



# CIRCUS COMMONS



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**This publication  
was edited  
by Circostrada**

**Since 2003, Circostrada Network has been working to develop and structure the fields of circus and street arts in Europe and beyond. With more than 120 members from over 35 countries, it helps building a sustainable future for these sectors by empowering cultural players through activities in observation and research, professional exchanges, advocacy, capacity-building and information.**



European Network  
Circus and Street Arts



## FOREWORD

After one session in Fossano (Italy), Rotterdam (The Netherlands) and Aix-en-Provence (France), the fourth edition of the CS LAB took place in Cesis (Latvia), from 2 to 4 July, 2019 co-organised with Rigas cirks and consisted in a 3-day experience in an immersive bubble, where participants were hosted in an artistic residency located 100 km away from Riga. The theme tackled this year focused on questioning and reflecting on the circus commons, or to say it differently, how circus and the values it conveys and promotes can feed our professional practices. The desired outcome of this lab was indeed for every participant to experience the circus values by engaging with the practice itself, reflecting on the engagement and sharing their reflections.

As the CS LABs are striving to explore new topics representative of the evolution of the fields of circus and street arts in a changing environment, approaching circus as a practice of “commoning”<sup>1</sup> allowed us to introduce questions around how to digitalise, share, govern and engage with the circus commons.

Facilitated by Olle Salorenta Strandberg, circus director and choreographer with a special interest in self-organisation and the creative process, the CS LAB featured at the same time physical workshops, thematic lectures, collective discussions and thinking.

This publication includes an experience-based testimony by the facilitator of the meeting as well as a set of articles dealing with specific contents explored during the CS LAB. This report complements a short video dedicated to the CS LAB#4 that you can find [here](#).

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<sup>1</sup> “Commoning” as a verb refers to the joint action of negotiating, regulating, and conducting ways of living together with the expectation of mutual care, aid, and benefit.

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© "Chemical Circus", photograph by Rachel Armstrong, Chemistry Outreach Laboratory at Newcastle University, 2016

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# DIARY OF A CS LAB EXPERIENCE

by Olle Saloranta Strandberg & Erik Bordeleau

## Going closer into the LAB

In February 2019, Māra Pāvula, Head of Riga Circus School (Rīgas cirks), contacted Olle Saloranta Strandberg and offered him to lead a 3-day laboratory bringing together participants from the circus field willing to reinvent their practice and flirt with innovative topics. Olle did not know much about the CS LABs by then but got nonetheless intrigued, as he was interested in unfolding new models for how to integrate the whole circus ecosystem. Māra told him that she was assuming artists do have innovative methods for the whole circus sector to learn from and both from interest and as a political statement, she wanted him to be involved, curating the LAB. Not fully grasping the context, Olle started off a bit hesitant but soon realized that curating the CS LAB could be a way for him to offer a truly explorative and creative experience by putting ideas around alternative business models for the circus sector into practice. What follows below is a day-to-day summary of Olle's experience through the CS LAB.



### DAY 1



On the first day I presented a lecture performance for the participants. The Sphere lecture. This was a way to change everyone's expectations of what these days could be. As the lecture performance is quite a complex introduction to how we could rethink business as usual –through distributing resources differently by using the advantages of blockchain technology<sup>1</sup> to formalize and recognize the values of circus (and art in ge-

neral) and change how we look at profit and ownership. Participants' brains started working seriously from the first minute. What is this lab? What is this performance? What is my part in all of this?

Next up we went to Ruckas Manor in Cesis<sup>2</sup>, outside Riga. This was a brand-new place for me and I really appreciated how I never really fully grasped what this place

really was. Reading up on it at their homepage I came to realize that two or three people are running the studio and that it also functions as a residency space. Who these people are is nowhere to be found. There's a Kaspars, a Leva and most likely a Janis. However, we continued the day by introducing ourselves, discussing the values of circus. I found the group of people very diverse and interesting.

