

## Echolocation (Session)

Script for a performative reading at Sydvaranger Separation Plant, Kirkenes, 12 June 2016, commissioned by Dark Ecology<sup>1</sup>

by Nickel van Duijvenboden



*The audience enters the Separation Plant's canteen via a stairwell. On the way up, it becomes clear the entire plant is abandoned. Half a year before, at the start of the morning shift, the workers had simply dropped their tools and work gear after the director had assembled them to announce the company's bankruptcy. After the audience settles, there is a welcoming 'ceremony' with local food: flatbread, a whole cheese, rhubarb chutney. A field recording of a piece of metal singing in the wind is playing. Historic photographs and blueprints related to the Sydvaranger mine are on the tables and the refrigerators. A giant schematic drawing of the iron extraction process is pinned to the kitchen cabinets. Chunks of ore, crushing balls of varying sizes, workman's knives and a bucket of sinter have been distributed across the tables. A small drum set, a Moog synthesizer, a mixer, microphone and some found objects are close to me.*

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<sup>1</sup> More on the immediate context of the Dark Ecology journey can be found in Arie Altena's travel diary: <http://www.darkecology.net/diary-dark-ecology-journey-2016> (last checked 23 June 2016)



*Nickel:*

During my stay, I received three letters. You may consider this reading a reply to these letters. Most of my readings are letters that I write on the spot, in one movement, without rehearsal. I like the indirectness, this act of addressing, the interposition of a ‘you’ that is not you, that is not even here.

Who might this ‘you’ be, by way of whom these words reach your ears?

And who is the author of these messages, precisely?

Sending out letters is like echolocating oneself by means of addressing others. It has very much to do with the idea of community that Timothy Morton was talking about the other day, with intimacy and being-one-with.<sup>2</sup> I’m not sure if it has to do with solidarity. That is a word I would hesitate to use in this context and in the context of art, unless you are actively engaging in it. Similar to not appropriating indigenous practices or ideas; my chocolate may be guilt-laden but to my mind you can only speak of solidarity or generosity if it is something you have truly incorporated and enacted. I’ve met some people on this journey whom I admire because they do precisely that. It feels like I should leave the talking about that subject to them.

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<sup>2</sup> These lines refer to Morton’s lecture ‘Dark Ecology Chocolate’ delivered on 10 June 2016.

I was awestruck watching Espen Sommer Eide use the speaking device he and Signe Lidén had made.<sup>3</sup> The expiry of breath, defying the toxic atmosphere on the hillsides above Nickel, had become the vehicle carrying another person's voice. I've always dreamt of a mouthpiece by which you can speak in the other's tongue. This phenomenon is called echolalia. In a letter, there is also always some simulation going on. A degree of dissociation or substitution. You write a different letter to each person, and to a certain extent, you assume the voice of the person you're writing to. That is to say, their individuality shines through in the writing – you cannot maintain that the writing is a hundred per cent yours. What's more, that part of the voice that would seem to be irreducibly yours, still needn't coincide with my proper person, with the way I speak. The sender's voice, in its murmuring, acquires a disembodied quality.

If corresponding is truly an echolocation, it means you can only derive your silhouette, your outline from a spectral map of your surroundings. The self is the only thing that isn't mapped. It's like a missing piece of a jigsaw, or groping your way through the pitch-black cavity of a mineshaft. Another analogy that equates the correspondence with echolocation is the rhythmic pulse: the reciprocal transmission of sending and receiving, replying upon replying, a reverberation.

Even a pause in the correspondence may be construed as rhythmic. Kafka and his lover Milena wrote one another multiple times a day, while other people may write to one another with year-long intervals, or pick up the thread an old correspondence at the very end of their lives. If you read Kafka's final letter, one still gets the sense that a reply is imminent. There is no closure. Simply deferral, suspension, like holding your stick over the drum indefinitely.

*I take place behind the drum.*

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<sup>3</sup> *Altitude and History*, 10 June 2016.

*Into microphone:*

Zapolyarny, June 12, 2016

Dear pa,

This morning I was up early in preparation for my reading today. I sat alone in the enormous dining room of the hotel, which is in all respects Russian, no matter its proximity to the border. Russian hip hop was pumping from the speakers, with refrains crooned by women. The curtains were drawn. I gobbled up my eggs within ten minutes. Outside, youths were lounging around the public benches in the square. In the small park beyond, two of the boys were having a bit of a brawl. One of them shouted something across the square, it echoed against the highrise all around, mixed with the sound of a ghetto blaster. I was surprised with so much activity in the early morning. But then it suddenly dawned on me that they hadn't shown up just now. It was far more likely that this was the afterparty of a sunlit night.

