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Museum-as-Compost – Matter, Rhythms, and the Nonhuman

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The reconciliation of divergent rhythms – that of a museum and non-human life – is a key issue raised by the display of *Immigrant Garden*¹, an installation by Kalle Hamm (b. 1969) and Dzamil Kamanger (b. 1948). The work comprises living plants that are governed by the rhythm of nature and conditions determined by the weather and climate. The work unfolds on the museum's balcony at its own unhurried pace.

The living component in the installation challenges established conventions of displaying art in a museum. With rare exceptions, exhibition dates and museum schedules are carefully planned and locked in. Visiting hours are inflexible, and guided tours adhere to an agreed schedule. The museum is a hermetic space with its own self-regulated rhythm. The presence of plants, however, injects an element of autonomous will. When more-than-humans are brought into the mix, the exhibition of artworks is no longer solely dependent on artists, curators, conservators or technicians.

Posthuman theory renounces established hierarchies in favour of the egalitarian coexistence of all beings. Entrenched anthropocentric notions and habitual patterns of thought have been challenged by feminist theory, but also by postcolonial theorists and environmental activists. Little by little, the idea that plants and other non-human agencies exist solely for the purpose of sustaining human life has correspondingly been deconstructed. The philosopher and feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti argues that all species originate from 'nature' and are hence equal: humans are part of the material world just like non-humans. Braidotti uses the term *zoe* to define the vitality and energy that flows through all matter. *Zoe* is distinct from *bios*, which represents an anthropocentric viewpoint on life. *Zoe* thus offers a conceptual tool for subverting anthropocentrism and embracing interspecies equality.²

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- ¹ *Immigrant Garden*, by Kalle Hamm and Dzamil Kamanger, also includes 26 watercolour paintings of plants, a map, written texts and sound recordings of illustrated botanical samples. The plants in question are commonly assumed to be native Finnish species, but they all originate from different parts of the globe. This article focuses on the organic component of the installation and its relationship with the museum.
 - ² Rosi Braidotti, 'Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism', in Richard Grusin (ed.), *Anthropocene Feminism*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 21–35.



Kalle Hamm and Dzamil Kamanger, detail of *Immigrant Garden*, 2006–18, shown on the terrace of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, plants (the complete art work includes paintings, book, plants)

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

Although humans have a special relationship to plants – we are dependent on the oxygen they produce and the nutrition they provide – their presence in an exhibition is a challenge. A clear line is drawn between the museum and the external world. Inside a museum, the amount of light, heat and humidity is carefully controlled within strict margins of deviation. But, if other-than-human entities are equal with humans, it would only be logical to rethink the fundamental terms of our coexistence also in a museum context. Customary conventions of display indeed had to be adapted for the ‘Coexistence’ exhibition; part of Hamm and Kamanger’s work is displayed on a balcony, as there is insufficient light inside the museum to sustain the survival of plant life.³ The tiny organisms inhabiting the soil and roots, as well as the pollinating insects flying from flower to flower, add a layer that diverges from usual museum conventions. The plants form part of an ecosystem that is difficult to reconcile with the controlled conditions usually prevailing inside the museum space.

³ *The Standard Facility Report* specifies the maximum limits for variables such as indoor temperature, humidity and brightness inside a museum. The conditions in the exhibition are supervised by the museum’s conservation team.

The organic part of the exhibition exists not in a state of stability, but in one of continual, slow transformation. The living organisms introduce an element of volatility and ephemerality, but the ongoing process of change is probably too slow to be detected by human exhibition-goers. Plants and other non-human beings follow a rhythm that is disconnected from human time and museum opening hours.⁴ Processes such as the perennial budding of new life, the growth of foliage, and the blossoming of flower-buds are ruled by the circadian rhythm and cycle of the seasons. For plants, time is cyclic – it goes around in a never-ending circle.⁵ Plant movement is far slower than human time; hence the growth of plants is imperceptible to the human senses.⁶

Humans and non-humans are divided into separate domains due to their divergent rhythms and concepts of time. Michael Marder, a philosopher and scholar specialising in plant intelligence, writes that vegetal life has suffered unbridled exploitation at the hands of humans during a long history of relegation to the margin of the margins.⁷ Plants have been devalued to the status of mere exploitable resources, void of intrinsic meaning or purpose.⁸

