

Nature Created? Or, the Gentle Touch of Artificial Snow

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Abstract

This article discusses, on the one hand, a holiday photograph of a ski hill in southern Sweden and, on the other hand, a fictional story set in a similar southern Swedish landscape, the children's book entitled *Den Fräcka Kråkan* from 1985 by Ulf Nilsson and Eva Eriksson. I use this discussion to broach wider questions concerning modes of appreciating what has traditionally been termed "nature" in light of the current condition of what is often called the Anthropocene. I include an example of how this concept has migrated into landscape architecture theory in the work of the German landscape architect Martin Prominski, thereby raising concerns about the historicism this concept entails and discussing the consequences thereof.

February 2017. It was the week of the school winter holidays in Denmark, and we had crossed the Øresund Bridge from Denmark to Sweden to go skiing for the day. I had a great time. It was a day of clear skies and beautiful sunshine, perfect snow and an absolutely gorgeous panorama. Skis on my feet, I was swooshing down the hillside accompanied by my six-year-old son, who was just beginning to get the hang of downhill

skiing. At one point we were standing atop the highest slope, about to embark on the ride downwards. I had stopped for a moment to catch my breath and enjoy the view. As I looked into the distance, a glaring contrast became evident between the soft sensation of the fluffy white snow on the hill and the flat, snowless landscape stretching out at the foot of the hill. Perhaps reinforced by the elevated point of view, this evident contrast in the landscape caught my attention. I paused. A series of questions began to take shape concerning the kind of nature the scenery represented and the form of entry we might have into discussing or indeed experiencing 'it', insofar as we can even talk about nature as a concept in this way. My son's energetic yell from behind me – "Come on, let's go!" – propelled my attention back to the activity in which we were immersed. However, before continuing down the hill, I quickly reached for the mobile phone in my pocket and took a picture of the scenery, as a minimal form of reflection on what I had seen.

In this article I return to my snapshot of the panorama of that southern Swedish skiing landscape. I consider the image and its context, reading the photograph as a cultural product rather than as pure documentation. I use the discussion to initiate wider questions concerning modes of appreciating 'nature' in light of the current condition of what is often called the Anthropocene. I acknowledge the descriptive evocativeness of this concept, the very existence of which is arguably indicative of a sea change in the way nature is considered in contemporary Western culture in the light of the pressing ecological concerns of climate change. However, I also reflect on the historicism this concept implies. To illustrate some of the consequences of this, I turn to discussions within landscape architecture, exemplified by the German landscape architect Martin Prominski, who calls for landscape architects to replace binary notions of nature versus culture with what he calls the "andscape". By proposing to replace dualistic notions with the symmetry of interdependencies given in the 'and' of the neologism 'andscape', Prominski arguably comes to ascribe problematic redemptive qualities to this word. I end by discussing another image of the southern Swedish countryside, one found in a story entitled *Den Fräcka Kråkan* (the naughty crow), a Swedish children's book from the mid-1980s.¹ This story illuminates the dependencies involved in our relationship with what, by means of allegory and allusion, is foregrounded as characterizing "nature" in this book. This suggests a different entryway into discussion regarding the relationships between the human and the non-human, grounded in direct involvement and ethical concerns.

The fact that I draw on vernacular materials – a holiday photograph and a children's book – as the primary vehicles for discussion in this article mirrors a methodological question. This question runs throughout this contribution, although it must also be emphasized that it evades a definitive answer: how to make visible and address the dependencies of human culture on the natural world that become evident in this situated material, without on the one hand turning them into a projection screen for something else, or on the other hand losing sight of their more general relevance?

The Gentle Touch of Artificial Snow

In the photograph (Figure 1), which I took on the top of the hill during my recent Swedish skiing adventure, the entire foreground – and more than half the image – shows a perfect white plane of soft, packed snow. The snow dominates the picture as a white sameness, except for the visible traces of people who have previously skied here. Further into the distance a line of people are clearly distinguishable who, like me, are looking out over a flat, snowless landscape. One thing that springs to mind is that the scenery they are looking at does not offer an alpine experience. There are no mountains in sight, but quite the opposite: the unfolding panorama is composed of the dark green and light brown hues of conifers and wintering fields.