Thanks for your message, it's sweet of you to think of me. Yes, I do remember you once went to Norway for a conference. You write: 'I hope you're lucky with your collaborators and you're having an inspiring trip. Doing things together is of course the most pleasing.' This is true. And I sure was lucky with my collaborators. It feels like a veritable community. I know you feel you've often lacked this, and I've written to you before about art substituting for a family, which I admit was a bit Oedipal of me... But much like the earlier artistic community I was in, one needs to withdraw every now and then to figure out what contribution one could make. This can be intimidating, it is never so self-evident as with a true family. In this case, I saved it for the very last.

I was reminded of the trip to Iceland that I'd made at the start of my residency in 2014. I knew no one. We were a group of about fifty young artists, and we were being driven through the treeless landscape by bus. A bit like we've been doing these last days. Sigurður Guðmundsson, a 70-year-old Icelandic artist, was our guide. On the second day, we were going for some nature sight-seeing, to a geysir and a waterfall, but the prospect of such a long drive just to see the main sights didn't appeal to me. The day before, we had been to a volcanic spring, and what happens when you unload fifty young artists at a place like that is they immediately swarm to the highest point of the mountain, paying no heed to any paths, either because they wish to shake off the others, or to measure the level of ambition. It was really quite striking.

So I didn't want to be in the bus that day. I found out that on our way we would pass a nature reserve, and I asked the bus driver if it was possible to drop some of us off there and pick us up on the way back. We would have five hours. Then I asked some people if they were interested in joining my little expedition. Three guys agreed to come along, a Canadian, a Japanese and another Dutchman. I made sure we all had crampons (spikes under our feet), because the paths were frozen over, and I bought a map. It was well-prepared, in a way, but the choice of people was more of a coincidence, and so was the choice for the location. It was simply convenient. Things kind of sorted themselves out.

It was a beautiful hike. We soon discovered that we had much in common, a certain modesty, being fine with long silences, and a dread for the overly social. We passed a number of fissures filled with clear water, until we came to a towering precipice, a gorge some tens of metres wide with a small waterfall. We ended up close to a tiny village, which we neglected to explore in our search for the 'uncultivated', 'unspoilt', whatever that was, and waited until we were picked up by the bus.

The next day Sigurður, the Icelandic artist, asked me quite seriously why I had chosen to leave the bus at that specific place. 'Don't you know what kind of place it is?' I knew the name, but it didn't signify anything to me. '*Thingvellir*, that's where the *Althing*, the world's first parliament convened in the open air. Thingvellir means "assembly plains".' Indeed, I later found the following passage in a text by Bruno Latour, which has partly inspired the theoretical framework of the Dark Ecology Journeys:

As every reader of Heidegger knows, or as any glance at an English dictionary under the heading "Thing" will certify, the old word "Thing" or "Ding" designated originally a certain type of archaic assembly. [...] Thus, long before designating an object thrown out of the political sphere and standing there objectively and independently, the *Ding* or Thing has for many centuries meant the issue that brings people together *because* it divides them. [...] Of all the eroded meanings left by the slow crawling of political geology, none is stranger to consider than the Icelandic *Althing*, since the ancient "thingmen" had the amazing idea of meeting in a desolate and sublime site that happens to sit smack in the middle of the fault line that marks the meeting place of the Atlantic and European tectonic plates. Not only do Icelanders remind us of the old sense of *Ding*, but they also dramatize to the utmost how much these political questions have also become questions of nature.<sup>1</sup>



So, the great precipice we'd been standing under had been the fault line between the western continents, and the excellent acoustics attributed to this strangely carved landscape had designated it as a site for collective deliberation. This was funny because these four guys, including myself, walking so innocently through the site of the oldest parliament, could hardly be called an assembly. What assembled us, had immediately bound and marked us, was our loneliness, our lack of sociality. We would prove to be about the *least* politically involved among our group of peers. We weren't interested in power and didn't feel like there was anything to deliberate, except which path to follow. And yet, that path had taken us straight to that ancient site of political deliberation.

The Canadian became a good friend during that year, but when he left, I lost track of him. The first time I saw him again, he had come back only to destroy all the work he had produced at that place. To be precise, he put it in a crusher. For somebody as tranquil as he, it was such a radical gesture, because he was getting rid of precisely the things that constituted his art. To my mind, he was erasing his practice. He said he simply had no space to store it and no exhibitions to show it in, but I detected a violence in his determination that deeply unsettled me.

With the friend from Japan, it was entirely different. He was utterly devoted to his art. Before he left, we had a goodbye dinner. We spoke about the liberty we had found during our time in the residency, but also the renewed sense of responsibility that had awoken in us. In light of the community, the exchange among artists which is fundamentally antagonistic to the capitalist neo-liberalism I've grown up with as being the one thought – *la pensée unique* as Alain Badiou calls it – I considered it my responsibility to be more generous, and to consider my work as a type of gift. My Japanese friend, usually so reserved and quiet, then said: 'You still have to practice generosity.'

