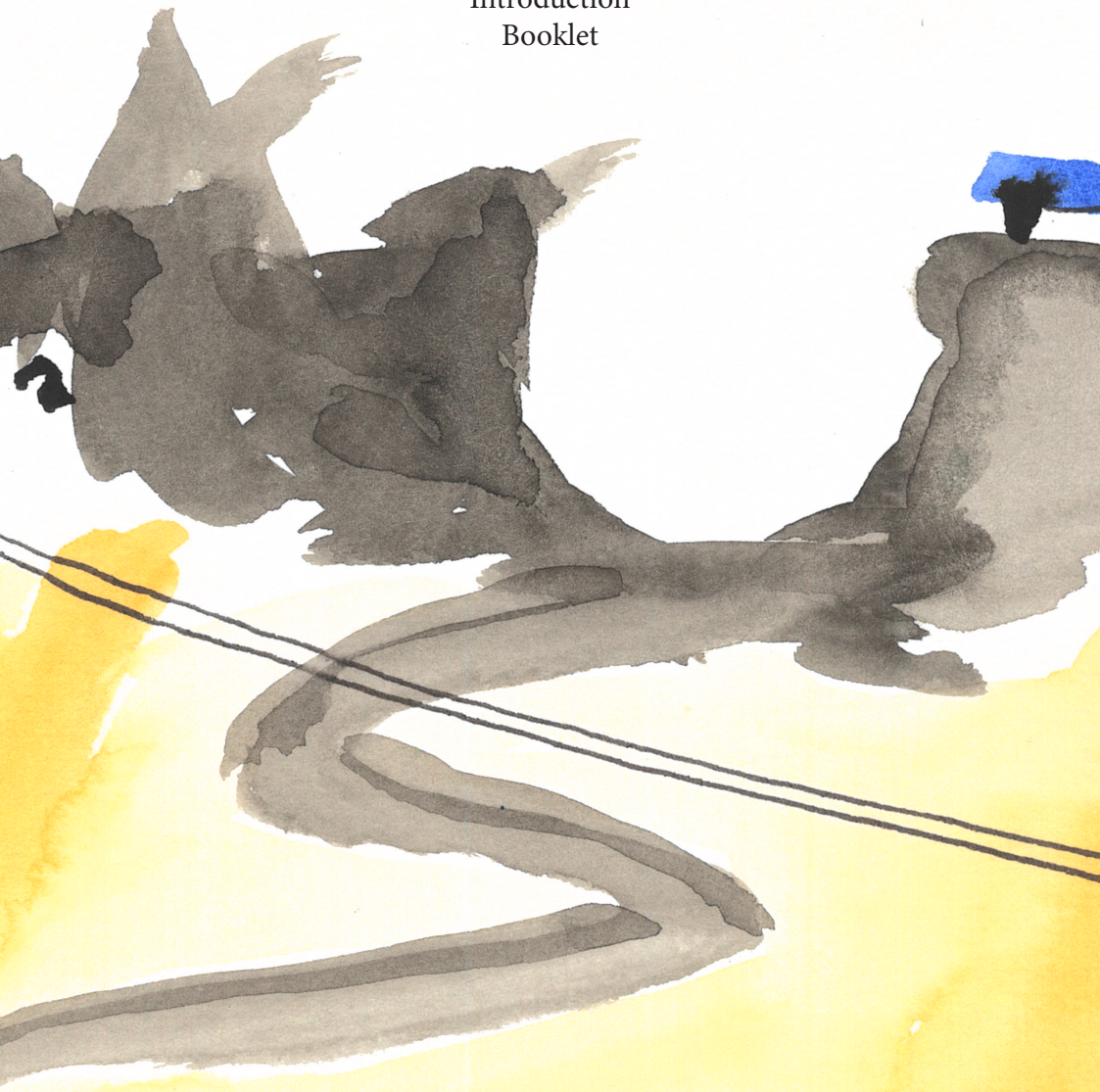
100 Years of Summer

Introduction
Booklet



Explore Lab Graduation | Valentin Zech | 4587979

Shul

‘Track’ in Tibetian: shul, a mark that remains after that which made it has passed by - a footprint, for example. In other contexts, shul is used to describe the scarred hollow in the ground where a house once stood, the channel worn through rock where a river runs in flood, the inddentation in the grass where an animal slept last night. All of these are shul: the impression of something that used to be there. [...] Indentations, hollows, marks, and scars left by the turbulence [...].[1]