The photo was taken in Vallåsen, probably Scandinavia's southernmost self-proclaimed ski resort. As such resorts go it is very unassuming, comprising a car park, a couple of small wooden shops where you can rent or buy skis and other sports gear, and a café, as well as a couple of ski lifts and a few fairly flat slopes down a single hill. Despite its modest size, Vallåsen is a popular destination, and my experience that day certainly had a mass-touristy feel, not least in the long queues outside the rental shop and at the entrances to the ski lifts. This touristy feel was emphasized by the fact that its proximity to the most populous part of Denmark, the area around Copenhagen, makes Vallåsen highly popular with Danish visitors.

So here I was, in Sweden, surrounded by hundreds of other middle-class Copenhageners who had also escaped the city for an outdoor skiing experience on this sunny holiday. The atmosphere was friendly and chatty, and many people were making jokes about the invasion of tourist Danes into Sweden. One of the few Swedes I did meet – an older polylingual gentleman from Helsingborg, one of the bigger cities close by – called Vallåsen the “Danish Alps”. For people from a flat country such as Denmark, Vallåsen, with its gentle slopes that are perfect for beginners certainly seemed to ‘do the job’ for a day’s outing in the snow, he seemed to imply. That Swedes prefer to go elsewhere – to do proper skiing, as it were – certainly seemed to be supported by anecdotal evidence that day, although the overwhelming presence of Danish families might of course have been contingent on the winter holidays falling on different dates in Danish and Swedish schools. Nonetheless, the gentleman’s statement pertained to the breadth and orientation of our interpretive horizon, and the kind of landscape necessary to experience “proper” downhill skiing may not be the same for everyone. One may thus say that behind the slightly condescending tone of this statement also lay a sense of generosity, something like: “Well, if this really is enough of a nature experience for the Danes, let them have it!” Indeed, as an experience it all felt very safe, a little like going sleighing in a city park. A hill just high and steep enough to get that swooshing sensation. A very urban experience, we might say, one of mingling with the crowd and conforming to the rules and expectations precisely orchestrated by the infrastructure of the ski resort.

This reflection obviously is a trivial one inasmuch as downhill skiing, not least in this area, is heavily dependent on human planning and heavy machinery – just like building a city. As can be gathered from the photograph, a large number of trees have been cut down to establish the slopes and the lifts that take

people up the hill. Of course, given that this is a sparsely populated area dominated by a mix of agriculture, forestry and leisure activities, almost everyone here must have been reliant on cars or buses to bring them to the site. It is not much of a wilderness experience, and we are far from any Romantic notions about revealing nature's sublime forces. Nonetheless, on the larger continuum of Western winter sports – ranging from very “urban” forms such as sleighing in the park to “wilder” forms such as heli-skiing or mountaineering – no sport seems any less steeped than any other in cultural notions and naive narratives about escaping the confines of human culture. This certainly applies to the activities reflected in the photograph. Despite the low-key setting of the skiing resort, we thus begin to enter the complex territory of the ways nature-culture dualisms continue to mark Western culture, as well as emerging questions about possible ways of dismantling them.

