

THE HELSINKI BIENNIAL
ART MEDIATION FORUM 2023

An Anthology



*The Helsinki
Biennial*

*Art
Mediation
Forum 2023*

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Helsinki Biennial was established by the City of Helsinki and is produced by HAM Helsinki Art Museum. Titled *New Directions May Emerge*, the second edition of Helsinki Biennial is curated by Joasia Krysa, in collaboration with other intelligences – Museum of Impossible Forms, TBA21–Academy, Critical Environmental Data, ViCCA@Aalto Arts, and an Artificial Intelligence (AI) Entity.

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HELSINKI BIENNIAL

New Directions May Emerge

12 June – 17 September
2023

*As contamination changes world-making projects,
mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge.*

 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing,
The Mushroom at the End of the World, 2015

Helsinki Biennial 2023 – *New Directions May Emerge* adopts its title from a quote by anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who proposes learning from (the art of) “noticing”. With close attention to other people, animals, plants, environment, data, and other entities around us, the biennial explores how we might find new ways of living in, and understanding, the world. The biennial unfolds through multimodal artistic acts of noticing, sensing and sense-making. Moving from humans to non-humans and between varying scales — a spectrum spanning data as the smallest scale, through to islands and speculative new worlds denoting

the largest — the biennial is an invitation to consider how recognising small or otherwise invisible details might prompt possibilities to act, to imagine differently, and reconcile the impact of human intervention, environmental and technological damage.

New Directions May Emerge introduces three main conceptual threads — contamination, regeneration, and agency — not as themes but intersectional vectors through which practices and conversations convene without the need to settle on a precise direction or position.

Bringing together established and emerging artists and collectives from Finland and across the world Helsinki Biennial 2023 comprises exhibitions, public programme, film screenings, and publications. It takes place on Vallisaari Island, HAM Helsinki Art Museum and other venues and public places in the city, and online.

The second edition of Helsinki Biennial is curated by Joasia Krysa, with other intelligences — Museum of Impossible Forms, TBA21–Academy, Critical Environmental Data, ViCCA@Aalto Arts, and an AI entity.

The Helsinki Biennial 2023 participating artists are: Matti Aikio, Ahmed Al-Nawas & Minna Henriksson, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, Golden Snail Opera, Asunción Molinos Gordo, Alma Heikkilä, INTERPRT, Keiken, Sonya Lindfors, Tuula Närhinen, Lotta Petronella with Sami Tallberg & Lau Nau, PHOSfate (Mohamed Sleiman Labat & Pekka Niskanen), Diana Policarpo, Sepideh Rahaa, Bitra Razavi, Red Forest, Remedies (Sasha Huber & Petri Saarikko), Tabita Rezaire, Yehwan Song, Jenna Sutela, Emilija Škarnulytė, Suzanne Treister, Adrián Villar Rojas, and Zheng Mahler.

Helsinki Biennial is produced by HAM Helsinki Art Museum.

Helsinki Biennial 2023 is further realized through creative collaboration with The Rodina, a post-critical graphic design studio with “an experimental practice drenched in strategies of performance, play and subversion,” and Diogo Passhorino Studio,

a research-based spatial design studio “investigating how emotional contexts can be brought into shaping spatial memories.” Together, they have added a layer to the biennial narrative “in search for possible visual and spatial tool for new directions.”

PREFACE

As If Wandering Through a Forest

Joasia Krysa
Curator Helsinki Biennial
2023



Entitled *New Directions May Emerge*, Helsinki Biennial 2023 takes its inspiration from anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing to emphasize that—despite the major challenges of our time that appear irresolvable—there are many ways to find new directions, and new ways of living in, and understanding, the world whilst envisioning various potential futures. Tsing proposes learning from (the art of) “noticing” small or invisible details—to tune in to the world around us, to accept inevitable and irreversible facts and learn ways to reconcile with them through a different approach. Thus, paying close attention to people, animals, plants, environment, data, and other entities around us, the biennial explores how we might find new ways of living in, and understanding, the world, whilst envisioning various potential futures.

Located on and off the shore of the city of Helsinki, and featuring the island of Vallisaari, one of over 200 islands in the Helsinki Archipelago, the biennial reflects on the eco-diversity

of the island and its surroundings, while at the same time pointing to wider geopolitics. Gathering ideas from an eclectic mix of disciplinary and non-disciplinary influences—from natural science and cosmology, the supernatural and artificial intelligence, data science, and science fiction, to the sense-making practices of humans and non-humans—the biennial identifies some of the conditions through which new directions may emerge. The suggestion is that these directions might be less universalizing, while prompting ways of being more attentive to, and inclusive of, other entities around us, as part of wider relations and contingencies that help to reconcile and even repair some of the damaging effects of human actions. All this helps to locate the conceptual concerns and geopolitics of the biennial, such as *environmental damage, political conflict, and the effects of technology*—concerns that are local and universal at the same time.

This publication operates in this spirit and offers an open invitation to explore the biennial exhibitions and events as a process of mediation that involves other agencies and modes of sensing, and sense-making. To quote Tsing again, we might understand the experience of the biennial through her evocative description of *wandering through a forest*, and in this way consider the potential of mediation practices to elicit alternative knowledge of the world:

To walk attentively through a forest, even a damaged one, is to be caught by the abundance of life: ancient and new; underfoot and reaching into the light. But how does one tell the life of the forest? We might begin by looking for drama and adventure beyond the activities of humans ... There are other ways of making worlds.¹

Alongside its sister handbook publication, the one you are now reading is part of the *Art Mediation Forum* conceived by Bassam El Baroni and Patrizia Costantin at ViCCA (Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art), Aalto University. ViCCA@AltoARTS is one of five art organizations, collectives, research institutions, and technological entities invited to co-create this edition of Helsinki Biennial, informing the development and conceptual directions alongside Critical

Environmental Data (a research group at Aarhus University), Museum of Impossible Forms (a cultural center located in East Helsinki), TBA21–Academy (a contemporary art organization dedicated to oceans), and an AI Entity (a collaboration between Digital Visual Studies, Max Planck Society/University of Zurich, artist Yehwan Song, and HAM – Helsinki Art Museum Collections). Furthermore, HB23 edition is expanded through creative collaboration with the graphic design studio The Rodina and spatial consultancy Diogo Passhorino Studio “in search for possible visual and spatial tool for new directions.” These diverse curatorial collaborations come together to form what might be called *post-curatorial collective intelligences*—a phrase that combines the “post-curatorial” with “curatorial intelligences” and that emerged in conversation with Bassam El Baroni and Markus Reymann during the process of curating this biennial—an assemblage of human and nonhuman sensibilities demonstrating that curating is a process of mediation in itself.

The *Art Mediation Forum* project is itself a further curatorial collaboration, developed with ViCCA students and other researchers in the curatorial field. The inaugural symposium (held in December 2022 at HAM – Helsinki Art Museum) highlighted how curatorial ecologies, including the computational, are linked to worldmaking and to the transformative possibilities of alternative narratives. The Forum also comprises the *Curatorial School of ‘May’* (as in *New Directions May Emerge*), a workshop with Aalto University ViCCA students and an invited group of curators, writers, and researchers, as well as a series of public mediation events over the duration of the biennial.

This approach resonates with an understanding of mediation as adopted from the field of litigation, referring to negotiating resolution through an impartial third party, where all participants in mediation are encouraged to participate actively in the process, and refraining from providing prescriptive solutions or only one direction.² Moreover, the choice of the term *forum* (from the Latin word meaning an outdoor or public place) indicates the means through which open discussion and the expression of ideas can happen. Noticing the details here, even the etymology, allows for an opening up of alternative approaches to aesthetics, modes of perception that combine

sensing and sense-making above and beyond the human. The forum in this way can be understood as a “poly-perspectival assemblage of open epistemic and aesthetic multiplicity.”³ Or, as El Baroni and Costantin describe it, Art Mediation Forum is an expanded “articulation space” for the concerns, themes, and topics mapped out in the biennial’s curatorial approach and artistic contributions. The understanding is that artworks create spaces for reconsidering how we perceive things more broadly, and how we might reimagine or remediate our relationships to the human and non-human world.

With this backdrop, the Biennial introduces three conceptual threads—*contamination*, *regeneration*, and *agency*—not as themes but as ways of negotiating possible meanings and action, which in this context we might understand as a process of mediation. Importantly though, and in keeping with the curatorial approach of the biennial, mediation does not follow a didactic need to settle on any precise direction or position. Rather, the idea is to uncover spaces of possibility, to reflect on some of the geopolitical realities local to Helsinki and elsewhere, at a range of scales and operations. Arising from these conceptual threads are questions that guide the exhibition as a whole and its mediation strategy: How might contamination be a force for positive change? How can we use biennials for the wider regeneration of the social body? How might agency extend beyond humans to other nonhuman entities and assemblages, including artificial intelligences? How might these threads be channeled into rethinking the ways in which practices and future worlds may be conceived?

Unfolding through multimodal artistic acts of noticing, sensing, and sense-making, the biennial mediates between humans and non-humans at various scales—a spectrum spanning data at the smallest scale, through to islands and speculative new worlds. In doing so, it becomes an invitation to consider how mediation practices might prompt possibilities to act, to imagine things differently, to move beyond the ways we conventionally think about mediating art, and the ambition to reach new audiences and produce publics. Beyond conventional forms of mediation, directions emerge that go beyond the sense-making and world-making capabilities of humans alone. It is in this context that the Art mediation Forum and

the *Curatorial School of May* situate themselves. Their aim is to suggest viable ways to navigate potentials, not by proposing a finite solution, but by opening up further enquiries into Helsinki Biennial 2023's worlds of "May."

1 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

2 See Gabriela Saenger Silva, "Rethinking Biennials as Educational Tools," a research project examining the emergence of discursive biennials and approaches to public, learning, and mediation programs in contemporary art biennials, with reference to mediation projects at Mercosul Biennial (editions 6, 7, 8, and 9) and Liverpool Biennials (2016 and 2018), publication forthcoming 2024, Exhibition Research Lab, Liverpool John Moores University.

3 Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London: Verso, 2021), 26.

INTRODUCTION

The Helsinki Biennial Art Mediation Forum 2023: An Anthology

Bassam El Baroni and
Patrizia Costantin

The Helsinki Biennial Art Mediation Forum 2023 is a collaboration between ViCCA (Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art) at Aalto University's School of ARTS and the Helsinki Biennial 2023. Helsinki Biennial 2023 curator Joasia Krysa initiated the collaboration and invited ViCCA faculty Bassam El Baroni and Patrizia Costantin to develop and lead it. The project focuses on mediation as an 'articulation space' for the biennial's themes and artistic contributions. It consists of two components: the Helsinki Biennial 2023 Symposium, which took place on December 9, 2022, and *The Curatorial School of 'May,'* a project involving eight students from ViCCA at Aalto ARTS. The first part of this compact anthology you are currently reading features newly commissioned essays by Filipa Ramos, Adeena Mey, and Livia Nolasco-Rózsás, based on their public talks at the HB23 Symposium. The symposium served as a launchpad for

the biennial, highlighting its central themes of contamination, regeneration, and agency. It addressed the effects of the climate crisis and the role of contemporary media in curatorial practices. Unlike older forms of media, twenty-first-century media emphasize prediction and anticipation of the future as opposed to recording the current moment.

The second section is dedicated to five new essays by ViCCA students. The essays are one of the outcomes of *The Curatorial School of 'May'*, a yearlong workshop that took the seemingly humble word “May” in the biennial’s title—*New Directions May Emerge*—as its point of departure. “May” and “might” are indicators of probability, possibility, or permission. They are words that we take for granted because of their supplementary function in sentences. The “May” in the biennial’s title produces fertile ground for possibilities to arise while indicating that the uncertainty of eventual outcomes should be acknowledged in today’s inventive modes of research and practice. *The Curatorial School of 'May'* nurtured speculative encounters with the biennial’s themes, methodologies, and inquiries. The school’s participants have engaged with interpretation and mediation through diverse lenses such as geological methodologies, poetry, hauntology, ancestral knowledges, healing practices, zoology, media studies, psychogeography, and research into human and posthuman agencies. This multifaceted approach highlights a continuously evolving and dynamic understanding of interdisciplinarity that serves not as an end unto itself, but as the foundation for achieving meaningful mediation from the vantage point of an open future.¹

In addition to five essays featured in this anthology, the school’s participants have programmed a set of mediation events taking place during the biennial. Through these events, they will communicate and perform their research on HB23’s key topics and the art projects that it showcases. Materials and productions by *The Curatorial School of 'May'* can be found on the biennial website. The school’s aim is to present thought-provoking strategies for sensing and giving accounts that intersect with the realm of mediation in ways that accentuate the “May.”

Directions Emerging from the Helsinki Biennial 2023 Symposium

Drawing on Krysa’s themes for the 2023 Helsinki Biennial, Filipa Ramos’ essay, *Possible Love*, explores the intersections within the material and philosophical realms that bridge human and nonhuman worlds. It proposes a re-thinking of two tropes—species and mating—that have deeply influenced Western perspectives on biology and existence. Using the 1985 film *Ladyhawke* as an example of hierarchical values in our relationship to other animals, Ramos articulates forms of intimate encounter that question the divisive connotations of species and problematize the reproductive emphasis of mating. In this way, she suggests that desire can be a transformative force that changes the way in which we relate to ourselves, our bodies, and the myriad other living forms that inhabit our planet.

In his essay *Curating’s Technological Unconscious: The History of Cybernetics and the Gaian Transformation of Curation*, Adeena Mey examines what he and philosopher Yuk Hui have termed the “cybernetization of the exhibition.” This phrase describes the historical transformation of the exhibition and institution into informational and communicational media. The process is closely tied to the writings and institutional experiments in the 1970s of figures such as curators Peter Althaus, Jorge Glusberg, and Pontus Hultén, and philosophers like Vilém Flusser. Interestingly, the 1970s also marked the emergence of a distinction between “first-order cybernetics”—which views living and technological beings as regulated by “feedback” processes—and “second-order cybernetics”—which sees systems as self-organizing and self-reflective. The former largely inspired these curatorial and theoretical attempts to transform museums and the form of exhibitions. The essay elaborates on the difference between first- and second-order cybernetics. It posits that we can attribute the prevalent curatorial logic to first-order cybernetics, while the recent and evolving changes in the exhibitionary complex might be related to the second order. Second-order cybernetics provides us with the tools necessary to reconsider the role of biennales in the Anthropocene. These tools can aid in addressing what philosopher Isabelle Stengers terms the “Intrusion of Gaia” (the activation of planetary and environmental forces that surpass

human control). Mey suggests that, to effectively address the current intersection of environmental, political, and scientific urgencies, we need to rethink institutions and curating through the lens of second-order cybernetics, viewing them as self-organizing systems.

Livia Nolasco-Rózsás' essay, *What never was but might yet have been*, directs our attention from cybernetics to cyberspace. According to Nolasco-Rózsás, computer-generated simulations, virtual realities, and networked digital platforms—from cyberspace to the metaverse, from web 1.0 to web 3.0—are no longer mere fictional locations found in science-fiction literature. They hold a significance and role that is on a par with physical spaces, even if this is not yet evident in contemporary curatorial and exhibition practices. Information technology has engendered realms that are legitimate, parallel dimensions of our perception, experience, knowledge, communication, and self. Here, the real and the possible, the virtual and the actual, are not antithetical opposites but interdependent entities that constitute an algorithmic present in which many contemporary societies find themselves. The essay weaves together ideas, reflections, and perspectives linking artistic projects showcased in the Helsinki Biennial and historical responses to the new paradigms brought about by calculating machines, as manifested in artworks, manifestos, exhibitions, theories, and even onto-epistemological frameworks.

Directions Emerging from The Curatorial School of 'May'

In a thought-provoking essay published in 2019 and titled *Orientation in a Big World: On the Necessity of Horizonless Perspectives*,² the artist and writer Patricia Reed embarks on an exploration of navigation as a synthetic operation. The concept of navigation, as it unfolds in Reed's text, is an exercise in synthesis, a careful negotiation between intentionality and the contingency of unknown or accidental events. Reed writes, "Navigation is, above all, a synthetic operation." This insight opens up navigation as more than a mere tool for orientation. It paints navigation as a process that fuses our desires and plans with the unpredictable and unforeseen, guiding us through spatial, conceptual, and temporal realms.

Reed further unpacks our understanding of navigation in her exploration of planetary considerations. She discusses how navigating an increasingly complex world forces us to consider and engage with our planetary interconnectedness, since for Reed, navigation's "operational zone is planetary, meaning that its activities affect, and are affected by, the mobilization of entities from around the globe." This perspective articulates navigation as a truly global process, highlighting the interconnectedness of all things on a planetary scale. Reed suggests that we need a distributed approach that combines different perspectives, and more robust accounts of reality that incorporate diverse experiences and viewpoints surpassing the limitations of personal geophysical location and its emphasis on pursuing a horizon. Navigation without a horizon involves trying out new strategies to handle the complexities that are often hidden and intertwined at many different levels; it is a challenge to our conventional understanding of space as bound by horizons. It opens up a realm where we can navigate without predefined boundaries or set paths while preserving the specificity of location, avoiding the homogenization of the world into one reductive picture, and maintaining the situatedness of knowledge.

Drawing from Reed's comprehensive exploration of navigation, we embark on a journey through the essays contributed by the students of *The Curatorial School of 'May'* for the Helsinki Biennial 2023, *New Directions May Emerge*. These essays, much like the biennial itself, are both geographically and conceptually moored in an archipelago, specifically Vallisaari Island. They echo Reed's ideas on navigation, acting as synthetic operations that intersect intentionality with contingency, global interconnectedness with local specificity, and horizonless spatiality with the physical confines of the island. Through their diverse perspectives, they invite us to engage with the intricate enquiries of *New Directions May Emerge* in a broader matrix of connections.

In a text titled *Navigating Turbulence—Towards the Conceptualization of Space*, Cyane Findji and Myriam Gras present an intriguing voyage that borrows from the investigative methodologies of geology to traverse the expansive maritime landscape of the Baltic Sea. The biennial and its

context are here mediated through various island influences. The text seeks to explore the thematic framework of the biennial while making the primary focus water in its various material states. The trajectory proposed by Findji and Gras disrupts the established dichotomy between those confined to the mainland and those tethered to the islands. Instead, it advocates for a more fluid, experiential understanding of the biennial that is informed by the unseen that dwells beneath the sea surrounding Vallisaari. The text invites us to navigate the Baltic Sea vertically, to pierce its surface, plunging into its depths to explore the layers of contamination and resilience therein, engaging our senses in a multidimensional exploration. Once back on the surface, we re-emerge with what the authors define as manifold points of departure to be explored in our experience of the Helsinki Biennial 2023.

In *What Lures in the Deep: Interacting with Virtual Worlds*, Aska Mayer and their AI collaborator, the language model LAIKA, take us on a deep dive into the depths of virtuality. Using language and magic as primary navigational tools, they explore the potential of advanced simulation technologies and immersive experiences to extend our sensory engagement. The experiences brought about by such technologies make us more aware of the different senses at play in this form of navigation that seemingly detaches itself from the geographical coordinates of the island. Mayer's essay asks how this sense of expanded bodily experience can open up new ways of interacting with the virtual worlds populating the biennial.

Island (In)visible: Tracing Storytellers and Other Ghosts of Vallisaari by Martina Šerešová introduces us to Hoary Alyssum, a plant-storyteller able to convey histories of oppression as well as resilience. Her essay reframes our biennial experience, exploring the non-human agents that make the haunted histories of the island's past accessible, allowing us to navigate the island through more-than-human perspectives. As visitors of the biennial, we drift through the island, navigating its complexities, which appear as traces of contamination and regeneration processes marking several sites and temporalities.

Micol Curatolo explores how mapping, moving, and circumnavigating the island as an art audience involves a relationship with Vallisaari and the many narratives emerging from

the island itself. From its military history to its current status as a nature reserve and site for an international art biennial, Curatolo reflects on how engaging with the island can help us rethink the ways in which we connect and politically relate to each other and the world we inhabit in times of socio-ecological crisis. *Never Ours* proposes a narrative about how to move and where to look as island visitors. The author encourages us to navigate the biennial in dialogue with the island's intricate systems, of which we, as biennial visitors, are also a part. This heightened awareness towards others, whether living beings, landscapes, or stories, promotes a sense of connection and reciprocity that calls us to actively participate in *New Directions May Emerge* by contributing our perspectives to the discussion.

A relational perspective concerning movement is central to the navigational framework that Julia Fiddler explores in *Get Well Soon—Meditation for Institutional Healing*. The text presents us with a spatial metaphor that probes the biennial's decentralized structure in the context of what the author calls "institutional healing." Fiddler's navigational parameters are situated on a more conceptual plane, prompting an investigation into how the Helsinki Biennial 2023's healing practices are bolstered by both the art projects it exhibits and its curatorial methodology. Site-specific modes of working, decentralization, and shared responsibility shift the biennial's focus from HAM and Vallisaari to broader directions, adding a reflective layer on the implications of *New Directions May Emerge* that extend beyond the island, reaching mainland Helsinki and the virtual realm.

This collection of writings offers various pathways to engage with the complex ecosystems that make up the Helsinki Biennial, supporting its pursuit for new directions to emerge. Visitors are encouraged to extend their antennae beyond the immediate and to notice anew at multiple wavelengths, whether that of the sea in its vastness and depth, the digital interface, historical narratives, the surrounding landscape or the social layers of institutions. The diverse actors, themes, and complexities that emerge from this international event necessitate a certain commitment to navigating the biennial, with its many interconnected identities and propositions. This publication aims to nurture and sustain a journey through collective and

diverse acts of noticing and observation, both on and off the given paths, inviting readers to tune in to the multitude of voices that shape the Helsinki Biennial 2023.

1 For a more detailed account of The Curatorial School of 'May' see Bassam El Baroni and Patrizia Costantin, "New Directions May Emerge Between Extinction and the Open Future," in *New Directions May Emerge*. Helsinki Biennial Catalogue (Helsinki: Helsinki Art Museum, 2023), 44–48.

2 Patricia Reed, "Orientation in a Big World: On the Necessity of Horizonless Perspectives," in *e-flux journal*, #101, June 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/101/273343/orientation-in-a-big-world-on-the-necessity-of-horizonless-perspectives/>.



PART 1

*Directions
Emerging
from Helsinki
Biennial 2023
Symposium*



Filipa Ramos

As a teenager, I was very fond of *Ladyhawke*, a romantic fantasy set in the Middle Ages. The film took an unusual turn to tell a familiar story, which has shaped much of the romantic construction of Western society: that of the impossibility of love. Set in thirteenth-century Aquila, Italy, *Ladyhawke* depicts the misadventures of a couple, Isabeau d'Anjou (Michelle Pfeiffer) and Etienne Navarre (Rutger Hauer), who are cursed by the bishop of Aquila (John Wood). Attracted by the woman's beauty and frustrated by her love for another man, the bishop chooses to use black magic, rather than ecclesiastic authority, to curse the couple by turning them into animals. In doing so, he performs a sort of reversion of the Divine gesture of creation and even more of the Darwinist theory of evolution. The woman is cursed to become a hawk during the day, regaining her human form at night, while the man keeps his human form by day, turning into a wolf at night.

The bishop is vicious, but within certain limits. He could have turned the couple into “lesser” animals, say a slug and a mosquito, or extended their incompatibility and biological mismatch by turning them into a fish and a bat, for instance, which would have had much trouble meeting. Yet he chose two historically charged and venerated animals. Both hawk and wolf incarnate some of the classical, stereotyped tropes of Western ideals of wildness, royalty and prestige. Their bodies and the metaphors associated with their characters have provided many political and symbolic figurations and representations, from realistic depictions of the animals in paintings, photographs, and sculptures to their uses in heraldic motifs of power, strength, and dynastic longevity. If the couple has been forced to exist in an ongoing creaturely negotiation, their metamorphosed counterparts pertained to the most inspiring and venerated animal kind.

