

(Holding) the Thin Layer **Tears and Goosebumps** **as Pedagogical Companions** **in Un/Learning**

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Abstract In this essay we unfold the textile artefact *(Holding) the Thin Layer* which was piloted in the second Confluence of European Water Bodies, in Venice 2024. A month later, it was part of a ceremony with environmental defenders from various advocacy groups around Lake Vättern in Sweden. The essay presents the origin story of the textile and the ceremony's setup, reflecting on its realisation in conversation with concepts such as un/learning, the overview effect, decolonisation, and affects as pedagogical companions. We believe that pedagogical objects and practices like this can bring values and criticality to the Rights of Nature movement.

Keywords Unlearning. Affective pedagogy. Decolonisation. Overview effect. Representation. Textile. Making. Ceremony. Subjectification. Lake Vättern.

Summary 1 *(Holding) the Thin Layer* in Venice. – 2 Decolonisation of Lake Vättern. – 3 'The Overview Effect'. – 4 Experimenting with Different Forms of Representation. – 5 Affected by Thinness. – 6 The Lake Taking Shape. – 7 *(Holding) the Thin Layer* in Håstholmen and Beyond. – 8 Conclusion: Art-I-Facts in the Rights of Nature Movement.



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1 (Holding) the Thin Layer in Venice

4 October 2024: a dozen people stand in a circle in the *piano nobile* of Ca' Bottacin, in Venice. Many more stand around, watching curiously. We all belong to the Confluence family and have come together on this day to share our experiences and learn from each other, with a particular focus on how many of us use ceremonies in our various projects and activist endeavours. Those of us who are there for Lake Vättern want to take the opportunity to try out a ceremony that will be performed in earnest a month later for a group of local environmentalists around the lake. A long, narrow piece of fabric is passed around the circle. The participants hold it in their arms, treating it with respect and solemnity. They have been told that it represents Lake Vättern but otherwise know nothing about the context of the fabric or the future ceremony [fig. 1].



Figure 1 The ceremony (Holding) the Thin Layer is being tested at the Confluence of European Water Bodies in Venice. October 2024. Video stills by Kennet Öhlund

After the round, we talk about the precarious conditions of Lake Vättern, how Vättern, despite the status as a Natura 2000 site, is being bombarded by the Swedish military, what consequences a planned mine next to the lake could have, and how the water on which around 300,000 people are completely dependent for drinking water has alarmingly high levels of PFAS. We also explain why the textile is designed the way it is and that for us it is an attempt to un/learn, especially regarding long-established notions about the enormous depth of the lake. We believe that un/learning in relation to this powerful narrative can be significant. When we explain that the fabric is true to scale not only in terms of length and width, but also in terms of depth, the participants are surprised and it feels like

the penny drops; after all, they have just felt and carried the thin fabric in their arms. We conclude by asking everyone what kind of un/learning might be significant in relation to their own water bodies.

Afterwards, Daria Testo, one of the participants, approaches us, clearly moved. She tells us how the ceremony reminded her of a special shawl, *khadak*, which is often used in rituals in the Buryat-Mongolian Indigenous culture to which she belongs, and that she had therefore intuitively understood what we were trying to achieve with our ceremony even before we explained it to her. In these rituals, which are about empathy and care, a shawl is held up in the same way as we had done in our ceremony. The ‘affect’ that had just taken hold of her, travels further into our bodies, transforms, and when we sit down a moment later, one of us begins to cry (Massumi 1995):

All of me collapsed in relief, gratitude, and a feeling of rebirth. I was shivering in my chair in the first row in an amazing room at Ca’ Foscari University, crying, and my mind blank. Thomas put his arm around my shoulder after he had folded the textile representation of Lake Vättern into its case, and I looked into the eyes of Swedish-Māori Erena Rhöse – sitting to my right nodding. My years in solidarity with Sámi land defenders and the knowledge I received from Indigenous scholarship at Várdduo was screened as a movie in my head. For a moment also, I felt that nothing is stopping the coming of Indigenous resurgence.¹

2 Decolonisation of Lake Vättern

Like many countries in Europe, Sweden has a complicated and troubling history as a colonial power. In this country, the colonial apparatus is not just part of the past, but it also represents to a very large extent an ongoing conflict. The majority of the Swedish society live their lives in ignorance or have no interest in addressing these abuses and heal this wound. These people probably do not think about the fact that they use, for example, electricity and toilet paper that are exploited from rivers and forests in Sápmi, and that this extractivism is changing the Sámi people’s living environments beyond recognition.

