

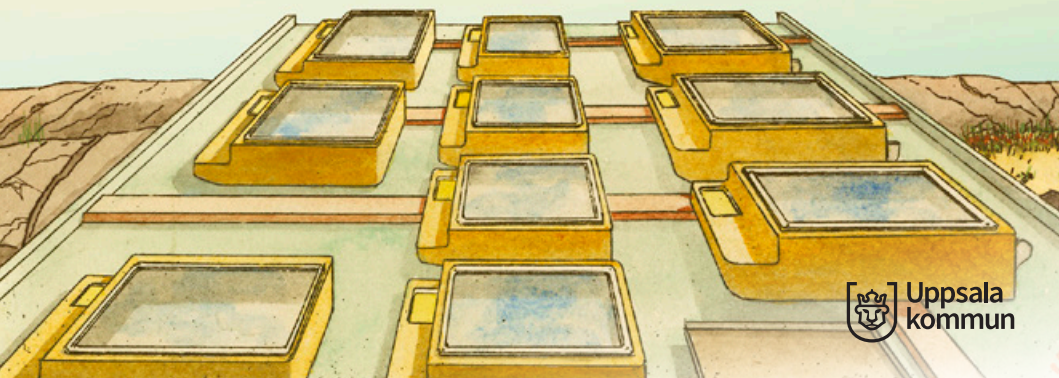
A Posthumous Journey

IN TO THE FUTURE

Imani Jacqueline Brown, Eglè Budvytytė, Alma Heikkilä, Johannes Heldén,
Signe Johannessen, Håkan Jonson, My Lindh and Mónica de Miranda

Encountering:
The Secret of Kullahuset by Sten Eklund

Uppsala Art Museum



A Posthumous Journey into the Future

Uppsala Art Museum 11 February–11 June 2023

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Encountering: The Secret of Kullahuset by Sten Eklund

Curator och writer: Rebecka Wigh Abrahamsson

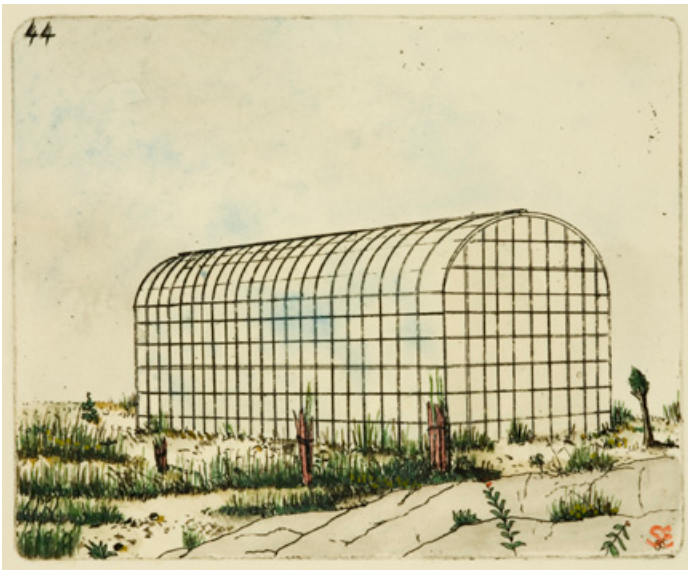


Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*.

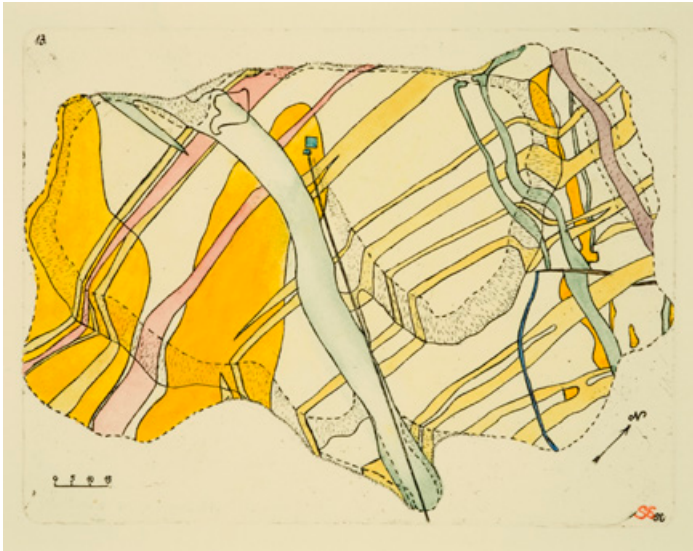
21. Horsetail from the cultivation.

