

# Eutopia

Prof. Dr. Konrad Ott

George Steinmann will construct a sculpture on the island of Vilm off Rügen. Vilm with its chequered history is a symbolic place for nature conservation since the Romantic period. George Steinmann's sculpture is essentially an artwork, not a building. However, it can temporarily serve as a shelter.

Artworks usually bear traces of worldly experiences, which are simultaneously remembered and poetically transcended. The following essay is based on the idea of being mindful of nature when looking at a sculpture, which, as an artwork, i.e. a genuinely aesthetic creation, is reminiscent of dwellings that have been important for the natural history of mankind, namely shelter huts. The sculpture does not deny this aspect, but showcases it.

As the critical theory (Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin) teaches us, we as members of a high civilisation should keep the natural history of humankind in mind, since the expulsion and elimination of the natural side of humans lead to a rigid self-restraint in the mental realm, which evolves into a form of furious domination and destruction of nature. Overcoming this aberration spiritually at first and then in social reality is the basic concern of all natural ethics.

It is also part of natural history that people have created dwellings in which they find protection from the rigors and hazards of nature: refuges. The "shelter hut" is therefore an archetype of humanity. Huts are dwellings that are on the border of sedentariness, where the nomadic way of life is still present. Shelter huts are still close to nature and yet are at the dawn of a global settlement practice, which appears to inexorably cover nature. The shelter hut, which is shown as a pictogram on a hiking map, and the flat in a metropolitan machine for living accessed via Google Maps, are extremes of the dialectical archetype of human living in the Anthropocene epoch. The sculpture teaches us to keep remembering the huts.

Shelter huts are archetypal retreats and places of rest. As such, they contain an element of regression in childhood and dream. As a child, who hasn't dreamt of staying in a shelter in the woods where it gets scary? Still campsites live on the longing for starlight and the drowsy thrill for nocturnal animal noises in nearby bushes.

In the Jewish biblical tradition, the communal celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles is reminiscent of departures and the wandering people of God. Huts made of foliage are even more fleeting than tents, the starlight shining through the leafy canopy. Franz Rosenzweig writes in *The Star of Redemption*, “The Feast of Tabernacles is the celebration of both wandering and rest; in memory of the erstwhile long peregrination [...] the housemates join in a cheerful meal [...] under a lightweight, quickly built roof that lets the sky shine through”<sup>1</sup>. The idea of this festival teaches us today to ultimately regard our solid houses, where we, too, often narrow-mindedly entrench and isolate ourselves, only as tents in the journey of life, which we must be able to pull down when we want to leave.

In the emergence of significant philosophical concepts of ethics of nature, three huts have played more than a merely external role, if one assumes that localities do not leave philosophical thinking unaffected but are subcutaneously involved in the way we let thoughts come and go, how we present arguments and how we articulate our experiences.

The first hut was built by Henry David Thoreau outside of Concord, Massachusetts, to perform there at first hand the project that inspired the ethics of nature by reducing the civilising sheaths to the utmost minimum, and to thereby (ipso facto) open himself up to nature with all his senses in order to be blessed with the experience of “*the wild*”, i.e. the feeling of the ubiquitous forces by which the living and animate nature grows and blooms, matures and dies, renews itself, propagates and rejuvenates. Thoreau writes in “Walden”, “My body is all sentient. [...] As I go here or there, I am tickled by this or that I come in contact with, as if I touched the wires of a battery.”<sup>2</sup> The forces of nature are a feast for the senses. The hut serves as cooking and sleeping quarters to the diurnal creature that must sleep deeply at night in order to be fully awake during the day and be sensually receptive. The sense of the hut can be found in the dreams of nature and a sensually awakened “outdoor” life. The door of the hut leads to the open air.

The second hut is “Tvergastein” in the mountains of Norway, to which Arne Næss, the founder of deep ecology, often retired. Arne Næss’ own ecosophy, which he consistently called *Ecosophy T*, wherein “T” stands for “Tvergastein”, originated in this hut. The location and the title of ecosophy merge. *Ecosophy T* is based on the ethical idea of overcoming the small, selfish ego through an ever-expanding identification (Næss: *widening identification*) with other beings that can lead to an identification with animals, plants, rivers, mountains, forests and so on. Similar to Vedic tradition, the little “I” thereby turns into a large self. This

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<sup>1</sup>[Translation from German]Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1988 [FirstEdition 1921], p. 355.

<sup>2</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Verlag, Jahr, p.

ecosophy contains and at the same time overcomes morality when dealing with nature, since those that live Ecosophy T will by themselves, that is by this “large” self, joyfully and generously do whatever there is to do which others (still) consider as tiresome duties of an environmental ethics. Something beyond the moral “ought to” exists for Næss only in the truly good, namely in connection with all that lives. Mice were tolerated in Tvergastein.

