The Gazing Zone is a carefully curated experiment on perception of Self and Other. When gazing at what exists one tends to apply meaning to things that might be differently perceived by various organisms. The experiment manifests in accordingly different forms (e.g. debates, performances, rituals, yet undescribed explorations) taking place in and of their own given environment, rather than examine them in the void. In search for radical and conflicted minds coming from different fields and parts of the world, the Gazing Zones are an intimate collision of humans with non-human people, coming together as objects having the same form of agency. It is also a playful way to engage with storytelling and narrative-based approach to the absurdity of being alive, having the world as a stage full of actors.
I will go on the impossible mission
exploring the limits of meaning
I applied to everything around me,
exposing myself to the frivolous game
of intuition with the analytical brain.
But what is an Umwelt?

It is a concept that describes the subjective universe of an individual organism and how different forms of life perceive the world, depending on their very specific — e.g.: biological, functional, psychological, etc. — makeup, described by Uexküll in his book “A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men.”

In principle, the Umwelt theory only applies to life forms, but in my application of the theory I strived to conceptualise how abiotic actors may also have some kind of an Umwelt, very much in the vein of recent object-oriented ontologies.

Central to my research is the term gaze — understood as the act of seeing and being seen. This term has become an effective vehicle for my thinking in design, which is trained on the boundary between self and other; the way one perceives and understands elements of a given environment and consequently, how one acts towards them. This is what I have set out to explore further in my project the Gazing Zone.

While collecting materials for my Master Thesis, I settled on a theoretical perspective; the Umwelt theory of Jakob von Uexküll. It has been a compass for my design explorations, guiding me in an attempt to see the world from the perspective of the other and in questioning the anthropocentric understanding of the world.

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My MA Thesis, Living Through the Gaze: Design Practice for and Without Human serves as theoretical support to my design activities, outlines my thought process and offers a certain context to my design work. In the thesis, I reviewed two influential projects from the expanded field of art and design: Pierre Huyghe’s “UUmwelt” and Thord Thwaites’ “GoatMan,” that influence my own practice and are representative of how and why I relate to these fields. More importantly, writing the thesis led me to collaborate with evolutionary biologist Skúli Skúlason, who supervised the thesis and assisted me in linking my insights to the already constituted field of Umwelt theory.

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One day, I found myself applying the methodology of an Umwelt researcher, whose goal is to understand species-specific perspectives of the world. I did this in a very human-centred environment: the kitchen of my apartment in Reykjavík. It was an autumn afternoon, and I and my flatmate had battled a small plague of houseflies occupying our home for the past few days. My flatmate hated their company and announced loudly that she would kill them one by one, if she had to. I was sitting on a chair, looking at their tiny bodies flying around, listening to the buzzing of their wings, wondering how their world compares with mine.

I proceeded to study houseflies and all the information I found revolved around methods and ways to get rid of them. It led me to ask the following question: “How could I change the function of a housefly in my Umwelt?” And just as importantly: “How could I change the function of myself in the perception of the housefly?”

With these questions in mind, I reached out to, and exchanged a few letters with, semiotician Morten Tønnessen, President of the Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies, asking him about the intimate cohabitation of humans and houseflies. “To change the flies’ role in your Umwelt might not be so hard (cf. my vs. my wife’s relation to flies… sympathy vs. antipathy will change that relation). To change your role in the Umwelt of the fly might be harder – but maybe worth an experiment?”. His answer prompted me to create a tool that would make it possible to switch the functions of self and other.

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This mask, which was supposed to stick to the surface of my face, could hold a pile of compost, the food of houseflies. As the compost is where they feel best, they would live on my face and relate my presence to an unorthodox function of a human face: serving food. Furthermore, I would now get to enjoy their close companionship, looking at them through the coloured glass with its pinkish hue; nurturing feelings of empathy.

While considering the size-differences between our bodies and pondering how many houseflies could fit onto my head, I came up with the idea of a mask made of flies. The mask would disrupt — very literally — not only my way of seeing the other, but also myself being seen by the other. And so, the headpiece came to life; a glowing square mask — a symbol of the gaze itself, constituting a visual identity for my project.

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Meanwhile, I asked myself: “Do houseflies even want to be my friends?” and: “How can I know if they enjoy my company as much as I want to enjoy theirs?” These were ethically important questions to be asked. However, it did not suit me to answer those questions, it would have brought me too close to the position of the problem-solving designer that tries to find the solution to a given problem — as if I even had the right answer to a problem which I most probably created myself in the first place. Solving a problem was not my intention — my aim was not to successfully mingle with houseflies, but for us to recognize the presence of each other in two different Umwelts, and maybe for a short moment, I naively imagined that the gap between two could be bridged.
As the concept for my design project itself is quite abstract and not grounded in common social norms I was unsure of how to communicate the narrative to an audience. My eternal admiration for the craft of stop-motion animation and the works of artists such as Jan Švankmajer prompted me to create a clay character: a human with a tiny mask, enjoying the company of flies.

The medium of stop-motion is very specific. It requires working with physical materials, preserving the very tangible aspects of their existence while freeing the artist to bend the reality which is being built — allowing abiotic factors to be brought to life and showing what can’t be seen in real-time.

Playing with scale, I consequently created a huge head of that same original clay character, using paier-mâché. The head suited an adult human and by complementing the puppet with a life-size actor I found a way to question the storytelling in my project, blurring the boundaries between what is real and what is fiction.