Ladyhawke's narrative seemed to suggest that, by becoming animal, the two individuals have been deprived of their capacity to experience and express love and relate to one another. Instead of imagining the possibility of interspecies alliances and healing pathways, the film accentuates how their mutual worlds and *umwelts* are disjointed, separated by sky and land, night and day, feathers, skin and fur, as their shrieks, howls and human cries fail to compensate for their loss of homogeneity and linguistic correspondence. Under this therianthrope curse, they lose the capacity to communicate with one another and even the possibility of imagining other ways of doing so. With such loss of language comes a loss of affect, since they also seem incapable of expressing their love. Their only hope is for the reversion of this condition of living in transit, so the film's heroes aim to nothing more than to regaining the human stability of their bodies. For this to happen, they need to coincide with one another, and with the bishop, at a moment of transition: either at dawn or dusk. Only if the bishop witnesses the metamorphosis of the two individuals (the woman into bird or the man into wolf, or vice-versa) is the curse broken, as if what the clergyman really desires is not the woman's love but to see, at least once, such a powerful spectacle of transubstantiation unfolding in front of his eyes.

If the classical precept in Western Christianity is that the bread and wine metamorphose into the actual body of Christ during the Eucharistic liturgical sacrament, the transformation of the woman and man into a hawk and a wolf reveal the god-like powers of the bishop, who is capable of such an act of conversion of the matter and spirit of things. It is the film's narrator (Matthew Broderick), a thief nick-named The Mouse—an interstitial figure, traversing and existing across the animal and human realm, as rodents do, with their capacity to adapt to human life—who helps the lovers to face the bishop during their metamorphosis and to break the enchantment, leading the film to its end.

Released in 1985, *Ladyhawke* was directed by Richard Donner, one of the New Hollywood era's most financially successful directors and producers, behind major commercial hits such as *Superman I*, *X-Men*, *Lethal Weapon*, *The Omen*, and *The Goonies*. The film introduces some curious elements for the kind of historical context it approaches. One of them is the collaboration with the British rock band Alan Parsons Project, which oversaw the soundtrack of the film. Andrew Powell composed the score, which was produced by Alan Parsons, combining orchestral scores, Gregorian chants, progressive rock, and synthesized tunes. But in general, the narrative of the film is linear and conventional. It enacts many of the tropes of violence and brutality that tend to be popularly associated with the Middle Ages, while reinforcing stereotypes of racism (as when it is narrated that a nobleman “died killing Saracens”), ableism and misogyny, revealed in the disparity of treatment of the male and female animals, and on the fact that both people of color and female actors, with the exception of the lead actress and a handicapped peasant woman, are largely excluded from the film. It also promotes the generalization of fears and miscomprehensions of the natural world, namely lupophobia, the fear of wolves, which impact both efforts in wildlife preservation and the implementation of ecological policies.¹

But for a filmmaker such as Donner, who was involved in the making of fantasy and other-worldly films, another kind of plot would have been possible—one that would not reinforce such a troubled ethos and would instead promote other forms of kinship, interspecies alliances, and healing pathways.

Considering that there is a long tradition of human-animal metamorphosis that departs not from punishment but from free will and individual-agency (Zeus becoming a bull or a swan to fulfil his romantic aspirations, the pride of the Centaurs, for example) why would it be a punishment for someone to become half human and half wolf or bird of prey? Why couldn't the two individuals enjoy their animal powers of seeing at night and flying high, characteristics that humans are not capable of enjoying without the use of complex technologies? Instead, they face obstacles that highlight the limitations of their being animal and require the intervention of other humans, as when the wolf/Etienne falls into icy waters. The filmmakers feel the need to reinforce the common prejudice that to be a wild animal is to have no world, to be helpless and have no other purpose in life other than living. In an even more problematic manner, the film takes an anti-feminist stance by depicting the wolf as a wild and independent creature and the hawk as a domesticated being, physically bonded and literally attached to humans with its hood and jesses.

Considering Donner's engagement with fantasy cinema, it would have been interesting if the film had imagined the possibility of the couple enjoying their mutual company and expressing their love and desire for one another in the shape they had assumed—the woman embracing the wolf and the man the hawk. It would have been fascinating to see the bishop's curse turn against itself by generating a case of inter-species encounter between woman and wolf, hawk and man, their intimacy not being interrupted but actually increased by their difference. This approach would explore the possibility of animal-human intimacy, a very clear Christian taboo, even more feared and punished than extra-conjugal relationships. As stated by an excerpt from *Leviticus*: “If a man lies with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal. If a woman approaches any animal and lies with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them” (*Leviticus*, 20:15-16).

It is worth looking further at this topic. In the white west, sexuality has historically been of ecclesiastic interest, given its potential to control people's minds and impulses and to govern the dos and the don'ts of their bodies. Sexual

practices were prescribed through the alliance of canonical and civic laws, which “determined, each in its own way, the division between the licit and the illicit.”² They were promoted by the church and enforced by its sacramental rituals of marriage, penance (associated with the Eucharist) and holy orders. As Michel Foucault noted, “The marriage relation was the most intense focus of constraints; it was spoken of more than anything else; more than any other relation, it was required to give a detailed accounting of itself [...] As to the courts, they could condemn homosexuality as well as infidelity, marriage without parental consent, or bestiality.”³ Sexuality mattered not only because it controlled people’s desires but because it surveyed the reproductive force of individuals.

The regulation and control of sexuality was applied towards the growth and expansion of religious and civic communities, of their serving bodies and souls, as a means to assure that practices were focused on reproduction. It was therefore important to maximize results (population control and growth) and reduce superfluous, time-wasting activities (individual and collective deviant forms of pleasure). By deeming acts such as masturbation, oral sex, sodomy, and homosexual intercourse as unnatural and perverse, the state-church alliance minimized (through culpability, marginalization, punishment, and criminalization) intimate relations that did not lead to reproductive success.⁴ Other such acts included zoophilia (erotic stroking or petting of animals), bestiality (sexual intercourse between humans and other animals due to “depravity”) or zooerasty (a pathologically-induced form of bestiality). As historian of science Lorraine Daston argued, there was a straightforward reason why “Christian theologians in the Aristotelian tradition such as Thomas Aquinas considered bestiality a worse sin than adultery or other sexual transgressions: such pairings overstep a boundary between species natures drawn by the ‘author of nature;’” and thus risked creating monstrous beings, which would interrupt “a continuum that begins when the offspring fails to replicate its male parent [...] and stretches to the extreme point when it does not even resemble its parents’ species.”⁵ Even worse than the waste of reproductive time and efficiency was the potential to create aberrations, monsters, and hybrid creatures living in a disjunction between matter

and form, that would challenge the rhetoric and vector of civilization and reverse the “natural” process of evolution and purity of species.

Biological, political, and ideological reasonings are difficult to disentangle in the construction of notions of deviancy throughout the inauguration and consolidation of modernity. As Foucault also argued, “medicine made a forceful entry into the pleasures of the couple: it created an entire organic, functional, or mental pathology arising out of ‘incomplete’ sexual practices; it carefully classified all forms of related pleasures; it incorporated them into the notions of ‘development’ and instinctual ‘disturbances’; and it undertook to manage them,”⁶ enforcing a form of power that complemented, legitimized and extended that of the church.

Returning to the plot of *Ladyhawke*, the possibility of upturning the bishop’s curse by exploring interspecies care and intimacy could also be a way of rowing against a tide that was about to be set in motion in the epoch in which the film is set. During the Middle Ages, the terrain for the consolidation of anthropocentric culture and an anthropogenic world was being prepared, one in which the human (a certain human, predominately the white Western man) would become the dominating presence and reference in a context that it would steadily control, eradicating and eliminating many of its nonhuman beings and spaces. This kind of human would not only be the central presence in its environment, but it would also pursue a process of division and classification that had already been initiated by such epistemological traditions as the Aristotelian natural philosophy, with its degrees and hierarchies, inclusions and exclusions. In fact, many of them had been turned into natural moral laws and axioms by Christian theology, and further consolidated by the scientific revolution as manifestations of divine logic and will. It is therefore not surprising that in the eighteenth century, European naturalists such as the Swedish Carolus Linnaeus and the French Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, created taxonomic schemes for arranging and ordering the natural world that also determined the hierarchy of the living and placed humankind as far away as possible from other species. The civilized, distinct human was not to be mixed

or entangled with other animals, since this would signal humanity's intrinsic belonging to "nature."

Accompanying such ordering of the world, humans performed their humanity with distinction, learning how to conceal their animality by controlling, taming, and disguising behaviors as well as bodily hair and odors, as if they were evidence of a wildness that would betray the Western narrative of human progress. Women were considered, at least since Aristotle, lower than men and closer to animals. Despite his arguing that female animals are in general cleverer and have better memories than male animals,⁷ Aristotle also proposed that they are "deformed males."⁸ Women thus ought to remove the animal traces from their bodies with even more diligence, eliminating body hair that would otherwise betray their quasi-bestial condition. In parallel, such power over the female body was further applied by a predominately masculine medicalization, invested in the regulation and control of reproductive means and force.⁹ Those who refused to accept such a regime were considered "the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, the obeah woman who poisoned the master's food and inspired slaves to revolt."¹⁰ Aesthetics and hygiene thus appeared hand-in-hand with science (the shaved, perfumed, pathogen-free, uncontaminated, reproductive body) and religion (the clean soul in the clean body) to shape the image of a modern, unsullied, and pure civilization.

By celebrating the two characters' union and love across taxonomic borders, *Ladyhawke* could also revisit the outstanding traditions of the Medieval bestiary, in which creatures of all sorts, real and fantastic, coexist in moral, symbolic but also factual universes. Many, if not most, medieval animal figurations were intended to offer metaphorical representations of people and therefore a complex and often contradictory weaving of the human and the nonhuman realms.¹¹ It is important to consider how anthropomorphism can easily become a demonstration of anthropocentrism (which Tim Ingold defines as "an attitude which values all things non-human—all inanimate and animate components of the environment barring other people—solely as instrumental means to the realisation of exclusively human ends"¹²), if not androcentrism, which

validates a presumed superiority of humans (or male humans) over other life forms. Daston describes such correlation by explaining how "anthropomorphism became fatally linked to anthropocentrism, although there is no necessary link between the two: both were indicted as evidence of a narrow-minded, self-centered assumption that one's own perspective was in some way privileged."¹³ An effect of such an assumption is, according to Jonathan Burt, the transformation of the history of animals into what he calls the "history of the disappearance" of animals (in the sense of extinction and in relation to what he calls "effacement," erasure, here meaning the limitation of animals to a human framework). As Burt argues, in an almost reversed version of *Ladyhawke's* rhetoric, "the history of animal representation is limited to a human framework of where the animals are depicted as if they were quasi-human."¹⁴

However, anthropomorphism, the attributions of traits and behavioral characteristics that emerge out of the Medieval bestiary tradition and could have been embedded in the narrative of the film, is also a necessary system of relations. It is a frail and deceiving one, for sure, but it also reveals a propensity that comes out of a desire and necessity to understand, to establish a parallel. Reflecting on the pre-Modern context of the film's narrative, John Berger historically situated this position by observing that "until the nineteenth century ... anthropomorphism was integral to the relation between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity."¹⁵ Despite, as Daston argued, anthropomorphism (aligned to bestiality, as previously discussed) also being "a theological sin [when used to compare humans not with animals but with divinities] long before it became a scientific one."¹⁶ Anthropomorphism therefore lies in a complex intersection between being a danger, a demonstration of human arrogance and a necessary attempt to get closer to other life forms and to "understand what it would be like to be nonhuman."¹⁷ Anthropomorphism may well be a limit, a vice, a sin, a univocal road to anthropocentrism, and in many ways to androcentrism. Yet it may also offer a possibility of bypassing a schismatic logic of species divide. By attempting to understand, feel and project oneself into another, I may learn to respect and care for the other. I may be able to speak and stand on behalf of them, in an intersectional manner, beyond a

logic of privilege, and to build alliances, successfully avoiding the phenomenon that Sigmund Freud called the murderous “narcissism of minor differences,” the assumption that minor differences between individuals otherwise alike provide the ground for strangeness and hostility.¹⁸

Such closeness, if proposed and enacted in the film, would help viewers to understand, and hopefully embrace, the fact that humans and animals have much more in common than is usually assumed. One of the common features to many living beings is love, which is, and has always been, a creaturely feeling, a drive for togetherness with that which is strange and mysterious, human and not. At the same time as people have systematically attempted to differentiate themselves from other beings, they have also recognized the expressions and manifestations of animal affect, even love, both between themselves and other animals and between similar animals. Dominic Pettman argues that “two humans making love are (always already) animals engaged in sexual intercourse,”¹⁹ and that love “makes us both more and less human.”²⁰ At the same time, it is unquestionable that this film tells the story of a heteronormative couple with the drive to create a nuclear family, which seems to be the real reason for their need to regain a stable human form. Departing from this, I have tried to imagine a different outcome for this film, one that re-proposes what a family is, what togetherness is, and what kind of affects, prospects, and desires may constitute a family, beyond the union between a man and woman and their capacity to procreate.

At once anchoring and deterritorializing the self, an alternative *Ladyhawke* would help to edify a different world, characterized by the recognition of love and care across the species divide that would tell us more about our being animals than about animals’ proximity to humanity.

Ladyhawke, cannot, of course, be re-written. But new roads for a new way of living and loving, in an ecological manner, for understanding ourselves as creatures among others, and acknowledging the impact that many reproductive agendas have on the exponential multiplication of beings on the planet, are waiting to be paved, with much urgency. At the end of 2022, as countries started to gather at Cop 15 in Montreal to agree a deal to protect the planet’s biodiversity, the Danish economist

and environmentalist Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, warned that “we are at war with nature” and must “make peace” with it. She continued: “We’ve just welcomed the 8 billionth member of the human race on this planet. That’s a wonderful birth of a baby, of course. But we need to understand that the more people there are, the more we put the Earth under heavy pressure.”

In her speech, Inger Andersen brought out together two crucial facts. She pointed out to the need to lose the fear and distance from nature in order to rebuild a more harmonious relationship with it and to the need to consider the impact of human overpopulation on the planet’s biodiversity. This is not disconnected from her first argument. Indeed, I will argue that it is only by considering kin, and loveable, those whom we have seen, described and treated for so long as “different,” “separate,” and “inferior” to “us” that we can start rebuilding a world that is balanced, fair, and sustainable. With the current trend of remakes and adaptations of former Hollywood successes, let’s hope that the sequel to *Ladyhawke* is one of emancipation, transformation, and true ecological intersectionality.

1 See Elizabeth Marshall, *Wolves in Beowulf and Other Old English Texts* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2022).

2 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 48.

3 *Ibid.*, 49.

4 On the construction of the correlation between moral and natural orders, see Lorraine Daston, *Against Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

5 *Ibid.*, 12.

6 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 53.

7 Aristotle, *Historia Animalium VIII (IX).1*, 608a25–28, 608b10.

8 Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals IV.6*, 775a16. For an important update and consideration of Aristotle’s understanding of women and its implications for later

philosophical thought, see Sophia Connell, *Aristotle on Women: physiology, psychology, and politics. Elements in Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

9 On the subject, see Silvia Federici, *The Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004).

10 *Ibid.*, 11.

11 For a feminist reading of medieval bestiaries, seeCarolynn Van Dyke, “Women and Other Beasts: A Feminist Perspective on Medieval Bestiaries,” *mff*, Vol. 54, no. 1, 2018: 94–117.

12 Tim Ingold, “Dwelling,” in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 218.

13 Lorraine Daston, “Intelligences—Angelic, Animal, Human,” in Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman (ed.), *Thinking*

with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 52–53.

14 Jonathan Burt, “The Illumination of the Animal Kingdom: The Role of Light and Electricity in Animal Representation,” in *Society & Animals* 9:3 (2001) © Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2001: 204.

15 John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” (1977), in *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers, 1980); reprinted as John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 11.

16 Daston, “Intelligences,” 39.

17 *Ibid.*, 38.

18 Sigmund Freud, (1918), “The taboo of virginity—Contributions to the Psychology of Love III,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XI, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1958), 199.

20 Dominic Pettman, “When Lulu met the Centaur: Photographic traces of creaturely love,” *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies* (Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 2015): 143.

21 Dominic Pettman, *Creaturely Love. How Desire Makes Us More and Less Than Human* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 6.

Curating’s Technological Unconscious: The History of Cybernetics and the Gaian Transformation of Curation

Adeena Mey



Cybernetics and the Exhibition Form

New Directions May Emerge, the Helsinki Biennale 2023

(HB23), provides a rare occasion to rethink a particular set of vectors that inform the way practices of exhibition-making and the tools through which they can be discussed critically and historically are shaped. Although, at the time of writing, the exhibition has yet to happen, I wish to discuss some of its undercurrent positions in relation to a possible genealogy of exhibition and curatorial thinking in which HB23 might be inscribed. But if this attempt to sketch such a genealogy does indeed historicize it, it hopes to do so by uncovering a largely ignored “technological unconscious” in the writing and discussions in exhibition histories and its archives. In this sense, it is driven by a revisionist impulse. But it also attempts to respond to our current moment and to discuss contemporary orientations in the (re)thinking of the biennale format. In other words,

it takes HB23's title quite literally and will try to interrogate what and how "new directions may emerge." As put by HB23 curator Joasia Krysa:

Helsinki Biennial is committed to responsible exhibition-making and inclusive principles—not as a theme but an ethical position and a method—and this extends to the curatorial process. Curating is a practice that is best shared, and so the next edition of Helsinki Biennial is conceived as an exercise in co-creating to explore the ways of thinking and doing a biennial otherwise. I have invited a number of arts collectives, research institutions, and other kinds of entities—as "curatorial intelligences"—to join the process and to think through the issues pertinent to the biennial together.¹

Here, it might be useful to single out the issues of co-creation and of including curatorial agencies that de-center the process of curation and put it at odds with what now almost seems to be a dated figure—namely, the curator as a single author, orchestrator, etc.—and their gearing towards the ethics of responsibility and inclusivity mentioned above, paralleled by an engagement with "some of the pressing issues of our time, encompassing environmental damage, political conflict and the impact of technology."²

These issues thus seem to constitute the cause and horizon of a renewed curatorial practice and a rethinking of the biennale format, affecting it at its very core, begging a rethinking of its *modus operandi*. My contention is that HB23 takes part in a wider transformation of exhibition-making and curation and that it invites a return to what I have called the "cybernetization of the exhibition." I have described this process, which consists in the redefinition of the exhibition and the institution as an informational and communicational medium, based on a series of writings and institutional experiments taking place in the 1970s by the likes of curators Peter Althaus, Jorge Glusberg, Pontus Hultén (to which we could add, amongst others, philosopher Vilém Flusser). Yet the 1970s also saw the emergence of a distinction between so-called "first-order" and "second-order cybernetics," the former being, broadly, the main inspiration for these curatorial and theoretical attempts to

transform museums and the exhibition form. My hypothesis is that HB23 and other recent curatorial experiments invite us to return to this bifurcation between first- and second-order cybernetics. It seems to me that this is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, with regards to the Anthropocene, second-order cybernetics—which engages with autopoietic, self-organizing systems—equips us better to rethink the role of biennales and the way they can address what Isabelle Stengers has called the "Intrusion of Gaia." Secondly, reconsidering these two trajectories of cybernetics is also necessary to recover what Yuk Hui calls the "technological unconscious" to re-include the question of the technical apparatus with which exhibition and curatorial thinking mostly engage on a representational or thematic level.

First-Order Cybernetics and Exhibition-Making

"Cybernetization" draws from the discipline theorized by Norbert Wiener, which he defined as the general science dealing with "the entire field of *control* and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal." Taken from the Greek *kubernētēs* meaning "steering/governing" it approaches machine and animal, living and non-living entities defined as information-processing organisms seeking homeostatic balance. This is achieved thanks to *feedback*, which enables self-regulation. Moreover, for Wiener, this notion of steering and control can be expanded to include neuroscience and computer science, as well as the political and social fields. For philosopher Claus Pias, cybernetics brought a shift through which "things as life, language, or work were united in the concept of the human being," whereas with this new epistemology they "encountered one another beyond human limits in control circuits of information, switching algebra, and feedback."³ These descriptions correspond to a moment referred to as first-order cybernetics in the history of the discipline and I will subsequently address mutations in recent exhibition-making and thinking through so-called second-order cybernetics.

Here, we can render the broad definition of the process of cybernetization of the exhibition that I have written about with philosopher Yuk Hui:

The cybernetisation of the exhibition is to be understood here as the cybernetic conception of the

exhibition, which implies its concrete—that is, spatial, technical, material—reshaping through the integration of the notion of *feedback*, and its conceptualisation as an organised retroaction system. The exhibition as a modulating apparatus acts both on the mediation between objects, visitors, and institutions, and on the attentional-sensible modalities of the spectators.⁴

The argument can be supported with examples from the history of exhibitions. As remarked in a report on the state of contemporary art museums published in *Museum*, the museological wing of UNESCO, the 1960s saw the emergence of institutions connected by “a kind of informal fraternity of co-operation between like-thinking museum programmers and represents the beginning of a system of comprehensive planning which will certainly become stronger in the years to come. All the museums mentioned co-operated with at least one show involving one or more of the others during the late sixties and 1970.”⁵

In a series of interviews on the topic of the “museum of the future,” French critic Yann Pavie identified this emerging network of new institutions and actors as comprising of Eddy de Wilde at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Pontus Hultén at Moderna Museet in Stockholm (and later at the Centre Pompidou), Pierre Gaudibert at A.R.C. in Paris, Harald Szeemann and the Kunsthalle Bern, Michael Kustow at the ICA in London, as well as Peter F. Althaus at Kunsthalle Basel. This network sought to develop new types of art institutions that could respond to the artistic and cultural, as well as the social, political, and technological, mutations of the 1960s.⁶ The emergence of such new museums happened at the juncture of several factors. First, the necessity to accommodate artistic experiments of the 1960s whose forms radically questioned the museum’s traditional structure and functions. Second, an increasing reflexivity of art institutions towards themselves and their social missions, especially in light of the upheavals of the late 1960s; indeed, as stated by the curators in the *Museum* journal report transcribed by Szeemann: “We must no longer regard the museum as just an instrument for offering art to the public. The museum has become more critical both of art and of itself, because it has become aware of its function outside

daily life. It does indeed function outside the system, sets itself up in opposition to the establishment, yet continually shows itself to be an instrument of the system.”⁷ These factors can be seen as having been cyberneticized, the new aesthetic, social, political, and infrastructural imperatives of the museum being recast by the broader epistemological transformation towards conceiving of all entities as information-processing systems. In the field of cultural institutions, this transformation has resulted in a conception of museums as centers of information or communication, one of the effects being a closer involvement of museums with research and universities and, at the same time, an increased popularity of museums among a general audience. Contemporary attempts to understand and redefine this emerging exhibitionary complex include: Hultén’s “museum as site of communication” epitomized by the information infrastructure of the Centre Pompidou; curator Jorge Glusberg’s concept of the “museum of communication”; Flusser’s proposal to reorganize biennials on a scientific format, as “open and fluid forms,” according to communication theories; Althaus’ notion of the “Open Museum/Das Offene Museum”; or Wim Beeren’s proposal to move “From exhibition to activity” realized in his nationwide outdoor project for *Sonsbeek*⁷¹. For Glusberg and his project of a “critical museology,” it is necessary to reinscribe the museum beyond artistic discourse in order to place it in the channels that participate in its internal structuring and its social effectiveness: the museum is fundamentally a “sign comprising other signs” and can therefore be designated by the McLuhanian expression of “museum-as-message.” As for Althaus, then director of Kunsthalle Basel, on the basis of his research into urban space and its rationalization—the development of a “thought model” for flexible structures capable of growing, shrinking, and regenerating, allowing humans to identify with this environment, he formulated the notion of the “open museum,” a concept that was put to the test in the 1970 exhibition *Das offene Museum*, which was held in the Swiss museum under his direction at the time. Beeren, in the catalogue introduction of *Sonsbeek*⁷¹, wrote:

It has become one of Sonsbeek’s aims to stimulate a greater public in the awareness that such things as visual

phenomena exist, and that those phenomena often concern space. Until recently those visual phenomena were confined to the realm of science or to the grounds of the museums. But now the time has come that artists are deeply involved in those spatial relations, and the attention they pay to it has long since ceased to be expressed in mass alone. Spatial relations means also: to be involved.⁸

In Beeren's curatorial frame, this emphasis on "spatial relations" and "activity" also pointed to the limits of the very idea of curating exhibitions. As he put it:

It is evident that the term exhibition is only partly relevant. We have turned to the word "manifestation" and subsequently to "activity". *Sonsbeek'71* is more like a workshop than a show. This means the Dutch public will not be able to take a walk amongst impressive statues, but that it will have the opportunity of a much closer involvement.⁹

But the most cogent example of this moment of (self-)redefinition of the museum, on which I wish to focus a little bit more here, is best described by Hultén:

Around the 1960s, we discovered that the traditional museum could be opened to radically different works bearing the aggressive values of what is authentic, original and new; commissioning artists' group creations whose originality and outcomes could stand at the antipodes of the art classically admired and admitted; playing alternative music, redefining interpretation; showing films other than those of established commercial circuits; in a word, betting on the event and on life to the detriment of outdated habits. The museum became a parallel place.

