

## DESCRIPTION OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH

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### *Ethico-Aesthetic Practices*

In my research, I have primarily focused on what might be referred to as the mutual interdependency of the critical theory of artistic practice and the artistic practice of critical theory, and, more precisely, on the relation between collaborative creative, artistic processes, ethico-aesthetics and socio-political and cultural dissent. My doctoral thesis, *Across a Most Radical Terrain: Towards an Aesthetics of Dissention*<sup>i</sup> takes as its point of departure, Nicholas Bourriaud's notion of 'relational aesthetics'<sup>ii</sup> and the discussion that followed Claire Bishop's criticism of his work in, for example, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*.<sup>iii</sup> Making the argument that Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics leaves us with a potentially limiting notion of art lodged within the field of representation thinly disguised as participatory practice, and that Bishop's criticism and the antagonistic forms of practice she promotes in place of Bourriaud's participatory ones, ultimately ends up taking a similarly representational but "realist" position that reveals existing power structures but stops short of actually producing anything different in the world or facilitating change or transformation, the thesis proceeds to argue that in the Spinozism we find in the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, we find a more profound link between art and aesthetics, on the one hand, and political engagement, on the other. This link, the thesis suggests, is lodged in the notion of an ethico-aesthetics of change and differentiation; that is, in the production of *different* forms of subjectivity in and through creative-critical collaborative practice. In the thesis, this theoretical discussion is juxtaposed to a series of practical, collaborative artistic experiments conducted within the framework of the artist collective C.CRED / Collective CREative Dissent (2001-2008), coordinated by myself and involving collaborative constellations that differed over time but that remained transdisciplinary and transversal throughout the lifespan of the project. These experiments tangent the theoretical concepts explored, weaving together documentation, notes and reflections with the more theoretical parts of the thesis in an attempt to open up and explore a space for creative practice situated in the interstitial space between ethics, aesthetics and political dissent and implemented, more concretely, in international, transversal and transdisciplinary collaborative projects and actions in and sometimes beyond the cultural sector.

Examples of such projects include:

- *Permanent Ignition* (Turin, Stuttgart and Erfurt, 2001-2007),<sup>iv</sup> a set of speculative counter-monuments (or proposals for monuments) seeking to explore connections between the commemoration of specific historical instances of dissent and the current political situation and the conditions and opportunities now being constructed for creative, ethico-aesthetic dissent. The historical moments referenced were local and specific to the sites in which the different installments of the projects were situated and included the occupation of the FIAT factory in Turin in 1969, the 1977 burial of the bodies of Jan-Carl Raspe, Gudrun Ensslin and Andreas Baader in Stuttgart, and the 1991 passing of the Stasi Records Act and the subsequent making public of the records the Stasi had kept on citizens of the former GDR. While engaging with these particular historical moments, and involving collaborations with people involved in different capacities, the counter-monuments also functioned as a wider framework for a series of conversations, interviews, symposia and discussions around the notion of commemoration as a cultural, social and political act interweaving different takes on popular history, alternative historiographies, (pseudo-) autobiography, forms of mythopoesis and fictions with a particular focus on current forms and practices of dissent and the relation between creativity, criticality, ethico-aesthetics and transformative political engagement at that period.
- *Counter/Cartographies* (on-line and various physical places, 2003-2007),<sup>v</sup> a nomadic, physical, platform for symposia and conversations on the link between artistic practice, social and political engagement and activism, primarily taking three interrelated forms: a.) collective peregrinations (by foot), a kind of peripatetic, site-specific approach where walks to and between specific sites significant to the local terrain in which the project were realized became

constructed events and situations opening up to improvised, often spontaneous, dialogues on specific, overarching themes related to the relation between artistic practice, ethico-aesthetics and activism; b.) a physical and on-line atlas, archive and resource consistent of lists of and links to participating artists, artist collectives and activist groups and their respective networks, and recordings, photographs, text, notes, sketches and maps gathered as the peripatetic and nomadic project progressed; and, c.) a structure or laboratory of sorts for the collaborative production of performances, fictions, myths, “travelling literatures”, manifestos and documents in other media and intermedial assemblages related to and making use of the archives generated.

