

Displaying Deep Surfaces:

Introducing a field and a method



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Metode

“Your kneecap, your bloodstream, your mother’s mouth. A soft butter, a creek. A cliff, a quick plaster wall, a rocking chair. A piece of felted wool, a chalk drawing, a single apple, a beating earthworm’s heart. A fresh picked red tulip, your spinal cord”

Julie Barfod, “The room that I am, the room I give birth to,” *Metode* (2023) volume 1 Deep Surface).

Sometimes it can be difficult to notice what is right in front of us: We are surrounded by surfaces; building façades, digital screens, textiles, plastics, and paint. We live on the crusty surface of our planet and within our tactile skin. Some even claim that the air we breathe is a surface.

Philosopher and media theorist Sybille Krämer states in her *Metode* keynote essay that “fertile thinking is oriented toward depth, and profoundness is desired, but superficiality is devalued” (Krämer, 2023). Anthropologist Tim Ingold claims the essential property of the surface is to withdraw and therefore that “scholars have long held surfaces in disdain” (Ingold, 2021: 149). Yet in art and architecture, the surface—usually defined as the aesthetic properties of materials—has always played a fundamental role with profound symbolic, functional, and economic value. Today, however, we are surrounded by surfaces conditioned by new technologies. For decades, scholars in the humanities have argued for new material awareness to confront the deep-rooted ideology of material production and overconsumption. Yet if surfaces habitually withdraw from attention and are often forgotten by scholars, there is a critical void for understanding our progressively techno-natural, everyday surroundings.

“What if surfaces are the real sites for the generation of meaning?” Ingold ponders in the book *Imagining for Real* (Ingold, 2021: 180). Currently, however, critical analyses of surfaces are fragmented and lack an explicit theoretical framework, as “being directed to the surface is intellectually nearly taboo” (Krämer, 2023). What happens if we look deeply at the surface? Will we generate new meanings?

In volume 1 of *Metode*, thirteen Norwegian and international artists, architects, historians, and theorists have joined Tim Ingold, Sybille Krämer, and *Metode*’s Editorial Board to study surfaces, intently, methodically even. The volume Deep Surface consists of experimental essays written by Andreas Ervik, Neda

Genova, Marius Moldvær, Severino Alfonso & Loukia Tsafoulia, Jenny Perlin, Adam Hudec & Beatrice Zaidenberg, Julie Barfod, Jakob Oredsson, Nick Walkley, and Benjamin Blackwell—and keynote essays by Krämer and Ingold. The participants were selected after a public open call, in which the premise for participation was to collectively engage in hybrid workshops for exploring experimental ways of collective thinking and new writing methods for creative knowledge production. Together with Ingold, Krämer, and *Metode's* Editorial Board, the participants have developed experimental essays about surfaces through open peer-review feedback, co-writing, critical readings, and exchange of ideas and experiences.

Researching surfaces

The fact that surfaces are often forgotten by scholars, is in line with what Jane Bennet (2010) has described as the Western societies' lack of ability to read material surroundings. Although the relationship between materials, technology, and culture has a strong research tradition in humanities (see for instance Collins, 1959; Barthes, 2009; Meikle, 1995), the last two decades have seen a renewed interest in materials, ontology, and culture—as a means to confront the overconsumption ideology.¹ Within art-, design-, and architecture history, the so-called material turn in humanities has generated a renewed interest in cultural histories of materials.² The theoretical starting point of *Metode's* first volume *Deep Surface*, is in alignment with the material turn in the humanities, but *Deep Surface* launches the surface—as such—as a fundamental site for critical analysis within art and architecture, with capacities of revealing profound aesthetic, technological, ideological, and ontological changes in the 20th century.

