

Organising in the Anthropocene

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David Hilmer Rex and Aslak Aamot Kjærulff are together with Bjarke Hvass Kure and Asger Behncke Jacobsen developing the organisation Diakron (founded in 2012). Diakron is a studio for transdisciplinary research, working-out of Copenhagen. Diakron sets out to explore open-ended organisational structures and action-oriented and aesthetic research methodologies, and to develop inter-organisational collaborations. The studio currently exists as a workspace for two collaborative research projects – Collective Learning Spaces and Organising in the Anthropocene – publishes an online journal, and is collaborating with two universities and an international research network to organise the upcoming conference Networked Urban Mobilities (November 2014).

The following conversation evolved from mutual interests. It represents at once a process of becoming familiar with each other's ideas, finding common ground for collaborations, and anticipating conditions and constraints for activities that are ongoing, or haven't yet begun.

Aslak Aamot Kjærulff

Thinking about climate change raises unfamiliar questions about things like the continuation of life as we know it. The perpetuation of modern development becomes a dubious question rather than a precondition for thought and action. So climate change could be seen as a kind of a climatological manifestation, or a

non-human response, to the ways humans have been rearranging the planet over generations. Climate change becomes one of several entities that start to emerge as large question marks. A social tendency that has been emerging alongside these question marks is the critique of a lot of the institutions that we take for granted today. But this critique hasn't been something that – at least in the mainstream practices of arts and sciences – has necessarily become integrated to what people do every day.

David Hilmer Rex

I think that a lot of people are equipped with critical tools to analyse problems around them. But perhaps there have been a lack of changes in the fundamental narratives around why we think, make, organise, produce, write, and so on, that incorporate large-scale environmental changes. A response to climate change is more something that has been added to a specific set of practices. We have reached a point where new values are about to be explored and experimented with on a wider spectrum. Visual arts have a strong tradition of experimenting with alternative ways of creating meaning, models of subjectivities and reflecting on values. So I tend to see visual art as an experimental laboratory for exploring new modes of engagement and sets of values.

AAK

So relating this to the values regarding environmental problems and climate change, I would say that these have been predominantly coming from representational, research based practices. Such as those of chemical scientists, physicists, astrobiologists, biologists, climatologists, geologists or atmospheric scientists – basically a lot of research traditions that deal with non-human entities, based on observation, measurement

and conceptualisation as their main modes of interaction. A lot of concepts and patterns of meaning are created. They narrate certain clarities about how different processes emerge and change. Maybe said in another way: the understanding of climate change has been based a lot on numbers and statistics and measurements and very little on an actual correlation to human practices. So a lot of what we know about climate change is based on discussions that have been very disembodied, and have been coined in very symbolic, numeric, and statistical languages. These languages have so far had difficulties establishing driving and generative narratives across disciplines and cultures.

DHR

The way in which climate change has been dealt with in the arts is a good example of its inefficacy as an official narrative or discourse. Climate change has largely been experienced as external to us, and maybe for that reason has been dealt with on a representational, symbolic and thematic level within the arts, without substantially changing what an artistic practice could be when faced with such a complex, distributed phenomenon as climate change. The actual way in which art contributes to climate change hasn't been dealt with. Here I'm not thinking of individual art practices, but the whole arts-industrial complex and its infrastructure: museums, art halls, and what goes along with that; the circulation of people, materials, works of art, and everything else that goes into producing and managing that system. All of that is virtually impossible to deal with as a single actor within the system. What is needed as I see it are explorations of the many ways in which aesthetic practices could contribute to collective attempts to tackle climate change. Even though our relationships to climate change might set out as very cognitive representational processes, they could develop into more complex

embedded artistic practices or efforts to create a more distributed awareness of climate change.

