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# ART AS RESISTANCE

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*Artists' reflections on environmentally engaged art and  
their roles as civil actors in society*

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*the ones who got away ate their way out*

(2019- ) by Matti Sumari

Photo: Courtesy of the artist

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## Abstract:

As climate change intensifies, more voices are being raised in favor of re-conceptualization and transformative systems change, where actions are taken on a social, political and economic level. Environmentally engaged art and its artists are brought forward as potential instigators of change, as both researchers and as civil actors in society.

Through semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis, this project analyzed the responses of artists in Malmö, Sweden when reflecting on their roles as civil actors in society, on climate change and art's potential to be transformative. The findings show that the artists are conflicted in their roles and whether or not art possesses transformative capabilities. All the artists question the perceived commodification of art, where art is being instrumentalized to fit a neoliberal capitalist form of valuation, while also expressing an awareness of their own roles in reproducing the system. Whilst the findings show that the role of art and the artist is vital in creating spaces of reflections and values that are not linked to economic defined valuation, the artists are increasingly concerned about the neoliberal capitalist influences on the art world, and how they have to negotiate their role and reproduction of it.

By engaging with theories from human ecology and art sociology to explore the artist's responses, this thesis concludes that when viewed as an act of resistance, art plays a fruitful role in critical political ecology, and creates spaces for reflection that promote critical inquiry and imaginative thought.

**Keywords:** art, environmentally engaged art, political ecology, enterprise culture, visuality, discourse analysis, political art

**Word count:** 17,453

*The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place*

**- James Baldwin**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

As the signs of anthropogenic climate change intensify, calls for mitigation as well as systems change have only increased in urgency. In a political climate dominated by neoliberalism, the solutions that are most frequently put forward are primarily techno-cratic and short-term, that depend on the monetization of nature and pollution, and yield meager results (Demos 2017; Keller et al. 2020). More voices are raised in favor of re-conceptualization and transformative systems change, where actions are taken on a social, political and economic level (Doll and Wright 2019; Foster and Martusewicz 2018). These voices include practices beyond standard science communication and research for knowledge production, and belong to politicians, journalists, academics, artists and curators that are questioning art and its role in communicating knowledge and, by extension, the possibilities of instigating lasting social change (Blanc and Benish 2017). The idea of art as an instigator for change has risen in popularity. Just last year in 2019, *The New York Times* published an article discussing climate change, entitled with the rhetorical question: 'Can Art Save the Planet?' (Tugend, 2019). In 2015, the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris was executed parallel with its own climate change focused art festival, *ArtCOP21* (ArtCOP21). Artists investigating themes of political and socio-ecological issues in their art is not a new phenomenon. However, with the immense growth in popularity of politically and socially engaged art, both within and outside of the art world, the artworks and their artists have taken on new roles and perceived duties within the context of environmental issues. This thesis is an explorative study into the diverse forms of practices within the art community and artists position of agency as a catalyzer in society.

These practices are largely grasped within socially engaged art and also *environmentally engaged art*. Drabble (2019) describes environmentally engaged practices as inclusive of the nonhuman perspective and “this new framing of subjectivity changes both the art practices we observe and our understanding of the act of observing art itself.” (20). Environmentally engaged art therefore touches upon numerous themes such as, but not limited to, climate crisis, human-nature relations and socio-ecological justice. Environmentally engaged art, and its artists, receive more weight and authority in positions of instigating change whilst theorizing on structures of environmental, societal and economic nature (Daves 2008). The narratives that inform our concepts and narratives of artists as civil actors and art as a potential instigator of change and communicator of knowledge are of great

importance, and require further study.

At the time of writing this, the world is in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. At first glance, this may not have immediate relevance to the discussion of art and its purpose. However, art has been shown through numerous research projects that has concluded that art is emotionally engaging, can increase human wellbeing and decrease anxiety levels (Daves 2008; Binnie 2013; Jensen and Torrissen 2019). Lachapelle, Murrar and Neil (2003) argues that this is not only a question “feeling” when experiencing art as aesthetic appreciation but that “our art viewing experiences solicit four key areas: the affective, perceptual, communicative and cognitive dimensions of human experiencing” (78). In conversation with a friend, I recall my own experience of discussing our gratefulness for art and our gratitude for the artists who have kept us healthy during these times of instability, uncertainty and isolation due to the pandemic. The array of art available to most of us not only offers us comfort, but also sanctuary, challenge, beauty and new perspectives; these artworks help us heal and reflect on known and new mindsets. Environmental art therefore offers a lot of questions as a field, on how to narrate forms of social change and how artistic practices outside of the capitalist valuation system develop and start to thrive (Blanc and Benish 2017). By viewing art and artists as civil actors of society we can begin to understand the importance of their potential to instigate necessary change and communicate knowledges in diverse ways. It is important to study what kind of discursive narratives are being produced, in terms of both the artist’s own perspective on their complex and multilayered roles, as well as the ways in which these perspectives are visually embodied through their art.

## **1.1 STRUCTURE OF THESIS**

This thesis is divided into eight parts. After Introduction (1) there is a background section (2) which gives a brief overview of environmentally engaged art and its history followed up by aim and research questions (3). Further, next section (4) includes the four theoretical and analytical frameworks that this thesis is anchored in. Next section encompasses the methodology and methods (5) of the thesis, firstly with the epistemological stance (5.1), semi-structured interviews (5.2), discourse analysis (5.3) and sampling and limitations (5.4 and 5.5). Next is short artist introductions (6) followed by the analysis and findings (7.) divided into three chapters: Duality of material and concept (7.1), Art as resistance (7.2) and lastly Commodifying change (7.3). Lastly, this thesis is with the conclusion of this thesis (8.), where I answer my research questions and contributions of this study.

## 2. ENVIRONMENTALLY ENGAGED ART

This section aims to give a brief overview on the meanings of environmentally engaged art. In his article a 'Rough Guide to Environmental art' (2008), John Thornes proposes the term 'environmental art' to describe an overarching umbrella for both directly representational art, non-representational and performative art. His scope spans from Western 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape painting, land art of the 1960's-70's, to current large scale installations of artists like Olafur Eliasson, who let glacier ice melt on the squares of capitals such as London, Copenhagen and Paris (*Ice Watch* 2014- ) and the destruction aesthetics of Edward Burtynsky's photography (2008). Environmental art in itself is as Blanc and Benish (2017) notes a “collection [...] of definitions and redefinitions” (43), as the ideas and practices under the terms of environmental art and environmentally engaged art are broad in their engagement and are therefore more defined by their themes, rather than a unified artistic style or movement. A more defined but still broad term is used by Drabble (2019) as 'environmentally engaged art' and argues that its definition comes from socially engaged art: “The geopolitics effects of neoliberal capitalism on human populations have long been the focus of socially engaged artists whose work focuses on social justice, community and democracy.” (19). Our current climate crisis and environmental issues are issues that underpin other social justice issues and a more environmentally engaged art has therefore emerged. This translates into art practices exploring global structures as well as local focused grass-root projects (ibid 2019). Environmentally engaged art and its practices mirror larger social movements and debates, such as environmental justice and criticism of capitalism, engaging in what it determines to be 'sustainable' more broadly (Blanc and Benish 2017). It has created new forms of collaborations and fields of research, leading to a new and increasing sense of hope for these interdisciplinary practices. Artistic narratives have gone from being described as merely complimentary to scientific research, in the form of illustrative components, to being viewed as a necessary companion to producing different forms of knowledge (Drabble 2019).

Thornes centers a problematic Eurocentric canon of art history when describing the history of environmental art, but engaging with environmental themes has become a way for artists outside of the hegemonic Eurocentric art world to not only reclaim their own culture heritage and autonomy, but also a way to reclaim autonomy of their cultural identity as contemporary practices, rather than often narrow



portrayals of art that has been produced through colonialism to fit tourism and an European audience. Example is Yhonnie Scarce (1973- ), born in South Australia who belongs to the Kokatha and Nukunu peoples, who with her pieces *Hollowing Earth* (2016-2017) calls attention to the ongoing environmental injustices in Australia, highlighting the continuing practices of neocolonialism there (TarraWarra Museum of Art n.d.). The self-taught artist Ningiukulu Teevee (1963- ) has continuously throughout her career reflected on Inuit history and contemporary life in Nunavut. Through her sketches she uses humor as she tells Inuit stories and generational knowledge whilst criticizing the continuing colonial and imperialist practices still effecting Inuit communities of the Arctic region. What entails environmentally engaged art therefore grasps a multitude of mediums and styles, and its commonalities is rather embodied in themes of everything from environmental issues to nature-human relations (Inuit Gallery of Vancouver n.d.).

### **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AIM OF STUDY**

Environmentally engaged art is often created and regarded as embodying captivating and hopeful ideas of increasing awareness, breaking barriers, and shaping new narratives and forms of communicating knowledge. It is not only being expressed as an additional form of communication and research, but also posed as part of political and monetary actions on environmental issues. With its increased popularity, its political and economic engagements, I argue that this makes art even more important to study in this intersection of art and sociopolitical and -ecological issues, as well as the arts' involved actors. The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the body of knowledge that engages with the intersection of visual culture in the form of art and political engagement. The aim of this thesis is not to create an account of generalizations of artistic practices and reflections on the environment, but rather to conduct an explorative study of the numerous, diverse forms and practices within the art community and its position of agency and as a catalyzer. For this thesis, the focus will be on artists practicing in Malmö, Sweden.

With this thesis I seek to study how artists can position themselves within the narratives circulating around environmentally engaged art. This will be done by looking at the role of the artist within civil society as a player and catalyzer within the local discursive narratives of socio-ecological issues. The research questions for this thesis are thus three interconnected questions:

- How are the artists reflecting on socio-ecological themes within their artistic practices?
- What are the socio-ecological themes that are embedded within their chosen artworks?
- How are the artists reflecting and engaging with their potential roles as civil actors within society?

## **4. ANALYTICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACH**

In the following chapter I present the theoretical and analytical approaches relevant to my research questions. Since this thesis is in the cross-section of art, sociology of art and human ecology, the analytical and theoretical approach demonstrates this, by being utilizing concept from these fields of study. As this thesis is situated in the intersections of art, political engagement, civil society and artists as actors within it, the theoretical framework will be anchored in political ecology as a main approach. To analyze the positions and relations of the engaged actors, a reformed framework of Howard S. Becker's 'Art Worlds' will be utilized. Lastly, this thesis will be anchored in theoretical concepts of visibility and how the artist are engaged with as political actors.

### **4. 1 POLITICAL ECOLOGY**

Due to the interlacing of political, economic and cultural structures at work within the perspectives of environmentally engaged art and its artists, the choice of anchoring this thesis in political ecology as an overarching framework and approach is beneficial because it enables an analysis of the intersections between the social, economic and political structures involved.

Political ecology as an approach recognizes that socio-natural relations are complex and multilayered, and endeavors to display the underlying power structures acting within those relationships. Linking political ecology within the study of contemporary art is a relatively new phenomenon and has been viewed as a beneficial field of study (Blanc and Benish 2017). Blanc and Benish argues that environmentally engaged art is not focused only on eco-aesthetics such as restoration practices, but rather aims to question and deconstruct the power relationships within socio-ecological issues through art as its practice. Therefore, the practice of environmentally engaged art and its production borrows from political ecology, and: “its chain of subjects and objects transforming the agentivity, the animal and the food, the planet and the world” (9). Demos (2016) argues the benefits of utilizing the framework of political ecology with contemporary art, as it “acknowledges approaches to the

environment that, although potentially divergent, nevertheless insist on environmental matters of concern as inextricable from social, political and economic forces” (7). Approaching environmentally engaged art from this perspective enables a way of studying the embedded political and economical power relations through the cultural narratives of artworks in their materiality as well as its responsible actors.

