CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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Abstract: In *Ung Uro: Unsettling Climates in Nordic Art, Architecture and Design*, thirteen young writers, critics, and art historians examine how Nordic visual art, architecture, and design relate to the Anthropocene. The chapters in the book represent a new generation of scholarship in the field of visual studies, which holds that critique and analysis of artistic expression must have a different form and agency than before: less descriptive and impartial, according to objective parameters, and more speculative and insistent, in accordance with subjective experiences. By discussing the artwork *Future Library: 2014–2114* by Katie Paterson, this introductory chapter presents key notions that run throughout the book: Arne Næss' deep ecology, Donna Haraway's 'staying with the trouble' and Giorgio Agamben's notion of profanation. Further, chapter introduces how *ethical criticality* functions as a methodological underpinning for the authors' interpretation and proposes the term *deep relationalism* as an analytical concept for describing a tendency in the Nordic arts in the latter part of the 2010s: an interest in processual works with an ethical value base directed towards destabilising human exceptionalism.

Keywords: art criticism, Nordic arts in the 2010s, Anthropocene, ethical criticality, deep relationalism

On the outskirts of Oslo, there is a clearing in the woods. The tall trees that once grew here were felled in 2014, leaving a sharp border between the dark forest and the open space [figure 1]. In this clearing, a new generation of Norwegian spruce is growing. The young trees are marked by red ribbons and, after growing for a hundred years, these trees will be felled, transformed into paper, and become books containing unpublished and unread texts by writers and poets of the 21st century. The newly planted

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Figure 1. The clearing in the woods in which the trees for *Future Library: 2014–2114* by Katie Paterson grow. Photo © Rio Gandara/Helsingin Sanomat. Reproduced with permission of Katie Paterson Studio. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

trees are a part of the artwork *Future Library: 2014–2114* by Scottish artist Katie Paterson. Every year since 2014, a manuscript read by no one except the author is handed over to Paterson and the Future Library Trust for safekeeping. So far, Margaret Atwood, David Mitchell, Sjón, Eilif Shafak, Han Kang, and Karl Ove Knausgård have submitted their manuscripts relating to the theme of 'time and imagination'. The young spruces grow parallel with the collection of manuscripts, and the thin trunks will one day make public *Future Library's* final anthology, which will contain one hundred essays.[1] Most of us living today will never read this book.

1 Each year, the Future Library Trust invites an author to the project. Guiding the selection of authors is the Future Library Trust, whose trustees (as of 2020) include artist Katie Paterson,

Figure 2. *Silent Room*, by Atelier Oslo, Lund Hagem and Katie Paterson. Deichman Public Library in Bjørvika, Oslo. Photo © Vegard Kleven, 2020. Reproduced with permission of Katie Paterson Studio. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

The trees that were felled in order to clear the ground for the new generation of spruces now clad the walls of the *Silent Room* in the newly opened Deichman Public Library in Bjørvika [figure 2]. Located on the top floor of the building, the room was designed by Paterson in collaboration with the architectural team of the library, Lundhagem and Atelier Oslo. From 2020 onwards, this room will keep the growing collection of unread manuscripts safe.

Entering the *Silent Room* is like entering a sacred space. The smell of pine eliminates the everyday urban noise outside the room, and the light, roughly

Publishing Director of Hamish Hamilton Simon Prosser, former Director of the Deichman Bibliotek Liv Sæteren, Publishing Director of Forlaget Press Håkon Harket, Editor-in-Chief of Oktober Press Ingeri Engelstad, and Bjørvika Utvikling's Project Director for Art Anne Beate Hovind.

Figure 3. Deichman Public Library in Bjørvika, Oslo. Photo © Reinert Mithassel 2020. Reproduced with permission of Katie Paterson Studio. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

carved timber makes you forget Bjørvika's smooth, grey facades [figure 3]. The public room is dedicated to reflection. Perhaps the smell of pine makes you think about the wild forest; maybe you speculate about Knausgård's secret essay, or perhaps you think about why this organic room has such a ritualistic atmosphere, like in a church. When sitting on the elegant hand-carved wooden bench in the midst of the Norwegian capital's newly developed fjord area of office buildings and Nordic coffee bars, the difference between the natural inside and the urban outside might seem vast. But then you notice goosebumps on your skin, and you realise that the air conditioning system has reduced the temperature, making it slightly cold. After all, the room is not that different from its surroundings. The capital penetrates and merges with the *Silent Room*, and what you thought was different was in fact the same.