AAK

So it might be partly about seeing the liminality and the connections between, not just the creative side of an artistic practice but also the disruptive, regulating or redistributing side, in terms of resources and energy. It's that move beyond just criticising and trying to change social structures, towards trying to embody or practice that critique yourself. That is important, but also difficult, because it almost always carries ambivalences of being both creative and destructive with it. And at the same time, in the last few decades, understandings of the active role of human societies in ecological change have emerged. This opens up for what is coined the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene basically describes a geo-historical transition in the ecological condition of planet earth. From the Holocene – a period with relatively stable climates, surface temperatures and tectonic movements – to the Anthropocene where rapid changes in things like water, nitrate and phosphorus cycles, some of the basic components of life, are caused by activities of human beings. Human activities have become natural forces.

DH

Another thing that is historically significant is that subjectivity is written out of the process when we talk about sciences, while the subjective experience is often where artistic research sets out from. Within contemporary complexity thinking and transdisciplinarity, a lot of effort is put into inserting morally or ethically reflecting subjectivities. Meaning that the 'scientists' and the 'artists' along this axis are beginning to look more and more alike. Both are engaged in elucidating subjectivity as an inevitable factor in processes of global ecological change.

AAK

And these large-scale changes can only be discovered today because of our collective capacity to observe and render large-scale, complex processes sensible and comprehensible through digital technologies. These processes are at once able to be represented through networks of researchers and technology, and so enormous that they become hard to sense and understand as an individual. So we have the ability to render large-scale and complex agencies comprehensible, and respond to them in ways that we haven't been able to before. We can simultaneously imagine the climate changes that are coming towards us, the role that we play in their becoming, and their consequences. We are dealing with agencies that are a part of a world picture that we at once create collectively with technology and have a very hard time sensing on our own.

DH

For me this is an issue of starting to capture some of the questions that are emerging across institutions and disciplines that are responding to the complex problems associated with the Anthropocene. The way I conceptualise what Irit Rogoff has termed 'creative practices of knowledge' is that they draw on intuitive, engagement, a large catalogue of ideas, and concrete direct manifestations of methods. It is exploration and experimentation at the same time, and not confined to predictable ways of working. Meaning that the discoveries are by-products of the ongoing methodological experiments. They both render problems sensible and make an audience sensitive to its surroundings. It could be argued that there are steps to take towards the actual organisation of artistic practices around complex problems. Thinking about artistic practices in organisational settings has direct implications for connecting environmental discoveries to social practices. Artistic research develops by opening up to the unknown, unexplored and unconditioned, shaping

as well as being shaped in a process of co-evolution. That same quality, in an organisational setting, is important in developing more resilient modes of organising; it concerns a method for corresponding with a plurality of human and non-human interdependent processes.

AAK

The Anthropocene is the dividing line where we have to invent a whole new set of practices that work creatively with ecological changes. New values have to be invented for the rehabilitation of landscapes, the generation of commons or building resilient rather than escalating societal processes. This could also lead to new desires for employment and lifestyles that are not yet put into action. It could also be kind of a hiatus for existing artistic, scientific, political, economic or engineering practices to reconsider their values and desires, in order for them to continue to exist, but in new ways. So, now might be considered a period for designing new or recalibrating existing practices.

I think that's partly why we are collaborating on Diakron: we are both interested in doing that to our own ways of working. At the same time we want to create an organisation as a forum that doesn't have to lead anywhere in particular for us or for anybody else, but create this transitory space for experimentation and reconsidering practice. In this way things can be opened up in a kind of non-linear manner, where we try to connect people with different ideas.

DH

The practices that we are looking to explore can be seen as manifestations of new modes of employment, thinking and collaborating. Historically, qualities such as flexibility, creativity and improvisation have

been appropriated by mass-labour markets. It's therefore logical now to explore new paths for organising employment, research, and ways of drawing on artistic practice.

Many of the qualities that creative practices of knowledge have are also present in other disciplines, and individuals exploiting them could be described as having 'dynamic range'. One of the main challenges of any discipline right now is the lack of ability to engage the complex problems posed to us in the Anthropocene, and to do so in a manner which is at once collaborative and independent.