<sup>1</sup> Blockchains are decentralized networks that enable people to remotely interact, coordinate and transact value with one another in a secure way. The blockchain is basically a distributed database. Think of a giant, global spreadsheet that runs on millions and millions of computers. It's distributed. It's open source, so anyone can change the underlying code, and they can see what's going on. It's truly peer to peer; it doesn't require powerful intermediaries to authenticate or to settle transactions. (source : <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/technology-media-and-telecommunications/our-insights/how-blockchains-could-change-the-world>)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rucka.lv/en/sample-page/>

The Socratic dialogue <sup>1</sup> later on the first night led to people questioning the actual model. Socratic dialogue. Why should we unite around one answer to this wide question? Why should we even formulate the value? Why should we restrict our thinking according to a model created to fit another

context? Circus practitioners looking outside art for answers to legitimate their existence? Some people were intrigued to see where the Socratic dialogue could lead but some were claiming that consensus is nothing but bad. The discussion around the model was interesting and in some ways answering the

question (what is the value of circus) by not answering the question. Me, as a facilitator was happy with the result. An awkward ambience in the room. When we quit the session a lot of people continued talking about the model, the ambience and the value(s) of circus as evening turned to early morning.



## DAY 2



The second day was more focused on practice and reflection. My aim with this CSLAB was to open up for a much wider notion of what circus is than what I normally recognize in the field. Therefore, I invited Rachel Armstrong and Rolf Hughes to present their current research and share their research

through an interactive workshop. This was followed by a workshop in balancing on wood and we ended the day by reflecting around the workshops we've been through during the day and a final dinner at a beautiful location.



## DAY 3



The third and last day was about finding ways to bring the experience and reflections shared the last couple of days and bring them back to our lives and working places.

Sara de Vylder, producer from Sweden, was invited to lead a discussion using her method of leading through listening and active passivity.



## Post LAB Reflection

The CSLAB#4 was about exploring all aspects of the circus ecosystem and different ways of recognizing new answers to why we work within the circus sphere. As I sit and write this back in Stockholm, a month after

the lab took place, I remember a few days of highly intensive experiences, discussions and meetings where people opened up to new ways of thinking, and acting, making possible new ways of approaching different

aspects of why and how we engage with the circus sphere. And the most beautiful seeds of potentiality, change and the constant process of exploration was planted.

<sup>1</sup> Socratic Dialogue is a design process method built on the idea that we have a life full of habits and assumptions that guide our way of thinking, acting, and feeling. If we want to think differently, we need to step aside of them. Besides, we usually pretend to listen, while we only capture those words that fit in our sequence of thoughts. Socratic Dialogue can be a way of building collaborative and reflective awareness space, in which we practice active listening and the art of collective attention leading to a collaborative mind. This method uses different steps and through each of these, the complexity of the challenges increases. "The final objective is to design a new narrative that is future proof with a steady moral compass, a new narrative that incorporates our values, our purposes and a way to create meaning" (Source: *Co-design and design thinking: a collaborative and envisioning methodology*)

# THE SPHERE

By Olle Saloranta Strandberg & Erik Bordeleau

Lecture performance Sphere presents an alternative business model for the circus ecosystem; opening up new thoughts about how we could distribute circus values, resources, decision-making, using a circus mindset.

## A detailed presentation of the Sphere

The Sphere is a radically innovative peer to peer community platform for self-organisation in the performing arts. It allows for different agents in the performing arts ecosystem - creators, producers, public, venues and a wide range of virtual sympathisers and potential stakeholders - to come together and initiate creative collaborations driven by distributed ledger (or "blockchain" technologies).

As a collaborative emergent infrastructure, the Sphere is a call to experiment and challenge the traditional frameworks of cultural production. In the spirit of the open source movement, the platform enables every agent in the performing arts ecosystem to participate directly in the shaping of new organisational, aesthetic and economic forms. The name of the project captures intuitively this all-encompassing intent: The Sphere is both a new business model and an integrated digital ecosystem for art production.

Inspired by Primavera de Filippi's Plantoid<sup>1</sup>, the Sphere serves as an automated reservoir for capital accumulation - a digital commons -, automatically collecting a percentage of the revenue generated by each performance produced in the ecosystem. When it reaches a certain threshold, the Sphere issues a new performance proposition to randomly selected members. The Sphere thus makes the success of one performance a catalyst for working opportunities for the entire community. It is also possible to plug in and engage with the Sphere



© Illustration: Emma Hanquist

ecosystem with one's own source of funding or in a curatorial mode, benefitting from the Sphere organisational, right management and tracking-value capacities.

The interconnected and self-reproducing digital souls, bundles of smart contracts, coordinating within the Sphere makes for an evolutionary organisation that facilitates both the production of original pieces and the proliferation of derivative works.