Most people living around Lake Vättern today probably think they live very far from Sápmi, a conception that can be understood as both right and wrong. Right, because it is about 350 km as the crow flies to the southernmost point of the Swedish part of Sápmi (Söderhamn)

¹ Author Martin Hultman recollects what happened directly after the try-out in Venice.

and about 1,200 km to its northernmost point (Karesuando). Wrong, because it has been in the interests of the colonial powers to make the majority population perceive the Sámi as ‘distant Others’ only living very far to the north (Nordin 2022, 484). New archaeological and historical research shows, on the contrary, that the Sámi lived and moved through the land considerably farther south than previously thought (Nordin 2022). Perhaps the Sámi people also had close ties to Lake Vättern long ago? Regardless, the need for decolonisation is applicable and necessary around Lake Vättern as well – not least because Sweden as a nation needs to come to terms with this history across its entire territory. So let us start from the understanding that decolonisation is a necessary process for repairing historical mistakes as well as for addressing intertwined injustices in our present.

Indigenous thinkers have for decades emphasised the importance of a broader understanding of decolonisation. These ideas have since become cornerstones of theoretical fields such as critical posthumanism and radical ecofeminism. What do we who have been socialised into extractivist ways of thinking and living need to un/learn? What could decolonisation of Lake Vättern entail, and what does it mean for the people who live by the lake and are completely dependent on the lake’s well-being? We need to ask a fundamental question that may provide answers to many other questions: Who is Lake Vättern really, and how can we protect their rights? The very first word in this question expresses a changed view of the lake, from merely an object and resource to a subject. It can be that simple to begin decolonisation – in theory, at least. Furthermore, to stop using the colonial tool of designating land and water as empty, wild and uninhabited, or if inhabited, ‘only by savages’; Lake Vättern is not *aqua nullius* – nor is it a giant tub of H₂O whose primary purpose is to be drinking water for humans – but a body of water that has lived, and has been a living environment, since time immemorial.

For centuries, seafarers around Vättern have perceived the lake as having a temperament: moody and wild. The explanation is said to be the lake’s elongated shape combined with its depth, which can quickly create very dangerous conditions for people in boats. With its royal castle on the island of Visingsö, for hundreds of years it was also a source of power and the water that needed to be conquered to make it easier for people to travel between the influential regions of Östergötland and Västergötland. The temperament and depth of Lake Vättern are key components of what Donna Haraway would call a strong story.²

2 See Fabrizio Terranova’s film *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* (Icarus Films, 2016).

The story of Lake Vättern's impressive depth³ is well established and is found not only among ordinary people but also in more official contexts, such as in the marketing of the municipalities around the lake. But this story is not insignificant or innocuously picturesque; it influences how people today understand the threats and challenges facing the lake. If we view Lake Vättern as an immensely large wild beast, co-created with royal power, this probably also influences us to believe that this beast can withstand a great deal of abuse. It does not help that ecologists try to point out that Lake Vättern is a very fragile ecosystem; the powerful narrative about the lake tends to take over. What happens if, in relation to Lake Vättern, we try to follow Haraway's call to "make the strong stories weaker and the weak stories stronger"?⁴

3 'The Overview Effect'

A counter-image to Lake Vättern as a wild giant is Vättern on a scale that we can relate to with our own human bodies, perhaps even hold and embrace. Lake Vättern needs to be made smaller. This is common practice when humans make maps to scale. We shrink the world and make it manageable and comprehensible, which, of course, with the coloniser's intention, can instil a sense of control and power. We shrink the world into flat images (maps) or three-dimensional models (globes) that we can hold in our hands. But if diminishment is part of the coloniser's toolbox, can it also be part of a decolonisation process?