- *alt.SPACE* (London and various places, 2005-2008),<sup>vi</sup> an alternative “free university” focusing on artistic research, the relation between artistic practice, critical theory and ethico-aesthetic and political engagement and activism. As part of the project, regular events were organized in temporarily occupied public spaces, squats and sometimes domestic spaces, and hosted by venues such as galleries, museums and other art venues, colleges and universities, pubs, bars and clubs. These events, often several each week, included: a.) seminars, symposia, reading groups and lecture series; b.) performances, screenings, and presentations of artistic projects; c.) biannual study retreats; d.) experimental reading and writing workshops; and e.) an annual artist research festival.

In my collaboration with artist and art theorist Simon O’Sullivan, most notably the article ‘Contours and Case-Studies of a Dissenting Subjectivity; or, How to Live Creatively in a Fearful World,’<sup>vii</sup> written during this period, a related endeavour is pursued, again through a reading of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari alongside Baruch Spinoza, interwoven with a series of case-studies, moments in our lives - some experienced individually, some together - in which creativity and the practice of responding creatively to the encounters that make up one’s life, played a crucial part. In the article, these moments or cases (walks, art projects, rave culture, rituals, etc.), are then considered points of intersection where ethico-aesthetic practice opens up to a micro-politics of dissent.

Continuing this exploration of ethico-aesthetic practices, more specifically in relation to political dissent and an expanded notion of design, my research into the Long Kesh prison in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and, in particular, the republican inmates’ protests in the 1970s and 80s, addresses the penal institution itself, its architecture, interior designs and the rituals implemented there, arguing that these were not only designed but involved on-going design processes to which inmates responded by developing their own design processes making use of the site itself as well as their bodies and what they signify within the semiotic regime of the penal institution. This research resulted in the paper ‘Long Kesh: Site – Sign – Body’<sup>viii</sup> and, in a more general sense, the digital essay collection *Manipulations*, co-edited with Eric Snodgrass and Mahmoud Keshavarz.<sup>ix</sup>

Similarly, in the paper ‘Towards a Post-Anthropocentric Speculative Archaeology (through Design),’<sup>x</sup> co-authored with design researcher Mathilda Tham, we’re proposing, with and through a performative engagement with archaeology, that *anaesthesia* can be understood as a cultural practice of a multitude of insensitivities characterizing the epoch now recognized as the Anthropocene. We argue, instead, for a new *aesthesis*, awareness-es and agencies with and in our world through and in art and design, in order to promote a more embodied engagement with sustainability.

Drawing upon a wide array of sources ranging from Spinoza and Guattari through Situationist practices to the writing of neuroscientists Francisco Varela and Antonio Damasio and biologists Humberto Maturana and Gerda Verden-Zöllén, I’ve since been trying to stake out the ground for an ethico-aesthetics of attentiveness that will allow us to consider art and design, and, indeed, writing, as practices and forms of knowledge, beyond the confines of their more traditional definitions. This research has resulted in a book chapter, ‘Reading Glass: An Extended Commentary,’ in which I take Spinoza’s and Descartes’ different relationships to glass and lens grinding as a point of departure for a discussion on modernity, the Anthropocene, and the ethico-aesthetic production of subjectivity, and a series of different but interrelated workshops, presentations and exhibitions conducted in various collaborative constellations with Simon O’Sullivan, Petra Lilja and Sara Hyltén-Cavallius under the

title 'Fictioning'. Here, my interest in ethico-aesthetic practices significantly tangents my interest in and work with critical, experimental pedagogies in the form of collaborative transdisciplinary and transversal projects involving both partners from within and outside of the academy and the field of art and design. Furthermore, the contextual and conceptual framework of these workshops was theorized in the text 'Fictioning & The City,' printed and distributed as a booklet and in catalogues and given as a conference paper at the Nordmedia Conference in Malmö, Sweden, and the annual conference of the Association for Philosophy and Literature in Klagenfurt, Austria.<sup>xi</sup>