In 'The thing', the text by Heidegger that Latour refers to, what I like most is his analysis of the jug as a thing that *gives*, which collects and brings together the qualities of the gift.<sup>ii</sup> Perhaps this requires some explanation. In explaining the nature of the thing, that which makes a thing a thing and not just an object, Heidegger uses the example of a jug. First, he simply offers an empirical and physical description of the jug: its shape, what it is made of, the way it retains a liquid etc. But then he switches to another order and also includes the filling and pouring, receiving and offering, to its properties, and the fact that it serves to quench the thirst of both gods and men. He concludes by saying that a thing as simple as a jug *assembles* all these properties, and brings together 'earth, sky, divinities and mortals'. This assembling is what defines it as a thing.

What is this thing called a drum? Is it possible to analyse it in the same way as Heidegger did the jug? Does it also gather what belongs to giving? In a sense, a drum is like a jug, in that it is filled with air, in that sounds flow from it. It absorbs blows, motion, and turns it into waves of sound.

Truly yours.

*Fade in a recording of the plant's switchboard humming. Find same frequency on the Moog to create deep overtones. Recording blends into the sound of dripping rain on a piece of roofing. Simulate this on the drum. When recording ends, ~~drum solo.~~<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Striked-through actions designate deviations from the script: I had planned to perform them but refrained from doing so, due to a sense of awkwardness.

Sydvaranger Separation Plant, Kirkenes, June 2016

Dear Tomoko,

I'm trying to write this as we speak. Thanks so much for your note. Why did you need three attempts to write it? It seems so spontaneous. But of course, one never gets to read the unwritten letters behind or beyond the one that is actually sent. I am grateful for your remark about the 'non-dominant hand', as you call it. You ask if I ever mind about my dominant and non-dominant hands when I play the drums. To be honest, I was touched by the sensitivity of that remark. That line is the whole letter to me. It has covered this distance that divides us.

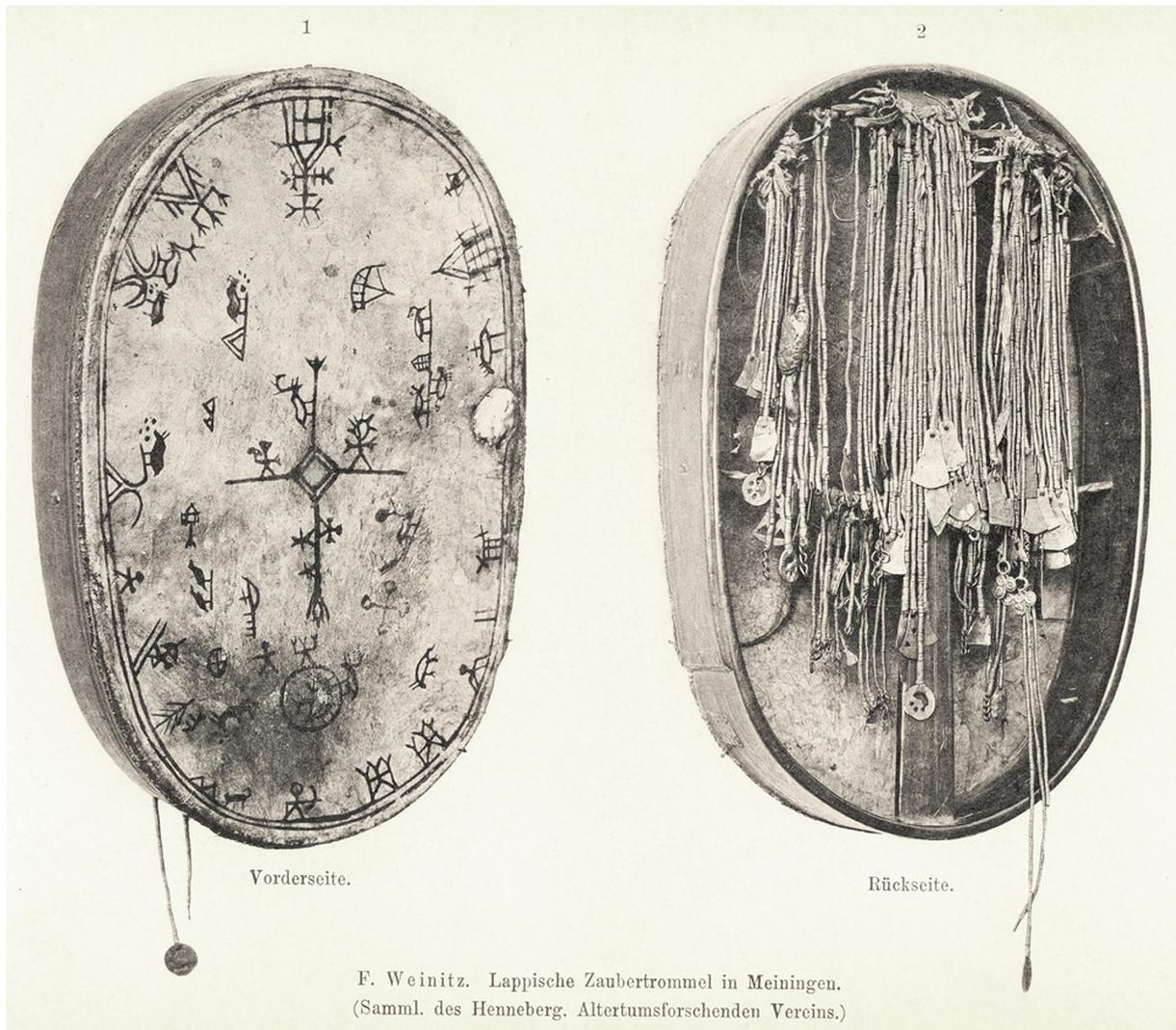
No, I honestly never give much thought to my weak hand. At least not in any writerly sense. I only feel and hear it whenever I play, since playing a drum beat occurs without thought – thinking impedes drumming, it stalls the flow of rhythm, and you play best when thought is suspended. Your phrase 'non-dominant hand' tears open this whole reservoir. After all, the asymmetry between my weak and strong hands is just one kind of asymmetry. There's also the asymmetry between body and mind, thought and action, writing and talking, reading and speaking. Daily asymmetries. But, getting back to the hands, what is this strange asymmetry in our bodies? Why does one side have to dominate? I write with my right hand, what about you? Does the right hand write a different letter than the left, if I were to try? Would the weak hand harbour a less dominant character? Would the way the brain controls the muscles result in different words? And what if it's the muscles guiding the brain?

