



# Vertigo

A Letter by  
Hanna Laura Kaljo

Dear L

Thank you for your letter.

The final days of the year were transient and grey-skied, the metropolis humming, restless. I followed the shaded, muddy paths that meander through the Heath, the rare 320 hectares of woodland and meadows near our home at the rim of central London, and savoured the beauty of decomposition. I saw the spiky leaves of young holly trees turn silver, wilting ferns and the silhouette of a tiny blackbird against the crescent moon at sunset.

I haven't always appreciated the murky palette of winter nor the elongated nights that cradle it. I've grown receptive to its aesthetic.

You may have come across the work of the Dutch landscape designer Piet Oudolf and the year-round seasonality of his designs that honour vegetation in passage. If a garden were a magnifying glass upon how we humans negotiate our relationship to the wider natural world, the becoming and undoing of which we too, of course, are a part, then Oudolf's winter gardens are one to amplify and advocate for the aesthetic value of nature at rest. They invite us to attune to the aliveness that stirs in stillness, in dormancy.

There's a line in the philosopher Luce Irigaray's book *Through Vegetal Being* that, five winters ago, evoked affinity. She writes that Western culture favours brightness and visible productions, whilst it does not value, perhaps even fears, the dark or the hidden. On my own pages, I extended this to the art sector, its emphasis on public-facing output, and, in the scarce yet sharp winter light, contemplated the art of exhibition-making as one of unveiling.

Irigaray notes that within such a culture: “the secret germination of plants and even that of a human being are not assessed as it would be worthy of them. They bear witness to the fecundity of the sap in the darkness of the soil, or of a womb, and the fact that appearing amounts only to a part of the growth of life”. How would a fair assessment of this phase, surely integral to the creative cycle as a whole, inform the work of those who tend to creativity in others and in themselves? What if the cultural sector were concerned with the dignified development of a human being through the arts, including their social and environmental dimensions, beyond all else?

You wrote about what continues to call upon your attention: the connection between planetary and human exhaustion. This appears to be the flip side of the above-mentioned question, which I began thinking about around the time Irigaray’s writing first made its way into my hands.

I was interested in the reciprocity between the human capacity for meaningful creativity and environmental processes, something I now understand as a relational perspective that holds creativity as a distributed phenomenon. This interest arose, in part, from being in conversation with artists over the years. It led me to wonder if the environments we inhabit, especially but not exclusively those of our formative years, in turn come to inhabit us as a “vocabulary” through which we think, feel, imagine and create. Is this what shapes our aesthetic, artistic sensibilities or do these develop over a lifespan? What about the ethics of the ways in which we give shape to environments through these creative acts? A cascade of further questions followed.

I turned my attention to the Nordic-Baltic region, especially drawn to understanding how these questions related to the harsh climatic conditions of the far north. That same year,

five winters ago, I had the opportunity to spend time in Northern Sweden. It was there, across the Arctic Circle, that I acquired a “vocabulary” to apprehend the – globally distributed – concept of the “planetary mine”. This is a metaphor, originally from Mazen Labban, used by the likes of Sverker Sörlin, the Swedish Professor of Environmental History, to speak about our current, extractivist world. Perhaps here, in the neglect of the value of nature at rest, lie the feeble yet stubborn roots of exhaustion as you frame it.

In November 2018, alongside a group of artists and art workers from Norrbotten, the northernmost county, I followed a long stretch of tarmac highway, edged with brittle, ravaged birch trees, through the open plains of the tundra. We arrived in Kiruna, a town built around the largest iron ore mine in the world, at midday as the sun was setting.

There, across a boundless valley, where the land had folded upon itself, a black temple, a mountain of iron, was swallowing a burning star. As the sun sunk into the open mouth of the mine, a tender red glow lingered on the wounded horizon for a moment.

The following morning, in the ivory breakfast hall on the fifth floor of the hotel with a view onto the mine, a colleague suddenly confessed:

“Ever since we arrived, I’ve had vertigo.”

Throughout the restaurant, an image of a broken body of Earth glimmered on the retinas of guests engaged in their breakfast.