And so, I felt I had finally moved from the theoretical mindset; acquiring knowledge a priori — to the hands-in-a-floury-mixture a posteriori of acquiring knowledge by designing.
stills from the short stop-motion animation starring the houseflies & the clay character using the mask.
I have decided to work in situ— which means to be grounded in a specific environment, preferably in a very human-centred, conflicted place. The concept of an environment (with the emphasis placed on the relations between different elements co-creating their surroundings, rather than simply inhabiting the same territory) had been an important part of my study. At the time of implementing this methodology, the final exhibition of the MA Programme was expected to take place in the art gallery Asmundarsalur, which couldn’t be more human-centred: What could be more human than the idea of art?

I spent numerous days hanging around and inside of the gallery, analysing what I saw, noting what I was being drawn to. While observing what kind of relations were being formed in the space, I asked myself another significant question: “What is, or is there something, beyond functionality in our perception of the other?”

My thinking was prompted by the words of Goethe: “The eye must be something like the sun / Otherwise no sunlight could be seen” and Jakob von Uexküll’s variation on that thought: “If the flower were not bee like / And the bee were not flower like / The union could never be successful.”

Thinking in situ and pondering over the omnipresent dance of diverse bodies around me, was a final leap I took towards working on different scenarios for intentionally curating collisions of different entities, human and other than a human.
shots taken when playing in situ, around the Ásmundarsalur gallery, with the papier-mâché mask on.
Following my fixation on how things relate and ‘leak’ into each other, how they constantly co-create their functions, I have decided that I will carefully curate a series of experiments on perception of self and other. I am a study of possible scenarios which might emerge through the collision of more than one object (human and other than a human). By shifting my focus from an object, examined as if it was taken out of its surrounding processes emerging in relation to something else than the objects themselves – the objects acquire different functions and come to carry different meanings. With time, the project morphed into the platform called the Gazing Zones, which is supposed to gather kindred minds from different parts of the world and fields of knowledge. Through seemingly funny experiments taking forms of debates, workshops, rituals, performances etc. it is to bring together different points of view and catalyse processes which results in new ways to look closer at these phenomena, which are not often being studied or taken seriously. Careful curation is necessary to maintain the spine of this vague experiment, which is conceptually undefined, to leave room for others to bring in what they think belongs to this platform. I have opened a call for participants, people from different fields and parts of the world, as it is a playful way to engage with storytelling and narrative-based approach to the absurdity of being alive, having the world as a stage full of actors. However, contrasting the anthropocentric perspectives, on this stage as big as the world, agency is assigned not only to human actors but everything other to them, biotic and abiotic entities co-creating different communities.
THE GAZING ZONE REMAINS UNDEFINED AS A CONCEPT, CAREFULLY CURATED & HAVING THE SPINE OF ITS OWN, IT IS TO BE UNDERSTOOD IN ACTION

now, think imagine

SELF
ABIOtic
GAZING
EACH
FICTIONALIZE

OTHER
BIOTIC
 AT
OTHER
POTENTIALIZE

IN SITU
While preparing manifestations of the Gazing Zones, COVID-19 hit the world and started to regulate the social, economic and cultural lives of Earthlings. Sounds like a fictitious digression, but just now when I am writing this it is the beginning of April 2020, and the future feels uncertain. The global lockdown resulted in an inaccessibility of environments other than one’s own house, followed by a magnificent increase in online activity of humans and their digital presence. This very peculiar moment became perfect for shaping the open call online. When in quarantine, I worked on the premises and reached out to potential collaborators, who – as everyone else – could easily be found in front of their screens.
please state the name you want to be referred to as

your e-mail address

are you interested in taking part in a ny specific G.Z. or want to let us know you are genuinely interested in participating?

how would you describe your self in three words?

if you could become anything, who/what would you not like to become?

do you perceive your current habitat as artificial or natural?

what is your preferable form of communication?

is there a difference between the surroundings and the environment?

what are your thoughts on pedophilia advocacy?

who/what is your best friend, other than a human?

do you perceive abiotic (non-living) existences as conscious?

what was the biggest liminal (transformative) experience you had?

would you go on a journey in search for something that is said not to exist?

give an example of invasive species

who/what would you refer to as beautiful?

what are you most conflicted about today?

share your favourite poem, sentence or thought

**answer the following questions only if you are interested in conducting the Gazing Zone.**

what is your premise for the Gazing Zone? State it in one sentence

what do you think is the biggest limitation in realization of this premise and how motivated are you to use it well?

what are the possible ethical/moral implications of your premise?

what is the role of the environment this premise is to be realized in?

who are the actors in this premise and what is their agency?

how would you lead the experiment?

when do you see it happening?

would you like to share any references (texts, images, sounds etc.) that could help us to contextualize/visualize your thinking?

pass on the filled-out form to us via e-mail

mat@thegazingzone.org

we will get back to you as soon as possible!

all best,

the G.Z. curatorial team
The online platform has its fundamentals in the official website of the G.Z., which serves multiple purposes: communicating crucial information about the elements of the project, being a mood board for the themes and theories that are currently being explored more firmly through the Gazing Zones, and an archive of previous events with an open call for upcoming ones. It is to be a collection of possible yet improbable collisions of many selves, seemingly funny but challenging in their seriousness. As a tool designed to harvest kindred minds, I have assembled a set of questions to be answered in a form, which are to unravel the sensitivity, curiosity and criticality of a person, who wants to either participate or conduct the Gazing Zone. The form can be accessed through the website, and everyone drawn to the initiative is encouraged to apply at any time by bringing in ideas, which resonate with the core of this experiment.

Here and now, I am going to drop the link to the website, finishing my contribution to designing and shaping the idea of the Gazing Zone, and letting it grow its own spine, while being co-fed by different minds and bodies coming from varied sources. www.thegazingzone.org

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