Hultén's museological and curatorial concept of the "museum as site of communication" built on his previous work in Stockholm as director of Moderna Museet and on a series of acclaimed international shows. His work as director of the

department of plastic arts at the Centre Pompidou drew on and extended his vision realized through attempts to reinvent art institutions and experiments in exhibition-making.¹⁰ Conceived during the 1960s while he was at Moderna Museet, Hultén's idea of the museum was synthesized in the notion of a "museum in movement." At that point, accounting for the artistic, social, and political changes of the time, an advanced museum's mission was, according to Hultén, not only to accommodate the experiences of late modernism and of the expanded arts, but, as exhibition theorist Kim West puts it, to no longer consider the museum as "a sanctuary that upheld the pure freedom of modern art to express its dynamic nature, but a catalyst that would render contemporary art active as a principle of extension of the freedoms of democratic society."¹¹ In its most programmatic and theoretical version, Hultén's museum was to become a "research center" and its curator "its coordinator," a conception in which the avant-garde horizon of the blurring of art and life would be accomplished thanks to art's modeling on information and communication theories. As he put it in an interview with Yann Pavie:

We would like to do what the Surrealists called the "critique of life". Such a mechanism is interesting only insofar as it functions permanently and is based on a methodology. A true science of information is being formulated in correlation to the new orientation taken by the sciences and the human sciences: computer sciences (*informatique*), cybernetics, linguistics, semiology, art history ... concepts of theory, history, space, time, sign are all called into question.¹²

Although this statement was made in 1971, in reference to the model of Moderna Museet, two years prior to his appointment at Beaubourg, a diagram sketched by Hultén also directly influenced the conception of the Centre Pompidou as an organic-machinic infrastructure. This diagram of a "site of communication" consisted of four concentric circles respectively standing for four kinds of "information," meaning that all components composing the art institution were to be understood as informational elements, summarized as follows:

1. Primary Information (teleprinted communication);
 2. Spaces and tools for the treatment of information (workshops for the public, artists and museum staff);
 3. Processed information (art exhibitions, films, music, dance, theatre...);
 4. Art collection, film archive ...
- Processed and saved information: memory.¹³

These four layers were further characterized in detail by Hultén: The outermost layer, the spherical envelope, discerns the universe of daily life, which is characterised by a concentrated acceleration of information. This information, as far as possible, should not be edited. It is for us raw and unmediated material. Here we find for example teleprinters from all news agencies. This will represent a sort of “degree zero” of information, a place where the individual is attacked by all kinds of information. Of course, it will not be possible to obtain unmanipulated information, but the very fact that these pieces of information will often be contradictory will create a situation of conflict, a critical situation. The situation of the street is recreated and intensified, the conditions for discussion improved.

The second layer will be reserved for workshops, that is, it will include spaces and tools: places where means of production are made available, from hammers to mere nails, from paintbrushes to computers. These tools are available, but nothing regarding their use is decided, nor the fields to be exploited, nor the goals of these experiences. Museum staff might act as instructor for these machines. These workshops might be used either by an artist, by us or by everyone. Specialists in the fields of art or communication will work on all sorts of problems.

The third layer of the sphere will present productions from the workshops and will be dedicated to manifestations: visual arts, films, photos, dance, concerts ... but also exhibitions of “finished products.” This is cultural activity as we already know it. But it is probable that contacts with the workshops will give this activity a more revolutionary aspect.

The last or core layer will contain the “memory” of processed information; this is the museum’s conservation and collection task.¹⁴

Through this cybernetic conception of the museum, Beaubourg was also understood to become France’s cultural brain, decentralizing some of its programmes and accompanied by a specific idea of museum experience, “the place *par excellence* for communication, encounters, broadcasting (*diffusion*).”¹⁵ These ideas of free-flowing circulation have notably been criticized by Jean Beaudrillard, for whom the only thing actually circulating fluidly seemed to be the “beguiling masses,” but as regards “the stock—works of art, objects, books—as well as the so-called polyvalent interior workspace: there the flow has stopped entirely.”¹⁶ Robin Mackay, in a discussion of *Les Immatériaux*, wrote that Beaubourg was merely a “receptacle for the ‘festive neoconservatism’ [denounced by philosopher Gilles Châtelet] in which ‘cultural production’ is incited to be a facsimile or working scale-model of economic dynamism, oriented towards an optimisation of the liquidity of all flows.”¹⁷

Exhibition-Making’s Ecosystemic Turn?

Here, I wish to point to another question. Indeed, if it is broadly first-order cybernetics that was the main inspiration for these curatorial and theoretical attempts at transforming museums and the exhibition-form, the 1970s also saw the emergence of a distinction with second-order cybernetics. As mentioned earlier, first-order cybernetics focuses on information, its circulation and control in systems aimed at maintaining homeostatic balance, and conceives of both living and non-living organisms as information-processing entities. As for the second, referred to as “the cybernetics of cybernetics” by Heinz von Foerster, it is more concerned with self-referring, self-generating, autonomous, systems (machinic or living), as expressed through the concept of *autopoiesis* coined by cognitive scientists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela in their book *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (1972/1980). The 1970s also saw the emergence of the Gaia Hypothesis, proposed by chemist James Lovelock and microbiologist Lynn Margulis, which

“suggests that living organisms on the planet interact with their surrounding inorganic environment to form a synergetic and self-regulating system that created, and now maintains, the climate and biochemical conditions that make life on Earth possible.”¹⁸ As literary theorist Bruce Clarke has suggested, the Gaia Hypothesis “echoe[s] ecosystem ecology despite its arrival from outside of ecology proper.”¹⁹

In the field of contemporary art, curator and professor of art and economics Mi You has recently identified: a recognizable ecosystemic turn in organizational and curatorial practices [...] Ecosystems strive to structurally integrate different “stakeholders” including artists, audiences, and their wider communities, administrators, and curators, as well as infrastructures [...] In arts and culture, one finds Ian David Moss’s “ecosystem-based arts research” and recent calls to conceive of museums as ecosystems, for example at the Taipei Biennial in 2018.²⁰

As for HB23, it engages with notions of ecosystem on various levels. For instance, it places “particular emphasis on outdoor artworks which subtly operate in dialogue with the surrounding environment and its unique ecosystem.” TBA21–Academy, one of HB23’s curatorial intelligences is presented as “a contemporary art organization and cultural ecosystem fostering a deeper relationship to the Ocean through the lens of art to inspire care and action.”²¹ New modes of interactions between the biennial and its environment are also expected to be fostered by a non-human curatorial intelligence, an AI Entity called *Newly Formed* created by artist Yehwan Song. Based on multimodal machine-learning technology and the collection of Helsinki Art Museum HAM, *Newly Formed* is designed to produce “new and unexpected artwork groupings. The groupings respond to inputs including the AI’s analysis of the artworks, Biennial visitors, and Helsinki’s geography.”²² “Ecosystem,” then, in this context, seems to refer to a rethinking of the biennale format as a collaborative network itself interacting with a variety of milieus (natural, techno-social, cultural, etc.), based on a variety of distributed curatorial agencies. Mi You’s discussion of contemporary art’s “ecosystemic turn” is written in response to

documenta fifteen and ruangrupa’s experiment with *lumbung*. As put by ruangrupa:

Documenta fifteen is practice and not theme based. It is not about lumbung or the commons, or any such notion. When we started, we realized that making a “showcase” of collective practices, done by many art centers, would be a trap. Instead, this exhibition and journey are with collectives and artists who have longstanding experience with practicing and not preaching (much)—walking the talk—and who would like to learn new tricks, strategies, and approaches from one another to enrich their local communities. So, in a way it is a study of many models.²³

This study of many models is encapsulated in ruangrupa’s own definition of the notion of *ekosistem*: “Ekosistem is the Indonesian term for ecosystem, developed in reference to, but not synonymous with, the ecological concept of ecosystem. ‘Ekosistem’ or ‘ecosystem’ describes collaborative network structures through which knowledge, resources, ideas, and programs are shared and linked.”²⁴

But with HB23, a different genealogy of the ecosystemic turn can be sketched. Without submitting HB23 to any linear reading or clear, logical, continuous causalities, looking at some of Joasia Krysa’s formulation of decentered modes of curating and non-human curatorial agencies might help complicate the contemporary landscape and the articulation of this ecosystemic turn. In *Curating Immateriality* (2006), Krysa asked: “How do curators respond to new forms of self-organising and self-replicating systems, databases, programming, code and source code, net art, software art and generative media within the wider cultural system? What new models of curatorial practice are needed to take account of the production processes, that are increasingly collaborative and distributed over technological networks and software?”²⁵ And in an earlier essay, Krysa questioned a fundamental shift that can be seen as being the core concern within the ecosystemic turn. Indeed, the issue, she wrote (about “online curating,” but the question can be translated to recent modes of self-generated organizations), “is not simply to engage with online curating in terms of modes

of display or new objects to select, but to consider how the practice itself has been transformed by distributed networks.”²⁶

These two examples suggesting an emerging paradigm in contemporary art founded on ecosystemic notions articulate two directions. The Indonesian *lumbung* and *ekosistem* draws from non-Western epistemologies and cosmologies, potentially pointing at the articulation of a “cosmotechnical” and “technodiverse” thinking of exhibitions.²⁷ With HB23, and its cybernetic epistemology, emphasis on network systems and now A.I., we find ourselves with a more future-oriented approach. Either way, Mi You’s diagnosis of documenta fifteen might seem to apply. Indeed, she suggests that “the flourishing of these concepts raises an intriguing question: Does the organizational become an end in itself, a kind of institutional self-actualization of the artists, curators, and community organizers? Are we entering an era in which artistic curatorial practices are merged into organizational development, or even entrepreneurship?”²⁸ Here, what seems to divide Mi You and ruangrupa echoes Bruno Latour’s asking what the politics of ecological thinking could be. Indeed, Latour notes:

how much difficulty ecology movements have always had finding a place on the political chessboard. On the right? The left? The far right? The far left? Neither right nor left? Elsewhere, in government? Nowhere, in utopia? Above, in technocracy? Below, in a return to the sources of wisdom? Beyond, in full self-realization? Everywhere, as the lovely Gaia hypothesis suggests, positing an Earth that would bring all ecosystems together in a single integrated organism?²⁹

For Yuk Hui, “Modernity was characterised by a technological unconsciousness willing infinite progress. By a technological unconscious, I mean the supposition that human beings could advance history according to their will and desire while ignoring the apparatus that makes the will possible, and that turns desires into nightmares.” In this regard, should it become an increasing and more generalized trend, the experiment shaping this ecosystemic turn literally *matter*, for their explorations of infrastructure and the ecosystemic *work through* their

technological unconscious. By so doing, they might represent a symptom of the exit from the Modern and articulate a path towards new directions.

1 Joasia Krysa quoted in “Helsinki Biennial 2023 is created together with five curatorial collaborators,” Helsinki Biennial website, <https://helsinkibiennaali.fi/en/story/helsinki-biennial-2023-is-created-together-with-five-curatorial-collaborators/>.

2 “Helsinki Biennial 2023 brings together twenty-nine artists and collectives to exhibit across Vallisaari Island and the Finnish capital” [Press Release], available at: <https://helsinkibiennaali.fi/en/media/>.

3 Claus Pias, “The Age of Cybernetics,” 2003, in Claus Pias (ed.), *Cybernetics. The Macy Conferences 1946–1953. The Complete Transactions* (Zurich/Berlin: Diaphanes, 2016).

4 Yuk Hui and Adeena Mey, “The Exhibition as Medium: Some Observations on the Cybernetisation of the Institution and the Exhibition,” *Afterall. A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 53, 2022: 80.

5 Pierre Gaudibert, Pontus Hultén, Michael Kustow, Jean Leymarie, François Mathey, Georges Henri Rivière, Harald Szeemann, Edouard de Wilde, “Exchange of Views of a Group of Experts,” *Museum*, Vol. XXIV, no. 1, 1972: 48–49. This report results from two meetings (6–7 October 1969; 1 April 1970) in Paris with contemporary art curators and museologists on the initiative of UNESCO. This group of experts, as it was referred to, met in order to discuss “problems of common interest to Western museums of contemporary art: ethics, organization, exhibitions, cultural involvement and other events; relations between such museums and their trustee bodies, artists, the art market, press and other mass media, the public, publishers; ideas and experience in relation to architecture and equipment. Tape recordings were made of these discussions.” Furthermore, “A questionnaire taking into account the content of these discussions was sent to 116 museums of contemporary art or contemporary art sections. Sixty-six replies

were received.” These conversations were subsequently rewritten into this published account by Harald Szeemann, curator at the Bern Kunsthalle. Michael Kustow of the ICA in London wrote comments on the questionnaire. Georges-Henri Rivière, “Editorial,” *Museum*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, 1972: 4.

6 Gaudibert, et al., “Exchange of Views of a Group of Experts,” 5–32.

7 *Ibid.*, 6.

8 Wim Beeren, “From exhibition to activity,” *Sonsbeek 71, exh. cat.*, 1971, 11.

9 *Ibid.*, 13.

10 Hultén’s projects are widely acknowledged in the history of exhibitions. Moreover, some represent important case studies for the archaeology of moving-image exhibitions. Shows he curated at Moderna Museet such as *Hon – en katedral* (1966), *Andy Warhol* (1968), or *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age at Moma* (1968–69) all experimented with specific ways of presenting moving-image works inside the gallery (or inside Niki de Saint Phalle’s gigantic doll in *Hon*). On *Hon – en katedral* see Benoît Antille, “HON – en katedral: Behind Hultén’s Theatre of Inclusiveness,” *Afterall*, no. 32, Spring 2013: 72–81. On *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* see Julie H. Reiss, “The Moving Image as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age,” François Bovier and Adeena Mey (ed.), *Exhibiting the Moving Image. History Revisited* (Zurich, JRP-Ringier, 2015), 18–27.

11 Kim West, “The Exhibitionary Complex. Exhibition, Apparatus, and the Media from Kulturhuset to the Centre Pompidou, 1963–1977,” *Södertörn Doctoral Dissertations* (Stockholm: Södertörn University, Aesthetics, School of Culture and Education, 2017), 45. West’s dissertation thoroughly retraces this shift in Hultén’s thinking about exhibitions and

museums from “museum in movement” to the museum as “catalyst for social change,” as “broadcast station,” and as “live centre of information.”

12 Yann Pavie, “Vers le musée du futur: entretien avec Pontus Hultén,” *Opus International*, no. 24–25, May 1971: 63.

13 + 14 *Ibid.*, 58–61.

15 Yann Pavie, “Vers le musée du futur: entretien avec Pontus Hultén,” *op. cit.*, 63.

16 Jean Baudrillard, “The Beaubourg-Effect: Implosion and Deterrence” (trans. R Krauss and A. Michelson), October, Vol. 20, Spring 1982, 3.

17 Robin Mackay, “Immaterials, Exhibition, Acceleration”, in Yuk Hui and Andreas Broeckmann (eds.), *30 Years After Les Immatériaux. Art, Science and Theory*, (Lüneburg: meson press, 2015), 225.

18 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/gaia-hypothesis>.

19 Brian Clarke, *Gaian Systems, Lynn Margulis, Neocybernetics, and the End of the Anthropocene* (Minnesota, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 10.

20 Mi You, “What Politics? What Aesthetics?: Reflections on documenta fifteen,” *e-flux*, issue 131, November 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/131/501112/what-politics-what-aesthetics-reflections-on-documenta-fifteen/>.

21 “Helsinki Biennial 2023 brings together 29 artists and collectives to exhibit across Vallisaari Island and the Finnish capital.”

22 Michael Irwin, “Forward-looking Helsinki Biennial Engages AI Curator,” *Ocula*, 10 April 2023, <https://ocula.com/magazine/art-news/forward-looking-helsinki-biennial-engages-ai/>.

23 Ruangrupa, “Keep on doing what you’re doing...”, *documenta fifteen handbook*, (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2022), 30.

24 Ruangrupa, “ekosistem,” *documenta-fifteen Glossary*, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/glossary/>. It is also useful to quote ruangrupa’s definition of lumbung:

“lumbung as a collectively-governed architecture for the storage of food serves a community’s long-term well-being through communal resources and mutual care, and it is organized around a set of shared values, collective rituals, and organizational principles. ruangrupa translates and continues this tradition of sharing within our own practice. We do not consider lumbung merely as a chosen ‘theme’ for documenta fifteen. Instead, it is deeply imbued in ruangrupa’s everyday practice and is a summary of our methods and values thus far. As a collective, we share resources, time, energy, funds, ideas, and knowledge among ourselves and others.” See Ruangrupa, ‘documenta fifteen and lumbung practice’, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/press-releases/documenta-fifteen-and-lumbung-practice/>.

25 Joasia Krysa, “The Work of Culture in the Age of Network Systems,” in Joasia Krysa (ed.), *The Work of Culture in the Age of Network Systems* (Brooklyn NY, Autonomedia, 2006), 9.

26 Joasia Krysa, “Kurator: A Proposal for an Experimental, Permutational Software Application Capable of Curating Exhibitions,” in Lars Bang Larsen, (ed.), *Networks* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), available at:<https://www.academia.edu/30945605/>

27 See Yuk Hui’s *The Question Concerning Technology in China. An Essay in Cosmotechnics*, Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2016; “Rethinking Technodiversity,” <https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/rethinking-technodiversity>.

28 Mi You, “What Politics? What Aesthetics?: Reflections on documenta fifteen.”

29 Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy?*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5.

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What Never Was but Might Yet Have Been¹

Livia Nolasco-Rózsás

The last decades have brought about seismic shifts in the capabilities of computing machines. As computation unfolds around us, possibilities and imaginaries turn into actualities. But questions are also raised about the societal and political embeddedness of digital technologies. The artistic and curatorial projects that I will discuss below adopt a critical attitude that enables their authors and also their audiences to articulate these questions around the potentialities and biases that phenomena related to computation, including artificial intelligence and machine learning, propel. They provide us with an answer to the question of how the notion of agency changes if human and non-human entities collaborate. What is the relation of contamination to computation? And of regeneration? Could the latter lead to re-worlding?

This text will attempt to give partial answers to these questions via projects of refiguration (a term used here

instead of “speculation” in order to emphasize the step of materialization that comes after ideation). Some of these projects are part of the Helsinki Biennale 2023 *New Directions May Emerge*, such as *Ángel Yōkai Atā* by the collective Keiken or *Hypoxia* by Emilija Škarnulytė. Others relate to other biennales, such as *The Next Biennale Should Be Curated by a Machine*, curated by Joasia Krysa, the artistic director of HB23, or *Spatial Affairs: Worlding*, designed by the post-critical design collective The Rodina, who are also responsible for the visuals of HB23.

More recent critical projects that do not relate directly to HB23, such as *Excavating AI* by Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, are mentioned in order to illustrate a larger historiography of investigations on the computational by pioneers of computer art. These examples are necessary to understand how we arrive at a present in which today’s generative algorithms or so-called “creative AI” take over the tedious task of representation. Just type a few words and they will turn into a startlingly accurate visual image, in the style and image medium you have prescribed.² These tools are designed for the automation of creative tasks, including the generation of new artifacts, such as music and sound composition and the creation of text and imagery.

As soon as artificial intelligence was linked to creativity, questions about its agency triggered speculations that AI might take over rather than complement human activity. The general concept of artificial intelligence emerged around seventy years ago and that of the technological singularity almost two decades ago, yet what both mean is still controversial. Artificial intelligence is already part of the public consciousness, but more as science fiction than as a set of technologies that have been influencing our daily lives for decades. Technological singularity builds on an understanding of these technologies based on the Promethean myth of stealing fire from the gods and giving it to mankind, or on Western imposed ideas of progress, and foresees a hypothetical tipping point in time at which artificial intelligence irreversibly surpasses human intelligence.

Talk of the exponential development of artificial intelligence and its growing impact on society has become

ubiquitous, but understandings of the phenomenon are extremely diverse. Drawing on the mythmaking power of science fiction, some have put forward a vision of a future that seems scientifically plausible; one in which beings with artificial intelligence become part of, or take over, human societies.

Skeptics tend to view advanced computing achievements as a debunkable myth, a set of automated statistical tools rather than a form of existence capable of thinking, reasoning, and evolving on a par with humans. While transhumanism and technological posthumanism see human bodies and minds as malleable matter and seek to improve and extend the human lifespan, critical posthumanism envisions a transcendence of humanism by treating non-human creatures (including man-made machines and algorithms) as equals.

Although information technology is based on a rigid, apparently clear binary system, each of its products is imbued with its contributors’ values. Every approach is the product of a specific worldview and cultural milieu. At the same time, artificial intelligence, together with achievements in, for example, synthetic biology urge a reevaluation of the perspectives and self-images of many societies, beyond the West or the Global North.

Yet transhumanism³ is one of various theories born under the California sun that fail to take the incomputable in intelligence into account, despite its incontrovertibility:

There is an element of the unknown in intelligence, if only because of its generativity. Intelligence is able to understand something it has never seen, never heard, or never felt, and even possibly do something new with it. Intelligence knows how to abstract from situations that which it will use on often heterogeneous states. What is an engine that runs on the unknown?⁴

The various algorithms of the “creative AI” genre are not engines that run on the unknown. Their operations are based on sets of data; in the case of images, these are generative adversarial network (GAN) images harvested from the internet. But generated images do not represent our reality in either sense of “representation.”

Representation has two adjectives that point to different, yet interrelated, meanings: representational and representative. The first relates to representation as *Darstellung* and the second to representation as *Vertretung*, or to portrait and proxy.⁵

Generated imagery is not a *Darstellung*; it doesn't display visually perceivable existent phenomena. Neither it is *Vertretung*, since it cannot mirror political and social realities accurately. In fact, generative or "creative AI" skews and distorts both, resulting in imagery that is often described as hallucinatory or dream-like. GANs don't just repeat but exacerbate biases inherent in the datasets with which they are fed, as pointed out by Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, among others. Through an analysis of the training dataset ImageNet and the taxonomy it uses, Crawford and Paglen show that its classifications are not neutral. Thus the question becomes political. AI, depending on its use, "can promote or discriminate, approve or reject, render visible or invisible, judge or enforce."⁶

AI is increasingly used in legal, forensic, logistics, and commercial environments. But databases that cannot represent, in the meaning of *Vertretung* or proxy, the society in which they are used, will necessarily provide false conclusions. As a consequence, "agency," being a dynamic force directly related to representation, can be attributed to human and algorithmic agents alike. As Crawford and Paglen put it, training sets "have an important but under-examined role: the power to shape the world in their own images."⁷ The authors warn against handing over full agency to algorithms, but leave it there, without entering a prefigurative phase beyond criticism.