(From “A Field Guide to Getting Lost” by Rebecca Solnit)

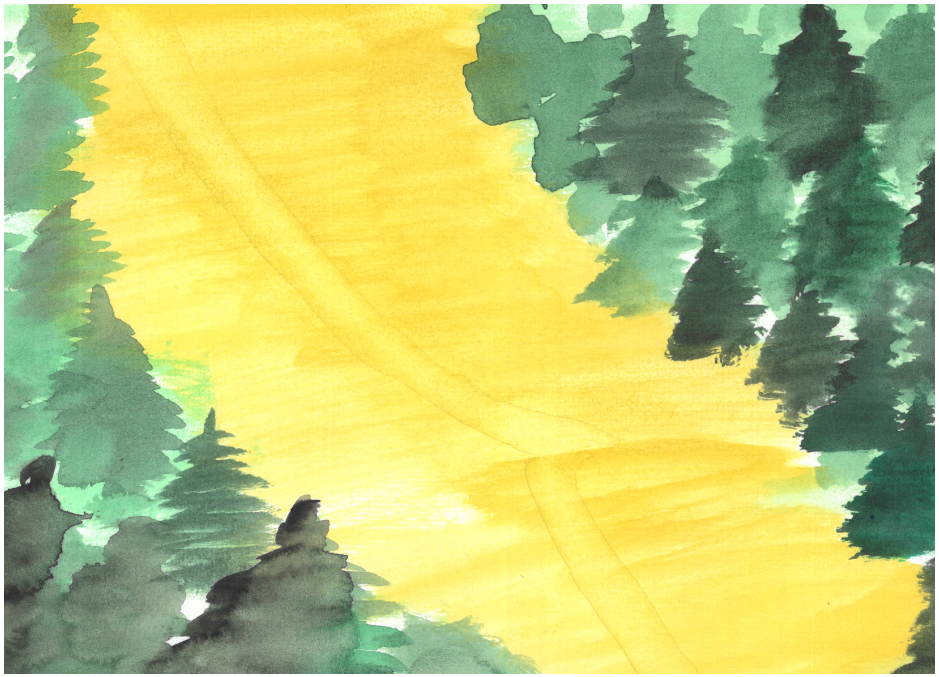
Contents

This introduction booklet contains the most relevant background information of my research. The main body can be found in the *6 altitude booklets* and the *'Bigger Picture' flipbook*. An *epilogue* in the final section of this booklet discusses some of the most important concepts and conclusions.

Fascination

I am gliding through a thick layer of powder, fresh snow that has fallen the during the night. It's early, I am the first one to cut a line through the sea of white and the cold wind blows across my face while I ride. I am in the here and now, I feel connected to the nature around me, nowhere else I'd rather be.

A few hours later I sit in the sun with a beer in my hand: happy, exhausted, with red cheeks from the sun and the cold. I start looking around me, notice the parking lot with hundreds of cars. Austrian plates, German plates, Dutch plates. People from close by and far away. I notice the snow machines blowing out sprays of water, just high enough that they can freeze before hitting the ground. I notice the cut through the trees where the piste runs, like a canyon or, perhaps, train tracks through the buildings in a busy city.



Growing up an avid skier in Austria, I have always felt very connected to the mountain landscape – both in the summer and the winter. As I am getting a bit older, however, I can't help but wonder about the future: *What we will be leaving behind once there isn't enough snow anymore for the resorts to be profitable? Can the destruction be reversed or repaired? Is there an economical perspective for the local communities? Could it be a moment for us to rethink our relationships with all non-humans?* I felt such a strong connection to these questions that I wanted to spend my graduation year exploring them.