Considering artists roles within spaces of critical political ecology can, as Braun (2015) argues, expand “the ways in which a situation is able to affect its participants, and in so doing, generate new ideas, new powers and perhaps new possibilities for composing socio-ecological assemblages otherwise” (105). To examine artistic practices within political ecology involves exploring art through an analytical lens, but also positioning art alongside political and scientific capacities to produce new ways of thinking and producing knowledge (Boetzkes 2020; Braun 2015). Thus the undertaking of political ecology and the study of complex socio-natural relations are interrelated with the theoretical concepts of 'Visuality' and 'Art Worlds'. This entails an acknowledgement of the researchers 'place of entanglement' being “situated in and often beneficiaries of the very politico-economic systems under consideration in our research” (Sundberg 2015, 117). The 'place of entanglement' is not only grasped within the role of the researcher, but for this analysis also with the situation of the artist's, as their position engaging and critiquing capitalist systems and environmental issues, whilst also benefiting from such systems, living and practicing within the Global North and to different forms of extent work and benefit from the political and economic systems that they are also trying to criticize and change.

## **4. 2 ART WORLDS AND ENTERPRISE CULTURE**

In 1982, Howard S. Becker released his now famous book *Art Worlds*, where he theorized the world of art as being produced and sustained by a network of actors grasping a larger perspective than the art market that singles out the selling and buying of art as commodities. Becker states that the art world is rather maintained by a larger number of engaged actors through selling, buying, producing, curating, preserving and writing about art. The art worlds are thus built on a sociological approach of art, as theorized by Becker as a social process built on relationships between the engaged actors upholding the continuing of the art world (Becker 1982). Focusing on the artists as an actor not only as the creator of the finished artwork, but their requirement to engage with other actors for financial and social necessities. Since its publication, Becker's theory and ideas have been criticized as being too singular in

their form, presenting a common Eurocentric frame of what the art worlds entails. As Lee (2012) argues: "in responding to the geopolitical and transnational preoccupations of the work of many contemporary artists, the art world enlarges at once its geographically overdetermined borders and its conventionally Eurocentric self-definitions in the process" (4-5). With an art history that is working with dis-engaging itself from the historically Eurocentric production of art history, the ideas of art world actors are engaged globally, as well as being plural: that being there are multilayered and overlapping art worlds.

Sholette (2010) too reformulates Becker's ideas of art worlds as an emerging contemporary paradox: whilst the art worlds becomes more 'global' in its geographical locations and also more diverse, it is also becoming more stratified and less varied. With a more stratified art world, emerges what Sholette calls 'creative dark matter', that criticizes the hierarchal and excluding form of art institutions that largely practices within a neoliberal capitalist form. The 'creative dark matter' entails art production that either seek to criticize the neoliberal forms of art and that is not defined, produced nor claimed within the larger art institutions, critics, dealers and museums (2010). The art worlds are being more modeled on the market concepts of neoliberal capitalism, and leads to a production of often homogenous globalization that enables profiteering and artistic 'super-stars' racking up large profits attainable for only few artists and actors within the art worlds (Lee 2012). More than ever before, the art world is immersed within a neoliberal capitalist structure, positioning artists in the role of entrepreneur, engaged in a market that increasingly focuses on profit and capital accumulation. This changes the positionality and engagement of the artists within the art world as self-representing in the form of a business culture, forming what Sholette (2010) describes as an 'enterprise culture'. With the art world adapting a more neoliberal capitalistic structure of value and market, art has experienced trends as 'turns', where popularity of certain types of art receives a substantial proportion of popularity as it is deemed financially profitable, recently what he defines as the 'green turn' (85), being art that concerns environmentally engaged themes.

#### **4.3 THE ARTIST AS A POLITICAL ACTOR**

Art merging social awareness and aesthetic responses has grown in popularity amongst artist and is emerging as part of educational, political and science platforms (Foster, Mäkelä and Martusewicz

2018; Saari 2018). The rise of artist's in social and political arenas comes from what Hertmans (2011) calls a growing form of 'artistic commitment': "artists become involved in public debates, and meddle in matters which do not necessarily concern them, but which they would like to take part in considering" (55). This argues for 'a cultural shift' within art, as Noyes Platt (2010) argues: "from the aestheticized art, stripped from any politic messaging, that historically was deemed as 'career killers', now artists having crossed over to the side of being activists more than anything, utilizing art as their form of communication." (xiv).

The progression of integrating artist committed to social and political change within larger forums needs to be viewed with caution. Nannicelli (2018) argues that environmental engagements within art has to be reflective in how artists' appropriates nature from an ethical viewpoint. Attempts to create awareness and inquiry regarding hegemonic systems or environmental issues cannot be palatable or easily adjusted to carry on producing or re-producing such systems (2018). This is of key when studying the political engagement of environmentally engaged artists, as within the last two decades, environmentally engaged art has rapidly developed into big business. As Drabble (2019) highlights, without denying that there are still many who collect art out of sheer interest, there is a growing sense of art as transformed into commodities that are now more than anything sold and traded as assets in order to accumulate more capital. Funding art and its institutions, especially art dedicated to environmental and social issues, has become part of corporate marketing strategies that push a narrative of social responsibility and action taking in issues such as climate change, a practice Drabble (2019) frames as 'art washing', a nod to the term 'green washing' (18). Environmentally engaged art has become a way for business' and institutions to promote a social and environmental sustainability agenda that puts their organization in more flattering narratives of sustainability. Luke (1992) connects this to how artist's engaged with environmental themes and systems change are practicing from a position of contradictions, by having to immerse within a destructive neoliberal capitalism to support themselves financially, the ephemeraculture of late capitalism but also how "they also have one of the last chances to imagine how an ecological permaculture could arise from the hyperecology of late capitalism" (76).

#### **4. 4 CONCEPT OF LOOKING: VISUALITY**

Visuality and how humans engage with visualities are vast and grasp numerous mediums from visual

data, to art, film and photographic images. As a concept visibility is grasping the socially embedded relations in how the analyzed artworks are being discursively narrated. Visualization has created socially constructed ways of visually seeing things not deemed as visual before, Mirzoeff (1999) points to examples such as the 'economic picture' that has created socially constructed images and visuals of complex and entangled systems of economics. Demos (2017) argues that visibility has been a forefront factor in the conceptualization of climate change and also the Anthropocene how the has reached outside of the scientific discourse to social and cultural ones.

Over the past century, the way art is viewed as a visual medium has radically transformed, as today we not only observe artworks in museums and galleries, but on social media, news publications and in various forms of communication and entertainment (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009). Alongside these changes in form and reception, our understanding of the mechanisms and processes of looking and observing have evolved into the varied and complex notion of visibility: “vision as a physical/psychological process while visibility refers to the socialization of vision” (Walker 2004, 24). Set within a perspective of political ecology, the theory of visibility discards the idea of autonomous art, or 'art's for art's sake', by situating art as produced and embedded within social, ecological and economic contexts (Martin 2007). Seeing visual images and artwork is not an objective process of information reception, and therefore it is important to analyze the mechanisms behind our visual perspective and to consider which structures influence our perceptions and artist's practices (Rose 2001). Visibility, is emphasizing ideas of the visual “is contested, debated and transformed as a constantly challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racialized identities” (Mirzoeff 1999, 3). This means engaging with the visuals of the artworks and the social relationships embedded within them; or engaging with the relationship between the artwork, the viewer and the eye of the researcher.

## **5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

For this thesis, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with artists resident and practicing within Malmö, Sweden. This is followed by a discourse analysis of the data from the interviews, as well as an exploration of the artists' respective art works. This approach enables me to study the artists' reflection on their own roles as civil actors, their perception of their positionality in relation to other actors of the

art world and society at large, as well as how this is reflected or engaged within their respective art works.

## **5. 1 EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCE**

My research is situated primarily within the framework of social constructionism for a number of reasons. Researching art and artist's reflections, it is important to acknowledge that a substantial amount of the knowledge that we produce is socially constructed. For art in particular, it is not the solely studying the work of art itself, but rather in the creating, experiencing and encountering art, acknowledging that: "art is a 'relational activity'". (Sutherland and Krzys Acord 2007, 133). From this viewpoint on art as a relational activity, perception and engagement with artworks are thus relational to experiences and social practices that produce and reproduce knowledge (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002). This is why I see it as beneficial to utilize discourse analysis as a method to study my data. Due to the subject of this analysis, the approach will be reflecting on what knowledges these artists are in possession of, and how this reflects and relates to their position as artists and to their work.

Even though this research is largely acknowledging that knowledge itself is something that is produced and reproduced, this project is anchored in a realist perspective as "physical objects also exist, but they only gain meaning through discourse" (Jørgensen and Philips 2002, 9). Hence, this thesis is underpinned by a more nuanced form of social constructivism that still adheres to a belief in reality and the existence of an external world that "places limits on what can count as knowledge" (Cobern and Loving 2001, 16). Social constructionism is often polarized as a self-defeating anti-realist point, and it has been suggested that it may be more fruitful to engage with a realist perspective that also acknowledges a material reality that also exists without socially produce discourses (Elder-Vass 2012).

## **5. 2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight Malmö based artists that in some way identify with environmentally and socio-ecological themes in their practices and work. Three of the interviews were conducted in the artist's studios, the other remaining interviews were conducted by phone or video call due to the 2020 pandemic of COVID-19, which inhibited the possibilities of conducting all remaining physical interviews safely. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, Norwegian and

English depending on the language of comfort for the artists. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, included quotes were translated to English by me as the researcher.

Due to the sensitive topics of the interviews (such as art and the environment being intimately connected to their work, as well as to their identity), it was important to ask the respondents to answer as truthfully to their own measures as possible. The interviews were formed as semi-structured rather than structured, in order to allow for flexibility. A shorter interview guide with open-ended questions was utilized for all the interviews, but with an informal approach, allowing the interviewees and researcher as Turner III (2010): “relies on the interaction with the participants to guide the interview process” (755). Turner highlights that both open-ended questions as well as more informal ways of conducting interviews is not optimal for research extracting precise codes or themes (2010). For this thesis, being an explorative study not intended to extract standardized or consistent themes with all the artists, this mix of more informal semi-structured interview is argued to be the most beneficial. This also enabled me as the researcher to conduct the interviews with a pre-made interview guide designed to stimulate and direct discussion, but also created space for the freedom to ask questions formed for each individual during the interviews (Please see Appendix II for interview guide).

Another benefit of the approach of informal semi-structured interviews was to give a greater degree of comfort to the interviewees and to encourage them to talk more freely and from a more relaxed position. Kvale (2011) points out that the focus of on an interview to enable a safe and approachable interview, both the interview guide and actual interview should focus on both the thematic and dynamic dimensions. The thematic being as to the purpose of the interview. The dynamics of the interview is to reduce the theoretical language and keep questions easy and short, allowing the conversation to flow (2011). For this thesis, more personal reflections on the interviewees positions as artists was desired, thus it was important to have more instinctive approach to the interview to the thematics. The artists all have different educational backgrounds, some with longer academic and scholarly careers; the questions were kept as short and easy as possible, but I as the researcher let the interviewees to lead the path of the interview, whether they chose to answer more conceptually as they wish.