A New Generation

In the year 2000, the term 'Anthropocene' was popularised by chemist and Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen. The concept arises from geology and

holds that traces of human activity can now be found in the geological layers of the earth. Crutzen and his colleagues proposed that human beings' impact on the earth had now reached an irreversible point and that the geological epoch of the Holocene was therefore over and that a new era had begun (Steffen et al., 2011). The concept of the Anthropocene has been widely addressed in humanities and artistic practices, thus translating the geological concept into a cross-cultural analytical category that allows for an understanding of nature and culture as intertwined. A united group of researchers from several disciplines now agrees that humans have used technological tools to exploit natural resources to the point of environmental collapse (see Bjerregaard & Kverndokk, 2018). In the Anthropocene—the geological age of humans—we have lost control of that for which we are responsible. Rooted in an ideology of overproduction and mass consumption, a new kind of unease is spreading in our environment, in politics, and consequently also in the arts.

'The end of the world has already occurred,' writes philosopher Timothy Morton (2013, p. 7) when investigating the philosophical consequences of the Anthropocene. A rhetorical exaggeration perhaps, but, nonetheless, it is an indisputable fact that irreversible human impact on the earth forces us to rethink the way we think about the world. How can the unsettling climates of our times be understood? What kinds of theories and concepts could be used to explain the new relations between nature and culture now that these two categories are completely entangled? How can art, architecture, and design that engages with the complexities of our new geological age be analysed and criticised?

In this book, *Ung Uro*, thirteen young writers, critics, and art historians examine how Nordic visual art, architecture, and design relate to this new state of unease. The Norwegian word 'uro' is defined etymologically as having a double meaning: it means 'movements and unease' but also 'riots and disturbance'. The word comes from the Old Norse *úró* and is used to describe political turmoil, social disorder, and a psychological state of restless anxiety. The title of the book (meaning 'young unrest') thus carries a paradoxical tension between describing the new condition—the Anthropocene—and referring to the reactions this condition provokes. In 2018, Greta Thunberg sat down in front of the Swedish

Riksdag (parliament) and started a global protest. All over the world, young voices demand action. They demand a different economic paradigm, not based on unbridled growth: 'If solutions within the system are so difficult to find,' Thunberg affirmed, 'maybe we should change the system itself' (Thunberg, 2018).

Most of the writers in this book are still students in a wide variety of disciplines within the humanities: art history and visual studies, philosophy, fine arts, gender studies, and media studies. The book started out as a course in art history at the University of Oslo, Art and Criticism in the Anthropocene (developed and taught by the editor in autumn 2018), and the project continued at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, as part of the course Art in its Context (developed and taught by the editor in autumn 2019). Consequently, the Nordic framework of this book refers mainly to Norwegian art, architecture and design, but the chapters also discuss artistic expressions relating to Danish, Swedish, Sami, and Icelandic contexts. During the university courses, Norwegian and international students wrote cutting-edge critiques of contemporary artworks in Oslo and Trondheim, and the group developed a common methodological base when continuing to develop their texts into book chapters. Each author selected an artwork and a topic that they had explored in the university course, and they developed it further into a subjective reading in which they reflected and fabulated *with* the works, in order to draw out the multiple complexity of our current times that the various artworks discussed in the book open up to. During 2020, the authors developed their chapters through writing workshops, and in these meetings a common methodological stance emerged: the authors of *Ung Uro* believe that academic analysis of the visual arts needs to be reconfigured in order to be relevant in a time where the climate crisis, global capitalism, and blurry truths are increasingly interconnected. The writers of this book say 'no' to the current condition by speculating, critiquing, and analysing Nordic art, architecture, and design that either prefigures, participates in, opposes, or is a consequence of, our present unsettling climate.

The chapters of the book all explore how the relationship between nature and culture is negotiated in a wide range of case studies. The chapters span from early 20th century landscape painting to contemporary

bio-acoustics; from energy-positive architecture to the Sami chant *yoik* and critiques of IKEA. However, most of the empirical material consists of specific exhibitions, artistic projects, and related events which have mostly taken place in Norway from 2018 to 2020 and, as such, the book also functions as an archive for critical issues at stake in Nordic contemporary art and culture. In addition, each author discusses her or his case study by drawing on novel theories and concepts; thus, the book introduces academic concepts and terms (such as *posthumanism*, *natureculture*, and *non-human agency*) and shows how these theories can be employed when writing about the visual arts.