Agency

Agency, contamination, and regeneration are the three main conceptual threads of *New Directions May Emerge*. All three are crucial if we mean to analyze what a computer, understood as a universal medium in the post-medial condition,⁸ is capable of currently and potentially.

The question of whether computational agency arose with the appearance of artificial intelligence has been discussed in several forms. Since the intelligence of intelligent

algorithms is inductive, they bear the ability to operate independently from a human actor, yet they are not comparable to the general intelligence of the human mind.

To truly begin to examine the prospects of the artificial realization of general intelligence, one ought to start from the position of systematic scepticism with regard to any paradigm of rationality built on a method of theoretical inquiry claiming to be a sufficient replacement for every other method [...] and to any inflationary model of mind that collapses the qualitative distinction between different faculties and the requirements for their realization.⁹

Even if general artificial intelligence is only a distant im/possibility, and AI can currently only take over the tasks of one or another faculty of the mind, our imagination of full automation transforms into more cooperative models, in which agency between the human and non-human actors of the network is shared.

Algorithms perform an operation somewhat similar to human perception in the machine-learning process before generating new content. While perception has been present in the visual arts for centuries as a distinct theme,¹⁰ the clear impact of technological advances on what and how we perceive is largely a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Today, as perception, vision, and the evaluation of incoming information (in other words, thinking) are increasingly entrusted to computers and algorithms, the notion of visual arts is disrupted and its boundaries become frayed.

In contrast to what its title suggests, *The Next Biennial Should be Curated by a Machine* brings together multiple actors for its curatorial process rather than delegating curatorial agency to an algorithm, but it aims to investigate the possibility of algorithmic agency in curatorial work. This prefigurative attempt, which sets direct criticism aside, has so far resulted in two online artworks. One of the experiments, *AI-TNB*,¹¹ the second in the series, uses as its source data from the biennial exhibition—photographic documentation of artworks, their titles and descriptions—and applies machine learning (a subset of AI) to generate new interpretations and connections.

As visitors navigate the project and create their own paths through the images displayed in the computer-generated space, a new iteration of the exhibition is created based on human-machine collaboration.¹² Here, agency isn't understood as an inherent property of a human or non-human entity to be exercised, but as dynamism of forces.¹³

Contamination

The term "contamination" comes with negative connotations, including in relation to computation. The computer contaminant, whether spyware or a virus, corrupts, damages, and disrupts the system. It is an alien taint that hinders the functionalities of the machine for which it was designed.

Whether it destroys an artificial or a natural system, contamination is understood here to be a result of human activity. The video installation *Hypoxia* by Emilija Škarnulytė refers to an organism's lack of oxygen supply, in this case the Baltic Sea. Oxygen depletion of anthropogenic origin causes "dead zones," meaning areas on the marine floor where no life can be sustained due to oxygen deficiency. Among other elements, Škarnulytė uses LIDAR recordings to speculate on scientific conditions and technologies related to contemporary deep-sea mining and ocean mapping, thus engaging with a technology that is used to model the world.

Speculative storytelling meets a technology of laser imaging, detection, and ranging surfaces that can be used to create digital models on a large scale. Not only a model of the Baltic Sea but the entire Earth's digital twin can be created and archived. As unlikely as it sounds, this endeavor is already underway,¹⁴ as groups seek to document ecosystems in their less contaminated state as a baseline for future generations.

So-called digital twins aim to represent the actual state of an environment, albeit that true and complete representation of any system as complex as currently decaying ecosystems is barely possible by digital means. These representations, however accurate they are, can hardly reverse contamination, but could contribute to regeneration of fragile ecosystems.

Regeneration

While contamination has an established use in relation to computation, in the case of "regeneration" it must be invented. To establish a connection between the word and the phenomenon it may designate, a form of speculative fabulation may be applied. Donna Haraway, when she describes SF, quotes Marilyn Strathern's 1988 book *The Gender of the Gift*: "it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas."¹⁵ Haraway adds:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thought think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.¹⁶

She refers to stories by Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia Butler, among others. Their words provide a fertile soil for all kinds of SF: "Tool, weapon, word: that is the word made flesh in the image of the sky god."¹⁷

A methodology is described here that urges its readers to analyze our tools (words) and to dig down to the roots of them, to dismember and then glue them together again before using them as tools in worldmaking. "Regeneration" can be dismembered into "re-" and "generation." The prefix "re-" indicates repetition. Terms like reconstruction, re-enactment, remake, revival, and reinterpretation all refer to an iteration of an act or the creation of a copy of something that already exists, or once did.

Computer-generated or virtual spaces, including games but also spatial artworks, just like the above-mentioned project *The Next Biennial Should be Curated by a Machine: Experiment AI-TNB*, repeat certain features of our physical surroundings, but can hardly remake them; rather, they model them. Works of art manifesting in such generated spaces problematize the prefix because they are accessed and navigated differently from physical spaces.

The relationship between a digital environment and the physical space after which it was generated is not that of the real and its copy, the original and its reproduction, the image

and its likeness. Instead, virtual models enable *re*-vision as well as re-interpretation of the physical assemblages of objects to which they refer.

The virtual is not a set of individual possibilities, one of which might yet be realized or actualized. Virtual possibilities are not what is absent relative to the real's presence. They are not the roads not taken or some yet unrealized potential future, the other to actual lived reality. The virtual is a superposition of im/possibilities, energetic throbs of the nothingness, material forces of creativity and generativity. Virtual possibilities are material explorations that are integral to what matter is.¹⁸

Regeneration is thus a process in which something that was once generated but got damaged or harmed or even ceased to exist may be regenerated—the prerequisite of regeneration is generation. If the virtual infiltrates this equation (bringing computation with it), the reassuring binary simplicity is gone. It is replaced by collaborative explorations between human and machine that provide a counternarrative to a hegemonic modernist fiction¹⁹ (recounted as a possibility) in which the group of machines and humans are against each other or can be even separated from each other.

In works of generative art, the virtual understood as a “superposition of im/possibilities” instantiates in fabulations that constitute as well as represent a reality. Generative art is a form of creation that “uses generative processes to negate unintentionality.”²⁰ It is art created using a generally non-human autonomous system independent from its creator; thus the artist is not directly involved in the artwork's production.

Defined as a form of computer art, generative art was pioneered from the late 1950s on. Engineers, artists and scholars at technology hubs or laboratories in the following decades, such as Max Bense's laboratory at the University of Stuttgart or the Bell Labs computer art trailblazers (including Frieder Nake, Manfred Mohr, Ken Knowlton, Charles Csuri, and Lillian Schwartz), as well as independent operators like Vera Molnár, started experimenting with computer graphics. As computer-generated imagery and the related hardware evolved, virtual reality, denoting a set of technologies that present immersive computer-graphics on a head-mounted display, emerged, and

grew in momentum in the 1990s, after which it fell into oblivion until its recent new tide caused by the controversial coining of the neologism “metaverse.”

In recent decades the tools to produce and generate imagery, and ultimately virtual environments, have radically changed. Instead of abstract plots, entire interactive worlds can be created and populated. The generative thus turned into regenerative when “energetic throbs of the nothingness”²¹ started to clatter with the im/possibility of generating worlds modeled after the ones that surround us by means of binary digits.

Worlding, or Re-generative Environments

Conceived as an online extension of the physical exhibition *Spatial Affairs*, *Spatial Affairs: Worlding*²² – *A tér világlása*²³ is an exploratory online environment: a game-engine-based multi-user virtual exhibition space populated by crawling avatars of net.art projects, wormholes, a stage, and various other digital objects. The visitors' avatars see each other and can interact via chat.

In collaboration with the post-critical design studio The Rodina, the exhibition curators found inspiration in Konrad Zuse's theory of calculating space²⁴—describing a universe that consists of an abundance of living and evolving automata, of discrete computational systems composed of cells that add up to a large self-reproducing cellular automaton. The second inspiration was the metaphor of the body without organs, used first by Antonin Artaud, then taken up by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,²⁵ who insist that it is “not a term or a concept,”²⁶ nor a counter-concept to some kind of organized body,²⁷ but rather a term as an event.

The organless body manifests here in a computer-based environment that produces intensities; it is a space in which organs (i.e. digital objects that represent artworks or are part of the scenography) can flow and circulate freely. The artworks and visitors inhabiting the exhibition's virtual world are computational, biological, and geological bodies without organs, and the walls and floors are technical beings: everyone and everything is sculpted from the same digital tissue.

The *Spatial Affairs* environment is an answer to the questions posed by the curators and The Rodina around how

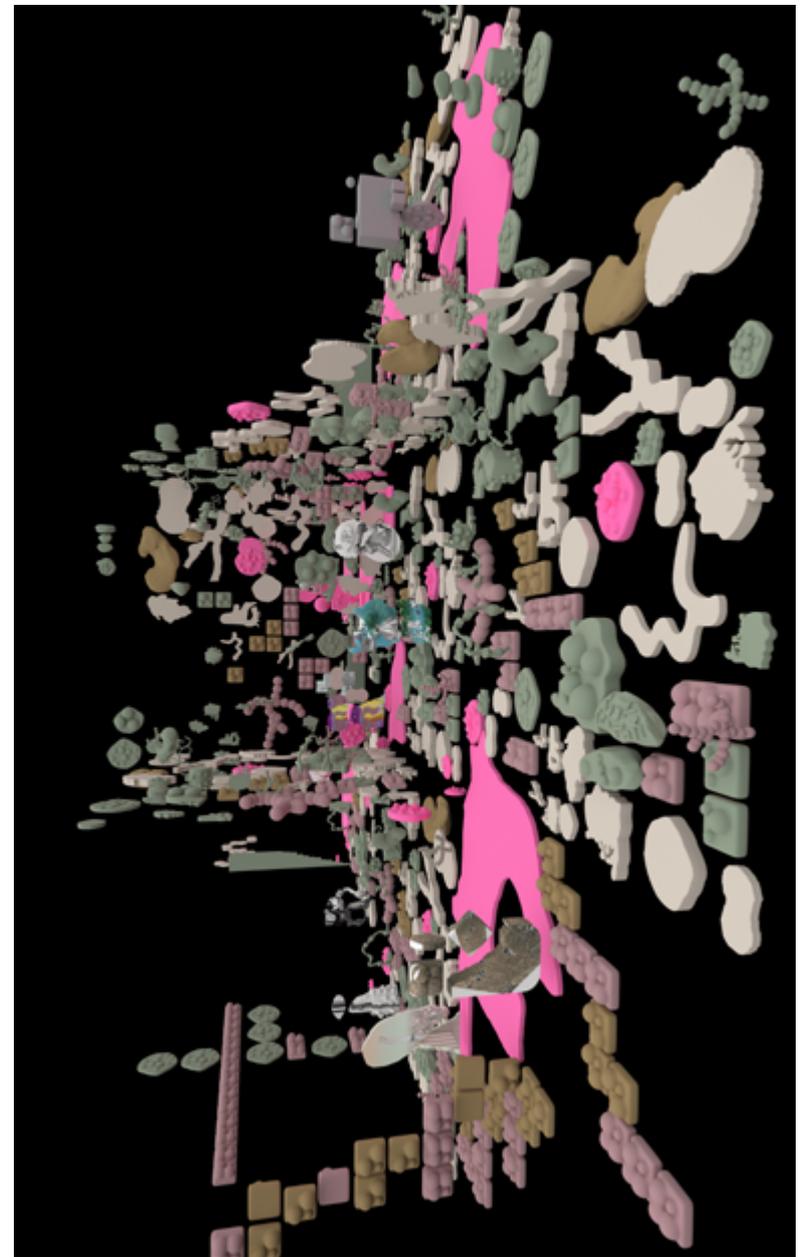
a computer-generated networked space can transform into a responsive online exhibition—and asks what if artworks are represented by avatars and one can meet them in virtual space?

Such an ever-evolving ecosystem requires its own ontology as arbitrary, performative, and processual, as a binary-code-based yet essentially pluralistic virtual environment. Boundaries between subject and surroundings are coming apart; all entities become agents even if they act without the agency of matter. Worlding refers to a constant process of bringing to light as yet undisclosed folds in digital space that lead to further speculations, theses, stories, and games, which in turn manifest as born-digital internet-based works of art.²⁸

In this processual emergence and constant unfolding of a digital environment, the viewer is wrapped in the space and becomes part of its digital enmeshment. In *Being and Time* (1927), Martin Heidegger describes different meanings of the word “world” and its ontological connections to temporality and transcendence. In all his variations, a rejection of the understanding of the world as objective presence is apparent. Keeping to that processuality, but not to the “human-exceptionalist”²⁹ definition of worlding, Haraway gives a new life to the term in assuming that “Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding”³⁰—and draws the conclusion that the risky game of worlding constitutes “staying with the trouble.”

Virtual worlding in computer-generated spaces may not sound risky if digit-defined worlds remain behind a computer screen without any agency in the “real” world. But a binary separation of the real and the virtual can barely be justified as digital realities enmesh our physical worlds—when AI influences decision-making processes, and when generative algorithms, for example, create “superpositions of im/possibilities.”

From a confluence of various formats, speculative worlds may emerge, as in the multimodal installation *Angel Yōkai Atā*. The artist collective Keiken points at the tension caused by the separation and opposition of the ontological functors of “real” and “virtual.” In speculative scenarios, the



The Rodina, *Spatial Affairs: Worlding* (2021).

viewer can explore a post-human type of consciousness that unites “material forces of creativity and generativity.”³¹

Computer-generated, AI-prompted environments actualize virtualities that constitute rather than represent, whichever meaning of the word is being used. Virtual is not opposed to real, thus virtual reality should not be understood as a technology that enables its users to delve into artificial or computer-generated environments via head-mounted displays, but as a set of technologies that propel worlding. A more topical approach to technology would be one that rejects a linear development-oriented technological singularity achieved by advances in machine learning, artificial intelligence, and ever-evolving platforms of computer graphics, and understands technology as cosmotechnics, or as “the unification of the cosmos and the moral through technical activities, whether craft-making or *art-making*.”³²

Re/regeneration

After meandering along the terms of agency, contamination, and regeneration in relation to computation, let me return to the above-quoted essay by Karen Barad to further explore the term regeneration:

Regeneration understood as a quantum phenomenon brings indeterminacy’s radical potential to the fore. The indeterminacy of being-time/time-being means that matter/materiality is a matter of material wanderings/wonderings, a virtual exploration of what might yet be/have been, dispersed across spacetimebeing and condensed into each material bit-here-now, every morsel (each “dressed point”) of spacetimemattering.³³

Regeneration in relation to computation, and therefore re-generative art and instantiations of worlding, can only be understood as quantum phenomena that negate the binary opposition between virtual and real, or between artificial and natural. They critically engage but also generate prefigurations of worlds that materialize through entanglements, in “yearnings for connection.” In this regeneration of “what never was but might yet have been,” new directions may emerge.

1 Karen Barad, “Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/realities and Queer Political imaginings,” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21:2–3, DOI 10.1215/10642684-2843239 © 2015, Duke University Press: 407.

2 For example, the image prompter Dall-E 2, released in 2021, quickly followed by rivals such as Stable Diffusion and Midjourney.

3 According to technological singularity advocate Ray Kurzweil, computers could have the same level of intelligence as humans by 2029, and by 2045 the age of self-evolving algorithms will arrive. The prediction is based on theories of transhumanism, premised on the imminence of the next evolutionary stage of humanity.

4 Anne-Françoise Schmid, “Intelligence,” in *Chimeras: Inventory of Synthetic Cognition*, ed. Ilan Manouach, Anna Engelardt (Athens: Onassis Foundation, 2022), 77.

5 Sven Lütticken, “Missed Encounters in Mesh Space,” in *Spatial Affairs*, ed. Giulia Bini, Livia Nolasco-Rózsás (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2021), 46.

6 Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, “Excavating AI: The Politics of Training Sets for Machine Learning” (September 19, 2019), <https://excavating.ai>.

7 Ibid.

8 Peter Weibel, “The Post-medial condition,” in *Arte ConTexto*, no. 6 (2005): 11–15.

9 Reza Negarestani, “Three Nightmares of the Inductive Mind,” 2017, <http://www.glass-bead.org/research-platform/three-nightmares-inductive-mind/?lang=enview>.

10 The highly illusionistic painterly genre *trompe-l’œil*, for example, dates back to the late Renaissance period.

11 Series curator Joasia Krysa; series technical concept Leonardo Impett; experiment machine learning concept and implementation Eva Cetinic; web development and design MetaObjects (Ashley Lee Wong and Andrew Crowe), and Sui.

12 Joasia Krysa, Leonardo Impett, Eva Cetinic, MetaObjects, Sui, “The Next Biennial Should be Curated by a Machine: Experiment AI-TNB,” <https://ai.biennial.com/>.

13 Based on the notion of intra-action. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

14 The Earth Archive is only one of such initiatives: <http://www.theeartharchive.com/about.php>.

15 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

16 Ibid., 12.

17 Ibid., 118.

18 Karen Barad, “Transmaterialities,” 410.

19 Borrowed from Bruno Latour, “non-modern” signifies a taxonomy where separating anything into two categories, human and non-human, is invalid.

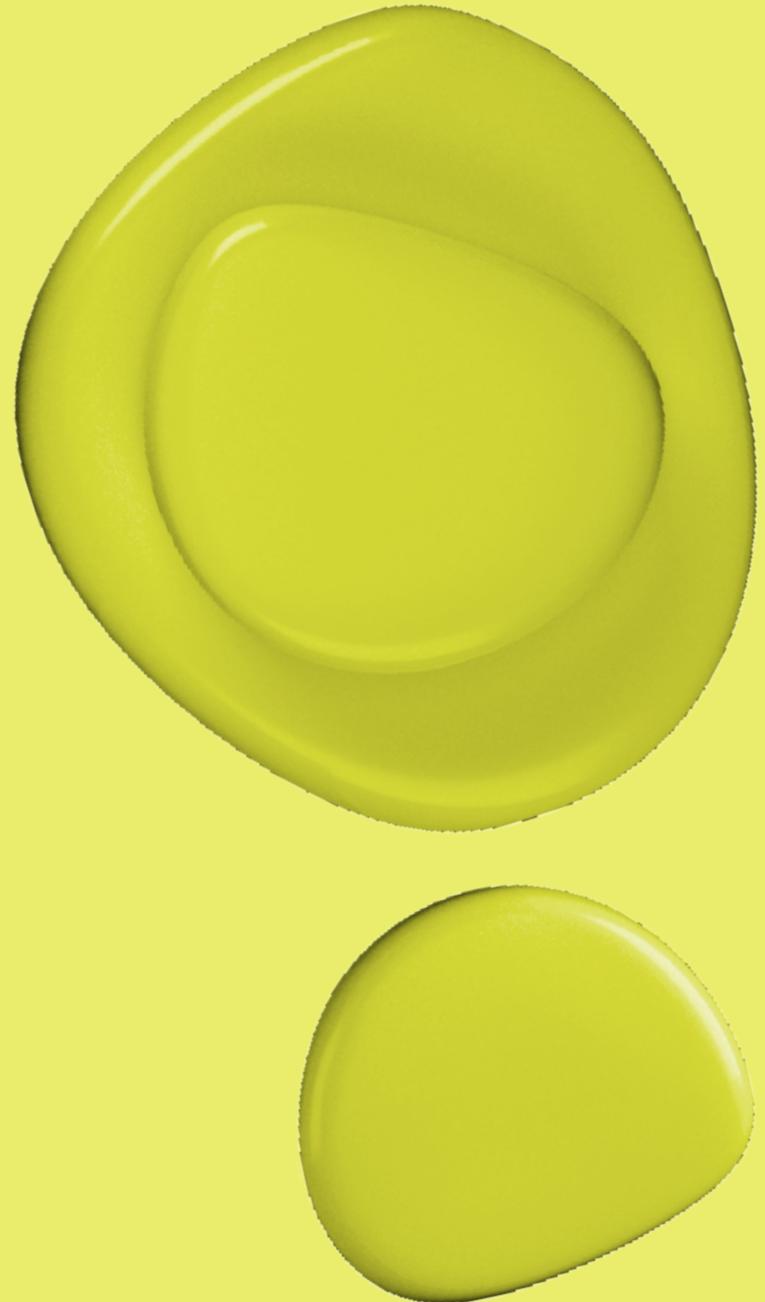
20 Inke Arns, “Comparison of Generative Art and Software Art,” in *Medien Kunst Netz / Media Art Net*, <http://mkn.zkm.de/quellentext/99/>.

21 Ibid.

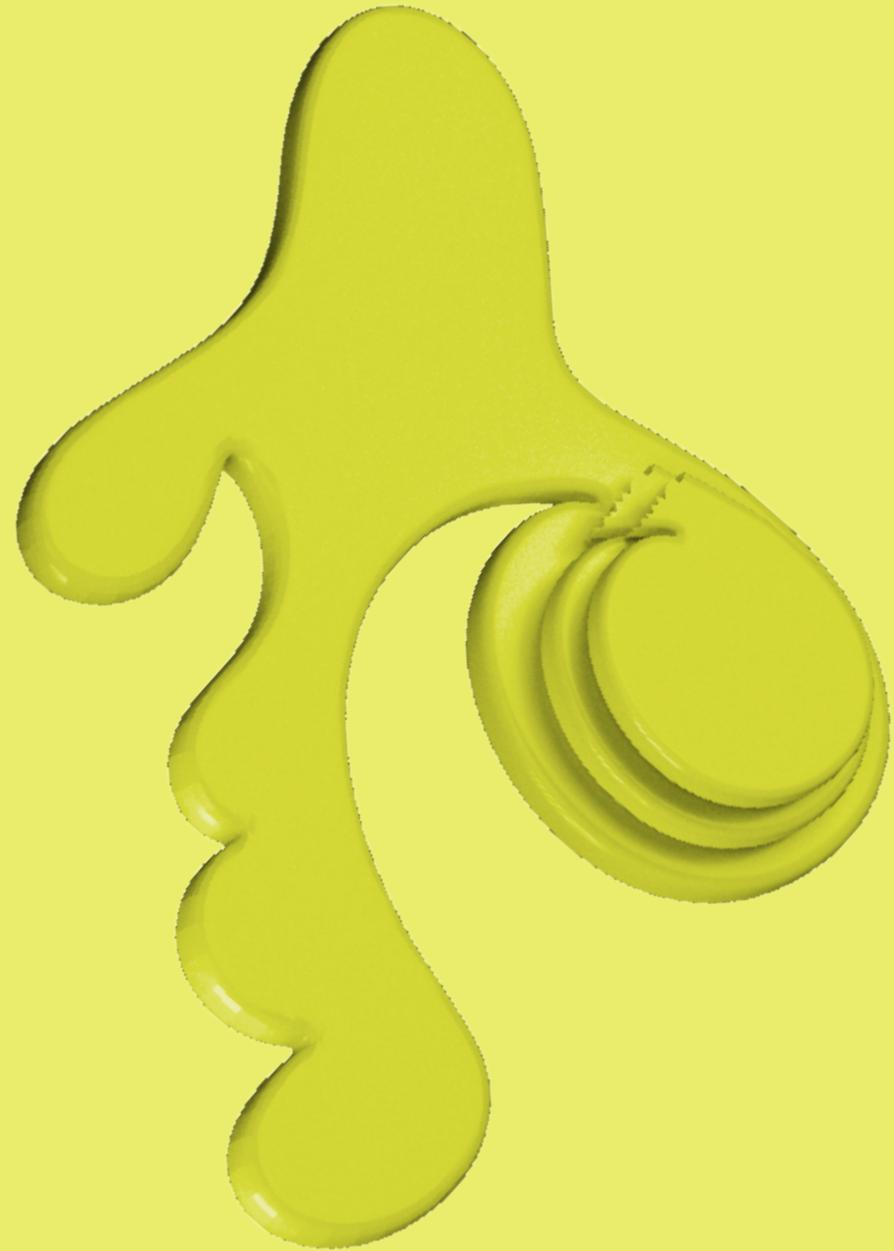
22 *Spatial Affairs* was presented at the Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, in 2021 and opened during a COVID-19 pandemic.