### **5.3 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

When the artist’s artworks and interviews are considered in parallel with one another, discourse



analysis has been a vital tool for understanding that data. The juxtaposition of the artworks and responses allows for explorative analysis of the multilayered and entangled perspectives of the artist's intentions and reflections on the instrumentalization of their art, as well as the environmentally engaged themes of their art and practices. This form of parallel analysis is also beneficial because when reflecting on their art, the artist is also relating to and reflecting on specific conceptual or material aspects of their art. Due to the cross-section of my data, I do not adhere strictly to a particular form of discourse analysis, but rather I am utilizing discourse analyses that applied to both the textual and visual material. My discourse analysis is informed by the work of Rose (2001) and Cuevas Valenzuela (2008), which help to create nuance my textual and visual analyses.

Discourse analysis, made famous by Michel Foucault (1926-1984), has historically been used to analyze text material primarily, but is also a beneficial method for deconstructing both visual and textual elements in connection to social contexts and power relations (Rose 2001). A discourse is characterized as a “form of social practice which both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 61). For the artworks this will include both the image of the artworks, as well as its production and how it is related to the perspective viewer adhering to the social practices of art.

To investigate the data, the analysis will be informed by a technological, compositional and social interpretation of the artworks selected by the artists, together with data from the interviews. The technological modalities are focused on either the production circumstances or on what material is used to produce the artwork, and on the compositional modalities and the formal visual elements, such as content, color, light and spatial dimensions. The social interpretations acknowledge the political, economic and social relations embedded in the artwork (Rose 2001). Within the cultural field, discourse analysis should “pay attention not only to the characteristics of the empirical discourse(s) under analysis, but also to the circuit connecting production and reception” (Cuevas Valenzuela 2008, 152) as it “stresses the political aspects of artistic production, which are too often overlooked” (ibid, 160). Similar to the approach taken by Cuevas Valenzuela (2008), attention will be given primarily to the social interpretations and meanings in the artist interviews and the artworks, and how they relate to larger social discourses and power dynamics.

## **5. 4 SAMPLING**

The primary baseline for sampling artists was that they themselves had positioned their work within the frame of socio-ecological issues or directly called themselves environmentally engaged artists. As has been aforementioned, this is a large scope and is not defined by a particular style or medium of practice. The decision for limiting the geographical scope to Malmö was in order to be able to conduct interviews on location with the artists in their studios, however due to COVID-19, this was in the end only possible with a few of the artists.

A call for respondents was posted on different social media platforms and groups that catered to amateur artists, and environmental artists, as well as local groups that were Malmö specific and asked to volunteer for an interview if they felt that their work and practice fitted with what I had searched for. I also conducted a scan of resident artists at Malmö galleries and art studios were made, 36 spaces in total, the list can be found in Appendix 1. Since I am participating in this artist community myself, my base of knowledge of the galleries as well as artist collectives were informed by this position, but I also made a point to reach out to other artists and curators to make sure the search for artists was a large scope of Malmö, and not only informed by my previous knowledge. The artists websites were studied and the artist that positioned themselves within the realm of socio-ecological issues were listed; this entails as the artist either specifically stating in their artist statements or texts that they are engaging within the themes of environment or socio-ecological issues, or has been included in exhibitions that engages with these themes. Based on the list of artists both from the gallery search and social media platforms, the artists were narrowed down in line with the research questions, but also to get an as diverse cross-section of artists as possible.

## **5. 5 LIMITATIONS**

The art community in Malmö is extensive and multifaceted, and there are numerous artists in the area that focus in different ways on environmental art. Therefore, the result of this research could look very different if conducted with other artists and artworks due to the subjective nature of the interviews and the usage of qualitative methods.

My position as a researcher is also influenced by my direct knowledge and participation of the arts communities of Malmö. Having a greater knowledge from within the community itself gives me a deeper understanding of the practices and culture of the context of the Malmö arts community, which enables further and more specific points of research. However, this direct experience also makes it of great importance to have clearly thought through both the ethical positions of my research, as well as my position within the community. This thesis does not aim to analyze an overall corpus of environmentally engaged art, neither from a global perspective nor within the realm of Malmö. The artworks studied in this thesis are far from homogenous, and if done with a different set of participants, the project could have reached a completely different story of conclusions.

## 6. ARTIST INTRODUCTIONS

<i>Fernandez-Cavada, Helena</i> (b. 1979, Spain)	Lives and works in Malmö, Sweden. <a href="http://www.helenafc.com">http://www.helenafc.com</a>
<i>Harrysson, E. Maria</i> (b. 1979, Sweden)	Lives and works in Malmö, Sweden. Currently working at studio collective <i>Sulfur</i> . <a href="https://ariah.se">https://ariah.se</a>
<i>Haugen, Johan</i> (b. 1968, Sweden)	Lives and works in Malmö, Sweden. Currently working at studio collective <i>ADDO</i> . <a href="https://www.johanhaugenart.com">https://www.johanhaugenart.com</a>
<i>Ihrman, Ingela</i> (b. 1985, Sweden)	Lives and works in Malmö, Sweden. <a href="http://www.ingelaihrman.com">http://www.ingelaihrman.com</a>
<i>Løvaasen, Rina Eide</i> (b. 1988, Norway)	Lives and works in Malmö, Sweden. Currently working at studio collective <i>Drift</i> ã Founder and Project Coordinator for Malmö Open Studios. <a href="https://www.rinaeidelovaasen.com">https://www.rinaeidelovaasen.com</a>
<i>Nakiito, Sarah</i> (b. 1983, Uganda)	Lives and works in Malmö, Sweden. Member of the art collective <i>SYSTERIA</i> . <a href="https://www.kalunjidesign.com">https://www.kalunjidesign.com</a>
<i>Surri, Matti</i> (b. 1987, Finland)	Lives and works in Malmö, Sweden. Member and coordinator at the artist-run exhibition space <i>Alta Art Space</i> . <a href="http://mattisumari.com">http://mattisumari.com</a>
<i>Zwahlen, Sofia</i> (b. 1992, Sweden)	Lives and works in Malmö, Sweden. Currently

	working at studio collective <i>FRANK</i> <i>GALLERY&amp;STUDIOS</i> . <a href="https://cargocollective.com/SofiaZwahlen/">https://cargocollective.com/SofiaZwahlen/</a>
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## 7. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the analyses and discussion of the interviews and is divided into three chapters, each centered around points of focus that emerged during the interviews. The tripartite structure of the analysis emphasizes the various ways in which artists and artworks are involved with environmental engaged themes and their positions as civil actors in society. The first chapter focuses on the individual artistic practices and establishes the artists' ideas of anchoring socio-ecological thematics through material and concept. The second chapter discusses the positionality of the artists within and outside of the art worlds, expanding on their reflections of environmentally engaged themes from previous chapter in how it relates to sustainable practice and the role of researcher. Finally, the last concluding chapter discusses the complex relationship to ideas of art as an instigator to change. This chapter also focuses on the ideas of the viewer in relation to ideas of change and the instrumentalization of art for purposes of education and transformation.

### 7. 1 CHAPTER 1: DUALITY OF MATERIAL AND CONCEPT

This chapter is dedicated to discussing how the interviewed artists are relating to socio-ecological themes in terms of both the materials that they use and the concepts they engage with. Here I divided my discussion of artistic practice into the ideas of material and concept: the former refers to the physical materials that the artists are using, and the latter concerns the ideas and ideologies that inform their art. Each artist's practice is, in different ways, immersed in socio-ecological themes that are entangled with both materiality and concept.

#### 7. 1. 1 *FROM WOOD TO PLASTIC*

For artists who intend to engage with socio-ecological ideas in their work, there is an inherent importance in extending that intention to the materials used. These artists take into account a variety of elements when selecting and working with different materials, considering a variety of factors from where their materials are sourced, to the potential toxicity of the materials, to what is necessary for

disposal or recycling. This is a recurring trend in environmentally engaged art as being in itself, more often than not, pursue sustainability as a practice (Blanc and Benish 2017; Nannicelli 2018).

When it comes to unsustainable material practices, a defining moment for Løvaasen was during her first year of preparatory art school at *Strykejernet Kunstscole* in Oslo, Norway, where early on one her lecturer stated that “artists have always been some of the worst polluters.” The artistic process of research, like most other forms of research, often involves numerous attempts of trial and error as part of its process – a practice often encouraged within the studies of art (Nannicelli 2018). Løvaasen remembers the containers upon containers of her and her fellow classmates discarded projects and rejects. This led to her decision to minimize the wasteful and linear experimentation process that is so commonly taught. However, she underscores that the materiality of her work is not the focus of her artistic practice; there is a clash between material and concept in terms of sustainability for her. Løvaasen provides the example of filmed performances where she and her project colleagues flew to both Uzbekistan and Svalbard: “My production is not sustainable [...] there is a clash there, and I am trying to save resources [...] here the concept was the most important”. In this instance, the concept involved the calling attention to climate change by filming a series of performances in locations that are heavily affected. However, by pointing out the unsustainable and destructive process of flying to these locations, Løvaasen acknowledges the inherent paradox in her work. What Løvaasen points out is a practice of self-reflection anchored within her practice where her ideas of 'being sustainable' is not a clear path of certainty, but a continuing reflection and valuation of what she decides to create, aligning with Nannicelli (2018) on how the role of artist is complex in its situating between extracting materials and how it links with the arts intended purpose.



Figure 1. *The Energy Between Realms* (2018) Rina Eide Løvaasen (Courtesy of the artist)

Even though Løvaasen's thoughts on climate change and sustainability are more deeply explored on a conceptual level, the materiality of her practice remains of vital importance. Løvaasen's piece *The Energy Between Realms* (2018) confronts its viewer with a combination of materials, where she aims to bring forward questions about humanity's relation to our natural environments, using plastic, uranium, glass and niobium. Part of the piece is constructed with marine plastic waste, melted and shaped together with mouth-blown glass, uranium glass, limestone and niobium, to create a soft organic shape, that with its blazing coloring offers an astounding unity. By mixing mouth-blown glass with uranium glass, Løvaasen shows us how in natural light, the two types of glass are indistinguishable to the naked eye. Part of the glass is silvered, which creates a distorted reflection. The platform the piece rests on is an ultra-violet light source: when lit, it uncovers the blazing neon green color of the uranium glass.

Niobium is a rare chemical element with a temperature stability that has proven vital to developing and manufacturing some of the most environmentally destructive technical inventions, such as rocket engines and gas pipelines. Niobium has historically been mined close to Løvaasen's home in Norway, and the interest in the material came from the idea of it being so close in her home and nature surroundings, whilst also being utilized for environmentally harmful productions, connecting to Løvaasen's interest in the human perception of materials in how it transforms when attached to different discursive narratives, from part of nature to industrial usage.

The physical materials making the actual artwork is as previously stated often entangled with the artists conceptual ideas in how the artists are engaging with environmental issues. However, working with environmental themes is not necessarily out of a direct concern for the environment or nature for Løvaasen. Rather, as Løvaasen states:

I am more interested in looking at the surrounding cognitive dissonance around environmental issues. How people react to facts about climate change. It is just a fact that it is occurring, and so many choose to look at and perceive it differently. I choose to use climate change as a tool to examine how differently we can perceive facts

Using climate change as a 'tool' has led Løvaasen to deconstruct the different narratives around how people engage with scientific discourse on climate change and construct their own views and interpretations. With the silvering, the viewer can see their own reflection, but it is distorted due to the shape of the surface. The idea of visualizing what we cannot see and attempting to challenge our own previous conceptions and knowledge also informs her utilization of uranium glass and niobium. For Løvaasen the materials are tied to questioning how people make sense of facts and perceive natural occurrences that cannot be directly seen: "you do not see the uranium, but we know it's there, we are terrified of it. What is it we are afraid of, when it also is so unspecific?". Here Løvaasen is reflecting on how fear functions in the debate on climate change, represented by the knowledge that both uranium and niobium are materials of environmental importance and material elements of environmental destruction, in atomic catastrophes and war. Thus, it is clear that although Løvaasen appreciates the environmental significance of the materials that she utilizes in her work, she is also interested in engaging with the emotional and psychological interactions between the viewer and the artwork.

