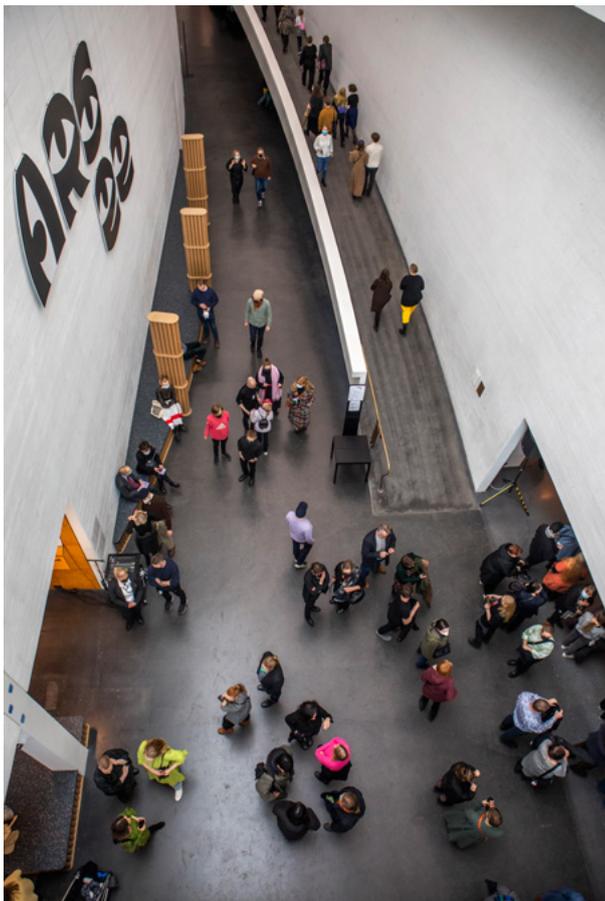


KANSALLISGALLERIA •  
FINLANDS NATIONALGALLERI •  
FINNISH NATIONAL GALLERY •

## ARS22 – Living Encounters

João Laia, Chief Curator, Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Also published in Leevi Haapala, João Laia, Jari-Pekka Vanhala (eds.), **ARS22: Eläviä kohtaamisia – Living Encounters**. A Museum of Contemporary Art Publication 173/2022. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma & Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2022



Visitors at the 'ARS 22 Living Encounters' exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, in April 2022

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

We live in a time of generalised crisis. Developments in ecology, economics, health, labour, migration, politics, technology, and beyond have triggered an 'emergency convergence' through which these fields manifest as part of a cumulative, integrated movement. Yet despite this confluence, translated in the mutual implication and global reach of this manifold crisis, such coalition does not unify the world and its agents under identical conditions. Defined by the feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti as a technologically mediated interlinking with the 'natural-culture continuum of our terrestrial milieu', the webbed composition of life on Earth also includes differences regarding human geographical location and/or 'access to social and legal entitlements, technologies, safety, prosperity, and good health services'. In fact, accrued historically through processes of domination and exclusion, inequality has in recent times expanded around the world, although – and depending on their contextual inscription – each actor perceives the impacts of these intensifying tensions differently. In Braidotti's words, '(t)he sexualised others (non-binary, women, LBGTQ+); the racialised others (non-Europeans, indigenous); and the naturalised others (animals, plants, the Earth)' have permanently throughout history been closer to any given crisis.<sup>1</sup>

The urgent features of the current situation have given rise to a generalised sense of anxiety and menace. For Braidotti, '(e)xhaustion and fatigue – a recurrent sense of hopelessness and impossibility – have become prominent features of the contemporary psychic landscapes', functioning as 'witnesses to the daily and nightly struggles to come to terms with what our world has become and the complexities of our historical context'. The accumulation and overlapping of fatigue, fear, and despair generates feelings of impotence, 'a social and psychological dimming of a sense of possibility, which triggers a

1 Rosi Braidotti. "'We" Are in *This* Together, But We Are Not One and the Same', *Bioethical Inquiry* 17 (2020), 465–69.



**Kimmo Kaivanto, *When the Sea Dies*, 1973, oil on canvas, 195cm x 162.5cm**

**Sara Hildén Foundation / Sara Hildén Art Museum**

Photo: Sara Hildén Art Museum/Jussi Koivunen

systemic fragmentation and a shattering of our relational capacity'.<sup>2</sup> Franco 'Bifo' Berardi also identifies a current inability emotionally and rationally to process current events, whose speed is intensifying, leading to nervous overstimulation. Berardi names this state of things 'chaos', articulating it as both 'the measure of the complexity of the world in relation to the capacities of intellectual reduction' and 'the excessive density of the infosphere in relation to the psychosphere'.<sup>3</sup> Such argument adds the imprint of technology to the context described by Braidotti, underlining how the digitally led exponential

increase of information flows has contributed to the exhaustion of the contemporary psychic landscape and an erosion of collective affinities.

