

Improvising the Vague Outdoor Event in Art and Technology Education & Research

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Biography

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Abstract

This article aims to re-visit outdoor learning, and explore a decentering of human agency as part of a post-human art and technology education and re-

search. The use of an outdoor learning and pedagogy are often promoted as part of education reaching for social and especially environmental sustainability goals. These claims are to a certain degree valid since, an outdoor learning stimulate more and other senses, but there is a risk that by the dichotomization of outdoor *and* indoor learning we, as teachers and researchers, just situate human centered learning into an outdoor environment, missing possibilities of developing a less human centered education and research. This art-based research explored material sound as part of an outdoor vague event. The experiments were entangled with a deep reading of “The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness” by Donna Haraway (2003). Posthuman perspectives of “intra-action” as undetermined, mutually constitutive and vagueness were materialized as part of the research (Barad, 2007). The research shows how human experience needs to be acknowledged as limited and differentiated to develop decentered human perspectives in education and research. By acknowledging this limitation a transformation of human experience as part of relating in significant otherness becomes possible. Here, improvisation is presented as a tool for this transformation, and as a possible transformation towards de-centered human perspectives in art and technology education and research. This in turn, enables moving towards sustainability and human responsibility in both outdoor and indoor learning and education.

Keywords

Vague event, vagueness, outdoor learning, material sound, improvisation, art education, technology education, experience, intra-action, art-based research.

The outdoor in art, technology and education

The outdoor in art and art education have a long tradition. For example landscape and field painting have made artists' work relevant through the history of western art movements. In the sixties artists turned to experiments of site-specificity and this led to an array of different art movements of the seventies, for example; land/earth art, process art, installation art, conceptual art, performance/body art and more. Miwon Kwon explains how a site-specific art became a relational art, "a radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience", this made way for artists to go against the commodification of art works (2004, 12). Technology's relation to the outdoor is more pragmatic and less used as pedagogy in technology education. But it is found in the testing of artefacts and prototypes in extreme and/or accurate environments. In technology and design research and development the outdoor can serve as a place to meet potential target groups and make visual, material, discursive or other formats of participatory research.

The outdoor in outdoor education is often romanticized as a learning encounter with 'real' reality, or an encounter with a 'pure' nature put on a pedestal (Morton, 2007, 5). Outdoor learning can at the same time be accused of being too expensive, time consuming and considered unsafe since safety standards can be difficult to obtain. This doesn't mean that risk should be eliminated but it needs to be managed by teachers and instructors (Barton, 2007). In a Nordic pre-schools setting outdoor pedagogy is much used and well-established (Berg, 2009), (Strid, J. P. & Szczepanski, A. 2007), (Lundegård, Wickman, & Wohlin, 2004). Both outdoor education and outdoor learning are well-developed areas and its potential to work with goals of sustainability has been researched, also from post-human perspectives (Malone, Truong & Gray, 2017). A big advantage of learning outdoors is that it stimulates more and other senses and this leads to other experiences than learning indoors (Szczepanski & Andersson, 2015). The

comparisons of differences between an indoor and outdoor learning is of course differentiated and depends of where it is taking place, for example the specificity of the architectural control of the indoor climate depends on geographical place, culture and economy.

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In contrast to pre-school and elementary school education where all subjects of education can benefit from outdoor learning and pedagogy, higher education mainly move outdoors to make studies, observations, excavate and/or collect material and samples. In certain research areas like biology, environmental education, geography, archaeology and for example the training of landscape architects the use of outdoor field work is part of the professional practice and the subjects research methods (Munge, Thomas & Heck, 2018). Here the outdoor is less used as a pedagogy, instead it is used as the object of study. This means that the outdoor as a phenomenon can be said to transform through the whole educational system from being an

active educational tool in pre-schools to become a passive research object in higher education depending on the entangled relations in education.

In higher education most often the outdoor is treated as if the foundation of life, for example; photosynthesis, weather and everyday life, is placed in a petri dish to be studied by the universal strategies and methods of the students and researchers. This can be criticized through the feminist theory of the so called “god-trick” in science, written and described by Donna Haraway (1991). If the “god trick” is used, the outdoor environment can be studied and researched by a face-, body- and context-less research subject (Lykke, 2009, 20). The outdoor in outdoor learning seems to have a shifting position as active or passive part of education and research. The point is that the phenomena of the outdoor as *opposite* to the indoors needs to be re-considered, and especially in relation to art and technology education and research. In a post-human education dichotomies like the outdoor and indoor learning needs to be revisited.