23 The exhibition gathered avatars of browser-based artworks by Morehshin Allahyari, Besorolás Alatt (Unrated), Petra Cortright, Louise Drulhe, Sam Ghantous, JODI, Sam Lavigne & Tega Brain, Oliver Laric, Jan Robert Leegte, Rosa Menkman, Sascha Pohflepp & Alessia Nigretti & Matthew Lutz, Rafaël Rozendaal. Curators were Giulia Bini and myself. Soundscape by Enrico Boccioletti. The exhibition was coproduced by ZKM | Karlsruhe and EPFL Pavilions, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne, in the framework of the international practice-based research project *Beyond Matter*.

- 24 Konrad Zuse, *Calculating Space*, original title: *Rechnender Raum*, 1969.
- 25 The concept emerges out of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (original title: *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*), first published in 1972. First published in English in 1977.
- 26 Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie (II)*, (Berlin, Perfect Paperback, 1992), 206.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 218.
- 28 Curatorial concept of the exhibition published online on the URL of the exhibition: spatialaffairs.beyondmatter.eu.
- 29 See Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 11: "Finished once and for all with Kantian globalizing cosmopolitics and grumpy human-exceptionalist Heideggerian worlding, Terrapolis is a mongrel word composted with a mycorrhiza of Greek and Latin rootlets and their symbionts."
- 30 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 31 Barad, "Transmaterialities," 410.
- 32 Yuk Hui, "Cosmotechnics as Cosmopolitics," in *e-flux Journal* #86, 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/161887/cosmotechnics-as-cosmopolitics/>
- 33 Barad, "Transmaterialities," 410.



*Directions
Emerging from The
Curatorial School
of May*



Navigating Turbulence: Towards the Making of Place

Cyane Findji
and Myriam Gras



The island in the midst of sea

The island, an unsubmerged piece of land, is almost a direct extension of the mainland. Although both territories are geologically, biologically, and culturally connected, one needs to cross the water to get there.¹ “In effect, the ferry becomes the equivalent of a bridge, a linear surface that connects by superseding the material differentiation of space, creating, as it were, an integrated land-sea transport route.”² The twenty-minute ferry ride across the archipelago necessary to access Vallisaari can be understood as a linear trajectory across the surface for the sole reason of transport, but can also be approached as a transitional moment for engaging with the Baltic Sea, in time and depth. All bodies traveled once, and others repetitively, in, on, through or above the sea in the midst of islands. Vallisaari is at the core of the Helsinki Biennial: the island is not only hosting the event but is defined as the center from which the

wider program sprawls back to the mainland. Intertwining its curatorial framework with Vallisaari, the biennial becomes part of the local ecosystem, transforming the island space into a temporary place for art. This island-biennial relationship carries a certain porosity, where the commissioned site-specific artworks influence the surroundings with their presence, as much as the surroundings have influenced their becoming. Experiencing the biennial contributes to the possibility of envisioning our presence within the processes in and around the island, and transforms the environment in which the artworks and the visitors temporarily find themselves.

Looking for landmarks in a landscape helps us to understand a place and its construction. Since landmarks can be interpreted from different perspectives and backgrounds, recognizing that they are fluid in nature, overlapping and interconnected, expands our understanding of space and place. Once immersed in the novel environment, inherited ways merge with adopted knowledges, observations, and behaviors. Whereas being bound to land induces a terrestrial point of view, being bound to an island invites us to surrender to the growing influence of its surrounding waters, which may affect movements, sensorial experiences, and thoughts in a regenerative way.

The ocean is not only liquid, it is also solid and airy, and reaches far beyond its assumed physical boundaries. Through ocean thinking we practice “a world of fluidities where place is forever in-formation and where power is simultaneously projected on, through, in, and about space.”³ It not only influences the perception of the ocean-space, but also expands to the terrestrial and site-specific exhibition spaces. In the same way, the following essay takes a turbulent, non-linear but continuous trajectory, following vessels and landmarks through interdependent layers of information, disciplines, scales, materialities, and agencies, as a proposition to navigate the context of the biennial as island. From it emerges a catataxis, a positive confusion between hierarchical levels, allowing space for embracing flows and frictions, chaos, complexity, and co-existence within the processes of place-making.

The sea in the midst of islands

In the coldest regions of the globe, diffused light pierces through the opaque white sky. When sun's rays hit the snow cover, they are cast back up and encounter the frozen particles in the atmosphere, which reflect them downwards again. Light is received from multiple angles and induces a flat perception of the surroundings. It becomes difficult to distinguish terrain features, depths or distances: no shadows or landmarks, just plain white in all directions.

Although a white-out is the result of a specific set of parameters that constitute the local conditions of a specific place, visually, we could be anywhere. The white surface becomes an abstracted space in which any object seems detached. It resembles modern ways of exhibiting art: a built space that provides hardly any visual information in order to exist as an assumed neutral space. By moving from the white cube to an outdoor location, site-specific interventions can open up layers of information and act as landmarks that build, transform and contaminate perceptions of the complex place in which they are situated. Once the continuous and localized cloud layer no longer merges with the adjacent sea ice surface, a landscape with a clear separation between sea and sky can be perceived. The horizon appears, identified by a single line. What landscape would two, three, four or more lines make?

The horizon is a line that marks the border between the airy space we humans inhabit and the uninhabitable under-water world. "The horizon indicates only where our view ends, whereas the ocean does not end there but continues stretching beyond."⁴ The horizon fixates our point of view and becomes a landmark for marine navigation. When no land is in sight, the celestial navigation method is commonly used to determine one's position on the ocean surface. It relies on the angular calculation of the horizon and a celestial body, seen through the lens of an optical instrument. Polaris, the North Star, has a stable position in the sky due to its almost perfect alignment with the North Pole. It is located on the Earth's axis of rotation, an imaginary line running north to south, through the heart of our planet. From our terrestrial point of view, it is a reliable landmark for navigation in open waters.

When defining the ocean, we start at land. The coastal outlines function as a spatial border; where one area of behavior stops, the next begins: static and loose places. Almost like an extension of the terrestrial grounds, landfast ice is attached to a fixed object, such as the shores, the sea floor or grounded icebergs. Further away from the coast, the ice cover is subject to a multitude of forces. When winds, waves, currents, tides, and thermal expansions collide on the ice cover, the ice cracks. The surface breaks into chunks, sheets, and floes. These ice formations are on a continuous and unpredictable drift. When driven together, they start to raft, bend, compress, and extend until the pressure makes them collide and shapes them into floating mountain ridges. On board, navigating through white outlooks is a difficult task. With climate instabilities, the ice is no longer continuously thick and slow-moving, but cracks and melts frequently, making the drift faster and even more unpredictable. The identification of ice formations relies on direct observation and overseas models generated by extensive measurement tools to maximize risk prevention. A ship maneuvering slowly through the drifting ice floes runs the risk of entering a compression zone. With all sides surrounded by ridges, the ship is encapsulated in the expansive icescape.

A curtain of mist is falling down. The metallic bridge slowly moves from one side to the other, spraying a mixture of tap water and ethanol that freezes in contact with the air and gathers on the surface. Overnight, the insulated body of cold water is entirely sealed by a flat layer of soft granular ice. This simulated landscape hosting the controlled and monitored body of water is above all a stage for a variety of scientific experiments on sea ice. The main research carried out at the ice tank aims to calculate and prevent risk while improving the efficiency of engineered ice-resisting objects, such as ice-breaking ships and offshore wind turbines.⁵ By using geometrical scaling, researchers are able to translate the parameters and forces at play in a smaller and simplified version of the in-situ environment they are studying. Ethanol here does not replace the absence of salt; it is added to alter the formation of the ice, making it more porous, and so, easier to break. While sensors monitor resistance, forces, and cracks, a testing object encounters the scaled ice, pressuring its elasticity until it fractures.

After a few warning beeps, the operated carriage repeatedly drags the model icebreaker across the tank, tracing parallel lines in the ice sheet.

In frozen regions, the icebreaker is called in to dislodge encapsulated ships from the ice and ensure further navigation.⁶ In an ongoing series of repetitive bumps, the icebreaker uses its weight and power to perform a vertical force, bending the ice sheet until failure. By cracking the ice open, their route becomes visible in the icescape. When seen from above, the line will stay inscribed for a relatively short period of time, depending on the weather conditions and the resilience of the ice sheet that freezes up after being fractured, scarring over to become whole again.

A route [...] is a linear place that—through conceived embeddedness in space and time, imagined stasis, and repetitive interaction—takes on an ontological stability that transcends the moment and sensations that occur when the moving body (or ship) and the moving surface (or volume) impact upon and transform each other.⁷

In order to keep track of its itinerary, the ship follows the landmarks available in the landscape in combination with established maps. Maps are cultural objects used to navigate a certain area. They transform a space into a recognized place. The Eurocentric conception of a territory—from the Latin *terra* (land)—supports a static and horizontal territorialization of the ocean. When seen from above, the ocean-space is usually represented as an opaque blue surface. When approached from below the surface, the ocean's ungraspable volume is categorized into discontinuous layers, affording it a mirroring surface, a submarine body, and a solid floor. In map-making, the historical shift from the continental concept, initially representing the ocean completely surrounded by dry land, to the oceanic referential, where the continents were surrounded by a vast ocean, allowed for the possible presence of yet-uncolonized land.⁸ The thriving colonial empires and their fleets crossing waters, from one land to another, shaped the perception of the sea as a surface for transport. Today, with a new visuality emerging from the sensing and imaging of the deep seafloor, maps are drifting from the representation of what is

seen to what is extracted.⁹ The making of territory reflects the dominant interests of the time and creates a second layer of meaning, both materially and discursively. From the perspective of the territorial political economy, the translation can be explained by the social construction of space that includes its use, regulation, and representation.¹⁰ With this resourcification of the seascape comes another perception of its spatiality:

“tomorrow's sea will be a space where specific points, at specific coordinates in four dimensions—latitude, longitude, depth, and time—are associated with specific values. The sea will become a space of places.”¹¹

The Law of the Sea establishes two main zones for regulation and governance. In the exclusive economic zones, approached as an extension of the continental territory, coastal states have sovereign rights to the air space, waters, bed, and subsoil.¹² Nautical miles away from the shores, the high seas are reserved for peaceful navigation, and when it comes to resources, they will remain in the commons.¹³ The regulated zones are defined by their width on the surface and distance from the coastline. Only some minor laws rely on the isobath, which represents the ocean floor topography by inscribing contour lines of constant depths using the surface as referential. In other words, the sea is highly regulated as a flat surface but not so much as a volume. This may be due to the fact that before the development of modern marine and submarine navigation, the bottom of the sea was simply unreachable. Humans had created a whole mythology about the deep sea that was too daunting to even imagine anything worth exploiting there. In jurisdiction, one of the few things that would connect the top surface with the underwaters was in the case of *shipwrecks*.¹⁴ Shipwrecks were exceptional cases that legally provided agency to the ocean. This granting of the sea a legal entity was not based on a legal-philosophical, constitutional or ethical value, but on the reduction of human responsibility in court.

Inherited legal distinctions ruling trade routes and resource extraction still operate, but with new places comes the need for new regulations. Recently, an agreement was reached to establish more protected areas in international waters, while imposing an equal share of marine genetic

resources and environmental impact assessments in activities such as mining.¹⁵ However, this *High Seas Treaty* cannot legally overrule agreements on activities that are already taking place, and a full coverage of the ocean floor is excluded because the only legal authority responsible for managing this area is the *International Seabed Authority*. Paradoxically, this organization is responsible for both protecting local ecosystems and regulating mining permits for the foreseeable future.¹⁶ The criteria for the need to protect a zone have not yet been defined, and consequently, less economically interesting zones are protected over the most ecologically vulnerable ones.¹⁷ The yet incalculable damage caused by future exploitation and the legal gray zone in terms of protection are reasons for the researchers to call for a moratorium.¹⁸ A temporary ban on deep-sea mining before the start of commercial extraction activities should compensate for the lack of knowledge about the local biodiversity and provide necessary evidence to support the establishment and conservation of effective marine-protected areas.

Disappearing from sight, taking human blame with it, the sinking ship becomes part of the seascape and a temporary marker of the nature-culture ecosystem.¹⁹ We dive through the photic zone, the uppermost layer of the ocean with sufficient light energy to support photosynthetic growth. We witness most colors dissolving in the water column. Longer wavelengths are slowly filtered out, and shorter, more energy-bearing waves like blue and violet travel further down. Through these pressuring monochromatic blues, we are only able to observe a few meters in the distance, above, below, and sideways. Our inability to physically experience this aquatic space distorts our remote perception of the watery environment. The ocean-space turns into a negative place, an empty space. In an effort to counter the uplifting force of buoyancy, we swim deeper, encountering not only a material resistance but also a growing pressure. Without the ability to identify any landmarks, the unfamiliar surrounding water becomes as heavy as a mountain. Simultaneously, we experience a sense of freeing nothingness, carried by the waves and currents. Together with the surrounding particles, we enter a timeless, omnidirectional drift downwards in the column.

Passing the continental shelf, up its walls and down its slopes, we end up in the vast abyssal plains. This dense and pitch-black environment generates a special interest, since large sums of small polymetallic nodules, rich in copper, cobalt, nickel, and manganese lie in the sand. In these areas beyond national jurisdiction, current activities of marine exploration and exploitation take place in the context of research. Conducted by both research institutions and commercial companies, *Remote Operating Vessels* (ROVs) are an extension of human sensory capabilities. While navigating the seafloor, they stir up fine sediments and form clouds, triggering a yet incalculable chain reaction of harmful side effects that would have global repercussions if operated on a larger scale.²⁰ Some ROVs are currently harvesting resources and are mapping the seafloor, while others use their robotic arms to mark territory by inserting a flag into the fine sediment. This speculative quest for resources leads to endeavors of both unregulated place-making and place-taking.

Along active volcanic areas close to the nodule plains, water seeps into the oceanic crust through its cracks and fissures. Here, the water is heated to extreme temperatures and boils forcefully up to be released, picking up dissolved metals and minerals along the way. When exiting the bedrock, these components encounter almost freezing water, causing them to solidify in layers. This phenomenon of layering creates hydrothermal vents on the ocean's floor in the form of chimneys, where deep-sea microorganisms thrive on chemosynthetically driven ecosystems, using chemicals as their energy source rather than sunlight. The exploitation of bacterial communities carrying unique genetic qualities could potentially lead to the isolation of new antimicrobial drugs, addressing the increasing emergence of new forms of multidrug resistance in human pathogenic bacteria.²¹ That is, if the laboratory is able to keep the genetic resources alive, since the extreme characteristics of the deep sea are very challenging to simulate.

The boiling water released from the hydrothermal vents pushes through the water column, and while it leaves metal and mineral particles on the seabed, the buoyant force also carries some of them to the surface. Up in the photic zone, the warm, mineral-rich water meets sunlight and feeds the phytoplankton

thriving on the influx of iron that were dragged along. In a balanced ecosystem, these photosynthetic algae form the basis of aquatic food cycles, but under excessive nutrient enrichment, also known as eutrophication, they reproduce too rapidly. The chlorophyll-bearing phytoplankton cast green wavelengths from the sunlight back into space, in contrast to the water itself, which absorbs all the reds and primarily reflects the blues. Remote sensing satellites map the concentration of suspended particles by measuring the reflectance at specific wavelengths of light, in order to map the vast green patches of algae bloom.

In the Baltic Sea, the source of harmful algae blooms is not only iron from the hydrothermal vents, but phosphate and nitrogen that enter the water with the runoff from agricultural activities, coloring it for a limited amount of time.²² After the bloom uses up the nutrients at the surface, the phytoplankton sink into the column and mix with other particles. This marine snow is hard to see and barely felt, but it is composed of many elements. Small organic matter, algae, nutrients, dead sea creatures, shells, plastic, dust, and minerals are brought by the breaking of waves and ocean turbulence. Some particles will ascend back to the surface, yet others continue their journey to the seabed. There, the algae decompose through oxygen-consuming microbial processes that might lead to hypoxia or even anoxia, the complete absence of oxygen, resulting in dead zones.²³ The remaining particles are subsequently remineralized by bacteria, becoming part of the existing strata.

Ocean strata are perceived as stable, static, and linear underground layers. In a similar way, we imagine the ocean's volume in a series of discontinuous layers, reflecting how we extract minerals, knowledge, and time from the ground. However, the strata formation is indissociable from the multidimensional and dynamic watery agencies, either in liquid or solid frozen states.²⁴ In the Baltic Sea, specific geological features can be found as the inheritance of the Ice Age. The sea bottom is shaped by complex deglaciation processes and several active ice-flow stages. Where erosion has carved lines and cracks, deposition has formed large transversal ridge clusters, indicating the last trajectory of an ice sheet as it moved over the terrain. The sediment ridges are known to have asymmetrical contours, and on a few occasions these landmarks are formed

into a seemingly perfect circle that resembles a half-buried extraterrestrial vessel left to rest on the dark seafloor.²⁵

Moving away from the coast towards the island, and leaving the mainland behind, the ferry follows its route, opening up the ocean space for a potential shift in perception. Floating on the mirrored surface, we stand on the deck and stare into the murky sea. We discern traces of light, time, and forces that appear and dissolve into the watery mass. Together with the movements of the boat and the sea, our bodies sink into a deeper inhabitation of this space.

1 John Gillis, "Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 112 issue 4 (October 2007): 118, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.112.4.1135>.

2 Philip E. Steinberg, "The Ocean and Transport / The Ocean in Transport / The Ocean as Transport; or, Mobilis in Mobili," in *Tidaletics: Imagining an Ocean Worldview Through Art and Science*, ed. Stefanie Hessler (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2018), 221.

3 Philip E. Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking," *Sage Journals*, Vol. 33, issue 2 (April 2015): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d14148p>.

4 Wolfgang Welsch, "Reflecting the Pacific," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 1 (2003): 3.

5 Aalto Ice and Wave Tank is the largest ice tank in the world and is situated on Aalto University campus. Its 40 x 40 x 2.8 meter water basin enables a wide range of experiments for academic and private research on sea ice and sea-ice structures. We would like to thank Arttu Polojärvi, Otto Puolakka, Alice Petry, Teemu Päiväranta, Lasse Turja, Tim Hammer, Hayo Hendrikse, Laura van Dijke, Tom Willems, and Cody Owen, who informed us about the current research and facilitated access to the ice tank.

6 The national fleet of Finland, operating under Arctia Ltd, consists of

eight icebreakers: Polaris, Otso, Kontio, Voima, Urho, Sisu, Fennica, and Nordica. In between expeditions, the ship is docked at Arctia's Office floating office in the center of Helsinki.

7 Steinberg, "The Ocean and Transport," 220.

8 Amanulla Buriev, "The legacy of al-Khwārizmī," in *Dixit Algorizmi: The Garden Of Knowledge*, ed. Space Caviar and Sheida Ghomashchi (Milan: Humboldt Books, 2019), 28–29.

9 Asia Bazdyrieva, "Bodies as Lands: Resourcification as Method," lecture as part of Contamination, Art & the Environmental Condition Symposium, Uniarts Helsinki Research Pavilion & Helsinki Biennial, March 9, 2023.

10 Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21–22.

11 Steinberg, "The Ocean and Transport," 219.

12 "Article 56 Rights, jurisdiction and duties of the coastal State in the exclusive economic zone," UN General Assembly, Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), 43.

13 The Law of the Sea defines the high seas as starting 200 nautical miles (NM) away from the coast. 1 NM = 1,852 km. "Article 88: Reservation of the high seas for peaceful purposes" and "Article 89:

Invalidity of claims of sovereignty over the high seas," UN General Assembly, Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), 57.

14 Information concerning shipwrecks in Roman Law is taken from Emilia Mataix Ferrándiz, *Shipwrecks, Legal Landscapes and Mediterranean Paradigms: Gone Under Sea* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 1–6.

15 The High Sea Treaty was adopted in March 2023 under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The treaty is a historical landmark for sea conservation because it expands the protected high sea areas from 1% to 30% of the earth's ocean. "How science can help fill gaps in the high sea treaty," *Nature*, Vol. 615 (2023): 373–74, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-00757-z>.

16 The International Seabed Authority (ISA) is an autonomous international organization established under UNCLOS and covers around 54% of the world's oceans. ISA controls all mineral-resources-related activities on the high sea floors, also known as The Area, which is there described as the common heritage of humankind. "About ISA," International Seabed Authority, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.isa.org.jm/about-isa/>.

17 Diva J. Amon et al., "Insights into the Abundance and Diversity of Abyssal Megafauna in a Polymetallic-nodule Region in the Eastern Clarion-Clipperton Zone," *Scientific Reports* (2016), <https://www.nature.com/articles/srep30492>.

18 "Momentum for a moratorium," Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, accessed April 7, 2023, https://savethehighseas.org/moratorium_2022/.

19 Stephanie Merchant, "Deep Ethnography: Witnessing the Ghosts of SS Thistlegorm," in *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean*, ed. Jon Anderson and Kimberley Peters (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 119–20.

20 Jennifer Chu, "Ocean scientists measure sediment plume stirred up by deep-sea-mining vehicle," MIT News, September 21, 2022, <https://news.mit.edu/2022/sediment-deep-sea-mining-0921>.

21 Emiliana Tortorella et al., "Antibiotics from Deep-Sea Microorganisms: Current

Discoveries and Perspectives," *Marine Drugs* 16, no. 10 (2018): 355, <https://doi.org/10.3390/md16100355>.

22 Phosphate, as a conceptual and material agent, links geographical and social spaces through its processes of extraction and agricultural use. By placing it in a global socio-economical framework and pairing knowledge and experiences, Pekka Niskanen and Mohamed Sleiman Labat reveal invisible connections between the mining of the Western Sahara, the Saharawi nomadic community, and algal blooms in the Baltic Sea. Pekka Niskanen and Mohamed Sleiman Labat, "PhosFATE" (2019–ongoing). The sandoponic garden, part of PhosFATE, is commissioned by Helsinki Biennial 2023, <https://helsinkiennaali.fi/en/artist/phosfate/>.

23 Jesper H. Andersen et al., "Eutrophication in the Baltic Sea—An integrated thematic assessment of the effects of nutrient enrichment and eutrophication in the Baltic Sea region," Helsinki Commission Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, No. 115B (2009), 19, <https://www.helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/BSEP115B-1.pdf>.

24 Steinberg and Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces."

25 In the Gulf of Bothnia, one of the circular ridges inspired the rumor of a spacecraft called the Baltic Anomaly. The reported UFO features in the film installation Hypoxia by Emilija Škarnulytė, which weaves together marine phenomena and fictional narratives of the Baltic Sea from the imaginary perspective of a future archeologist. Emilija Škarnulytė, Hypoxia, film installation, 2023, commissioned by Helsinki Biennial 2023, <https://helsinkiennaali.fi/en/artist/emilija-skarnulyte/>.

What Lures in the Deep: Interacting with Virtual Worlds

Aska Mayer

 **renote**

With their contribution *Ángel Yōkai Atā*, artist collective Keiken present an iteration of their complex work *Morphogenic Angels* at Helsinki Biennial 2023. Manifested in the space of Vallisaari, the work is immaterial, experienced through game engines, animation, and virtual reality, projected on screens. With this projection, Keiken explore invisible spirits and consciousness, both concrete and virtual, evoking a new world filled with angelic entities and interspecies beings that inhabit a protopian environment, a world that due to its freedom has the potential to turn into a better state of being.¹

Keiken's work can be understood not only as being located within a longer-standing cross-cultural history of imagining worlds that are better than our reality, but also as a manifestation of advanced simulation technology, allowing the creation of highly immersive virtual experiences. When

we approach these virtual spaces, our role as members of the audience quickly changes. As we venture into the virtual world, we can no longer be observers. We interact with the digital technology, moving from being an audience to being users, players. If we understand the audience of such works as users, we also need a new approach to understand the interaction with the artwork, its objectives and what shapes our perception of it.

