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One Among Many. Alma Heikkilä's Work for the Kiasma Commission by Kordelin

Satu Oksanen, MA, Curator, Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art
Kiasma, Helsinki

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Through painting, Alma Heikkilä (born 1984) strives to reach out to organisms that are undetectable by the human senses due to their microscopic size, or some other kind of inaccessibility – microbes, spores, algae, the interior debris of dead trees, or colonies of lichen growing inside a rock. Heikkilä alerts our senses to the tiniest, most invisible array of life forms that can usually be perceived only with the aid of devices like microscopes. In her paintings Heikkilä enlarges these organisms and their worlds to such an extreme, that they diminish the human viewer with their vast scale.

The surfaces and motifs of paintings provide habitats – bodies – for various life forms: sea, decaying wood, intestines and forest ecosystems. In turn they inhabit the space of the museum.

Heikkilä collaborates with various co-beings – scholars, artists, organisms and materials. She reflects on multi-species' coexistence by fusing scientific knowledge with personal experience. Her approach is rhizome-like, pulling together multiform modes of thought, producing knowledge through dialogue, and allowing materials to interact spontaneously with each other, with ongoing back-and-forth movement between these domains.

In her practice Heikkilä looks for ways of connecting with non-human species, especially those with which her body has a symbiotic or otherwise interdependent relationship. Bacteria partly govern the process, as bodily functions are not solely controlled by the human subject's conscious will. Microbes affect feelings and behaviour, producing states that either enable or inhibit the body's functions. The philosopher and feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti argues that all species originate from something we used to call 'nature' and are hence equal: humans are part of the material world just like non-humans. Braidotti defines the vitality and energy that flows through all matter using the term 'zoe'. (Greek for 'life'). This term *zoe* offers a conceptual tool for subverting anthropocentrism and embracing interspecies' equality. *Zoe*-centred egalitarianism is the core of post-anthropocentric turn. For Braidotti the post-human feminist knowing subject is a complex



Alma Heikkilä, warm and moist | decaying wood - red, gastrointestinal tract, vomit, nipples, Mycetophilidae, Fuligo septica slime moulds, jelly fungus, mycelium, Parasitoid wasps, wood-decay fungus, Hyaloscypha epiporia, xylariaceae, Crustose lichen, pseudoscorpions, arcyria denudata, long-legged flies, ruby-tailed wasps, cuckoo wasps, damselflies, snakeflies, metallic wood-boring beetles, halcophora mariana, crane fly, harvestmen, greenfly, ants, black-fly larvae, ticks, snails, mosses, Heteroptera, bacteria, 2019

polyester, aluminium, hardwood, acrylic polymer emulsion, cotton, sand-based pigment from Hyrynsalmi, ink from black alder fruit, industrial pigments and inks, plaster, 308cm x 240cm

Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

assemblage of human and non-human, planetary and cosmic, given and manufactured.¹ On the other hand, the feminist theorist Donna J. Haraway, a science, technology and culture scholar, uses the concept of 'composting' to describe the relationship between humans and other species – it is a continually evolving, interdependent state of becoming-with, becoming humus.²

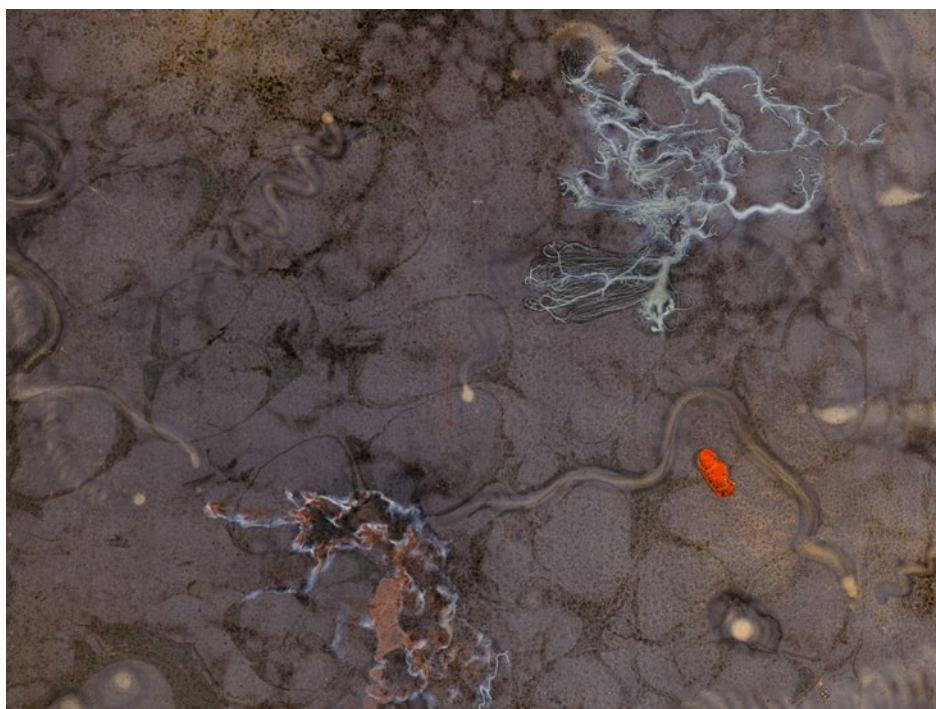
The anthropologist Anna Tsing describes multispecies' coexistence with the term 'assemblage'. Assemblages are open-ended gatherings in which diverse species influence each other to varying degrees: some are survival-critical, while others are less significant.³ For Heikkilä, human and non-human life forms are inseparably connected.