Indeed, with each passing moment, the exhausted mountain neighbouring the town was diminishing, slowly

collapsing into its internal hollow over a thousand metres deep. Whilst it devoured itself, taking the town with it, a golden tower was rising towards the sky on a site three kilometres east. The latter was the new town centre, a place of resettlement, for escaping the ground being swept from beneath the inhabitants' feet due to over-mining.

Later that day, families were gathering in the new town hall. Parents, some Swedish, some Sami, guided their children onto wide steps where an avid music teacher attempted to arrange the young into respectable rows. Despite the teacher's effort, the rows swayed in ebb and flow. I saw the children's curious gazes wander across the sleek surfaces of new furniture, the winding wrinkles of a mother's face, the melting snow underneath their shoes and the slow passing of clouds above the skylight.

As they opened their mouths, air journeyed upward through the tunnels of small throats across tender vocal chords. When harmony appeared, it quickly disintegrated. "What lies in their future?" I thought to myself. A large clock kept time on the side of the building, counting 1.8 billion years since the rocks holding the iron ore deposits were formed.

After sunset, the Konstmuseet i Norr, the Norrbotten County Art Museum, also housed in the new town hall, hosted a series of talks as part of their first exhibition *Transitions*. Among the presenters was Bolatta Silis-Høegh, an Inuk artist born in Qaqortoq, Greenland, to a local mother and a Latvian father.

She too addressed mankind's exploitation of natural resources, with examples of work from her previous exhibition *Lights On Light Off* at Nuuk Kunstmuseum, a series of dark and affective paintings. She spoke of the physical reaction she suffered to the reversal of Greenland's zero-tolerance policy regarding uranium mining, in response to which these works were made.

“I stayed for two days in bed with headaches and fatigue,” she revealed.

She had then picked up the paintbrush and, two months later, her studio was filled with deep, dark shades, spat out by a kind of therapeutic reckoning with the impending consequences of the decision on the people and the land she, too, was made from.

Based in Denmark, Silis-Høegh grew up in South Greenland, where sheep farming collided with the Kuannersuit uranium-mining project. Due to radioactive contamination, the distribution of these sheep would have spread illness to further bodies. Consequently, through her artistic practice, she came to consider the effects on the emotional landscape of the body when the land, upon which one’s community depends, is harmed. Her paintings depict her scarred naked body with the barren Greenlandic terrain as its background.

Extractivism first emerged with European colonial expansion five hundred years ago. It is not limited to minerals and oils, Sörlin and colleagues tell us. Naomi Klein, too, expands the definition of extractivism to include social and relational dimensions: “it is also the reduction of human beings... into labor to be brutally extracted, pushed beyond limits”.

This, I believe, is produced by the same frame of mind that Irigaray was pointing to, one who values productivity but neglects the relational and temporal nuances of life and of creativity. It is a modus operandi that, Sörlin writes, is especially hard to deal with since it also brings profit to the exploiters and wealth and sovereignty to states and thus, until recently, it has been considered largely virtuous.

The “planetary mine” is ubiquitous, complex and may

condition our most intimate views and actions, expectations towards ourselves and others. It may even have something to do with our (in)ability to slow down, to choose an appropriate pace, as well as to perceive the value and aesthetic of nature at rest, of wintering, beyond ourselves.

“You have a Latvian pencil stroke but with Arctic colours,”

someone had said to Silis-Høegh when she first came to exhibit in Latvia.

“Everything is somehow connected,”

she reflected on the comment.

Through painting, Silis-Høegh turned to the murky soil of emotions and paved a way to relating to the issue at hand, which, I expect, served her and her community.


Her practice, like that of many native and non-native artists, shows the porousness between human emotions, creativity, policy and environmental health. There, at the end of November, her story was that of South Greenland, but also Kiruna and those of us in the room. We shared the vertigo brought on by a planetary unravelling.

Living in an age of extractivism, how do we begin to compose a cultural sector that is attentive to the vital phase of dormancy – the potent silence between notes – within a creative process, the development of a human being, alongside valuing productivity?

Creativity, through the technology of the arts, is able to reach into the otherwise shaded places of the life we share. We can tend to it with respect, like Oudolf would in a winter garden. It's a temporal aesthetic.

Yours,  
Hanna Laura Kaljo





Commissioned as part of *Get Well Soon (prologue)*,  
an exhibition curated by Lucy Lopez at Ormston  
House, Limerick, November 2023 - February 2024