In terms of the history and geology of the site, Vallåsen was established in the late 1980s after a series of very cold winters in the region, one effect of which was the establishment of a ski hill on the so-called Esker of Halland, “Hallandsåsen”. Hallandsåsen is the name used for the hill formation that stretches across the southern part of the Swedish province of Halland and the northern part of the province of Skåne. However, it is not a real esker: an esker (ås) is an elevated soil formation created at the end of the Ice Age by gravel sedimenting in streams beneath the ice. Hallandsåsen is really a horst, a small ridge, so the proper name for this geological formation would probably be something like “the Horst of Halland/Skåne”. It is the relative steepness of the northern part of the ridge which makes the ski hill possible. Equally confusing, however, is the prefix Vall in Vallåsen. It could mean something like a rampart or wall in Swedish, but in the context of the skiing resort it may also be said to allude to famous French skiing resorts such as Val Thorens, where Val means valley. Thus in Vallåsen there is no wall, valley or esker in sight, and calling the site a “skiing resort” seems a bit of an overstatement. This in-built optimism (or perhaps simply successful branding) obviously does not impact on the skiing experience as such, and the numerous visitors who come for a day or two's skiing conveniently close to both Copenhagen and the southern cities of Sweden seem not to mind these discrepancies. They seem quite content with the mere existence of a hill just steep and long enough to provide a 1,260-metre ride down a snow-covered ski slope.

With the trend towards warmer winters and diminished snowfall since Vallåsen's establishment in the 1980s, the ski resort has been open for business in the winter season for periods ranging between just 11 days (2007–2008) and 100 days (2010–2011) during its nearly 30-year history.² However, despite the tendency towards warmer winters, there seems to be no general downward curve in the number of days the resort is open each year. The solution to the problem of less snowfall is evident in this picture, and is a quite technological one: the snow cannon. This is why you can even see a thick blanket of snow in the foreground of the picture, on the slope, against the background of brown trees and snowless fields. Artificial snow is certainly snowy enough to be perfect for skiing; it is not as if my skis care whether the snow fell “naturally” or was produced by a machine. As soon as the temperature drops below zero degrees Celsius, water – of which there is plenty in the region – is pumped into the snow cannons and the hill is

covered in thick, perfect snow. Paradoxically, we must assume that my choice to go to the so-called Danish Alps in Vallåsen by car and to ride down a hill covered in artificial snow was more ecologically sound, all things considered, than if I had flown with the family to the French Alps to go skiing. Having said that, however, and although there is much to be said for the 1970s phrase “think globally, act locally”, pitching the problem of climate change as a moral dilemma about whether it is “better” to drive to Vallåsen or fly to Val Thorens arguably misses the point of the discussion about what to make of the dwindling snowfall in Vallåsen in the light of climate change.

What discussing this image does tell us, however, is the way it gives rise to potentially conflicting interpretations concerning not just the temporality of the looming effects of climate change, but also Western culture’s unwavering optimism about the possibility of finding technological solutions to what may be bracketed as technological problems. Here, of course, it is also quite evident that even in light of what may seem quite a concrete problem at the local level – that is, the decrease in snowfall – simply inventing better snow cannons is hardly an adequate response to the larger-scale problems that afflict this area and are felt by those who want to go skiing at Vallåsen. Unlike the infamous indoor ski slope erected in the flat, hot desert setting of Dubai,³ it is clear that Vallåsen depends on the weather – on temperature, if not snowfall – to produce the necessary conditions for a skiing experience. This acknowledges a series of dependencies in terms of both climate and the geology of the sloping hill.

With global warming, the businesses at Vallåsen may of course face further difficulties, as a temperature drop below zero degrees Celsius is necessary for the snow cannons to work. One wonders whether there is a large enough customer base to make it a sensible investment to cover the hill to change it into a Dubai-style climate-controlled interior and cool it artificially sometime in the future. Even if we were to choose to ignore the paradoxes raised by this discussion and simply hope for colder weather, the highly culturally manipulated experience which Vallåsen has to offer is already indicative that our entry point into even discussing the term ‘nature’ is inherently cultural in character. More interesting, therefore, is the way the discussion illuminates the contours of a situation where the local and the large scale are so intrinsically interwoven that it is hard to distinguish the one from the other in any meaningful way. This points to current discussions which variously go under headings such as the Anthropocene, to which I now turn.

Nature Created?

