





## Introduction

Due to the history of textile industries in and around Borås and its lack of local sewage treatment, the Swedish river Viskan is today one of the most polluted in the country. Tons of toxins of mercury, zinc, copper, lead, chromium, and other dioxins are to be found in the bottom sediment (Borås Stad) which is affecting the entire ecosystem. The pollution, however, testifies to the significance of the river for its residents through time. Nonetheless, Viskan is not an isolated example. As commonly known, all human activity leaves a footprint and many environments in the world are and have been jeopardized to serve human needs and desires. When the places that support or enable our lives fall out of visibility they are so-called shadow places (Plumwood, 2008).

In line with United Nations Global Goal 15, to preserve and restore damaged lands, I want to bring forth Viskan as a shadow place that represent similar issues of alterings and transformations of the planet, intoxicated ecosystems, and other urgent climate issues and resource inequities. In short, I aspire to approach the river critically and reflectively to explore how an interplay between its human as well as non-human residents can be achieved. As my project is conducted in parallel to the ongoing preparatory work of the sanitation of Viskan, led by Borås Municipality, I see my project as a complementary practice, in which to explore how design and artistic methods can shed light on a specific geography "in the shadows of our actions". The project can be valuable both in terms of the sanitation planning but also in a more general eco-sustainable sense. Can fostered multispecies interplay help us relate differently to our local environment and its residents?



## Background

A *shadow place* can partly be described with the term 'dematerialization' which explains the process of becoming more and more out of touch with the material conditions, including ecological conditions, that support or enable our lives (Plumwood, 2008, p.141). This is what Val Plumwood, philosopher and ecofeminist, also called 'the splits of mind and body' which she describes as the controversy of dwelling in one place but getting economically supported by multiple disregarded places. Hence, when not acknowledging these places outside of the 'own place', the home, one also loses the sense of responsibility to them and thus make unrealistic demands on them (Plumwood, 2008, p.142). This is something that the student project *Unearthing Remnants of the Cobalt*, by Cornelia Hulting, investigates. As she seeks to acknowledge terrestrial processes (what she calls 'unearthing') she contributes to the place-based discourse about relations and the non-relations between humans and relevant material conditions, including its places and residents. The place "in the shadows" in her project (in relevance to current Swedish discourse), is the hand-dug mines in which cobalt is mined from in Congo, in both historical and contemporary perspective. Cobalt is increasingly demanded because of its application in rechargeable batteries for smartphones, laptops and electric cars (Hulting, 2019). Her work reveals the complexity in which the 'critical raw material' cobalt is entangled in our everyday lives as well as what its extraction and use means for other's lives. Hulting is exploring designerly and artistic methods such as craft, or more specifically, stoneware clay and what the display of it in a gallery setting can do (see figure 1). Using a critical and speculative design approach, she summarized her result being a speculative design fiction of the mythological creature Cobelt and how complex narratives can be unearthed in craft-based practice (Hulting, 2019). By exhibiting handmade clay tiles painted with cobalt, being speculative remnants of a mythical Cobelt creature, she hopes to get the viewer of the exhibition to start thinking. Can we start to relate to cobalt differently? With curiosity? With caution? She asks.

**"Local nature study and observation can foster respectful disclosure and friendship, mutual knowledge and care, as well as understanding of the ways and needs of non-human neighbours."**  
(Plumwood, 2008, p.143)





▲ Figure 1. Speculative remnants of the Cobelt, by Cornelia Helling, in exhibition. Photo by: Cornelia Helling.



▲ Figure 2. Art Lab Gnesta at the swamp. Photo from: Art Lab Gnesta's webpage.


As *Unearthing Remnants of the Cobalt* is a smaller artistic intervention, a more large-scaled project that includes more people is *Swamp Storytelling* (see Figure 2). This project acknowledges another place that tends to fall out of visibility in our everyday life namely the swamp, rooting in the Swedish swamps. Seeing the swamp as a symbol for current climate politics, necessary transformation processes and a cradle of life (Art Lab Gnesta 2020) the project explores the earnings of treating the swamp as a subject, in opposition to an object in a collaboration between Swedish and Indian researchers. The purpose is to combine the



fields of work for scientific research and artistic production around current environmental issues (Art Lab Gnesta 2020), referring to the multidisciplinary, multinational, participants of scientists, artists, and others. Additionally, there are many different projects, activities, and exhibitions stemming from the Residency program, of which *Swamp Cosmos* is one. At the *Swamp Bienal 2018*, director and choreographer Katja Seitajoki and sound designer Tomas Björkdal presented an interactive performance in the form of a sound landscape. They invited the visitors to the swamp outside of Gnesta where they handed out headphones in which one would listen to speculative sounds of the swamp- *Swamp Cosmos*. With this interactive performance, they asked themselves whether one can, by camouflaging oneself as another species, approach nature and challenge the perspective that puts humans over nature (Arena Baubo, 2018). The activity is an example of how to use artistic-based practice critically to activate conversation, making a place for thoughts and reflections about a post-anthropocentric reality.