The point of many drumming exercises is to even out an asymmetry. I have played the drums since I was twelve, but I've never become really great at it. One reason for this is that I could never find the motivation to practice the so-called rudiments. I went straight for grooves and fills, but my drum teacher kept urging me to exercise my roll, my flam, and my paradiddle. Techniques that would allow me to play more fluently. Actually, what's funny is that in English, the vocalisation of a double-stroke roll – left left, right right – is 'mammy-daddy-mammy-daddy'. Now think about *that* in terms of asymmetry... I need to practice my daddy hand.

So I never got really good at playing the rudiments. And strangely, now I find them the most interesting. In a book about the history of percussion, I've been reading about the origin of the snare drum. Of course, it's difficult to say from which drum it evolved, since drums may have been one of the earliest built instruments. Archaeological evidence shows that they were all

around. The indigenous people of this region, the Sami, also have a special drum, with inscriptions on its skin and sometimes small objects suspended from strings on the inside. It was thought to have magical powers, so the Sami shamans played it, for instance, when someone was sick.

**Drum solo.**



I'm writing this in the canteen of the separation plant in Kirkenes. It is a place where they extracted iron from stone. It closed down on 18 November last year, after the company had declared itself bankrupt. The price of iron ore had been dropping for too long, and Sydvaranger Gruve, as the company was called, had accumulated about a hundred million dollars in debt. Workers who had come for their shift were told in the morning: 'It's over.'

Some mechanics stayed a couple of days longer to salvage the machines, which had been functioning day and night, year round, and would be unusable if they were simply shut down. Then the mechanics too left. Now there's just a caretaker, who was kind enough to allow me into the building. The plant is silent, save for the gulls. Everything is still there. On some machines, the lights are still flickering, they were merely paused.



This canteen, the *spisesalen*, was built in the early seventies as an extension of the original building from 1952. There was another building on this site before, built in 1908, but that was damaged beyond repair by firebombing during the war. A canteen is a place where people get together to eat and rest. It is also a place where people talk, discuss, joke around, perhaps play a game.<sup>5</sup> In the months approaching the bankruptcy, they were no doubt discussing the fate of the mine and what was there to be done. Who knows, the workers also gathered here in the middle of the night; after all, they alternated in shifts.

In *How to Live Together*, Roland Barthes has a chapter on *Nourriture*: food.

Rhythms (schedules) of food consumption. Three problems: 1. Community meal times.