In current scholarship, the term Anthropocene is often used to describe the current situation, where it has become clear that activities of human culture have begun to influence what used to be termed nature on a very large scale and in highly complex ways. Landscape architect Martin Prominski defines the concept as follows:

The effects of human activity have reached every square metre of the earth and beyond – for example through carbon or nitrogen emissions – thus we should acknowledge this total human influence by changing the name of our geological epoch from Holocene to Anthropocene. Yet, this acknowledgement has consequences for society in general and for landscape architecture in particular, because the Western concept of ‘Nature’ as something independent of human influence is shattered.⁴

Since its proposal in 2002 by geologist and Nobel prize winner Paul Crutzen, the concept of the Anthropocene has received interest both inside and beyond the natural science community as a way of conceptualizing humans’ increased impact on the global environment.⁵ But, notably, this is not always interpreted only in negative terms, and as Crutzen concludes in his article, the Anthropocene “will require appropriate human behaviour at all scales, and may well involve internationally accepted, large-scale geo-engineering projects, for instance to “optimize” climate.”⁶ The Anthropocene is a powerful description of a situation where we may say that the influence of human culture has reached deeply into the ecosystems of planet Earth, even into the deepest sediments and far out into the atmosphere. Climate change thus is a primary large-scale phenomenon displaying local effects. It is significant that its impact is beginning to show itself in complicated and uncontrollable effects on the ecosystem, and thus also in what may be regarded as the predicament of human culture. This indicates the difficulties in even thinking “nature” to be separate from “culture”, and calls for descriptions of their extreme entanglement in terms of their mutual effects.⁷ However, the term Anthropocene, as it originates in Crutzen’s *Nature* article, has also been criticized in different ways – for example, as representing an anthropocentric attitude, or for associating with the entire human species phenomena that actually originate within a particular Western economic context and should thus be seen in the light of very particular power structures.⁸ In itself, however, the idea of a movement from one age (the Holocene) to another (the Anthropocene) where even geological structures are influenced by a single species (humans) draws on a historicist attitude. It portrays history’s progression as a series of successive ages, and involves an idea of human prowess, invention and ingenuity, thereby even implying that such progress can overcome the Anthropocene predicament itself, as seen in the concluding quotation from the article. This way of thinking is, of course, a tradition in its own right.⁹ To some extent we have here the problem of a “new” term relating to an ‘old’ set of relations and a redemptive belief that technological development will “solve” the crisis as the relevant way forward. Nonetheless, the term does reflect the global or even planetary scale of the problem, which challenge may be said to call for corresponding “planetary” imagery.¹⁰

For Prominski, discussing the Anthropocene as a condition poses new challenges for the work and self-understanding of the landscape architect, who traditionally manipulates “nature” in the form of soil and plants with the purpose of making meaningful spaces for people. This new condition leads Prominski to propose replacing the concept of “landscape” with that of “andscape”, a term connoting the fact that the

categories of nature and culture are now so entangled that they have become completely fused. He draws this concept from the Russian painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), who in 1927 proposed the word “andscape” as a way to encourage the dissolution of dichotomies. In the andscape, human culture and nature are on a par, a symmetrical relationship represented in the “and”. While it should be evident that something is going on in the photograph discussed above that makes it hard to uphold the binary categories of nature and culture, I do wonder whether the radical sameness implied by the word “andscape” (and similar concepts in some accounts of the Anthropocene, such as post-nature, etc.¹¹) is helpful for a full understanding of the changed conditions of the interpretation of “nature” that this photograph indicates. Rather than questioning the degree to which we create nature or vice versa, or elevating the relationship into a radical sameness, we should be enquiring into the quality of this interdependence. Let us therefore attempt to reframe the question in order to begin this discussion and turn to a different representation of the southern Swedish landscape.

In Figure 2 we can see an image from the Swedish children’s book *The Naughty Crow*.¹² It is a story about two children on a farm in Skåne who turn to a variety of measures to chase a crow away from a cherry tree, where it is eating cherries to which the children feel entitled. The book is illustrated with pencil drawings that look a little like soft water colours and are thus unlikely to be a precise depiction of a particular farm in rural Skåne. Rather, what we have here is a picture of a typical farm in the flat region of this part of Sweden close to the sea.