General Introduction

Once upon a time..
In 1894, the priest of the small mountain village Warth, Austria saw photos of Scandinavians moving through high snow on two long slats of wood. He was immediately convinced that this would also be practical for him – often times in the winter, he couldn't leave his village for weeks because of several meters high snow. The first attempts on the new skis were tough, but soon him and the other villagers regularly used them to travel between the small towns in the valley. What the priest probably could not have imagined is how big skiing would become and that it was about to fundamentally change the town of Warth, along with many other small mountain towns in the Alps.[2]

Commercialized Landscapes
Nowadays, the main income source of these towns has transitioned from farming to tourism: even in 2021, a year still affected by the corona pandemic, more than 22 million tourists visited Austria – many of them for skiing and hiking in the mountainous regions.[3] This transition is visible in the physical world: the guesthouses and hotels are getting bigger and more numerous, new lifts connect smaller ski areas into large-scale resorts to stay competitive; elaborate snow-making systems and higher cable cars conquer new untouched areas to delay the

effects of climate change. While the economy blooms, the non-human natural world suffers. Their "voices" often go unheard while their living environment is being transformed into a capitalistic production landscape with little attention for actors that stand in the way of selling the "product".

Inevitably however, climate change will make it impossible to ski in the future – the lower altitude resorts are already closing, and it is a matter of time until this will happen higher up as well. What will be left are the ruins of capitalist human activity, a derelict landscape covered with infrastructure that has been rendered useless by the warm climate: the ski areas will be the new brownfields of the Alps.

Walking through a brownfield can be quite an impressive experience: they tell the story of places that were once buzzing with life, the spaces are often vast, and infrastructure that has lost its purpose creates a very strong feeling of abandonness. Being there stimulates you to wonder. You wonder about the people who worked or visited the places when they were at their peak. You wonder about the processes of production, about what a certain building was put-up for, about what a derelict machine was doing.
I would like to explore and communicate those experiences through photos, physical objects, and video/sound. Those media can convey the strong phenomenological side of strolling through a ski area brownfield, but also allow for a non-linear way of storytelling. I feel this is important when attempting to uncover some of the complex entanglements of technology, landscape, humans and non-humans, and places.

Finally, there are many ways one could go about researching and documenting a brownfield. Striving for a physical research result will help me to focus on the spatial perspective when thinking about the brownfield, its machinery, and the human and non-human experience.

Ski Arlberg as a Research Location
There are four main reasons why I chose Ski Arlberg as a Location to conduct my research:

1. Ski Arlberg is the biggest ski area in Austria. There is arguably no other ski area in Austria with the same diversity of landscapes, lifts, and towns. With 88 lifts and 300km of piste, it is a good place to try to understand the complexity of a large ski resort.
2. The ski area is a "patch-work" of several smaller areas. The ski area consists of several smaller areas that have been connected throughout time. Those connection moments are especially interesting, because they often cross whole valleys and large 'untouched' areas. Furthermore, the individual ski areas all had their own character and approach that can still be seen today and makes it possible to compare a few different areas without having to actually do fieldwork in several locations.
3. I know the area very well. My family has been going skiing in the area ever since I can remember. This is a very strong base for my research.
4. Accessibility and contacts. Since I grew up close-by, it is easy for me to retrieve information (no language barrier) or go back to the area to conduct more research if necessary. In addition, lots of the location specific literature is only available in local libraries and in German language that might not be easy to access in a context that I am less familiar with.

Problem Statement

Ski areas have become elaborate and exhaustive landscapes of production. The infrastructure of lifts, pistes, avalanche safety equipment, and snow making systems changes the mountain landscape and influences the plants and animals living there, but also tells the story of human exceptionalism and a capitalistic profit-above-all attitude. Already, the course of our changing climate challenges the profitability of winter tourism - with inconsistent seasons both regarding the amount of snow and the timing of snowfall. This issue will worsen as the planet warms up and might even make winter tourism impossible in the future. The effects of this will be visible in the form of ski area brownfields: (seasonally) abandoned industrial landscapes that are obsolete most of the year and difficult "redevelop" or reuse. At the same time, inconsistent skiing activity will present a big challenge to the local inhabitants of the mountain villages who rely on the income generated through tourism. This means there will be opportunities to think about the future of those landscapes, as well as the future of how we view ourselves as humans among other species. Therefore, the main research question is:

Research Questions

How can reading a post-snow ski area as a brownfield help to re-think the relationship between humans and non-humans in winter tourism landscapes?

The research question is split up into two parts:

Part I:
The first set of sub-questions is about the machinery of the ski area brownfields, inventorying and documenting the objects, patterns, systems, and processes of these industrial landscapes.

What is the machinery of ski area brownfields?