While certain characteristics of the Sphere productions are effectively "hard coded" into each performance's DNA (provenance pathways that allow for retrospective valuation and capillary copyright recognition), others are open for artistic and organisational in-

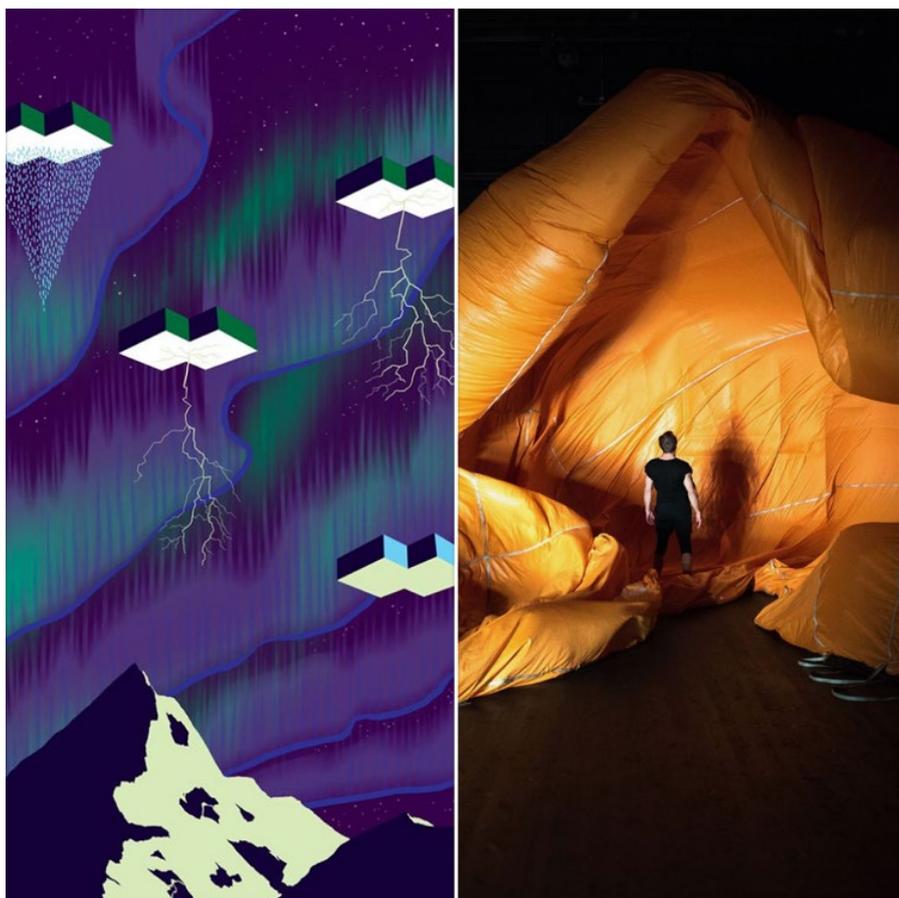
terpretation. In this way, active members of a Sphere performance's DPO - its distributed governing team - can decide where it is exhibited and presented, the way it looks or is experienced, etc. And since the digital soul and its upcoming generations may work globally, artists from all over the world can eventually be engaged to create performances anywhere.

On a technical level, the blockchain-based infrastructure of the Sphere is the site of three major breakthroughs:

- 1. It ensures trustable and granular data lineage and provenance, allowing for secure, ethical and resilient network-based value-tracking and p2p transactions;
- 2. Its native crypto-token - the Sphere token - creates the possibility for liquid ownership and dynamic governance structure that facilitate the distribution of power to all agents on the platform;
- 3. The platform architecture is designed for robust scalability, favoring transnational collaborations and work dissemination, all the while protecting the local autonomy of the work and resisting the standardization of content.

Taking the circus community as a starting point but extending easily to other cultural fields, the Sphere is one of the first examples of crypto-scalable commons, a term for the visionary new mode of organisation that promises to transform network-based value production. It leads the way toward new sustainable models of redistribution of the risks and opportunities of living - in a world that gestures ever more strongly beyond limited profit-taking enterprises.

<sup>1</sup> The Plantoid Project: <https://okhaos.com/plantoids/>



The Sphere is, all in all a new organisational and economic model. It enables a radical shift in the way we conceive of and manage copyrights and intellectual property in the performing art ecosystem and beyond, that is: how we (an)archive<sup>1</sup>, express and organize ourselves around artistic propositions and ideas. By leveraging the capacity to register each and everyone's contribution to a given creative process, by setting attractors for our own collective behaviors through the design of fair and stimulating socio-financial incentives, the Sphere represents nothing less than a new model of value production - a new economic space -, fostering a spirit of speculative generosity by making the potential success of one performance a catalyst for the entire community.