In the story, as implied by the book’s cover image (Figure 3), a crow invades the peaceful setting of the farm and refuses to be “put in its place” by the children. The crow may be seen as an allegory of wild “nature” in this domesticated setting insofar as it is perhaps the wildest beast the children are likely to meet in this part of the world. The little boy in the picture gets a visit from his cousin, the slightly older Cilla Axelsson. Cilla is best described as a tough cookie. She is furious that the crow is eating the cherries, and she does not shy away from using all sorts of methods to scare it off. This includes chasing the crow with the garden hose, trying to scare it away by blowing a trumpet, dressing up like an even wilder beast and becoming a living scarecrow. Finally, the children capture the bird with a net.

While the children manage to disturb numerous other animals on the farm, the crow is depicted as a disturbance from the outside, one they cannot influence or get rid of. At the same time, however, the crow is humanized. Its behaviour is described as ‘naughty’ – for example, in the way the children perceive its mannerisms, as if it were bowing naughtily before them or grinning when it squawked. Of course, we may see this as a projection of the children’s own forms of behaviour, perhaps even as a self-mirroring: the word “naughty” is usually applied to children. When they finally manage to catch the crow with the net, it grows silent and lethargic. The children fear that they have killed it and they begin to mourn, only now realizing what they have done. Luckily, at that very moment, it is as if the crow is brought back to life, and it flies off, squawking more loudly than ever. The children experience great relief and begin to accept the

presence of the crow. The moral of the story presents the children's learning from experience and their acceptance of the crow's presence as a call for cohabitation between plants, animals and humans, each on their own terms. The last page of the book reads:

That summer, the cherry tree ripened in the courtyard between the henhouse, the shed and the barn. In the mornings, my cousin Cilla Axelsson and I ventured into the soft shade of the tree and feasted on our cherries. Later, the naughty crow came and tore at its own berries. Crows don't ask for anyone's permission. They do as they please. Since this happened, I now know that no one can own a tree and keep it to themselves. And that you can't change a crow. No one can change a naughty crow.¹³ (Figure 4)

We may talk about overcoming the duality of nature and culture by describing it, like Bruno Latour, as a form of entanglement; we may discuss the Anthropocene as a screen for new projections, as did Martin Prominski. But I would caution against too radical a lack of ontological differentiation. If nothing else, one may argue that "nature" cares little whether human culture exists or not. However, the means we have at our disposal to begin to understand this condition – as I have attempted with the "vernacular" material here – may allow for a interpretation of this situation in a process of self-reflection. In this way we too, like the children in the story, might begin to outline an ethical investment in our concrete interactions with and dependencies on "nature", hopefully before it is too late. Not to force anthropocentrism upon it, nor to completely possess it, but to engage in peaceful pruning and a sensuous enjoyment of the crops and experiences it offers – whether cherry-picking or skiing.

The Clear Skies of the Anthropocene

Let me sum up. I started out by considering a picture of an artificial clearing in a forest. It is connected to the local road network, complete with commercial institutions for renting or buying "gear" and food, toilet facilities, etc., and supported with an infrastructure of excellent plumbing, ski lifts and even snow! Not much wilderness here, one might say. If anything, on my outing in the Swedish landscape I was part of a deeply cultural experience. But at the same time, discussing this photograph began to expose the limits of Western culture's narrative of the mastery of human culture over nature. Drawing on the story *The Naughty Crow*, I began to outline more concretely the dependencies between human culture and nature, which, when freed from its abstract conceptualization as "nature" may be said simply to be very silently present – the ground that quite literally carries us. Nature, in this sense, is perhaps what French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's later writings called a natural ground underlying a human world of habits and culture.¹⁴