The thirteen chapters represent a new generation of scholarship in the field of visual studies, which holds that critique and analysis of artistic expression must have a different form and agency than before: less descriptive and impartial, according to objective parameters, and more speculative and insistent, in accordance with subjective experiences. If writing about the visual arts and artistic work—which are creative fields per se—observations of these expressions need to come from a subjective point of view. Yet, perhaps the key common trait among the approaches in the book is a desire to disturb traditional and outdated frameworks of thinking, and venture into an *ethical criticality*; in other words, the texts in this book want to participate in changing ethical thinking—an approach that is deep-rooted in Norwegian academic thought.

Deep Ecology

> Today, we see the possibility of a destruction or deterioration of the biosphere. If we try, in a few words, to summarize what makes the situation so critical, I would propose: the accumulation of increasing—almost or total—irreversible environmental decay or destruction brought forth by a deep ideology of material production and consumption. (Næss, 1972, p. 1)

These words were written almost fifty years ago by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (1912–2009). This is the opening segment of his 1972 report *Økologi og filosofi* [Ecology and Philosophy], in which he presented a radical way of thinking about the new powerful catchword 'ecology.' In

this work, Næss suggested combating notions of progress and growth by changing mankind's pattern of thinking and ethical behaviour.

Fifty years ago, the ecology movement was generally understood as a political ideology with the aim of, in Næss' words, 'combating pollution and the depletion of natural resources' (Næss & Anker, 2008, p. 59). Yet, if the measures to combat pollution and over-exploitation of natural resources were confined to signing international agreements on specific issues, Næss claimed these man-made problems would never be really solved. In *Økologi og filosofi,* Næss suggested that the concept of ecology had much *deeper* implications than such political objectives.

Thus, in 1972, Næss formulated his notion of *deep ecology,* in which he blamed the 'hard sciences' and Western scientific models for producing a false feeling of competence in how to grasp accelerating world complexities (Næss & Anker, 2008, p. 63). Næss stressed that ecologists who were using scientific models to describe present conditions and followed up with warnings about a forthcoming catastrophe, belonged to the *shallow* ecological movement. According to Næss, a *deep* ecological movement would, on the other hand, entail a normative concept of ecology; the matters of concern in deep ecology could be described as a political wisdom of ecological harmony or equilibrium. Næss declared that in order to meet the environmental challenges of the future, an 'ecological equilibrium' was needed at every level of society, from local communities to global bodies. Far from being a back-to-nature philosophy, Næss' concept of ecological equilibrium also embraced industry and technology. However, to achieve equilibrium, the organisational principle had to be changed from a belief in growth and progress to a perception that technology and development must be based on circular principles.

These philosophical ideas were formulated while Næss was a professor of philosophy at the University of Oslo (UiO) and, importantly, his ideas were not formed in a vacuum. Several pivotal figures, such as Sigmund Kvaløy and Nils Faarlund, worked together with Næss to formulate the movement's ideological content. At the time, the Philosophy Department at the University of Oslo was the core of the deep ecology movement, but important inspiration also derived from the *outside*—per se. Næss' interest in mountain climbing started already in the 1930s, and in 1969

the Philosophy Department at UiO founded the activist group 'Cooperation Group for Nature and Environmental Protection', which initiated a protest in the north-eastern part of Norway to stop the development of a hydroelectricity plant in connection to the Mardøla Waterfall (see Anker, 2020). For the deep ecologists, thinking, nature, and political activism were deeply related.

As a way of thinking and being-in-the-world, deep ecology aimed to alter human beings' mode of thinking; in order to combat pollution and the over-exploitation of resources, humans needed to redefine their philosophical perception of themselves. In the West, the legacy of philosophers like René Descartes and Immanuel Kant had fostered the idea that the existence of the world is inextricably linked to the way humans map, classify, and conceptualise reality. Fifty years ago, Næss and his colleagues affirmed that we had organised the world as a hierarchy, and we had placed ourselves—the humans—on top. Deep ecology promoted the idea of an 'equal right to live and blossom', but that restricting this right to humans alone would have harmful effects on our quality of life. Næss claimed that quality of life depends on a symbiotic relationship, or coexistence, with other forms of life.

