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Being and Thinking with(in) the Pavilion Space. Curatorial Notes

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Dead Hedge is a two-metre diameter metal structure packed with twigs and branches gathered from around the Nordic Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale. It is a work by the artist duo nabbteeri and is situated on an elevated section behind the pavilion, blocking human visitors from accessing a shortcut to the building. The work offers a suitable home, however, for many non-human species inhabiting the Biennale gardens – or at least, this is the proposal of the artists.

There are bird spikes attached to the beams under the pavilion's eaves. The spikes are there to deter pigeons, unwanted guests. The built environment often draws species boundaries. Here, the exterior wall indicates the beginning of territory reserved for human activity.

The demarcation between the Nordic Pavilion and the Giardini¹ is both radical and virtually imperceptible. The rectangular building is distinct from the lush gardens, yet it opens directly onto the Giardini via its wall-high sliding doors. The spikes are installed to drive away birds, but it is otherwise difficult to prevent non-humans from entering the open space. Furthermore, wind, heat and humidity flow freely through every pore of the pavilion, undeterred by the spiked obstacles and built barriers. There is, moreover, no mechanical air-conditioning sealing off the building as an inward-looking, mechanised system.

In front of the pavilion, there is another work by nabbteeri, *Compost*, which consists of organic matter routinely removed from the exhibition premises and its grounds. The vegetation generates a steady stream of garden waste. By means of composting, this organic material is transformed into nutrient-rich humus, both as part of *Compost* and in the peripheral areas of the gardens behind the exhibition pavilions: thus, waste is only its temporary status. The Nordic Pavilion's porous travertine tiles must be kept clear of rotting leaves, but the very same waste is transformed into life-sustaining fertile matter as part of nabbteeri's works. How any given material is defined is contingent on the space or place it occupies, and attempts to designate separate spheres of human and non-human agency.

An exhibition is inherently an invitation to a get-together. This exhibition offers a space for the coexistence of diverse life forms, as well as a place for reflection on multispecies

1 Garden in Italian.



The Nordic Pavilion in Venice

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

entanglements. Posthuman theory questions anthropocentrism by underlining the inevitable interdependency of human and non-human species. Feminist posthuman thinkers additionally focus critical inquiry on persistent dualisms assumed to exist between inside and outside, familiar and other, mind and body. For me, feminist posthumanism provides a lens for reflecting on the mechanisms of othering, of which taxonomic hierarchies offer an example. Feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti represents a branch of feminist materialism that critiques dualistic thinking that results in hierarchies. She advocates species egalitarianism, based on the premise that we are all enmeshed in the entity we previously defined as nature.² Material feminism furthermore embraces the materiality of the human body, underscoring material productions of reality and how humans are subject to non-human agencies, forces and materialities. During the curatorial process at the Nordic Pavilion, this was a guideline when thinking about the artworks, their materiality and being in a shared space.

The commissioned artworks focus not only on interdependencies but also on alliances with and between non-human entities. This is simultaneously affirmed and challenged by the spatial logic of the Nordic Pavilion.

The three European nettle trees (*Celtis australis*) growing inside the pavilion stand as a reminder of the presence of the non-human. The exhibition is a temporary guest that must

² See e.g. Rosi Braidotti, 'Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism', in Richard Grusin (ed.), *Anthropocene Feminism*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 21–48.

adapt to the space,³ necessitating a re-negotiation of agency and sharing space. In addition to the towering trees, the building and its surroundings are populated by far smaller life forms undetectable by the human senses. Each human entering the space is itself actually a holobiont – a host plus all the resident symbiotic microbe ecosystems that one carries within the body. Not only does interspecies relations force a philosophical reappraisal from

The exhibition ‘Weather Report: Forecasting Future’ touches upon salient themes related to climate change, species extinction and loss of biodiversity, but it also voices hope in the possibility of coexistence, underscoring the need to re-evaluate how humans relate to other species and the obligation to acknowledge the interdependencies existing within multispecies ecosystems. Writer and activist Rebecca Solnit reflects on the importance of hope, emphasising that hope is not tantamount to denial of fact – hope is not blind faith in recuperation. Rather, it is a spur and engine of action; it entails recognition of the complexity of existing problems and the ability to imagine alternative futures.^{*)} In this exhibition, it was a curatorial decision to acknowledge the significance of hope in thinking about the future. Contemplation through fears, hopes and instincts does not entail watertight logical argumentation. Rather, by staying in touch with materiality and instilling a heightened awareness of it, and by inviting visitors to identify with the non-human through a corporeal entanglement, the works can serve as exercises of conceptual realignment and as a space for collectivity, calling also for an ethically compelling rethink of established notions about various entanglements.

*) Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.

the humanities, but biology itself has been compelled to review its theories about human, interspecies relations and taxonomies. From a biological perspective, a human visitor is not an individual, but a host of many species. Only half of our body is actually human; human cells make up less than half of the body’s total cell count. Every human hosts roughly 160 species of bacteria, all of which constitutes their own ecosystem. The theory of living organisms as holobionts debunks established ideas about organismal individuality, also posing questions as to what it means to be human. Scott Gilbert, a biologist and scholar of developmental genetics, argues that symbiosis is the evolutionary strategy that supports life on Earth.⁴ So too Margaret McFall-Ngai, a biologist and researcher of host-bacterial symbiosis, draws on recent findings of biological research that revolutionise established notions about humans and their presumed individuality. People are in fact predominantly microbe, not human. Bacteria influence our brain functions, affecting how we think and feel.⁵

Various flora, fauna, fungi and microbes coexist under the travertine tiles, on the pavilion’s surfaces, as well as between its joints: the roots, branches, foliage, rhizomes and symbiotic entanglements create a bustling hub of more-than-human life inside the space. This teeming colony is most likely oblivious to the presence of the exhibition and the artworks, its sole impulse being to inhabit the matter imported into the building. It is impervious to all attempts to restrict the interior purely for human usage.

The pavilion is itself a giant case for displaying, containing and protecting artworks, yet it is highly susceptible to exterior conditions and forces of nature. Hence, from a human perspective, uncertainty and unpredictability prevail. Ane Graff’s installations make visible the vulnerability of the human body to various agencies. The body is exposed to environmental toxins – usually contaminants of factitious origin – which turn against it, causing diseases. Graff’s works take the form of cabinets; they are enclosed, human-organised entities. Display cases are usually meant to be hermetically sealed but in this instance the doors are left ajar, transforming them into permeable zones exposed to environmental impact. They, too, are rendered prone for the materials and objects inside to change, grow, and break free from any attempts to isolate and control.

The premise of this exhibition is an attempt to recognise the agency of the non-human. It is often difficult for humans to acknowledge and grasp the existence of life forms and phenomena

3 The curators are responsible for watering and looking after the trees in the pavilion, as stated in the Rules for use of the Nordic Pavilion.

4 Scott F. Gilbert, ‘Holobiont by Birth: Multilineage Individuals as the Concretion of Cooperative Processes’, in Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, M73–M89.

5 Margaret McFall-Ngai, ‘Noticing Microbial Worlds: The Postmodern Synthesis in Biology’ in Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, M51–M69.



European nettle trees that form part of the Nordic Pavilion in Venice

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

that exist on a scale different from theirs, such as microscopic organisms or the slow workings of toxic agents and reactions of prolonged temporal duration. The exhibition gives a visible, tangible form to entanglements and interdependencies, also of an emotional kind. Ingela Ihrman's algae-shaped sculptures surpass humans in their proportions. Such inversions of scale can draw our attention to the existence of a variety of living and non-living entities, compelling a rethink of interspecies relations. The cyclic changes that occur in the exhibition may be too slow to be perceived with the human eye. Such transformations are activated by non-human agencies, whether as materials changing form, plants becoming rooted or as the slow decay of organic matter.

Graff, Ihrman and nabbteeri often work collaboratively. They reach out and work on a cross-disciplinary basis, initiate a social gathering or form a collective. In a group exhibition, artworks and issues become interconnected: they float, intermingle and cross-pollinate in a shared context, forming a temporary ecosystem of artworks, visitors and various non-human beings, even if the latter might use it as a transient habitat, ignorant of the presence of art. By heightening the visitors' awareness of the materiality of the building, the artworks, and the environs, and by assimilating their bodies to diverse co-existing beings, the exhibition reaches out to connect with other agencies. It reveals that the spaces and domains reserved for different agencies – what is considered inside and outside – are ultimately unstable in their shifting boundaries.