

August Valentin Schmidt

Inertiae

Bachelor's project in Bachelor of Fine Art

Supervisor: Jacob Jessen, David Rych

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Architecture and Design
Trondheim Academy of Fine Art



Kunnskap for en bedre verden

Preface

The circumstances of this graduation have changed dramatically since the start of the semester. I am because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic turning in my bachelor thesis combined with sketches of the proposal for my addition to our graduation show. My practice revolves around being present, under these circumstances especially so, I therefore dedicate each chapter to the present(s) and being present.

August Valentin Schmidt

12.05.2020

Table of Contents

Summary

1

Historic Presents – *Immediate build-up to the sixth semester*

2

Possible Presents – *Brainstorming*

6

1st Alternate Present – *The assumed project of the world before*

10

Present Continuum – *Situations we face of unknown duration*

11

Extemporaneous Present – *Foundations of my practice, reasoning*

12

Ultra Present – *Project description*

14

Sketches for *Inertiae* – *Presenting what wanted to be*

15

Previous Works – *Selection of*

18

Summary

In this thesis I will walk through the contents of my process leading up to the submission. This involves seeing process as larger than single works and focuses on the succession of work collecting into a practice. the main body of the text therefore will be a description of the thoughts and links made to arrive at the conclusion sketch for *Inertiae*, my proposal for a graduation piece. Underlining a contextual understanding of practice and art, select previous works are also added.

Historic Present – *Ideas leading up to*

Individuals, and interactions as material.

In my practice I want the audience to be the primary material, their actions and decisions augmented, or altered in any way, preferably being the most noticeable physicality of the work.

In *Relational Aesthetics* Nicolas Bourriaud writes:

Our day and age is certainly not short of political projects but it is awaiting forms capable of embodying it, and thus of enabling it to become material.

For form produces and shapes sense, steers it, and passes it on into day-to-day life.

The revolutionary culture has created and popularized several types of sociability. The assembly (soviets, agoras), the sit-in, the demonstration and its processions, the strike and its various devices (banners, tracts, spatial organization etc.)¹

Of course, here Nicolas Bourriaud is more referencing an activist sociality (and distinctly progressive/left-wing activist sociality), but politics, as the structured – and structure giving – part of our contemporary sociality is here only given importance as people will be filling out the space. This will of course not always be possible. At least not within the arts, that as I see it excels primarily in questioning status quo (either progressively or regressively), as opposed to politics providing definitive answers in maintaining that particular ideology's status quo.

Two instances have been the main focus leading up to the 6th semester. The first of them being my first serious foray into curating. A show looking at the foundations and levels of

¹ Bourriaud, N., (2002), *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Le Presse du Reel.

sculpture, artist and institution, and the structures behind and within. I intend to level the floor of Gallery KiT where the different sculptures, of artists ranging from icons of neoclassicism to academy students, will be placed on the naked, levelled concrete floor underneath the uneven layers of varnish. For economic reasons the addition of the neoclassical or older art to the finalized exhibition was not possible. Of course, this had a negative impact of the archeological aspect of the exhibition's concept and contributed to an even more scarcely "populated" exhibitions space.



Figure 1 Installation view; Exhibition text, Bikini Atoll (Nanna Abell, 2016)



Figure 2 Installation view; Presence (Daniela Björkenstam, 2020)



Figure 3 Installation view; Far From the Mountain (Emilie Lærkner, Anna Ida Pezzot, 2020),

Plateaus

Tradition is a layer of varnish, at first just a habit, a thin glaze [sic] over the structure providing some protection for it, but also showcasing and highlighting it. Traditions are built from habits, over time, the varnish becomes more and more opaque, until completely solid. At this point, we have a sallow, grey shell, covering the structure. Informed by it, but not showing details other than fault lines and gashes in the habits, and traditions – possibly craters from unsuccessful revolts, or just lived life, against them – making up the layers. The shell, or floor if you want, has now become uneven, a crater painted over before the blood has been washed off and the surface has dried out will not produce the same adhesion as the varnish that was removed.

