

MUDSTONE

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# 1. An early draft

The artist TK Doddle was in his studio, sketching on a new project.

It was an early spring morning outside his 2nd floor window. Down on the ground his cat was playing with something invisible. Kitty would toss her imaginary object up in the air with one paw, then throw herself on her back to catch it.

The preceding winter had been unusually cold in Lofoten, a string of islands off the northern coast of Norway, a few degrees north of the Arctic Circle. The dark season had offered miniscule amounts of snow, but with a glacier-coloured ice blanketing mires and rocks.

According to TK's idea of *the logic of nature*, the blankets of ice didn't make sense. The logic of nature – which he thought of as the laws of physics combined with a kind of masterly X factor – would produce more snow when temperatures were lower, because snow insulates and hence protects the mire grasses and life underground from freezing to death. That's what he figured, the colder, the more snow. So, quite possibly, nature didn't subscribe to the logical.

During winter, you would find the roadsides scattered with rental cars at dawn. Waves of

tourists from China were washing over Lofoten to take pictures of the aurora borealis, with chauffeurs that could not manage the icy curves of the winding roads, while at the same time looking up at the sky for northern lights. International car rental agency AVIS made good money in Lofoten. Who paid to have the cars towed? TK Doddle wondered.

But now it was spring, the birds were migrating, and something had changed. TK had recently undergone an intense series of coaching sessions, and, heavily influenced by his mentor Roanne, he was now preaching to himself that all situations were *mouldable*. And situations, when combined, *spend* time. Therefore *time was mouldable*. The latter part about time only seemed to make sense to him sometimes, other times he just wanted it to make sense. You are born, time is *spent*, you die.

At Roanne's instruction, he'd firmly decided to clear his schedule, clear non-essential activities from it, make space for core activity. Ever since that firm decision, things had started shuffling.

The *shuffling* first manifested itself when he was approached by a curator from a regional contemporary art biennial about a rather large commission. The biennial would mostly sport

international artists, at the same time as it insisted on producing local relevance. Whatever it might otherwise entail, *he* was to be the local artist.

He was definitely flattered, and content with the prospect of a new project to dominate the next year and a half or so. This was all good. But although flattered and content, he felt an ambivalence to being the 'the local alibi'. This particular insecurity stemmed from a review in a national newspaper three years back, of a show he'd been in with artists from Russia, Sweden and Sri Lanka. The insignificant, but "out-spoken", art critic, had downplayed him as the local alibi of the show, which led to him attacking the critic in a Facebook thread on the exhibition curator's 'wall'. Late one evening, he ranted back at the critic for being conservative and in the game for all the wrong reasons, failing to review the work itself, calling her a "dinosaur with red plastic glasses" – she had worn red plastic frames at the opening reception, which was to TK provokingly pretentious, unless on an Italian man, or a child. A seed of insecurity had been sown in TK back then, even though he smirked proudly at the memory of his social media rant.

TK Doddle was one of four so-called *signal projects* of the biennial. The three others were a U.S.

activist performance troupe, Estonian sound artist Vellio Dormis, meaning ‘world asleep’ in Latin, and a Taiwanese artist who had dedicated his career to animal species going extinct – known for staging the suicide of two penguins from London’s Millennium Bridge. Considering the biennial’s articulated ambition to integrate itself *into the local*, TK was undoubtedly the local alibi. He was the only artist that actually lived and worked in Lofoten. An atypical local, he liked to argue, because after all, he had his international experience, which included extended stays in cultural hubs like Berlin and Los Angeles, and an esteemed artist residency at the McMurdo research base in Antarctica.

The other artists would be invited and imported for months-long production residencies before the biennial opened. He would be mimicking this by turning his home and studio into a guest studio (for himself) over the same months, and also finding ways of involving bits of the local community, in something that was labelled a *semi-public* way.

TK Duddle’s participation in the biennial required him to relate to a written curatorial statement which was, according to the curators themselves, *specific, but still offered flexibility*. The four main artists,

or *lead roles* as he flattered himself to think of it, would each be assigned an arm of a starfish. Not an actual chopped loose starfish limb, but rather, metaphorically. His *arm* was assigned its own title, which was *Maths, Matter and Body*, where the artist was *imagined as an eye on the starfish’s arm*. Or *leg*, as he for some reason felt was a more appropriate way to describe a starfish appendage. Another thought: in nature, weren’t there five, not four, arms/legs on a starfish? When pondering this, he came to think of a memory from free-diving in the Caribbean (as an excuse to rid himself of his jetlag before a show in Colombia the previous year), where he’d seen a giant starfish with ten arms. It had been the emerald colour of a glacial blanket!

The biennial stated ‘the tidal zone’ as a key concept. TK Duddle firmly decided to approach this directly, and he had proposed to make a film which would be shot in the actual tidal zone, some over, some under water. Since it would be winter again at the time of shooting, he imagined he could capture a unique material. Roanne had given him this mantra, ‘To get something you haven’t had before, you need to do something you haven’t done before’. By venturing into numerous days of recording in the freezing waters of the harsh Arctic winter, he’d get something special, no doubt.