Drawing inspiration from Eastern philosophy, Næss and his colleagues suggested that a de-hierarchisation—a degrowth—of the philosophical value of human beings was imperative for the survival of the planet. Deep ecology's turn towards notions such as coexistence and relations contributed to a conceptual shift that still echoes today and, in this way, the questions explored by the deep ecologists are tied to our current situation.[2]

Beyond Humans

Returning to the clearing in the forest outside Oslo, the trees with red ribbons [figure 4] require us to think of as together what has usually been

2 Although ecological concerns have a long and complex prehistory, Næss is considered to be a pioneer of ecological thinking. Often-mentioned contributions that also inspired environmental activism include Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), the first Earth Day in 1970, Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971), and the report *The Limits to Growth* (1972).

Figure 4. A growing three which is a part of the artwork *Future Library: 2014–2114* by Katie Paterson. Photo © Bjørvika Utvikling by Kristin von Hirsch. Reproduced with permission of Katie Paterson Studio. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

understood as distinct: in *Future Library*, nature and art become one—as if reminding us that nature and culture cannot be understood as separate. *Future Library* exemplifies and participates in a major issue and theme in contemporary art and theory: a turn *away* from the human as an ultimate guarantee of definite knowledge and lived experiences. The understanding of the world in which the human is placed in the centre of the world—and thus is given more value than other living and non-living entities—is called *anthropocentrism*. In both art and humanistic disciplines, artists and scholars attempt to challenge and even break such

anthropocentric attitudes by, for instance, speculating about the realm of the non-human, exploring non-Western worldviews that open up to multiple understandings of reality, or activating more-than-human experiences through science and technology. In light of this, a common topic in contemporary art is *multiple timescales* that surpass human capacities (for instance, a human life); time as either stretching backwards to past geological epochs—so-called *deep time*—or into unknown futures. In the *Future Library* project, the artwork is entangled in the lifetime of trees and this radically changes the interpretation of the work. Those of us living today will not experience the finished artwork and critics cannot fully understand it in order to interpret and critique it. Our humanity limits the full experience of this artwork, and the public can only partake in a segment of the long process of *growing* the work.

During the last decade, the Nordic contemporary art scene has seen a dramatic increase in processual artworks with an ethical value base directed towards destabilising human exceptionalism—in accordance with Næss' ideas. Simultaneously, in disciplines such as philosophy, history, and cultural studies, there has been a new development in theory and method that attempts the same. Today's methodological approaches in the humanities question the traditional understanding of the (human) subject as a source of action and the (non-human) object as a passive thing. In other words, recent methodological developments in the humanities aim to destabilise subjectivity and objectivity as epistemological notions, attempting instead to understand *multiple complex relations* between familiar epistemological dualities, such as subject vs object, mind vs body, and culture vs nature. The eco-feminist philosopher Donna Haraway is perhaps the most celebrated theorist within contemporary humanities today, advocating conceptual notions such as pluralism (which she calls 'tentacular thinking'), hybridity, and more-than-human beings. According to Haraway, all entities are hybrid entities which are constituted by their relations to other entities. On this, she writes: 'Through their reaching into each other, through their "prehensions" or grasping, beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not pre-exist their relatings. "Prehentions" have consequences. The world is a knot in motion' (Haraway, 2003, p. 6).

To understand all things in the world as connected through relations—thereby avoiding an anthropocentric perspective—and to understand the world as being in constant motion, or in flux, are fundamental philosophical underpinnings and ethical imperatives in recent developments in arts and humanities. These developments have been gathered under the umbrella term 'posthumanism' and include heterogenous directions and movements such as eco-feminism, new materialism, and object-oriented ontology. Apart from the writings of Haraway, theorists from these directions (for instance, Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, Jane Bennett, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, Elizabeth Grosz, Timothy Morton and Anna Tsing) have been widely read in Nordic art schools during the latter part of the 2010s (Yazdani, 2019). Although these directions and movements differ quite dramatically from each other in terms of means and aims, they all claim that the superior status of the human being needs to be broken down and new approaches based on a *posthuman* ethic need to be cultivated. The motivation for these directions in both art and theory is a belief that the anthropocentric attitudes that have been predominant in Western thinking (See Latour, 1993) have led us to the point in which the world we now live in is radically different than before.

In the Nordic art scene of the latter part of the 2010s there has been a tendency towards the manifestation of Næss' relational ethics of deep ecology in the production of artworks; the relations that constitute the works are entangled in more-than-human processes. In contemporary arts there is also a growing interest in what can be described as a 'deep relational' connection between living and non-living entities: several works activate this deep relational connection by artistic practices in which the final outcome of the work is not designated by human intention but by creative agents such as trees, mushrooms, bees or algae.

