WHAT HAPPENS ON EARTH STAYS ON EARTH

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ABSTRACT

In this project I look at our relationship to Nature and how it is expressed in western material culture. I propose that this relationship is ambivalent and paradoxical and seek means to make this evident. I look to 18th century gardens for a historical and cultural context and to Rene Descartes for an explanation as to how this ambivalence came to be. This is the work of someone who thinks too much, makes cynical and wide sweeping assumptions about human behavior and has access to a workshop 7 days a week for 2 years.
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There is an indecision or duality in how we position ourselves relative to Nature that I find very interesting. On one hand, we distance ourselves as much as possible. We want to be outside of or above Nature, free to dissect, curate and consume it with a clear conscience and without consequences for our own existence. On the other hand, we have an urge to be a part of it, we want to be in it and to feel it in us.

Nature is simultaneously the most beautiful and horrifying thing we know.

There is potential in the collision between these two perspectives and I find this especially interesting against the backdrop of environmental issues like global warming and the looming concept of the Anthropocene.

My main research question is:

What is our relationship to Nature, how is it expressed in western culture and how does that relate to my craft-based practice?

I started out looking at the potted plant as a representation of this relationship. Thinking of why we keep them I realise there is a much bigger version of this and as a point of departure I’ve chosen the garden. Specifically, 18th century European gardens as they for me represent an idealisation. The garden is to me a practical example and more importantly a physical manifestation of our desire towards Nature as well as our need to control it.

We go to extreme lengths to create and curate a place that reminds us of what is beyond the walls, but we keep it tidy and clean so that it is pleasant to both look at and be in.

Looking within the garden, for something more distinct and related to craft and material culture, I found the folly. A garden folly is a building purely constructed for decoration but often refers to function or purpose through its appearance. These seemingly pointless elements of 18th century gardens often took the form of sham ruins, Chinese pagodas or Roman and Greek temples.

In The Observation I will tell the story of where the idea for this project originated.

In What is Nature to Us? I explore our dualistic view of nature and how it might have come to be.

In New ways to make old things I walk you through my own thoughts about how and why I make the things that I do and make an attempt to contextualize my work in relation to history, craft and art.

In To put a Cap on It I conclude the paper with some brief thoughts I carry with me in the face of my final exam.
It was a beautiful sunny day.

As I was sitting in Galärparken, one of the large park areas in Stockholm, I watched as a man and a woman were attempting to have a lovely day in the green outdoors. They were all geared up in Fjällräven with camping backpacks, vests, trekking boots, the whole shebang.

Not very exciting you might say, but what sparked my curiosity and later would steer me towards my main research question is the farce that played out between this couple and the Nature they coveted.

They carefully picked out just the right spot to lay down their blanket and started unpacking a multitude of plastic containers and utensils. At first it seemed as though they were actually enjoying themselves, and if I can be allowed to interpret their intentions, it was all going according to plan.

The weather was optimal, everything was just as they had pictured it and the park was even perfectly located near the water where some lovely geese were spending their day.

After a while I noticed that the pair had piqued the interest of the geese. The -until now- calm and collected couple became noticeably uncomfortable by this advancement of Nature. As the geese approached them they started shooing lightly, but when the geese were too close for the couple to handle, it ended up with them throwing stuff at the birds. Kind of like warning shots but with bunched up napkins.

Over the next fifteen minutes I watched as a man ate standing up, stomping the ground, shooing and threatening the geese not to come closer, while his partner ate sitting down, protecting her food with her body glancing over her shoulder to see where the birds were.

Their picturesque picnic had turned into a siege and as the fragile facade of their perfect union with Nature was crumbling around them, the couple gathered some of their things, threw most of it on the ground and headed for the closest hot dog stand by the edge of the park and finally, enjoying a civilized meal in a civilized environment, took the tram far away from that hostile place that is Nature.

Opposite: Image 4. Photo of the beacon folly at Stanton Country Park
I want to start off by acknowledging the complexity of a concept such as Nature. Nature with a big N is all encompassing. It is the entirety of existence, the physical universe and everything therein but the normative use of the term Nature refers to that which is not human, or man-made. The plants, the animals and natural forces that surround us. Of course we humans are a part of this, but are most often understood and looked at as a separate category than other natural phenomena. Already at this early stage of definition there is a disconnect between us and the rest of the universe.