An important aspect to keep in mind is that while creating a community for performing arts agents - with contemporary circus as the starting point - the whole model becomes a case for how to create autonomous web 3.0 communities using distributed fractal ownership and blockchain technology. It is a practical example that can easily be applied to other communities with similar or divergent interests.

## Why The Sphere?

We're all influenced and inspired by circus. One of our key starting points is a shared frustration with existing models for organising artistic production. Circus artists creativity is often limited by inflexible infrastructures that suffer systemic inertia, restrict artistic expression and waste resources. We felt the need to propose an alternative organising system that distributes power differently between actors and incentivises artistic inventiveness. New forms of art can thus arise, and inefficient bureaucracy is avoided.

The other main starting point relates to circus as an artform and its current reception. As contemporary circus artists and

innovators, we're part of a movement where interdisciplinary, global and experimental work are essential parts of the practice. Nevertheless, the expanded notion of what contemporary circus could be is often held back. We have an urge to experiment with the art production framework itself. This is what brings us to imagine business models meeting artful propositions, pondering in tandem on their joint landing point<sup>2</sup>.

We didn't know at all where this exploration process would end up at first; we approached the blockchain space as a new circus discipline - mapping different possible approaches, techniques

and entry points to somehow interact with this hard-to-grasp apparatus. As we started to choreograph different economic flows and build an understanding of how the circus ecosystem could benefit from our design, we didn't fully grasp the full potential of the meeting between these two forms of expression. Little by little new ideas and possibilities started to unfold. What we finally had in front of us was something that potentially could change the way we engage with our artworks, how we share and contribute to each other's concepts and ideas. But that wasn't enough. We also saw a way to include every actor in the whole ecosystem - the artists, the audiences, the

<sup>1</sup> Senselab on anarchiving: <http://senselab.ca/wp2/immediations/anarchiving/anarchive-concise-definition/>

<sup>2</sup> On how artists drawn to the blockchain for realizing their project happen to launch art-ventures along the way, see Ben Luke, "Artists as Crypto-financiers: Welcome to the Blockchain", The Art Newspaper, June 13th 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/feature/artists-as-cryptofinanciers-welcome-to-the-blockchain>

venues, the producers, the potential investors and sympathisers - at the level of decision-making, funding and production.

What other curatorial models could be invented?

Could audiences of dreamers and publics of interest be invited to participate in the propositional stage of an art project?

And could they all benefit from the new radiance of a circus culture that is actively involved in its own reinvention?

*"The circus arts are a young and dynamic art field, offering an alternative vision of contemporary artistic creation. Presented in black boxes, traditional theatres, tents, or in the public space, contemporary circus has the capacity to attract new audiences and touch the diversity of individual and collective sensitivities at work in our societies. [...] Relying on the talent of highly trained professionals but being also a popular cultural practice and a socially engaged sector, the circus arts have the capacity to contribute to a variety of local development objectives but also to question mainstream opinions and institutionalised policy choices. At the crossroads of different artforms, and more flexible in its structure and operations than other sectors, the circus arts have the capacity to invent or contribute*



© Photo by Mats Bäcker

*to original partnerships, within or beyond the cultural sector."*<sup>1</sup>

We as circus artists are constantly practicing calculated risk-taking, common trust and creative adaptation to changes in the environment. We are used to work together with people of different disciplines, backgrounds and intentions. We know how to not only represent our visions but rather fully engage with them. Circus is the art of presenting the vision. The art of doing. We have come to realize that the meeting with the blockchain technology also invites us to

fully grasp the art of decision-making. We do not shy to work in the unknown, collaborating with technologists, researchers, economists, philosophers and other artists in our journey towards a new contemporary circus expression, where our work with or against gravity meet experimental economic and organisational choreographies. The Sphere is a new business model created by circus artists, showing Europe and the world an alternative way of creating radical and relevant contemporary circus work and beyond.



**Olle Saloranta Strandberg** is a circus director and choreographer. He is chairman of Manegen, a Swedish national member organisation for circus, variety and street performance. Olle is an educated circus artist from the circus pilots (2002-2005) and holds an MFA in direction and dramaturgy for movement-based performing arts. He is a former acrobat and juggler and used to be an artistic director and artistic project manager for the Swedish company Cirkus Cirkör, 2011-2018, where he established Cirkör LAB (Cirkör's residence and artistic research department). In the self-organisation and the productivity sphere, Olle is a licensed trainer in GTD (Getting Things Done), Scrum master, Holacracy Practitioner and licensed trainer for the 12 Week Year.