By situating myself in the discourse of critical river studies and posthumanism, as an emerging design discourse, I want to contribute to building bridges between the sense of boundaries between humans and (local) nature. I position my design practice within critical design, emphasizing Dunne and Raby's definition of it as an attitude that resists the status quo and being; critical thoughts translated into materiality (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 34). Just like in *Unearthing the Remnants* and *Swamp Storytelling*, I'm taking upon a critical design approach to ask questions, instead of providing answers and design to make us think (instead of buy) (ibid). By so, I explore how to face changes in our local environment that on a global scale respond to issues that revolve around the Anthropocene, the era which considers how human activities, since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, have fundamentally impacted our Earth's ecosystems and species (Cheng, 2019). I believe that thinking through design, rather than through words, and using the language and structure of design to engage people (Dunne & Raby, 2013) is necessary in the conversations of how to deal with these issues, to complement for instance scientific research such as natural sciences. Hence, I also hope to engage the non-academic public such as (human) residents around Viskan.





## Research Question

How can a design project shed light on a shadow place and re-imagine the relationship between human and non-human residents through critical reflections and other formats that explore modes of multispecies interplay?



## Methods

My way of conducting this work is process-led and artistic-based in the way I'm using designerly methods and approaches. With a critical mindset, I am striving to design *with* the river and thus acknowledging a posthumanist perspective, which means that I seek to address and include both human and non-humans in the process. As the basis for my methods is my emphasis on Donna Haraway's concept of *becoming-with*: the importance of human response-abilities in our relationships with companion animals (Haraway, 2008). It is an ambition as well as a method to try to step out of human exceptionalism and design in a sensitive, empathic and interconnected way, in a non-violent manner.

One method, along with material investigations, is mapping, both in the sense of a traditional map as well as in more artistic formats. I am also striving to work with an openness to other fields of expertise which I'm doing by conducting interviews and having conversations with people outside the design field. Residents around Viskan, non-designers, are also a group that I consider. For instance, I will further explore the possibility of conducting workshops (see figure 3) to open up the dialogue with, for example, high school students in the close area. Another method that I am practicing in this project is to take recurrent walks by the river to get a better local knowledge and understanding of the site(s), its geography, and residents. On my walks, I'm practicing mindful and bodily *presence*.

| What I respond to | What I strive for    |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| on the expense of | <i>together with</i> |
| human- centered   | <i>posthumanism</i>  |
| sense of boundary | <i>interplay</i>     |
| nature culture    | <i>natureculture</i> |
| objectify         | <i>subjectify</i>    |
| absence           | <i>presence</i>      |





▲ Figure 3. A pilot test facilitated by me and Mirai Nemoto in December 2020. We are exploring how collaging can work as a co- creative method to achieve interplay between the participants and the environment at Stora Delsjön in Gothenburg.

## Earlier investigations

In my practice, for instance, I explore the more *artistic format* of mapping to reveal and bring out the complexities in and around Viskan. One example is a set of plant samples that I made of clay with dried plants picked from and around the river during a walk (see figure 4). When put on a board, the bricks act like a map that encourages playfulness and mobility that allows different findings to be made. In one session, with help from Artportalen (2020), I located red-listed plants that for obvious reasons weren't on the board. One of them is for instance the Silver thistle. Coming originally from the Alps, it immigrated in the early 18th Century with the seeds imported to the watermill by the river, and ended up in a meadow there (Västkuststiftelsen 2020). So by the mapping method, I could bring out these otherwise in-the-shadows stories, and suddenly, the geography of Viskan extended to the Alps.

However, in addition to this artistic map that is subverting the “objective” map that describes the space from the top view (Multi Multi 2020), I'm carrying on one of these maps, from the top view, of Viskan in print (see figure 5). Nevertheless, this map is to act as a conversation piece in meetings to point at, refer to and take notes on. For instance, it has been used in meetings with people such as the project leader of the sanitation project and the city antiquarian at the Municipality, and a volunteer worker at Borås Textilmuseum. The meetings have helped me to get an overview of the social, economical and spiritual entanglements of river Viskan in historical and present time such as the background, plans and dilemmas around the upcoming sanitation project. One point that will be taken into consideration in the preparatory work is for instance the importance of involvement and communication with the local residents.