Having worked as a construction worker, I have seen brick walls so brittle that the only part still providing any structural integrity was the plaster and paint, the traditions upholding the structure.

Plateaus, normally elevated physically, will in this setting be heightened by a removal of the apparent traditions and history; sculptures given the chance of being measured up against the naked structure of the institution, and vice versa. The sculptures dealing with structures of differing sizes, working with – and against – the various layers encasing their surfaces.

Exhibition text, *Plateaus*²

² Schmidt, A. V. (2020). *Plateaus*. Exhibited at Gallery KiT 01.02.2020-06.02.2020

Instead I had to focus more on a different kind of distance, adding to the more concrete institution rather than *Institutions* at large. This is primarily seen in the curation of *Far from the Mountain* (2020)³, by E. Lærkner and A. I. Pezzot, where extraction takes over for archeology as the subterranean element. Strangely, this concretization resulted in a floatier and more abstract exhibition text than I had envisioned. The other effect mentioned, the scarcely populated exhibition space, was actually on purpose – even from the start – meant as a contrasting factor to highlight this exhibition’s difference from the usual “democratic” exhibitions – such as *open calls* – both in this exhibition space, and in the younger, less established art scene in Norway, in general.

The second was an intervention in Trondheim Kunstmuseum’s collection exhibition, where I proposed to light the exhibition only with handlamps distributed to the audience, so as to let them see the artworks in their own light. To add to the feeling of the unknown in the darkness, artist and KiT student Sofie Clausager Sørensen and I had chosen two of her works to be placed on the floor, scattered around the exhibition. Sadly, this project was not realized, partly due to Trondheims Kunstmuseum’s lawful responsibility to take outmost care of both art pieces in their collection, and logistic issues concerning the health and safety of their employees and visitors.

My take from the experiences I’ve made from these projects range in varying scale of relevance to my BFA project. I was again reminded that it is necessary to stay on top of prospective partners, both in regards to the artists that I had asked to join the exhibition and institutional partners from Trondheims Kunstmuseum to Gallery KiT. Some can help you, but can’t find the time, some can’t help with what you’re asking, but have their respective reasons for not letting you know this.

³ Lærkner, E., & Pezzot, A. I. (2020). Plateaus. [Installation] Trondheim: Courtesy of the artists

Safe to say both the curation of *Plateaus* and the non-realized project in Trondheims Kunstmuseum with Sofie Clausager Sørensen taught me some valuable lessons; don't expect that people or institutions will necessarily remember to help you out with any issues or problems that you will need them to sort out or produce solutions to, even if there is willingness and support for the project everyone is susceptible to being overworked or have new assignments thrust onto their desks. I don't think having a practice with an undercurrent of institutional critique such as mine helps either, maybe on a personal level, but hardly when expanding the scope to an actual institution with all their responsibilities towards budget and the political currents du jour. Further on, working with anyone, having to have them produce something – an artwork for instance – requires a pretty fine-tuned social radar, I fell right into the wrong lane on this with *Plateaus*; because of more eager involvement from one artist, and a feeling that I was neglecting another participant, I came to annoy them, making them feel like I was watching over their back. Even though this might read like very mundane realizations as compared to more typical artistic breakthroughs, my view on these examples is that as art is questions posed, the myriad of sensibilities one encounters and creates will necessarily be needing development as well; my most important learning experience, artistically, during these projects was the realization that perceived inequality (thinking that one is being favored over the other) is not necessarily actual or reciprocated inequality, there is a necessity in actual dialog in, and the inherent cohabitation of space that it entails in both curating and creating art but also in viewing this, and the environment at large. In short: treating and thinking of interactions between individuals and groups as a material.

Possible Presents

Leading up to the BFA-show I have also looked towards public spaces. Sitting on a staircase, with a cool glass of red wine, a nice and warm sunset, the youngsters play football on the field just below.