Important, because (a) more than in other contexts, they're what give rhythm to daily life; relation between an implacable rhythm and *otium* (the rural pensioner's meticulously

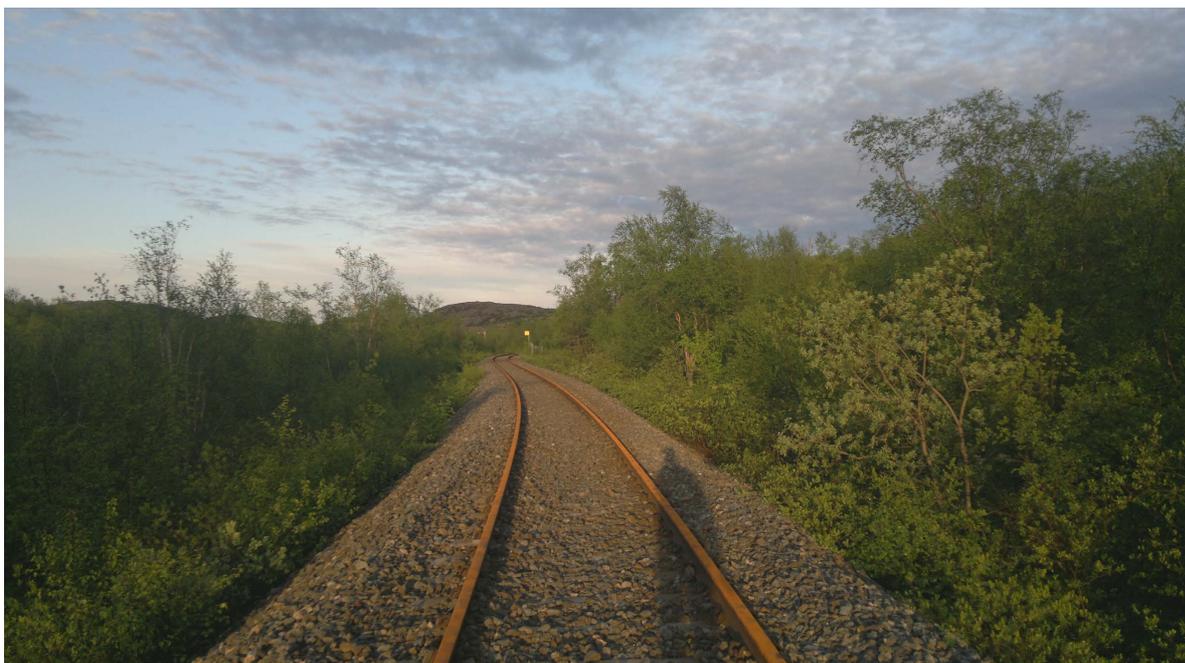
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<sup>5</sup> There was a deck of cards and a dice game, as well as a chess board, which I distributed across the tables.

planned schedule, [where meals represent antiboredom]), (b) provide an opportunity to come together, for conviviality (a modest celebration). [...] 3. A different way of absenting food: not paying for it, forcing it to operate outside an economy of exchange (working to earn a crust). This is the practice of food charity: to ask for and to be given food (nature's gifts / monetary gifts). Universal practice.<sup>6 iii</sup>

It's nice to look out the window and watch the gulls on the roof across with binoculars. In the time that I've spent here, their chicks have grown big. They nest on the building where the trains filled with iron ore pulled in. Twenty wagons were unloaded through holes between the tracks, after which the rock, still in big chunks, passed through two crushers before being conveyed into this building, the *sepverk*. Here it was then separated from the silica by means of giant mills and magnetic drums. I picked up some heavy iron balls I found lying around, some big, some small. First I thought they were the final product, until I found out they were used in the mills to pulverize the stone. You can find these balls all over the place, tons of them, even in the town itself. After running through the entire cycle, what remains is a powder: iron sinter. I'll include some in the envelope, I hope it doesn't soil the paper too much.

*Show the powder and pass the bucket around. Fade in field recording of footsteps on the rocks between the railway tracks to Bjørnevatn. Simulate this rhythm of walking using the brushes on the snare ~~and on the Moog~~. With a lowered volume, the recording of the footsteps continues to play.*

