

# Dark Ecology — Outside the Comfort Zone

Interview with  
Arie Altena  
Gideon Kiers  
Hilde Methi  
Lucas van der Velden  
Annette Wolfsberger

by Mirna Belina



This is the transcript of an interview with the curators and organisers of the Dark Ecology project: Arie Altena (AA), Gideon Kiers (GK), Hilde Methi (HM), Lucas van der Velden (LV) and Annette Wolfsberger (AW). All of them answered the same questions; most of them did so separately. The answers were compiled into the following text through a collaborative editing process.

**MB** What is Dark Ecology? Could you explain both the term and the project?

**LV** Dark Ecology brings together a set of ideas and ingredients that accumulated over the years in our own projects with Sonic Acts and the personal interests of the people involved. With Sonic Acts we've always been investigating research-driven and experience-based art, as well as interdisciplinary and experimental forms of art and their connections with science and philosophy. We've been investigating new forms of presentation, and new infrastructures to create new experiences, both intellectual and physical. We've done a lot of location-specific projects over the years, mostly indoors. With Dark Ecology we invite artists to go outdoors and investigate the natural and industrial landscape and create site-specific works for these environments. The project also brought more urgency to our activities. The nature of the project forces us to interact and engage in a more direct way with the world, because of its theoretical implications and the geographic and social and political challenges. Dark Ecology functions first and foremost as a catalyst for research, ideas, the development of new artworks, setting an agenda, and connecting artists with theorists and scientists. We foster an artist-driven approach to the discussion around the Anthropocene by organising residencies and commissions and by providing artists with an academic and theoretical framework.

**AA** We borrowed the term 'dark ecology' from Timothy Morton. What I find interesting about this concept is that it is so outspoken in stating that we need to think ecology without the ideal notion of Nature with a capital N. Ecology is about connections, it's a mesh (and a mess). It isn't about going back to some originally pure natural state. It does not conceive of the world as an environment that human beings are 'in'. Various interconnected actors, both human and nonhuman, are caught up together in a process of

world-making. Dark ecology takes this interconnectedness seriously, and thinks it through. In the modern view, nature is a background on which the history of human culture unfolds. In a non-modern view (to use the Latourian term) these strict divides — which have characterised the modern worldview — do not exist. Also, dark ecology takes as its point of departure that the 'apocalypse' (namely the devastation of our planet, and our human civilization through human-induced climate change) has already happened. If we accept this, it means we can grieve, and go on. That's an interesting proposal for art. It's about finding new ways to connect.

**HM** I would say Dark Ecology is a collaborative curatorial effort that takes time to dig deep into the Earth's crust, and make things speak. It is about forming a microcosmos and a community of thinkers and doers who care for a shared planetary space, a micro-reality that can spread and infiltrate into other realities, and ways of thinking about and being in the world. Dark Ecology is about seeing, listening, acting and reflecting art and theory.

**MB** How did it start and why?

**AW** It started in 2012 with Per Platou from PNEK introducing Sonic Acts to Hilde Methi after we visited Kirkenes and the factories in Nikel. Coincidentally, it turned out that Arie had been interested in that area for a long time, and knew quite a bit about the Barents Region.

**AA** The project took shape during our first visit to the Barents Region in May 2012. We were standing in the black snow at the edge of the road above Nikel, looking down on the town and the smelter with its pipes belching coloured smoke. (It is the 'official photo spot' where tourists stop — but we didn't know this.) We were amazed by the industrial landscape, the heavy industry and the pollution in the middle of the beautiful nature of the Pasvik Valley. I'd been reading Timothy Morton's books *Ecology without Nature* (2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010), and I thought: 'Eat your heart out, Timothy Morton, *this* is dark ecology!' So how to deal with this? A lot of intimate connections that we have (with pollution, with metals, with industry, with nature) and which are pretty much hidden in our 'smart' Western cities are very much in your face there. It's immediately clear there is no such thing as a nice, smart, clean, green solution to all



Top—Area close to Kirkenes Airport, Høybuktmøen. Photo by Konstantin Guz, 2014. Middle—Sydvaranger mine, Kirkenes. Photo by Marijn de Jong, 2014. Bottom—Kirkenes harbour. Photo by Konstantin Guz, 2014.

our problems (and certainly not a smart technological solution). It's complex. It's messy. Black snow exists — it's not a rare thing.

**LV** Dark Ecology started because several strands we'd been working on fell into place. With Sonic Acts we'd been investigating Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology as part of our Dark Matter research, and we wanted to do something with Timothy Morton and others in this area of theory and philosophy. But until we visited Kirkenes and Nikel we hadn't found the right context for it.

