

AN AGE OF OUR OWN MAKING

Holbæk, Reflection I

The Life of Materials. On another Nature and Ecology

Introduction

“The Life of Materials. On another Nature and Ecology” is conceived as a sculpture-walk in public space in Holbæk with more than ten new artwork commissions by artists from East- and West-Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It presents sculptures and installations that carry out new narratives about the life and circuits of select materials that are central to a discussion of ecology. This exhibition part reflects upon the journey of raw and synthetic materials and their presence and perception as part of the public sphere; upon the relation between the human and the non-human in regards to ecological concerns. There are several reasons why new interpretations and expressions of e.g. certain politicized raw-materials are relevant to bring to the attention of a Danish audience. There are also specific colonial trajectories connected to the Holbæk area that motivated the choice of the subject of the exhibition in public space, the Cultural History Museum and the library of Holbæk. We elaborate on these contextual arguments in the following concept text.

The sculpture walk will create entries to audiences to perceive of more than ten international artists analyses of the material world they live in and the different political ecologies connected, which also relevantly question western practices of ecology and sustainability. The core and co-related questions in this exhibition part therefor are: what is defined as material and what is not and by whom? How do raw and synthetic materials circuit and how does the travel influence the social life of it and us? What expectations do we have towards a certain material or object and how does it encode our actions? And last but not least, is it possible to perceive of materials as organisms with a certain agency in terms of e.g. ecological effects?

Materiality, vitality, and endurance

"The stance to materiality (...) remains the driving force behind humanity's attempts to transform the world in order to make it accord with beliefs as to how the world should be."¹

There are multiple understandings of materiality and ecology in the world. According to what belief system we live in, the meaning of objects, materials, their circulation and consumption, and what we do with them, varies. Materials and how they are produced and used - whether it e.g. concerns raw or synthetic materials, the food and clothing industry, the making of iPhones, cars, architectural and urban constructions - are the keystones of ecological circuits in Holbæk, but also in cities like Accra, Kinshasa or Jakarta. We humans are socialized with a certain, ethically specific understanding of materiality, sustainability, consumption and care for an ecosystem. In ecology, the concept of sustainability refers to how biological systems remain diverse and productive. In more general terms, sustainability is the endurance of systems and processes. The expression "Sustainable development" includes four interconnected domains, which are ecology, economics, politics and culture. The connection between these four domains is what is perceived of very differently depending if from the African continent, Asian, Middle-eastern, Latin-American, American or East- or West-European. The practice of sustainability is devious when we think of how the west and the non-west interact when it comes to sharing the consequences of polluting activities and ecological responsibility. In many ways the colonial history and the situation of the economically, politically and legally privileged Europe practically leads to the current global problem that western countries move pollution (factories, trash) to other parts of the world, buy CO2 outlet, earn on the packaging of the raw-materials, the selling and distribution of commodities and thus clean themselves up locally, while profiting economically. So how is a concept as sustainability, invented in Norway, perceived of from a non-western perspective?

Rethinking relations between materiality and humanity in small steps locally is necessary in order to rethink ecology and sustainability on a large scale. Anthropologist Daniel Miller makes an essential observation of the role of materials to humanity in the capitalist parts of the world like Denmark in his central essay on materiality; "Humanity is viewed as the product of its capacity to transform the

¹ Miller, Daniel, Materiality: An Introduction, In Materiality (Duke Press, 2005)

material world in production, in the mirror of which we create ourselves.” Miller sums up the consequence of this worldview in regards to what materialism has come to mean in the context of a capitalist belief system: "In economic thought the accumulation of material commodities is itself the source of our extended capacity as humanity[.]. Poverty is defined as the critical limit to our ability to realise ourselves as persons, consequent upon a lack of commodities." Finally the question is how art can help us jump beyond ourselves, envision other logics, solutions and circuits of materials that we might adopt in future lifestyles?

Holbæk, Denmark: The historical context

Historically seen Denmark has played an important role in the colonial trade between Europe, Africa and the West-Indies until a century ago. Farm owners also in the Holbæk area have been involved as actors in the triangular trade of goods such as sugar and humans with the West-Indies and West-Africa upon which Europe has earned great economic profits and still does. Furthermore in terms of ecological matters the colonial past has led to a “colonial pollution” where former colonies as Ghana and Nigeria have been used for (electronic) trash dumping or hosting polluting factories.