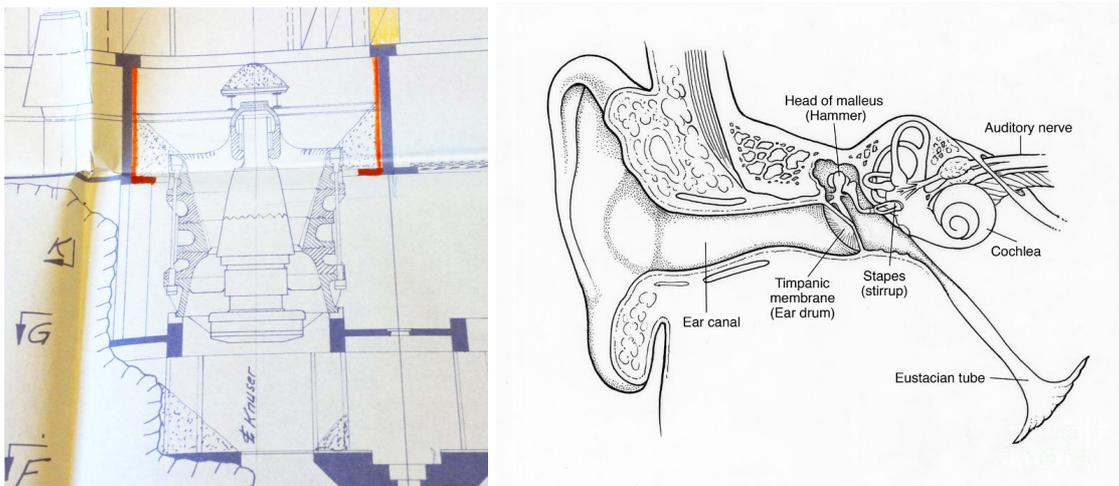


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<sup>6</sup> An implicit reference to Norwegian artist Liv Bangsund, who was in the audience. She is the founder of, and a volunteer at, *Tromsø Folkekjøkken* (Tromsø People's Kitchen).

About ten kilometers south of here, in Bjørnevattn, there is an open-pit mine, a gutted landscape with deep craters. A few days ago, I followed the railway line that ends here, tracing it back until it curved into a tunnel carved out in the rock. The tunnel was sealed by a roller door. Since it rested on the tracks, there was a crack underneath, just wide enough for a bird to worm its way in. On the other side, I could hear an ominous hooting that made me stop dead in my tracks. It was neither the otherworldly desolation of the mine, nor the darkness that stopped me from going any further. It was the bird, an animal, a living thing.

I assumed the bird's perspective, wondering what it was like, there, on the other side of the door, in the pitch black, to hear footsteps approaching. Who is this newcomer? What is he going to do to me? I imagined that beyond that door, one would walk right under the primary crusher, from which the stone gushed straight down into the train cars. I imagined myself groping my way along the walls in the fathomless shape of the cavity. And I imagined this crusher, the legendary *grovknuser*, which has been there since very early on, a ferocious device lodged in the rock, cone-shaped like an eardrum. I quickly retreated.



Because of the midnight sun, I had a hard time falling asleep that night. For two nights in a row, I dreamt feverishly of stone crushers. Falling into them or standing under them. Sliding down the slope, irreversibly, clawing into the stone dust. Sometimes I woke up with a jolt, because in the luminous blindness behind my eyelids, I was sure I misstepped. I endlessly replayed footage of a haul truck backing up into a small building, emitting warning honks and thick black smoke, and dumping its load of ore into the shaft. Cut to the stones streaming into the crusher, a mouth one-and-a-half metres wide, where they danced around as they were broken up into pieces of 'about head size' – a detail no info sheet fails to mention. At least the head would be let through.

*Play field recording of tumbling pieces of gravel in reverberant pellet silo. Simulate harsh, crushing sound on Moog and increase volume to bearable threshold. As crushing continues, use a pair of rods found in the plant to create high-pitched, resonant sounds on rusty pieces of metal found along the railroad tracks. Abruptly stop crushing sound. Long pause.*

As soon as I address you, I run the risk of not reaching you, of unloading my words into the tiny crusher of your ear, where they are disassembled into mere sounds. I know, this kind of reading presupposes an elaborate process of extraction, with its own means of conveyance, decomposition and filtering, which may alienate you, come across as absurd and unwelcoming.

For me, writing is like a crater, an act of excavating, tearing open a space that used to be a surface, covered, seamless. To write is to create an abyss, it's like clawing and scraping, scooping, ploughing. To me, it always seems as though there is nothing to be said, just traversed, horizontally, in the linear nature of sight, walking, and reading. 'Things' just speak for themselves, they are sealed and self-contained, with no corners and edges to rub or pry. Preparing to write, then, is like an odd act of halting, a standstill for no apparent reason, setting up an archeological dig or a geological site without any evidence pointing there. And once the words are put in order, they plummet, they leak, they drill into the surface, like some early computer game which shows a cross-section of the ground, and the movement of the screen just shifts from lateral to vertical, in a perpendicular move.

Once, while talking to a friend, I called writing a 'labour'. She patiently listened as I continued to use metaphors related to physical exertion, saying it was a millstone, a chore, a trial. It was arduous and exhausting. Then, before she left, she said: 'By the way, I don't think you can call what you are doing labour. *Mining* is labour.'

Please tell me your thoughts.

Yours,

Nickel



*I guide audience to the workers' locker room. It is cramped and in disarray, untouched since the bankruptcy. I encourage people to shove aside any boots, helmets, used towels, headtorches, and packets of tobacco, to make space on the benches. Some people can stand or lean against the lockers. The acoustics are entirely different from the canteen.*

Kaukasus house, Kirkenes, June 7, 2016

Dear Mirjam,

I think it's exceptional that you write to me while I'm here, with some input no less. Open-handed, that's the word I think we couldn't come up with. It's cold here. Today was all right, but two days ago it was 4°C. But, I was determined to cycle to the airport twelve kilometres outside of Kirkenes, without gloves – I had forgotten to pack them and the shops were closed.