It is this very idea that we are somehow different from everything else that is the spark of my investigation of this subject. There is a paradox in our way of understanding and using this term that I feel needs addressing.

During the past two years I’ve been looking for confirmation of an idea that came to mind that day in Galärparken. As I watched the couple flee from the very thing they wanted, the cynic in me ‘realised’ that we don’t like Nature, we only like our idea of what Nature is. When the idea and reality don’t match, we run.

When we think of Nature and specifically Nature in Sweden it is the vast forests, the mountain ranges, the lakes and the archipelagos. Nature is also present in our cities with open green spaces and curated gardens and parks throughout.

We often have a perception of Nature as a vast uncontrollable place that is pristine and primeval. Contrary to this is the fact that 50% natural forests are gone and untouched forests in Sweden are miniscule¹. A study published in the journal PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences) suggests that the unspoiled Nature that we want to believe in is almost entirely gone and has been for millenia².

Here the line between Nature and the man-made is blurred.

If you are walking in the forest in Sweden, you are walking through a factory of sorts. It’s the backbone of our national economy and in addition to being a symbol of something greater than us, something ancient and “natural”, today it is a symbol of resources and wealth.

Nature is dead long live Nature.

The disappearing unspoiled Nature, apart from making our everyday use of the term Nature a bit paradoxical also brings me to the idea of the Anthropocene³, which is a new proposed geological era signified by human impact on earth’s environment, geology and ecosystems.

The idea of humans being the king of the hill in terms of Nature is not really a new one, in the western stage of definition there is a disconnect between us and the rest of the universe. Of course we humans are a part of this, but are most often understood and looked at as a separate category than other natural phenomena. Already at this early stage of definition there is a disconnect between us and the rest of the universe.

The idea-world is the realm of the subject and rational thought. The outer world is measurable and objective and therefore comprehensible for the inner Cogito.

In the podcast Människan och maskinen - eng. Man and the Machine - Per Johansson and Eric Schüldt explore Descartes influence on our relationship to the Machine - Per Johansson and Eric Schüldt. According to Descartes, the Cogito - the thinking subject - paired with the objective way of the rational scientific method and its proposed power to identify an objective truth, creates a dualistic worldview.

On one hand there is the idea world and on the other is the physical world.

Actually, the coming of the Anthropocene doesn’t really mean anything else than putting a time stamp on something we already knew was true. However, in accepting it as a fact we also accept that we as a species are now - for good or for worse - the most powerful force acting upon this planet. As If we needed more reasons to think we were great.

I hereby present this trophy to human kind, we did it, congratulations us!

But this achievement is as hollow as my plaster pillars. This thinking creates that idea of the outer world as a measurable object have inadvertently lead to an indifference towards Nature and an inability so see ourselves as a part of Nature⁴.

This thinking creates that idea of the outer world that I mentioned in the introduction, by separating and categorising existence like this the world becomes something to consume and to measure.

A possible understanding might lie in the idea of the Biophilia Hypothesis. Introduced by Edward O. Wilson, an American biologist and researcher, and popularized in his book Biophilia (1984) where the term is defined as the urge to affiliate with other forms of life⁵. The Biophilia Hypothesis suggests that we have a genetic predisposition to associate with life, or Nature and that it has to do with our drive to survive and procreate. This could in part explain our excessive need to depict Nature as a beautiful and pristine world that is not part of the, in comparison dirty, human machinery.

In 1637 the French philosopher Rene Descartes publishes his Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences or Discourse on the Method. Methodically doubting what we can perceive with our senses, he arrives at the conclusion that the only thing we absolutely cannot doubt is that there is something or someone doing the doubing, and thus coins the term: Cogito, ergo sum – I think therefore I am.

Understanding and securing the foundation of knowledge and the base of the modern scientific method is one of the great breakthroughs of modern philosophy.

Descartes was a big proponent of rationalism. According to Descartes, the Cogito - the thinking subject - paired with the objective way of the rational scientific method and its proposed power to identify an objective truth, creates a dualistic worldview.