An appreciation of non-human agents, including plants, as intelligent life forms with the ability to communicate might help humans to conceive of alternative modes of being and to cease consigning non-humans to the status of mere resources. In his book *What a Plant Knows*, the biologist Daniel Chamovitz describes how plants perceive and respond to their environment. Trees send signals warning other trees of approaching swarms of foliage-devouring insects. Plants also communicate with each other through fragrances; they are able to detect airborne chemicals and translate these perceptions into physiological reactions. When a plant is under stress, it increases the amount of minerals it absorbs from the soil. On a hot day, plants regulate their stomata (the tiny adjustable openings in their leaves) to prevent excessive water loss through evaporation. Plants can detect touch and can sense human presence; they sometimes respond to tactile stimuli by ceasing to grow. They cannot directly hear sounds, but are able to sense vibrations and will stretch their roots in the direction of running water. Plants are, moreover, able to remember past events and to apply acquired knowledge.⁹

Because humans and non-humans communicate and perceive time differently, they must find alternative ways of connecting. Artist and scholar Tuija Kokkonen has sought to find ways of expanding non-human agencies in performance art.¹⁰ She uses the term ‘weak agency’ to describe how space can be made for non-human life forms, namely by actively effacing human presence and choosing to abstain from exercising power. Her strategies include diversion of attention, waiting, and embracing a condition of not-knowing. ‘Weak agency’ does not entail speaking on behalf of the non-human, nor total identification therewith, but co-action. Humans must abandon their presumed position of dominance in order for other life forms to emerge and be acknowledged.¹¹

4 Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking. A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, 12.

5 Marder 2013, 113. As plants do not actively aspire towards a ‘goal’, their position at the bottom of the teleological ladder has proved problematic in philosophy and metaphysics. Marder 2013, 107–108. Plants have nevertheless received attention in non-Western and feminist philosophy, e.g. Luce Irigaray, Marder, 2013, 6.

6 Marder 2013, 21, 103; Daniel Chamovitz, *What a Plant Knows*. New York: Scientific American and Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017, 107.

7 Marder 2013, 2–3.

8 Marder notes that this objectifying tendency even extends to the rationale for protecting forests: their protection is deemed essential because forests are the lungs of the earth – not because they possess inherent value in their own right. Marder 2013, 25.

9 Chamovitz 2017, 27–138.

10 Tuija Kokkonen, *Esityksen mahdollinen luonto: suhde ei-inhimilliseen esitystapahtumassa keston ja potentiaalisuuden näkökulmasta*, Helsinki: Uniarts Helsinki, Theatre Academy, Performing Arts Research Centre, 2017, https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/186249/Acta_Scenica_48.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, 20–23 (accessed 11 November 2018).

11 Kokkonen 2017, 85, 168–71. Kokkonen staged her performance outside the theatre, where she experimented with new ways of engaging more-than-human agencies.

Perceiving non-human agencies is a slow process that takes time. It entails willingness for human participants to defer or decelerate their usual rhythm – it demands a tolerance for waiting. The perception of non-human life and matter is a process that engages the whole body and its entire reserve of corporeal knowledge.¹²

Coexistence in a museum necessitates a shift of mindset. Acknowledging and giving space to more-than-humans requires the acceptance of uncertainty, surrender of control, and a sensitive, listening ear. Waiting is also a necessary element in Hamm and Kamanger's installation in the 'Coexistence' exhibition. The plants cannot be placed outside before the weather is warm enough, presumably not before June. Once outside, they will continue growing until September or later in autumn, as determined by the weather.

Three works in the exhibition by Charlotta Östlund (b. 1973), *Bouquet, Moulting and Cup* (2017), are comprised of dried plants. As time passes, the dried leaves attached to the branches gradually crumble and fade. Exposure to light accelerates the process. The organic matter alters so rapidly that the work, as it is, may last no longer than the duration of one exhibition. Östlund is interested in the study of transience, for which plants provide an ideal vehicle.

Bouquet, Moulting and Cup, which belong to Finnish National Gallery / Kiasma's collections, change continually from one moment to the next. They exist in an interminable process of change, renegotiation and repair – at a pace decided by the materials. Humans can impose certain conditions and parameters for their preservation, but control is possible only up to a certain point. In a museum, fragile artworks can be protected in a display case. Nevertheless, both organic and synthetic materials are subject to a slow transformation process, although the viewer or artist might not notice this decay. Only deliberate intervention can halt this inexorable degeneration, and the intervention itself is subject to negotiation.¹³