AAK

In talking of these many different approaches, I think it's important to say that none of them necessarily contain a solution to the problem, but as a whole they compose a set of reactions to a specific set of circumstances. Here I'm thinking of anthropologists working with new ways of representing agencies, from plants and animals to indigenous communities, or people trying to escape the lifestyles of urban western societies. 'Speculative realism' and 'object-oriented ontology' – people attempting to speculate once more about reality, independent of thought and of humanity more generally. Political economists, working with different ways of imagining the distribution of resources, beyond productivity-based lifestyles, liberal nation-state democracies and global capitalism. Creative practices of knowledge that condense ways of working, that conceptualise and engage problems leveraging artistic research methodologies. Peer-to-peer based imaginaries for new modes of distributed, decentralised and non-hierarchical modes of organising. Or collaborative projects of research-creation, where creative and interpretative disciplines work together to create theory that aims to avoid being

a part of a 'creative economy', but rather to experiment with interdisciplinary learning and growth.

We have been detecting or gathering different topics important to us that could be embedded as long-term interests of an organisation (see end of conversation). They do not have to be a part of every act but can operate as a core of collective intelligence of our organisation. Based on our common interests we've been developing research topics that we feel like we'll be working on for a number of years – sometimes together, sometimes apart, and through several projects, not as one big model. It is according to these research interests that our activities are given meaning within the organisation. We are interested in making projects that contribute to these topics, rather than creating successes according to primarily external validations, be those financial markets or whatever. So I guess that's the first step in our design of what an organisation is, and in the recalibration of what we do with our individual practices. Having research as a core component, and then activities as the expressive marks of that research, and no particular kind of end point or starting point, helps to generate imaginaries of what a creative research practice is, and what an organisation may potentially do.

DH

I think the question of new imaginaries could be a good point for finishing this conversation. Our research topics, each in their own way, aim to reengineer how we see ourselves and our position in the world. If the Anthropocene does ask people to consider their actions in a deep systemic and distributed manner, then what we're trying to do is to design

and engineer an organisation and a set of practices that can help people to think in that manner. The topics are an attempt to collect a set of common interests that over time accrue and attach new interests and desires. They are therefore never finished or exhausted, but are operational tools with which we navigate. Some of our main topics are:

- **Organising:** Coordinating events that make people assemble. Expressions of creativity and concerns through collective actions that generate and maintain social infrastructures for the distribution of and access to services, education, resources etc. We are interested in varied types of organisational imaginaries that represent distributed and plural sets of values.
- **Practices:** The cognitive, perceptive, intersubjective, imaginary and expressive characteristics of what people do every day and how they inscribe the larger social institutions they are a part of. We are interested in how people become aware and react to the politics they are a part of – the mess (shit), destruction, ordering and creation – that indirectly cascades into distant, indirect, unintended and generative processes.
- **Temporalities:** What are the conditions for imagining the ancient past and the distant future? Not by positioning events linearly in time, but (re-)positioning life forms, minerals, politics, practices in habitats. We are interested in the methods for invigorating and evoking futures and pasts and the values and concerns projected into them. Underlying this is a focus on the desires to extend (human) life beyond our own (inter-generational) mortality.

- **Technology:** Our interest in technology has to do with a perspective change from technology as solitary objects to an interest in social projects that compose these objects. This perspective focuses on imaginaries, and the relations needed to make technological infrastructures and objects possible. We are interested in exploring technologies as non-teleological experimental exercises that follow the many possible complex outcomes, rather than pre-given purposes.
- **Subjectivities/Agencies:** Made up of several modes of thinking (microbiology, systems biology, animism, speculative realism, quantum physics, science and technology studies, physics). Modes of thinking that in different ways incorporate multiple forms of agency, and follow their processes of becoming and unbecoming. We are interested in how the acknowledgement that a plurality of agencies challenges the ways we as humans conceptualise our own ways of being, acting and organising within philosophy, politics, agriculture, (digital) technologies, art etc.
- **The Anthropocene:** An interest in the interconnectedness in human life relating to landscapes, plants, animals, parasites, climate, bacteria, plate tectonics, atmospheres, water cycles viruses, minerals, metals, acids etc. Investigating the conditions of anthropogenic destabilisation of planetary ecologies that encroach on modernity/modernisation, and lead philosophy, sciences and arts into new (un)territories. The concept doesn't 'do' anything in itself, but points towards necessary changes in all spheres of socio-ecological processes.