The vague outdoor event

Our main method for a post-human research is *vagueness*, the vague relations of an outdoor learning are where we start. The vague outdoor event is the methodological frame for the experimental workshop. Stephanie Springay argues that nothing can be separated from the event and be looked at from the outside, “There is no subject separate from the event” (2015, 85). The actual place is not a passive object or background to the event but an active part of what comes out of the event. It is an expected active part in all the aspects of the event, not only site-specific related concerns of art and technology.

In the vague outdoor event we experiment with the outdoor as a making, learning, teaching and researching subject. By that attempting to break the subject-object hierarchical order described by Nathan Snaza and John A. Weaver as something that “alienates the researcher from the world, and as a result form reality, and demotes the world to an object to be analyze, probed,

prodded, tested, manipulated, and silenced” (2015, 9). A post-human education and research does mean the decentering of human agency and that also means a decentering of human agency and power of structuring education and research (Snaza & Weaver, 2015, 6). Our question as part of the vague event is how we as educators and researchers can decentralize our own agency and make other agencies noted and respected? Again, an event is understood as a disruption that brings other truths into the open, thereby changing traditional frameworks of knowledge (Atkinson, 2017, 5). We think that the vague event invites time for immersing into an open exploration, and that makes *time* a crucial part of the experimental workshop.

Here the outdoor learning is the time spent exploring non-human/human relations as these relations are affected and formed by the worldview as part of entering the outdoor. The worldview in this research is making use of the post-human theory and methodology *agential realism* by Karen Barad (2007). The experiments of materializing intra-action as part of the vague event co-existed with a deep-reading of the “The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness” by Haraway (2003). Here Haraway is talking about “relating in significant otherness” by experiencing and researching dog-human relationship (2003, 25). Theory and event have been integrated all the way through the vague outdoor event project. This means that theory and making the experiments are entangled, here simply described as a constant and dynamic movement.

One of agential realism key concepts is intra-action, this concept have been the starting point of this exploration into an outdoor vague event. Intra-action differs from *interaction*, interaction deals with what is happening in-between already defined entities while *intraaction* changes this causal order and instead the definitions of entities or phenomenas emerge from relations (Barad, 2003, 2007). A short and accessible definition of intra-action is a collaboration and interplay between phenomena that is vaguely divided from each other, *and* has mutual transformational impact and agency (Lykke, 2009, 107). Relation in a posthuman world is constitutive, and

is undetermined in its on-going performative transformation. What we experience as solid is repetitions of intra-actions that make relation appear determined while they are really undetermined phenomena.

The idea from Haraway of “reaching into each other”, a mutual relation as curiosity and an on-going of relation made intra-actions of the vague event possible to explore further (2003, 6). It becomes an event of experimentation that is also constitutive. “Through their reaching into each other, through their “prehensions” (Whitehead) or graspings, beings constitute each other and themselves.” (Haraway, 2003, 6). This made it possible for the vague event to act as both a technology experiment and an art performance simultaneously. The grasping into each by Haraway lead way to engage in the vague event for longer moments, use and explore our senses with enhanced curiosity, being open to impulses, careful and meticulous with possible and impossible transformational relations, and by this creating a situation of *improvisation*. Improvisation means “the activity of making or doing something that you have not planned, using whatever you find” (“Improvisation,” n.d). The vagueness of the activity of improvisation and the described intra-action by Lykke as “a collaboration and interplay between phenomena that is vaguely divided from each other...”, the vagueness is what connects intra-action and improvisation and this made improvisation a relevant concept to explore further (2009, 107). By materializing vague specificities in the moment, we hope to find practices leading to an “onto-ethico-epistemology” of art and technology education (Barad, 2003, 2007). We ask ourselves how we can develop and explore ways to decenter human agency and become better at “relating in significant otherness” in art, technology and education (Haraway, 2003, 25).

Vague Art and Vague Technology

This paper is built on an integration of Art and Technology via the research platform of Vague Research Studios (VRS). VRS objective is making experiments, workshops and performances

within both of art, technology and education. VRS refuses to use art to communicate technology and to use technology as only adding technological solutions to art. The relationship between art and technology is built on curiosity of other fields of knowledges and we actively try to integrate each other's competences and practices. Here, 'not knowing' as part of improvisation and the vague event, means taking the risk of making your own professional knowledge and identity vague. We argue that experiences outside of professional and traditional phenomena is necessary, to entangle art, technology, knowledge and environment.