In the podcast Människan och maskinen - eng. Man and the Machine - Per Johansson and Eric Schüldt explore Descartes influence on our relationship to the机。“Anthropocent” 3

2. Ecological consequences of human niche construction: Examining long-term anthropogenic shaping of global species distributions’ http://www.pnas.org/content/113/23/6388
4. Podcast, Människan och Maskinen http://svr3.sverigesradio.se/manniskanochmaskinen

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
The Folly & The Fake

18th Century follies were built for adornment or decoration. In the English landscape garden of the 17th and 18th centuries they served to show off the commissioners’ sophistication, power and wealth. Generating a narrative inspired by the paintings of the romantic era. Echoing the virtues of the time. These buildings are intentionally fake in nature. They have no purpose and the cost of making them are disproportionate to their function.

For me they express a desire for another narrative than what Nature in reality provides.
The fakeness in my work and that of the historical folly is the same fakeness that you will find on the Las Vegas Strip, it’s a façade with the purpose to transport you as an observer or visitor to another place and another time. It makes unfounded references to histories and cultures that the builder and or commissioner might never have experienced, ripped from its original context to legitimise and amuse.

Let’s look at the Dunmore pineapple for example, a mix of styles and architectural forms from different times and places. There are Tuscan Pillars and Palladian archways at the entrance. On either side of the entrance there are two low stone structures with small windows seemingly above eye height. And of course the giant pineapple at the top. Describing this to someone who hasn’t seen it this it sounds insane but when you see it, it absolutely makes sense.

What unifies these seemingly random elements of architecture and fruit are that they are all made from the same material. The unified scale and the material legitimize them and makes these forms into a building and stops them from being a collage of different things standing next to each other.

While making my master project my thoughts have gone to the world of scenery and props but also neoclassical and postmodern architecture. Taking advantage of the inherent properties of the material and connecting it to the fakeness I experience in the garden folly.

In my twisted mind, I also connect them to the ceramic tradition of figurines. The Figurine first made its appearance in Europe in the 1700s as a product of the hunt for the recipe for porcelain that was taking place at the time. As small-scale sculptures, often with motifs taken from the rural every day, they were often placed on dinner tables working as conversation starters.

You could look upon the installation that I have built and follies in general as largescale figurines or as conversation pieces. It is made to decorate and to spark conversation, but where some conversation pieces are merely things we look AT my folly is also something to have a conversation IN.

The Work

My installation is made up of a group of pillars that stretch between 1 and 3 meters tall, surrounding a trophy displayed on its own pillar plinth.

Follies were often built in the image of Roman and Greek temples, often in their already ruined form, laying claim to a history that connects to what at the time was considered the peak of civilisation. In my work I have utilised the expression of the technique and the material that I use, I have intentionally kept the rough edges that are created when sledging the plaster and left the imperfections in the surface that have occurred in the process - to enhance the feeling of degradation and decay of the ruined temple.

My pillars are somewhere in between architecture and object, by removing them from their original context they shift from functional pillars to hold up a building into sculptural artworks to hold up my philosophical musings.

The trophy is the embodiment of these musings and the pillar on which it stands is the conceptual foundation.

Even though we know that these pillars were never part of a “real” building, our minds still fill in the gaps and we project the building that was never there and read the imaginary history it holds. Very much like when we accept the dunmore pineapple as something as a matter of course.

Through this my work highlights our dualistic perception of the world, being both objective and subjective at the same time. We see the idea world in the projection we make onto the piece and the physical world when looking at the work itself.
I have never identified primarily as a potter or ceramicist, I usually describe myself as a maker or craftsperson. I am schooled in a studio pottery tradition, and I confess; I have at times romanticised about having a workshop in a barn somewhere making pottery for a living. But there was always something else pulling me away from that picturesque future.

I'm interested in how material can speak and how techniques can connect my practice and what I make to different places and other times.

Starting off my ceramic studies, at Capellagården which is situated in a small village on Öland off the east coast of Sweden, a place that at times feels frozen both literally and in time, I familiarised myself with the big names of ceramic history. The story that most resonated and stuck with me was the one about Josiah Wedgewood and the race for the recipe for porcelain. Before the 18th century, porcelain was only available as a commodity imported from China. European nobility and society's crème de la crème coveted it for its purity, translucency and grace.

It was in Meissen that porcelain was first produced outside of China but I'm more fascinated and inspired by how that race led to the invention of a new ceramic material, very similar to porcelain - Jasperware, which was later used in the most famous of Wedgewood's pottery lines. A silky smooth unglazed coloured in pottery with a sharp finish. These pots have inspired me in many ways, and in my work the colour palette is a kind of love letter to this line of ceramics.

