

In his latest exhibition at Berlin's Galerie Neu, 5G, the Oslo-based artist Yngve Holen physicalizes the expansive roll-out of next generation computing infrastructure, its material excess and scale. Presented as a brooding, forest-like constellation of metal towers, the imposing exhibition redirects our attention to the very real material presence of 5G within our environment and societal-body. Holen spoke to Curator Samuel Staples following Berlin Gallery Weekend about his new life in Oslo and latest work.

Text: Samuel Staples

Bild: Yngve Holen

Portraits: Rob Kulisek

Y Yngve Holen

S Samuel Staples

S I understand this is your first show since fully moving your studio practice from Berlin to Ensjø, Oslo last year?

Y Yeah I moved the studio last year, so this is the first show that I've fully produced in Norway. I'm starting to like the show myself now, it took a minute. It was finished just in time.

S What led to the decision to move your studio practice fully to Norway from Berlin where you've been based for some time?

Y I was supposed to have a show opening in March 2020 in China which then of course opened in 2021 due to the pandemic. At the time I still had the studio in Berlin and was splitting my time between Oslo and Berlin driving back and forth, during this time our daughter was also born. It was a really crazy time and there were no flights. I would find myself in the weirdest situations, like on ferries full of truckers. After COVID, I'd spent so much time in Oslo already and was bored of planes and this back and forth. I was so happy not being in the plane, so I moved fully to Oslo.

S Why 5G?

Y The show was really an idea that just came to me and from there everything flowed quite naturally.

The new studio is in Ensjø, this old industrial area in Oslo which is being reconfigured recently with new condos and buildings. I started just noticing all the 5G

towers being built up on the rooftops of neighbouring buildings, so the show in a way is really what I see from my studio in the skyline. Sometimes it's like that, an eyesore becomes an aesthetic you can work with.

S For those who don't know, what does 5G do?

Y I guess if 1G is telephone, 2G is SMS, and 3G is when the first iPhone came out and you could send data in real-time, which didn't happen before. 4G

is LTE which is faster, and 5G then is the latest standard really, it's the closest to the real-time experience we have of the Internet, connectivity and data-transfer. It does everything the other »G's« did but with higher speed. I think what changed mostly is the addition of active antennas, 5G massive MIMO technology that can beamform and better focus towards reviving devices using extremely high frequencies called millimetre wave bands.

With 5G you need a denser grid of antennas, they're really actively powered by electricity. There is a consumer-aspect to it, in this idea of real-time connectivity, 5G has better download than upload capacities.

S The roll-out of 5G networks in Germany and across the EU has been subject to quite heated debate over the last few years, in part due to questions of security and who should be allowed to provide technology for critical infrastructure.

These concerns have been additionally met with health-related and environmental concerns from its citizens, which have led to a whole breeding ground of more conspiratorial fears and theories worldwide.

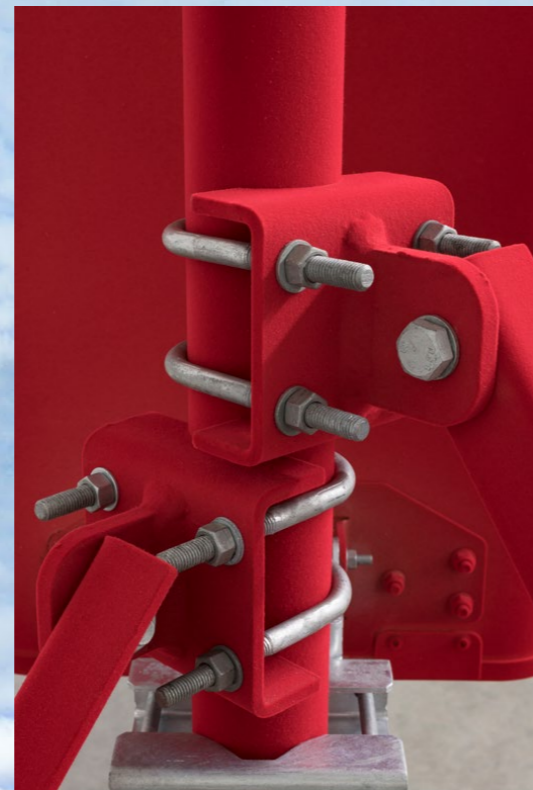
But essentially from what I can grasp, people really don't want them built near their homes...

Y Definitely – at least in Germany. Maybe in Norway people are more tech-naïve or tech-optimistic somehow? I think that's also why the structures are more visible there and less concealed than they are in Germany. People don't seem to care and are just happy to have Netflix or home office really.

I think it's also one of the reasons it was possible to do this show in Norway, as there is a certain kind of »tech-positivity«, we were given a lot of access during the production.