An artwork is not created by a single author, but by a collective of agencies. It is formed in an entangled ecosystem of connections, species and beings. By making space for other agencies, Heikkilä submits her authorship and her individuality for critical reappraisal. She participates in events co-instigated by many bodies and agencies in a chain reaction that does not follow the predictable paths of human logic. When paint is spread over a canvas, the process is the combined effort of water and pigment. As materials interact, the ink obeys its own will. Heikkilä literally works with the materials; they are not merely resources, but

1 Braidotti, Rosi 2017, 'Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism.' In Richard Grusin (ed.), *Anthropocene Feminism*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 21–41.

2 Haraway, Donna J. 2016, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, e.g. 4, 19, 30–57.

3 Tsing uses the example of the *matsutake* mushroom (a mushroom that grows wild in human-disturbed forests) in her analysis of the human impact on natural ecosystems and the possibility for cohabitation in the midst of human destruction. Tsing, Anna 2015, *Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 22–23.



Alma Heikkilä, } soil ~ minerals mixing with the living, lichens, slime moulds, traces of insects and roots, mycelium, erosion, earthworms (detail), 2019
 polyester, coniferous wood, acrylic polymer emulsion, steel, cotton, sand-based pigment from Hyrnsalmi, industrial pigments and inks, plaster, 265cm x 240cm

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Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

co-agencies. The works are traces of coexistence and communal processes. They are not a self-contained unit with clear boundaries, but interwoven entanglements of processes.

Working together is an inherent necessity. Heikkilä is dependent on other agencies, such as nutrients provided by plants, oxygen in the air, and the organic materials critical to making her work. The artist's conscious awareness of this interdependence and of the autonomous will of the materials, confers her co-authorship status – she is one among many.

Collaboration with more-than-human organisms is a time-consuming process. Slowing down is a conscious way of listening. Because humans and non-humans communicate and relate to time differently, they must find alternative ways of connecting.⁴ Giving space to diverse agencies entails working flexibly with time, accepting uncertainty, surrendering control, and developing a sensitive, listening ear – the experience must embrace the entire corporeal dimension, harnessing all of the body's stored knowledge. The works in Heikkilä's

4 Artist and scholar Tuija Kokkonen has experimented with novel ways of expanding non-human agencies in performance art, through strategies such as diverting attention, waiting, and embracing a condition of not-knowing. Time is needed in abundance for the perception of non-human agencies. This entails a willingness to abandon human rhythm and a capacity for waiting. The perception of non-human life forms and materials engages the whole body and its entire reserve of corporeal knowledge. Kokkonen, Tuija 2017, *Esityksen mahdollinen luonto: suhde ei-inhimilliseen esitystapahtumassa keston ja potentiaalisuuden näkökulmasta*, https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/186249/Acta_Scenica_48.pdf. Taideyliopiston Teatterikorkeakoulu, Esittävien taiteiden tutkimuskeskus, Helsinki, 85–89, 165–79.



Alma Heikkilä, warm and moist | decaying wood - red, gastrointestinal tract, vomit, nipples, Mycetophilidae, Fuligo septica slime moulds, jelly fungus, mycelium, Parasitoid wasps, wood-decay fungus, Hyaloscypha epiporia, xylariaceae, Crustose lichen, pseudoscorpions, arcyria denudata, long-legged flies, ruby-tailed wasps, cuckoo wasps, damselflies, snakeflies, metallic wood-boring beetles, halcophora mariana, crane fly, harvestmen, greenfly, ants, black-fly larvae, ticks, snails, mosses, Heteroptera, bacteria, 2019

polyester, aluminium, hardwood, acrylic polymer emulsion, cotton, sand-based pigment from Hyrynsalmi, ink from black alder fruit, industrial pigments and inks, plaster, 308cm x 240cm

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exhibition invite visitors to linger; it can function as a resting spot, a place to think, a space for corporeal immersion in the work and the space.