I've also taken to colouring in my materials in a similar fashion instead of covering it with paint, which would be cheaper and easier. Adding a liquid pigment to the water I use when mixing the plaster for my pieces I enhance the voice of the material. The quality that fully colouring in the material adds in contrast to the glazed and painted is that it is the material itself that shines. Adding a layer on top of my work would feel like I'm cheating the material out of its chance to be speak.

For me the story of Wedgewood is one of experimentation, engineering, craftsmanship spiced with a fascination for classical antiquity. These are some of the things that also have come to define my practice. I am inspired by contemporary artists like Anton Alvarez who lets the technique control a lot of what comes out in the end. Creating the tool to make the work is just as important as making the finished piece.

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As a maker in a time where it seems everything has already been made I find myself looking for new ways to make old things.
I am always on the lookout for new techniques and ways to work my materials. Over the years I've been doing this I've found that I am a visual learner as well as a big fan of learning by doing — maybe this is a craft specific thing rather than an individual thing, I haven't really looked into it yet. I can easily become so completely caught up in a technique that it has me spending hour after hour on YouTube, soaking up as much information and inspiration as I can to later try to replicate it in the workshop. YouTube is my library giving me an endless stream of connections, similar to how I make connections in my work and my thinking. This usually results in a sort of Frankensteinish mashup of different styles and methods of working.

As an example, in this project I have been working with the technique of sledging plaster, traditionally used for making coving and mouldings for interior decoration. Nowadays this technique is most often used when restoring older buildings by trained carpenters and very often site-specific. Today covings and trim are more often made in either wood or plastic and bought by the meter and this craft technique is slowly becoming obsolete outside of niche markets.

During my research into the world of sledging I came across the London based design duo Studio Glithero8. In one of their projects called Running Mould they use the same basic technique of sledging, but they have worked in situ. A pivot is set up in the middle of a space. By connecting their profile sledge to the pivot, they are able to create a circular extrusion that later functions as a bench the pivot is left in the center of the piece as a reminder of what happened and how. This way of picking up elements of architecture and manifesting process and material in a site-specific work is a method that I am interested in working with in the future.

In the process of sledging, the maker pulls a profile through the plaster creating an extruded form. Normally the profile is hand sawed out of sheet metal but as I am a tech nerd, after I tried my hand at doing it the old way, I used a 3d modelling software to make sure I got the profile just the way I wanted it and then laser cut it out of acrylic plastic. This way of doing it allows me to try the profile out in a 3-dimensional setting before cutting into material making sure not to waste any more of the planet than I necessarily need to make this completely useless peace of art 😄.

I've also used lathing or turning where the basic principal is the same but the profile is used together with a spinning wheel to create circular extrusions.

Mixing older techniques with new technology is one of my favourite ways of working. Not only because it often leads to something new, but it is also a method for me to learn new and different things that might not have come up in a more traditionally disciplined ceramic practice.

An example of mixing in new technology into a traditionally bound field is the maker/designer/artist Michael Eden, he is a potter who discovered additive manufacturing and 3d printing and shifted his practice from throwing pots to expanding what craft can be.

“…life at the beginning of the 21st century has furnished makers with a wider choice of tools, materials and processes with which to realise ideas and concepts. All have their place, the new does not replace the old; the key is to make appropriate use of them.”9

An old teacher of mine once told my class, when questioning the legitimacy of cast ceramic objects in comparison to the “really handmade”, that craft has always followed industry, and in its wake craft continually expands into something new with every new technology that is applicable to your own field.

This way of thinking allows me the freedom to explore approaches to craft traditionally “not allowed”, I’m not scared of new technology and fearlessly utilise all it can offer to my making. Using machines and technology to serve craft rather than replacing it.

As a result of my fascination with sledging I've recently been working mainly in plaster. In the class hierarchy of materials, in most ceramic workshops, plaster is the working class and plaster has the very special property of being somewhat invisible as a material. It is most often used as a tool to create something in another material through processes such as casting and other mould work. Plaster is also used to mimic other materials such as marble and stone.

For me this makes plaster and the crafts related to it an interesting tool for me to bring up ideas of value, status, fake and realness.

