

# REFUSALS & SHUTDOWNS

I often experience that I am required to have reasons for doing things. Everything need to be legitimised. This reason cannot just be a feeling or a hunch. It must be a verbal explanation involving cause and effect, logic reasoning. You are also asked to provide an alternative. If you don't want one thing you have to say what you want instead. As if a little bit of void, of in-between is unacceptable. Whenever kids have put on strike against the level of national co2 emissions, outside the parliament they have been told to instead engage in politics and say what they want instead. But what happens if I just ignore that and trust the deep sense of refusal that arise? Where would that lead me? What if it is only such acts that can lead to an eventual verbalisation, concretisation of that thing, that unknown I need to know in order to address the current dilemma? What if it's the current presences that renders the reasons invisible in the first place?

~~This is a search I recognize in many of my colleagues, mia, unmaking abstractions, Sandelin.~~

## Sensory inner form

The inner world shifts and changes for every situation. An invisible architecture that still guides. Sometimes, when it is heavy and hard to walk in a certain direction, it is as if the walking is taking place in a parallel world where it is currently uphill. Sometimes it is paralyzingly impossible to move in a direction, as if there is a wall in that parallel. Or when the fear is vertiginous, maybe it's an abyss, a chasm?

In a video about how autists perceive the "bigger picture" of things<sup>i</sup>, Quinn Dexter describes how the autistic mind may rationalize its perceptions into a "form" that makes sense. This form is interpreted differently depending on the person. It could be as a flow-chart, an artwork, a piece of music or as in Quinns case; a machinery where the various influences move as gears and levers to form the whole situation.

Two common traits for autistic people are an eye for detail and a skill for seeing patterns. With this follows a tendency to examine everything thoroughly and consider all influences. In order to harbour that complexity it has to be compressed into a more manageable form. If all parts fit together and the form moves smoothly, an opinion can be formed. But if the parts are clashing and jamming it can't. And in the case where it can't, it is very difficult to discern why. Decoding all the underlying information of the "form", of all the parts and influences that makes up the situation is an overwhelming task. In the moment there and then, all that is known for sure, is that the "form" is incomplete or erroneous and therefore more processing or more information is needed to form an opinion.

This description aligns a lot with how intuition is often described. A strong sense of certainty, but without being able to exactly explain what that certainty is based on.

And this is how I experience the intuition in my artistic practice; as such a "compressed form". In my case, this form takes the shape of an inner world. When a situation is coherent with that inner world, I feel confident to form an opinion. I

recognize the functions of my “world-form” in Quinns descriptions of his “machinery-form”.

## Inner world form

What is this way of learning and knowing? It's as if all the information I absorb, continuously updates my inner world, making it more complex and specific. I'm not good at recalling information I've been given. Names and dates are especially difficult. But somehow, I store my understanding of the information in this inner model. When I'm faced with a tricky situation, I process my options through this model. In this way, I can faster get a sense of what needs to be done. Without consciously thinking through all the knowledge I've acquired, I still perceive that my decision is filtered through it all in, even though it happens in an encoded process not entirely available to my conscious self.

That's why I can feel confident in my conclusion in a complex situation. It's like I simulate different ways of acting, and this inner world responds with a variety of options I couldn't see before.

But sometimes it doesn't offer any alternatives. It simply signals that something is off. That there's something clashing or misaligned in my current plan or course of action.

Then this physical bodily refusal arises.

This research has been led by such refusals I do not yet understand. Leaning into them is what has brought me to understand them more.

## CO2 refusal

In 2017 parts of me shut down. It was difficult to discern exactly what my body was refusing or reacting to. But being complicit in the slow violence of excessive Co2 emissions was one of the things that I could identify as fuelling this growing inner refusal. The artistic act to divest my practice from fossil fuels that followed from this acknowledgement, came to produce shutdowns of many other things that I hadn't yet fully identified as failed in my life. Things that were blocking my functioning and embodied knowing.

I held my breath for 2,5 minutes to see what happens when I withhold the co2 emission of my exhale. As I finally inhaled, my lungs realized that they hadn't taken a full breath like this for as long as they could remember.

When I reduced the co2 footprint of my food consumption, my eyes started seeing new colours around me. I could see what green nuances and textures were tasty. As I ate things I came across (that had not been transported or packaged), that I did not know what they were and had not eaten before, but I could see that a certain leaf was tasty, and when I put it in my mouth it was confirmed.

Shrinking my co2 footprint gave me a feeling of coming home. At a PhD seminar Mia said to me: every time I see you, you get smaller and smaller. I hadn't realized it was visible; I thought it was just a feeling. A sense of shrinking into my proper size after having grown out of proportions for a long time.

