

ASCENDING FROM THE LIQUID HORIZON
Contemporary Visions of a Changing World

21st October 2018 > 06 January 2019
Tuesday > Saturday from 2pm to 7 pm /
Sunday from 3pm to 7 pm (sun 9 dec at 12-8:30pm)
closed: 16 nov, 17 nov (close at 5pm), 25 déc, 1er janv

Curator: Kati Ilves
Scénography: Tõnu Narro
Graphic design: Ott Metusala

Artists
ANNI PUOLAKKA and JAAKKO PALLASVUO (1983/1987, Finland)
GUAN XIAO (1983, China)
JOEY HOLDER (1979, United Kingdom)
KATJA NOVITSKOVA (1984, Estonia)
KRISTINA ÕLLEK (1989, Estonia)
LAURA PÕLD (1984, Estonia)
NICHOLAS RIIS (1987, Denmark-Norway-The Netherlands)
NORMAN ORRO (1986, Estonia)
SIMON WALD-LASOWSKI (1980, France/ The Netherlands)
SOL ARCHER (1983, United Kingdom)
TAAVI SUISALU (1982, Estonia)
VELLO VINN (1939, Estonia)



EESTI KUNSTMUSEUM

KUMU



As part of the centenary of the Republic of Estonia



Kati Ilves
ASCENDING FROM THE LIQUID HORIZON

Prologue: Once Upon a Time Not So Long Ago

In 1971, the Estonian graphic artist Vello Vinn completed the etching *The Rockets* in which a large sea shell floats in the centre of the picture, accompanied by a group of rockets ascending on the horizon. The whole picture – is rich in details, and in their abundance and intricacy each reveals aspects of the work's content to us. Repetition in pattern, such as the sea shell motif that continues reappearing, manipulates the viewer's perception, asking the viewer to take a closer look. The sea shell seems to be a Nautilus – a pelagic marine mollusc that is considered a "living fossil" – an extant taxon, as opposed to being extinct, meaning that it is "still alive". Originating from the Nautilidae family, the Nautilus is one of two family members that, in fact, hasn't yet died out. "Still alive", though, might be a slight understatement in this case. Our Nautilus is very much alive, and is rising up with its own army of rockets which fill the horizon.

Approximately one hundred years before Vinn completed this work, the Nantes-born writer Jules Verne published what is probably his most influential book, *Twenty Thousand Leagues*

*Under the Sea: A Tour of the Underwater World*¹

Describing an underwater journey 20000 leagues with many obstacles that were overcome by a submarine called the Nautilus, an underwater vessel Verne named after American engineer and inventor Robert Fulton's submarine of the same name. Nautilus' journey ended with its whereabouts unknown: it drifted off, perhaps to resurface again someday. And like its animal namesake, it might be "still alive" or at least possible to re-activate.

Verne's articulation of underwater life through the endless possibilities that he imagined has had a rebirth. The Nautilus – as suggested by the origins of the name – has not yet disappeared; it's sailing across uncharted territories. Verne's speculative scenarios have been adapted and appropriated by technocratic global enterprises that mix scientific research with corporate interests. In 2019, the first deep-sea mining venture is set to take place to excavate minerals such as copper, cobalt, nickel, gold and platinum, according to market demands. The remotely controlled robots resemble sea mammals or corals. Nautilus Minerals Inc. is the first company to commercially explore the sea

¹This book was first published in 1869–70 in France.

THE L floor. Compared to research conducted on land, little is known about what lies beneath the liquid horizon. Speculation, as always, depends greatly on imagination. In the science fiction film *Pacific Rim* from 2013, it was concluded: "We always thought alien life would come from the stars, but it came from deep beneath the sea—a portal between dimensions in the Pacific Ocean." The living fossil Nautilus might rise again, under heavy alien influence, from depths nobody has yet to see.

2018

Going by the results of prominent research labs across the globe, it has been stated that we are in the thick of climate change and its irreversible transformation. The nature, as well as the future, of the current geological epoch is under heavy debate. Humans, alongside their synthetic companions, have pushed non-human forms of life towards large-scale extinction, brought on by rising global temperatures, acidification of oceans, and the shrinking of the Arctic ice sheet.

Maybe it's only symptomatic of the situation that we are so obsessed with capturing and collecting non-human biological life at the peak of its extinction. Almost everything is collected and preserved and, as a result, we have a collection of visual data intense and precise enough to model a whole new entity. Taavi Suisalu's work shows how planetary-scale computation is becoming a tool for building contemporary infrastructure: both the immaterial, floating somewhere between servers, users and data banks, and the physical. When it malfunctions it can produce inaccurate, incomplete or inconsistent data, aka dirty data. Using satellites for both visual and aural parts of the installation, Suisalu has created an immersive landscape responding to visitors' presence in the room. The image – an animated picture originating from a weather satellite feed – is paired up with signals recorded from malfunctioning satellites, which are played back on a modified record player whose speed is dependent on the position of those satellites over the horizon. This artificial satellite-created landscape could be stretched out over cities or states to cover up the gap produced by the malfunctioning "dirty data".