The idea of balancing the conceptual with the material is something Zwahlen also struggles with in her practice. She reflects on her conflicting sense of the stratification of environmental responsibility as an individual and artist, describing it as an internal conflict about whether or not the material usage serves the purpose of her art practice, in a way that can be at times very limiting for her process: “I struggle a lot with it, because in order to discover, you have to try things and that can be things such as do molds in plastic”. Zwahlen continues that she can also sense a different form of calmness in using materials from nature, like fallen branches from the trees that surround her home: “...when I am aware of where I found the material and with knowledge that I have not brought harm and that I can easily place it back into nature again”. This is part of her ongoing process, as she actively tries to engage with materials that cause less environmental harm and approaches her practice from another point outside the linear material consumption where materials is eventually being 'turned' into waste. Zwahlen's reflection on her own material usage is rooted in her view of balancing what she sees as environmentally destructive, utilizing materials that are hard to recycle or that may be harmful to the environment. Noyes Platt (2010) argues for this fragmentation within the ecological art produced within the Global North, as the ideologies are still rooted in the perspectives of European philosophy: that “human beings are still the prime movers and destroyers” (271). For Zwahlen, the consumption of the physical materials in her work is rooted in the problematic environmental issues (such as capitalism, environmental degradation and destruction) that she as an artist is attempting to reconcile and primarily distance herself from. She continues, “This is also important for me to mention this in form of texts for audience to read”. By providing further clarification to viewers, she encourages the viewers to reflect on their own use of environmental materials, as well as her material usage in the artwork. This becomes a way for Zwahlen to reconcile her material consumption by highlighting the process of trying to find ways of forming a circular rather than linear way of creating and producing.

Zwahlen is trying to differentiate between the positions that Sundberg (2015) describes as the 'guilt and responsibility'. Sundberg argues that responsibility is not only viewing the individual perspective but also collectively as part of systems critique (122). Zwahlen states that she never returns to her old artworks, but; “I rather see it as a part of that time, because I always think of what I could have done differently [in relation to being sustainable in her practice]”, acknowledging her position as a form learning and unlearning in how she approaches her own artistic practice, recognizing it is not without



faults. Thus, both Løvaasen and Zwahlen reflects not only upon the material usage for the finished artwork, but primarily being conscious of the path to it, by minimizing the 'trail and error' of their research and having to discard material and rejected projects, but engages the viewers to make their own reflections on what they deem as sustainable.

Working with fabrics and textiles such as cotton and other natural fibers is allowed to be the focal point of Nakiito's project *The Leftovers* (2018). The project includes paintings and textiles that are dyed with flowers, plants, wood and copper, that create different colors and patterns, where she aspire to let the dyeing process take its own course with as little interference from her as possible. Below is photograph from part of the series, where the remnants of the dyeing process are displayed:



Figure 2. *The leftovers* (2018) Sarah Nakiito (Courtesy of the artist)

Letting go of the control of the outcome of her textile pieces is inherently bound up with the ideas of time and agency for Nakiito. She cannot decide or control the chemical process of the materials engagement with each other, and allowing the process to take its own turns and forms is not only a therapeutic process for Nakiito, but also a way to let the material speak. When reflecting on her process, Nakiito states:

For this process it does not matter how fast I do my job, it will not make the process go any faster: I cannot speed up the coloring process. A project like this can take all summer. Natural fibers need protein in order to be able to absorb the color and there are a long line of steps in that process. I cannot control exactly what it is going to look like, cannot decide its details. [...] When unfolding the piece, there may have happened something in the chemical process that I could never have anticipated, and the result is its own.

Working with textiles is frustratingly often bound up with design, a skill in itself that has become primarily bound up with a craft that has been positioned as a commodity. Working often with pieces that can be worn on bodies, as well as it being textile material, Nakiito is often introduced as a designer, in spite of her own preference to avoid using such titles. Her objection to the label 'designer' reflects Nakiito's desire to resist commodification. The tendency to label art as design, or 'commercial art' is a phenomenon that Martin (2007) identifies as a challenging part of creating autonomous art, and acknowledges the importance of rejecting the idea of art as a commodity to be purchased and consumed, stripped of other embedded values (Martin 2007). The frustration associated with this misidentification inhibits her process of holistic sustainability, as the embodied ideas she wishes to question are silenced when her artworks are identified and also purchased as commodities in form of 'designer products', rather than being labeled artworks.

How the artists are negotiating their materiality of their artwork in terms of being sustainable, is primarily linked to creating a process with minimal waste, but allowing the finished artwork to include and use the materials that fit their vision, even if they can be deemed or construed as environmentally harmful. For Nakiito, her focus on her artwork's materiality is resting on low-impact, where there is no trial and error process, but rather letting the material and the chemical process of her natural dyeing be a focal point, thus removing the process of 'trial and error' linear process. However she reflects upon

her issues of having her materials as the focus point, utilizing textiles, which often makes her art narrated as commodities in forms of designer products, rather than art.

### **7.1.2 CONCEPT IN VISION AND AS A TOOL**

When reflecting on his own practice, Haugen defines it as a deeper process of being more actively conscious as an individual, personally and artistically. More specifically, Haugen describes a practice of questioning body, time and labor within his own identity and sense of being, as he continues learning how it is situated in its surroundings, both socially and physically. In his own words, Haugen expresses interest in “the idea of awareness about everything being alive in some way and having its own value. How it is from your own perspective but actively viewing it as part of a whole”.



Figure 3. Still from slow walk, *I still live in water* (2014- ) Johan Haugen and Felicia Konrad (Courtesy of the artists)

Exploring the narratives of awareness in relation to individualism and collectivism is the main conceptual idea behind Haugen and his partner Felicia Konrad's project *I still live in water* (2014- ). The project is actively ongoing and they have executed performances such as slow walks, photography, texts and sound pieces together and in collaboration with other artists globally. By reflecting upon meanings and discourses around bodies of water, they place water as a common denominator that runs

through everything. Not only is water necessary to the survival of all life on earth, it is also embedded in complex social and cultural discourses, and for Haugen, it has been of importance to research and explore the overlapping narratives within *I still live in water*. He explains, “Water is what ties us together, the water carries a message, carries our history. It carries our present”. With *I still live in water*, Haugen reflects not only on his own work of learning through their practice, but also extends its impact to the audience and participants as part of the artwork’s purpose and concept:

We do not aim at being reprimanding but attempting to raise awareness about your own body and mind, in order to connect more to your own surroundings. By increasing a thoughtfulness about the water of my own body, then so does the same caring for the bodies of water surrounding me: then by extension the livelihood connected to water as a whole

With the project *I still live in water*, Haugen and Konrad have explored our human relation to water through a mix of mediums and practices. Haugen, who primarily works in two-dimensions with oil painting, has been able to immerse himself more conceptually into the ideas of bodies of water by shifting focus away from the material aspects of the project. Contextualizing water as an essential element for all life, Haugen aims to center the global issues of ecological injustices linked to water and access. This is what Noyes Platt (2010) defines as politically situated work that questions “normally-ignored functions” (279) of our everyday life by making it the center point of the artwork. Haugen wants to highlight the urgency of climate change and access to water by encouraging the viewer to consciously thinking of their relation to water. He believes this personal connection is important as the global environmental injustices around access of water are not presently an urgent matter in the Global North, where Malmö, Sweden is situated. Thus Haugen points out that it has to be highlighted in another manner as problems of access to clean water is not actively faced by citizens of the Global North. For Haugen and Konrad, *I still live in water* is about active self-inquiry into their relation to water, and inviting the viewer to engage and take part in their own subjective process and self-examination. One of the main parts of their project has been based on location performance and having them be participatory practices. The idea behind doing the slow walks in connection to the beaches of Malmö, is not only to create a slowing down of motion and creating awareness of the bodies functions as connecting to the bodies of water outside, the presence of the water being. The slow walks were highlighted on social media beforehand, welcoming people to participate and join the slow walk, for



this event almost twenty five people showed up to join as well as viewers who happened to be there. The slow walk of I still live in water as an engaging participatory performance, participants are invited to question their own relation to the bodies of water surrounding them.



Figure 4. *Jättemusslan* (2020) Ingela Ihrman (Courtesy of photographer: Marte Edvarda Tidslevold)

For Ihrman's performance *Jättemusslan* (2020) (*The Giant Clam*), her inspiration came during a residency in Andaman island, India, where she got a chance to work and study the location and the aquatic creatures there. For Ihrman, the opportunity of the residency was far removed from her everyday practice and when framing it in her artistic practice, it was important for her to link it to her own space of home: "I would not feel comfortable trying to speak about a place that I am not deeply connected to. It was an important inspiration for me, but in order for me to conceptualize my experience, for me it is to bring it home". By enacting this performance in the privacy of her personal home, the viewers were immersed in the intimacy and connectivity of the experience. When it comes to

her own art practice, she is not interested in global contexts or situating her work outside of her own self:

I work from the concept of myself [...] performances or rituals that are social, social pieces speaking about what is human: how it is to be human amongst others. I build, write, photograph and am not so dependent on the medium, rather about what I want to form

For Ihrman, this meant connecting it back to her own surroundings of Seved, a neighborhood of Malmö but also allowing visitors into her home. Ihrman performed *Jättemusslan*, a reading performance, as part of the schedule for Malmö Modern museum's exhibition *Sensing Nature from Within*. The performance took place in Ihrman's apartment and bathtub, where visitors could experience her reciting her own written tales of water creatures, embracing and reflecting on our relation to other species, whilst dressed as a mussel-like aquatic creature made out of acrylic, silk and plastic.

Environmental justice being ingrained in Harrysson's identity of herself led her on the path of interlacing her passion for environmental justice with her artistic engagement as conceptual ideas: “I am trying to find parallel histories on human relations to nature through our patterns of vision and consumption, how we watch and engage with nature differently.” Harrysson states that she aims to “work with emotions and what I want to call the collective consciousness”, and she states that she not sure if the terminology she is using is 'correct':

We as painters have this idea of what the sun looks when it sets, and this is so tied to our human perception and that is what I am trying to deconstruct. What happens when we cannot see the horizon anymore because of all the smog? How the sky looks so beautiful, but the colors are shifting because of pollution, it is a doubleness in that. How will we define the sunset when the water level rises?