Throughout the following segments, we will embark on a deep dive into various aspects and layers of virtuality, exploring how the digital space is presented through language as an enchanted realm. We will begin by discussing the initial experience of virtuality and how our perceptions are linguistically pre-shaped. As we identify the recurring theme of magic in discourse around the virtual, we will explore the portrayal of emerging technologies in both media coverage and curatorial writing. Subsequently, we will introduce the concept of immersion and contextualize it with language and the idea of magic. This will lead us to some pivotal questions: How can we reflectively approach navigating virtual spaces? And how can we put this question to work when considering the visitors' journey through Helsinki Biennial 2023 and its proposition that "new directions may emerge."

The techno-social perspective of this essay is accompanied by fictional fragments, recalling a memory of a digital ocean dive, *Subnautica*,² co-written with the Artificial Intelligence program LAIKA.³ Starting from fragments of a description of the game experience and using source material on reception, virtuality, and reflection, the AI developed a textual collage describing swimming through the virtual sea. Different from other text-based AIs, LAIKA does not respond to questions, but continues sentences, which are written by the user. Here, instead of using a game controller to interact with the virtual entity on the screen, the user needs to utilize language to control the potential outcomes of the text. Similar to understanding the movesets⁴ necessary to navigate the virtual world, we need to find linguistic tools and pathways, to explore the story unfolding while co-writing it. The following text therefore not only discusses digital worlds, but is an applied attempt to understand interaction with virtuality.

The Encounter

I step out of the pod, looking at the virtual ocean in front of me. There is no one around me, and I feel safe. Then, as the waves crash against me, I look down and gaze beyond the surface into the empty space. A blue shimmer fills my vision.

Standing on the edge of a space capsule, I look around. There is nothing but water, wind, an endless sky, and me. And, at the same time, none of these things are present. They only exist on the visual surface of a VR-Headset, while my body is located in a living-room in Helsinki.

This experience, like the encounter with Keiken's virtual spectacles, is shaped by the difference between visual and bodily sensation, a discrepancy in what is seen and what is felt. As in the introduction to this segment, we might see an ocean surrounding us, but we cannot feel the water on our skin. This creates an immaterial feeling, which is unique to virtuality. While we can grasp the visual representation, we can neither perceive it haptically, nor see beyond the surface during the moment of interaction. The virtual world we experience therefore becomes a magical site, where we cannot immediately understand the processes that cause the events our eyes can see.

During these moments of uncertainty, intangibility, and the resulting potential misunderstanding, a dive beyond the visual surface of the virtual becomes crucial. First, it is necessary to think of the virtual experience as being located within the so-called *magic circle*. This term—borrowed from theories on culture and play—traditionally describes the clearly defined field in which all actions are subjected to the rules of the virtual space, the playground of experience.⁵ Drawing a parallel with the medieval magician who draws a protective circle around themselves to establish an isolated space for their ritual, the digital counterpart generates a distinct, separate reality during the moment of interaction. But the magician's space is just a line drawn on the ground, and the boundaries of both the ritualistic and digital spaces are not impenetrable. Rather, there is a constant exchange between what is happening outside and inside the circle.

Making visible the structures, objectives, and external influences that shape and define the magic circle should not be

read as a form of disenchantment. As Giuliana Bruno describes in *Surface Encounters*, analyzing and explaining the objectives of the virtual visual forms allows us to see how they envelop and influence us at the same time as we interact with them.⁶ Revealing the structures beneath and around the virtual magic circle can be conceptually linked back to *Ángel Yōkai Atā*, in which Keiken understands studying the object's spirit as familiarizing oneself with the invisible, allowing a closer and more present interaction with it.

The Surface

The waves rise and fall in a great circle, and then, with a loud crash, the water drops. The pixels moving around are the only sounds that can be heard. A glow beneath me draws me towards the abyss below, and before long, the empty space beyond it.

As already established, the aesthetic experience of virtuality, whether artwork or media, is not an encounter with the actual structural nature of virtual processes, but a mediated moment. Playing out on a surface, an interface, the complex abstraction of the code is translated into a visual form, which allows us to interact with it. But those interfaces are often not the first moment of experiencing the virtual world. Rather, exhibition descriptions, columns, blogs, reviews, and essays like this one, are all filled with language conveying and shaping an image of virtuality. In those narratives, the screen often becomes a veil, mystifying what is underneath and creating a perception of digital technology as either a threat or a promise.

This is especially evident in the contemporary discourse on Artificial Intelligence (AI). Before individuals even consciously interact with AI, they are confronted with descriptions of a magical or apocalyptic tool,⁷ either heralding a new age of technological progress or cultural decline. As a result, their position as users is influenced by those narratives, which are linguistic attempts to make sense of something seemingly ungraspable.

The origin of these perceptions lies in the abstract nature of deep technology,⁸ which seems to have no tangibility below the surface. And while the visual surface through which

we encounter the virtual is a portal into another world, it is a projection, a site of mediation and transformation,⁹ virtuality brought into a form that is comprehensible for us. At the precise point where techno-critical or excessively optimistic rhetoric falls short, the aesthetic experience of this form presents an opportunity for us to dive deeper into the structures and complexities of the virtual.

The Immersion

As I break through the surface of the water, my perception changes and a pleasant, powerful sense of security fills me. This place is secure; no one but I can see it. So where are you now, and how will you continue your research? I have to keep moving further down, unsure how long it will take to see the ocean's bottom. And then I sink.

To further understand the specific language of mediation, we need to look at the motivation for and process of interacting with virtuality.

As we approach *Ángel Yōkai Atā*, we are confronted with visual abundance. The virtual world is filled with fairy-like creatures, otherworldly textures and science-fictional iconography, an alien environment that is both strange and fascinating to us. Using existing narrative concepts of the magic house, the Japanese yōkai, and angelic beings, these tropes are re-signified within the digital environment,¹⁰ making them more accessible to the audience. In this opportunity of access, there might emerge a wish to actively encounter this strange new world. The virtuality proposes the possibility of this exploration, without the effort of going anywhere,¹¹ offering an immersive experience as a passive audience turns into an active usership.

To be able to fulfil this desire to venture into the virtual world, Ágnes Karolina Bakk points out three aspects shaping the potential immersion of the self in virtuality. First, the user has to be in a relationship with what is perceived as their own body and the environment. They must be able to find familiar points of reference and orientation in their surroundings and the representation of their self. Second, they need to be present consciously, having agency over their own movement and knowledge about their intention. Third, they need to be able

to identify the virtual body as their own, as an enhancement or expression of themselves.¹²

Still, as already hinted in the previous segment, these aspects are shaped by both deep technology and the discourse on it. Since Bakk's understanding of immersion is based on the subjective perception of the user, it still cannot tackle the incomprehensible levels of deep technology. Rather, it further points out the subjective experience of immersion, depending also on the individual level of engagement. Here, the already mentioned influences of language again come into play. If the user is primarily consuming sources on the threatening potential of virtuality, the possibility to engage with the three aspects of immersion might decrease. However, it can be assumed that the enthusiastic description of the digital as a mystical, enchanted space does not necessarily allow a more aware interaction, but rather makes the limits of immersion even clearer.

The Deeps

You're swimming in the virtual depths of the ocean, where there is nothing but the sea. The trouble is—how do you get to that point? First, you have to realize that the things that are around you aren't real. Then you need to dive among the colorful corals towards the glowing deep. There, you will find the source of all true things—the source that all true things must be.

If we understand the immersive experience as deeply affected by the language through which it is mediated, what constitutes the technology we are confronted with becomes even more evident. In its combination of complex computation, animation, and narration, the virtual environment becomes a technological *hyperobject*. The term, coined by philosopher Timothy Morton, describes *virtuality* as an entity that we cannot grasp through our visual, haptic, or theoretical perception. It is a structure of massive complexity, which is almost omnipresent in our surroundings and constantly affects us.¹³ And while it is hard to grasp it in its entirety, we strive to make it more comprehensible, to understand what is happening below the surface.

This complexity makes the notion of magic so attractive when approaching virtuality. Speaking about the enchanted

virtual, we ascribe a positive nature, satisfying an escapist urge into a better world and time. But just as the historical perception of magic is separated into good and evil, the enchanted space isn't necessarily read as purely positive. Rather, the invisible structures underneath the virtual surface, carry a "dark" and threatening connotation.¹⁴

This is not only limited to the theoretical or even fictional notions of apocalyptic scenarios induced by machines, the decline of culture or the deceptive potential of virtual technology. The subjective scariness of virtuality is also revealed as soon as we accidentally get a glimpse beyond the surface, through glitches, bugs or the uncanny movements of virtual beings that break our immersion in the aesthetic experience. As Thomas Elsaesser defines it, the uncanniness of those moments reminds us "that the reality we see and experience every day may be nothing like the reality that affects our lives."¹⁵ It finally becomes evident that the portal to a new and better world is an illusion; it is a glimpse into a world that can never be reached. We cannot venture into it because we lack the virtual presence to do so. And, at the same time, the simulated world cannot take over, since we made it. Despite the mystifying language in connection to virtuality, it is neither an alternative nor a clear and present danger.

The Ground

Finally, I find myself in a dark place. It is pitch black; the sky is empty, and there is nothing but the current and the sea for warmth. In the distance a green glow, as if from within some hidden structure or power source, shines intensely. At least that's what my sensors pick up. The virtual sea is empty. And yet, somehow, it contains me. I am present within it. I am present in the present.

So how can we try to understand and approach virtual worlds and the interaction with them? It may be useful here to return to the concept of magic. Instead of understanding the virtual world as a type of magic in itself, we can see the process of interacting with it as an almost spiritual ritual.

Our motivation to interact with virtual environments may stem from an escapist urge, allowing us to move into new environments without physically relocating. Consequently,

picking up a controller becomes an almost ritualistic practice for mental passage. We know, as soon as we put on a VR headset, that we are about to create a situation where we mentally travel to another place, where we can potentially find distraction, safety or excitement. Much like the already introduced image of the magician casting a circle, the controllers and headsets are turning into tools, a way of drawing an imaginary line between the “outside,” the analog, and the inside, “the digital.” The magic therefore is not in the virtual code-based world, but in the rite of passage, which is the moment of starting the interaction with the headset, the controller, the screen.

“These rites of passage are characteristic to the situation of switching between worlds, between immersive environments. This switching constitutes the keying in this case: it is not a real liminal experience but represents a threshold.”¹⁶

This ritualistic experience additionally constitutes what is addressed through popular discourses, the inability to venture into digital spaces, to get on a par with the virtual complexity as users. This inability is addressed through those tools that allow us, like the séances and summonings of magical tales, to catch a glimpse of something we cannot physically access.

1 At the time of writing this text, Keiken's work is still being developed.

2 Subnautica [PC] (San Francisco, CA: Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018).

3 Riddhie Raj, Charlene Putney, and Martin Pichlmair, LAIKA [Closed Beta] (Copenhagen: Write With LAIKA, 2023), <https://www.writewithlaika.com/>.

4 The assortment of maneuvers that a digital avatar is able to carry out, controlled through the player.

5 Edward Castranova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 147.

6 Giuliana Bruno, “Surface Encounters. Empathy and Intermediation,” in *Virtual interiorities. Book One: When worlds collide*, ed. Gregory Turner-Rahman, Vahid

Vahdat, and Dave Gottwald (Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2022), 121.

7 John Davidson, “Is Chat GPT Magical or the Apocalypse?,” *The Australian Financial Review*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.afr.com/technology/is-chatgpt-a-form-of-magic-or-the-apocalypse-20230117-p5cd4p>.

8 Max Bense, “Kybernetik oder die Metatechnik einer Maschine,” in *Ausgewählte Schriften. Band 2. Philosophie der Mathematik, Naturwissenschaft und Technik*, Max Bense (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 1998), 436.

9 Giuliana Bruno, “Surface Encounters,” 119.

10 Alison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 285.

11 Griffiths, Shivers, 285.

12 Ágnes Karolina Bakk, “The Hunter and the Horrors. Impossible Spaces in Analog and Digital Immersive Environments,” in *Virtual Interiorities. Book Two: The myth of total virtuality*, ed. Gregory Turner-Rahman, Vahid Vahdat, and Dave Gottwald (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2022), 69.

13 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 130f.

14 As is, for example, evident in the contemporary discourse on Artificial Intelligence.

15 Thomas Elsaesser, “Simulation and the Labour of Invisibility: Harun Farocki's Life Manuals,” *Animation* 12, no. 3 (November 2017): 216, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847717740095>.

16 Bakk, “The Hunter and the Horrors”, 64.

Author's Notes

AI-generated segments of this text were created through co-writing with LAIKA, utilizing the following digital brains: A Fragmented Mind (Anonymous) / Algernon Blackwood Mix (Algernon Blackwood) / Alienated Existence (Anonymous) / H.P. Lovecraft. Complete Works. (H.P. Lovecraft) / Meditations (Marcus Aurelius) / Melmoth the Wanderer (Charles Maturin) / Poe's Collected Stories (E.A. Poe) / Unbreakable (Simon Mayeski).

(Is)land (In)visible: Tracing Storytellers and Other Ghosts of Vallisaari

Martina Šerešová

There is something enticing about islands—they capture the Western imagination with the colonial promise of the unknown and the wild, the dreams of the land untouched by human influence. Separate from the mundane lands of our daily existence, islands seem to bend to different, more obscure rules than ours, beat in different rhythms from those of the fast-paced time of modernity. Vallisaari—on which the Helsinki Biennial unfolds—is no exception to these fantasies and to recognize this, we only need to go as far as the opening paragraphs of the Metsähallitus webpage, where it stands described as “enchancing ... [a] mysterious [island] on which time seems to stand still.”¹ But when we dream of islands as “the other,” as places of isolation and mystery outside of our own implications and temporalities, we blind ourselves to the entangled realities of life. As Bill Holm reminds us, “we only think we escape to islands; we forget the wind, which blows spores and ashes from

all over the planet to keep us company.”² In reality, rather than mysterious, untouched planets of their own, islands have long been situated within complex ecologies of mutual relations and contaminations through winds, waters, trash, and histories of human activity that extend far beyond the water line of which we have come to think as their firm border. In the end, “connectedness describes the island condition better than isolation,”³ and this is true of Vallisaari, too.

Our unwillingness to recognize the connectedness of things, and our own role within the large web of mutual implications and affects that characterize our ecologies is, in many ways, the story of the human existence on Earth. Unwilling to change our ways, we try instead to suppress the thoughts of the ecological ruination we are running towards, and in which we are already living. Even as we trip over endless streams of trash washed up on our shores by contaminated waters, we still dream of purity; of (is)lands that do not yet know the consequences of our actions, of wild nature separate from our destruction. To an extent, this is understandable—the human eye has been trained to keep a sharp focus on short-term visions of progress and individualism, in which stories of consequentiality, connectedness, and mutuality can easily go unnoticed. Those who testify to these stories and contest our fantasies of human exceptionalism that justify our systems make us uncomfortable. Their stories of indebtedness and mutual transformations—increasingly dominated by irreversible transformations caused by human activity—haunt us like ghosts. And like ghosts, their storytellers often live only on the edges of our perception, prevalent but easily overlooked, belonging both here and elsewhere. But when we learn to re-attune our senses to these storytellers and notice them for what they are, new—and perhaps more caring—possibilities of inhabiting this Earth may emerge.

Opening up to new avenues of sense-making, of noticing, and attuning to storytellers of mutuality that permeate our landscapes and shatter our fantasies is both an important and difficult endeavor. It is also the domain of the anthropologist Anna Tsing, whose vocabulary and ways of seeing have shaped both this text and the conceptual framework of this year’s Helsinki Biennial. In her book *Mushroom at the End of the*

World,⁴ Tsing champions the “arts of noticing,” of paying attention to patterns of human and non-human assemblages, of temporalities and stories that diverge from narratives of progress and individuality, and instead seeing worldmaking and survival through “layered and conjoined projects”⁵ of mutuality. Retraining our eyes to notice and attune to these kinds of storytellers carries with it the potential of re-aligning ourselves within the world, rather than outside of it—the promise of seeing things anew. This is an exciting prospect for a world increasingly defined by precarity, scarcity, and environmental destruction, and it is perhaps no wonder that the wish to find new directions for navigating and inhabiting it also underpins Helsinki Biennial’s conceptual framework and title this year—*New Directions May Emerge*—another quotation from Tsing’s book, another call to see the world through mutuality, rather than separation.

Responding to Tsing’s proposal, Helsinki Biennial 2023 “unfolds through multimodal acts of noticing, sensing and sense-making [and] invites the audiences to consider how recognizing small or otherwise invisible details might prompt possibilities to act, to imagine differently.”⁶ But we cannot, of course, practice sensing and noticing in isolation—this requires a kind of conscious situatedness, the possibility to attune to environments in order to hear, trace, and unravel the stories layered and intertwined across their landscapes. This is perhaps where the biennial’s proposition can come into play in the most immediate way—in offering us a lens through which to re-read the site that hosts it; to re-read the island of Vallisaari. Vallisaari itself is not only enmeshed in larger webs of mutuality; it also houses its own intertwined and ever-changing web of intricate relations, conflicting and collaborative agencies, or temporalities that stretch deep into the past and future, overlapping at times. And it hosts storytellers and ghosts too—often in the form of “small or otherwise invisible details”—that testify to these entangled relations and temporalities. In attuning to them, we might run the risk of having our dreams of impunity uprooted, but we might also learn about hope and resilience in the process. One such storyteller—easily overlooked, but full of potential to uproot our worldmaking—is the Hoary alyssum.



Hoary alyssum (*Berteroa incana*)⁷

In the heart of Vallisaari, close to one of the island's ponds, lies the Alexander Battery—a military fortification structure, nowadays surrounded by a peaceful meadow. Every other year in late summer—just like the Biennial itself—the meadow comes to life in a particular way, blossoming with small white petals, the flowers of the Hoary alyssum (*Berteroa incana*). It is an inconspicuous plant, a member of the mustard family, but its presence on the island tells stories that seep beyond its own borders, troubling the linear separation between a now and then, between a present that is safely contained from its past. The thing is, Hoary alyssum could not always be found on Finnish meadows. It is, in fact, native to the dry steppes of southern Russia,⁸ and has only been brought to Vallisaari from the East with animal fodder and cereals,⁹ which were regularly shipped to Russian soldiers when Finland was under Russian control,¹⁰ and when Vallisaari was used for cattle grazing. From this perspective, the contemporary presence of this slender plant on Vallisaari takes on a new layer of meaning, and becomes a kind of living memorial, a persistent, even if subtle, reminder of the Russian colonial history on the island, and the way in which it is still very much part of its ecosystems today. This, as well as many other coexisting and overlapping (hi)stories—including that of the biennial itself—layer on top of each other, reshaping the island, fighting for our attention, even blooming together at times.

Hoary alyssum is an interesting plant in that, much like more traditional memorial forms, its existence is tightly intertwined with histories of war. This is true both for Vallisaari and beyond since the plant can be found growing around old military barracks and in old garrison towns across Finland¹¹ previously manned by Russian soldiers. Perhaps even more unsettlingly, it is also commonly planted as a vegetative cover at mining sites and wastelands in Europe.¹² Taken together, the small white petals of all Hoary alyssums collectively swaying in the wind constitute a new layer on top of existing Finnish topographies, a sort of map of Russian military takeovers formed from flower crowns. By occupying and thriving around military structures and on polluted soils that hide waste, Hoary alyssum marks and points to the complicated histories of conflict, war and violence with which these sites are charged, reminding us that no place is neutral,

and no site is free from its past. Its presence serves as a testimony to the fact that past ways of life, even if no longer visible to the human eye, still actively thread through the landscapes of now, its roots twisting around military waste and layers of histories, its flowers blooming into today.

Thinking about the Hoary alyssum as a memorial form does not, however, do justice to the whole story, because its tale is not only one of commemoration, but also of resilience. Memorials are, after all, mostly vessels crafted to uphold the version of history that whoever commissioned them wishes to remember and do not, traditionally speaking, have agency of their own. This is where the memorial metaphor runs into trouble: rather than celebrating the glorified version of human history as that of progress and victory, storytellers like Hoary alyssum actively and persistently uproot it. Their bodies, adapted to thrive on ruined landscapes and polluted soils,¹³ cracking through our abandoned infrastructure projects and slowly displacing native species,¹⁴ have their own versions of human history to tell—ones that too often point to its disruptive effects on the fabric of our ecologies. And rather than merely commemorating a version of the past from the vantage point of the present, as memorials so often do, these storytellers thread through different temporalities, uprooting our visions of linear time, showing us instead that the past ways of life, and the ecological relationships they set in motion, still actively haunt and transform the landscapes of today, very much undead.

When we think of ghosts, the undead and landscapes, we of course think with Tsing again, who so poetically reminds us that “the winds of the Anthropocene carry ghosts—the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present ... the traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade.”¹⁵ Thinking of these vestiges of past ways of life, the traces of past(s) that are still constitutive of the present as ghosts, rather than as memorials, accounts for their capacity to constantly haunt us, rather than to reassuringly set desired narratives in stone. It also speaks of their elusiveness—the ghosts of the Anthropocene permeate our landscapes—yet often remain invisible to the untrained eye; we do not see them for what they are. We try to bury and do away with these ghosts and the stories to which they testify,

to forget and unsee the mutual involvement of things and actions, unhear the call for accountability and solidarity upon which such interconnected and interdependent worldviews insist. But our dreams of containment and impunity fail us, because the ghosts of our pasts—such as the Hoary alyssums of Vallisaari—always seem to come back to haunt us in one form or another, reminding us that our actions reverberate across times and across landscapes, even if we bury them under layers of soil and fantasies. These ghosts insist on calling for our attention, persistently showing us our own alignment within “life’s enmeshment in landscapes,”¹⁶ both on Vallisaari and beyond.

Viewed through the prism of resilience, the fact that Hoary alyssum is commonly classified as a “noxious weed,” an invasive species whose presence should, in some places, be reported to the authorities¹⁷ for weeding out, is uncannily fitting. Weeds and ghosts are both unruly, invasive, and undesirable; both known to evade our modern efforts of control and containment, defying our struggles for cultivation of some and eradication of others. It is perhaps this resilience—this refusal to be undone, to be contained within human projects of control—that gives weeds and ghosts a particular strength as storytellers of the Anthropocene. Their resistance to our narratives that depict humans as exceptional and all-conquering, uproots our values and hierarchies and, in the process, opens up new possibilities of seeing and sensemaking. This is the story of the Anthropocene—the epoch defined by the human impact transforming and undoing the planet’s ecosystems—in which tensions arise between the idols of growth and progress, with their eyes always pinned towards the future of more on the horizon (but never too far beyond), and the unruly, weedy storytellers that insist on showing us otherwise.

But there are also tales of hope and survival in this destruction. The weeds, the ghostly storytellers that haunt the disturbed landscapes and thrive on polluted soils, show us that life can find a way in ruination, too. Or, to call on Tsing once more, “considered through ghosts and weeds, worlds have ended many times before.”¹⁸ Their story of survival is one of resilience, rather than utopia—not relying on unattainable dreams of ecological restoration and purity, on undoing the

irreversible. They account for the ruination of our times—the compromised landscapes of today—and yet still find a way forward. Their roots thread in-between life and destruction, growing towards a meaning-making more fitted for our compromised times. In this way, they remind us that “neither tales of progress nor ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival”;¹⁹ how to think about meaningful ways of being in the messy, entangled, and often disastrous realities of the Anthropocene.