### ***Creative Critical Writing and Publishing Practices***

Alongside my more theoretical investment in the research fields above, and following the demise of the artist collective C.CRED in 2008, my interests have continuously veered towards performative and creative-critical writing and publishing projects, often collaborative ones, that traverse the arguably artificial divide between artistic and theoretical research. These interests have resulted both in attempts to theorize creative-critical writing (and other) practices as transversal and transdisciplinary ethico-aesthetic forms of practice and in actual examples of performative, creative-critical writing and transmedial projects situated at the interface or in the interstitial space between critical theory and artistic, explorative processes; that is, projects that engage with theoretical issues and develop critical perspectives using experimental, non-academic forms of expression, often oscillating between different media and media hybrids. The emphasis in these projects is very much on research and process, rather than end results, with each project having several outputs, or better perhaps, instantiations, each of which, in different ways, constitute an attempt at exploring the ways in which criticality and creativity intersect in different fields related to change and transformation.

An example of an attempt at theorizing creative-critical practice is my journal article 'Kafka and Deleuze / Guattari: Towards a Creative Critical Writing Practice.'<sup>xii</sup> Drawing upon the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in particular their collaborative writing on Franz Kafka, this article stakes out the ground for a creative-critical writing practice beyond the confines of literature. Exploring the notion of writing in relation to affect constellations, *what causes one to write*, and expressions without content, *how one begins to write*, the argument put forth is that in rethinking the distinction Deleuze and Guattari tend to make between artistic practice and philosophical thought, a space is opened up for transversal lines that may cross between these fields in practices that are creative *and* critical and involve what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as aesthetic figures as well as conceptual personae. These practices, it is argued, provide a potential link between aesthetics, on the one hand, and ethics and politics, on the other.

As for examples of actual creative-critical writing projects, I've produced a substantial amount of work in this field, much of it within the framework of the experimental, collaborative publishing platform Publication Studio Malmö. Taking the physical form of a two-storey former post office in central Malmö, this platform involved several different collaborative constellations of participants with different points of entry into each project, exploring experimental forms of dissemination, in particular artists' books, focusing on creative critical writing and an expanded sense of publishing as a collaborative activity involving exploratory research, conversations, discussions and collective learning in symposia and seminars as well as making-oriented activities such as writing and printing workshops, design, editing, prototyping and events-based activities such as release parties, exhibitions, screenings, live readings and performances.

Within this structure, three series of edited volumes were produced exploring specific themes with each release accompanied by live events, performance evenings, concerts, screenings, etc. The themes explored include the following: *In Edit Mode*, focusing on inter- and transmediality and translation processes;<sup>xiii</sup> *Appropriations*,<sup>xiv</sup> exploring plagiarism and strategies re-working found or stolen texts and images; and *FASAD*,<sup>xv</sup> using the facades of the studio building as a public interface and publishing surface to feature work produced in collaboration with invited authors and artists. Additionally, the platform included *Absonant*, a sound/writing lab exploring the collaborative production of experimental sound pieces that posit a relationship to writing, text or printed matter,

often semi-improvised and often involving found and sampled materials, field recordings, readings of text, etc. Finally, Publication Studio Malmö served as a host for the production of more complex installation and exhibition projects and limited-edition artists' books produced in different collaborative constellations and most often related to issues or problematics embodied, materially and discursively, in specific sites or archives. These projects include: *23,500T*,<sup>xvi</sup> a critical engagement with the infamous Brutalist housing estate Park Hill in Sheffield, UK; *Concrete, & The Smear*,<sup>xvii</sup> a discursive and material sound and text exploration of the derelict defence bunkers scattered along the littorals across Europe and the US; *Border*,<sup>xviii</sup> a publication and installation taking the form of a wallpaper border reworking fragments extracted from the collection of historical graphic prints housed at KUMU Art Museum in Tallinn; and *FILM*,<sup>xix</sup> a printed text, video and performance based project reworking a found draft of a thwarted attempt at an autobiography dealing with migration and maritime labour during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