There is not really any way to create a public social space, not with certainty anyway as a paraphrase of the quote from *Relational Aesthetics*⁴ above states. If no one feels entitled to move their sociality into it, it will just be an empty space. Or staircase. The staircase in my train of thought came as a place of re-placement, being both a place to move through, and to rest – using the steps as seats or tables. An obvious choice of public gathering, as the Spanish Steps in both Rome and Kolding shows, now that the more famous of them apparently is being policed and has outlawed the inhabitation and socialization on the stairs (implemented before and unrelated to Covid-19). Levels and plateaus can create dynamics in many modes of interacting with your environment; slow or heighten your speed of travel; trip you up; having to crane your neck out from the normal gaze hitting the asphalt 4 meters in front of you; even take your breath away – in more than the obvious way of ascending them too fast, I almost fainted the first time I stepped on to the escalators down into the Prague metro. It changes your horizon, or at least it makes achievable to gain another one, by moving through in either direction.

With the stairs, I wanted to create a place that is not bound. A place where anyone can fill. If not filled, it loses its function, its right to be. What is available then? How to find a neutral space in your own world? The exclusion is implicit in a staircase, no person in a wheelchair can gain access to anything but the extremes of the space. As such our societies' mitigation and help for people in

⁴ Bourriaud, N., (2002), *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon: Le Presse du Reel.

wheelchairs – and with other restrictions on their mobility – does not help with taking up space in public, but only eases their travel from one, potentially private, point to another.

The square, or the commons, is probably the most direct way of seeing a public space and was to me a way out of the possibly discriminatory setting of stairs and steps. A space originally designed by society, to develop society. This place has to be open to arrival by anyone. With a parabolic form as the city square in Copenhagen, one can even hope that most people can get a view of whatever is going on in an imagined center.

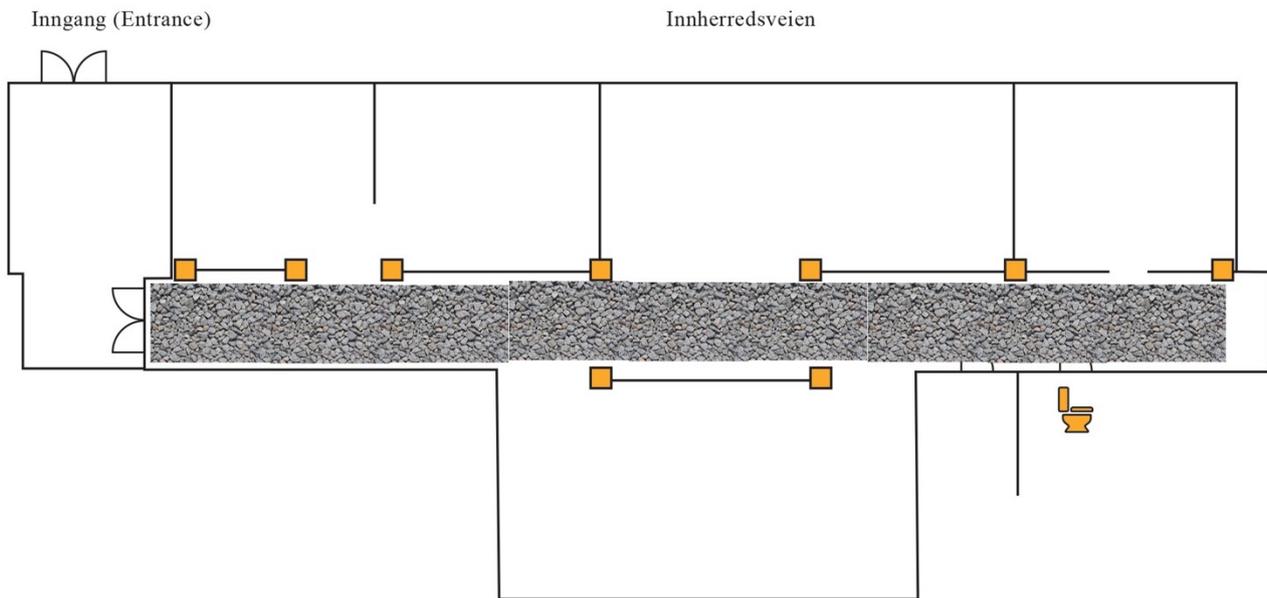
The parabolic space may be the best physical offer in a public space, given that the substrate is welcome for all modes of personal transportation. However, such a place would not be very conducive to staying and gathering, levels are necessary to let people know that they are welcome to occupy this area. Give them a reason, and a way to stay. So, with the stairs and the and the square having the exact opposite problems with access, both directly, and in welcoming, the entrance to and of a place came to be my lead. Entry can both a breach and an acceptance. The idea that came out on top was to have built a new, separate entrance to the venue of our graduation show, Gallery KiT, instead of the existing entrance shared with the rest of the building including the neighboring gym. I figured, with the help of some friends, that to have any hope of having the landlord say okay the project I would have to have some kind of serious backing in the form of a top shelf architecture firm. I proceeded to contact some, but they weren't very enthusiastic, both taking time and resources on their behalf. The entrance would have been at the only windowless wall towards the street, the wall-module to the left of the existing entrance when facing the building. Seeing that without full support from – for example – Snøhetta, I would likely get a resounding no from the landlord, I opted to drop the project as a graduation piece.