It was gorgeous, delightful. But why cycle back to the airport when you're not flying? Well – it had initially escaped my attention, but next to the place where I had landed earlier was the *Ankomstsenter Finnmark*. Ankomstsenter: place of arrival. It sounds innocent, almost welcoming. But this one has nothing to do with tourism or art, much less a welcome: it is a place where refugees are held. Last year, more than five thousand of them crossed the border from Russia by bicycle – you're not allowed to walk or hitchhike. By word of mouth, they had learned that this 'Arctic Migrant Route', despite the vast diversion, was a safer alternative to the rubber boats of the Mediterranean. Those who made it have since been relocated or sent back, and the vast majority of them don't have a right to stay.



Now, the centre is used as temporary housing for refugees from all over Norway. Just imagine, the government, instead of reviewing their cases elsewhere, just flies them in from any location to one of the northernmost places within the boundaries of Europe. And this place isn't even near a city. It isn't exactly far either, but still far enough to discourage any newcomers from exploring the surrounding towns, and also far enough to deter any concerned locals from paying them a visit. It is kept quite deliberately at a distance, and information about arrivals and departures is minimal. In fact, when I approached the guard sitting at the gate and asked him if there was anyone there to speak to, he replied: 'Who are you, and why do you ask these questions?'

The other day, I had a very memorable meeting with a local activist, Merete Eriksson. She teaches at a local private school, but she became involved when the authorities started returning the newly arrived migrants to Russia without any form of interview. They simply put them in a bus and dumped them across the border in Nikel, where they slept in the streets and hotel lobbies.<sup>7</sup> It was January. She and four others told the next group of refugees to be sent back to leave the reception centre, which they didn't even know was possible, and some of them found refuge in the Kirkenes church. Merete and the others were jailed for it, but the result was that from then on, there were no more deportations and everyone got their case reviewed.

I told Merete about Hannah Arendt, who describes the condition of refugees as one of 'rightlessness in an age of rights'. In *The Perplexities of the Rights of Man*, written as early as 1951, Arendt writes:

The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion—formulas which were designed to solve problems *within* given communities—but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. [...] The trouble is that this calamity arose not from any lack of civilization, backwardness, or mere tyranny, but, on the contrary, that it could not be repaired, because there was no longer any “uncivilized” spot on earth, because whether we like it or not we have really started to live in One World. Only with a completely organized humanity could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether.<sup>iv</sup>

And so this guard, the face of the law, asked: 'Who are you, and why do you ask these questions?' In fact, it is a very good question. Who am I, and why do I ask these questions?

Arendt's once lover, Heidegger, starts his book *What is a Thing?* with a warning, a particular pitfall for philosophers. To be exact, he repeats a warning from Plato: he who occupies himself with metaphysical questions risks falling into a well. If you stare at the sky too much, wondering about what is beyond all this, you may just ignore what is right in front of you.<sup>v</sup> More practically-minded people will laugh at you and take you for a fool.

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<sup>7</sup> Most of the listeners had visited Nikel the day before. As a result, the grimness of the conditions were obvious.

I'm afraid the time has come for me to definitively admit that I am one of these persons. Coming here, having read Heidegger as a preparation, should be evidence enough: as if I'm unable to distinguish what the fact of the matter is, which things gather in Kirkenes, which things exactly *assemble* Kirkenes.

A mine that has recently gone bankrupt, and just sits there waiting, inoperative. A refugee camp removed from any nearby community, a mere transit zone for the stateless and rightless. The warmest month of May ever recorded; a greener spring than ever before. A gridded map of the Barents Sea in which every rectangle designates a fresh oil drilling license. A steady rise of tourism. A friendly and hospitable people. And I come here lugging a suitcase of German and French philosophers, most of whom are already dead, and an odd-size baggage with drums.

What brings philosophy, drums, a mine, and a refugee camp together? Could there be some *thing* that assembles them? That is the question I have been asking myself here. I'm trying to somehow weave it together, here in this separation plant, of all places: a site where things that are crystalline are cracked open, broken apart, divided, and are separated for good.