At the Department of Design, specifically, this interest has primarily taken the form of the development of the part of the department's research platform engaging with practices of creative-critical expressions and practices, across artistic and other disciplines. As part this platform, I've organized regular research seminars, often with invited guest contributors, staff development workshops, experimental workshops and projects with students on under- and postgraduate level, and the research retreats *We Are All At Sea* with independent participants, colleagues from Linnaeus University, Goldsmiths (University of London) and Falmouth College.<sup>xx</sup>

My current and forthcoming work in this field includes *Opistography*, a series of writing and publishing instances exploring, in a much-extended sense, the act of writing on the back of something (as in notes written on the back of labels, receipts or ticket stubs, etc.). Conceptually, the different installments of the project take as their point of departure existing artefacts which are explored transversally, often in different collaborative constellations, stitching together diverse trajectories of thought, conversation, pseudo-autobiography, fictioning, fashioning of diagrams, drawings, icons, etc. that emanate from each chosen artefact. From the virtual complexity of each item engaged with, then, diverse assemblages are generated, actualizing and rendering explicit, often in a somewhat crystalliferous fashion, aspects of its complexity; notes, as it were, taken down and printed, semi-concealed but permanently there, on the "other-" or "back-" side of the artefact itself. The initial instantiation of the project has taken as its point of departure a 1976 photograph of an installation / intervention by Jannis Kounellis in a hotel room in Rome – the photograph depicting a horizontal incision in one of the walls of the room with a solid globular shape stuck inside of it keeping the two sides slightly apart, being the only remaining trace of the event itself. This image has then been explored in the form of prose-texts, fictions, pseudo-autobiographical pieces of writing, drawings, recorded conversations and sound pieces, an assemblage of which was performed on cassette tape recordings, overhead projectors, with live and recorded voice as part of an art writing event at Box Gallery, Gothenburg, in 2014, under title *Pebbles; or, the world has become a flatter place*.<sup>xxi</sup>

### *Climate Emergency Studies*

More recently I have turned my attention to what this notion of ethico-aesthetics as a form of cultural and sociopolitical dissentious engagement opens up to in relation to transdisciplinary and transversal approaches to sustainability and, more specifically, the notion of a *climate emergency*. It is my contention, that the complex set of challenges we are facing today involve interconnected global crises developing across multiple ecologies and registers: the environment, economy, culture, socio-political structures, but also ethics, subjectivity and the very notion of the human being are called into question as we are prompted to respond to an increasingly precarious situation. In dealing with these crises, we have reached an impasse, across research and pedagogy, that requires us to rethink and move beyond modern disciplinary boundaries and develop transdisciplinary and transversal fora and platforms that allow us to establish links between ethico-aesthetics and a creative and critical commitment to sustainability and change.