It could have been different. If fossil-based society had not taken over and consumerism had not flourished. Back in 1971, the artist Sten Eklund expressed an uneasy sensation that something was wrong in our society. There is no room in language to express feelings, Eklund wrote.¹ The series *The Secret of Kullahuset*, comprising 53 hand-coloured etchings, opened the door to another world, and inverted the civilisational logic of exploitation and rational decisions. A romantic perspective on world.

In the exhibition *A Posthumous Journey into the Future*, eight internationally active artists together explore Sten Eklund's Kullahuset series and how fiction and speculative thinking can generate a different form of understanding of the cultural and planetary crisis we are currently in the midst of. A future that is cancelled or postponed, in many ways. Sten Eklund's fictional visual narrative is set in the fateful year of 1849, just before Crystal Palace was built and the World Fair in London opened; this is often described as the breakthrough of consumerism and early industrialism.



Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*.
44. The greenhouse.



Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*.
13. Geological map of the Kullahuset District.

A Posthumous Journey into the Future aims to offer a perspective on the world where time and space are dissolved, where the historical link between “discovery, conquest and knowledge”, which the author and philosopher Édouard Glissant discusses, can be challenged. Metaphorically, Glissant writes that there are no longer five continents, only archipelagos.² He proposes an archipelagic approach, where the sensory and imaginary world is central. The anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour voices similar criticism, writing, “To be modern, by definition, is to project onto the others at every turn the conflicts between the Local and the Global, between the archaic past and the future.”³

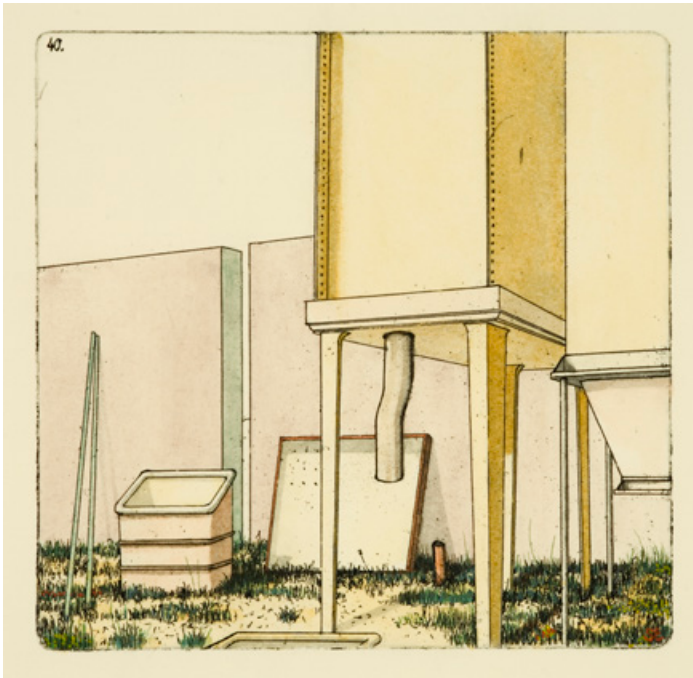
In video installations, text-based works, objects and prints, we travel backwards in time in the exhibition, allowing ourselves to visit microbiotic worlds, computer-generated places, magnetic zones and dream states. Here, there is room to mourn the species on the verge of extinction, and for past and present extractivism. The imaginary also offers healing processes – a re-enchantment of the world, where the link to an archaic past is still perceptible. Several works of art also exist in the interstice, the chasm of unreality and vertigo that we experience briefly in everyday life, when the extent of the climate crisis opens before us.



Eglė Budvytytė. *Songs from the Compost: Mutating Bodies Imploding Stars*, 4K video, 2020.
In collaboration with Marija Olšauskaitė and Julija Steponaitytė.