The third hut is the one in Todtnauberg, where Martin Heidegger went to think about the fate of Western metaphysics and lay furrows for the seeds of a “different kind of thinking”, which no one can intentionally or wilfully call upon.. The other thinking appears as a “clearing”, perhaps the track across the field close to the hut. Whatever one’s attitude towards Heidegger’s late work might be, it teaches the preservation of what we experience as “nature”, “environment”, “landscape”, and “ecosystem”. Conservation, care and composure are essential alternatives to the lopsidedly technological and commercial modern approaches to the world. Heidegger has emphasised his closeness to Far East teachings of wisdom (Tao, Zen). Heidegger’s thinking extends to reflections on the context of construction, housing and thinking. We learn what living could mean for Heidegger when we hear the line by Friedrich Hölderlin, “Full of merit, yet poetically, man dwells on this earth.”<sup>3</sup> Whether they are habitable or not, sculptures are comfortable in this poetic sense.

Archetypes provoke unexpected memories. When thinking about huts and sculptures I remembered that in the years just after the unification of Germany, on a fenced-in waste land at Potsdamer Platz, i.e. in close proximity to the former Berlin Wall, Thoreau's hut was reconstructed in its actual dimension, while palaces were “pulled up” all around. In the face of the large construction site of the new capital, Thoreau’s hut was a counterpart, in which, as Walter Benjamin says, knowledge flashes and scurries by.<sup>4</sup> At that moment the aim was to all of sudden counter the palaces of Potsdamer Platz with the spirit of the huts of Concord, Tvergastein and Todtnauberg with the question of how to deal in future with the environment, nature and landscape in the land between the sea and the Alps, the Oder and the Rhine (and of course in other countries as well).

Each archetype holds an original utopia. Through archetypes we shift into the archaic, what may be in store for us in the future. In the case of the hut, this could be a human habitation that turns towards nature. Such habitation demands a sense for the outside (Thoreau), magnanimity in dealing with nature (Næss) and the attitude of serenity, from which the willingness to protect arises (Heidegger).

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<sup>3</sup>[Translation from German] Friedrich Hölderlin, *In lieblicher Bläue*, Verlag: Ort 1808, p.

<sup>4</sup>See Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt a. M: Suhrkamp 1974, Vol. 2, p. 695.

In contrast to the essential insights of a rational morality (such as discourse ethics) existential attitudes must be located in order to be embodied. Attitudes, such as confidence, are not deductively derived from projections, but draw from deeper sources of vital energy.

Sometimes it seems as if the “weak messianic power that is given to us”<sup>5</sup>, would find food and refreshment in certain ports of call. In gaining new strength and fresh courage lies the truth when speaking of “places of power” and their aura. There are also places where we let thoughts come and go in a different way, and provide them with time and space in other ways than, for instance, in the restraints of academia. In special places we do not struggle against thoughts, which seem to approach us, so that we can play with them. Intellectual games are a form of spiritual freedom. This also applies to the ethics of nature, which - as the Greifswald nature ethicist Philip Thapa emphasises - requires creative imagination so as not to rigidify into book learning.

Philosophy can examine (with existential pragmatism) human practices such as “leisure”, “linger”, “withdraw”, “gain strength” “take notice”, “celebrate”, “contemplation”, “recreation”, etc., and thereby explain why some places are particularly useful for certain practices of human existence. The places themselves must be found. Steinmann’s sculpture has (after some wandering) found its place, and the place has, or so it may seem, summoned the sculpture.

The sculpture can and should be a port of call for thoughts and for the embodiment of attitudes. The sculpture preserves the archetype of the hut in the sense Friedrich Hegel associates with the expression “preserve”: conservation, denial and exaltation in a new sphere of the intellect. In this sense, it is a hut, it is no hut, it is more and something else than a hut, and it is all of it together. *Location* (Vilm Island), *context* (Academy for Nature Conservation), *material* (wood from the forest of Goor), and even the exact *place* of the sculpture, which, as a former tennis court of the SED’s Politburo, is not without a certain irony - all this join together in this project in a unique way.

Contrary to the aforementioned three other huts, where the names of places and people are firmly linked, this sculpture is a possible source of energy and inspiration for anonymous others who will stay there in the near and distant future. The sculpture might help people whose names we cannot know now, to articulate thoughts of conservation that we cannot know now, but which we may hope are worthy to be discussed in future dialogues. In this sense, the artwork is “open”.

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<sup>5</sup> [Translation from German] Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt a. M: Suhrkamp 1974, Vol. 2, p. 694.

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