The designation of non-humans as 'other' is intrinsically linked to the notion of language as the basis of knowledge production. Researcher Karoliina Lummaa describes how language-anchored thought and communication lead to the inescapable exclusion of the non-human. The human command of language is furthermore seen as evidence attesting to the special status of humans in relation to other species.⁵ When we regard humans as equals among all matter and all life forms, it seems only fitting to expand the experience in the exhibition space to a bodily dimension. As part of her collaborative method, Heikkilä has invited a contribution from dramatist Elina Minn, who has created experiential anatomical exercises for viewers, focusing on touch, breathing, and relationships between bodies. By

5 Lummaa, Karoliina 2014, 'Antroposeeni ja objektien ekologia. Ihmisen luontosuhde humanismin jälkeen.' In Karoliina Lummaa & Lea Rojola (eds.), *Posthumanismi*. Turku: Eetos, 269–70. See also e.g. Braidotti 2017, 27–29. Gender, feminist and post-colonial etc. studies have provided new methods and created alternative visions of the human and of society. Feminist theory is in the middle of a reconfiguration of knowledge production.



Alma Heikkilä, installation view of the exhibition, ' / ~` mediums, ' _ " bodies, ' _ " ° ∞ logs, ∞ ' , ' / ~` ' holes, ' ` - . ` ' -- ° habitats / / ^ ' * ' - ' . ' , ' / ~` want to feel (.) you inside \ | * . . * * \ | * . . * / . - . ~ ' ' , ' / ~` * * * ~`

Kiasma Commission by Kordelin, Kiasma's Studio K Gallery,
 on view from 15 March – 27 July 2019

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Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

incorporating touch in the exhibition, Minn subverts the idea that knowledge production is tied exclusively to language. Museums have a problematic relationship with bodily beings and touch. Perspiring skin, odours, and greasy fingers are not considered part of the museum context, where vision is privileged over the other senses. Smells are virtually eradicated. The viewer is in touch with the artwork solely through textual mediation, for physical approach is forbidden, or at least restricted. Minn's anatomical exercises heighten a physical experience of the artwork, deepening it beyond the sense of vision.

There is a distinct boundary between what is deemed to be the inside and what is the outside of a museum. The amount of artificial light inside, for instance, is carefully controlled, with only a limited amount of natural light permitted to enter. The evenness of the lighting is artificially regulated. Everything inside the museum, starting with the air itself, is subject to control, too. The doors shut out a multitude of life, but this excluded array of extant beings nevertheless intrudes, not only in the colonies hosted within human bodies, but also in an artwork's materials.

The display of the works challenges the human impulse to control exterior conditions. The show, in Kiasma's Studio K Gallery in spring 2019, is lit by natural light. Depending on the weather and the amount of incoming daylight, the installation presents itself differently, as it

naturally would during different times of day and across the seasons. Direct sunlight fills the space in the afternoon and evening. During the exhibition, from March to July, the amount of natural light will progressively increase. If weather conditions limit the availability of sunlight, making it difficult to see, the other senses will need to become more sharply attuned. Thus, the weather – an element that is usually kept outside the museum's walls – becomes an active co-contributor to the exhibition. Light, a usually stable, uniform presence in a museum, is meanwhile destabilised.⁶

The context of Heikkilä's practice is defined by an awareness of the ecological crisis and human impacts on ecosystems and non-human species. Art historian and cultural critic T. J. Demos notes that the problem with exhibitions is that they inevitably have a carbon footprint, leading to a conflict of content and structures. Demos argues that environmental issues cannot be viewed as separate from issues of race, gender, ethnicity or power – social, economic and political problems are all intertwined.⁷ Heikkilä subjects her practice to such a critique, ranging from the repercussions of electricity consumption to issues of transportation. Heikkilä works in between limitations and possibilities. On the one hand, her practice is a way of contributing to discourses on environmental emergencies, but this personal imperative comes with the inevitable, even painful realisation that her output, too, exacerbates the burden on the planet. She reflects on the structural problems inherent in artistic practices, the choices of the individual artist, the surrounding community, and how these issues are intertwined.

For Heikkilä, art is a domain for interspecies' communality. During this epoch of ecological threat, taking action means searching for new ways of existing, speculating, and recognising the agency of the non-human. Posing questions is more important than finding answers. Heikkilä strives to broaden the scope of authorship beyond the individual, dismantling structural hierarchies and making space for more-than-human agencies. In doing so, she challenges not only anthropocentrism, but also museum conventions. By making space for other agencies, such as natural light, and by bringing corporeality into the museum's ecosystem, she opens up the hermetic interiority of the museum space, creating opportunities for new symbiotic forms of existence. Heikkilä's role in this rhizome network is that of voicing an invitation to gather.

Alma Heikkilä: *the Kiasma Commission by Kordelin*, is open 15 March – 27 July 2019, at Kiasma's Studio K Gallery, Helsinki

6 There is a back-up lighting system that turns on automatically when conditions become too dim to see.

7 See e.g. Demos, T. J. 2016, *Decolonizing Nature. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 37–38.