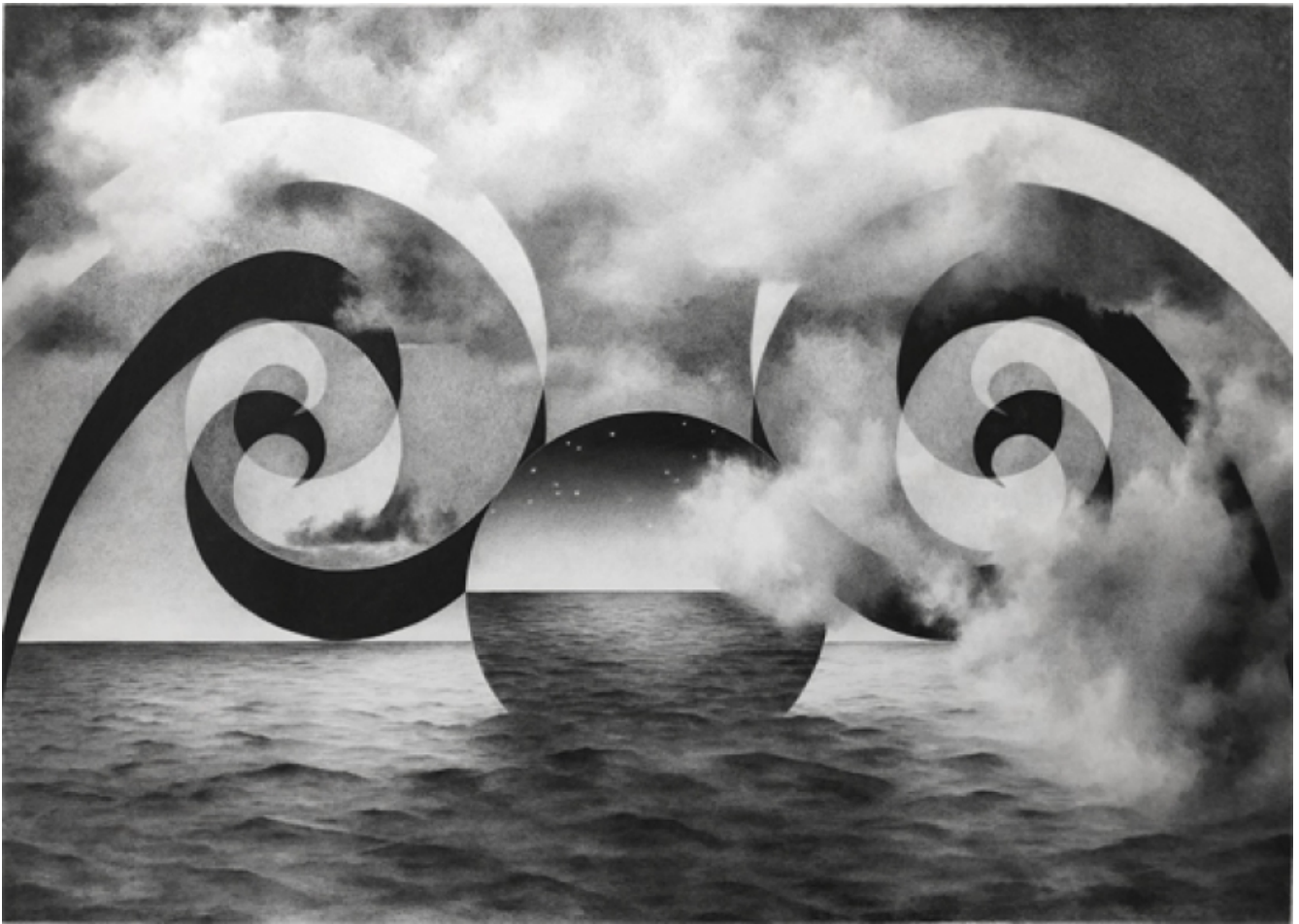


Figure 5. *Tide* (2020) Maria E. Harrysson (Courtesy of the artist)

Circulating through discursive narratives of what is deemed as 'natural' and how humans make sense of environmental changes occurring, whether anthropogenic or not. Harrysson is searching for ways to explain and uncover the reasoning and emotional bonds behind these existing narratives that enable certain questions and deny others: what is it that makes us think actively about an issue and what do our cognitive skills have to do with it? *Tide* (2020) depicts a picturesque horizon that is appreciated for its natural beauty, however, the aesthetic is disrupted by an optical illusion. The image creates a sense of self-reflection in the viewer by skewing the obvious and discursively 'natural', and questioning how it relates to social discourses (Demos, 2017).

Engaging conceptually with nature-human relation and environmental issues is diverse amongst the artists and ideas of self-reflection and inquiry into themselves as individuals situated in larger social contexts are of vital importance in how they decide to engage with environmental themes. Focusing on

the human experience of nature, the artists are highly reflecting on their own individual narratives and engaging on what entails nature and environmental issues, and allowing the viewers to engage with them on this path of self-examination.

## **7. 2 CHAPTER II: ART AS RESISTANCE**

This chapter analyzes the artists reflections on their practices in relation to ideas of sustainability. The artists point to how they themselves position their practice as a form of resistance against neoliberal capitalism, environmental degradation and how this relates to their art and practice.

### **7. 2. 1 SUSTAINABILITY AS PRACTICE**

Whilst the number of art graduates has increased rapidly on a global scale since the 1980's, the art graduates themselves are less likely to find stable and well-paid employment within their field when compared to others with the same level of education (Sholette 2017). The instability and uncertainty of sustaining yourself as a professional artist is a concern that all the interviewed artists expressed throughout the interviews. When Harrysson decided to end her previous career path to become a fashion designer, she could no longer deny her desire to continue as an artist: “my way of thinking has always been as an artist [...] at the time it felt 'irresponsible' to continue on this path [...] I had to rebuild myself anew but still based on the old me”. A lot of this feeling came from not wanting to start a career within the corporate fashion industry as it did not correlate with her political values of social and environmental equality. Even though her sense of being 'irresponsible' was linked to the idea of choosing a profession that was financially unstable. Ihrman states that when she started her career as an artist, it was something she had to reconcile with: “Being an artist is often succumbing to poor work conditions and worker’s rights”. This became clear for Ihrman when in 2014, she was active in the artist studio collective *Trumpeten*, when Malmö faced its largest flooding in a hundred years. This had devastating effects on the city as a whole, and no cultural institution was left unscathed. The then newly established collective of *Trumpeten*, like many other artist studios in Malmö, was housed in a cellar space, which was completely devastated because of the flooding. Ihrman and the other artists at *Trumpeten*, were offered meager support from the municipality and their landlord – a blow that compounded the existing financial struggles mentioned above. This made Ihrman and the other artists question their roles as cultural workers and their position as civil actors in Malmö. Ihrman explains:



...we did not talk that much about the environmental aspect of the flooding, this was a few years ago and it was not as much in our minds at the time, which definitely reflects in how we chose to work and formulate ourselves. We did not demand any action from Malmö municipality or anything, we more just saw ourselves as vulnerable cultural workers. If it had happened now, we would probably have looked at it differently.

The shift from focus on their own rights as cultural workers aligns with Drabble's (2019) assertion that the social question of practice and creation has seen an emergence of committing to exploring the deep-rooted connection between social questions and environmental issues. In her responses, Ihrman is reflecting on a shift in her focus, from local social sustainability in the form of her and her colleagues poor working rights to her current perspective linking the social, economic and environmental conditions effecting and shaping her artistic practice as well as influencing her artwork. For Zwahlen, who also has a studio located in a cellar that was thankfully not affected by the floods, being an artist is an attempt to work on disassociating herself from capitalism and the corporate art worlds as far as she can, therefore also acknowledging her career path as both being unstable in work and financial income. She is not deeming her career successful in terms of making her art palatable for commercial purposes or commercial galleries. Apart from grants that she has received for her art practice, she had to do other ways of sustaining herself financially, by working another job completely unrelated to her art. Blanc and Benish (2017) argue that this turn towards a more local production outside of commercial galleries, as political and ethical endeavor against the accelerating capitalistic model of the art world:

...today's generation of artists are increasingly frustrated at the 'one per cent' structure that effects the gallery/museum system as much as it does the world economy in general; very few artists 'rise to the top' to become stars/rich, or are even able to afford a basic standard of living (117).

When reflecting on her artistry Ihrman states: “being an artist is about resistance”. She does not relate to the art world or the art market in its form of neoliberal ideal; her practice of working as an artist is a way to resist against the ideas of engaging in the increasingly more capitalist model of the art world. Thus, by turning back to a smaller and more local way of creating, Ihrman pursues a way to be more sustainable and conscious of her practice. Similarly for Zwahlen her ideas of sustainability as a practice is not primarily focused on the finished artwork but the process from idea to finished piece in terms of

exhibitions as well as what organizations and scholarships she applies for: “the most important for me is that it feels good as a process”. What Zwahlen is pointing to is a self-inquiry into her process, what she defines as 'good' here being reflecting on her entanglements of economic and social values, mirroring her own knowledges and situation.

Facing issues with sustaining yourself financially as an artist is something pointed to by all the artists in some form, whether it is how to handle the commercial part through art market to funding applications. Sumari points out how often the actual creation of the artwork is only the tip of required labor of him sustaining himself as an artist. From applying for grants, scholarships, practicing other forms of entrepreneurship in form of creating exhibitions, budgets and planning – skills that are often underappreciated or taken for granted. This is what Sholette (2010) is pointing out as the entrepreneurial formation of the role of the artist. Sholette points out that: “the increasing capitalization of the art world by financial speculators, as well as the explosion of museum building seem to show an art system that is integrated into the expansionist tendencies of capitalism” (61). Sumari points to how this has shaped the way he structures applications when applying for funding or projects: “you are aware of what a certain institution is looking for and you highlight those aspects”. Similarly, Løvaasen explains how the popularity of environmentally engaged projects is seen in project applications and how you situate your work to fit what the institution is looking for, aligning with the respective institutions sustainability goals. What both Sumari and Løvaasen are identifying here is the requirement to work and practice within today's art worlds, as phrased by Sholette's (2010) enterprise culture, and that requires artists to not only create their art, but also to engage in finding other ways of funding and promoting their art. The necessity of participating in the capitalist system, a system that these artists have critiqued their artworks and interviews, is of deep concern and this concern emerges in art that they create.

When reflecting on socio-ecological themes in relation to their practices, several of the artists point to a process of self-inquiry within their work. Being engaged with environmental themes is not only linked to ecological reflection, but crosses over themes of social and economic sustainability. As Ihrman pointing to her practice as a form of resistance and critique towards neoliberal capitalistic structures and norms of living and working. This does not mean that Ihrman sees herself as an 'outsider' to the current norms in the art world, as it is as pointed out by Luke (1992), Sholette (2010) and Sundberg

(2015) is an impossibility to be a practicing artist who still needs to economically sustain their living on their labor.

The paradox of operating both against and within the capitalist system becomes a constant position of reflection and self-inquiry for the artists interviewed. As Nakiito points out, “you are criticizing the system, but for those who are somewhat established, they are criticizing a system that is also benefiting them [...] Some of the institutions and actors I have criticized, I have now started working with [...] It is hard to balance it, and I sometimes feel it is easy to forget the power you have acquired”. Nakiito is referencing this in the context of her own artistry, and her development from a underground perspective towards a more well established cultural network that now helps her develop artistic projects. Nakiito points out the complex conflicting as argued by Sholette (2010) in the deep-rooted importance of negotiating her changing roles, and preserving her purpose: “It is an activist background that is included in the way I create art and it is my way of practice. But how do you relate that to your own growing authority and power? It is hard”. Nakiito has an ongoing process of self-inquiry when it comes to these conflicting roles of power, seeing herself not as having clear answers, but viewing it as an ongoing process of learning and unlearning.



Figure 6. *the ones who got away ate their way out* (2019- ) Matti Sumari (Courtesy of the artist)

Sumari's *the ones who got away ate their way out* (2019-ongoing), made out of polypropylene plastic from vegetable crates for transporting strawberry, parsley, grapes, avocado and champignon mushrooms has a shape reminiscing of a non-terrestrial being, growing out of its place, as if it is frozen in movement. For Sumari this idea of a sense of movement is derived from an idea of visual and physical spaces. This sculpture is part of several that have been exhibited within galleries and as public sculptures. Moving between these spaces, the context of the pieces changes, as Sumari points out. In a world where material resources are used as if they are infinite and production chains are linear rather than circular, *the ones who got away ate their way out* circles back to the question of what we value within the dichotomy of waste and utility. By re-contextualizing waste through the idea of shaping non-living materials into something reminiscent of living materials, Sumari considers the question of value in the current hegemonic neoliberal capitalist structures, of the standardized linear model of production, rather than circular. Sumari recalls an early interest in utilizing discarded or found objects for his process. Initially this practice started out of sheer financial strain, not necessarily from an idea of sustainable practice or circular economy. As Sumari explains, "it is tied to the economics of it, trying to avoid expensive costs for material: my materials have then become part of my content". In this way, being sustainable in material use is not a newfound practice, but rather a form of survival and necessity that has adorned a new coat: from thrift due to meager financial means to a consciously chosen and maintained sustainable artistic practice.