Much like that time when he brought a cameraman and a costume to the Vinson Massif in the Antarctic desert: he knew that his script wasn't the best, or even finished. But the surroundings were spectacular, and just the *fact* that he was filming an actor wearing a home-made bright-pink, astronaut suit of the cheapest polyester, plus a dreadlock wig, running amongst iced-over volcanoes at 5000 metres above sea level – it was impossible that this could not result in unique imagery. The *effort*, slightly, or not slightly heroic, was by itself a path to the sought-after *production value*. Hence, insert a couple of professional actors into a saline ice bath reminiscent of a Turner painting, and his new project would be well on its way to *value*.

He'd been pondering the extensive description of his "arm" and something it said about math and subjectivity. He landed on proposing to the curators a film that would be shot in the tidal zone, under and over water, with actors, and dealing *somehow* with the subjective use of statistics (maths) and other objective sciences in the rhetoric of the debate on climate change.

TK Doddle sincerely felt a project of his own was beginning to crystallize out of the vastness of a contemporary art biennial's curatorial statement, which he was obliged to respond to.

It was interesting to TK to look into what was being stated in the mainstream climate debate. He noticed that there didn't really seem to be a common ground of science upon which the debate was based. This was *funny* to TK. It was a bit like religious debates, which turned eerie and unreal as soon as the *carte blanche* of faith came up. *I believe it is true, therefore it is true*. He saw a Fox newscast about global warming and wondered, how could arguments that seemed, no, *were*, completely opposite, still seem convincing to people? He'd watched documentaries and news reports which had presented completely opposite truths, from say a so-called climate sceptic versus an environmentalist – let's say ex-scientist Fred Singer versus ex-Vice-President Al Gore. Why did he feel an urge toward believing peers of both camps? And at the same time reject all of it?

TK's assistant Viktorina had already supplied him with a generous amount of research. It was a collection of texts, documentaries, and recorded lectures. Often TK found it challenging to know where and how to get started on a project, and even though another mantra of Roanne's was **START ANYWHERE!**, Viktorina's research folder gave him somewhere to start. There was especially much to delve into when it came to the cognitive science behind what makes humans

decide what is true or not. Evolutionary theory for one, would claim it's always related to assessing dangers in nature, in other words survival or not.

TK Doddle's project would be spun around the good old *fact versus fiction* division, although he took care to formulate it more subtly.

The half-crystallized idea for the project seemed also a slightly cynical one. He'd want to test messages in a content versus form kind of way. How much is *what* you say, how much is *how* you say it? This, he felt, was in line with his earlier films, where the link between message and mediation continually gets *disrupted*. Sometimes he would think that the reason for the disruption was that he didn't have the skill to write it without disruption. But *continually disrupted* was how he described his work.

Cynical because he felt that his claim was that he could make his audience believe in things that were not true, and not intelligent, hence insinuating that the audience is stupid, and hence, he's smarter. TK felt inspired by Danish director Lars Von Trier, who in the early 2000s had been criticized for disrespecting his audience, because he made people cry on purpose, as sheer manipulation, to prove a point. *But hey, after*

*all, any use of language, be it climate debate rhetorics or filmmaking, is a desire to manipulate*, he imagined himself saying in some future interview situation.

TK Doddle titled his new project *Shallow Water Blackout*. The term, he borrowed from *freediving*, describing a phenomenon where you pass out under water because you force your body to hyperventilate before you dive. Hyperventilation is popularly believed to extend your capacity to hold your breath, but this is a myth. Normal breathing will saturate the oxygen in your blood flow up to 99%. What hyperventilation will do, is to postpone the body's urge to breathe when you need to. As a result you will black out underwater because you have manipulated your body into thinking you don't need to inhale, while in fact you are drowning yourself.

There was alarm in the title *Shallow Water Blackout*. TK Doddle felt confident that it embraced the general stupidity and danger of overrunning the warning signals emitted from the logic of nature.

2.  
Figurines to populate  
his construction

START ANYWHERE. There was a myriad of ways to approach his project.

TK Doddle was imagining people who could populate what he had called in an email to the curators, perhaps mistakenly, a *filmatic art drama*. For the moment, he imagined characters getting washed up on the shore, one by one, then to each deliver monologues, or maybe interact and talk to each other too.

1. Maryan Beavis, a woman around 50, the Deputy CEO of Heartland Institute, a U.S. organization that thwarts science on climate change for corporate interests.

Maryan had previously never heard of the title Deputy CEO. It was a logical oxymoron. How could an individual be both a 'Deputy', ie: subordinate, and 'Chief Executive'?

Just as she got involved with the Institute, Maryan had been in on a counter-report being written and published. The report took all the info of the fresh climate assessment from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and rewrote it. Heartland Institute used the same design and layout, graphs, maps and illustrations as the original, but had the info lead to the opposite conclusions. Thirty one thousand scientists had signed the report and they also signed the petition against government-imposed restrictions that came in its wake.

The names of the scientists were all made up. Maryan's contribution was a collection of names from spam friend requests to her on Facebook, names like Tiffany English, Fiela Vanessa Rusmala, and Yohana Kylee Manik. She could still amuse herself over this little detail.