Non-human agencies and interspecies relations can fully emerge into focus only when the presumed dominance of the human subject at the apex of the power hierarchy is questioned. Humans and non-humans – rather than being defined through dualisms and taxonomical categories – can be seen as equals that exist in a relationship of mutual entanglement.¹⁴ This condition of entanglement is addressed by theories such as new materialism. Rather than adopting an individual-centric or anthropocentric perspective, new materialists regard agency, corporeality, matter and thought to coexist in an ongoing state of flux.¹⁵ Donna Haraway, a feminist theorist and scholar in the fields of science, technology and culture, uses the concept of compost to describe the relationship between humans and other species. This relationship is one of perpetual transformation and intertwined interaction; we exist in a constant state of becoming-with, all being part of the same compost heap.¹⁶ Drawing from sci-fi and speculative feminism, Haraway has coined the term *Chthulucene* to describe the present epoch of tentacular multispecies entanglements and processual existence. Wrenching free from patriarchal systems of thought, it challenges not only anthropocentrism, but also the privileged status of the individual. Haraway's theory expands the relationship between humans and the environment and their respective places in the world: humans

12 Kokkonen 2017, 88–89, 165–71.

13 The negotiation takes places between the curator, conservator and artist. For the work to survive, it must be returned to storage for a rest after prolonged exposure to light. The museum's facility report defines acceptable parameters for indoor conditions.

14 See e.g. Braidotti 2017, 32–35; Donna J. Haraway, see e.g. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016, 30–57.

15 This line of reasoning is associated especially with feminist theory, which contests the structuralist notion that all phenomena and assigned significances are ultimately social and cultural constructs. See e.g. Barbara Bolt, 'Introduction. Towards a "New Materialism" Through the Arts', in Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds.), *Carnal Knowledge. Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts*. London, New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2016, 1–3.

16 Haraway 2016, e.g.4, 32.



Niina Tervo, from the series 'Undulate', 2018 (from left) 1, 5 and 2:
 natural rubber latex, pigment, polyethylene, polyester wadding, 27cm x 25cm x 175cm;
 natural rubber latex, pigment, polyurethane foam, 24cm x 155cm x 20cm;
 natural rubber latex, pigment, polyester wadding, 45cm x 60cm x 22cm
 Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

are inseparably entwined not only with other organisms and life forms, but also with technologies.¹⁷

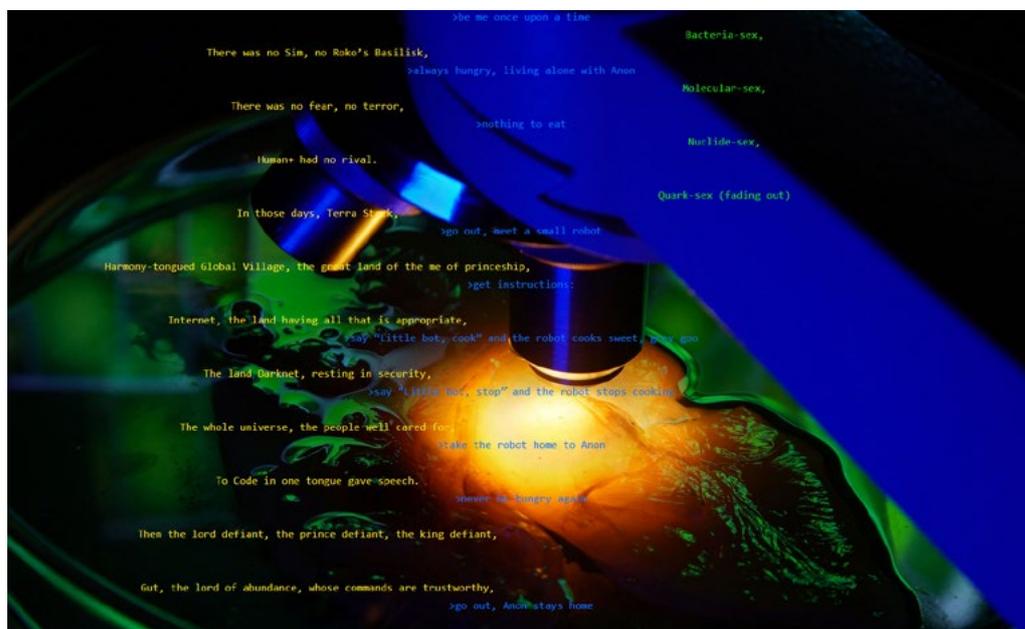
Niina Tervo (b. 1983) bases her practice on the idea of the human body as a multispecies collective in which microbes outnumber the total sum of human cells.¹⁸ The bacteria inhabiting the human body affect our thoughts, emotions and brain functions; therefore the gut is often described as the second brain.¹⁹ In her practice, Tervo harnesses bodily senses, feelings and intuition as modes of action alongside logical reasoning. Acquired information alternates with experiential knowledge, with the two becoming enmeshed. The dualistic separation of mind and body, thought and artwork, is abrogated when feelings and body memory are incorporated as working methods.