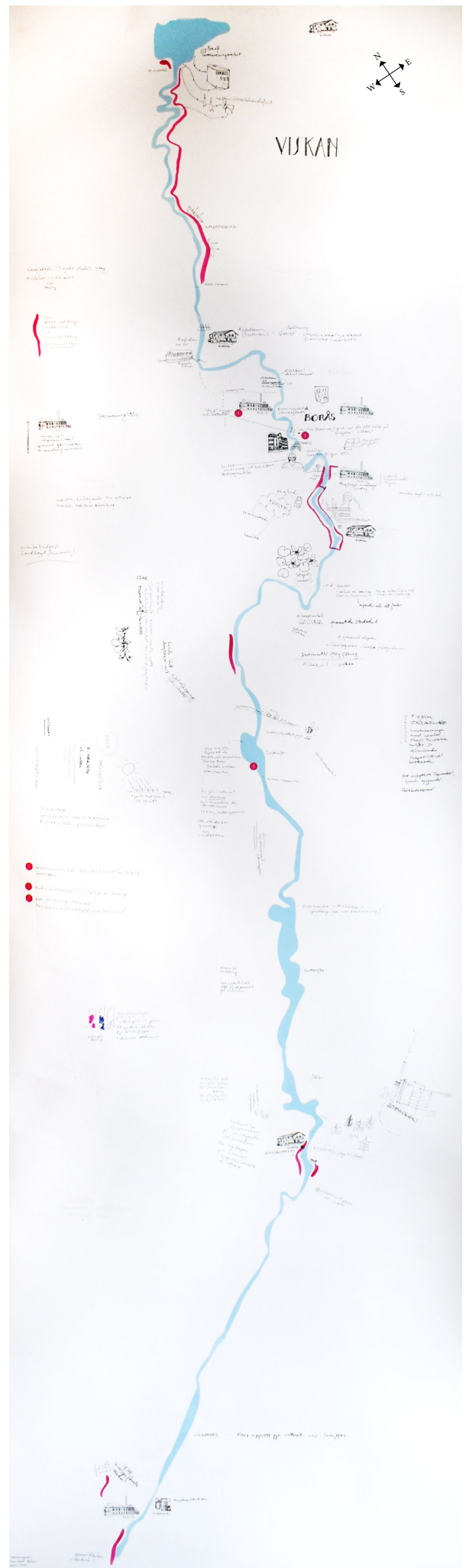
Many of the ideas for the material investigations in the process stem in one way or another from the walks by Viskan. For example, I discovered an old watermill by the ponds at Rydboholm that I engaged with in an investigation by, in this case, baking bread. I will continue to take walks and be open to what it gives and continue with material investigations as a central part of the project.



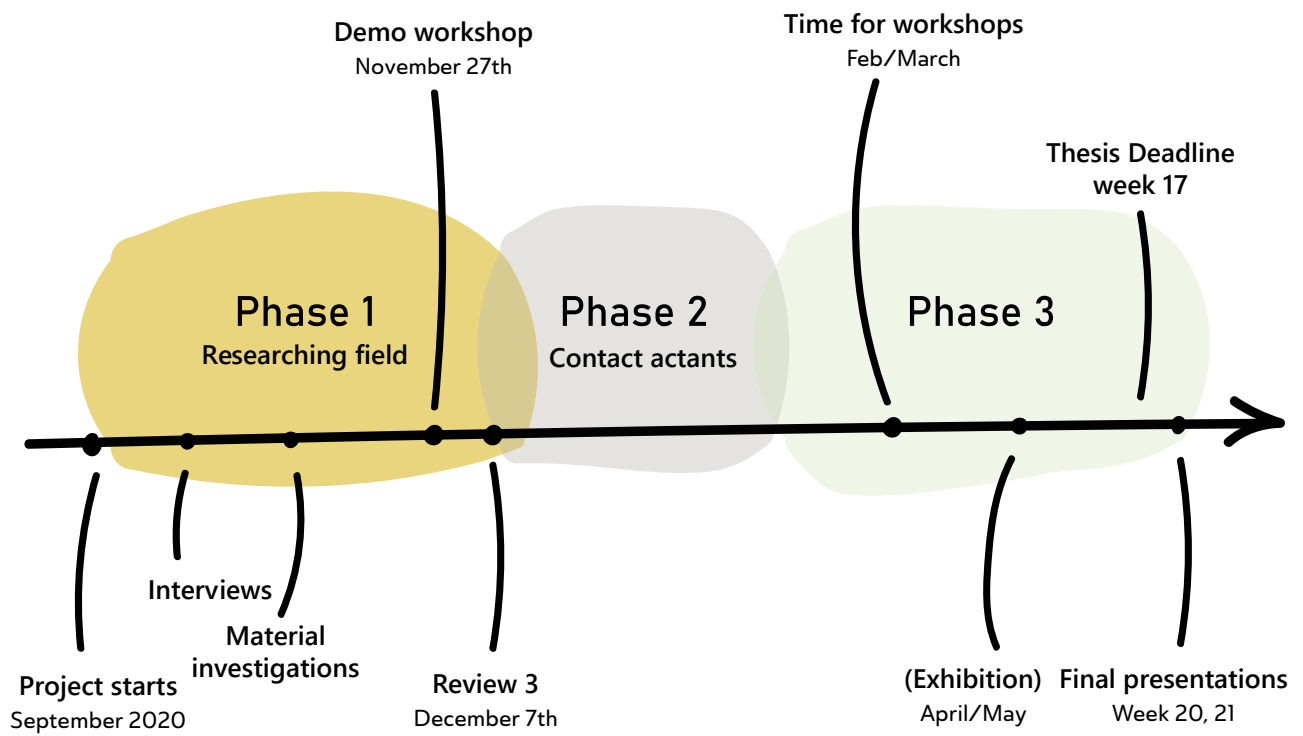
▼ Figure 4. Plant samples



Figure 5. Top view map of Viskan. ►  
Research area from upstreams  
Borås, Öresjö (top), to Viskafors  
downstreams of Borås (down).



# Timeline









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