How was it made?
How does it function?
How has it shaped the land?

Part II:
The second part is about the experience of the ski area brownfield, how humans and non-humans perceive the landscape, but also each other.

How does the machinery influence the human and non-human experience?

Just like an abandoned factory has some especially interesting spatial "moments" that define how we perceive it (e.g. a part that is especially big, or a place that was the core of the industrial process before the shut-down, etc.). The same might be true for a ski area brownfield. I would like to try to identify those places in my research – the ones relevant for humans, non-humans, and others where the interaction between the two groups is most prevalent.

Which places in the landscape are most significant in influencing the human and non-human experience?

Finally, the research should help me to formulate paradigms for designing in a ski area (brownfield), considering all relevant actors.

What are the most important factors when designing for humans and non-humans in a ski area?

Methodology

A core part of this research is to experience a ski area without snow. As a result, I had to do the fieldwork as soon as possible in the process – as the autumn progresses it becomes less and less likely that the ski areas are snow-free. Therefore, the framework of the research was only loosely defined before going on the fieldtrip: through photos and literature I had chosen the 'lens' of the brownfield and I had come up with a basic set of observatory activities for the time there.

Upon my return, I reflected on my experiences and the collected material and found the research to naturally split into two phases:
1. the collection of material and experiences
2. the structuring and ordering of the material and experiences to draw conclusions

A methodological approach that describes this way of working well is ethnography. Much more well-known in anthropological research, it is usually used to study a community or a group of people. The researcher spends a longer period of time living daily life with the group that is the subject of the research, observing the ordinary: daily rituals, objects, and processes. Afterwards, the anthropologist uses the research records (journals, photos, drawings, etc.) to draw conclusions about the cultural and philosophical views and practices of the observed group.[4]

A similar framework can be applied to this research project. Each of the two phases uses a set of specific method(s) and tools:

Phase 1: Collection of material and experiences (Fieldwork)
The first phase documents the ordinary 'daily life' in a ski area brownfield.

Observation
A selection of tools was used to document the observations during the fieldtrip.

Daily Journal:
during the fieldtrip I kept a daily journal that I wrote in every night before going to sleep and sometimes during the day when something noteworthy happened that I did not want to forget. I also recorded some conversations with my fieldtrip partner when we discussed experiences and ideas during the hike.
Photography:
next to the journal, taking photos was the main tool to observe and capture the ski area brownfield. Not only the result of the photo itself is important. Also the conscious looking at and framing of a subject as well as the choice of equipment for a certain shot force the photographer to closely observe the environment.
Drawing:
while photography was the main tool to record experiences during the fieldtrip, drawing was used for some moments when I wanted to understand a certain place or object more profoundly.
Sound Recording:
I recorded many sounds along the path to capture the feeling of being in a ski area brownfield beyond what is visible in photos. I focused on noises that are relevant for nonhuman animals and humans.

Interviews (Informal and Formal)
Both formal and informal interviews are used to complement the observations.

The informal interviews happened on several occasions during the fieldtrip when we got involved with people who were doing work in the ski area or one of the towns (construction manager of a cable

car company overseeing the repair of one of the cables, supermarket employee in Lech, lift operator and maintenance worker at a chairlift station above Lech, hotel owner in Zuers). Those conversations were unprepared and the names of the interviewees were not recorded.

Two formal interviews were conducted. The first one with olympic skier Hubert Strolz. He lives in Warth and is both a farmer and guesthouse owner there. His family has been living in the small mountain village for at least four generations and he told me about his experiences in a fast changing winter tourism town; both as a farmer and guesthouse owner. The second formal interview will be with a biologist working as a government official for nature conservation in many of the ski areas in Vorarlberg.

Phase 2: Drawing conclusions

The material collected during the first phase is only about documenting a status quo. In order to show and understand systems and dependencies, the material has to be processed. Therefore, the second phase is about ordering, structuring, and interpreting the material to draw conclusions about the bigger picture of ski area brownfields. The products of this process are the 'pieces' of the exhibition. This phase has two steps:

Disentangle (mapping, structuring, and curating)

The first step results in maps, photo essays, and (imagined) dialogues and answers all but the last research question.