The workshop model entangles art and technology for other than traditional phenomena to appear, one is called vague performance art and the other is vague technology. A vague performance art is evoking other states of attention and engagement incorporating the participants' body-appearance and actions. The body and physical material, and aesthetics create awareness, and serves as a productive part of the event's setup (Eriksson, 2009). A vague technology allows for plurality and richness in perspectives and by disassembling conventional technology into the simplest components, a space is opened to discover the relationship between body, and the material world. In this case of the outdoor vague event material sound became the main phenomena to explore of both art and technology.

Prior the experiment a material sound was established as a good choice to explore vagueness and intra-action in and art and technology education. We believe it is because music and sound have a long tradition of improvisational practices. The deep relatings between musicians and the technology of the musical instruments, between musicians and the environment, seemed to be a good starting point. In our quest of a decentered human agency of art, technology and education we met the experimental musician Natalia Kamia. Kamia introduced her experimental collaboration with musician Haruhiko Okabe and their piece "mastcutters' vision", this became the music that we used as part of the vague event (2017, track 1). They recording were an unedited free improvisation and the musical instrument used were sax and candle stand (Kamia

& Okabe, 2017, track 1). The track was chosen since it uses an improvisational attitude in its making, both from the point of playing and tampering with the musical instruments. This improvisational approach was shared with us by Natalia during collaborative studio workshops. This improvisational attitude became a strong influence and helped further develop the vague outdoor event.

The vague material sound event by the Long water

In this particular case the events took place in a large recreational area in Gothenburg in Sweden called Långvattnet (the Long Water). It is an area of a natural growing forest with wetlands and flat rocks. There are a lot of runners and mountain bikers using this place. The area is well taken care of and there are signs and places for people to rest, and there are parts designed to host groups of people. The place can be described as a non-urban urban area, since it is well established as recreational area, part of the city but still big enough to make you experience wild nature and feel as if you left the city.

This vague event explored the phenomenon of sound, both as music, material and acoustic energy in the form of vibrations and electrical signals. The phenomena of sound was a good starting point from its relation to musical improvisation but also since sound is part of everyday life, immersed in every action and is an intermediate material. Sound is also a special media and interplay of movements, vibration and electrical energy. It is a phenomenon that can be experienced in many different ways, both as sound but also as tactile feeling. By decomposing the speaker into simpler elements and by inventing other forms of speakers, it was possible to investigate both experience and relation when tuning the body, electrical signals, vibrations, materials, and sound. Sound as art and aesthetic in the vague event was acted on as a mutual relation and therefore both the listening and sounding in the event was equally important.

When the music appear from the decomposed speaker, the music changes by hand and

yellow paper-horn movements, and this sound merges with the leaves rattling by the wind. The built-in microphones of the camera recording is hit with soundwaves that overstep the cameras' threshold values and creates distorted recordings of sound. The rhythmical body experience that are part of the wind, the trees, the music, the play with the paper-horn that changes the quality and the volume of the sound originates from an mp3 file playing from a mobile phone and an amplifier powered by solar light. The yellow color of the jacket that dresses the upper body shines brightly in the sun light. When the sun disappears behind clouds the sound also disappears, and instead a whining sound appears from the amplifier that has reached its threshold of minimum energy supply while two white, middle class women, moves, listens and play in this peculiar constellation. This vague event depends on specific body-mind impulses to act and is driven by the differentiated body-mind sensations appear through being immersed in the event. By borrowing the musical concept *improvisation*, the vague event became clearer in the perspective of decentering human agency.

The outdoor in the vague outdoor event creates a lot of things, many which would usually be thought of as disturbances or limitations to what we strive for. In this case the outdoor was invited as kin and not as a backdrop or surrounding environment. This made material, bodily, mental and energy concerns become more noticeable. By moving outdoors, particular experiences become significant noticeable in its otherness, for example there is nowhere to plug in for electricity. The source of energy had to be discussed and materialized together before anything else could happen. There were no tables or chairs and this made the experiments set up materialize in other than usual ways. We had to improvise with the natural environment that was there, and this made other visual documentation imagery appear as part of the vague event. We also had to adjust our expectations of the performance of the technology equipment and the qualities of sound. Our expectations were sometimes not met that meant that anticipated experiences had to be adjusted, and other values had to be acknowledged, like for example



Figure 1: The material sound set up as part of the vague event



Figure 2: The outdoor vague event

listening to low volumes of sound. In order to work with solar energy and fewer components of technology our previous standards of sound quality performance had to be adjusted, this in turn made possible other ways of appreciating and relating to sound and listening practices. The experience of body movements and the focus of listening, activated instead of turning the volume knob, made low volume matter in a new way. It was enchanting to listen to a favorite piece of music coming from an interaction with a natural stone and a yellow piece of paper in middle of the woods.