<sup>1</sup> Circostrada Network, "European Capitals of Culture and Circus Art" "The way ahead: recommendations to circus stakeholders, ECOC teams, and policymakers"

# BECOMING MULTIPLE: THE CONCEPT OF THE UNIT OF EMBODYING

By Rachel Armstrong

By viewing different forms of organisation through the lens of the natural world, CS LAB participants were introduced to different ways of thinking about the body: from the soft “machines” of modern science to collectivist collaborations between bodies. Led by Rachel Armstrong, Rolf Hughes and Madara Garklāva, they embarked on a workshop dedicated to the notion of “embodying” and explored new ways of understanding bodies through physical interaction as individuals, within partnerships and through group work.

Our systems of organisation deeply shape the way we imagine and inhabit the world. The *Becoming Multiple* workshop considered different forms of organisation viewed through the principles of life, whose understanding greatly affects our expectations. The prevalent view held by modern science is the Modern Synthesis that regards organisms as soft “machines” made up of a hierarchical system of molecular “parts”, which are coordinated by each cell’s genes. In recent years, alternative ways of understanding creatures have come to light that are more inclusive and equitable. Such Post-Modern Synthesis suggests we are far less individual than previously supposed and that life’s diversity is forged by all kinds of collaborations between other bodies, which deeply complicates its nature.

The *Becoming Multiple* workshop examined some of these perspectives during a workshop that took participants on a journey of “embodying”, where they could interrogate the idea of being a body in an evolutionary process. Starting off with an understanding of their own self-awareness through an awakening of all their senses, they then sought proximity to “other” bodies through the *Third Thing*, the point at which a body becomes conscious of another without directly touching. Such forms of organisation make a transition from individual existence to colonial lifestyles. In nature these are witnessed through the magnificent morphological diversity of siphonophores, which are made up of many physiologically integrated “zooids”, which have a particular structure but can only completely function

fully in relationship to all the other bodies. Siphonophores challenge us to think about what we mean when we call something an “individual” by suggesting this can be achieved through “ecological” relationships. Inherent to this way of living and working together is an *ethics of difference*. By ente-

bodiments that functioned as new “wholes”. These symbionts, beings whose lives are entangled, have partial knowledge of the entirety of the complete “organism” itself. Combining with “others”, the limits and freedoms enabled by becoming multiple led towards the group becoming a superorganism, a



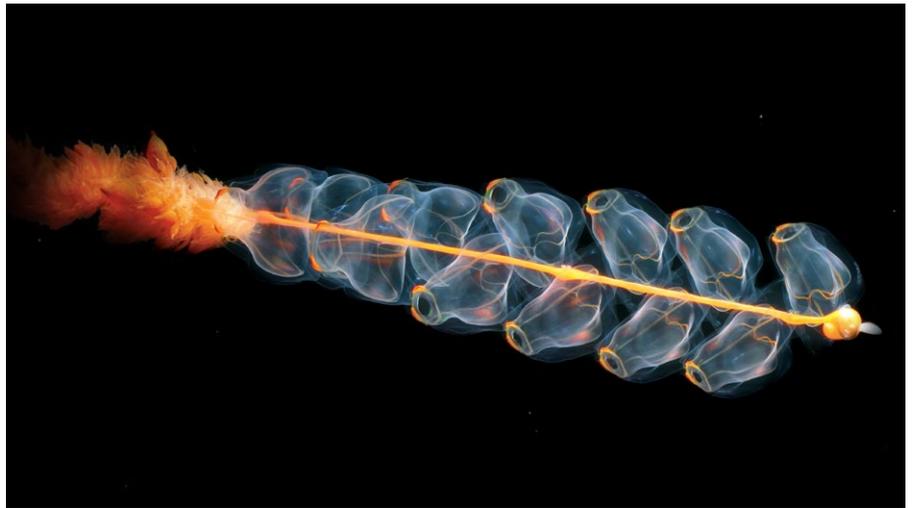
ring into this space of “otherly” embodiment, participants could directly experience how such forms of proximate interaction could encourage alternative forms of identity and mutual recognition between unlike bodies (some of which were nonhuman like soil and trees), which empathised, moved and worked together without fusing, leading to new concepts for community and organisation.