It is said that the first astronauts, when viewing the Earth from a distance, alone and fragile in the vastness of space, experienced a profound sense of love and gratitude for our small planet. This experience is now known as 'the overview effect'. What would happen if we used this effect for educational purposes, if we made Europe's sixth largest lake fit in one's embrace, not as a conventional map but as a 'body'? And what would happen if this representation formed the basis for a ceremony for people who are certainly familiar and intimate with the lake, but who might gain new insights and perspectives through this ceremony? Could this experience weaken the powerful narrative? Can this 'body', this representation, be understood in terms of an 'aquatic doppelgänger', a doubled form of

3 The depth of Lake Vättern is 128 m. By way of comparison, here are a few other European lakes: Hornindalsvatnet (Norway) 514 m; Lake Como (Italy) ~410 m; Lake Ohrid (North Macedonia/Albania) ~287 m. The world's deepest lake is Lake Baikal with a maximum depth of 1,642 m.

4 Fabrizio Terranova's film *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* (Icarus Films, 2016).

Lake Vättern that unsettles what the lake is allowed to be?⁵ For two years now, we have been exploring these questions in a process of design, creation, experimentation, evaluation and reflection [fig. 2].



Figure 2 Members of the research project *Whose Body of Water?* prototyping with a piece of placeholder fabric. April 2024. Video still by Thomas Laurien

4 Experimenting with Different Forms of Representation

Since the start of our subjectification process with Lake Vättern, many different forms of representation have been tested, both in theory and in practice. For example, we considered creating a full-body suit representing the lake, which could be used in everyday situations, perhaps in grocery stores, to start conversations about Lake Vättern. Here, we mainly wanted to reach people who live very far away from the lake but still get their drinking water from there via an extensive system of pipes and pumping stations. Could such a costume spark conversation that challenges the ‘modern water’ paradigm: the disconnection between the source of the drinking water and the kitchen tap where the so-called modern human being consumes the water (Linton 2010)? We never pursued the idea because we thought there was a risk that we would feel silly in the costume. At a seminar on the ‘relational turn’ a little later, we held a prefigurative workshop on how Lake Vättern is represented on the websites of the

⁵ The concept of the ‘aquatic doppelgänger’ is developed by Marie Widengård in the text “Mar Menor and Vättern as Aquatic Doppelgängers” in this special issue of *Lagoonscapes*.

surrounding municipalities today (most often as a resource and a beautiful backdrop), and how it could be represented instead if Lake Vättern were subjectified. For this workshop, we attached strips of blue shimmering fabric to our jacket sleeves to make it look as if water was flowing out of us – all to make Lake Vättern and water present in a perhaps new, surprising and thought-provoking way. We finally decided to create a scale representation of the lake, around which we also wanted to build a ceremony.

5 Affected by Thinness

Thomas leads the work, searching for suitable materials and thinking carefully about how the depth of the lake will affect the construction of the representation:

I lay awake at night thinking about what might work. It felt increasingly difficult to bring to life what I saw within myself. I visited a fabric shop a few times to look through all the different filling materials they sold. Nothing felt quite right. I took the bull by the horns and decided to work out how much material was needed to create the 'depth'. I calculated and calculated, but it kept coming out wrong. After several recalculations, I was suddenly struck by a realisation. It wasn't that I had calculated wrong, but that I had an incorrect idea of the depth of the lake. It is no exaggeration to write 'struck' here, because it really was a physical experience. Goosebumps. Dizziness. Like I lost my footing a little. I grew up by Lake Vättern and had heard since childhood about its incredible depth, about the crack that opened in the bedrock millions of years ago, where water collected and which eventually became the lake we know today. But the figures from the calculations revealed something completely different.⁶

The figures show that all concerns regarding the filling material have been unfounded. Nothing more is needed than the two different fabrics to be used for the top and bottom layers. These two layers measure a total of 1 mm, which corresponds to the lake's scale-model depth. Surprisingly, what is to be held in the arms is merely a thin, two-layer piece of fabric. Despite its enormous volume of water, Lake Vättern is merely a thin film on the Earth's crust. Once this has been realised, the production of the textile representation can begin.

⁶ Author Thomas Laurien recollects a pivotal moment during the process of making the textile.

6 The Lake Taking Shape

From the outset, the ambition is to include the entire catchment area in the representation, not only the rapid river that links the lake to the sea, but also the streams that flow directly into the lake, and all the smaller lakes that feed the streams that enter Lake Vättern, and in turn their up-stream waters, and their branches of tiny watercourses, and so on [fig. 3]. What we envision is a tangle of water, which is also part of un/learning. A lake is never just a lake. However, this ambition proves too difficult and time-consuming to implement, at least this time around.