The context and the setup of the vague event is another aspect and gives an opportunity to reflect on the material you bring, you have to carry it yourself and also bring it back. Since this particular outdoor had no roads everything had to be carried and brought by foot. The material and equipment brought depends on how much your body can carry or who or what kind of technology can help you. This makes the event also a social negotiation of how much energy and strength a group of people can manage. Considerations of who needs help and support

have to be taken into account. Not only electrical energy needs to be considered but also human energy, all food, drink and resting time need to be part of the whole experiment set up. Time became an important issue on how to solve both human and technology energy levels. Inviting time, curiosity, impulse and breaking loose from anticipations of certain results were part of the transforming experience.

The limits of human experience

The well-known pragmatist John Dewey (1934) finds the foundation of experiences in the interactions between living creatures and the environment, and he also relates art and the aesthetic as the necessary part of the experience with environment. In design and human computer interaction (CHI) technology as experience is to enable considerations of sensual and emotional conditions as part of design and development processes (McCarthy & Wright, 2004). In contemporary visual art, experience of art is discussed as the experience of the viewer. The experience of the artist is of more interest in artistic and art based research. Some artists have developed specific ideas on experience, for example the Brazilian neo-concretists that engaged with art and aesthetic as lived experience (Ramírez, 2007). Experience is a contested term and the definition of it is not a main interest here, but there is at least one thing that these definitions have in common and that is the implication that experience implies *human* experience (Bishop, 2005, 8).

The stories from the outdoor vague event are told from the perspective of human experience and are therefore limited if the aim is to relate in significant otherness as part of a post-human world. Human experiences are differentiated and certainly not the same for every human, but to decenter from a human perspective, as we are trying to do here, the species specification in experience is something that needs to be considered. The limitation of human species experience as the “species-specific biophysical limitation” is not only a limitation but also a possibility

(Gough, 2015, 160). In this paper the possibilities are connected to the acknowledgement of human species limitation in experience.

The outdoor vague event was initially presented as a workshop example. This was partly to avoid it to be seen as a method, because a method comes with the inclination to have inherent scientific qualities following the western scientific traditions. Instead the workshop example could be thought of as *procedure* as Springgay suggests (2015). In her chapter *Approximate-Rigorous Abstractions* she uses an example from architecture, referring to Gins & Arakawa (2002); she writes “research exists where living happens within and across the organism-person-environment” and she continues “Research needs to be considered from the start as the site from which procedures emerge, as opposed to applied to; research is immanent to research itself” (Springgay, 2015, 84). Procedures are specific, undetermined and makes space for research as experience (Springgay, 2015). The procedure of the vague event is happening as much outdoors as inside of human experience. This means that acknowledging and taking into account the limitations and possibilities of human experience are part of the research, and also constitute the event. How can an outdoor learning event, based on human experience, move away from the inherent human/non-human dichotomy and aim for an art and technology education and research that decenter the human?

Haraway declares her interest and curiosity of other-than-human experience and to research significant otherness, through her relationship and agility partner (the dog) Cayenne, and “their reaching into each other” (2003, 6). The grasping and reaching into are possibilities while being limited to human experience, and at the same time being curious of the non-human experiences. The idea of “relating in significant otherness” is valuable to act as practitioners of art, technology and education to transform the dichotomy of non-human/human experience. The reaching into each other differs fundamentally from the relation of research subject/research object since it stays open and undetermined. Instead what is going on in the vague event is staying, trans-

forming and developing an interest, grasping and improvising, in this mutual and undetermined relatings in significant otherness. To engage in a different and a less human centered way in relations with environments, humans, art, aesthetics and technology, the limits of the implicit human experience is crucial.