Photo Essays: The material is structured into six different parts of the machinery: ski lifts, pistes, buildings, snow making systems, paths/ roads, and avalanche control. Each part of the machinery is presented in a photo essay to show its elements, workings, and implications for the natural environment.

(Imagined) Dialogues: Furthermore, each of the six machinery parts is

matched with the experience of one human or nonhuman actor most relevant to that part of the machinery. The voice of that actor is made heard in the form of a dialogue, either imagined or real depending on the nature of the actor.

Maps: Finally, the structuring of the material and experiences results in a collection of places that are especially relevant for the human and nonhuman experiences. The selection of these locations is described in detail in the 'The bigger picture' booklet. These locations also form the base for the final phase: re-entangle.

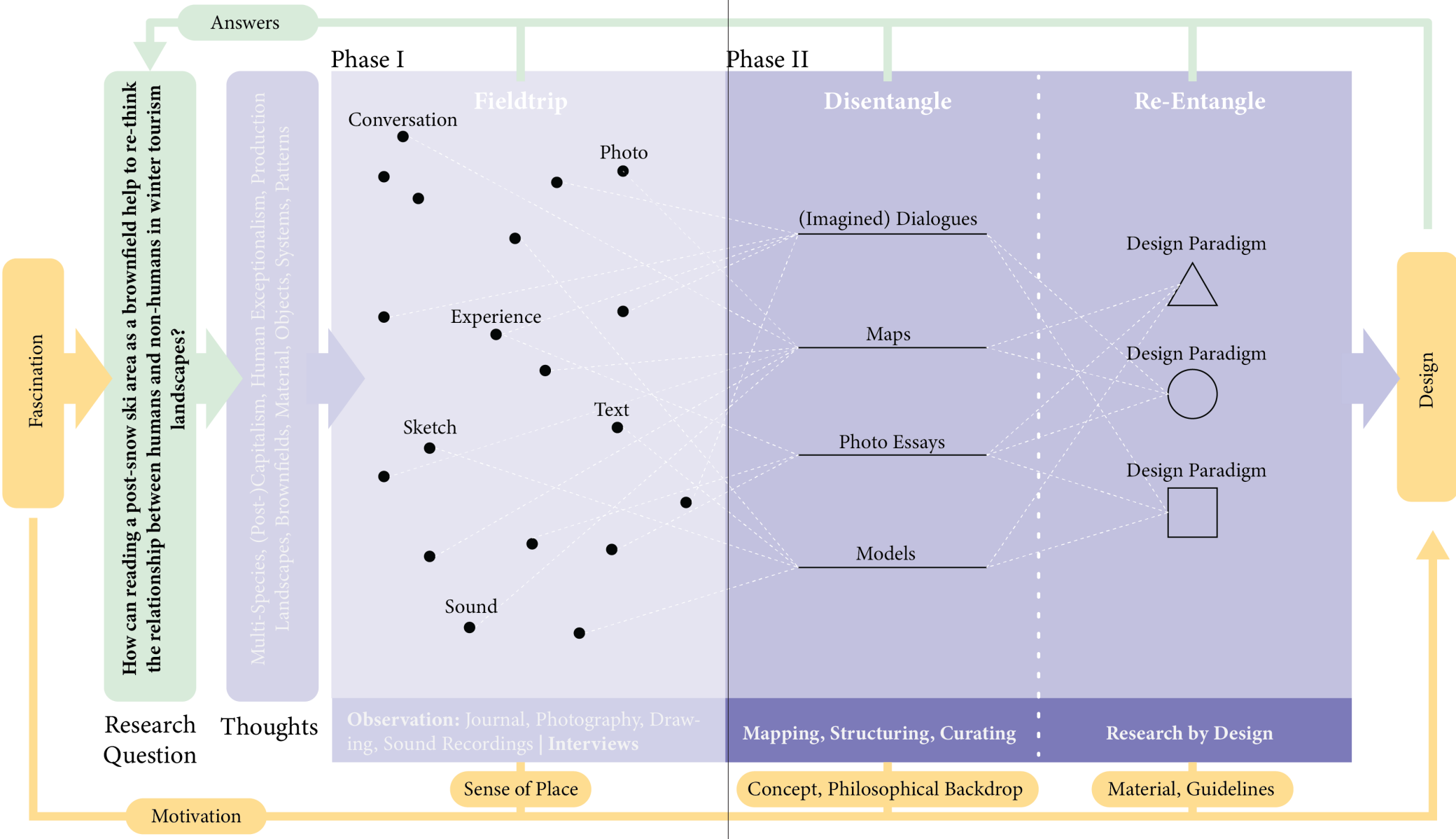
Re-Entangle (Research by design)