Tervo allows the clay, natural rubber and stone to take part in steering the process. The human body and the heat, energy and information that it retains within itself influence the material, and *vice versa*. Energy is circulated through the body and matter, permitting a two-way flow of inputs. The interaction with the materials is dialogic; Tervo engages her

17 Haraway, 2016, e.g. 51–57. Haraway argues that the Anthropocene places too much emphasis on humans and does not make a radical enough departure from anthropocentric models of thought. She proposes the term Chthulucene as an alternative, which she sees as representing hope and opportunity rather than cynicism.

18 Conversation in Niina Tervo's studio, November 2018.

19 Matti Mielonen. 'Ihmisen kaksi älyä ovat yhteydessä toisiinsa: uusi tutkimus paljasti, että suolistosta on suora hermoyhteys aivoihin', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 26 September 2018, website, <https://www.hs.fi/tiede/art-2000005842497.html> (accessed 11 November 2018).



Jenna Sutela, *Gut-Machine Poetry*, 2016, screen capture from the online artwork
 Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

senses and learns from matter by experimenting, mixing pigments, moulding clay, and simply spending time with the materials. The process is time-consuming, but its very slowness allows the agency of the materials to emerge. Tervo's approach is characterised by openness, processuality, and the absence – or impossibility – of a clear beginning and ending, which challenges the notion of individuality and authorship.

Experientially-focused artistic practice that fosters interaction with materials can offer an alternative mode of knowing that challenges the privileged status of depersonalised scientific production of knowledge. Artistic practice can yield alternative forms of knowledge born gradually and experientially through a connection with matter and objects, on a partly intuitive and unconscious basis.²⁰

20 See e.g. Estelle Barrett, 'Materiality, Affect, and the Aesthetic Image', in Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds.), *Carnal Knowledge. Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts*. New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2016, 63–72. Barrett argues that there is continual back-and-forth movement between the biological and social self and the material world, which she sums up with the concept of 'performative production of knowledge'. The othering of non-human species is linked to the notion that knowledge is produced primarily by linguistic means. Karoliina Lummaa describes how linguicentric thinking and communication inevitably results in the exclusion of the more-than-human. Command of language is also cited as evidence pointing to the 'special' status of humans in relation to other species. Karoliina Lummaa, 'Antroposeeni ja objektien ekologia. Ihmisen luontosuhde humanismin jälkeen', in Karoliina Lummaa and Lea Rojola (eds.), *Posthumanismi*. Turku: Eetos, 2014, 269–70. Rosi Braidotti has similarly critiqued the connection between language and being. In its tendency to categorise, the language of science is inherently subordinating: Kirsti Lempiäinen, 'Rosi Braidotti – Nomadisen naissubjektien visioija', in Anneli Anttonen, Kirsti Lempiäinen and Marianne Liljeström (eds.), *Feministejä aikamme ajattelihoita*. Tampere: Vastapaino, 2000, 22–24.

Gut-Machine Poetry (2016)²¹ by Jenna Sutela (b. 1983) further expands the concept of coexistence by uniting humans, more-than-humans and machines. The work links the fermentation of yeast and bacteria in kombucha tea with a text-generating digital database, creating a symbiotic relationship between living organisms and a machine. When linked, a new language is created: the movements of the living material trigger an algorithm that jumbles up texts fed in by the artist, generating machine poetry that is free of the artist's control and all rules of grammar. The work questions the separation of technology and the organic world, as well as the dualism presumed to exist between the natural and the synthetic, the physical and the immaterial. The relationship between the artist, the fermenting kombucha, and the computer is so entangled that it is impossible to tell who is influencing what, rendering creative agency inseparable from the artwork.

The exhibits presented by Hamm and Kamanger, Östlund, Tervo and Sutela pose a challenge to the museum and its established assignments of time, permanence, authorship and spectatorship. They stretch the concept of the collection and the exhibition beyond something that exists in a frozen, inert state of imposed control. When the author, artwork, matter and the viewer are interwoven in a network, a space is created for new modes of thinking and being. The museum-as-compost, as a being that exists in a perpetual state of becoming-with, presents an opportunity for alternative modes of existence and for the appearance of the unexpected; it also proposes a rethink of conventional notions of agency within a museum context. Opening up the museum to non-human agencies can engender a broader understanding of interspecies equality, helping us move closer toward a more egalitarian existence, both in the museum and beyond.

21 <http://arsplus.kiasma.fi/jenna-sutela/> (accessed 11 November 2018). For further reading Aino Nurmesjärvi, 'Beyond Human Understanding: Creating New Language and Visuals on the Web. Commissioned Online Artworks by Jenna Sutela and Tuomo Rainio', *FNG Research* 1/2018, https://fngresearch.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/fngr_2018-1_nurmesjarvi_aino_article1.pdf (accessed 11 November 2018).