During the 20th century, the dialectic between surface and depth has been a fundamental theoretical and critical concern across fine arts, crafts, design, and architecture (see Shklovsky, 2005; Krauss, 1979; Stroll, 1988; Didi-Huberman, 2005; Harman, 2022). These seminal studies have contributed

¹ Instead of privileging the human subject as the superior power in the world, emphasis has instead been put on notions such as material agency (Gell, 1998; Boivin, 2008; Ingold, 2013; LeCain, 2017; Krohn-Hansen et al. 2019), ontology of materiality (Coole, 2010; Harman, 2013)—or immateriality (Irigaray, 1999; Grosz, 2017).

² See for instance Slaton, 2001; Gandy, 2002; Forty, 2012; Osman, 2012; Bell, 2013; Fisher, 2013; Sheller, 2014; Fry & Willis, 2015; Wilk, 2017; Zimring, 2017; Edensor 2020; Picon, 2020; Varner, 2020; Thomas, 2021.

with in-depth scrutiny of the surface from various disciplines within art-, architecture-, and design history, visual studies, philosophy, and aesthetics—connected to numerous concepts with dissimilar ideological, discursive, and philosophical implications.

Ingold's recent scholarship on surfaces—together with Giuliana Bruno's book *Surface* from 2017—are the primary critical literature for the current project. The previous research on surfaces in art and architecture reveals, however, a key theoretical argument: Surfaces tend to be theorized as *something else*. Either as a mediating agent or interface between content and form; a superficial or shallow obstruction that hides the essence of things; or a dialectic opposition to depth. Moreover, the surface has been theorized as materiality (Bennett, 2010; Picon, 2020; Thomas; 2021) or as relational media (Bruno, 2014; Krämer, 2015), and the *effects* of the surface have been of significant interest in phenomenology (Gibson, 1979; Zumthor, 2006), and in architectural design (Moe, 2010; Lovel 2013). In the present volume *Deep Surface*, however, we suggest that previous critical studies of surfaces have merely studied the *surface of surfaces* (as also argued in Halland & Johnslie, 2023). In order to truly study the depth of surfaces, volume 1 of *Metode* reverse the habitual quest for depth beneath the surface and asks instead: "How is depth revealed on the surface—as such?" This question becomes particularly urgent when thinking about future surfaces, as new high-tech materials such as 2D materials, Graphene, and other nanomaterials "is itself, *essentially all surface*," as Benjamin Blackwell remarks in his *Metode* essay.

What is a surface?

The thirteen essays written for *Deep Surface* reveal how the surface is connected to various concepts with dissimilar ideological, discursive, and philosophical implications. "Surfaces are fundamentally ambiguous situations," participant Jakob Oredsson states in his visual *Metode* essay. If surfaces are simultaneously inextricably intertwined *and* separated from an object—and also interrelates with its environment, as argued by Timothy Morton (2017: 143-144)—how to theorize a surface? Is it an event? Is it an interface? Or a solid boundary?

“Surface:
Space of desire,
... of projection
... of imposition
... of reflection

What politics impose themselves between our surfaces?”

- Jenny Perlin, participant in *Metode* vol. 1 Deep Surface

“The (outermost) zone of a body most open to engagement/
interaction with others—visually, materially, chemically.”

- Benjamin Blackwell, participant in *Metode* vol. 1 Deep Surface

“A possibility for osmosis, connection and also friction and
separation.”

- Anders Rubing, Editorial Board member of *Metode* and Chair of the Board at ROM for kunst og
arkitektur

“A process of surfacing, a coming together of materials, implements,
desires and affects.” ”

- Marie-Alix Isdahl, Editorial Board member of *Metode*

“A membrane covering or containing. What meets, includes, and excludes.”

- Marte Eknæs, artist affiliated to *Metode*

“In the interplay between eye, hand, and brain, inscribed and illustrated surfaces become a laboratory for thought, a playing field for artistic composition, or an experimental space for architectural work.”

- Sybille Krämer, keynote participant in *Metode* vol. 1 Deep Surface

“A surface bears the promise of containing something else, of protecting or shielding something from the outside world.”