The interpretation I made of the trend of warming winters in Skåne, which suggests that climate change might impede the running of the ski resort Vallåsen in the future, is of course not backed up by facts. Yet, although I took the photograph spontaneously and without giving much consideration to the technical details, like the other people who broke off their activity to line up and admire the view, it is a reminder that we have been taught to “see” nature in a very particular way, a way that is reminiscent of Romantic notions of wilderness, grandeur, etc. At Vallåsen it is probably impossible to choose a grander perspective than the one I unconsciously chose when taking the picture. Paradoxically, perhaps, while it became a means to discuss aspects of this tradition, it also was precisely this inherited constructed view that enabled me to voice the questions discussed here. While the interpretation of products of visual culture – even mundane and trivial products such as a photograph and a children’s book – can begin to unlock deeper issues, it also suggests a range of methodological questions to which it is impossible to give clear answers. The particularity of the material depends on interpretation to be understood, and it risks being entrapped by the very dependencies the interpretation wishes to make visible.

Acknowledging this, in my discussion I have used Prominski’s endeavour as a (problematic) example of a current orientation in different areas of scholarship within the humanities and social sciences towards the material, towards objects, things, and the built and natural environments. This orientation should be seen as contrasting with the important role that representations previously played in these fields, as well as with the modern Cartesian tradition of thinking that separates categories such as mind and matter, human and non-human, etc.¹⁵ It includes such theoretical formations as actor-network theory and what goes under the heading of new materialism. As archaeologist Ian Hodder writes, “in these different approaches it is accepted that human existence and social life depend on material things and are entangled with them; humans and things are relationally produced.”¹⁶ Yet as Hodder also argues, many of these approaches, by calling on metaphors such as networks, assemblages, mesh, etc., often imply a symmetry of relationships. Instead, he suggests that “our relations with things are often asymmetrical, leading to entrapments in particular pathways from which it is difficult to escape.”¹⁷ This article has set out to give examples of the meaning of this entrapment in concrete situations, and in relation to questions about how to approach nature in light of the increasing discountenance of inherited binaries such as nature versus culture and the Anthropocene.

Images



Figure 1. View from Vallåsen ski resort. (Photo by author)

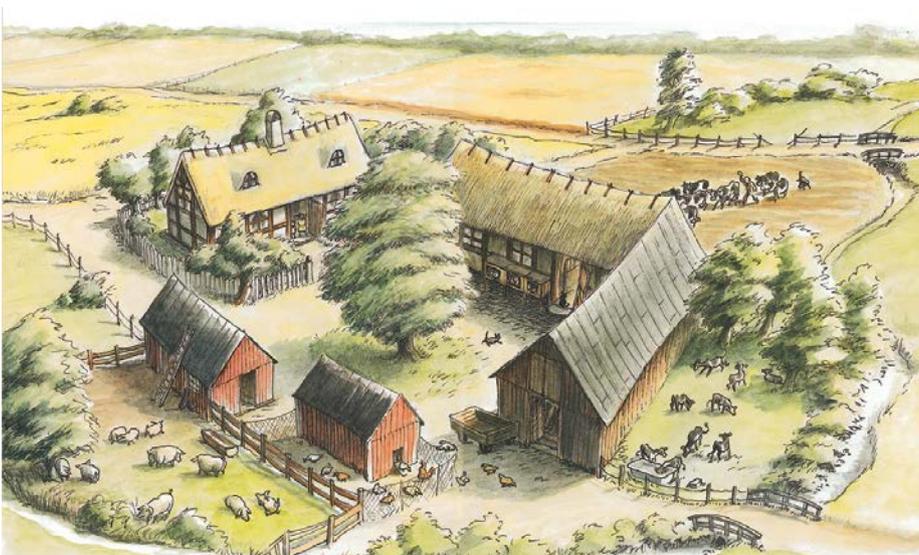


Figure 2. *The Naughty Crow*, pp. 2–3. (Courtesy of Bonnier Books)