**HM** I liked Sonic Acts' curatorial work and through conversations and mutual visits since 2012 we developed a basis for working together here in the North. There was a mutual interest in developing our experience in curating and producing site-responsive artworks. This specific Northern region on the border between Norway and Russia — a periphery with a small population and few or no infrastructures for art — invites artistic works and interventions outdoors or in unusual spaces that are not the ordinary black box or white cube. For me it has been important that the commissioned and produced artworks are shown *in* the area rather than having the area exported as material in works presented elsewhere, in very different contexts. The commissions are different from what has been shown here before — and that is where Sonic Acts has been a great partner, with its background in interdisciplinary arts, science and technology, and its networks.

**AW** It also provided a great opportunity to work outside the white cube and present, produce and negotiate artistic ideas in this area. For Sonic Acts, it has created an opportunity to expand and test its ideas in a new territory and in a new collaboration with the experience of having curated a festival abroad (the Kontraste Festival in Austria from 2011 to 2013).

**MB** What did each of you hope to expand or explore with Dark Ecology?

**AA** For me Dark Ecology meant I could 'activate' within Sonic Acts an interest that I had pursued in, for instance, Science and Technology Studies, Actor-Network Theory, Object-Oriented Ontology, and political theory. Bruno Latour's work was very inspiring, and it certainly changed a lot of my ideas. This interest was always somewhere in the background of

what I was doing with Sonic Acts, never in the foreground. In this project the challenge of reformulating what nature is, how we relate to the world, what ecology is, and what type of ecological thinking we need in the face of climate change, and the devastation of the Earth through neoliberal capitalism, became more central. These issues have been absorbed into the Anthropocene debate, which has put climate change on the map for art, and where interestingly it's the humanities and the arts that are most articulate in bringing forward this idea of living in a new geological age. The question is also: how do we adapt (as humans, psychologically) to 'living after the apocalypse' so to say, or living in the Anthropocene. When I reread Latour's *Politics of Nature* (2004) after reading Morton, I found that a lot of Morton's ideas of an 'ecology without Nature' that were so vivid in my head, were also formulated, in a slightly different way, by Latour.

**LV** The current situation in the world — the scientification and financialisation of everything, the geopolitical and ecological crises, and the impact human activity has on the entire planet — throws very big questions at us as individual actors and in many ways leaves us completely in the 'dark'. With this project we want to make these huge abstractions more tangible, physical and experience-based. In many ways the Barents Region is a place where the complexity of the 'now' is very real and can be experienced first-hand, as it is part of this complex multi-layered system of geopolitics, resource extraction, Arctic nature, industry, and indigenous, European and Russian cultures. So for me Dark Ecology is very much about the 'now' and how we can present experimental art and forward-thinking theory in such a context and maybe come up with some new approaches to it.

**MB** How does working in a border zone influence the project?

**GK** Growing up in Europe in a period when a common goal seemed to be to become 'borderless' — with a free flow of people, goods, services, culture and ideas across former divides — the present resurrection of borders throughout Europe and between Europe and its neighbouring countries is a very physical sign of the times. We seem to have entered a time of fear, and bells of much darker times that were not so long ago can be heard ringing all across Europe again.



Top left—Panorama of Nickel. Photo by Nicky Assmann, 2015. Top right—Tree on a hill close to the Norilsk Nickel processing plant. Photo by Lucas van der Velden, 2012. Middle—Panorama of Nickel. Photo by Marijn de Jong, 2014. Bottom—Dark Ecology participants arriving by bus at the main square in Nickel. Photo by Konstantin Guz, 2014.



Antenna between Nikel and Zapolyarny, Russia.  
Photo by Annette Wolfsberger, 2012.



Top—On the road between Nikel and Murmansk. Photo by Lucas van der Velden, 2015. Middle—Propeller graveyard in Murmansk harbour. Photo by Rosa Menkman, 2015. Bottom—Panorama of Murmansk from the feet of the Alyosha, a 35.5-metre-high statue overlooking the city. Its full name is 'Monument of the Defenders of the Soviet Arctic during the Great Patriotic War'. Photo by Rosa Menkman, 2015.

This makes these regions a particularly difficult terrain to navigate, also in a spiritual sense. There's a strong urgency to act defiantly while at the same time it is vital for the success of this project and the wellbeing of the travelling party to remain respectful at all times. This is a delicate balance that sometimes seems impossible to maintain.

**LV** In a way Dark Ecology is also an attempt at 'unbordering'. Making and doing on a very small and personal level (not a political or bureaucratic level), using the region as a reflection device for testing new approaches and ideas to understand the world in a different way.

**HM** Making this border zone into a temporary space for artistic intervention is in my view more important than talking about the border or provoking the border regimes. It's about being present and about insisting on the ability of art to direct our senses, make us listen and see. The 'activism' of Dark Ecology is to expose and cultivate the poetical, to stimulate reflection and conversations in, and from, this highly political territory.