- Petrine Vinje, artist and former Chair of the Board at ROM for kunst og arkitektur

“At this moment, my hands and wrists rests on the surface of my desk. It is grey, smooth, made of an unknown material. It is dusty (too dusty?) and feels quite strong: it supports all my clutter, bits and pieces.”

- Anna Ulrikke Andersen, Editorial Board member of *Metode*

“Surfaces experienced from close, become seducing, sensuous and strange.”

- Jakob Oredsson, participant in *Metode* vol 1. Deep Surface

The surface as a form of thought

In *Metode* we believe that thinking can take many forms, not only as linguistically formulated thoughts in the mind or as words on a screen. “A sort of thinking can go on, too, in painting, or on the painting, the surface” Editorial Board member Gustav Jørgen Pedersen writes in his Deep Surface essay (Pedersen, 2023). A work—an artwork (including architecture and design)—can *think* poetically in itself; what Pedersen calls pictorial thinking is manifested in the surface as such. Seen in this perspective, looking deeply at the surface can open up metaphysical or ontological questions. “The surface is thicker than one might expect, and more charged with possible meanings than we’re maybe accustomed to think” (Pedersen, 2023). Thinking can go on in poems, in videos, in built works, and even in 3D printed surfaces.

Cultural theorist Sara Ahmed writes that: “... histories are not simply available on the surface of the object [...]. Histories shape ‘what’ surfaces: they are behind the arrival of ‘the what’ that surfaces” (Ahmed 2006: 44, quoted in Oredsson, 2023). Arguable, we can read the entire human history through a close engagement of human-made surfaces. In his Deep Surface essay, Ingold ties bonds between the surface of a palimpsest and the traces of human impact on surface of the earth. He proposes that “deepest of all are the most recent traces” (Ingold, 2023). One example of this is the lawn, as discussed by Andreas Ervik in his vegetative essay “A Small Old Plot.” Such a domesticated, normative urban surface might easily be overlooked, yet when being attentive, the lawn “becomes a manifestation of patriarchy, capitalism and further types of human violence” (Oredsson’s interpretation of Ervik’s essay). By turning the surface into a form of thought, deep traces of our own time will surface.

In her keynote essay, “The Cultural Technique of Flattening,” Krämer explains how our everyday surfaces have become planes of what she calls artificial flatness. We are surrounded by industrialized, mass-produced, and standardized surfaces, that rely on extensive resource extraction. The screen in which you read these words is perhaps the most revealing example. “[B]ehind the screen, a universe of interacting networked computers, protocols, and algorithms proliferates like a rhizome, which can no longer be seen or controlled by those located in front of the screen” (Krämer, 2023). Behind this smooth and gleaming surface—in which the artificial blue light allows you to think with, engage, or criticize this volume of *Metode*—a new unseen and hidden layer needs our attention, since the carbon footprint produced by uploading, downloading, and processing all the *Metode* high-res photographs, PDFs, gif.-files, and videos is considerable. Krämer concludes by stressing the

urgency of investigating the relationship between artificial flatness and the electronic interface: “The promise of transparency and control—which was originally associated with the cultural technique of flattening—turns into a new opacity and into a loss of control” (Krämer, 2023). Looking attentively at the surface can also reveal political questions of tomorrow.

Thinking *with* as method

During the last decade, the terms “artistic research” and “research-by-design” have been introduced as working methods in the fields of art and architecture. These are practices where the traditional work (material or intangible) is not an end point, but instead a process-based project where the work becomes part of a complex context with specific references, which often position themselves in relation to specific knowledge traditions. The term “research methodology” in the field of art and architecture, however, often operates within the framework of educational institutions. But within educational institutions, advanced thinking about art and architecture must often relate to measurable and performance-driven parameters such as impact, feasibility, and risk-management factors. This breaks radically with the idea that art is ambiguous, without a clear goal, and seeking the unsafe. As written in *Metode*’s Editorial Statement (2022): “Therefore, independent institutions which are not conditioned by performance-driven risk management factors are needed, where artists, architects, researchers, historians, and theorists can explore complex issues through co-creation that requires time, patience, and trust to build.”