The last part tackles the final research question: *what are the most important factors when designing for humans and non-humans in a ski area?*

A hypothetical design assignment forms the base to explore this question: designing an artwork for each of the previously chosen locations that both positively impacts the experience of non-humans while making visible some of the brownfield characteristics not visible to ski tourists in snow conditions.

By "systematically varying both the design objects and their context"[5] and evaluating the design possibilities in a pre-defined matrix, a set of design paradigms can be formulated. Those paradigms are relevant for designing in a ski area context when considering both the human and non-human experience.

Research Diagram



Epilogue

This text gathers the most important thoughts, concepts, and conclusions of my research. It provides answers to the main research question ***How can reading a snowless ski area as a brownfield help to re-think the relationship between humans and non-humans in winter tourism landscapes?*** *and loosely covers the sub-questions without explicitly listing each one with its conclusions.*

Humans and the perception of their surroundings

When Babies are born, they are not yet able to differentiate between themselves and the world *out there*. Only after a year or two they acquire a clear sense of self and disconnect their perception of themselves from that of their direct surroundings.

Historically speaking, humanity as a whole has also gone through different phases of self-perception in relation to the world out there as Christian Illies illustrates in his text 'Der Mensch und seine Stellung in der Natur' [The human and its position within Nature]. The author presents a short history of the development of the position of humans in nature and their perception of it. He concludes that, throughout time, we have gradually disconnected the world *out there* from what *we are*.

In ancient times, philosophers observed an inherent *striving* within all things. Living beings had their own specific goals based on their species, while even non-living objects *strived*: air wanted to move upwards, while heavy things found their natural place further down. Scientific efforts were focused on seeking truth and understanding the world, rather than establishing dominance over it.

However, a significant shift happened during the Middle Ages with the extensive influence of Christianity. With the belief that a creator

was in charge of the existence and purpose of all things, their agency and autonomy were removed, leaving them to exist only in relation to their creator. Furthermore, as God incarnated as human, humans were placed at the center of the cosmos and began to perceive themselves as god-like beings. They saw themselves as secondary creators and designers of the world around them.

This perspective of viewing non-human entities as objects, separate and primitive, continued into the modern era. Descartes, for instance, rigidly divided the world into thinking (res cogitans) and physical (res extensa), considering them to be two entirely unrelated things. Illies argues that since a human is both part of the res cogitans (with its thinking) and the res extensa (with its body), the cut of this divide runs straight through the human itself. The cut cannot be healed without reconsidering the division that lies at its base.

This research is not trying to argue that we should aspire to act like babies or go back to pre-historic times. It is self-evident, however, that our current view of the world leads to many destructive practices, and it might be worth it to take a look at how we could re-think our relationship with other things and beings.

The trouble with wilderness

This strict division also has an impact of how worthy humans find different nonhumans – depending on how strongly they (seem to) have been changed by humans, as William Cronon argues. According to him, this strict divide leads to us assigning different values to nonhumans by looking at how *natural* or *wild* they are.

"Wilderness gets us into trouble only if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that is somehow depends on pristine landscapes we ourselves do not inhabit. Nothing could be more misleading. The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest [...] Both trees in some ultimate sense are wild;

both in a practical sense now depend on our management and care. We are responsible for both, even though we can claim credit for neither. “

So Cronon proposes that we don’t use such a strong dualistic concept to divide our surroundings into natural and non-natural realms. Instead, we should find a way to see all places as our “home”, no matter if we are considering a densely populated area, a brownfield, or a pristine mountain landscape. In either place on this gradient of places we have a responsibility and an agency.

Actor Networks, or: Nonhumans have Agency too

The French philosopher Bruno Latour goes even one step further when he describes this shift in perception of our *home*, our world. To him, it’s not only us that are responsible for the tree, but it is also the tree that is responsible for *us*. The world is not one of nonhumans (trees, animals, rivers, streets, poles) and humans, not of objects and subjects, but one of actor networks. In a network, each actor – human or nonhuman – has responsibilities and, more importantly, agency. “All the actors do something and don’t just sit there”.