**MB** Dark Ecology experiments with the 'festival' format. For one, it involves 'curating the audience'. Could you share some ideas about the concept of 'the Dark Ecology Journey'?

**GK** Indeed, we carefully handpick a group of about 50 people for these Journeys. Roughly two thirds consists of people we invite ourselves: artists who are presenting a new work or who come along to think about and work on a new piece, keynote speakers, our Sonic Acts team, the production crew, a documentation crew, and so on. The remaining one third is selected from a list of applicants who respond to our open call. Some are curators, some are artists, some are academics, some are scientists, some are activists, and some are organisers. These people are the only ones who experience the entire Journey. Most of the events we programme along the way are open to the local public as well. Although not necessarily conceived as such, it is my experience that our bright red and yellow tour bus and its very peculiar load are often as much a spectacle for the local audience as the artworks and performances that are presented, usually for the duration of the visit only. It is therefore not entirely clear to me who the audience actually is. But in terms of people experiencing the Journey in its

entirety, I'd say the audience is the travelling party. And in that sense I think it's almost the perfect festival; as organisers we get to create a 120-hour experience from which the audience is unable to escape.

**AW** I think that 'being there' acts as a multiplying factor for the participants; it makes one more vulnerable, more perceptive, opens up one's thinking... Travelling as a group makes it possible to create a temporary 'safe' zone for an intense exchange and discussion triggered by the environment and even more by the works and interventions. In my conversation with Alicia Cohen during the first Journey, I called this 'curating intimacy'. Because of this intimacy it is especially important to be precise and accurate in what you present and how you do it. At times, the project feels like a luxury. Not in a 'package-deal-Hurtigruten way' but in the sense that it creates and ring fences time and space for experiencing, thinking and discussion. It confronts and exposes both the local and nonlocal public with art and ideas that fall outside their comfort zone, and therefore it creates a much more intense experience than a normal festival setting 'at home' could ever provide. Due to its size, length, location, et cetera, the Journeys invite experimentation with format and content. I wouldn't even call it a festival. Dark Ecology is about curating the experience of the audience, and is about mediation. The other challenge is not to become too speculative, especially in 'discovering' the region, its venues and its obvious extremes. It requires going beyond impressive factories, mines and towering smokestacks, beyond visible pollution, and it's about discovering more layers of reality. The area and our topic can easily turn into a cultural 'dark tourism project', and that is definitely not what we want.

**HM** It's an insider-outsider perspective that we discuss constantly. It's about being in dialogue and listening to 'the local' while not compromising our curatorial ideas — maybe a 'detour in the local'. Most of the elements of each Dark Ecology Journey were public, but indeed 'curating an audience' is also what we do. In that case, the audience is the participants and the participants are the audience. The format is a hybrid; it could serve as a proposition for a research-driven format for art that can work at the periphery (both geographically and artistically) and in a local setting, and also in larger artistic contexts. From a curatorial perspective I

think that experimenting and working in more peripheral settings is *per se* about inventing new formats.

**LV** We don't present Dark Ecology as a festival, but you're correct, it is in many ways an experimental festival format. We have of course a long background in curating festivals in the Netherlands, and also with the Kontraste Festival in Austria. With Sonic Acts we have always tried to approach the 'festival format' as an experimental system. From very early on our own discussions about the festival were in terms of a 'journey' and a 'curated experience'. So for us the Dark Ecology project fits in with this line of format experiments. For most people our festivals in Amsterdam are about the actual event, and we see the same thing happen with the Dark Ecology Journey. But I think the residencies, the commissions and the research before, during and after, are equally important. This is especially the case with Dark Ecology, and with the longer running collaborations and exchanges that originate in these 'festivals'.

**MB** Could you talk about challenges of organising such a project?

**AW** There are many; it is a challenging project. Acknowledging differences and overcoming borders in all senses: cultural, linguistic, social, geopolitical, economic, ecological, and artistic; time restraints; dealing with translating and negotiating 'the other'. There are many dichotomies to deal with: outside versus inside, visitor versus local, West versus East, to name a few.

**HM** I think working with Dark Ecology has made it more clear to me that the relationship between curation and production is blurred when working within a complicated reality without the 'protection' of a physical space. I enjoy seeing how landscapes, surroundings and sometimes even bureaucratic issues are negotiated and taken up in an artwork. Together with the encounters between the audiences, the participants, the lectures, the in-between moments, the practicalities — all these become an organic mix where everything filters into everything else as if there were no clear endings or beginnings.

**AW** I embrace this — indeed the Journey is a 'Gesamtkunstwerk'.

**GK** As Hilde points out, the 'trap' of doing these logistically complex projects is that the effort of overcoming those challenges somehow becomes the experience of the Journey itself. I think our real challenge is to enable ourselves as organisers as well as our fellow travellers to move beyond



Panorama of Murmansk and its harbour, taken from the hill overlooking the city. Photo by Telcosystems, 2015.

these obvious challenges, in order to provide enough space to experience, concentrate and communicate on levels that are necessary for this project to be worth the effort.