In *Metode*, dialogue is both a textural structuring method and a working process. The essay by Gustav Jørgen Pedersen is written as a dialogue between painter Edvard Munch and himself. Munch and Pedersen explore the relationship between art and thinking, and Pedersen—rather provocatively—states that “you cannot use the methods of art history to understand what art or history is” (Pedersen, 2023). Advanced thinking goes *on* in art itself. As Munch claims in Pedersen’s essay: “When I painted, I often wanted to convey certain ideas about what it means to be a human being in the world. Indeed, what you could call philosophical ideas. Both concerning the individual and the great forces that we’re all subjected to” (Munch paraphrased in Pedersen, 2023). Motivated by Munch and Pedersen’s statements, *Metode* aims to 1) combine arts-based methods (aesthetic and technical experimentation, research-by-design,

and research-based curating) with methods from the humanities (such as aesthetics, visual culture studies, critical theory or art history and theory) in order to innovate a risk-oriented working platform outside the framework of educational institutions.

An essential incentive for establishing *Metode* was to develop a platform for *thinking with* art and architecture in order to understand what art and architecture is. We believe that thinking with surfaces—with art, with façades, with facsimiles, with screens, and thinking with the womb—can display what it means to be a being in the world, both concerning the individual and the great forces that all beings are subjected to.

Dis/playing the surface

The English word “*display*” originates from the Old French word “*desploir*” which means unfold or spread out. *Desploir* comes from the Latin “*displicare*,” which the dictionary defines as follows: “‘to scatter,’ from dis- ‘un-, apart’ + *plicare* ‘to fold.’”³ *Displicare* is composed of the negative prefix *dis-* (un or not) and *plicare* (fold). The Latin negative prefix *dis* has multiple meanings, it means not, lack of, or apart. *Displicare* is intrinsically a dialectical word; there is a tension or a strife between openness and enclosure—between concealing and revealing. The English word *display* entails the same connotations, yet in the English word, there is also a dialectics between play and non-play. In a similar vein as the surface, the concept of display is caught up in tension. In the first volume of *Metode*, we explore the surface by not only by words, but also by works. We aim to *display* the surface, in playful ways, to *show* which questions the surface opens up to by manifesting the questions in the very structural layout and visual format.

In his video essay “I Will Acknowledge the Shallowness of my Depth,” Deep Surface participant Marius Moldvær shows how the primary knowledge production format of our times is created and operationalized. Our eyes move rapidly over the screen as we visually follow his hypertextual googling activity, his typing mistakes in TextEdit, and his feverish fluctuation between internet tabs—and thereby revealing the complex layers of human interaction with

³ Online Etymological Dictionary: “*Displicare*”: <http://www.etymonline.com/word/display> (accessed January 20, 2023).

technologically enactive surfaces. Moldvær's work displays a deep meta-level of how knowledge today is completely conditioned by the surface.

In Oredsson's visual essay "Surfaces Surfacing (Weaving Words)," the reader becomes an active co-explorer of the surface. His visual essay consists of an interactive surface which can be experienced through a browser on a digital screen. "How is everything connected?" one participant asked after experiencing Oredsson's visual essay. You must weave through the layout to find out.

Loukia Tsafoulia and Severino Alfonso's hyperbolic essay "Synesthesia: An Experiment on Enacted Surfaces" is formatted and structured as an interactive "coded narrative" in which the formal format becomes an exploration platform to amplify the employed concepts and theoretical underpinnings they explore in the essay. Tsafoulia and Alfonso display—in their design work and their written essay—that not everything is related in an orderly manner, following a well-defined red thread. In their highly complex coded narrative, they display that the algorithmic realm contains errors, mistakes, glitches, and discontinuities. Such glitches and breaks situate the experimental essay on the margins of comprehensibility. "How then can this vastly complicated text be streamlined into a concise article?" Nick Walkley wondered after reading Tsafoulia and Alfonso's first draft. By folding in and out, back and forward—blinking, breaking, *error*—though and above, the labyrinthic essay shows how a technological surface is a living, active being.