In my conversation with Tuula Närhinen,²⁰ one of the artists exhibiting as part of Helsinki Biennial 2023, we also spoke of ghosts and stories—namely of the “traces” left behind by others that underline much of Närhinen’s practice. These include traces of lives materialized through discarded or lost objects that resurface across time and space, eventually crossing Närhinen’s paths—drifted ashore,²¹ dropped on the streets of Helsinki or picked from the muddy banks of the River Thames at low tide.²² The notion of shoreline is important to Närhinen, who is also tightly connected to an island—namely, the island of Harakka, where she has been working since 1997, and on whose shores she walks to collect and make meaning of these traces, once lost and now washed ashore. It is no longer surprising to hear that an overwhelming majority of all marine debris is made out of plastic today,²³ and plastic pollution of the seas is also the subject of Närhinen’s work *Plastic Horizon*, which will be exhibited as part of the biennial. *Plastic Horizon* consists of small pieces of plastic collected on the shores of Harakka and meticulously ordered and lined up according to their color. When Närhinen speaks of her practice of collecting and ordering the debris she finds ashore, she says something that sticks with me—her sense that no matter how much plastic she collects on a given day, there seems to be no end to it on the following one. This sentiment encapsulates the uncanny nature of plastic—the way it haunts us through its omnipresence, washing not only ashore, but through complex chains of ecological mutuality, now also inside the bodies of species tied to sea water, including inside our own.

Plastic waste is a peculiar ghost—perhaps the most emblematic of both the human impact on the planet and of the impossibility of wishing it away; if there is a ghost that truly

never disappears, it is made out of plastic. The omnipresence and deathlessness of plastic make it a particularly menacing ghost—a sort of “hyperghost,” to borrow from Morton—²⁴ that operates on the opposite end of the scale from the small flowers of the Hoary alyssum. The full impact of our plastic pollution is invisible, unperceivable, precisely because it is too vast; its enmeshment permeates whole ecological scales, floating in rivers and blood vessels alike. The ubiquity of plastic—the eternal return of that which we have discarded—is haunting because it perpetually proves the futility of our wish to look away from our own impact on the environment; indeed, it undermines “the notion of ‘away.’”²⁵ The deathlessness of plastic, and works such as Närhinen’s *Plastic Horizon*, remind us that there is indeed no doing away, no detangling into purity, no mythical island that knows not of human pollution. Taking away “the away” forces us instead to come face to face with the impact of our ways, blurs the separation between man-made and natural, and reveals instead how our existence, and so our pollution, seeps through vast ecosystems and bodies, mutating into new polluted ecosystems and bodies of our future. This is both terrifying and change-permitting—stepping out of the comfort of the mythical land of “the away” is stepping into accountability, and perhaps into shame, but it is also stepping into more holistic and systemic worldviews—the essence of solidarity and collaboration, the essence of survival.

The world of the Anthropocene is messy and terrifying, full of conflicting tales of destruction and resilience, of suppression and insistence, of individualism and mutuality. In this entangled mess, it can be hard to know where to turn our attention to in order to navigate it more meaningfully, and perhaps with more care. Drawing on Tsing’s arts of noticing, the conceptual framework of this year’s Helsinki Biennial invites us to practice this through more attuned modes of sensing and noticing; of paying attention to storytellers on the margins of our perceptions. All around us—on Vallisaari and beyond—our landscapes are permeated with such storytellers. They call on us to notice them and to see the world, and our direction and placement within it, anew. They point to complex entanglements and assemblages that make up our landscapes and so remind us that when we set foot on Vallisaari, we are not

in a neutral place devoid of human influence, and we are not neutral ourselves either. Instead, we are stepping into a land of ghosts—remnants of past actions, discarded objects, and mutating histories—that entangle with each other and transform and come together across time. The biennial itself—the artworks, the discourse and the traffic it generates—are all part of these complex enmeshments. Through the behaviors and pathways we follow, through the artworks and storytellers to which we pay attention, through the traces and ghosts we leave behind, we are already becoming with the island, and we are already part of seeding its unruly futures. Viewing the world through these ghostly storytellers of mutuality, indebtedness, and accountability shows us that perhaps there is still hope to realign within our systems, to act in more attuned ways with our environment—and so to find meaning and solidarity even among the destruction we have caused, if we can only turn our attention beyond the horizon, towards the right storytellers.

1 “Vallisaari,” Nationalparks.fi, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.nationalparks.fi/vallisaari>.

2 Pete Hay, “A Phenomenology of Islands,” *Island Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2006): 23, <https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.185>.

3 Ibid.

4 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

5 Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 22.

6 “Helsinki Biennial 2023 Announces Preview List of Artists and Title: New Directions May Emerge,” Helsinki Biennial, December 9, 2022, <https://helsinkibiennial.fi/en/story/helsinki-biennial-2023/>.

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Author's note

This text has its roots in the conversations that Micol Curatolo, Iida Nissinen and I had on the themes of *New Directions May Emerge*. I wish to thank them together with Helsinki Biennial 2023 artist Tuula Närhinen for taking the time to discuss her practice within the context of this text.

Never Ours: A Story About How to Move and Where to Look as Island Visitors

Micol Curatolo



Sketch of Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's *Black Trans Sea* by the author¹

March 9, 2023

Two months to the seasonal reopening of Vallisaari,
three months to the opening of the Helsinki Biennial.

The story we are about to tell is the latest part of a long journey; it begins on an island and it ends with an art exhibition.

We are looking at Vallisaari from the southernmost shore of Suomenlinna. The island sits placidly across the narrow waters crossed by ships into the port of Helsinki. In the eighteenth century, the archipelago became Helsinki's first defensive stronghold, fortified under both Swedish and Russian rule. The archipelago stored large quantities of ammunition and became a strategic site during major conflicts. Vallisaari was targeted with heavy bombardment during the Crimean War, and until the 1920s hosted a community of pilots who sparked a rebellion in 1906. During World War II, the island housed the Rajia air surveillance radar, and a military weather station in the second post-war period. By the 1950s, Vallisaari had become home to many civilians, who lived on the island until 1996, when it was closed to the public in an attempt to restore its natural ecosystem. Twenty years later, the Finnish state forestry company Metsähallitus reopened the island as a "unique nature tourism destination."² From 2021, the Helsinki Biennial has found in Vallisaari a charming natural setting for its first two editions.

If this were an Epic novel, we would be the anti-heroes. Epics narrate the story of a community. They begin when life feels settled, yet something terribly wrong is brewing under the surface. A founding figure is forced to leave, knowing that they represent a public threat.³ This anti-hero embarks on a series of travels to find themselves, often across seas, often getting lost. During their absence, they get to know more about the world. Sometimes they come back to their island, sometimes they colonize another land. Often, they "contaminate" the communities, territories, and seas they touch on the way.

*You will need to navigate my body,
the body of the ocean, to figure out
why you are back here.*⁴

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley,
Ocean Remembered Your Body, digital game.

Anti-heroes lead the narrative of a story despite, or precisely because, they are imperfect and real: mundane, faulty, and complicit, yet good at heart. Contemporary environmental narratives often follow this plot, where humans become the

self-assigned anti-heroes in the story of cohabitation with our planet. "We" is a key character in this story. Leaving Vallisaari entrenched with the scars of war, we come back ten years later, believing that we can help with a new view of the world: a heightened sense of global interconnections through media technologies and infrastructures, an intensified urge to consume and socialize, and a deeper awareness of our implication in environmental destruction.

*It feels as though you have stepped
into the arms of something that has history with you,
but you can't tell if that history will protect you
or justify punishment towards you.*⁵

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley,
Ocean Remembered Your Body, digital game.

The biennial borrows its title from anthropologist Anna Tsing, who presents *contamination* as the transformation from a state of "before" to one of "after": I am changed by encountering you and as a result we both begin living through a slightly altered condition.⁶ "We" and the island met, and things have changed.

Vallisaari was once called Lampisaari, Pond Island, in honor of the two natural ponds that offered drinking water to sea travelers before reaching the mainland. Later, the pond became a place of sociality:

Hannu's parents ran a summer swimming school at the pond. They went swimming in the pond as soon as summer started. And summer started when school ended. The pond warmed up for swimming long before sea water; yet it was a somehow mysterious spot, once used as a source of drinking water by the Russian army.⁷

Today, a yellow sign is pegged by the lake warning about the military waste stored in its bed. Contamination highlights the deep interconnections that transform the matter of life and the ways in which it moves again and again. *Chemosociality* is another term used to express how different species cohabitate in highly polluted environments. It shows that when things mesh in ways that endanger communal life, relations shift in new resilient directions. Chicana feminist scholar Gloria E.

Anzaldúa wrote about life on the border as a colonially contaminated condition that produces new forms of expression. For Anzaldúa, border life represents a “junction of cultures” where “languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized; they die and are born.”⁹ Contamination, in its negative and positive understandings, works as an “expressive marker,”¹⁰ a form that signals where things touch and where we can access complex worlds and stories. What does it mean, then, to come back to Vallisaari once again, now as its visitors, and through an art exhibition?

Narratives associated with tourism can lure us into the illusion that islands still host an untouched and self-sufficient pocket of nature, and that we can consume on the island without consuming the island itself. This is rooted in our practices of looking, in how we read signs and how we assign them with meaning. During the biennial, Vallisaari’s gunpowder magazine will host the installation *Oikos* by artist Matti Aikio. In his works Aikio points at how Nordic nation-states perceive Sámi land as “no man’s land” because they are unable to understand the materiality and movement of Sámi cultures as “traces of human culture occupying the land.”¹¹ This misperception of the visibility and belonging of certain forms of human and natural life, leads to seeing the land(scape) as empty. In the case of Sápmi, the Sami lands, this justifies the outsourcing of Indigenous lands to large infrastructures, such as those of green energy production. Aikio has previously used elements of Sámi architecture as a way of “Sámifying the landscape”: a form of occupation of the horizon that opens up the relation between nature and culture, visibility and belonging. In this sense, Helsinki’s archipelago is a particularly interesting site. Twenty minutes away from the city center, it is a hybrid space of urban nature. Vallisaari belongs, firstly, to its natural life, while its historical and natural heritage can be understood as belonging to everyone. Yet, because access to the island is seasonal and regulated, this belonging can be afforded in practice only by some. Thinking of the island as a semi-public space allows us to reconsider the form of our participation, in the island and in the biennial. We can attempt to participate politically by associating a sense of responsibility to that belonging,¹² and work to recognize the transparent structures that make Vallisaari accessible to some

rather than others. These structures let us read spaces in ways that influence our behavior.

Close your eyes and imagine circumnavigating Vallisaari ... Circumnavigation allows you to learn about the island from different perspectives: you go in circles in order to figure it out. Circumnavigating establishes your optical control. Throughout history, this has been a practice of colonial powers to map territories. Mapping assigns rigid borders to places and defines set values and relations between spaces and their inhabitants, according to what and how who draws sees. The term “practice” implies that behind that way of moving there is an agenda. Movement makes it easier to see ourselves in relation to others, which helps us understand who we are. Through the ways we look as we move, we define spatial, cultural, and political relations. Through life and in society we exist in movement, “on a constant circulating route from one discomforting zone to another one,”¹³ in ways entirely specific to who we are. This extends to our bodies, economies, and social condition, to the places we are or not allowed to enter, and to where we are safe.

Our movement and settlement express certain philosophies or ethics of living. The artistic research of the collective *PHOSfate* (Pekka Niskanen and Mohamed Sleiman Labat) is a contribution that helps us see the connections between acts of moving, noticing, and culture. Their ongoing project researches the impact of phosphate extraction for agricultural purposes. It connects the pollution and desertification of the Baltic sea to the neo-colonization of the Hamada Desert in southwest Algeria. *The Sandoponic Garden* is installed in Vallisaari as a continuation of this research, which was presented in Helsinki earlier in the year with the film *DESERT PHOSfate*. The documentary helps us contextualize their research. It follows the memories of the Sahrawi elders, who remember their nomadic life of pasturing camels in the desert before being forced into refugee camps in 1975 when Western lobbies began mining phosphate.¹⁴ These tiny rocks on the surface of the desert are crystallizations of natural fertilizer. For the nomadic Sahrawis, these rocks participate in the compound and powerful body of their homeland. For the agricultural-industrial complex, phosphate is isolated from this context for its functional potential. Different politics of looking shift value-making and redefine

the tight web of lives, movements, and matters that constitute a land. The forced settlement of the Sahrawi people resulted in a severed connection to the desert, its flora and fauna, as well as their cultural expressions and social structures. As they rethread their identity into a sedentary lifestyle under unstable conditions, family gardens and permaculture have been practiced in the refugee camps since 2002.

*Plants are also nomads, they travel upwards [...]
Movement and stillness are some of life's greatest secrets.*¹⁵
Pekka Niskanen & Mohamed Sleiman Labat,
Nomadic Seeds, *DESERT PHOSfate*, film.

The Biennial hosts many stories: global narratives, local efforts, old narrations, and imagined futures. Together, they point to micro- and macroscopic ways of moving that take place in the environment, within and between us. For *New Directions May Emerge*, artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley guides a pilgrimage through Vallisaari and into a “more imaginative” past of the island for a history of Black trans-spirituality.¹⁶ Performing as the group’s spiritual guide, the artist will provide no finite answers. Rather, the experience introduces questions and tasks that kickstart an adventure, both collective and personal, towards a mythological gate that—as the artist anticipated—might allow its crossers to become the persons they want and need to be.¹⁷ The good or bad choices that the participants make on the way will be left for the next group to deal with. Immersed in a history that is for us to write together, the group will “need each other to do better.”¹⁸ Brathwaite-Shirley’s powerful storytellers will bring us face to face with our choices and our identities, even when we have no choice. In her work, the artist shows that there are no universal epics, but stories that follow the far-reaching waves of who we are. They intrigue us, she says, to “invest in a particular world,” with the hope that the dynamics experienced in the performance might activate a personal journey and linger with us long afterwards.¹⁹

Discomfort is one of the strategies that the artist uses to activate our emotions. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed explains how “comfort is about an encounter between bodies and worlds, the promise of a ‘sinking’ feeling. If white bodies are

comfortable it is because *they can sink into spaces that extend their shape.*”²⁰ Ahmed shows that institutions—museums and art organizations included—relate to certain bodies as their matrix, devising norms that extend those bodies into “somatic norms” that we reproduce, often without noticing. Discomfort can “investigate the tensions that disturb the smooth surface”²¹ of behaviors that are too easy or unfair on us, depending on whether spaces are molded on bodies like ours or otherwise. Brathwaite-Shirley’s tour will not bring about a resolution, but will mentor us through “a harder experience than it needed be,” which aims to leave us asking how we are to continue.²² In a virtual game by the artist, Vallisaari can also be explored from home. Sitting by a screen, as we would by a fire, we get lost in spaces of repetition and symbolism that not only archive Black trans livelihoods, but are made of and by their vitality, legacies, ghosts, and resistance.

Brathwaite-Shirley described to me Vallisaari and the visible traces of its past—its paved pathways, the inaccessible Battery, the warning signs studded along the trails—as creating the feeling that “ghosts still own it.”²³ In Vallisaari we walk through a complex environment like a spider web woven through the entire island: a net of time, stories, and histories, culture, politics, and nature. This is the transparent dramaturgy that has regulated our behavior since the island was made ready to host us again. It encourages a transient experience that safeguards the island through narratives of danger and distance. This text is an invitation to find a form of moving through the island, of touring through the biennial, that is transient, not as in dismissive and consuming, but self-facing, visceral, slow, and sisterly. Words make worlds; and telling stories can be a tool of conscious participation and resistance. For example, narrating the forceful, at times destructive, nature of islands can be a way of reclaiming the profound knowledge needed to live *with* the island.²⁴ In Finland, many will be familiar with author and artist Tove Jansson, who wrote stories of island life where both island and humans are powerful, independent, at times moody beings, slowly getting to know one another. Jansson’s stories are tales of cohabitation, respect, and at times of uneasiness, where loving is caring for a space shared by many and, when needed, letting each other be.²⁵ These

are stories in which we touch the island's rocky skin barefoot, just as we touch each other's hands when the winter gets harsh. The legacies of colonial storytelling that oppose nature and culture flatten places like islands from sites of many connections and histories, into an "empty" wilderness that we are free to experience: to take in and to take over. Instead, we can tell stories together that "work and play hard to understand how to inherit the layers upon layers of living and dying that infuse every place."²⁶

If being in Vallisaari is a dialogue with its complex system, a way of contributing to its livelihood, political participation can be a choreographed act of moving together that allows us to check our self-positioning, to notice and to learn. Exhibitions can facilitate this process because they are curated environments that express and visualize relations and structures.

The practice of "curation" entails the creation of spaces of relations, both material and intellectual. One of the elements that bring about these relations is, again, movement: the space of the exhibition is designed to guide you —or not!—in a certain direction. One way of relating the habits of looking and noticing that this text has sketched so far to the exhibition space is to think about its transparencies. When the language of exhibitions is opaque to us, we need to engage in some translation and learning to access the site. When the language of exhibitions is *transparent* to us, the space lets us in because we are able to decipher it, through habit or through knowledge. Exhibitions are a reflective space: both transparent and opaque in ways that are specific to each one. "By assuming a body, institutions can generate an idea of appropriate conduct without making this explicit."²⁷ When these structures and their intentions go unnoticed, it may lead us to forget that we are always immersed in them. Nevertheless, the expressive space of an exhibition can help us see the relations we establish as we visit places, artworks, and each other.²⁸

The biennial's wish to speak to large audiences relies particularly on bringing art to public spaces. The Artists' Association of Finland defines the structural promotion of art in public spaces as "a political decision in principle" because it influences the participation in and appreciation of shared environments.²⁹ Through art, the biennial contributes

to remapping the city and mobilizes people towards certain focus points. Yet cities are not neutral spaces. Urban planning reflects and sets realms of belonging and safety, individual and collective identities, which separate and connect people. Thus, public art carries into our lived environment narratives and possibilities of behavior that are recreational, educational, and inherently political.

Jenna Sutela's sculpture *Pond Brain* is a public art installation shown in Vallisaari this summer. *Pond Brain* is a bronze bowl filled with rainwater, with which visitors can collectively play through touch. By rubbing the fountain, they will activate a soundscape of vibrating and dripping water. These sounds will echo in the public space, expressing the interaction of water-artifact-human formed by the artwork. We can imagine that *Pond Brain* will contribute to a space of sociality and playfulness, asking for a form of participation that is relational and which brings into the public space themes related to environmental responsibility and climate change. The installation reflects on large and minuscule interconnections in "a world made of brains," as Sutela describes it.³⁰ An AI neural network will compute the movement of the water and combine it with environmental signals into a growing soundscape that fills the public environment.

*The origins of ponds are in the stars.
A pond seems to say, 'as above, so below,'
and turns its image of the world upside down.*³¹

Jenna Sutela, Pond Brain,
New Directions May Emerge,
Helsinki Biennial 2023.

The works presented in this text show that lives, time, and spaces are not as linear as our history pictures them, and divisions are not as rigid. If we were to measure the borders of Vallisaari, we would each find ourselves with a different number. The smaller the unit of measure, the deeper into the crevices of the shore you will go, and the larger the borders will appear.³² This geometry is defined by fractal mathematics. Fractals describe self-repetitive and connective patterns of growth that are extremely common in nature: from the form

of our lungs, to the distribution of galaxies, and to the cellular structure of a blade of grass.

Fractal thinking lets us see the world in four dimensions:³³

*not linear
but conic
in circles
deep into the crevices
and then to the side
and then again.*

By testing new perspectives through our bodies in motion during the mediation event³⁴—for example by breaking small behavioral norms—we can activate alternative ways of “moving into thinking”. We can search for ways of thinking that are expansive: tilted movements that accommodate the iridescent nature of things. We can let our moving and looking be guided by those environmental patterns that trace changes and happenings—the way contamination signals an encounter—so that we can explore creatively, but also organically. The biennial is a call to learn how to cohabit without colonizing. It means thinking about how to “make the most of it.” Rather than rushing through the exhibition to get a glimpse of everything, when we are in dialogue with a space or with an artwork we need to make time to listen. Dialogue makes space for others rather than taking over. Being in dialogue with each other and the island, with art and the invisible layers that Vallisaari carries, enlarges the directions of our thinking. Fractal thinking helps us build knowledge through repetition, creating patterns that we can follow to trace the ins and outs of these connections. The four-dimensional space of fractals fits well with what today is understood as *intersectionality*: another way of moving into thinking that reads no category in isolation, but pulls the transparent threads that carry vibrations from one layer to the other of our lives.³⁵ These threads, many of which are of our own making, make society and nature thoroughly entangled and envelop us like cocoons. Our participation is important because, as we move onto this web, we initiate far-reaching repercussions.

This story is about a spider web woven through an entire island, connecting, like sea water, the island of Vallissari to near and distant shores. Transparent enough to catch you in, if you change position and tilt your head a little, its threads will twinkle against the sunlight. In this story you and I are both spider and fly, at times threading the web, walking on its tensions, at times being trapped in it, forgetting to look.

1 Rendered by the author, sketch of Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's Black Trans Sea, virtual interactive game, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.blacktranssea.com/>. The title of this text also takes inspiration from Black Trans Sea. The visual and written language of Brathwaite-Shirley's digital works has been a starting point of reflection on how storytelling can shape reality and participation. Our later conversation was also influential in thinking around the format of a guided tour and the role that narrative plays in art mediation.

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3 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 45–62.

4 Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, *Ocean Remembered Your Body, Examining the Sea: An Interactive Fiction by The Wound*, Release 1 / Serial number 211023, virtual interactive game, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.daniellebrathwaiteshirley.com/copy-of-home>.

5 Ibid.

6 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 27–34.

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lähdettiin uimaan heti, kun kesä alkoi. Ja kesähän alkoi, kun koulu loppui. Lammen vesi lämpeni uitavaksi paljon ennen merivettä, mutta lampi entisenä Venäjän armeijan juomavaihteluna oli jollain lailla mystinen uimapaikka.”

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10 Jussi Parikka, “Contamination as Method,” *Contamination, Art & the Environmental Condition-2023 Symposium*, live conference, February 27, 2023.

11 Matti Aikio, “Conflicting Relations,” *Vera Art Centre*, live conference, March 11, 2023, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/809863639>.

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13 Fataneh Farahani, “Home and homelessness and everything in between: A route from one uncomfortable zone to another,” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22 no. 2 (2015): 243.

14 Pekka Niskanen and Mohamed Sleiman Labat, www.nomadicseeds.com.

15 Pekka Niskanen and Mohamed Sleiman Labat, *Nomadic Seeds*, DESERT PHOSfate.

16 The information in this paragraph was gathered during a conversation with the artist held on March 27, 2023.

17 Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, interview with the author, March 27, 2023.

18 Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, interview with the author, March 27, 2023.

19 Ibid.

20 Emphasis in the original. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 40.

21 Rafal Niemojewski, *Biennials: The Exhibitions We Love to Hate* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 2021), 20.

22 Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, interview with the author, March 27, 2023.

23 Ibid.

24 Emily Eyestone, "Cannibalizing paradise: Suzanne Césaire's ecofeminist critique of tourist literature," *Island Studies Journal* 17, no 2 (November 2022): 52–73.

25 Some of Tove Jansson's narrative books set on islands: *The Winter Book*, 1957; *The Summer Book*, 1972; *Fair Play*, 1989.

26 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the trouble* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016), 138.

27 Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 38.

28 Nature is "curated" too, for example through the practice of "landscaping." In Vallisaari, a park was landscaped in the nineteenth century under Russian rule. This included importing non-indigenous vegetation and paving pathways to control movement.

29 Miisa Pulkkinen, et al., "The Handbook of the Percent for Art Principle in Finland / For Commissioners," 2020, Artists Association of Finland, 5–7, https://www.julkinentaide.fi/sites/default/files/inline-files/2021-08/Percent%20For%20Art%20Principle_For_Commissioners.pdf.