Contributing to an important chapter in the history of Danish participation in Colonialism thus the redistribution of goods and raw materials globally, the Holbæk area has historical roots that connect to the current subject of the exhibition, “The Life of Materials”. After all the different perspectives on materiality, locality and object history represented in the sculpture walk, reveal how artists with other views on nature, ecology and colonial history uses materials and the local context. So beyond the necessity of re-opening the subject of slave trade on the occasion of the 100 years marking of the Danish sales of the then colonial islands St. Croix, St. Jan and St. Thomas in 2017, the hegemonic principles behind today’s global exchange of goods, which stem from colonial times, should be examined. The latter part of history is what motivates our focus on exposing new narratives and possible perceptions of ecological circuits of materials and objects today. Near Holbæk there are farms such as Hørbygård as well as the local Culture History Museum that reveal the traces of this trade physically and as documentation. This historical trajectory also will influence the parkour of the urban sculpture walk and

thus the artistic investigation made in order to create the commissioned artworks in Holbæk.

If we zoom out on Denmark as a nation, it was industrialized more than a century ago and Danish culture is based on an equally long tradition of materialism and consumerism. Within the last five decades the concern of the environment has also been connected to this consumerism and a political issue. What we however understand as ecological progress, may create an ecological distress in another part of the world. We therefore need to question the Danish and the western perception of ecology as an ideology for the privileged and to question for which geographical parts of the world's environments are cared for?

Anthropologist Daniel Miller states that Capitalism has transformed the relations between the producer and the consumer of objects (eventually also materials) in a way that the producer of a commodity is suppressed by the consumer of it: "Capitalism is condemned above all for interrupting this virtuous cycle by which we create the objects that in turn create our understanding of who we can be. Instead commodities are fetishized and come to oppress those who made them."

As the commodity based belief system, Capitalism, seems to have ignored the "life" of things and materials subordinate to persons for a century or more, the ecological crisis of today has taken shape. "It is a civilizational wake-up call. A powerful message—spoken in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions—telling us that we need an entirely new economic model and a new way of sharing this planet", as Naomi Klein states in "This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate". Now the question is how we integrate ideas and practices that go beyond this belief system? Professor of political theory Jane Bennet has a question that may take - at least our thoughts - further: "How would political responses to public problems change, were we to take seriously the vitality of (non-human) bodies? By "vitality" I mean the capacity of things, edibles, commodities, storms, metals - not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents of forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own?"

The Life of Materials unfold. Materials as actants.

This exhibition consists in site specific sculptures, and interventions, a sculpture walk in the urban space of Holbæk, which focuses on rethinking the possible relations between the human and non-human, humanity, ecology and materiality, the vibrancy of matter. In this context the western idea of and practice of ecology is just one perspective amongst a plurality of ecologies from around the world.

In order to see objects and materials differently than we are used to we need to activate the perception of materials. To see materials and objects in a different light than what capitalism offers. Some materials and objects are not seen or perceived of, because they are so "normal" to us, subordinate to us, that they disappear - be it things in the category of trash or raw materials. Yet they may be essential to our understanding of how the world functions, to how we understand our culture. Only when e.g. an artwork presents a material in a different way, we may see it and order it anew, perceive differently of it. An example would be when an artist as Ibrahim Mahama, who is part of this public space exhibition, covers a high-rise building with old jute sacks and creates a temporary monument dedicated to the narratives of the used coal and cocoa transport sacks from Ghana.

Jane Bennett envisions a 'vitalist materialism' where both the human and nonhuman can create an important shift in the perception of the world together and thus contribute to political events. This could be a step towards integrating ecological long term concerns in cultural or consumerist mindsets and politics of today: " ...a political act not only disrupts, it disrupts in such a way as to change radically what people can "see": it repartitions the sensible; it overthrows the regime of the perceptible. Here again the political gate is opened enough for nonhumans (dead rats, bottle caps, gadgets, fire, electricity, berries, metal) to slip through, for they also have the power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception: what was trash becomes things, what was an instrument becomes a participant, what was foodstuff becomes agent, what was adamantite becomes intensity. We see how an animal, plant, mineral, or artefact can sometimes catalyse a public, and we might then see how to devise more effective (experimental) tactics for enhancing or weakening that public."²

² Jane Bennett *Vibrant Matter - a political ecology of things*, A John Franklin Center Book, Duke University Press Durham and London 2010 p. 107. On the same page Bennett elaborates concludingly that "A vital materialist theory of democracy seeks to transform the

In short we may conclude reflection I by asking: Can materials be considered as vibrant actants and part of a public, just like humans (yet without voices, but creating disruptions, e.g. storms, floods etc.), that generate effects in an ecological system? How can we give those materials a voice?

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divide between speaking subjects and mute objects into a set of differential tendencies and variable capacities."