Indeed, while technological developments in the digital sphere have enhanced our sense of connection, they have also exacerbated pre-existing dynamics of exclusion and inequality via social atomisation. Cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han argues: 'To the extent that it exerts a disembodied influence, digitalisation weakens common ties.' Envisioning social media as a paradoxical tool of fragmentation, Han identifies how current attention-seeking compulsions led to a crisis of the social: 'Digital communication channels are filled with echo chambers in which the voices we hear are mainly our own. Likes, friends and followers do not provide us with resonance; they only strengthen the echoes of the self,' leaving us progressively more isolated. For the theorist, the (digital) 'community' that is today invoked everywhere is atrophied and 'lacks the symbolic power to bind people together', rather dissolving commonality into 'a market in which one exposes and exhibits oneself'.<sup>4</sup> Distorting early utopian aims and hopes for boundless connectivity, today's commodified model of the digital field has been contributing to social fragmentation, promoting a gradual disintegration of the public sphere.

<sup>2</sup> Braidotti, "'We' Are in *This* Together...'", 465–69.

<sup>3</sup> Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. London and New York: Verso, 2017, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Byung-Chul Han. *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020, 11, 13, 21.

Visitors at the 'ARS 22 Living Encounters' exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, with a detail from D Harding's *International Rock Art Red*, April 2022

D Harding, *International Rock Art Red*, Drawn from Felt Blankets, 2022, hematite, gum arabic, wool felt  
 Courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
 Pirje Mykkänen



Such processes of individualisation not only foster detachment between people and their social environments, but also, and just as importantly, disable potential encounters with the other. By structuring communication according to the closed logic of the loop, the digital regime at large and social media in particular exclude unfamiliar and unexpected agents and narratives from one's inventory of exchanges. Because this dynamic eliminates engagement with and the witnessing of other ways of being, it further crystallises the self, limiting both our relational spectrum, as well as our capability to imagine otherwise. Culture, media, and social justice researcher Max Haiven describes the contemporary moment as a 'crisis of imagination' that we experience every day 'in how and who and what we value, (...) in the patterns we imagine the world around us and hence, we act in the world, a crisis in the way we, as social, co-operative beings, reproduce our world and are reproduced by it'. Haiven also underlines the crucial role of imagination in the construction of 'ranks, hierarchies and other forms of coercive authority', such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and nationalism, all of which are 'ultimately imaginary distinctions between people'.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1961, the exhibition series ARS has engaged with the most pressing questions defining its time. The tenth edition, 'ARS22 Living Encounters', deals with the processes of social fragmentation that are endangering life on the planet today. Drawing from Braidotti's envisioning of life as an interconnected albeit unequal system, the project envisions the social as an expanded field, proposing a plural portrait of the world that underlines the mutual implication of areas often considered separate. In a recent article, Kim West claims that today's key political-aesthetic task is to transform the world's 'heterogeneity into an assembled image of these different problems, which could make it possible for us to grasp them as *one* common problem, but without dismissing any (...) as secondary to the

<sup>5</sup> Max Haiven. *Crisis of Imagination, Crisis of Power*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2014, 8.



Installation view of Jenna Sutela's *Magma*, 2019, comprising head-shaped lava lamps and mobile app, on display in 'ARS22 Living Encounters' at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki

Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

others'.<sup>6</sup> According to West, only this sort of perspective would make it possible to imagine an alternative to the present. 'ARS22' engages with the current ecological emergency in its multiple declinations not only as one of the central issues of our time but also as a magnetic centre around which other essential issues orbit, aiming to formulate an integrated composite proposal about the now.

In addition to both the deployment of the ecological emergency as an overarching embodied representation of Braidotti's interlinked approach and West's challenge of designing an image able to produce a holistic description of the now, 'Living Encounters' includes two other defining gestures: the inclusion of historical positions and an emphasis on live practices. For the first time, ARS includes key moments in art history, drawing from its past editions, the collections of the Finnish National Gallery, and loans from international institutions. As argued by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, '(h)istory represents the quintessential tool for *denaturalising* the social' and therefore is a necessary element of any critical position.<sup>7</sup> The main goal is to historicise the present, underlining and speculating lineages and brushing against the entrapment of the eternal now radiating from the instantaneity of the digital regime, while at the same time exploring the enduring presence and permanent reconfiguration of past questions.

Among others, the exhibition includes Marina Abramović and Ulay's seminal performative experiments exploring the embeddedness of the spiritual and the bodily; Lewis Baltz's documents of the interaction between health and technology in connection to regimes of bodily control; Jimmie Durham's reconfiguration of the monument as personal portable device; Tehching Hsieh's radical performative critique of the disciplining of society; Kimmo Kaivanto's seminal mass-produced ecological statements; Danutė Kvietkevičiūtė's webbed representation of nature, culture, and spirituality; Howardena Pindell's humorous and painful portrayal of everyday racism; Mervi Kytösalmi-Buhl's analysis of the relation between

6 Kim West. 'The Problem of Organisation', *Kunskritikk*, May 15, 2019, <https://kunstkritikk.com/the-problem-of-organisation/> (accessed 15 February 2022).

7 Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1999, xxiii.

femininity and representation; and David Wojnarowicz's urgent plea for empathy toward nonconforming sexual orientations.