In the workshops that followed, bodies were first paired then compiled to generate em-

group of synergistically interacting beings that make up a single body. Just as participants became familiar with these rulesets of living together, they were invited to take a walk into the world. At this point the collective body began to physically experience when and why such bodies “fall apart”. These “embodying” exercises were repeated within site-specific context, where freedoms, deceptions and restrictions were placed upon the “superorganism”. Partially, yet collectively, the participant “superorganism” explored the

relationship between place, behaviour and ways of experiencing the world.

Rather than hierarchical notions of working, the *Being Multiple* workshop emphasised the importance of “others” and “difference” in our living together, where our own limits and reliances are appreciated and valued. In biological terms, this intimate notion of interdependency is being increasingly understood as “holobiont”, an assemblage of different species that form “whole” ecological units. Becoming stable and persistent communities these modes of organisation are conducive with a rich and vibrant lifestyle. Empowered and enlivened through innate connections, linkages, symbioses, and networks, such translocations of identity within the *nature of living and being* enable altered perspectives of selfhood and



© Siphonophores such as *M. orthocanna* are often called “superorganisms”.  
Courtesy, of NQAA National Marine Fisheries.

community through radically extended and interconnected bodies that enable us to make different kinds of choices together in our ever-evolving world.



**Rachel Armstrong** is Professor of Experimental Architecture at the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University. Her work choreographs matter through space and time, where alternative kinds of living systems to the biology we know, are possible.

# CHANGING THE WORLD: WORKSHOPPING THE THIRD THING

By Rolf Hughes

Changing the world begins with a changed mindset, a willingness to transform experience. One way of beginning this process is through *experience prototyping*, a means of initiating an *iterative experimental process* such that *epistemic things* and *experiences* become evident. In common with experimental systems more generally, this is less a means of problem-solving, than a *vehicle for materialising and complexifying values*.

The “age of entanglement”, the “eco-cene”, the “era of hyper-complexity” all require new ways of exploring *poetic knowing* – *seeing connections within spooky entanglements*.

Rachel Armstrong and I boarded a plane and arrived in Latvia for a workshop held as part of CS Lab #4 on 2-4 July 2019. We were met at Rigas Cirks by Madara Garklāva, who became part of our workshop team, specialising in somatics and dance.

We introduced the participating circus artists to the concept of *the third thing* – this being understood as the intangible charge captured at the optimum moment of creative and epistemic tension.<sup>1</sup> It can be as simple as sensing the heat of another person’s skin when suspended (without touching) in close proximity, learning to move together while protecting this delicate (non) space. It can be augmented by the addition of other bodies and skins to the original pairing, creating monster forms of fragile co-operation (which yet respect the collective *third thing*). This monstrous assembly can then be invited to navigate a space, indoors or outdoors, and create *third thing* relationships with non-human encounters – tree bark, walls, arches – making allies of environmental actors and obstacles. Such encounters can shape our understanding of the conditions of life on an ecologically stressed planet, helping us



construct value landscapes – environments in which shared values can be meaningfully configured. The workshop constructs narratives and micro-experiences that interrogate the slippages between observation and expectation to question causal inferences, language logics, forms of collaboration, proximity, kinship, thinking, feeling, and *value*.

How materially rich yet phenomenological-ly strange are our waking experiences and

dreams! They extrude hyper-complexity – events woven into environments of massive scales in which hyper-objects (weather, dust clouds, communication systems) immerse us to the point where an external overview becomes impossible. Their heterogeneity and inconstancy become part of the unpredictable conditions of daily life, teaching us that modernity’s machines and myths of mastery cannot compete with the fascinating, engaging, enchanting and, as yet, unwritten stories of the Ecocene.



**Rolf Hughes** is a poet and director of artistic research for the Experimental Architecture Group. He develops new transdisciplinary practices spanning architecture, art, craft, design, and performing arts. He was previously Head of Research and Professor of Artistic Research at Stockholm University of the Arts.

<sup>1</sup> I first heard the term in a workshop I attended entitled “Intuition in Action” in Stockholm, November 2016, held by the actor and director Stephen Rappaport. “The third thing” – the unspoken charge in the space between performer and fellow-performer, or between performer(s) and audience – became both the practical challenge to capture and safeguard across a range of movements the heat between two participants – who were strangers to each other – while avoiding any form of physical contact.