronger with the inconceivable ramifications of climate change. It seems we are not evolutionarily prepared for witnessing anthropogenic waste entering geologic timescale. The consequences of this are unknown, grim, and freighting. In his book *In the Dust of this Planet*, literary theorist Eugene Thacker offers the genre of horror as a language of engaging with the dark side of our reaction to the contemporary environmental crisis. Artist Sean Caulfield deals with calamity in the fictional worlds he creates in large woodcuts and installations. His work offers a platform where a viewer might find company in their fears toward the disasters we face, and mobilize the tool of their own imagination as a way to engage these often avoided sentiments.

d. Nostalgia

A pre-existing hierarchy of matter was made visible by noticing my evaluation of certain things having a place in the frame and others, not. If I excluded the Styrofoam cup, I would be actively proliferating the idea that a pristine nature exists, a fiction. I am certainly not alone in this impulse, especially in the Norwegian context. The government idealizes (capital N) Nature and circulates it in the global image economy. In the Oslo airport, for example, you can't buy a bottle of something without reaching into a white plastic stone underneath an imbedded screen with rolling drone footage of the nation's mountaintops. Literary theorist Timothy Morton contends that "putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration" (5). Depicting a pure environment that once was will only affirm the subject-object duality that assails it. Perhaps out of reactionary moral obligation, I decided that I should know seaweed in equal measure to the debris it collects, even if only as an exercise embedded in my methodology. Photographer and now filmmaker, Edward Burtynsky exemplifies this tendency, in the 2013 film *Watermark*. He presents a photographic series that chronicles the transnational tampering of water resources; while reviewing the work he remarks,

If I look at 30 years of my work, I think the one constant throughout all of it is that because I understood what nature is, I learned to understand what is there before we come, before we change it. And for me not to have that profound relationship, I couldn't do this work because this work is lament for that loss (01:14:00)

I have three issues with this: he positions the environment as something entirely separate from humans ("admiring [it] from afar" (Morton,5)) and as something that he has witnessed in purity within his lifetime, that there is a before and after. In this case, nostalgia fuels a fiction. Thirdly, that he gladly takes on the role of heroic artist, perpetuating the myth that artists have an exclusive and profound relationship to nature which they must communicate to the rest of the world. This, again, is divisive and fails to acknowledge his complex and imperfect relation to the issue of water pollution.

e. Anthropomorphism

At one point, I had the idea of carving a manifesto or poem about my project into one of these monolithic blocks of Styrofoam. However, after discovering the library of information already contained in these blocks, I became increasingly wary of tampering with it. Who am I to rewrite their coded history?

Although anthropomorphism can be a tool to imaginatively expand one's horizons and sense of connectedness, it is insufficient. One need not reach any further than the inherent qualities of the thing itself

to make a work of art, to argue for its importance in the world and its vitality. I would rather try to work with the thing itself in such a way that begs the viewer to reevaluate what they imbue with agency. Take the Margarethe Pettersen's 2015 work on the Sonic Acts Dark Ecology Field Expedition, for example. She installs lights beneath a frozen lake in a pathway that guides the viewer through a series of oral anecdotes told from the perspective of snow, a water plant, and other sea non-human inhabitants. At a first glance, the work seems to fulfill aspirations of New Materialism. She is, after all, literally "highlight[ing] the active role of nonhuman materials in public life," (Bennett, 2) and giving voice to the inanimate. However, the things that are giving the frozen pond attention are the human voice and lights, all of which are installed by the artist. How could she have done something similar without reaching outside the inherent vocabulary of the site?

Secondly, in scripting how various sea inhabitants might narrate their stories, Petterson claims an impossible perspective. In working with the other, I believe it is important to acknowledge one's own subjectivity. When I go out to film on the coast, as much as I try to work in a way that allows for the site, the other, to come to me and co-determine the course of what I do, I must acknowledge my willful act of going towards it. I think we can work in a way that allows more or less room for the other to enter, but there is no escaping that a work always comes into being in relation to something else.

f. Contradiction

One of my central questions in this project became: "how can I inhabit contradiction?" I wanted the expression of this project to embody the position I attempt to occupy: to resist the urge to project a heroic image of activism, but rather have the work itself hold two contradictory positions.

Artist Olafur Eliasson and geology scholar Minik Rosing wade through this contradictory terrain in their 2015 *Ice Watch*. On the occasion of the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Paris, Eliasson and Rosing towed twelve icebergs totaling 80 tons to the Place du Panthéon in Paris. The blocks were arranged in a circular clock formation, and left to melt away throughout the conference. This piece shares the same concerns as Taumoepeau's *I-Land X-isle*, in regards to climate change, their desire to promote positive change and use of the materiality of ice set up to melt for the duration of the work. The difference lies in where the responsibility for pollution is directed. While Taumoepeau blames all developed countries, Eliasson points no fingers. He frames the issue as our collective responsibility, which he is a part of. By actively participating in the melting of this ancient ice, the artist shows some willingness to be a part of the problem and position the project in a paradox of artificially expediting the very process it aims to reverse.

Eliasson and Rosing claim the carbon footprint of the project in a downloadable pdf from their website. The creators do, however, appear hesitant to be in the contradiction by specifying on the project website that they were "free-floating blocks of ice and thus, not actively depleting the ice sheet." It seems like the most ethical method of "harvesting", but why specify it publicly? Here I spot an urge to maintain an environmentalist image. Surely they would have received more criticism for it, but I think this could have opened up an interesting discussion. Even so, removing "free-floating" blocks would impact water temperature, thus affecting the rate at which the next blocks will separate from the ice sheet.

I can explain why this project is working in many ways I have been thinking about, but it is lacking in the uncanny. It feels like something designed for a conference, which it is, and that is fine.

Conclusion

As a final gesture of the Styrofoam Project, I ceremoniously returned the blocks to where I found them, unframing my role of heroic artist as researcher. The material can then continue on their own journey, right from where they left off, before I thwarted them for my investigation. By doing so, I also refuse the title of environmentalist, a position that I still deny with great hesitation.



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