1st Alternate Present

Continuing thoughts kept me returning to archaeologies as a base for contemporary social interaction and another “commons”. The base for our knowledge production is in *Thousand Plateaus*⁵ proposed as to being nomadic in nature; in a concrete, physical and societal manifestation, this in my mind came to be roads. Common, (mostly-) public, and in my – then – context of being placed in Norway by way of Providence, a still existing tradition of being in its foundations made of gravel. Thinking of archaeology, the gravel road in a Norwegian context was to me the foundation of transferring knowledge, all the while still being a present part of daily life in the hive mind – both with ubiquitous trips to *the cabin*, and in the apparently horrible condition that proper asphalt roads in Norway is in. I have no empirical evidence for this last postulate, only anecdotal from seeing Facebook discussions on the matter, (they are an utter laugh). This gave me to possibilities, in my mind, to produce a work. in the gallery I could emulate a gravel road – the archaeological, founding and collective knowledge transfer – in the gallery’s entrance and hallway. Somewhat an equal opposite of *Asphalt Rundown*⁶

⁵ Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., (2005), *Tusind Plateauer: Kapitalisme og Skizofreni*, Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademis Billedkunstskoler.

⁶ Smithson, R. (1969). *Asphalt Rundown*. [Sculptural Event]. Rome: Holt/Smithson Foundation.



By acting as gravel does this would provide a parasitic element to the work by spreading out to the rest of the exhibition space during open hours, hereby afflicting and interacting with, the other student's artworks. This could of course become an annoyance to some of my classmates, but that could be remedied by "resetting" the installation every evening, sweeping the gravel back in place after closing.

The other possibility, I thought, would be to lay out a layer of gravel on Innherreds veien, the road in front of the gallery, in a thickness approximately the height of the curb, in the entire length of the gallery's façade including entrance A and excluding entrance B. This, to my thinking, would give a sense of belonging to the gallery and exhibition for the people aware of it, and hopefully to people unaware, but curious in nature – inviting so to say. One of the more defining aspects of this project – with both of the alternative forms – is the minor hindrance in the normal movement over the new surface, as opposed to the original solid surfaces. People walking over the gravel in the gallery would supposedly experience lesser foothold, and cars on the road outside would possibly have to slow down. Signs would probably have to be set up facing both directions of the road warning of the change in surface, which could lower the curiosity-aspect of my concept and

in turn re-introduce the subject-object barrier I'm trying throughout my practice to eliminate. Although as stated I seek to keep artworks primarily social and relational in nature I am aware that even in the more successful works of this kind there is still an element of physical material and they are object based in some way, as for instant Bourriaud mentions in the quote above. In Félix González-Torres' installation *Untitled (Placebo)*⁷, this is also the case, but I would argue that both in the cases of this, and my project with gravel, the object(s) are secondary only working as catalysts for the actual artistic experience of connectedness, or the social aspect.

