**"Re-presenting ruins, visualizing the toxic sublime:**
**Cross-disciplinary collaborations in lens-based art"**

**Conversation proposal**
**VR annual symposium on artistic research 2020**

### *Synopsis*

Bringing together an architectural photographer with scholars from design, history and sociology, this conversation will focus on three questions:
1. What is the place of (architectural) design in generating new political imaginaries?
2. What is the role of lens-based artistic expression in the re-presentation of the present world of political and environmental crisis?
3. What modes of cross-disciplinary collaboration are emerging around these issues?

### *Extended abstract*

Writing in the context of the climate emergency, theorists such as Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers and Anna Tsing have embraced a "post-apocalyptic" position (Latour, Stengers, Tsing & Bubandt, 2018). According to this position, our time is one of apocalypse – that is, we are currently experiencing a kind of revelation. What is being revealed to us is the fact that we are from now on destined to inhabit environments – natural, as well as built environments – that are effectively ruins. For Tsing (2015), we need to learn from other species that prosper in ruin landscapes. Re-imagining our environment in this way may generate new political prospects for the coming decades.

The recent work of these theorists can be understood as efforts to *re*-present our place in the world – through texts, but also through the medium of art. Note, for instance, Latour's regular curating of exhibitions at ZKM in Karlsruhe. Thus, the still-emerging interdisciplinary field of environmental humanities has – to a large degree – gained its popularity through its productive engagement with contemporary art. The ambition to rejuvenate "the sociological imagination" through aesthetics did, nevertheless, emerge before the rise of environmental humanities. (Toscano, 2012)

In their recent essay film, Palmås & Sanner (2020) engages with this overall ambition to re-presenting this new world. Specifically, it pursues the proposition of seeing the ruin as a potential architectural model – and as a potential political imaginary – of the present. This proposition is presented alongside earlier examples of architectural models' connections to political ideas. Thus, the film posits that there is an intimate connection with dominant architectural forms, on the one hand, and socio-political ideas, on the other. It further posits that images and imaginaries are intrinsically tied – indeed, the photographic or cinematographic image act may act as mediator between concrete designs and abstract ideas, between constructions and constructs.

However, while architectural forms serve as powerful metaphors for social imaginaries, and while architectural photography has historically been an effective means of promoting such ideas, it may equally be the case that these devices are becoming obsolete. Phenomena like

climate change and the proliferation of environmental toxins are sometimes described as "hyper objects" beyond our comprehension. (Morton, 2013) Similarly, artists are turning to computer-aided visualisations and simulations, trying to make sense out of the immense spatial and temporal scales involved in these phenomena. (Kane, 2018) Thus, in the efforts to capture this new "toxic sublime", traditional lens-based media are now complemented by digital approaches to visualisation.

This conversation will thus engage with the following questions:

- First, what is the place of architecture – and design, more generally – in providing new models of thought and new political imaginaries? Are concepts like "the ruin" suitable conceptual handles to grasp the present political challenges, or should we look elsewhere for inspiration?
- Secondly, what is the role of artistic expression in this re-presentation of the world, and forging of new political imaginaries? Specifically, what is the role of lens-based media?
- Thirdly, given the interdisciplinary nature of the work described above, what modes of collaboration are emerging? Which types of knowledge, and which forms of experience are produced?

The conversation will be formatted as an online, Zoom-based discussion that starts with interventions from four catalysts – see below for details about these contributors. The 16-minute film *Too Late for History to End* (Palmås & Sanner, 2020) will be available online for participants who wish to see it beforehand.

### *Confirmed catalysts*

Henric Benesch is senior lecturer and vice-dean of faculty at HDK-Valand – Academy of Art and Design, University of Gothenburg. Since 2013 he has worked with the Centre for Critical Heritage Studies (CCHS), running the platform "Curating the city". In the project "Toxic heritage", he is now exploring issues of visibility in the context of socially, culturally and professionally distributed knowledge about environmental toxins in built environments, together with colleagues in film, photography, conservation, social sciences, IT and architecture.

Karl Palmås is a sociologist, and associate professor at the Science, Technology and Society division, Chalmers University of Technology. Palmås researches the relation between the things we think and the things we think, and his primary educational duties are situated in the intersection between the design sciences and social theory. Together with Kalle Sanner, he has produced the essay film *Too Late for History to End*.

Kalle Sanner is an architecture photographer, lecturer and head of unit at Film, Photo, Literary Composition at HDK-Valand – Academy of Art and Design, University of Gothenburg. Together with Karl Palmås, he has produced the essay film *Too Late for History to End*. His most recent monograph is *Lukas/Markus*, which was nominated to the Swedish Photo Book Prize 2019.

Anna Åberg is an historian of technology, and assistant professor at the Science, Technology and Society division, Chalmers University of Technology. Åberg researches and teaches on narratives of the environment and the future in popular culture. While at the KTH

Environmental Humanities Laboratory, she founded an annual film festival on environmental film, bringing researchers, filmmakers, and activists together to explore the creation of environmental knowledge through different mediums and languages.

## *References*

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Morton, T. (2013) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press.

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