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8 Gustavsberg Art Gallery http://www.gustavsbergkonsthall.se
9 http://www.glithero.com/running-mould
10 http://www.micheal-eden.com/about

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To try and answer my research question: our relationship with nature is complex. This is expressed in a lot of different ways. My thoughts around this actually started with the innocent potted plant which led me to gardens which in turn led me to arrive at the garden folly. The idea of garden folly is kind of like an inversion of the potted plant. With potted plants we presume to take a part of Nature into our homes converting Nature into Culture. The folly is placed in Nature perhaps in the ambition to convert Culture into Nature.

For me going into this project I had own ideas how this relationship plays out. To me it seems obvious that I’m no different than the computer that I am writing this paper on in regard to being part of Nature. Neither are the trees outside my window or the building that I am sitting in. It’s all the same materials held together by the same forces. Nothing is above or before anything else. An answer to the part of my research question regarding how our relationship to nature relates to my craft practice is maybe found here.

My practice revolves very much around material and so it must be very much affected to my relationship to material which is in turn dominated by my ideas about the world I live in. Perhaps my ideas about Nature has played a part in pushing my practice away from traditional pottery into something that more resembles a post-disciplinary craft practice. Or perhaps it is my close relationship to material, that has become manifest through many years of cultivation, that informs my view on the rest of the world.

But the research that I have done has clarified some things and muddled others and I can somewhat comprehend how the normative ideas and perceptions we have of nature can be so contradictory, but in the end there is no one way to look at our existence and through the natural mixing of different philosophies and worldviews that happens in a person’s life it’s hard to carry one clean answer to anything. In a world where everything is considered to be relative everything is everything.

But for me things are the way they are because that’s how it happens to be and it’s just a happy coincidence that one part of this existence evolved into something that could write a paper about a craft project and another part evolved into the atmosphere that supports the first part’s existence.

This paper doesn’t need another tangent so I’m going to stop myself here.

This paper and the project that it is a part of, is one of many strands of thought. So many that - even for me - it’s hard to keep track of them, even harder to connect them in a comprehensible way and in a cohesive exam paper. However, the physical work that I have been doing has always felt very clear, and maybe the installation is what connects all the dots. My making is how I process these ideas, I rely on my installation and the pieces that it consists of to do a lot of the same work that words on paper would. I’ve used the folly as a symbol of meaning and narrative but also as a vehicle for aesthetic choices. However, conveying the history of the folly isn’t as important as what the idea of the folly lets me speak about through my work.

Ultimately what I want the viewer to take with them is a thought about history, culture and nature. How we use them to tell the narratives we want them to. In this case the narrative of us being the conqueror over everything else. The finished pieces tell a story that my words cannot, the actual work or act of making is a big part of how I take in and decompress the ideas that I have. For me the act of making is interwoven with the act of thinking, I make therefore I am.
Image 14. Congratulations Us, We did it!

Image 15. Pillars
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7 Anton Alvarez - www.antonalvarez.com (2018, April 3)


9 www.micheal-eden.com/about (2018, May 4)

IMAGE LIST

Image 1. Detail of Pillar, 2018, Coloured in sledged plaster approx. 25 x 300 cm
Image 2. Detail of Pillar, 2018, Coloured in sledged plaster approx. 25 x 300 cm
Image 3. Front facade of Dunmore Pineapple House, 1761, Stone and stucco, Dimensions Unknown, Dunmore, Scotland, Image from Wikimedia Commons taken by user: giannandrea
Image 4. The beacon folly at Staunton Country Park, 1830, Hampshire, England Image from Wikimedia Commons photo by user: geni
Image 5. Detail of installation, 2018, Coloured in sledged plaster approx. 25 x 100 cm
Image 6. Profile in sheet metal, later to be replaced with the lasercut acrylic plaster, 2018
Image 7. The profile together with the lathe creates a circular extrusion, 2018
Image 8. Installation View, 2018, Coloured in sledged plaster
Image 13. Caspar David Friedrich, Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, 1819, Oil on canvas, 98.4 cm x 74.8 cm, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany, Image from Wikimedia Commons the photographic reproduction was done by user: Cybershot800i
Image 14. Congratulations Us, We did it!, 2018, Plaster and acrylic Paint
Image 15. Pillars, 2018, Coloured in sledged plaster various dimensions