There was a moment in the production, when we visited a warehouse looking to get some specific parts, and walking past this crazy chamber where there were all these »caution« and »danger« signs, where they were testing antennas, my assistant asked: »So, what's up with 5G? Is it dangerous?« The guy we were with sort of shrugged and were like, »I think the government really fucked it up with 3G, but with 5G I think we have it under control.« Which I thought was really funny.





Maybe it's true in a way, and it was kind of out of control for a while and now it isn't anymore. Or maybe every conspiracy theory or story needs some time to evolve, and the current ones are already a bit late. There were a lot of funny moments along the way like that.

S There is this very real geo-strategic and political element to the expansion of this infrastructure worldwide, and to much of the discourse and opposition centres around the overall roll-out.

Y Totally. Norway is speaking a lot about the importance of 5G for the future of its military and its survival, and in Germany Chinese-owned companies like Huawei are being kicked out. So there's this question of which countries are allowed to have access to or control of this infrastructure.

Norway has, in my mind at least, always been half Europe half America, it isn't in the European Union, it relies heavily on America and NATO, that's where we buy fighter jets (laughs).

I think there's definitely a clear message to Norway which antennas to buy and which not to buy, and there's definitely a geo-strategic and political aspect to all of these decisions. I was actually trying to get some Huawei antennas for this show, but I still haven't been able to find any since they were banned 2 years ago. There must be some stored in a warehouse somewhere.

S I think what's interesting about your new body of work is this physicalization of 5G's real life presence in our larger societal body. You redirect our attention to the physical mass and material excess of the physical infrastructure itself of something that's widely thought of as immaterial.

Y I like the sizing of the works being larger than human and to think of them in relation to this scale. There's four towers here. Norway is a large country geographically, in terms of population we have 5 million inhabitants, and I can't remember the exact number but there's something like 100,000 of these towers within that, which is crazy to think about.

Something I think is interesting and that I talked a lot about in earlier works, is this idea of scale-failure and not being able to grasp the scale or mass of something. At the same time I do think there's this idea of the roll-out of 5G as this kind of immaterial network that gives you everything, while in reality there's a million tonnes of steel being driven around and built up around the country. When you enter the space and look up at these towers, it doesn't feel so immaterial anymore.

The show is not really a negative or positive show around 5G. What I really wanted to focus on was the physicality of it, and less about the panic and controversy around the rollout, but still this is all present in the work physically.

There's some parts of the new works, which I've never seen used in Oslo, like the concealers for active antennas, which are supposedly for keeping the aesthetic the same, but they're also in a way concealing or hiding the active antennas. We all know the passive antennas, which do broader frequencies, but the active antennas on top incre-

ase download rate and give the 5G »user-experience«. These seem to be the »microwaves« that people are afraid of.

S One thing that stood out to me at the opening was the viewers' reaction to, and interaction with the individual works. I don't think I've ever noticed such a clear struggle within viewers, holding themselves back from reaching out and touching the works at an opening. Can you give me some insight into the texture of the new works, they're flocked essentially?

Y The main idea for the show was that I wanted to flock 5G somehow. I don't know where it came from. There was this idea of bringing people into the studio to flock the whole thing, but then you start thinking in terms of logistics and transports, and the whole thing weighs something like 600 kilos.

With Flocking you basically apply a hairy texture to an object. The works are essentially the original tower structures, so galvanised steel, which is then coated in a layer of epoxy. All of the metal parts are then charged with an electric current, and you have a certain period of time until the epoxy dries to apply these small 1mm polyester hairs using a machine. Because the structure is charged, they stand and you get this feeling and textured effect.

I don't know why they were supposed to be flocked but it just made sense at some point. Furry 5G antenna and base stations.

S It took me off guard to realize that your last exhibition in Berlin with Galerie Neu, *Rose Painting* (2018), was already five years ago.

Y With the last exhibition I wanted it to be sort of cabin meets architecture and automotive at the same time. There was this idea to scale an object or ornament up until it becomes architecture. Using SUV ornaments and making them cabin through milling them out of cross-laminated timber.

Following this, the China show, *F.O.D.* in Beijing was more about Ego, POV, consumer-focused culture, my house, my car, my yard...

The fighting for resources seen through legos. I used the aviation term of F.O.D, »Foreign Object Debris« for this show. I really like the word Debris, because lately I think a lot about taking an object out of its context through placement and scale, changing the loops of things, which is in a way what this show does as well. The show and its materials are super heavy but seem super light, super present but also swallow light itself.

Don't you think they look like caskets sometimes?

S Yes. But for what?

Y I dont know.

S 3G I guess.