More recently, the necessity of using discarded materials has evolved into a conceptual practice. Sumari underscores that using such materials engages with a sustainable practice that is "more of a symbolic action than anything else. Even if I use found materials, it is not like I have solved anything, or cleaned up a whole beach. I am more just showing another way of doing things". Sumari is linking his usage of plastic as a concept and symbolic value, to invoke thinking. Sumari is utilizing plastic as a visual element and material to invoke social embedded narratives, aligning with Mirzoeff's (1999) argument for the social relations embedded in visual elements. Sumari appropriates plastic as a medium that is handled and used in everyday life in order to make his viewers question their own narratives on plastic, and the social embedded discursive narratives that are visually present. Even though Sumari's practice of using discarded or found material is partly the result of pursuing a sustainable practice, it is also part of the reality that as an artist you often have to make the meager fiscal means stretch as far as possible.

Self-inquiry and reflection on the role as an artist is brought up by Nakiito, who says that being environmentally engaged and sustainable in her practice is inherently bound with her labor; being sustainable is not only concerned with ecological sustainability and the materiality of her art, it also involves using her work as time for reflection and a form of therapy. She goes on to explain this is a part of her being an activist, in terms of the way she reflects on time in relation to her labor, and what it means to deconstruct value in relation to other forms of valuation apart from the economies of production and labor within capitalism. Having reached a point of burn out previously in her career, Nakiito is conscious of working with art in a way that engages time outside of her control, and she makes a statement against the idea of constant performance and productivity:

It is so much about productivity, one 'should' produce a lot, be effective and find methods and tools to make our practice and our lives more effective. In some ways it is great, but it is destructive in so many ways [ecologically and labor]. That is why it is fruitful for me to work with a process that cannot be made quicker or more productive. The coloring process [of her fabrics] cannot be accelerated and I cannot control the outcome.

When discussing her reflections on ecological sustainability and how she relates it to her labor practices she states: “It has to be about deconstructing the ideas of full control. The process helps me, as I cannot control it, the result will be what it is and I have to reconcile with it”. Nakiito's process therefore centers around the 'position of contradiction' as posed by Luke (1992). In her practice, Nakiito is actively trying to disassociate herself from the hyperecology of the unsustainable ideas of production, value and effectiveness of neoliberal capitalism, by reconciling with the natural processes of her materials that are outside of her control. Instead seeing her practice as engaging with slow, low-impact ideals and production whilst still acknowledging her gains from technological methods and practices.

Engaging with environmental themes and sustainability is approached by the artists as shown in the first chapter in both material and concept. The artists are shown here engaged with sustainability as a practice in self-inquiry and reflection on their labor and how they approach their practice as a whole. Negotiating their own practice in relation to the art worlds and the artist's struggle with conflicting emotions in how the artists sustain themselves financially and acknowledging that while they are

resisting and actively trying to work outside of the neoliberal art worlds, they also actors re-producing the systems they are criticizing.

### **7. 2. 2 ARTISTIC PRACTICE AS RESEARCH**

The division between fine arts and science through Western philosophy can historically be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Age of Enlightenment, stemming from Kant's 'art's or art's sake', being the valuation of art was only supposed to be tied to its aesthetic values. Artists often borrowing scientific tools, from maps to scientific data and knowledge (Blanc and Benish 2017). Linking art as research, Sumari comments on the popularization of narrating your art as a form of research:

it has really taken off within the last 10-15 years, almost turned into a joke of an artist having to do 'research' in a topic, as another form of valuing the art and add weight to it. Using a more scientific language is often relevant and useful [...] the work of an artist shares a lot of similarities with the work of an academic researcher, similar processes [...] because art is a form of research

Braun's (2015) argument that art is a way of 'redistribution' of knowledge production connects with the idea of artists as actors within larger bodies of explorative research. Sumari phrases this as research 'adding weight' to art, and thus formulating its suitability to engage in political and social spaces outside of art and its aesthetic values, as part of a larger discourse of knowledge production. Reflecting on art as research aligns with Fernandez-Cavada's responses, when she similarly expresses how her work has functions reminiscent of research:

I was interested not only in the more sociological problem, which is not really my field, but more the to images to it, how I could think and reflect around it. So it's more like the social science research that is behind it that give background for me. But it is tools that I use not really from the perspective of social science research because I'm still working from the art field.



Figure 7. *Just and idle question, while away the summer* (2014-2015) Helena Fernandez-Cavada (Courtesy of the artist)

Similarly to Sumari's reflections on the research qualities of art, Fernandez-Cavada argues for art as a form of research, but does so with the theoretical tools of social science. Fernandez-Cavada travelled from Mexico City to Malmö eight years ago and through a residency at Inter Arts Center (IAC), an artistic research platform that is part of the faculty of Fine and Performing Arts at Lund University, she started the research of what would become *Just and idle question, while away the summer* (2014-2015). In relation to *Just and idle question, while away the summer* (2014-2015). Fernandez-Cavada writes that her “research and artistic praxis is about our conception of time, and particularly in relation to value and purpose” (Fernandez-Cavada n.d.). The piece questions narratives and ideologies circulating around the ways that we value labor and time in the context of the socio-ecological ramifications of urbanization in the neighborhood of Limhamn in Malmö. With *Just and idle question, while away the*



*summer*, Fernandez-Cavada offers a space for reflection and critique on the continuing neoliberal capitalistic system of valuing time in relation to productivity and labor for profit, situating it in the rapidly gentrifying area of Limhamn. When discussing her project Fernandez-Cavada explains that she often works across mediums as part of her process: “I work with many different mediums I will say and I'm quite interested in the social/political environment and it is a very grounding locality.” Like a kaleidoscope, she oscillates back and forth between a global and local perspective and vision:

You understand the global by looking a lot of local aspects of everything. [...] But I think all the processes are kind of similar somehow, but I was more interested in like how this affects the personal life of each person.

*Just and idle question, while away the summer* is a mixed media project, with recorded interviews, illustrations on the walls as well as large scale illustrations on the gallery floor of herself sleeping and resting. Researching this project Fernandez-Cavada conducted interviews with workers from the cement factory but also civil servants and planners in Malmö municipality. Limhamn area is not alone in its history as a gentrified urban area that was previously used as a labor intense industrial area. Where in the past, thousands of people were employed in industries situated in the harbor area, the increasing global production chain has led to the outsourcing of a once prosperous cement factory, leaving hundreds of workers unemployed. Limhamn is now a rapidly growing housing area, with new apartment complexes, that are attractive due to the area's modern architecture and the luxury of its ocean view. Fernandez-Cavada researches the socio-ecological effects of this urbanization and gentrification through the portraits of the individual workers, whose labor no longer serves its purpose in the area. Their labor made the area of Limhamn redundant, transforming it from being the cement factory to what Fernandez-Cavada calls a “housing factory” (its new project of creating a residential area has been ongoing for more than twenty years). The neighborhood notably lacks cultural hubs and intentional public spaces, as its sole focus is on being a residential area for those who can afford it. From Braun's (2015) perspective of utilizing art, Fernandez-Cavada's artistic project embraces a political ecological analytical framework to engage in criticism of how the gentrification of Limhamn lacks both environmental sustainability and fails to promote social and cultural sustainability.

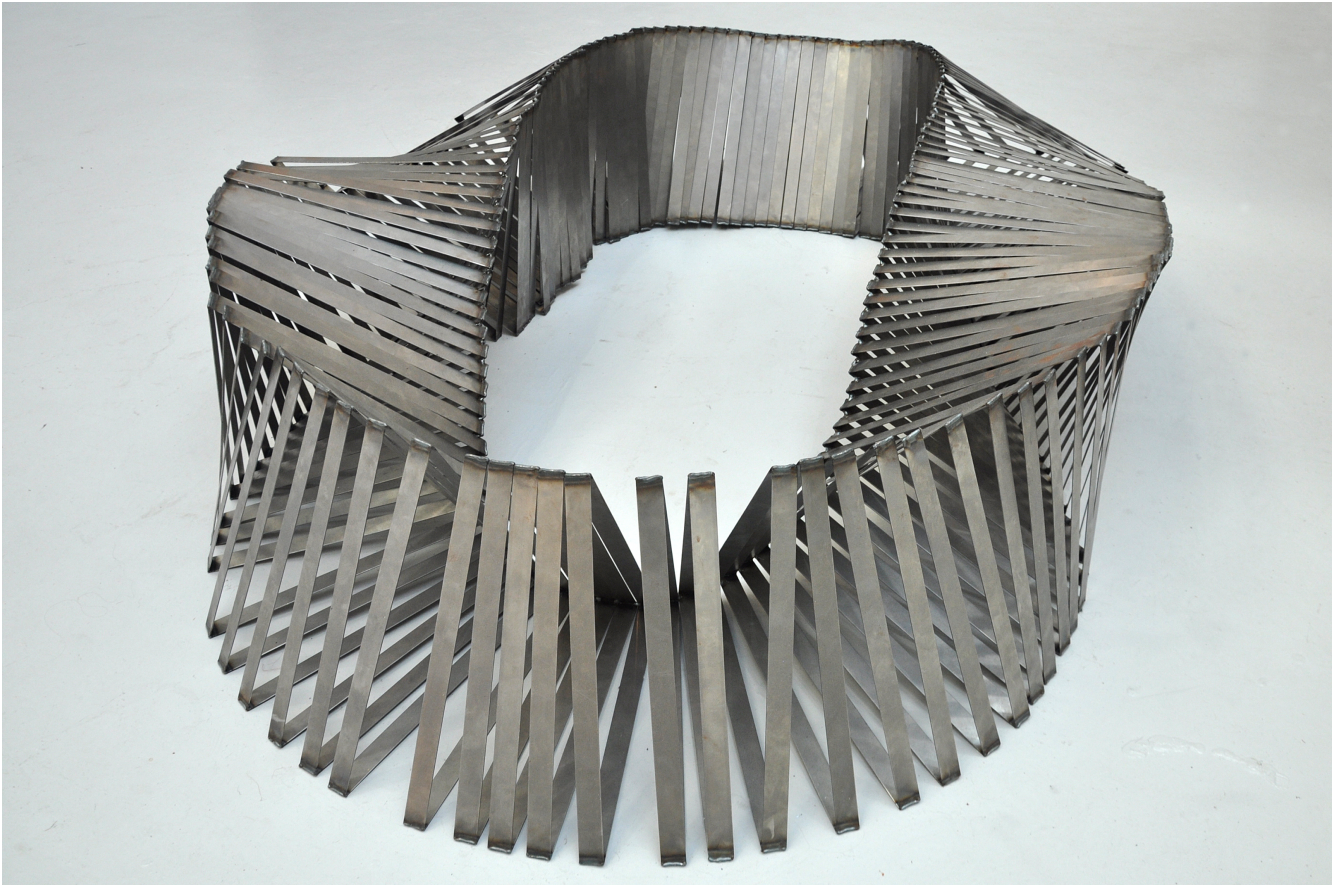


Figure 8. *More often than not, I await a disturbance* (2017) Sofia Zwahlen (Courtesy of the artist)

Zwahlen initially began an academic path within environmental studies, but quickly decided to shift her focus towards more artistic endeavors. However, the question of how to understand environmental issues and how to actively work for a more just society remains a focal point, as Zwahlen aspires “to make sense of knowledge and the world” through her short academic path and as well in her artistry. This has led her to be a part of exhibitions that crosses the field of natural sciences and art (the latest of which is the upcoming exhibition 'Heath/Energy', which has been postponed due to COVID-19) that combines architecture, environmental science and art. Engaging with this combination aligns with Braun's (2015) ideas of the current path of political ecology where engaging art in order to build new critical and experimental bodies of research, in order to invoke other forms of thinking and knowledge (2015). Zwahlen's piece *More often than not, I await a disturbance* (2017) is an interpretation and physical portrayal of an ecosystem. When speaking about the piece, Zwahlen explains that it embodies the idea of changes, disruptions and loops, and both its form and concept continue to circle back in her

thinking:

Primarily I was thinking of disruptions, how systems can rebound back to its loop or adapt and create new phases. It goes back to humanity for me, how we live and repeat our narratives and our choices, with possibility or risks of change. [...] I want to illustrate or translate phenomenon in order to understand it, through art it [science and research] becomes more approachable for me

Art became a way for her to reshape, transform and make tangible her questions in order to open paths towards their answers. The metallic curvature that loops together in abstract forms enables her to imagine new circular forms to the questions she is asking, and rather than providing answers, these new forms assist in reframing the questions altogether. This draws on the idea of utilizing art as a medium of communication, in order to “draw attention to hidden environmental issues” (Blanc and Benish 2017, 132). By using the idea of the 'system', Zwahlen links naturally occurring ecosystems to socially constructed discourses, to explore how we understand natural occurrences outside of the human perception. By displaying her interpretation of her knowledge and thought process, Zwahlen encourages the viewer to use their imagination to question the status quo of our current systems.