Present Continuum

Friday, March 13th, 2020, a couple of days after campus and thereby studios have shut down because of anti-epidemic measures to combat Covid-19 the prime minister of Denmark, Mette Frederiksen announces that by the following day at noon the Danish borders will be shut. After a conversation with my wife, we agree that the best thing for me to do is to come home as fast as possible. This of course dramatically changes everything. In Norway gravel roads are a living part of the collective mind, in urbanized Denmark – and especially the capitol region – not so much. Gravel roads are a thing of the past, even in the few national parks in the region roads are made of asphalt. Not being one to see art as a modernist venture into self-contained objects, deliberately blind to their context. I see I have to change projects yet again, this time as a result of the force majeure pandemic.

⁷ Gonzales-Torres, F. (1991). *Untitled (Placebo)*. [Installation]. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

Contemporary Present

Throughout this span of this BFA-project I have had some guidelines, informed by my general practice as an artist. These guidelines are mainly situated within conceptual art and carries some of the concepts that formed into the term relational aesthetics that Nicolas Bourriaud coins in the book of the same name. The notions of the social being, individuals interconnected and the exchange of ideas, ideals and experiences between them. That being said, I try to avoid the kitschy soup-kitchen-hangout part. When pressed for it I will call my artwork something along the lines of situations, scenographies or (performative-) installations. On the output level I can say that I view aesthetics as a slumber – efficient communication is short circuiting already existing symbols to ask questions your audience will hear in life-after-the-viewing. Acknowledging the advantages in commercialized society is perhaps an already-made, but nevertheless it is a not unheard-of strategy – connecting to both some of the avant-gardes of the early 20th century and political theory (historical materialism, accelerationism, etc.). My reason being both mentioned above, and the idea that forms we agree on, are liberated from questions of education, i.e. *am I allowed to understand this without having been taught/given the key to this artwork?*

Back in Copenhagen I shifted back to an idea I had when looking at entrances and their connotations. In Trondheim I had wanted to try to “move” a pedestrian crossing from its normal place right next to Industribygget (the building in which KiT resides) to being right in front of the entrance to the gallery, hereby confronting people with the exhibition and try to invite them in, instead of hiding off the main road. This would be done by covering the existing traffic lights and setting up temporary ones, like those they use for roadworks. In Copenhagen the gallery part was not really feasible, but other kinks had opened up for new possibilities. All the covid-19 talk of social distancing and showing civic awareness made me realize that the combination of the

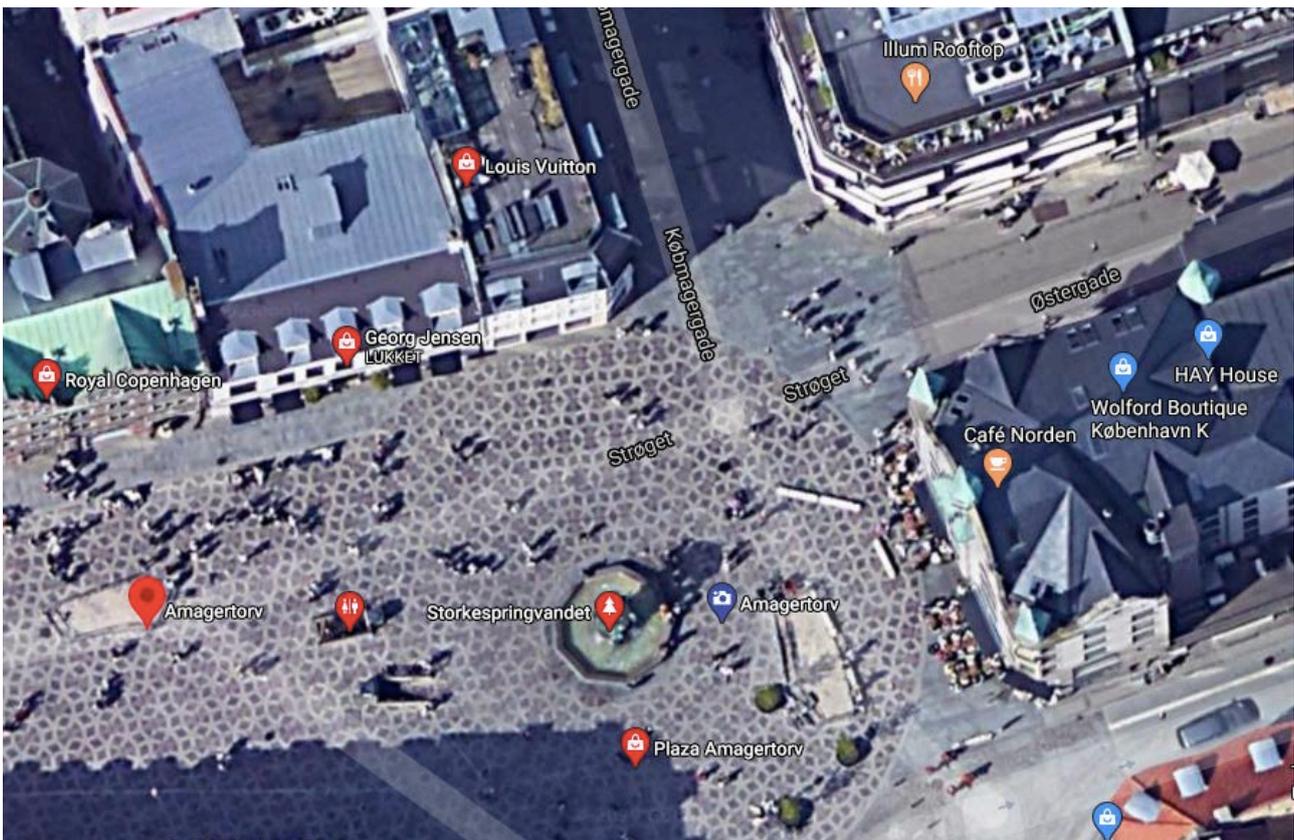
concepts I have been working with, termini, inhabitation and collective consciousness was applicable for one project.