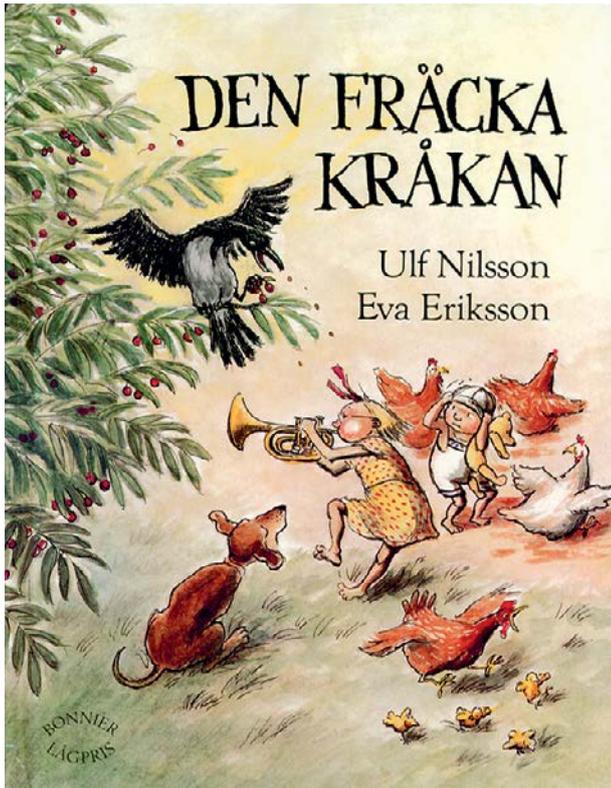


Figure 3. *The Naughty Crow*, cover image. (Courtesy of Bonnier Books)



Figure 4. *The Naughty Crow*, p. 30. (Courtesy of Bonnier Books)

Notes

- 1 Ulf Nilsson and Eva Eriksson. *Den Fräcka Kråkan*. Stockholm: Bonniers Junior Förlag AB, 1985.
- 2 See <http://vallasen.se/om-vallasen/vallasen/#vinterhistorik>, accessed 20 August 2017.
- 3 See Ski Dubai, <https://www.theplaymania.com/skidubai>, accessed 20 August 2017.
- 4 Martin Prominski. "Acknowledging the Anthropocene". In *On the Move: Landscape Architecture Europe #4*, ed. by Lisa Diedrich et al. (Blauwdruk: Wageningen, 2015), pp. 173–177, p. 173.
- 5 Paul Crutzen. "Geology of Mankind." In *Nature* (415, 2002), p. 23.
- 6 Crutzen, "Geology", p. 23.
- 7 A prominent framework within the humanities and social sciences for understanding these entanglements is offered in actor-network theory. The French philosopher Bruno Latour has played a particular role in establishing this way of thinking, see e.g. Bruno Latour. *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- 8 See discussion in e.g. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg's "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative." in *Anthropocene Review* (1:1), pp. 62–69.
- 9 In relation to architecture, see e.g. Dalibor Vesely. *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
- 10 James Graham et al. eds. *Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary*. Bern and New York: The Avery Review and Lars Müller Publishing.
- 11 Other examples of such concepts, despite their differences and degrees of evocative effect, include Timothy Morton's notion of the "hyperobject", Donna Haraway's suggestion of the Chthulucene, and Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter". Timothy Morton. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. Donna Haraway. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kind in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016. Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010.
- 12 Ulf Nilsson and Eva Eriksson. *Den Fräcka Kråkan*.
- 13 Ulf Nilsson and Eva Eriksson. *Den Fräcka Kråkan*, p. 30. *Own translation*.
- 14 See the discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* in Henriette Steiner. "The Earth Does Not Move and the Ground of the City: Towards a Phenomenology of the City." In *Journal of Comparative Cultural Studies in Architecture* (6, 2012), pp. 46–55.

- 15 Ian Hodder. "The Entanglements of Humans and Things: A Long-Term View". In *New Literary History* (45:1, 2014), pp. 19–36.
- 16 Hodder, "Entanglements", p. 19.
- 17 Hodder, "Entanglements", p. 19.

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