**MB** What was the most interesting aspect of Dark Ecology?

**AW** Seeing what this project has triggered in artists and thinkers and how this was and is mediated through residencies, journeys, experts and various (international) spin-offs. And also how it contributed to and influenced the scene of local cultural actors.

**GK** Although I've experienced a Russian version of reality before by travelling in and around Saint Petersburg and Moscow quite a few times, it took these Journeys to make me realise, almost on a physical level, how fundamentally different reality can be for people who actually live only a few kilometres away from each other. No documentary or book can prepare you for the actual experience. It's like stepping through a mirror into an alternate reality. The past three editions have, in a way, mostly been spent on establishing a 'ground base', paving the way for what will hopefully become a permanent portal, through which journeys by entities from the other reality will become just as feasible.

**AA** It is also very interesting to see how much the situation has changed in just three or four years. When we started the project the predominant discourse — which was driving the economic activities — was about how much more important this area would become, economically and geopolitically. The feeling was that this remote area, which is mostly hidden from the scrutiny of the mass media, was set to become even more important with continuing global warming. It's been way too warm up there for a long time already, so the idea that climate change is happening is old news. It has been fuelling economic speculation for many years. So still in 2012 the thinking was that soon it would be financially feasible to exploit even more oil and gas fields in the Barents Sea. The Northeast Passage would become vital for global trade. Kirkenes would be an important harbour — they were already working on a new one. Investors were advised to put their money into the Arctic, as it was the future. (Well, that last bit hasn't changed, maybe. And Russia is again planning to invest a lot in Arctic projects). At the end of 2015 the iron ore mine and processing plant in Kirkenes were declared bankrupt, and most of the working

population faced immediate unemployment. The majority of the envisioned new oil and gas exploitation in the Barents Sea have been put on hold or postponed for at least several years because oil prices are too low. The Northeast Passage was used less in 2015 than in the years before. Trade with Russia — the second source of income for Kirkenes — declined dramatically due to the economic sanctions. And in the summer of 2015 Kirkenes became one of the entry points to the West for refugees from Syria and elsewhere. All of this was not completely unexpected (and not all of it is negative), yet the speed with which this transformation happened was surprising.

**MB** What are your best memories of Dark Ecology?

**GK** From the perspective of a participant, a fellow traveller and artist, the best experiences I had were when I was able to escape the mediated group experience. Lucas and I deliberately intended to use this project not only to further the agenda of the Sonic Acts platform, but also to explore new territories for our own artistic endeavours. Each time we went we tried to stay a few days longer, or organise time so that we could go out and harvest audiovisual material for our projects as Telcosystems. Those moments, out there by ourselves in the middle of nowhere, on our own adventure, have had the most enduring impact. Coming from an artistic practice that for most of the past fifteen years has mostly taken place inside machines, inside coded virtual spaces, this engagement with the very real has opened up a fundamental new approach to thinking about our own work, which we've only just begun to understand. And of course these private journeys are embedded in the larger Journey project. We could never have escaped if there was nothing to escape from. In that sense the group journey also creates the possibility of an escape, as well as a safe space to return to. And I think this approach is vital for my own curatorial practice. Sonic Acts is in essence a festival that is curated by artists for fellow artists, by creators for other creators. In order to understand what it is that we're good at as a group of organisers, what it is that we're trying to do, I also need to experience our own projects from the perspective of a participant, or as a visitor.

**HM** It's great to watch artistic works unfolding, to learn and exchange, to see that people are enjoying the exploration and are fuelled with energy despite the intensity.

**AW** It's the collaborative curatorial and producing experience; learning from a great bunch of collaborators and participants, and having deep conversations and experiences that I feel would happen nowhere else. It's about finding out that what we prepared in a laborious collaborative effort really does work throughout the Journey. It's about creating shifts and leaving traces. If I had to recall some special moments: Signing a contract for the building of an outdoor screen in a garage with a carpenter (and one of Murmansk Region's best beatboxers). Dancing with the police mayor of Zapolyarny until the early hours in the Pechenga Hotel. The concert in Nikel School with Franz Pomassl creating violent sounds, strobing youngsters who refused to go home and small kids chasing each other through the sports hall tanked up on soft drinks and eclectic sounds. The trip from the border to Murmansk when we listened to a careful selection of podcasts. Stopping off in Titovka to pick up fresh apple pirogs. Setting up our production unit anywhere. Being covered in reindeer skins and drinking tea while phoning about permissions and waiting to set up the *lavuu* (a Sami tent) for a soundwalk. Exploring sites with artists and the team. Dreaming up wild plans and developing seemingly impossible ideas together.