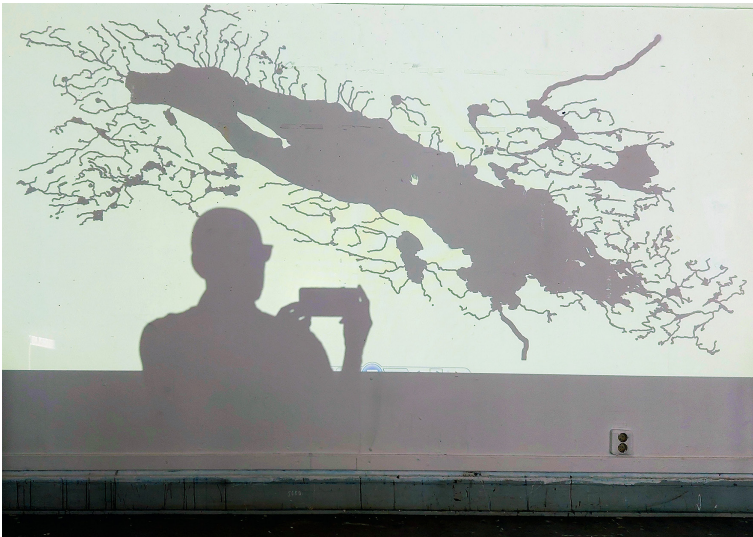


Figure 3 An image of the catchment area of Lake Vättern projected on a wall during the process of the making of the artefact. April 2024. Photo by Thomas Laurien

The shape of the lake is simplified and projected in full scale onto a wall so that the lines can be traced onto the sand-coloured velvet-like fabric that will be the bottom fabric of the representation [fig. 4]. Then the shape needs to be cut out. This is a time-consuming task that requires full concentration and a sharp pair of scissors. Perhaps it would have been possible to laser cut the shape, or perhaps not? This is never an option, as there is value in spending a long time with the representation; through the slow but decisive movements of the scissors along the drawn line, the person cutting becomes familiar with unfamiliar parts of the lake [fig. 5].

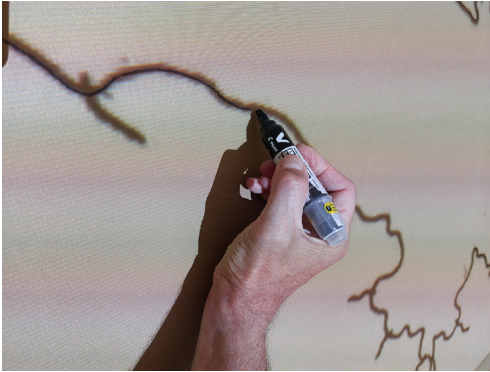


Figure 4
The outline of Lake Vättern
is drawn onto the fabric,
which is intended to represent
the lakebed. August 2024.
Photo by Thomas Laurien



Figure 5 The shape is cut out by hand. August 2024. Photo by Thomas Laurien

It is then time to attach the top fabric to the bottom fabric. The two fabrics have completely different characteristics and thus behave in different ways, which always presents a challenge when joining two layers together. After a few unsuccessful attempts using a sewing machine, a regular sewing needle and embroidery thread are used by hand [fig. 6]. It takes a long time to attach the two layers by hand, but this is also valuable time [fig. 7]. We are convinced that it matters for the experience of the representation that it is 'well made' and that it has artistic merit. It is laborious work, but after a few weeks, the islands and some of the many waterways can finally be stitched

together [fig. 8]. Lake Vättern is ready to be united with the Venice lagoon, and the essay began by describing how the meeting went. A month later, we repeated the ceremony in Sweden.



Figure 6
The two layers of fabric are sewn together by hand. August 2024.
Photo by Thomas Laurien



Figure 7 After joining the layers together, the shape is also cut out from the shimmering top fabric. August 2024. Photo by Thomas Laurien



Figure 8
Finally, the islands and tributary
streams are placed
in their correct positions.
September 2024.
Photo by Åsa Sörman

7 (Holding) the Thin Layer in Hästholmen and Beyond

8 November 2024: after the experience of the ceremony in Venice, it is now time to put the textile to work with a group of environmental defenders who have been invited to a *Vättern*⁷ – a meeting where we want to get to know local environmental defenders to understand what they are fighting for/against, and where we also want to present the idea of Rights of Nature. Several of the invitees already know each other and are skilled at talking about Lake Vättern based on what is primarily their group's focus: the threat from a new mine, aerial bombing, or alarms regarding PFAS and other toxic subjects.