Ultra Present – Project description

The project is the before mentioned mobile road-works traffic lights being set up at the intersection of two pedestrian streets in Copenhagen, at Amager torv, where Strøget and Købmagergade to manage the traffic as the restrictions in Copenhagen gets loosened. The setup of traffic lights meant to regulate motorized traffic (the materiel-rental doesn't carry pedestrian lights) on a pedestrian street will probably seem odd to some, even to the extent that they will not comply with them, further setting the work into the petit-bourgeois discourse that seemingly has accelerated exponentially over the course of this lockdown. Hopefully, and maybe with the guide of a plaque/text they will find that elusive higher meaning. Kidding aside, the physical form of a lights regulated intersection normally meant for motorized traffic, but placed in a pedestrian-only-area (granted, some vehicles will pass through) to my thinking, is a way of showing individuals that they are of the same, an ultra-contemporary take would be that civic awareness (samfundssind in Danish) is not anything inherently related to the Covid-19-pandemic, it's a condition, explained in modern political tradition (democratic) by Rousseau in the book of the same name in 1762. This can possibly be said in one way or another of many if not all of my works, and I would not disagree, this is to me the more important part of life and a powerful engine for bringing about the newer society. I don't usually give instructions in my works; I try to have the scenography be just barely registrable so as to give the public freedom to choose their involvement. This is also to try to counter an easy-to-make critique; that I as a director of the work enigmatically enlists unknowing (partial in an arts context, totally in this instance in the public sphere) people to my

show, their performance. I don't disagree, the puppeteer is a deeply authoritarian figure, but I'm not in doubt that this gives the "guinea pigs" more of a choice in an easier to swallow pill than say authors of participatory performances.

Sketches for Inertiae



Sketch 1 Location of Inertiae

Inertiae is bastardization of inertia in plural, the proper plural is inertias, these unstoppable forces.

The project could sadly not be realized within the timeframe for this graduation. Jens Christian Hermansen, Sales Manager – East, of GSV material-rental, was looking forward our cooperation, but the traffic lights he had wanted to bring me, was rented out hours before we were to meet at Amager torv. We have agreed to finalize the project when they are available.



Sketch 2 The intersection, coming from Købmagergade.