With this context in mind, I have recently been involved in instigating a Centre for Climate Emergency Studies at Linnaeus University. Coordinated in by myself in collaboration with a steering group consistent of four colleagues from other departments within the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, this project proposes that the gravity of the planetary condition of climate emergency that humanity is facing urges forth a paradigmatic shift across ecological, socio-cultural, political, scientific, and other domains. Of particular importance is that such a shift entails the incorporation of a *geo*-ontology that acknowledges that the Earth is no longer a passive and stable backdrop for notions of “society” and “nature” but has transformed into an active foreground. What the recognition of this “new” Earth requires us to engage in is precisely different, specifically earthbound, ethico-aesthetic practices. In other words, we need a new kind transdisciplinarity, or better, transversality, premised on the prefix *-geo* and operating across fields and forms of knowledge and practice. This also involves dealing with temporality complexes we are not necessarily used to with lines traversing planetary and geological time, evolutionary biological time (the times of living systems), pre- or deep historical time and the temporalities of recorded history and different forms of mediation, narration, fiction, speculation and mythopoesis – not to mention the rich temporal texture and experience of (e.g. neurobiological) presence and the changing understandings of “the future” we are facing. How do we cope with, or even begin to approach, ethico-aesthetically and pedagogically, the urgency and complexity of the field thus opened up if we are to take seriously, and act upon, the urgencies that appear with the conceptual terrain that crystallizes around the nexus of the terms: ‘climate’ and ‘emergency’? This is a task that is at once ethico-aesthetic – the creative production of forms of being – and pedagogical – finding ways to learn together how to live in and with the climate emergency. It is within the context of this concerted effort, and the incitement that we have to learn together how to learn anew, across disciplinary silos and fields of experience, across different forms of practice – artistic, creative, scientific, pedagogical - in alliances that may at first seem unfamiliar, that the project of Climate Emergency Studies is situated. In its current form, the ambitions of the project include: a.) a research and educational platform at Linnaeus University exploring Climate Emergency Studies discursively and materially, in relation to the construction of spaces for action and agency, including the role played by critical and experimental pedagogies and aesthetic and other mediations and practices; b.) an educational portfolio of independent- and programme courses in the field; and, c.) an international exchange programme, in part within the structure of the European University of Health and Well-Being (of which Linnaeus University forms part) open to students and staff engaging with the complex issues addressed.

In terms of my individual current research in this field, I’m currently working on a multifaceted project in the form of a an archive / assemblage (possibly resulting, in part, in a monograph) with the working title *Crisis*, looking at the relationship between ethico-aesthetics, transversality, creativity and crisis from a transdisciplinary nexus bringing together references primarily from neurobiology, psycho- and schizoanalysis, philosophy and critical theory. Drawing upon a wide range of cases, the project weaves together critical theoretical and pseudo-autobiographical trajectories, artistic, exploratory processes, part-fictions, visual works such as icons, relics, diagrams and collages, and reflections on a series of related concepts and thematic figures, all within the wider context of the notion of crisis.