*I move through the door behind me and guide the audience into the actual plant, via a landing overlooking the machine hall. It is chilly there and very quiet, but every little sound resonates for about twenty seconds. A row of giant drum-shaped mills extends towards the back. The view of Kirkenes is obscured by the dirt on the windows. A sole snare drum stands waiting. I repeatedly sound a pair of claves. Its woody timbre echoes through the hall for an extraordinarily long time. I continue sounding them – echolocating – until the audience is complete.*



‘Who are you, and why do you ask these questions?’ I’d been wanting to ask newcomers who arrived here by bicycle, or in the case of Holland, by foot, if they could remember anything of their journey. My experience is that when you walk or cycle a certain distance, the alertness you experienced can never be retained, the stones and weeds and roadsides you saw, the birdsong and rainfall you heard, all blur into a memory that traces a line from A to B, from departure to arrival. Perhaps that is why we westerners have come so far in techniques to capture singular moments. But I feel we ought to privilege memory.<sup>8</sup>

By means of *Erinnerung*, Derrida writes,

By means of [memory or internalization], the content of sensible intuition becomes an image, freeing itself from the immediacy and singularity in order to permit the passage to conceptuality. The image thus interiorized in memory (*erinnert*) is no longer *there*, no longer existent or present, but preserved in an unconscious dwelling, conserved without consciousness [...]. Intelligence keeps these images in reserve, submerged in the bottom of a very dark shelter, like the water in a nightlike or unconscious pit [...], or rather like a precious vein at the bottom of the mine.<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Before entering the plant, the listeners had explicitly been asked to refrain from taking any photographs, sound or video recordings of their own, for the duration of the reading.

I found this quote in *Margins of Philosophy*, a book which, interestingly enough, begins with a chapter called ‘Tympan’: another word for drum. There’s drums everywhere here, vertical as well as horizontal ones. Did you know that rudiment, the elementary pattern practised on snare drums, comes from *rudis*, which basically means unprocessed, raw ore?

Tympan, Derrida’s word, doesn’t mean just drum but also eardrum, tympanic membrane. Much like Heidegger and Arendt, Derrida identifies a shortcoming in philosophy, but he does so by means of the inner ear. The eardrum receives signals from both the outside and the inside, like a drum that can be hammered on either side, and what philosophy does is incessantly talk to itself; it hears its own muttering from within. The eardrum is put under a certain pressure, it is displaced, and it needs the outside to talk to it in order to balance itself out. That is, it needs to listen. ‘How to unbalance the pressures that correspond to each other on either side of the membrane,’ Derrida wonders. ‘How to block this correspondence destined to weaken, muffle, forbid the blows from the outside, the other hammer?’<sup>vii</sup>

*I walk around and play on oil drums, a suspended shovel, an aluminium ladder, and more oil drums. It creates a booming sound.*

When, after their break, the workers went back to work, they put on eye and ear protection. The ear protection served a double function: it shielded them from the constant noise, but it was also a headphone for the walkie-talkie system. They communicated via radio. That is, the operation of the machines was a constant vibration, muffled but visceral, and one would have been able to hear one’s own interior voice, singing or humming, which is what I tend to do when I’m working, as well as the messages relayed by radio from any point in the building: abruptly, I imagine, as interruptions or punctuations.

*I produce a walkie-talkie and press a button. Elsewhere, I’ve planted another one that now chirps a short melody through the hall.*

Elsewhere in the book, Derrida explains why sound is the most ideal, most theoretical of the senses. Even more so than sight. The same applies to speaking and reading, since speech is connected to hearing and text connected to sight and spacing. He borrows a beautiful word from Hegel, *Erzittern*, the closest word I have ever heard to the sound of a cymbal. *Erzittern*, trembling, shuddering, but with more Klang. Here’s what it says:

[If] sight is ideal, *hearing is even more so*. [...] Despite the ideality of light and vision, the objects perceived by the eye, for example works of art, persist beyond the perception of their sensory, exterior, stubborn existence [...]. This being the case for works of art, it certainly will be so for writing as such. But not for music and speech. Hearing is the most sublime sense: “Hearing ... like sight, is one of the theoretical and not practical senses, and it is still more ideal than sight. For the peaceful and undesiring contemplation of works of art lets them remain in peace and independently as they are, and there is no wish to consume or destroy them [...]. The ear, on the contrary, without itself turning to a practical relation to objects, listens to the result of the inner vibration (*inneren Erzitterns*) of the body through which what comes before us is no longer the peaceful and material shape, but the first and more ideal breath of the soul.” (Hegel)<sup>viii</sup>

I have to leave it at this. Have I spoken to you now or am I reading? You tell me.

With affection,  
Nickel

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### Sources

<sup>i</sup> Bruno Latour, ‘From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public’, in: Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.) *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 12-13

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, ‘The Thing’, in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper Perennial Classics, 1971

<sup>iii</sup> Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 102-103

<sup>iv</sup> Peter Baehr (ed.) *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, New York/London: Penguin, 2000, pp. 36-38

<sup>v</sup> Cf. opening pages of Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?* Chicago: Regnery, 1969

<sup>vi</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 77

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid.*, p. 92