

Farm, Farming; Farmer:

Thinking about design in the fringes

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In 2018 Tone Bjerkaas inherited her ancestral farm located on the island of Dyrøy in Troms in Northern-Norway. This farm had been in her family's care since the 17th century, thus, the farm that came into Bjerkaas' stewardship was a sort of capsule of time and place, packed with family heirlooms and the history of her origins. This same year Bjerkaas embarked upon another task, she enrolled in the MA program in Design - Clothing and Costume at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. Many people in Bjerkaas' position, being left with the sole responsibility of sorting through the debris and remains of past lives, would look upon this task as one of cleaning out or sorting through trash. Posing themselves questions of what to keep and what to discard: what has value or not. Bjerkaas looked at these archaeological layers of remains as tools. Tools of which she could embark on the challenge of producing her MA diploma project. This was the environment world she knew best. The environment world that would help her conceptualize the way she thought about design, about production and about resources. In describing her project, Bjerkaas interestingly weaves her stories from the starting point of the objects and materials she found *at* the farm. The farm does not become a stage or a setting disengaged or outside from the objects she encountered there, but rather a habitat. For Bjerkaas, the farm is a way of thinking, a way of knowing the world. It therefore, in her own words, becomes a metaphor for multitasking, conceptualizing and seasonality. It becomes the way Bjerkaas knows designing: the farm situates her knowledge and her design practice.

A farm is a place of practice. A place where *farming* takes place. Farming is an act of stewardship, an act of cultivating and of *caring for*. Caring or to care for is an act of practical labour, as Thom van Dooren explains; "caring require more from us than abstract well wishing, it requires that we get involved in some concrete way, that we *do* something (whenever possible)

to take care of another.”¹ Caring is therefore an active state, not merely an ethical or emotional one. At *Fashion Farm* the practical labour executed pertains to a multitude of players and acts. Bjerkaas describes the interconnectedness between farming and her designs as a dualism between the production of resources and the production of sartorial matters. “It is important to note,” she says, “that most textiles starts out in the hands of the farmer or growing in the fields.”² But this concrete relation, or contradiction, between the sartorial and farming does not completely cover the interconnectedness of fashion and farm in the *Fashion Farm* project. The act of farming as a metaphor or conceptual kin with the act of designing in Bjerkaas` practice also highlights her sensibility of the relations between the disparate actors and agents in her environment world. Faced with stacks of old fabrics, her grandmother`s embroidered cloths, her hand woven wall hangings and carpets, stained table cloths and worn out bed linens, Bjerkaas commenced on the practical labour of caring for these mundane, tattered textiles. She got involved in a concrete way in order to take care of these objects so carefully mended and loved by previous generations. Thus, the textiles and objects she found at the farm became tools as much as sources of inspiration. They became interconnected to her practice through a dialectics of thinking and material. The gesture of taking a tool in hand is, as philosopher of science, Isabelle Stengers argue, “both producing and produced by, the relationship of relevance between the situation and the tool.”³ This means that the tool (whether it be conceptual or material) also situates knowledge and vice versa. The darned and patched textiles that is the material basis of the *Fashion Farm* showcase, thus simultaneously produce and are being produced by the relationship between designing and the material. In Bjerkaas` “Mellom Beuys og Bestemor” for instance, she activates a nexus between her grandmother`s worn out table cloths, a jacket found in the old stable at the farm re-labelled “The Barn Suit”, and dead-stock textiles acquired from outside the farm. In this flux between the materials, patterns and habitat, the tools that Bjerkaas takes in hand both informs and are being informed by her design practice and the objects. She thinks *with* farming, with the act of caring for, growing and stewardship. “Mellom Beuys og Bestemor” thus becomes a way of thinking or *acting* the nexus between the old and the new, the

¹ Thom van Dooren, "Lexicon: Care," *Environmental Humanities* 5 (2014). 291-294. 291.

² Bjerkaas, Tone. *Fashion Farm*. “Self Assessment Learning Outcomes & Modes of Design”, submitted for the degree of MA in design. The Oslo National Academy of the Arts, May 2020.