As explored in Neda Genova's essay "Thinking with Labyrinths," a labyrinth often withdraws until its surface is marked—or felt—and thereby makes orientation possible. In the essay "The Matter of Illusion: Seeing the Surface of Facsimiles," Nick Walkley invites the reader into his fieldwork experience at the Factum Foundation in Madrid, in which he observes how advanced technology magically transfigures a white surface into the Raphael Cartoon *The Sacrifice at Lystra*—with no possibility of seeing the difference with the naked eye. Yet as Walkley discovers by observing a conservator named Silvia, the difference, however, can nevertheless be *sensed*. Silvia uses her profound material knowledge to feel the reproduced surfaces. By tracing Silvia's touch on Factum's facsimiles, copies or reproductions, Walkley brings the reader into, in his words, "a deeper understanding of what we are truly seeing" (Walkley, 2023).

Being attentive to the surface often makes a labyrinth possible to navigate. The attention to the surface must, however, be active, skillful, and creative. Yet, as Neda Genova concludes in her essay: Be aware. In the same manner as a labyrinth, the surface is not innocent, passive, or simply there. Some surfaces

are toxic, some are not what they look like, and some might even conceal hidden dangers.

Deep surface ethics

The implications of the Anthropocene have been widely addressed in humanities and artistic practices, thus translating the geological concept into a cross-cultural analytical category that allows for an understanding of nature and culture as intertwined (see examples in Halland, 2021). In the age of humans, the relationship to surfaces must consequently be reconfigured.

According to philosopher Timothy Morton, a hyperobject is “something that is so vastly distributed in time and space, relative to the observer, that we might not think it’s even an object at all” (Morton, 2018: 4). A hyperobject is an object that stretches across different global landscapes and more-than-human timescales, without being anchored in a specific, local context. Often invisible or dematerialized, often intimately entangled in processes of industrial exploitation and corporate globalization, a hyperobject is challenging to make concrete. *Climate change* is such an object, Morton claims in his influential book *Hyperobjects* (2013). The hyperobject climate change is now entangled in numerous everyday surfaces; we live with it, and on it.

Based on his own ethnographic fieldwork in a nanomaterial laboratory, Benjamin Blackwell’s *Metode* essay “Deep Layers of ‘Flatland’” details an approach to surfaces that arguably must be left behind: a techno-optimism in which new nanomaterials—claimed to be a green solution for a sustainable future—aesthetically mimics a material that can be claimed to be a signature of what can be called “mining modernism,” namely concrete. Blackwell writes: “The notion could perhaps itself be considered ‘surface’ level, or superficial in the sense that the complexities of concrete’s environmental impact are reduced to a ‘problem’ which can be ‘solved’ through a 30% decrease in CO2 emissions” (Blackwell, 2023). Blackwell’s essay demonstrates that a new approach to surfaces is needed, which is not only theoretical, but also ethical.

Understanding how the surface is entangled in processes of mass-extraction, industrial exploitation, and corporate globalization—in different scales—can

be one strategy for developing an ethics for new surfaces. Another strategy of becoming more aware of our material surroundings can be to dig down into historical references to search for earthy origins in our increasingly synthetic artificial flatland. Not in a way that seeks comprehensive technical knowledge, because, as Ingold reminds us, “knowledge breeds inattention.” Instead of knowledge, Ingold claims we need wisdom: “To know is to have things accounted for, explained away or embedded in context so they no longer trouble us; to be wise is to bring things back into the fullness of presence, to pay attention, and to care” (Ingold, 2021). We need to be troubled; advancing a deeper understanding of the surface itself—across times, forms, and scales—might generate attention to the global entanglements that today’s surfaces are weaved into, onto, and *with*.

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