But the most prominent effect was the shutdown of traveling. Every time I was to leave my home, I felt a full-on bodily resistance. Commuting and travelling felt like such an unnecessary burden on the environment. I had already stopped flying but now I tried to eliminate the emissions from travels altogether, so I only walked or biked an occasionally took the train. While walking and biking I came to notice and relearn physical movements that shifted this research in completely unexpected directions, that I will address more later.

The shutdown of traveling caused me to increasingly work from home. Integrating my work with my home-activities created a stability and a holistic framework that offered a long-lost point of reference for my thinking. this "structured niche" where every day-life chores informed my research also became very vital.

## Seminar refusal

Another refusal that emerged during the studies was in regard to the percentage seminars. Initially I sensed it as a resistance in doing things at a fixed interval rather in "their own time" as well as a frustration with the lack of climate transition in SKH's organisation. As I was examining this resistance I found some resonance with the research of designer Erik Sandelin. He positions his practice as "a-design", as an affirmative "letting be", a negation of human and designer activities that too often violently constrict the lives of others.

During my studies I had developed an understanding of my animation practice and worldbuilding practice as a way to tune to environments. By using inner hypothetical "counter-environments" that I actively immerse myself in, I can find ways to make small adjustments to hostile environments so that they better support me. But there are problems with bettering problematic environments. As Sandelin says: it's about designing the right thing not designing the thing right. Sandelin critique entanglement with the example of how Temple Gradins reducing of the emotional stress of animals in slaughterhouses, becomes a way to uphold and polish a system that is fundamentally wrong. I agree. At the same time, I strongly relate to Gradin's tendency to attune to any environment, even oppressive environments, and gradually attempt to shift this environment in a direction towards something less intolerable.

For example, I see my work with the climate calculator for film ["Elsa"](#) as a parallel to Gradin's slaughterhouse intervention. My calculator aims to soften the climate footprint of education and film industry by using its own structures of quantification and administration, channelling structures that I actually wish to change. I understand how such gradual betterments may prevent a needed system change but I also want to point out that we don't always choose how we can interact with the world. And fundamentally this kind of gradually tuning interaction with one's environment is potentially sustainable. It's a way of being in relation with the world that allows for responses and careful threading in the environment. It's when we are

placed inside a destructive system that this relational way of being becomes counterproductive in a sort of Stockholm syndrome situation.

I think that this work that allowed for small shifts WITHIN the current system ALSO have the potential to point at something BEYOND the current system. Because quantifying carbon emissions and inserting them into the administrative system of the film industry led to withdrawals, opt-outs and shutdowns of many practice-as-usuals. And in its turn these negative non-actions opened for new, previously invisible manoeuvring possibilities. ~~(list the examples, anders boman, sensorimotor manoeuvring, students that share scenographies and found new ways).~~

Aligning with the school strike Fridays for futures.

But still, in the end it is not sufficient. Despite my efforts to tune to SKH and adapting my vision of carbon reduction to fit within SKH's bureaucratic workings, I don't see enough work being done to reduce the emissions of the organization as a whole. An ambivalence was growing.

This brought me to compose my PhD [50% seminar](#) as an ultimatum to my university; that I would only hold my final seminar when the university has aligned its emission reduction with the Paris agreement. During my 80% seminar I will present how the university's emissions has developed, (it is leaning towards not yet aligned). This puts my final seminar in the position of becoming indefinitely pended.

As Sandelin states, the withdrawal or negative act of not doing, can only be exercised from the position of privilege. It is only when something is expected or wanted from you that the non-act can become something. Sandelin's research speaks from the privileged position of the designer and the human. The position of privilege that I try to draw from here, is the position of the PhD student. As a teacher I know myself that in the current academic system it is the registering of academic credits that uphold its neoliberal economic machinery.

Using this withdrawing of a seminar that is necessary to register my credits and degree, to interfere with the quantifying systems that keeps the monetary funds flowing through the system, I wanted to put pressure on the university to reduce its emissions. But it is not the emission reduction that is the only aim. The poesis of any non-act lies in what opens up instead, in the place, of what has been revoked. Greta Thunberg's school strike is an example of what movements can open up, when the first thing is refused.

Though artistic research plays a role in restoring our view on knowledge in western scientific tradition, the competition, quantification, commercializing development of artistic education also urges us to keep other options, outside the university, open. Something I explored during my 50% seminar, where I modelled a future outside of the university, without the PhD title, teaching from my home-studio.

As Fred Moten says: "What kind of intervention can cut through neoliberal configuration of today's university, which betrays its own liberal commitment to bring about emancipation?"