With the tangibility of the material world slowly slipping away and new means of materiality on the rise, the exhibition aims to look closely at the possibilities emerging from these new horizons. Katja Novitskova has been investigating the nexus between technology, ecology and seeing by drawing her own source material from online data banks. Her research shows how seeing has been outsourced to robotic agents operating in the depths of the sea and on distant celestial bodies, experiencing those new horizons for us. Navigating across big-data-provided landscapes, her works create another visual articulation of natural life.

Similarly, Guan Xiao's installation questions simulation by displaying how concepts such as "archaic" and "natural" gain other dimensions under software engineering. By juxtaposing "old" and "new" and blending images from different cultures and regions, a visual language difficult to pin down to one common denominator emerges. This pan-historical approach, varying from displaying relicts or fake archaic artefacts to contemporary commodities can be used to describe Norman Orro's work as well. The bodily compartments of his sound

piece – rock-imitating loudspeakers – contribute to a Flintstones-era theme park. Merged into a landscape, this setting could serve as a graveyard of Earthly relicts. When the planet underneath is long gone, dead, these replicas erected on the digitally composed surfaces running on vast data collections will be our guideposts.

The artist and theorist Hito Steyerl has found data to be the new tool for survival, which, considering the choice of vocabulary, will place us at the dawn of a new epoch. Terms like data "farming" and "harvesting", "mining" and "extraction" are all rather pastoral, allowing the current era to be defined as Data Neolithic and place us – the current inhabitants – in a state of transformation.² Mixtures of the archaic and contemporary are symptomatic of the current day: we are farming, harvesting, mining and excavating again for new material, partially out of fear and uncertainty, but also because these activities were built into our genetic survival kits millennia ago. "Excavating" the past also describes Laura Pöld's practice. For the exhibition she uses archaic materials, such as clay, reeds, wood and wool, in a pottery-based installation. Her site-specific work takes architecture into consideration: the former LU biscuit factory building is rich in architectural layers and Pöld work begins from considerations of its red brick wall. Blending these specific aesthetics with ancient warrior masks and warfare-related objects, Pöld's created zone blends the dichotomies of the archaic and contemporary, domestic and public, and war and peace. Her works could serve as a monument of the in between, pregnant with speculations, references and prophecies.

The Port of Rotterdam on the Shore of the Unknown

Rumour has it that there are more cats online than exist in the real world. Most of the pictures get uploaded and circulated by users, while other images represent a carefully designed strategy. This is done to provoke human sympathy, and for this reason, one of the first games built on blockchain technology, which also made crypto-currencies such as Bitcoin and Ethereum possible, revolves around the image of a cat. Although the game CryptoKitties includes a satisfaction factor, its main purpose is to make money online.

Along with other practices, both money and making money have undergone radical shifts cryptocurrencies are used in parallel with conventional currencies, workplaces have moved online, and the nature of labour is radically changing. In his film, Sol Archer investigates the diminishing role of manual labour in the port of Rotterdam, which has been brought about by amazing developments in automation and robotics. Allowing the aesthetics of "capitalist futurism" to intertwine with science fiction, the film operates in an amplified version of realism, i.e. the scenes look familiar yet they are presented with an odd intensity.

Progressing into the same realm, the video works by Anni Puolakka and Jaakko Pallasvuo unravel the characteristics of the attention economy. Inhabited by social media "influencers" and "taste-makers", the current digital landscape serves well to monetise personal endeavours. Puolakka and Pallasvuo have staged a video series with a Youtuber protagonist: a dancer whose videos get shared online; this in

² Hito Steyerl, "A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition," e-flux, no.72 (April 2016), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/72/60480/a-sea-of-data-apophenia-and-pattern-mis-recognition/>.

and of itself creates value through monetisation. Stretching from Youtubers' channels to the larger pool of contemporary consumer culture, this timely articulation speaks for the current (Western) person through capital distribution. As both digital platforms and the content they carry become outdated sooner than their offline or material equivalents, the Youtubers' culture will soon be floating like a fossil in the ocean of the forgotten Internet. Maybe it will be pushed ashore some place for further investigation as a telling relic of this era.

Future of DNA

It might not only be the Youtube heroes and their culture fossilizing – the key question about the future has always been the human role in it. Will humans become extinct as dinosaurs did many millennia ago? What is the correct balance between the biological, the synthetic and the other? Speculation often depicts the future without biological humans, and with the emergence of the non-human, hybrids or simply otherness.