A number of contemporary positions also deal with history, reframing or questioning established readings of the past. Evgeny Antufiev's speculative approach grounded in folklore and shamanism explores the shifting quality of the object.<sup>8</sup> Drawing from Mesopotamian traditions, Kholod Hawash's fabric works articulate tensions related to gender roles and their associated social expectations. Samson Kambalu dives into the history of film to analyse archival and contemporary forms of moving-image representation. Grada Kilomba reconfigures classical mythology so as to question its pretence of universality. Vojtěch Kovařík portrays ancient mythological entities as fragile, androgynous figures. Luís Lázaro Matos queers the myth of Atlantis to address another collapsing civilisation destroyed by rising sea levels. And Tuan Andrew Nguyen weaves Vietnam's mythology together with its current political situation and natural ecosystem. Together, the contemporary and historical works provide a dialogic context for current investigations and positions, highlighting how art has permanently been an arena in which to engage crucial questions of the moment, then and now.

Building on the history of the ARS series and Kiasma's regular activities, the live programme is conceived as an integral part of the exhibition, and materialises in different spaces of the institution. By emphasising the here and now, these participatory and performative proposals underline the museum as a physical space for gathering, using diverse methods and projecting myriad scenarios that place audiences at their core. Alexandra Bachzetsis looks at the influence of pop culture on how identities and bodies are constantly choreographed. Alex Baczyński-Jenkins's community-rooted practice reacts against the recently experienced constraints of social isolation and stillness. Sol Calero explores the frictions inherent to a bus as a commuting tool and instrument of touristic exoticification. Pia Camil invites us to question an object's value in light of its personal significance. Donna Huanca's collaborative live sculptural installations analyse the relationship between body, identity, and space, questioning dominant understandings of human form. Alexandra Pirici's participatory proposal investigates the political agency of representation to create an ephemeral living collection. Michele Rizzo experiments with the choreography of clubbing, exploring the friction between individual and collective, and envisioning transformation as inevitable. SERAFINE1369's practice engages with the body-as-oracle producing sanctuary-like space-times. And in Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė, and Lina Lapelytė's operatic *Sun and Sea* (2017), beachgoers sing about the ongoing climate emergency.

By countering mediated forms of isolated digital connectivity with actual bodily and dialogical exchanges, these expanded live practices create spaces of communal experimentation, places of imaginative possibility where social formations can emerge in shared manners.<sup>9</sup> Other artists in the show employ photography, sculpture, painting, and film to estrange dominant forms of understanding the world, teasing expectations and predefined conceptions with their bodily, immersive, magical, oneiric, and poetic proposals. Farah Al Qasimi's mysterious images question Western conceptions of the Arab world. Frida Orupabo analyses the politics of visibility, bringing to light colonial archival materials in tandem with content from digital platforms. Laure Prouvost explores images as haptic instruments to address current processes of dematerialisation. Juha Pekka Matias Laakkonen explores how technology has made us forget our intrinsic kinship with nature. Anni Puolakka employs biography as a fictional tool to investigate the overlaps between the human and the nonhuman. And Andra Ursuța's sculptures reference institutional and personal frameworks such as history and memory to transform ordinary items into otherworldly presences.

8 Evgeny Antufiev has withdrawn this work, his new installation, from the exhibition due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He opposes the war, and he and Kiasma have agreed that the work will not be exhibited as long as the war continues. In its place, there is an anti-war message 'No war' on the wall in the room where the installation was to be featured.

9 See Catherine Wood. *Performance in Contemporary Art*. London: Tate, 2018.

Together, the many featured practices stage moments of reflection and empowerment that highlight our consciousness of belonging to a diverse collectivity. 'ARS22 Living Encounters' engages with the contemporary period as a critical and multilayered moment, employing art as a crucial space of engagement with the world. The exhibition explores the experimental potential of art and the museum to become platforms of exchange and imagination where existing structures can be questioned and other possibilities may not only be imagined, but rehearsed. In this sense 'Living Encounters' foregrounds Max Haiven's 'radical imagination', a stance that acts out 'the idea that things could be different and that we could live life otherwise'.<sup>10</sup>

'ARS22' designs a choreography of gestures and positions that in their specificity and as a whole offer alternative paths to present-day detachment, disenchantment, isolation, and hopelessness, making visible the mutually dependent dynamics between individual and collective imaginaries both in their continuities and in their ruptures. 'ARS22 Living Encounters' is a gathering that celebrates the intimate, multiple, shared, and dynamic constitution of life on the planet while projecting dreams, doubts, and hopes into the future.

**'ARS22 Living Encounters', until 16 October 2022, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki**

Leevi Haapala, João Laia, Jari-Pekka Vanhala (eds.), *ARS22: Eläviä kohtaamisia – Living Encounters*. A Museum of Contemporary Art Publication 173/2022. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma & Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2022, available from the Finnish National Gallery's webshop, <https://museoshop.fi/en/product/ars22-elavia-kohtaamisia-living-encounters/>

---

10 Haiven, *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power*, 18, 218.