Staying with the Trouble

Returning to the sacred, wooden *Silent Room* in the Deichman Public Library, the entanglement between nature and culture has not yet been recognised by profiteers who market the Norwegian forest as pure, silent, and untouched by human meddling. The light timber in the hermetically

sealed room makes the contrast between the inside and the outside of the room remarkably explicit. The artwork *Future Library* might seem like a true 'ecological' artwork but, in accordance with Næss' distinction between shallow and deep ecology, a rather different value base is revealed when investigating the specific situation underpinning the work.

The Future Library project was conceived by artist Katie Paterson, but 'commissioned and produced by Bjørvika Utvikling' (Bjørvika Utvikling, 2021)—a real estate developer whose goal is to develop Bjørvika into Norway's most attractive area for real estate and commercial businesses.[3] In this context, the artwork can be considered to be participating in what Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre call 'the enrichment economy'. In *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities,* Boltanski and Esquerre analyse the European economic paradigm that emerged after industrial production moved from Europe to East Asia. The new form of capitalism is not connected to industrial production, financiers or industrialists, but instead to the arts, luxury goods, and cultural heritage. According to Boltanski and Esquerre, agents in the enrichment economy are creatives, travellers, and culture makers that might not even be aware that their actions are entangled in paradigms of financial growth: in urban development, real estate marketing or tourist industries.

In the 1970s, art theorist Brian O'Doherty (1999) wrote a classic essay about the ideology of the art gallery space that he identified as 'the white cube'. The white walls of art galleries, O'Doherty argued, had become of such vital importance for the interpretation of contemporary art that the *context* had now become *content*. Consequently, the white walls sanctified the singular artwork and thereby increased its market value. Not only contemporary art but also architecture and design can be said to exist in the realm of such a 'white cube' that sanctifies its content and thereby increases its value. Yet, in light of the recent climate crisis, perhaps we must update the 'white cube of modernism' and instead talk

3 Bjørvika Utvikling is owned by HAV Eiendom AS and Oslo S Utvikling AS (OUS). On their website, OUS writes: 'The real estate company Oslo S Utvikling (OSU) was established in 2001, and is owned by Entra ASA, Linstow AS and Bane NOR Eiendom AS. The company has an ambitious vision to make Bjørvika Norway's most attractive residential and commercial area.' [https://osu.no/om-osu/informasjon-om-osu].

about a 'green cube of sustainability' in which art, architecture and design become sanctified creative agents working for the European Green Deal—as, for instance, in the *Future Library* project that is sanctified in the name of ecology to promote urban development. Today, Næss' two notions of deep and shallow ecology might be hard to tell apart—especially in relation to the creative economy.

Apart from discussing how Nordic arts relate to notions such as ecology and anthropocentrism, this book also proposes that the Anthropocene inaugurates new kinds of phenomena as sacred, and thereby sealed off from critical approach. As discussed by Riccardo Biffi in Chapter 3, philosopher Giorgio Agamben proposes that we need to *profane what is sacred*, in order to, in Biffi's words, 'open up to new and heterodox uses of something that is originally separated from common control, something "sacred" that can be looked at but not modified.' *Ung Uro* attempts to profane the green cube in order to 'stay with the trouble' as Haraway (2016) suggests is a way to cope with the troubling entanglements—or, in other words, the unsettling climates—of the Anthropocene.

Confronting *Uro*

The book is divided into four parts in which the chapters explore connected topics: 'Unsettling Climates' discusses three cases of Nordic art, architecture and design, and respectively shows how notions such as pristine nature, sustainable design and green architecture become troublesome in a time of global crisis. The second part, 'Restless Resources,' presents three artworks which utilise natural elements as their primary material. The artworks are interpreted as opening up for three different ways of understanding and responding to the environmental crisis. Then, 'Entering Darkness' brings the reader into discussions of the uncanny and the unknown: the works discussed in this part open up to different ways of sensing, touching and hearing. In the book's final part, 'Deep Relationalism,' four artworks that ethically aim to destruct human exceptionalism are analysed and critiqued. Taken together, all the chapters in this book attempt to tell heterodox stories of the Nordic *natureculture*.

Ung Uro explores how various artistic and philosophical strategies confront our unsettling climate and the authors do this by unsettling traditional interpretations and modes of thinking: engaging in ethical criticality and hoping to change the course.

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