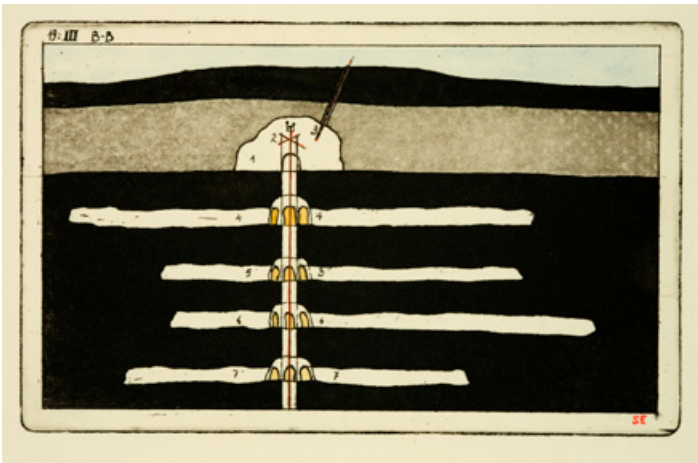
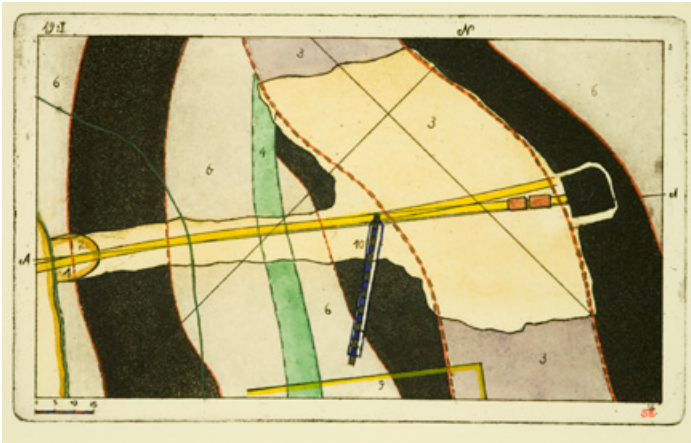
The posthumous

In 1971, when Sten Eklund set the events in *The Secret of Kullahuset* in 1849, he was highlighting something radical. In many ways, we are living posthumously, with the decisions and actions of previous generations. The Kullahuset narrative is utopian and forward-thinking, but it also shows how we carry different temporalities, both past and future, with us at all times.



Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*.
40. Some of the machines close to the wall.

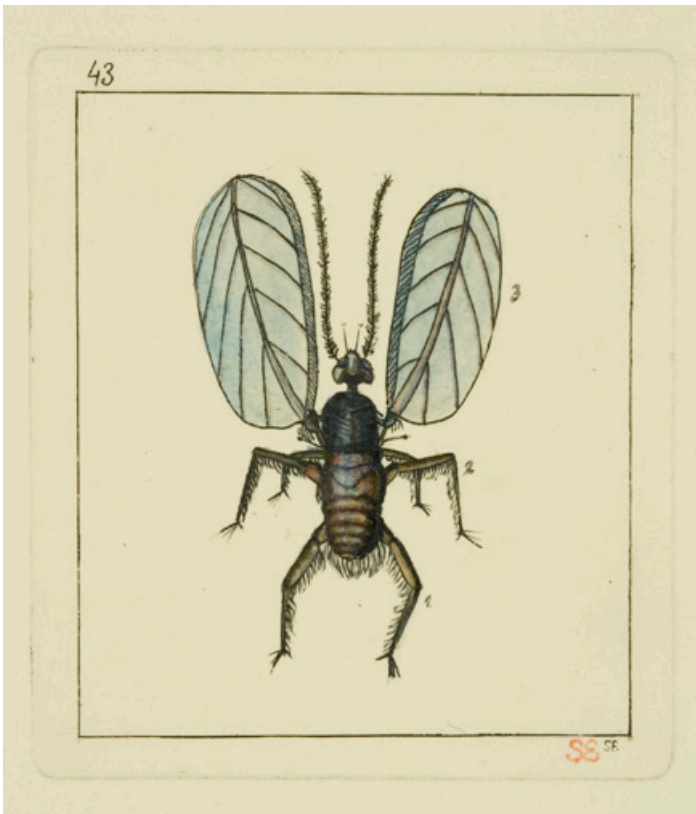
Bruno Latour writes, “In practice, we are all counter-revolutionaries, trying to minimise the consequences of a revolution that has taken place without us, against us, and at the same time through us.”⁴ We are living with, and participating in, the decisions of previous generations to extract coal and oil and to uphold colonial extractivist structures.