There is no pre-defined hierarchy or value system that splits those actors into subjects and objects – but they are connected in a multitude of ways and influence each other. If you change or remove one actor in the system, others will have to change, too. Anna Tsing sums up what this paradigm shift to a world view of interdependent networks might mean for the human perception: “Human exceptionalism blinds us. Science has inherited stories about human mastery from the great monotheistic religions. These stories [...] direct questions to the human control of nature, on the one hand, or human impact on nature, on the other, rather than to species interdependence.”

Aliveness

The interdependencies within the eco-system that makes up our world – from bees pollinating plants, humans emitting nitrogen, or rivers

slowly grinding down mountains – often come with messy and ambiguous relationships. If each actor strives for their specific goal, conflicts and suffering inevitable arise. But as biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber argues, this is not necessarily a bad thing. He defines the common goal of all things collectively as maximizing aliveness – meaning both literal biodiversity as well as granting all living beings a *within*, or a striving, responsibility, and agency. Suffering then, and death in particular, is an essential part of maximizing aliveness: “being alive means making yourself edible” The death of one actor creates the conditions for new life, while keeping the eco-system dynamic to increase its resilience.

Humans and nonhumans in a ski area brownfield

Brownfields are “the legacy of contaminated and derelict lands that have been left by industrial activity”. When a place is used for intensive industrial production activities – from mining, manufacturing, to tourism – contaminations and marks are still present even after active use of the facilities has been ceased. At the same time, there is a vacuum caused by the absence of a defined purpose for that specific area. Brownfield transformations often seek to fill this vacuum while utilizing the spatial heritage (marks, equipment, contaminations, etc.) as a space where dialogues can take place: dialogues about the culture of local populations, about the human role in a changing environment, or reflections of responsibilities for humans and nonhumans.

Ski area brownfields are especially interesting for a dialogue about our role as humans as part of the planetary eco-system, because the two concepts that we so persistently use to “understand and value the world” – nature and culture – clash so visibly that its inadequacy becomes obvious. Just as we have trouble to detect and whole-heartedly value ‘nature’ in our urban environments, it is equally hard to see the ‘culture’ in the pristine photographs of alpine tourism magazines. A ski area brownfield resembles, in many ways, a city in the mountains: with roads, buildings, lifts, signs, and underground piping systems. While often invisible in snow conditions, these elements are easily readable

in the ski area brownfield and blur the lines between the concepts of nature and culture.

It is already difficult to strictly split *systems* (river, field, water reservoir, forest, lift, building) into one of the two categories if you assume a human perspective. But an attempt to put oneself into the world of a nonhuman brings even more clarity. To a bird, a lift pole is most probably not ugly looking, it is just another element of the landscape surrounding it. It is not relevant for the bird to value a thing according to the way it ended up there; rather, it would identify objects as relevant or not relevant for its specific experience. *Can I find food here? Is this a suitable place for a nest?* The water reservoir looks like a beautiful lake to the human eye, the bird would probably find it utterly irrelevant because of the lack of fish or plants as a food source.

This is a simple example, but it shows how useful it can be to assume another perspective when dealing with the world we live in. Our preconceptions of what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, worthy or unworthy might be fundamentally different for another actor of the eco-system we are a part of. Ideally, we can find as many moments as possible to take both our responsibility and agency in this network seriously and contribute to a more *alive* whole.

Nature or Culture?

Nature or Culture?

Notes

Booklet 1/8: Introduction

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Booklet 3/8: 1650m

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Booklet 4/8: 1854m

[1] OpenTopoMap, "Licenced Creative Common: CC-BY-AA, opentopomap.org." (The maps on pages 2 and 14 are black & white versions of the OpenTopoMap)
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Booklet 7/8: 2304m
[1] OpenTopoMap, "Licenced Creative Common: CC-BY-AA, opentopomap.org." (The maps on pages 2 and 14 are black & white versions of the OpenTopoMap)
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Booklet 8/8: 2579m
[1] OpenTopoMap, "Licenced Creative Common: CC-BY-AA, opentopomap.org." (The maps on pages 2 and 14 are black & white versions of the OpenTopoMap)
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