The process of creating art is noted by artists, is similar to the process of academic research, and in certain forums the idea of narrating your art as a form of research adds weight to its process. Artistic research is a way to study a field and finding knowledge and understanding is a key part in the intention of their process.

### **7.3 CHAPTER III: COMMODIFYING CHANGE**

In this chapter I continue the analysis of the findings of themes recurring in how the artists are reflecting on their role as instigators of change, their position as civil actors in society and how this relates to the viewers of their art. Then, I expand on the analysis and discussion of engaging with the relationship between artists and artworks; the struggle of negotiating the balance between maintaining sustainable artistic practice while necessarily existing within the capitalist system discussed in the previous two chapters. Here I consider the question of what happens to an artwork once it leaves the

possession of the artist and how the meaning and purpose of the artwork is interpreted, influenced and transformed by new, often contradictory, contexts and viewers.

### **7.3.1 *THE VIEWER***

The communicative capabilities of art, and the relationship between artist, artwork and viewer depend on the multiple layers of social relations and contexts. How viewers are responding both short-term and long-term to environmentally engaged art has been a focal point of recent research, specifically in relation to the ways art can communicate changing attitudes, knowledge and, by extension, long-term change (Doll and Wright 2019).

Although art and its institutions are continuing to be more easily accessible to those with fiscal means, this limited access tends towards a certain cultural and educational capital and, in turn, reproduces a hierarchal and elitist practice (Sholette 2010). The problematic hierarchies and elitism of the art world, as identified by Sholette (2010), are concerns expressed by the artists interviewed for this project as well, especially when reflecting on possible viewers of their own and other environmentally engaged art. This aligns with Harrysson's reflections on when posed the question of who environmentally engaged art is intended for, Harrysson reflects on what she perceives as an unnecessary disconnect between being able to be communicative whilst also engaging with the political and that it is "often seen as water and oil". Harrysson suggests that artists are often afraid of being seen as 'folksy' or affable by addressing a larger mass of viewers when he identifies a problematic disconnect between hierarchal exclusionary practices around the portrayal of environmentally and socially engaged art with a communicative intention. Harrysson is pointing to the exclusionary practices common in the art world, a phenomenon that Sholette (2010) also locates in her discussion of how the cultural hierarchy of the neoliberal capitalist art world has created an environment of complex art that often requires a high degree of cultural knowledge and experience that is limited to most. It becomes a discouraging idea of access, Harrysson laments, with over-complicated narratives that even she, as a well-educated and practicing artist, does not fully comprehend, "not even I understand half the artworks sometimes". This is partly to do with the subjective nature of art as a highly individualized experience as argued by Mirzoeff (1999) and Rose (2001), but Harrysson is primarily concerned about the problem of art's communicative and transformative purpose, which makes her ask the question: who the art is for?

As Foster, Mäkelä and Martusewicz (2018) argue, “Artists’ explorations initiate multiple sensibilities, not just rational but also sensory, emotional, ethical and aesthetic; therefore, art can serve as a persuasive way to challenge the overpowering effects of rationalism and its associated value hierarchies” (2018, 6). The multilayered processes of art- and meaning-making are entangled with each other and can be appreciated in several forms of enjoyment and experience. However, in order for viewers to engage with the 'multiple sensibilities' of art engagement, it is important to identify that the process is neither objective nor homogenous, as visual information reception is embedded in previous knowledge and identities (Rose 2001). When it comes to the idea of direct transformative power, Løvaasen is apprehensive of this kind of reasoning. She explains that for her, the idea of creating awareness is not meant for our current time, and its interpretation is in the hands of our future generations. Viewing her art as part of the history of our time, she continues to expand on her belief that art is meant to be contextualized and reflected upon for future generations: “You do not create change for the perspective of your own time, that perspective can only future generations hold”. Løvaasen aspires to make sense of our time, worries and fears, though the scope of its understanding can only be claimed by its future viewers – whom she cannot control. For Zwahlen when reflecting on her and potential viewers, she links it to the present time but rather as a experiencing hopefulness rather than direct change:

Art is, for me, connected to hope, and it is also so much anchored to the present, how it is connected to well-being and cherishing the present. For me art and also creating art, seeing and experiencing it can make you land a little more in yourself and then make you see the outside of yourself

These assertions represent a counterpoint to the now popularized idea of art’s responsibility to create awareness of current events, as is often seen as a vital part of artistic practice (Doll and Wright 2019: Foster, Mäkelä and Martusewicz 2018). This resonates with Sutherland and Krzys Acord (2007) who argue that art is a 'relational activity', and as Mirzoeff (1999) explains in relation to visuality, the sensibilities are engaged with the social and cultural knowledges of the viewer. The concept of visuality aligns with Sumari's ideas on engaging with the viewer as more interesting outside of the 'white cube' of the gallery space:

...the white cube is exclusionary in so many ways, and I am more interested in how art

takes form in the public spaces. Having your sculptures be social makes its more about the meeting between artwork and viewer, and it is the viewer who constructs the meaning making.

He continues to share how some of his other pieces in the series *the ones who got away ate their way out* have, in his words, “their own life outside of my control”, as they are placed in different parts of Malmö (one, for example, has ended up in an ocean pool by the Malmö harbor). In regards to ideas of visibility, on how individual knowledges and identity construct how an artwork is seen (Rose 2001; Mirzoeff 1999), Sumari relies on the viewer to create meaning, the artworks sparking curiosity in the viewers.

Museums and galleries are important institutions for the social relationships and knowledge production that art worlds are based upon, and for an artist to gain access to exhibit in museum spaces also means gaining access to art interested audiences and further endorsements, both fiscal and relational (Lee 2012). In *I still live in water*, Haugen has also battled with these concerns, questioning practices in public spaces versus art institutions such as museum and galleries. For Haugen too, it is important to bring the practice outside of the setting of a museum and the white cube of exhibition spaces: he is interested in the connections that can be made by engaging with people who may not have been exposed to art within museum spaces. As he states, engaging with viewers within the space of a classic exhibition “often brings the same people that already have that frame of mind. What changes does that make?”. Here Haugen is expressing a sense of skepticism about a system of art that these artists and visitors are re-producing; his question points to the idea that if art is going to be accessible to a more general audience, it is important that art is allowed and encouraged in public spaces. Applying for funding and endorsement to have public performances is not an easy project, Haugen explains, an experience that he finds discouraging at times. He states that municipalities and other institutions often have a criterion of durability when allowing and funding public art projects, often making it difficult to gain support for temporal performances of *I still live in water*. Haugen attempts to rationalize this criterion as the institutions wanting the art-experience to be “worth the money”, but he also believes that “there is more to public art than bronze statues” – a clarification he makes with a sense of humor. Haugen’s frustration about how public art is tended to be valued in relation to its longevity and ornamental properties aligns with Martin's (2007) argument that the commodification of art, rather than

promoting artistic ideas outside of the economic valuation of its worth, rests upon ideas of exchange and value (2007). What Haugen is reflecting on here is again a resistance from institutions towards art that may not be deemed durable for longer period of times and thus not profitable.

The idea of art instigating change with its viewers and audience relies on an pre-conditioned idea of function of the relational activity between artist, the artwork and its viewers. The artists are hesitant to the kind of thinking, posing it as the commodification of change, the capability of transformation does not lie within the artwork, but how the viewer responds to it. Whilst agreeing that art has the capabilities of reflection and embracing new ways of thinking and knowing, the artists are pointing to how that relies in the perception of the viewers, a connection that simply cannot be assumed to happen. The artist points to how institutions in different ways attempt to valorize this embedded social relation inherent, in what artwork they chose to support and how it is used in discourses of direct change and profitability of art that the artists does not identify with.

### ***7. 3. 2 INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF ART***

When discussing the possibilities of art as an instigator of change, Sumari recalls being confronted by the idea on several occasions throughout his career. Each time, his own reflections on the effects, purpose and end goal of his artistic practice have shifted. Sumari describes this as the "instrumentalization of art", where art is being commodified to fit a desire of capital accumulation or serving other social or political purposes. Sumari's reflection points to art as a social product and idea, stating: "Art cannot be placed in a container, for better or worse". What Sumari is emphasizing here, resonates with Walker (2004) on the social implications of art experiences and that art is not created or experienced in a vacuum outside of social constructs, and it too can carry complexities and contradictions, as well as engaging with plural, simultaneous discourses. Ihrman points this out too, in relation to how certain artworks of hers have been situated within exhibitions and resituated in discussions that are not from her perspective:

Regarding nature, it is recently that I have been invited to these kind of context, about the issues were facing in our times. In one way I can see why my art fits that frame, that I have a way of relating to landscape, nature and animals as when I lacked humans, as if they were humans. A sense of belonging. [...] The way the art world is handling it, yes it is incredibly important questions that you cannot forget, but I feel that since it is turns

such a heavy focus on me using nature and animals, it only reaches a superficial understanding.

When discussing art's potential to instigate change as a communication tool, it is important to acknowledge that artworks are only partly informed by the artist themselves, and are often entrenched in multifaceted contexts and discursive narratives beyond the artist's control. Purpose, meaning and message are ambiguous terms that are common when discussing artwork and artistic practices.

When posed the question of whether or not art has the potential to create opportunities to instigate change or communicate knowledge, Ihrman expresses a sense of skepticism and conflicting ideas. Even so, Ihrman understands the sentiment behind it: "I understand why someone turns to art to find answers to questions that do not have answers yet; it is in the nature of art to search and move towards something not existing yet". Fernandez-Cavada believes her art instigates "very little" change, and she problematizes occasions where there has been practices of commodification of her art in social work and gentrification projects as part of sustainability plans:

...in relation to commodifying social change, it's a really difficult question, because of course we are aware of how institutions and public institutions use artists to process investigation or they have this project in areas they deem economically depressed and they use artists and that is something that has to be negotiated and you have to be very aware. You have to be very aware and negotiate your position. How do you engage in this and how you may contribute to these processes? I think if anything it is more related to the process of experiences than transforming, because I cannot transform.