Sketch 3 Projected discrepancies, law-abiding citizens and their counterparts

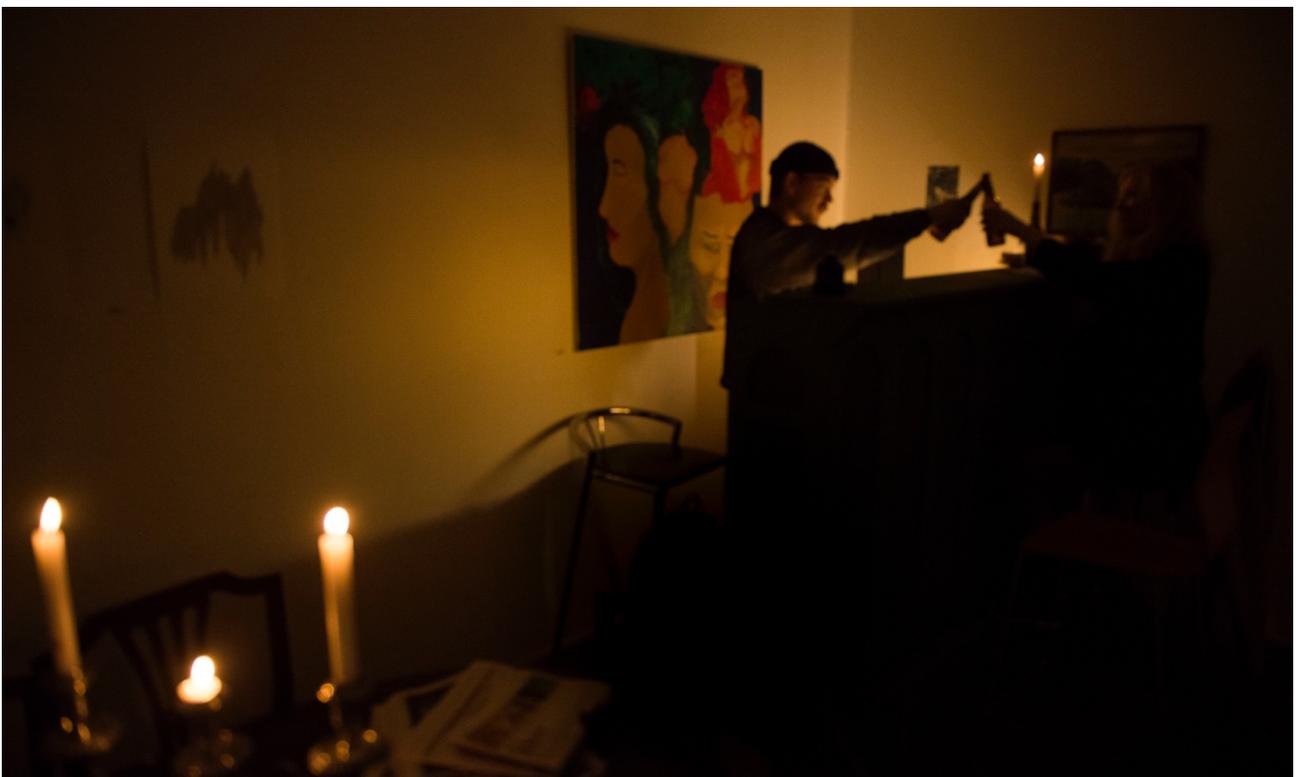


Sketch 4 Detail

Previous Works – *selection of*



S'ALLONS (2017) 1 Durational performance, dive bar set up in Galleri Blunk



S'ALLONS (2017) 2 drawings exhibited were for sale, all profits to be distributed equally among the artists



Ida Blauenfeldt Dam (guest) (2018) 1 Former student-intern invited to her first opening, clueless to how one acts at such gatherings. She has since been to many events at the gallery



Tal Trygt (2019) 1 Posters from an anti-harassment campaign directed at cultural educations, set up in the only art academy not to have joined the initiative



De/-Forestation (2019) 1 Performance lecture and talk with Head of Innovation D. Dybvig about the internet as forest



No Access (2019) 1 "no access"-sign hung between two rooms in an exhibition, the visitors were encouraged by guards and text to unclip and enter the room

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