The basis for this speculation lies within the developments of the scientific research conducted in medicine, engineering and biology. Joey Holder's project steps into the near future to unravel the possibilities rooted in today's scientific practice. The core "material" in her project is DNA: the unique code defining every form of life. Genome research is increasingly used in medical science to prevent and cure chronic illnesses, and it is understood to be essential for solving many major health problems. Human bodies are now increasingly mapped and digitised, and the growth of DNA-based data banks may lead to other operations, such as modelling and designing DNA. In the future envisioned by Holder, human life will be increasingly engineered. In other words: the future will be predominantly synthetic, with only a few human or anthropomorphic elements.

The anthropomorphic approach towards the non-human has not only been broadly theorised about, but actually realised in various ways and manners. Often the form given to certain machines, e.g. Mars rovers, resembles either the human or close companions, e.g. pets. Replicating, cloning, stretching, distorting, mixing, copying, pasting, erasing and so forth are key tools for Simon Wald-Lasowski. His massive spatial installation with 29 obscure chimpanzee figures originates from an encounter with "chimpanzee zero", which he found standing on a table with a book resting on its head in a curiosity shop. By making a mould from the original, Wald-Lasowski started replicating it and giving each copy its own characteristics. Similar to lab practices, where data is extracted from DNA for further research purposes, Wald-Lasowski operates between the familiar and the unknown. Shaping through each chimpanzee a larger picture of future breeds and genders, he bends and warps in great detail the speculative visions emerging from our current understanding of animal and natural life.

Nicholas Riis works with material even more severely: he models the familiar form further by reshaping and rethinking binaries. His pieces are hybrid forms of various kinds of otherness. Drawing from the queerness of material and form, he allows practicality to intersect with uncanniness. The outcome is a sculptural, well-designed object that is both alluring and alarming. In the Freudian

psychoanalysis practised by Melanie Klein, it is argued that an infant fantasises about eating its mother while being breastfed. Could this be applied to non-humans too? In terms of growing and progressing, certain acts of violence are often practised. To perform and live through trauma is essential in gaining identity, and this is what these odd forms might be trying to accomplish.

Ascending from the Liquid Horizon

Imagining a post-human future often leads to envisioning a catastrophic event that might either put an end to life, especially human life, or change it to its core. After 9/11 it's generally believed that a major threat – a pandemic, a terrorist attack or an incident leading to WWII – is lurking around the corner. It may come from an unstable situation anywhere in the world or emerge from increasing social inequality. It is also believed that developments in technology might provide solutions to problems such as global population growth, climate change, migration crises and the lack of resources. Corporate and scientific interests often overlap in finding solutions, and the explorers of the contemporary world dive deep into the unknown.

The sea shell Nautilus and the rockets ascending on the horizon line in Vello Vinn's work belong to the realm without humans. Remotely operated or without any human assistance, they seem to know their way through the open skies. In the early 1970s when the work was created, Estonia was part of the Soviet Union, which channelled most of its resources into sciences catering to the military. In terms of efficiency and growth, manual dexterity was swapped for automation whenever possible. This "progressive" approach left many "living fossils" floating on top of or sunk at the bottom of the sea: monstrous underwater military vessels resurfaced from time to time from the netherworld to show they were "still alive". Perhaps this applies even more broadly: this remorseless progress was characteristic of both the Soviet Union, eager to win the race against America, and to contemporary corporations and their little start-up companions. Captain Nemo confirmed to Professor Aronnax in Verne's story that there was zinc, iron, silver and gold at the bottom of the sea and that mining them was certainly feasible.³ Drawing from Vello Vinn's work, Kristina Õllek looks into the undertakings of Nautilus Minerals Inc., and focuses on an underwater vessel that will dive deep into the sea in 2019. Structured around the opportunities provided by contemporary material science, Õllek stages Verne's prophecy to the full. She looks at the Nautilus by Nautilus Minerals Inc. as it ascends to the liquid horizon.

Contemporary liquid, solid and digital surfaces have been highly mapped and manipulated. The increasing amounts of data reshaping the ecology on a planetary scale lead to a more ambiguous realm where the abyss between the natural and the constructed has been masterfully bridged. It might be a coral reef or a landscape, an animal, a fossil or a mineral – or it might all be smoke and mirrors. Across those landscapes, the contemporary Nautilus sails. The horizon might have altered, but there are still uncharted territories full of potential. The world might have changed slightly, but this story is not going anywhere.

³ Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea: A Tour of the Underwater World*, translated from French by F. P. Walter, published online in 2007, <http://jv.gilead.org.il/fpwalter/>