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- <sup>i</sup> Ståhl, O., *Across a Most Radical Terrain: Towards an Aesthetics of Dissent* (Leeds: The University of Leeds, 2007)
- <sup>ii</sup> Bourriaud, N. *Relational Aesthetics* (Les presses du reel, 1998)
- <sup>iii</sup> Bishop, C., 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,' in *October* (issue 110, 2004)
- <sup>iv</sup> The main instantiations of the Permanent Ignition projects were realized as part of exhibitions and events during BIG Torino 2002: BIG Social Game, Turin, Italy (2002), Oberwelt Gallery, Stuttgart, Germany (2004), and Kunsthau Erfurt, Germany (2007).
- <sup>v</sup> Counter/Cartographies "centres," events, performances and exhibitions were organized at numerous locations over the lifespan of the project. The more substantial investments include contributions to ISEA 2004, Tallinn Art Hall, *Intervening in the Urban Void*, Public Space With A Roof, Amsterdam, Holland (2004) and Versionfest 05, Chicago, USA (2005).
- <sup>vi</sup> alt.SPACE events were organized very frequently and on a regular basis in various venues in and around London, and sometimes elsewhere in collaboration with local businesses (pubs and bars, cafés, etc.), institutions (museums, galleries, etc.), organizations (squats, social and political groups, etc.) and domestic spaces. Recurring and more substantial events series were organized with or hosted by institutions such as South London Gallery, E:vent Network (London), Urban Festival / Operation City (Zagreb, Croatia) and Basekamp and the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (PA, USA).
- <sup>vii</sup> Ståhl, O. & O'Sullivan, S., 'Contours and Case-Studies of a Dissenting Subjectivity; or, How to Live Creatively in a Fearful World,' in *Angelaki* (vol. 11, issue 1, 2006)
- <sup>viii</sup> Ståhl, O., 'Long Kesh: Site – Sign – Body,' in *Proceedings from Design Research Society, 50th Anniversary Conference* (Brighton: Design Research Society, 2016)
- <sup>ix</sup> Ståhl, O., Snodgrass, E. and Keshavarz, M., *Manipulations*, [www.manipulations.info](http://www.manipulations.info) (Nordes, Konstfack, Stockholm, 2015)
- <sup>x</sup> Ståhl, O. & Tham, M., 'Towards a Post-Anthropocentric Speculative Archaeology (through Design),' *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* (vol 4, issue 2, 2017)
- <sup>xi</sup> Ståhl, O., *Fictioning & The City*, Nordmedia Conference, University of Malmö, Sweden, and the International Association of Philosophy and Literature, Klagenfurt, Austria, 2019
- <sup>xii</sup> Ola Ståhl, 'Kafka and Deleuze / Guattari: Towards a Creative Critical Writing Practice,' in *Theory, Culture, Society* (vol. 3, issue 7-8, 2016)
- <sup>xiii</sup> Contributors to the series include, amongst others, Charles Bernstein, Johannes Heldén, Caroline Bergvall, Christian Bök, Kenneth Goldsmith, Lars-Gunnar Bodin, Neil Chapman, Jill Magi, Brendan Fernandes, Uriel Orlow, Sissu Tarka, Jaanika Peerna, Derek Beaulieu, Steve Giasson, Jörgen Gassilewski, Martin Glaz Serup, Craig Dworkin, Cia Rinne, Elizabeth Tonnard, Cecilie Bjørgås Jordheim, Helen White, Magda Tyzlik-Carver & Andy Prior, Pär Thörn and Peder Alexis Olsson.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Contributors to the series include Linnéa Eriksson, Joseph Quintela, Peder Alexis Olsson, Ida Börjel, Álvaro Seica and Steve Giasson.
- <sup>xv</sup> The FASAD installations / publications include collaborations with Peder Alexis Olsson, Lovisa Witt, Daniel Persson, Sam Gould / Red76, Fredrik Edin, Luca Frei, Cassandra Troyan & Nicole Langille, Joseph Collins & Andrew Brown, Steve Giasson and Kristina Bengtsson & Lotten Pålsson.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ståhl, O. & Östling, T., *23,500T*, Moderna Museet Malmö, Sweden; KIM?, Riga, Latvia; No Format, London, UK, 2014-2015.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ståhl O., *Concrete, & The Smear*, Esbjergs kunstmuseum, Denmark 2007, and Neon Gallery, Brösarp, Sweden and RM104, Auckland, New Zealand, 2009-2010.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ståhl, O. & Östling, T., *Border*, Tallinn Triannual of Graphic Art, KUMU, Tallinn, Estonia, 2014
- <sup>xix</sup> Ståhl, O. & Troyan, C., *FILM*, Headlands Centre for the Arts, San Francisco, CA, USA; HIAP and Oksasenkatu 11, Helsinki, Finland, Malakta, Malax, Finland; KRETS, Malmö, Sweden; Bureau for Open Culture, Columbus, OH, USA. Published by KRETS, Publication Studio, *Journal of Radical Shimming and OEI*, 2010-2014.
- <sup>xx</sup> Participants in *We Are All At Sea* included Mathilda Tham, Cassandra Troyan, Marie Sterte, Petra Lilja and Ivar Jung (Linnaeus University) and Alma Tischlerwood (independent artist), Martin Conreen, Ruby Hoette and Simon O'Sullivan (Goldsmiths College, University of London) and Neil Chapman (Falmouth University).
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ståhl, O., *Opistography No. 1 – Pebbles; or the world has become a flatter place*, Galleri Box, Gothenburg, Sweden.