In the outdoor vague event aesthetics and technology are significant part of the undetermined mutual and relatings in significant otherness that fore-runs being. The technology relatings can be more difficult to notice since hidden and growing more and more ubiquitous than for example relatings with animals and plants. The boundaries of human/machine as a mutual undetermined relation are significant even when 'under cover'. For example automatic light in cameras makes dark faces less differentiated since their threshold values are tuned to lighter skin tone, bathroom tap sensors that don't react when a dark hand reaches under it and therefore there is no signal to make the water flow, and mobile phones that cuts out the high pitch voices of women and children, hence the need of compressing the sound sensors' threshold values. There is an interesting less visible, a machine/human intra-action that creates phenomenas of exclusion, and this grows more common since technology becomes ubiquities. This makes threshold values an interesting area of research relation to human/machine and inclusion (Crutzen, 2005). This is also the reason why the technology in the vague event is deconstructed, and why components are kept as simple as possible in order to engage in grasping and reaching into technology, and making the relatings mutual, undetermined and a kind of free improvisational practice (Haraway, 2003, 6). This is to materialize and to explore human/machine relation without getting stuck in the dichotomy of having control and being controlled, using Haraways' words "none of the partners pre-exist the relating, and the relatings is never done once and for all" (12). In the vague outdoor event technology, for example our mobile phones, digital camera and deconstructed sounding/listening equipment, was chosen, organized and performed to make a procedure of grasping and reaching possible. Here imagined as a free improvisation of an "on-

tological choreography in technoscience” (Haraway, 2003, 11). A posthuman education aims “to let go” of planning and to aim for an open-ended pedagogy (described by Spivak, 2005) making wonder and curiosity central, and moving further by a deepened engagement in relations (Snaza, 2013, 50). Expanding how we think about experience, and not pin pointing what is dead or alive, with or without experiences but instead creatively explore the limitation of human experiences. Here, experiencing by sensing, and following impulse and curiosity to explore our own limited experience. Using the limits as tool to engage in relations differently, and develop experience into engagement, enchantment and care. Here we have tried out improvisation as a tool that transforms the limits of human relatings. The possibility of an on-going mutual relation as improvisation is a kind of tentative exploration, one that constitute “a ‘gradual’ relation to its shifting spatio-temporalities, a process of gradual acclimatization, absorbing and relating” (Atkinson, 2018, 17). Here, the open-ended and gradual relating incorporate humans as a transformational part of the outdoors, an outdoors that is being made through the outdoorings itself.

The outdoor in outdoor pedagogy should not only be valued from stimulating more and other senses that lead to other experiences. The limitations of the achieved new or other (human) experiences also needs to be explored, to make the transformation of relations part of education. It is the students of art and technology and their teachers’ will and curiosity to explore and accept *their own* limits and possibilities of experience in all relations that makes a difference. Here, making and mating with the significant other, machines, trees, animal, stone, electricity, weather, bad attitudes, low energy, different bodies and so forth, that which matter and challenge one’s own traditional experiences. The experience used not as an end or result but as a tool to explore procedures, a finding out as much as a creation in relation. It builds on the transformational nature of relations, experiences and actions. Noel Gough describes human experience as “species-specific biophysical limitations *and possibilities*“ (Authors Italic) and

the transformational quality of human relation could be seen as a possibility of the limits of human experience (2015, 160).

The outdoor found inside

The outdoor makes it possible for other relations to appear than if staying inside, but the inside and outdoors is connected by human experience. The acknowledgement of the limitations of human experience is a tool to explore mutual and transformational agency both indoors and outdoors. This is in contrast to consider the outdoor as a defined and determined phenomenon. The environment is not separated from human, living creatures or objects in a posthuman world. The intra-action, the *within* of relatings makes the phenomena of the outdoor and the indoor come into being (Barad, 2007). Since the limits of experience are part of the relatings that makes outdoor and indoor come into being, following the posthuman perspective “Beings do not preexist their relatings”, it means that if we are looking for outdoor learning it can also be found indoors, by the exploration of our own species bound limitations of experiences (Haraway, 2003, 6).

It is possible to argue that this research is re-stating the well-established posthuman perspective of questioning a clear division between nature and culture (Barad, 2007, 66), (Haraway, 2003), (Morton, 2007). To a certain degree it is true but it misses the point of the experimental practice and materialization of the vague event. The differentiation of experience, experimental practice and the vague event creates many different possible outdoors and indoors, where theoretical concepts are embedded in the phenomena being described (Barad, 2007, 129). The point here is that the vague event of entangled practice and theory has potential to make new and specific other knowledges appear. Art and technology outdoor education are here proposed as an intervention into human ability to transform and change within its own limitations, rather than an intervention into outdoor space. It is an example of making 'the human' a departure, not

the end-point of education and leads to other states and the letting go of a human centered idea of the world (Snaza, 2013). By acknowledging the limit of human experience, and engaging in procedures of grasping and reaching into other relatings, here understood as a form of *improvisation*, bring possibilities of developing human responsibility and ethic of an ever changing art and technology education and research.

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