Or Malin Arnell: It (the dissertation) asks how this (neoliberal) socio-economic trajectory intra-actively infiltrates the live practices of making knowledge, and how such cuts (or transformations) might be made differently?

~~So speculating on the outcomes. If I cancel my final seminar and is failed during my finalthing I will continue working with the outside position. If I pass this means the refusal has been accepted as a valid knowledge form. This may be a fruitful position to work with from within academia.~~

It may be questioned what the seminar-form has to do with my art practice. This relation comes from an inability to separate myself or my practice from my environment. And since my practice moved inside this academic institution with the start of my artistic research project, they have become intertwined. During a presentation at Linköping's posthumanities hub, Ombre Tarragnat described her critique of entanglement and research on "Keeping relationally at a distance - the autistic ethos of shutting down". She presented the autistic shutdown as a form of ethos that shuts down interactions when they become destructive.

I recognize this in how my tuning to my environments can be abruptly halted by somatic refusals or withdrawals, when the situation somehow feels incompatible with my inner world. So afterwards I asked Tarragnat if this realization had affected her academic work and the ways she do research in any way. She answered that for her, the shutdowns acted more in their personal life, not so much in the academic. But for me this refusing withdrawal becomes a total shrinking of the world. This shrinking includes many aspects of the academic world after I became embedded in it. It includes all aspects of my life.

## The refusal and shutdown as attack response.

I don't want to anymore.

I don't even want to animate anymore.

I often sense that our most natural instincts and organismic needs, such as eating or learning have become hi-jacked.

Our organismic need for nutrition and energy has been hi-jacked by industrial high-energy foods with "vanishing caloric density" that enable an eating that does not produce a sense of fullness. It lures us to eat ourselves into diabetics to continue the growth of our consumption. No wonder refusals such as restrictive eating disorders and anorexia are peaking.

Our organismic need to learn what we feel the need to know has been cancelled by filling our days with a learning that is de-situated from life. A repetitive automatic inscription of multiplication tables and national standardised testing leaves no space or budget for excursions, play or personalised assessments. And this is the only teaching that can be afforded after owners have extracted their profit and tax money have been redirected towards home services for the upper middle-class. No wonder 18000 children lock themselves up in their home and refuse compulsory school in Sweden.

Human activities that have evolved out of needs, as practices of self- preservice are being instrumentalized for accumulation and growth of things that has nothing to do with our life. These needs are being turned against us like cancer cells.

No wonder our bodies come to react at food or schools as an existential threat, because they are under attack in this ongoing omnicide, this sixth mass extinction

### **Attack on self-organization**

Things that exist on earth tend to organise together for reasons of joint efficiency. This has allowed for a universe of diverse lifeforms to evolve, living off and sharing the same limited resources. In the text “Subatomic particles”, I describe that such spontaneous synchronization relies on three simple rules. (And one exception). First, all the individuals are only aware of their nearest neighbours. Second, all the individuals have a tendency to line up. Third; they’re all attracted to each other, but they try to keep a small distance apart.

When you build those three rules in, automatically you start to see swarms that look very much like fish schools or bird flocks. Now, fish like to stay close together, about a body length apart. Birds try to stay about three or four body lengths apart. But except for that difference, the rules are the same for both.” This fundamental organizing takes place on all scales. Even on atomic level these three rules’ structures how matter organizes and shifts.

### **Attack response**

Except for one exception - when a predator attacks – then the rule “get out of the way” is activated and overrides the three first rules. This also applies to human individuals and groups, but they add some layers of complexity to them.

Humans tune to their surroundings, for example through sensorimotor exchange. But when a human comes under attack and perceives fear, this sensuous manoeuvring is overridden, and an automatic preprogrammed survival response is activated. The fight or flight responses are the most well-known, but there are also others, such as freeze, fawn and flop. The fawn response is an automatic response to please the perpetrator, disguising the fact that there is even an aggression going on. The fact that such reactions are automatic and subconscious makes it extremely complex to decipher power structures between humans. It makes it invisible even to oneself, that one is under attack, when the body hides it like that.

As I realized this, I could for the first time comprehend why we can’t seem to organize for mutual efficiency in ways that also sustain the larger bodies we as individuals are part of. Presence of violence overrides our inherent ways of organizing mutually beneficial, shared, joint life.

But it is not impossible hear the warning signs through the layers, signals that there is something going on. There are ways to feel towards the injuries, to make them reveal themselves as visible and material. Sensing towards them by following the refusals, where it halts and stops, where it freezes and stiffens.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZQLCGCWY94>