

Nikhil Vettukattil



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Nikhil Vettukattil

Nikhil Vettukattil (b. 1990, Bengaluru) is an artist living and working in Oslo. Vettukattil studied at Central St. Martins in London and the Center for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) at Kingston University, London. They are part of the Institute for Scene Experiments.

Vettukattil has exhibited at FELIX GAUDLITZ (Vienna), Kunsthall Oslo, Nasjonalmuseet (Oslo), CAPC (Bordeaux), and K-U-K (Trondheim), among others. They are a member of art collectives Tenthaus and Carrie, and co-curator of MOMENTUM 12 Biennale. Working across sound, installation, performance, text, sculpture, and video, his practice questions modes of representation and image-making processes in relation to lived experiences, including current research on Nordic diet and food trade in the High North examining class, culture, and ecological nutrition models.

Nikhil Vettukattil presents two works. *A House is not a Home* reproduces a mass-market camping tent in thick, beige cotton canvas. Hand-painted with the fragmented phrase “passive li e”, it engages the fragile boundary between shelter and exposure, permanence and precarity. The work reflects on how the simplest form of temporary architecture can shift meaning depending on context: a tent may offer leisure, mobility, or protection, but equally speak to social invisibility and displacement. It points to how belonging is conditioned by structures—both material and ideological—that determine who is seen, sheltered, or excluded. By translating a standardised product into a heavier, more vulnerable fabric, Vettukattil alters its function and presence, making it less portable and more exposed, caught between the promise of safety and the threat of collapse. The tent thus carries contradictory associations: of recreation and refuge, of voluntary retreat and forced migration. It was first shown in *Hothouse Flowers* (Podium, Oslo, 2024), a collaborative project exploring human–nature entanglements.

Reanimist (2024) is an audio work presented through directional speakers. It is generated from field recordings made in Wayanad district, Kerala since 2020, capturing ambient sounds at sunset when bird calls, cicadas, frogs, monkeys, and other creatures shift in the transition to night. Using a custom-coded algorithm and bandpass filters, frequency segments are recomposed to produce an altered soundscape that remains tethered to its source. The title refers both to animism, the belief that nature is animated by spirits, and to reanimation, bringing something to life through representation. The work plays with familiarity and estrangement, suggesting how nature and technology, often perceived as opposites, are in fact co-constitutive. Heard within Polar and Tropic—a gathering of Nordic and South-East Asian art spaces—it resonates with the project’s concern with polarity and circulation, collapsing distance into proximity and tracing how sound itself moves between regions, traditions, and forms of belonging.



A House is not a Home (2024)

The following text by Una Mathiesen Gjerde accompanied Vettukattil's exhibition Hothouse Flowers (Podium, Oslo, 2025). Adapted here, it situates the work within wider debates on ecology, botany, and human-nature relations.

“Nature is not under threat of destruction. We are. Astonishingly, we continue to describe the on-going environmental crisis as a natural disaster, in the sense that it's destroying our surroundings rather than ourselves. Efforts have been made to change the focal point, to re-direct our gaze, and to open our eyes to a more unbearable reality – *nature* will survive climate change. It is modern culture that is dependent on a stable scenery. We should be beyond this binary by now – nature and culture are not antonyms. They intersect and blend, they are co-dependent. Maybe the distinction isn't even valid, maybe it distracts us from experiencing the complexity of the non-human world, and with it our humanity.

«How do you *feel* yourself and how do you *feel* the world?» are central questions in the ecosophy of Arne Næss. In a letter to his friend and colleague Per Ingvar Haukland, Næss argues the importance of us acquiring the ability to *feel* the world, and in so doing rekindling with our environments. Describing his relationship to nature – in this case how he as a child would try to connect with non-human cohabitants of our world, and how he, at a later stage of his life, feels one with the flowers, trees, and mountains surrounding his beloved cabin home at Tvergastein – he goes on to challenge the idea of an absolute divide between his own being, and that of the world:

«The world and I are not that far away from one another, perhaps the distance between us is not thicker than the paper of a cigarette (...) resembling a flux [more] than anything solid».

Næss was a passionate advocate of positive ecosophy – he believed that we – humans – held the key to create a more constructive development for the planet by altering our understanding of other living things. In our present-day state of hopelessness, many might perceive this as naïve, but where has the realistic pessimism latent in modern [enlightened] thinking led us, other than endless exploitation of all living things?

Aside from his writing, Næss was also an eager hiker – or what one in Norwegian would coin as a

friluftsliventusiast – an enthusiast of the outdoors life. In many ways, it was this entry point that enabled his thoughts on nature to go beyond the academic circles and penetrate the public discourse in Norway of the late 1970s. Norwegians are obsessed with *friluftsliv* – skiing, climbing mountains, and following tracks through various national parks all year round. At the same time, the Norwegian economy has always been dependent on the destruction of the landscape which in many ways is at the core of national identity. This goes beyond the oil of the North Sea, which may be described as the backbone of the Norwegian welfare state. For centuries we have been tearing down our forests and polluting our surroundings to the point where there's almost nothing left: every hour an area of nature equal in size to a football field is being destroyed. Simultaneously, Norway exceeds any other nation in the consumption of sports and hiking equipment per capita.

Departing from this tragic irony, Nikhil Vettukattil with Gabriel Alonso have taken the body of a tent and reconstructed it to fit Podium's exhibition space. The high-tech tent that has served as a template for the various works of the exhibition points to our contradictory relationship to nature – how can we so eagerly destroy what we hold so dear? On the other hand, the tent also points back to alternative ways of living with nature – ones that make less permanent alterations to their surroundings. The tent is an image of both leisure and survival; it houses the figures of the explorer, the homeless, the scientist, the nomad, and ever increasingly, the refugee. By the expansion of agriculture, modern societies have colonized the land, the forests, the fields, and the animals. With industrialization, we took the rivers, and the oceans, and more recently we've been set on conquering the sky and space too. Our very concept of civilization suddenly appears as irrevocably barbaric. Through the remaking of the tent, the artists are questioning this status quo – this is not our only option, we can instead organize ourselves differently. There is in every moment an opportunity to interact with nature, and with each other, in less harmful ways.

The colonial ties inherent in the human-nature relationship is most obvious in the field of traditional botany, through which we have sorted and mapped nature in our self-referential image. By imposing our own bias on other living things we have reduced the world of plants to binaries – male

and female, toxic and edible, useful and useless. They are serving our needs. Not unlike the arts, or any other academic discipline for that matter, the imperialistic backbone of botany reveals itself immediately in the established institutions.

[...]

Capitalism and the mass consumption it necessitates are rapidly making other living species – plants and animals – extinct. Paradoxically, this has made the botanical gardens not solely sites of showcasing botany, but also sites of protection that make – small, but nonetheless significant – halfway homes and campsites from the destruction caused by our ways of life. The greenhouses become safe spaces, shelters, and tents for the plants. They are protective, but also reductive in the sense that they are forcing these plants to live as hothouse flowers – a term used to describe one who has been nurtured in privileged conditions, too fragile for the real world outside. Blinded by the greed of our kind and the systems we have built, we too may end up like this – forced to live in artificial environments, where the borders between us and the world grow too thick for us to feel our surroundings, and so also, ourselves.”