30 Jenna Sutela, *Pond Brain* (2023). Helsinki Biennial Catalogue (Helsinki: Helsinki Art Museum, 2023), 114.

31 Ibid.

32 James Bridle, "James Bridle—The intelligence singing all around us," *On Being with Krista Tippett*, Podcast (March 2, 2023).

33 Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "Fractal Thinking," *aCCeSsions* 2 (April 27, 2016), accessed April 1, 2023, <https://accessions.org/article2/fractal-thinking/>.

34 The mediation event, *How to move and where to look? Stories of making life for each other* is curated and facilitated by Micol Curatolo on 16th and 23rd of August 2023 and is part of the public programme of Helsinki Biennial 2023.

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Author's note

This text began in conversation with Martina Šerešová and Iida Nissinen. Thanks to Martina, Iida, and others who have contributed to my writing along the way, and to artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley for sharing her work with me.

Get Well Soon: Meditation for Institutional Healing

Julia Fidler

*T*aking some time to get comfortable, whether you're sitting up or lying down. Just gonna start with the eyes open. Soft focus—just taking in the space around you in the room. No matter what's been going on, no matter what the mind is stressed with right now, no matter how the body feels—just for a moment letting go of all of that. Just focusing on the space around you, without moving the eyes, just taking in the space. And just starting with a few deep breaths—breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth. As you breathe in, just feeling the body expand, the lungs taking in fresh air. As the body exhales, there's a sense of letting go of whatever's going on in the mind, in the body. And breathing in through the nose and as you breathe out this time, just allowing the eyes to close.¹

The voice of Andy Puddicombe from the meditation app Headspace is scattering through my headphones and penetrating my ears, in a lousy attempt to heal, or silence, what's in between them.

Practices of meditation, yoga, healthy diets that consist of so-called superfoods, wellness activities that are dominating social-media platforms in the form of skin-care routines or the “treat yourself” trend that pushes us to spend money on new wardrobes and over-priced iced lattes, have gained massive attention and popularity over the last decade. Healing is a general hype in Western countries where we adopt seemingly Eastern—at least at a surface level—traditions that focus on mental and physical well-being.² “Self-care practices of healing and tending to one’s body and mind have evolved, for many, as necessary tactics to survive in political and economic environments that seem antagonistic to mental and physical well-being,” writes Karen Archey in her essay *Art & New Age: Who Cares?*, in which she points out the discrepancy between the self-care hype and real-life problems. The reality of healing is not as trendy or sexy as mainstream culture portrays it. Practices such as self-care, self-enhancement or healing are difficult, messy, and are ongoing processes that actively oppose hyper-capitalism, excessive individualism, and depoliticized forms of self-care.³

*Feeling the weight ... press down. Does it feel restless or still?*⁴

These practices that permeate our everyday life are also adapted by artists and art professionals. In inviting artists who practice healing into art institutions, however, lies a risk of relying on them to do the labor of healing on behalf of the institution, instead of the institutions reflecting on their own processes, drawing from inner resources. In the dawn of this new, promising era where healing is gaining more and more attention, I wonder how institutions such as biennials can host these healing practices without appropriating or relying on them.

Institutional Change

The biennial takes place in and around a highly polluted area: The Baltic Sea is one of the most contaminated waters

in the world, subjected to waste from regimes of violence and unregulated industrialism. Yet, Helsinki Biennial proposes new layers of productive contamination as a cross-pollination between practices and ideas. Recognizing that biennials have often been founded on principles of urban regeneration, in terms of tourism and the economy, it additionally proposes how exhibitions can be a force for healing and repair.⁵

However, biennials are known to have a heavy environmental footprint—count the flights, production materials, tourism, and we are soon at a Kardashian-worthy emission-level. This very contradiction of healing versus polluting lies at the core of *New Directions May Emerge* and its developing process. curator Joasia Krysa has come up with several strategies to approach healing within the institutional context of the biennial. Instead of merely inviting artists as healing agents, she has attempted to integrate systematic changes in the ways we perceive, organize, and host biennials, especially related to the current socio-political state of the world.⁶

*Just feeling that rising and falling sensation.
We're just gonna use this as a place for the mind
to rest or to rest our attention.*⁷

Tabita Rezaire, Adrián Villar Rojas, Lotta Petronella, and the “curatorial intelligence,”⁸ Museum of Impossible Forms, are some of the contributors invited to this edition of the biennial who intend to practice healing both directly and indirectly. Connecting to some of the core strategies of *New Directions May Emerge*, they all work with healing in particular ways. Their practices engage with modes of breaking the destructive cycle of neo-colonialism, decentralizing the exhibition, developing site-specific modes of working and promoting shared responsibility.

Past to Present

Artist Tabita Rezaire is an “infinity incarnated into an agent of healing, who uses art as a mean to unfold the soul.”⁹ Through her art-making, she practices and shares healing rites while articulating their intricate relationship with today’s world. The digital has a central role in her practice, both as a theme, a metaphor, and as a medium or site for healing and sharing

healing practices: “Through screen interfaces and collective offerings, her digital healing and energy streams remind us to access our own inner data center, to bypass western authority and download directly from source.”¹⁰ Rezaire’s work points out that the digital and the internet dominated by racist and oppressive Western narratives, need decolonization and healing:¹¹ “The internet is exploitative, oppressive, exclusionary, classist, patriarchal, racist, homophobic, transphobic, fatphobic, hoe-phobic, coercive, and manipulative. The internet who produces the West offlines racial, economical, political and cultural violence and domination, legitimized behind the idea of modernity and technological advancement.”¹² In *Deep Down Tidal*, the artist reflects on the link between past and present in terms of the colonization of the oceans as well as the internet, by pointing out the similarity between the nineteenth-century copper telegraph cables that followed colonial-era shipping routes and the optical cables of our present-day hyperspeed internet that follow the same route.

*same paths,
same stories,
same pains.*¹³

The ocean connects our past to our present and proposes a means of remembrance. *Deep Down Tidal* emphasizes the enduring intergenerational colonization perpetuated through cycles of violence that necessitates urgent attention to tackle and heal the wounds it has inflicted. Such wounds scar both the seafloor and the bodies that have been subjected to this continuing violence for too long. By materializing the “ungraspable” state of the internet, Rezaire de-mythologizes it, and by drawing connections to the past, proposes the internet and (digital) colonization as a present day issue rather than something that only exists in the past.

*Is there a sense of flow?*¹⁴

To the Margins

This edition of the biennial spreads its roots to reach further than its central site on Vallisaari island. Works related to Helsinki Biennial 2023 are scattered around the city and



Tabita Rezaire, *Deep Down Tidal* (2017). Film still. Courtesy of the Artist and Goodman Gallery.



Adrián Villar Rojas, From the Series *The End of Imagination* (2023). Live simulations of active digital ecologies, and layered composites of organic, inorganic, human, and machine-made matter. Courtesy of the artist.

can be found in HAM, Oodi library, and in cultural centers Stoa and Caisa. This act of decentralization was a conscious choice made by Krysa, in an attempt to lighten the impact on the island. Facilitating this process of shifting the center of gravity is Museum of Impossible Forms, whose mission it has been for several years to bring attention to the margins within the cultural field of Helsinki.

Attempting to protect the island while also wishing to open it to the public is a duality that has been taken into consideration both by the organizers and by the contributing artists. The island is treated as another active agent with which to coexist, rather than invade. Most of the works on show are not interventions in the landscape or big installations, but rather dialogues *with* the island, and can thus take unexpected forms.

Site

Not only the sea in which Vallisaari is located, but also the body of the island itself bears the indelible scars of the island's military history. Both the restricted zones and the foreclosed lake evoke an aura of mystery that recalls the USAF's Area 51 in the Nevada desert, triggering speculation that military equipment may be concealed beneath the soil. Over the past years, during a period in which the island has been uninhabited, it has been slowly regenerating—allowing biodiversity to grow and the body of the island to heal itself from within. Not only the island but also its non-human inhabitants and its workers are considered as contributing agents in the overall process of the exhibition.

*Noticing space around you again, any sounds...*¹⁵

Attached to abandoned buildings, hiding in tree branches, the sculptures of Adrián Villar Rojas can be found all over the island. The small interventions immediately catch the eye due to the artist's use of material and color highly contrasting its surroundings. In prior iterations, the artwork bore a striking resemblance to bird nests; however, the sculptures



Lotta Petronella, *Själö Poeisis - Lament to Pine Trees* (2022). Photographer Jussi Virkkumaa.

currently housed in Vallisaari exude a more overtly synthetic quality. Although it may seem that *From the Series The End of Imagination* collides with its forestry environment, Villar Rojas' work embodies a welcoming atmosphere towards more-than-human lifeforms.¹⁶ Encompassing biodiversity and accepting multi-species agencies, destruction and decay become an inherent part of the work, emphasizing the dialogical relationship between the work and its environment.

The sculptures are not typical of Villar Rojas' artistic practice, which often take the form of show-stopping interventions. Instead, *From the Series The End of Imagination* is a subtle proposition that tries to co-exist with the island, and quietly critiques the spectacle-value that is usually strived for in biennial-making. On the verge of becoming predominantly entertainment for wide audiences, biennials have been criticized for not developing these outdated strategies. Krysa believes that a re-evaluation of these strategies is long overdue. In the current age, in times of war and after years of fighting the pandemic, the biennial-extravaganza is no longer fitting or urgent.¹⁷

From I to Us

The non-hierarchical approach to working, where the whole congregation of species is taken into consideration, is also apparent in Lotta Petronella's approach to her project *Materia Medica of Islands*. The work focuses on healing, song, ingestion, and remembrance, and consists of "an apothecary, a lamenting choir, nightly recordings of moths and a commemoration to Ilma Lindgren, the woman who fought to secure everyone equal rights to roam and forage freely on land virtually anywhere in Finland."¹⁸

Care work is teamwork—we have to come together to practice healing and take care of one another. Petronella facilitates the coming together of those with whom she works, to find common ground, while also allowing the differences between them to thrive. In *Materia Medica of Islands*, the artist transcends individuality by cultivating a sense of collective care. Moths, invasive and local plants, people, and the island are united in temporary communities of care in an attempt to remember together those who have facilitated and cared for us in the past, those who still do, and to inspire the continuation

of caring practices in the future. Actively seeking entry points into the site of the island, she questions how to be in or with it—how to make room for herself and others, how to enter a space. And while seeking these openings into the site, she encounters even more collaborators, widening her network of healing and care.

*Just gently opening the eyes again.*¹⁹

Institutional Healing

In a world where the notion of healing is rapidly gaining attention, Helsinki Biennial 2023 looks for ways to integrate institutional healing in a durational way. The process of institutional rejuvenation is best approached through a collective and collaborative lens, emphasizing the importance of shared responsibility. Thus a partnership has been established, integrating the organization, the guest curator, diverse curatorial agents, the island's unique characteristics, non-human elements, and the contributing artists. This multifaceted approach offers the possibility of a healing that expands beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the institution. By engaging external expertise to complement internal resources, institutions can cultivate an enriching environment that encourages healthier practices in today's world and in working towards a more hopeful future.²⁰

1 A 10-Minute Meditation for Stress from Headspace | Mental Health Action Day, Headspace (Headspace, 2022), 00:00.

2 Karen Archey, "Art & New Age: Who Cares?," *Frieze*, issue 185 (2017).

3 Erika Sprey, "Het Helen," *Metropolis M*, issue 4/22 (2022).

4 A 10-Minute Meditation for Stress from Headspace, 1:25.

5 Helsinki Biennial, "Helsinki Biennial 2023 Announces Preview List of Artists and Title: New Directions May Emerge," HAM, November 28, 2022, <https://helsinkibiennaali.fi/en/story/helsinki-biennial-2023/>.

6 Joasia Krysa (Curator of New Directions May Emerge), in discussion with Julia Fidler, March 2023.

7 A 10-Minute Meditation for Stress from Headspace, 4:06.

8 Krysa has invited several collaborators into the curatorial process, whom she calls "curatorial intelligences"—a term borrowed from Markus Reymann.

9 Tabita Rezaire, "Info." <https://tabitarezaire.com/info>.

10 Rezaire, "Info."

11 Wepresent, "Tabita Rezaire—Art that finds the link between spirituality and tech," *Wetransfer*, October 28, 2019, <https://wepresent.wetransfer.com/stories/tabita-rezaire-on-digital-worlds-attention-and-spirituality>.

12 Tabita Rezaire, *Deep Down Tidal*, 2017, video, Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/248887185>.

13 Rezaire, *Deep Down Tidal*.

14 A 10-Minute Meditation for Stress from Headspace, 2:28.

15 *Ibid.*, 9:42.

16 Adrián Villar Rojas, *From the Series The End of Imagination* (2023). Helsinki Biennial Catalogue (Helsinki: Helsinki Art Museum, 2023), 120.

17 Krysa, in discussion with Fidler.

18 Krysa, Helsinki Biennial Catalogue (Helsinki: Helsinki Art Museum, 2023), 21.

19 A 10-Minute Meditation for Stress from Headspace, 9:57.

Author's Note

I would like to thank Joasia Krysa and Lotta Petronella for taking the time to share their stories, practices, and thoughts with me in the context of this essay.

CONTAMINANT
NOITAN
REGENERATOR
AGENCY
NOITAN

REACTIVATE
REJUVENATE

RECONFINE



Joasia Krysa

Curator of Helsinki Biennial 2023 New Directions May Emerge, is a UK-based, Polish-born curator and scholar working at the intersection of contemporary art and technology. She is Professor of Exhibition Research at Liverpool John Moores University. From 2012–15 she was Artistic Director of Kunsthall Aarhus, Denmark. She was part of the curatorial team for Documenta 13 (2012), and co-curator of the 9th Liverpool Biennial (2016). Past projects have been presented at, amongst others, The Whitney Museum of American Art, ZKM Center for Art and Media, and Tate Modern. Her current research focuses on AI and curating.

Bassam El Baroni

is Associate Professor of Curating and Art Mediation at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University, Finland. Formerly, he lectured at the Dutch Art Institute, ArTEZ University of the Arts, Arnhem, The Netherlands (2013–19) and was Artistic Director of the now folded non-profit art space ACAFA—Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum in Alexandria, Egypt (2005–12). His most recent research engages with issues such as financialization in relation to artistic practices, AI and curating, artists' engagement with infrastructural futures and histories, and new forms of artist-led activism. He is the author of various essays on artists, art, and curating, and editor of *Between the Material and the Possible: Infrastructural Re-examination and Speculation in Art* (Sternberg Press, 2022) and co-editor, together with Ida Soulard and Abinadi Meza, of *Manual for a Future Desert* (Mousse Publishing, 2021).

Patrizia Costantin

is a lecturer and researcher whose work investigates the curatorial as a site for knowledge production and political worldbuilding. She is particularly interested in exploring the role of curating as a relational practice for negotiating with reality, contemporaneity, and the technological realm. Costantin holds a PhD in Curatorial Practice (Manchester

Metropolitan University, UK, 2019). Her thesis, *machines will watch us die: a curatorial study on the contemporaneity of digital decay* explores digital decay after the material turn in media studies through a postmedium curatorial approach. She is currently Head of Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art, and Lecturer in Curating at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture at Aalto University, Finland.

Filipa Ramos

is a writer and curator with a PhD awarded from the School of Critical Studies at Kingston University, London, UK. Her research, manifested in critical and theoretical texts, lectures, workshops, and edited publications, focuses on how culture addresses ecology, and how contemporary art fosters relationships between nature and technology. She is curator of the Art Basel Film sector and a founding curator of the online artists' cinema Vdrome. Ongoing and upcoming projects include the arts, humanities and science festival *The Shape of a Circle in the Mind of a Fish* (since 2018) and *Persones Persons*, the 8th Biennale Gherdeina (2022), both with Lucia Pietroiusti. In 2021, she co-curated *Bodies of Water*, the 13th Shanghai Biennale (with Andrés Jaque, Lucia Pietroiusti, Marina Otero Verzier and Mi You), and co-curated the group exhibition *Feet of Clay* at Porto's City Gallery (with Chus Martinez). Previously, she curated the exhibition *Animalesque*, at Bildmuseet Umeå, Sweden (2019) and *BALTIC Gateshead*, UK (2020). Ramos has extensive experience as an editor and publisher. She was Editor-in-Chief of *art-agenda/e-flux* (2013–20), Associate Editor of *Manifesta Journal* (2009–11), and contributed to *Documenta 13* (2012) and *14* (2017). She authored *Lost and Found* (Silvana Editoriale, 2009) and edited *Animals* (Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2016). Her upcoming book, *The Artist as Ecologist*, will be published by Lund Humphries in 2024. She is a Lecturer at the Master Programme of the Arts Institute of the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, Basel, Switzerland, where she leads the Art and Nature seminars.

Adeena Mey

is Managing Editor of *Afterall Journal* and a Research Fellow at the Afterall Research Centre, Central St Martins, University of the Arts London, UK. His writing, editorial and curatorial projects explore artists' moving image, exhibition studies, contemporary art in East and Southeast Asia, cybernetics, decolonial and cosmotechnical thought. As Principal Investigator of the digital research project 'Black Atlantic Museum' (Paul Mellon Centre, 2021–22) and co-initiator of the workshop series 'Writing and Publishing Art in Southeast Asia' (British Academy 2021 and 2023–24), he has been exploring sustainable infrastructures for new modes of writing, publishing, and thinking about contemporary art based on non-Western epistemologies and thoughts. He is also a lecturer in Contemporary Art History and Theory at ECAL/Lausanne University of Art and Design, Switzerland.

Livia Nolasco-Rózsás

is a curator and art historian. She has curated exhibitions at institutions of contemporary and media art worldwide since 2006, including at the ZKM | Center for Art and Media (Karlsruhe, Germany), Chronos Art Center (Shanghai, China), Tallinna Kunstihoone, Ludwig Museum Budapest, Hungary, focusing on the constantly changing media of contemporary art and intersections with various disciplines. She has initiated and developed thematic exhibitions raising questions such as the genealogy and social impact of planetary computation and computer code, electronic surveillance and democracy, and synesthetic perception. As of 2019, she began curatorial research at the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig on the virtual condition and its implications in the exhibition space, and as acting head of the international collaboration project titled *Beyond Matter* at ZKM | Karlsruhe, Germany which she initiated and in which institutions such as Centre Pompidou Paris, France, Aalto University, Finland, and others participate.

Cyane Findji

is a video artist and curator based in Helsinki, Finland. Her artistic practice focuses on art and science, documentary film, hydro-feminism, care, ecologies, and postnatural narratives. She explores the body of the filmmaker together with its environment, performing an exchange and not only extracting images from it. Through moving image and the curatorial, she investigates alternative stories of our time by portraying different ecological connections between humans, waters, and other beings within the landscape. Included in this contribution, *Navigating Turbulence ~ towards the making of place*, is a collaborative project with Myriam Gras on ocean thinking. Findji holds a BA in Fine Arts (2020) from ECAL/ University of Art and Design (Lausanne, Switzerland) and completed an internship at MAMCO, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Geneva, Switzerland. She is now completing an MA in Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art (ViCCA) at Aalto University, Finland.

Myriam Gras

is a Dutch artist, curator, and educator based in Helsinki, Finland. Interested in the relationships between contemporary art, ecological, and man-made infrastructures, her practice explores various temporal and geographical environments, and aims to transcend specific domain-specific knowledge and language. Gras' multidisciplinary and nonhierarchical practice is rooted in factual data but is transported into the realm of the imagination. It includes photography, sculpture, installation, and curatorial activities as research methods. *Navigating Turbulence ~ towards the making of place*, is a collaborative project with Cyane Findji on ocean thinking. Gras has been part of several art institutions, including Club Solo (Breda, Netherlands), TextielMuseum (Tilburg, Netherlands), and Fontys Hogeschool voor de Kunsten (Tilburg, Netherlands). She is founding curator of Ringbaan Kollektor, a platform that re-searches value through modes of exchange, and co-founder of Salt Collective, a project embarking on a journey through the world's waters with their floating satellite studio.

BIOGRAPHIES

Aska Mayer

is a researcher with a background in Theory of Arts and Media, focusing on the cultural analysis of digital games, augmented bodies, and idea-historical examinations of apocalyptic tropes and crises. Recent works include writings on digital play as a metaleptic crisis, as well as examinations of the representation and role of bio-modification and the creation of fluid identities in Immersive Sim. Currently based in Finland, Aska is graduating from the MA program Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art at Aalto University with a thesis on neo-baroque phenomena in digital crisis games and their relation to historical forms of counter-reformatory theater. Additionally, they are a co-founding member of "LudoBande," Interdisciplinary Network for Young Academics in Game Studies, as well as a member of the central committee of "AKGWDS," Working Group Historical Science and Digital Games.

Martina Šerešová

is a thinker, writer, and curator based in Helsinki, Finland. She holds a degree in Language and Cultural Studies from University College London (UCL), UK, and is currently pursuing a MA degree in Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art at Aalto University, Finland. Her research interests revolve around ecologies, politics of care, and systems thinking, through which she approaches topics of speculative futuring and social change. Her approaches touch on various disciplines, threading between art, culture, and politics, but are always rooted in questions of locality, place-making, and collaboration. As part of this, she is interested in exploring possibilities of facilitating experimental encounters and community engagements. Šerešová is currently working as part of the production team at M-cult, Helsinki.

Micol Curatolo

is a curator and producer based in Helsinki, Finland. Her current research deals with the relation between identity, movement, and place-making, using border thinking as a curatorial strategy to address topics of belonging, participation, and migration. Curatolo works with multivocal and everyday formats. She is interested in creative work that addresses people's stories, their possible conflicts and common emotions. She is graduating from the MA Programme in Visual Culture, Curating and Contemporary Art at Aalto University, Finland, and holds a BA degree in History of Art at the University of East Anglia (Norwich, UK). Micol works as the project coordinator of PUBLICS Youth Advisory Board at PUBLICS, a curatorial agency, library and event space in Vallila, Helsinki, Finland.

Julia Fidder

is a Dutch curator, writer and educator based in Helsinki, Finland. She has worked for several art institutions including Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma (Helsinki, Finland), SEA Foundation (Tilburg, The Netherlands) De Kunstmeisjes (The Netherlands), and MU artspace (Eindhoven, The Netherlands). As an independent curator and writer she has been exploring the meaning of motherhood, self-care, grief, and rituals in today's world. Her current research project is called Grieve with me, which is an invitation to come together to grieve on our own terms. In an attempt to oppose normative thought caused by capitalist thinking and the privatization of grief due to neoliberalism, Grieve with me explores shared grieving rituals and communal mourning in contemporary times.



COLOPHON

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Editors

Patrizia Costantin and Bassam El Baroni

Contributors

Micol Curatolo, Julia Fidler, Cyane Findji,
Myriam Gras, Joasia Krysa, Aska Mayer,
Adeena Mey, Livia Nolasco-Rózsás, Filipa
Ramos, Martina Šerešová

Commissioning Editor

Joasia Krysa

Proofreading

Melissa Lerner

Graphic Design

The Rodina

Paper

Munken Lynx 90gms2

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BIENNIAL

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School of Arts, Design
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The Helsinki Biennial Art Mediation Forum 2023: An Anthology is a compilation of newly commissioned essays arising from a collaboration between ViCCA (Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art) at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture and the Helsinki Biennial 2023 curated by Joasia Krysa. The forum concentrates on mediation as a space for articulating the biennial's themes and artistic contributions. It comprises two components: the Helsinki Biennial 2023 Symposium, which took place in December 2022, and *The Curatorial School of 'May,'* a yearlong workshop involving eight ViCCA students that foregrounds the transformative potential of the word "May" encapsulated in the Biennial's title, *New Directions May Emerge*. This anthology juxtaposes perspectives from established contributors in the field of curating with creative texts by the Master's students. It delves into the themes central to the biennial: contamination, regeneration, agency, and curating and computation. In sum, the volume provides an engaging exploration of contemporary curatorial ideas that intersect with the biennial's pursuit of new directions capable of responding to an increasingly complex world.