³ Isabelle Stengers, "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices," *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2005). 183-196. 185.

up-cycled and the seasonal, all situated by the habitat of her Dyrøy farm and her practice as a designer.

There is another entanglement that came to make up the *Fashion Farm* project, namely the Covid-19 pandemic. Just as there is a temporal duality imbedded in the *Fashion Farm* project — it is simultaneously a place inhabited by an open-ended design practice, as well as a fixed diploma project due to be showcased in the spring of 2020 — the Covid-19 pandemic both posed a concrete problem in need of a design solution as well as producing a conceptual backdrop for the open-ended practice of *Fashion Farm*. With the lock down imposed by the Norwegian government in March 2020, the question of how to display a sartorial diploma project was informed by the inability of producing a fashion show. In such a manner, the pandemic became a player in the form and outcome of the *Fashion Farm* project. In the absence of a fashion show, the collection is depicted and showcased through a different medium. The digital mediation of the project's outcome also informs and is being informed by the conceptual framework of *Fashion Farm*. Throughout the project, Bjerkaas have been interested in the collective as a way of knowledge-making. Through the digital mediation of the project, Bjerkaas engages the collective by inviting the thinking and making of a variety of her colleagues and peers. As with farming, *Fashion Farm* is a collective endeavour, and the knowledge and practice born from of this collectivity reveals the relations between the different actors and agents. Such as in “The Robe”, where Bjerkaas applies the conceptual framework of farming to the practical challenge of pattern making. After purchasing a dead-stock bolt of Norwegian made linen from Krivi weaving mill, Bjerkaas wanted to maximize the quantity of robes she could make from the textile. She designed a pattern that minimized the cuttings and waste of the material. This idea follows a lineage of vernacular patternmaking; making the most out of the accessible material and designing patterns that would be easy to replicate. In “The Robe” project, she enrolled other designers and makers to personalize the robe through different aesthetic expressions such as prints and embroideries. This places her in historical kinship with other DIY design approaches, such as that of Enzo Mari's *Autoprotteggazione* from 1974, where Mari proposed a number of furniture designs applicable for individualization that responded to human needs. Within this ideological kinship, “The Robe” does not evoke the idea of “good design” as a response to human needs, but it reveals what Bjerkaas conceives as human needs in a world in crisis; how to

go from the personal to the everyday or the general in a world where production of new things is indeed problematic?⁴

Isabelle Stengers, demands that no practice should be treated like any other, and that we should rather look at an ecology of practice.⁵ For Stengers the “first step” towards an ecology of practice is, “to approach a practice as it diverges, that is, feeling its borders, experimenting with questions which practitioners may accept as relevant, even if they are not their own questions [...]”⁶ Through *Fashion Farm*, Bjerkaas breaks with convention and positions herself at the fringes or borders of her field. *Fashion Farm*, situates itself in a dynamic relationship between the fringes and the centre of the process of making. It addresses sartorial matters as well as non-sartorial matters, such as crisis and habitat. Through *Fashion Farm*, Bjerkaas circumpass linear narratives and what she calls “chronological approaches to creating”, in order to highlight her symbiotic relationship to materials, techniques and outcome.⁷ She engages the whole of what she considers to be the practice of making. She weaves connections between production of material and the design outcome. She wants us to see all the parts, actors and entanglements enmeshed in the process of making, be it concrete or abstract. Her habitat, the Dyrøy farm, is the container for as well as the context of her thinking. Through *Fashion Farm* she invites us to think beyond the sartorial, beyond the conventional and to experiment with ideas of designing in the fringes.

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⁴ Bjerkaas, Tone. *Fashion Farm*. “Self Assessment Learning Outcomes & Modes of Design”, submitted for the degree of MA in design. The Oslo National Academy of the Arts, May 2020.

⁵ Stengers, Isabelle. "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices." *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2005): 183-196. 184.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bjerkaas, Tone. *Fashion Farm*. “Self Assessment Learning Outcomes & Modes of Design”, submitted for the degree of MA in design. The Oslo National Academy of the Arts, May 2020.