We want to open a different kind of conversation that may complement or even challenge their habitual and mainly human-centred way of talking about Lake Vättern. After a brief introduction, we therefore begin the meeting with the ceremony. Stones from the lake have been laid out in a circle on the floor, where the participants now stand. We lift the fabric from a table where it lies and then let it be passed quietly from one person to another. Unlike the rehearsal ceremony earlier in Venice, on this occasion all participants immediately understand that it is Lake Vättern that is

⁷ As method within the six-year research programme *Whose Body of Water?*, on situated water and the Rights of Nature, we arrange meetings, known as *Vättern*. The tradition of meeting at a thing has deep roots in Nordic history and served as the fundamental political and legal institution of society.

being represented. Everyone knows the shape of the lake, and with that knowledge, each person adds their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas about this body of water. When the circle is complete, we place the textile representation of the lake on a chair in the middle. We have now made Lake Vättern present in the room in an affective way that may contribute to un/learning.

It is difficult to know during or immediately after the ceremony how it has affected the participants. A little later, two of them lay the fabric on the floor and want to have their photo taken next to it; it has obviously aroused some kind of desire in them at least, but otherwise it is difficult to know. Some time after the meeting, we receive evaluations. One person thinks the ceremony was completely unnecessary, one even thinks it was embarrassing, but several say it made an impression:

It was new for me to feel tenderness for Lake Vättern. The lake is large and impressive, beautiful and dangerous. The proportions were telling. // The model of Lake Vättern fascinated me. // I had an eye-opening experience. // It was both emotionally and visually powerful and gave me a new understanding of what we are trying to protect and that we are all part of Lake Vättern. That we all literally carry Lake Vättern and are responsible for the lake's well-being. // The image gives a strong impression that the water in Lake Vättern is very vulnerable.⁸

Since our first *Vättern*ing, we have activated *(Holding) the Thin Layer* on several other occasions, which has given us new experiences. For example, it is not surprising that there is a difference depending on whether the group performing the ceremony has a connection to the lake or not. We have also learned what is required of us as facilitators for the ceremony to be successful, for example, that the first person to receive the textile from the ceremony leader must understand how the handover is supposed to take place; that person sets the example for how the others will then act. We have also been invited to participate in a curated exhibition at an art institution, where we have had the opportunity to test what the textile representation can convey, without the ceremony - an opportunity that would probably not have arisen if the artefact itself had not been of high artistic quality.⁹

⁸ Voices of several different participants.

⁹ In the exhibition *Vattenbalans*, at Rian designmuseum in Falkenberg, Sweden, 13 September-28 December 2025.

8 Conclusion: Art-I-Facts in the Rights of Nature Movement

How does an idea emerge, and in which ways are the history of an artefact shaped and always relationally designed? In this essay we have tried to write the history of a process of becoming with a textile representation of a lake. We propose understanding this representation as an Art-I-Fact: a piece that brings together issues of subjects and subjectification, facts and the potential of artistic approaches. We suggest that our concept of Art-I-Facts, and the realisation of them, can bring values and criticality to pedagogical artefacts involved in the Rights of Nature movement.

In *Confluence of European Water Bodies*, we have encountered many artistic practices, pedagogical experiments, ceremonies, and overwhelming learning experiences. We have come to understand them as part of the core need for an ontological shift when transforming our juridical systems to recognise Rights of Nature (Knauss, Lindau 2025). The laws, and how laws are practised across the Globe, are today intertwined in a planetary ecocidal trajectory. In line with scholarship from Aotearoa/New Zealand we argue that making sure pedagogies are developed that can enlighten another path is incremental to the changes needed (Hay 2025).

(Holding) the Thin Layer was created with a particular water body and process of un/learning in mind, with tears and goosebumps as companions, and in the context of Rights of Nature. We end here by repeating but also expanding the question we asked to our friends in Venice: What kind of un/learning could be meaningful and important regarding 'your' water body, and might the agency of an Art-I-Fact be helpful in this endeavour?

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