What Fernandez-Cavada is pointing out, is a continuing self-inquiry into what is at stake in the situations in which her art is being displayed and the way that she participates in those stakes. She goes on to recount a direct experience of her art becoming part of a problematic commodification and participating in the gentrification of Mexico City:

I was doing an exhibition in Mexico City and a magazine wanted to release this huge article about artists in the city center, contributing with different discourses and coming from all around the world. But when I saw it, I asked them to pull I out, because it was really contributing to the gentrification of the city. I never got the magazine...

Fernandez-Cavada notes projects that she has been asked to be a part of that she has turned down, and



others that she has asked to withdraw from, as her art was instrumentalized in manners that did not align with her values. Largely these examples include interviews and projects in socio-economic areas with a problematic gentrification agenda.

Having to negotiate how their art is being utilized and narrated to suit a certain perspective is something Ihrman has experienced as well. She was asked to participate in the Nordic wing of the Venice Biennale in 2019 (one of the largest and most long running art biennales, that first came 1895 and is today a multi-million dollar event that attracts tourists from all over the world). It is worth noting that in 2019, the Biennale's budget was over 13 million euros and attracted over 600,000 visitors (Morris 2019). Both Ihrman and her piece *A great seaweed day* (2018-19) were heavily promoted during the biennale as a reflection of climate change and human-nature relations:

What questions is this piece supposed to communicate? It did not really feel anchored, I felt hesitant about the context and what it really wanted to accomplish, what my work became and for whom and for what purpose. These are really relevant questions. In the Biennale context it is problematic in so many ways, regarding sustainability, traveling and such and it feels hard to keep the credibility in that kind of context. But I still think it is more important to try than not...

The growth of the art market in general has spurred a narrative of internationality, with global exhibitions making world tours and artists traveling together with their works for the construction, and following interviews. It is a global art market that invites to more art-inspired tourism and traveling to experience art on location (Drabble 2019). All that is entailed by the production and consumption of not only environmentally engaged art, but the art world in general, has created further degradation and pollution rather than creating awareness. Ihrman's hesitation can be understood through Drabble's (2019) problematization of the manufacturing of environmentally engaged art to serve the purposes of capitalism and 'art washing' (the process of utilizing art to narrate systems and production more positively without engaging in transformative practices). This is also something that Lee (2012) points out as part of producing globalization, where the art Biennale is heavily influenced by "nation branding [...]" in which the relationship between culture and tourism becomes paramount" (Lee 2012, 13). Ihrman reflects on how her work is being framed within a larger event of the art world, garnering interest for her work, but that this also means she has to negotiate how her work is being utilized and discursively narrated in ways she does feel present her own practice.

Zwahlen questions the importance of producing clear or direct answers in environmentally engaged art, as she aspires to do the opposite: “I like when it is just allowed to be diffuse, it should not have to be literal in order for it to matter or be understood”. Similarly, Ihrman notes that she is “not here to provide answers”, however, she acknowledges the growing expectation that art produce answers to environmental questions as part of its valuation. When reflecting further, Ihrman continues: “By creating something new, you are starting from a line of not knowing how it will end. Art can therefore take on questions without looking for resolution at its end, one can embrace something unsolvable and simple dare to exist there”. What Ihrman is putting as purpose is creating spaces outside of current structures that creates imaginaries for potential realities existing out of the norms, in terms of understanding and valuation outside of our current capitalistic neoliberal reality she is living and sustaining within. Attempts of practices that has end goals of providing answers or a clear purpose, Sumari think of as “incredibly boring”:

In the best of cases, can art effect by offering new thinking and perspectives, but that should not have to be necessary as condition of the artworks right of being. In the best cases, it may happen but to have it as the main purpose it gets too political in the sense that it is attempted to change for a purpose, transformed into education or just entertainment.

The overlapping concerns expressed by Zwahlen, Ihrman and Sumari in their reflections fall within what Sholette (2010) identifies as the neoliberal capitalist structures that neutralize art to fit within the a neoliberal capitalist form of valuation. The importance of art as meaningful in both communities and for individuals is still of vital importance; however, the artists object to its meaning being instrumentalized to have direct effects that can be valued and monetized.

Haugen is more hopeful in his reflections on art in terms of invoking transformative powers, and reflects on how *I still live in water* has been used as a pedagogical tool, aligning with Saari (2018) and Foster, Mäkelä and Martusewicz (2018) on the beneficial qualities of art as a tool for teaching. When *I still live in water* was first exhibited as Tomelilla art center, the work was leased by the art center as part of their focus on water in order to create a pedagogical space and the art as tools of communication

and learning: “they really tried to embrace the concept of water and use it as a pedagogical tool [...] it brought a lot of school classes and kids to the exhibition...” The use of their project as an educational tool was not the intention of either Haugen or Konrad when beginning *I still live in water*, but they have since embraced the idea, hoping their work can continue to grow in this manner in other contexts.

The artists express a sense reluctance about the instrumentalization of art, and how they have had to reconcile their artworks being appropriated in discursive narratives that they themselves do not identify with in their practices or pieces. The phenomenon of 'art washing', in which art is utilized to fit a purpose of promoting engagements within neoliberal capitalistic discourses, is a complex source of internal conflict for the artists, as they cannot always discern beforehand how their art will be utilized and narrated once it is outside of their control (such as appropriation for gentrification projects and corporate art events). However, appropriating art for pedagogical purposes and education is viewed as favorable, especially by Haugen. This potential value, that challenges the neoliberal capitalistic ideas of economic worth, links to the artists ideas about art's transformative possibilities - especially in the form of creating space not to provide answers, but as places of relief and curiosity, places that embrace reflection and new ways of thinking.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

In recent years, art has garnered more attention in the studies of environmental issues as a potential catalyst for change, and thus the role of the artist has transformed to represent an actor that promotes and instigates sustainable change. Throughout this thesis, I have explored the diverse forms of artistic practices relating to environmentally engaged art and considered the artists' position as a civil actor and catalyzer in society by studying artists living and working within Malmö, Sweden. This study is in no way an exhaustive study of the field, nor has it aimed to form knowledge that can be generalized about the positionality of all artists as actors in society. However, this thesis has provided a critical perspective on the contradicting roles of the artist, from reflecting upon socio-ecological issues to problematizing their art and practices being coopted by neoliberal capitalist forms of valuation and instrumentalization. This thesis has also contributed to the study of artists' reflections on their roles within political ecology research. The multilayered ideas of engaging with environmental art and political research are an understudied area that lies at the cross-section of art sociology and human ecology, and this thesis is an important contribution to this emerging interdisciplinary field.

This thesis began by posing questions about how the artists reflect on socio-ecological themes within their artistic practices and how these themes are embedded within their chosen art works. This thesis has also sought to explore how artists reflect on their potential roles as civil actors within society. In response to the first and second questions, through interviews and analysis of their respective artworks, I considered the various ways that the artists approach environmentally engaged themes in their art through discourse analysis. I found that the artists engage with such themes in three different areas: material, concept, and practice. Throughout the interviews, the artists reflected on environmentally engaged themes in the material usage of their art, in terms of creating balance between what they deem to be harmful to the environment or extractive and how this relates to their conceptual ideas. The artists engage with concepts on themes relating to political ecology, linking socio-political, economic, and environmental issues, reflecting on present times and human-nature relations. This approach highlights the multilayered nature of the artists' reflections on their engagement with environmental themes while attempting to balance the sustainability of material and negotiating their own roles in re-producing and negotiating being a part of the neoliberal and capitalist structures of the art worlds they are criticizing. Apart from working with socio-ecological themes in their artwork, the main findings of the analysis show that the concept of sustainability in connection to their artistic practices creates links between environmental, social, and economic aspects of sustainability.

Lastly, in response to the final research question, I have discussed how the artists approach the roles of researcher and being civil actors in society in how they see their art as a potential instigator of change. Throughout the interviews, concerns emerged around how their art has been instrumentalized for such purposes by other actors and institutions than themselves. Several artists recalled situations in which their art has been instrumentalized to fit a certain purpose and how their situation as artists is utilized as part of commodifying change. However, the artists expressed conflicting positions on whether art can create change. This thesis concludes that although the artists do see their art as being involved in criticism of contemporary unjust societal structures and creating societal change, they do not feel that their ideas fit within the frame of neoliberal forms of economic valuation. As emphasized by some of the artists, they reflect on conflicting positionalities, where environmentally and socially engaged art is being coopted by capitalistic and unjust structures that they themselves are consciously trying to disassociate from (that being forums such as exhibitions and political spaces), whilst still recognizing

the artist's own role in reproducing these structures. This is further problematized by the idea of art as an instigator of change, where art is seen as a way of creating new avenues of curiosity and exploration, adverse to the discursive narrative of art as providing answers or immediate change.

By using theoretical and analytical frameworks drawn from human ecology and art sociology, I argue that the artists are engaging with an analytical framework of political ecology through self-inquiry and embracing forms of artistic research. The artists were reflecting upon how to negotiate their roles situated within art worlds and enterprise culture as theorized by Becker (1982), Lee (2012) and Sholette (2010) that they admitted to being actively a part of, whilst still trying to disengage themselves from. Identifying their complex roles within the art worlds brings us to the artists reflection on their role as a political actor. This analysis is informed by Hertmans (2011), Luke (1992) and Sholette (2010) who discuss the ambiguous roles of the artist, from engaging in social and environmental criticism, whilst still resisting the perceived benefits of neoliberal capitalism in forms of instrumentalization of art and monetized valuation of their artistic work. Thus, this thesis has contributed to the study of the multilayered narratives of the role of the artist and their art, laying a foundation for further studies of environmental, social and economic sustainability in the art worlds and beyond. The implementation of analytical frameworks from political ecology revealed that art and artists engagement with the overlapping forums of science and politics creates conflicting narratives – from being a critical voice for systems change, to being coopted by neoliberal capitalist agendas. The true role of art, as Ihrman states, is to be “an act of resistance” that creates spaces for critical thinking that allow for new processes to form. This thesis argues that allowing artists to create and invite us into these spaces is vital to the creation of a world that understands and appreciates other forms of value beyond the economic.

## 9. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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## 10. APPENDIX 1

### GALLERIES

Breadfield

Delfi



Formargruppen  
Form/Design Center  
Galleri 21  
Galleri Final  
Galleri Format  
Galleri Leger Galleri CC  
Galleri Lohme  
Galleri Ping-Pong  
Galleri Rostrum  
Galleri Sagoy  
Galleri Slätten  
Galleri S:t Getrud  
KHM Gallery (Malmö Art Academy own gallery)  
KRETS  
Makeriet  
Textiltryck i Malmö  
OBRA  
Signal – Center for Contemporary Art  
Svenska Konstgalleriet

*MOVEMENTS FOR ART PROMOTION*

Skånes konstförening  
Inter Arts Center  
Skåne konstfrämjande  
Konstitutet

*ARTIST COLLECTIVES*

Ateljéföreningen 125  
Ateljéförening Addo  
Borrgatans Ateljéförening  
Bunkern  
Celsius  
CirkulationsCentralen  
Drift  
FRANK Gallery & Studios  
Gatukonstoret  
Keramisk form  
Kollektivet Prekariatet aka Palatset  
REHAB Kultur  
Sulfur  
Sämjan  
Vista

*MUSEUMS*

Malmö konsthall  
Rörelsernas museum

*ART EVENTS*  
Open Art Studios  
Gallery Night of Malmö

## **11. APPENDIX II**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

How do you reflect on the idea of inspiration, and where/how do you get/create inspiration?

What do you think of arts capabilities of societal change?

What is your reflections on linking your artistic practice to themes of socio-ecological and political issues?

How do you relate to socio-ecological themes and sustainability in your own practice?

How do you relate to the idea of art as research?

Do you relate your artistic practice to activism?