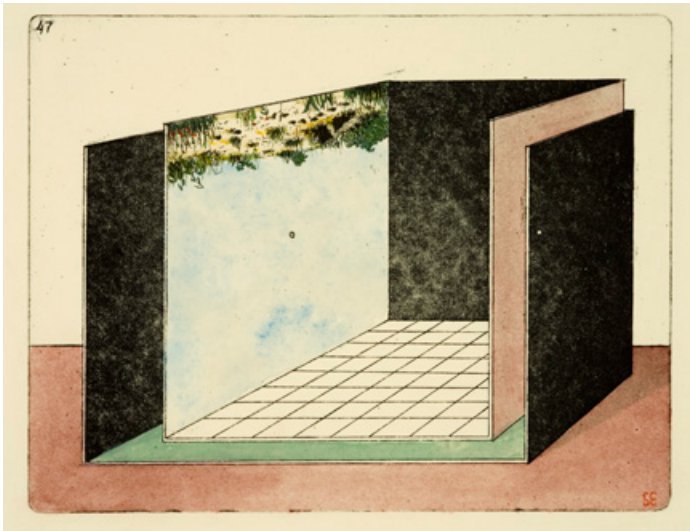
Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*. 19:1, 19:III. The Kullaite quarry.

Matter created by humans, such as infrastructure and buildings, now weighs more than the earth's total natural biomass.⁵ We are in the midst of a sixth mass-extinction, where one million species risk being eradicated. 70 per cent of the earth's vertebrates have disappeared since 1970. The overwhelming majority of all mammals populating our planet are livestock.⁶

Public debate rarely features alternative visions of society, of how to achieve transition, beyond the mantra of economic growth.



Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*.
43. The insect.



Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*.
47. From the inner parts of Kullahuset (Camera Obscura).

The author Stefan Jonsson has focused on the relationship between art and politics, accentuating that art enables us to imagine. “**The imagination, therefore, has its own political potential,**” he writes.⁷ In other words, the imaginary reveals possibilities, unlocking fixed notions. This is not escapism, but a means of changing patterns of thought through subtle shifts. “**The power of the imagination springs from everyday utopia,**” writes Édouard Glissant.⁸ To do this, we need to both travel back in time and look ahead and dream.

The imaginary

The story in the video *Path to the Stars* takes place in Angola, where the female protagonist Carlota travels by boat down the Kwanza river. The artist **Mónica de Miranda** associates to the year 1975, when Angola gained independence from the colonial power Portugal, after a bloody war.

In his journalistic book *Another Day of Life*, Ryszard Kapuściński describes the white Portuguese exodus that followed. Carlota, who fought in the war, survived two days of independence. Then came a long civil war. The river, which runs to the Atlantic, tells of colonial battles and conquests, extractivism and natural resources. Mighty and in constant motion, the river is a perpetuity that sees everything that was and is yet to come.

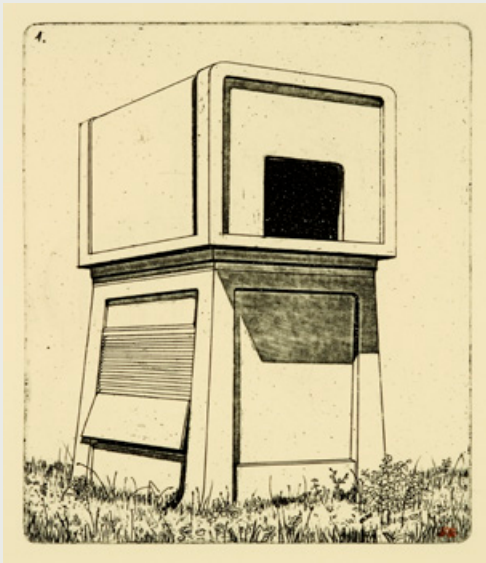
Mónica de Miranda blends her own biography with Carlota's, and the voyage is not just temporal and geographical but also mental. In the internal dialogue, the self meets its darker sides and range of emotions, all portrayed with a voice that resonates in the landscape. The title, *Path to the Stars*, is from a poem by Agostinho Neto, Angola's first president after independence.



Mónica de Miranda. *Path to the Stars*, HD video and sound, 35 min, 2022.

Sten Eklund and the pivotal 1970s

“In the summer of 1849, a young J. M. G. Paléen went on a field trip in Sweden. On his walk, Paléen claimed to have come across a strange and silent community he later called the “Kullahuset District” – a small area encircled by magnetic fields, seemingly without any human presence but with various activities in full operation – mining, agriculture, and so on.”⁹



Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*.
1. Kullahuset. General view.

This is how the artist **Sten Eklund** begins his story about the young scientist J. M. G. Paléen and his discovery of Kullahuset, an encounter that came to occupy him for the rest of his life. The story unfolds around 53 prints, meticulously etched and hand-coloured using the same methods as for older botanical illustrations.

The solitary scientist continued to analyse the topography, minerals, plants, buildings and vehicles of the area, without ever being recognised by scientific academia. And what is even more remarkable is that the minerals that were mined were useless, as were the plants that were grown. An organised society devoid of economic incentives.

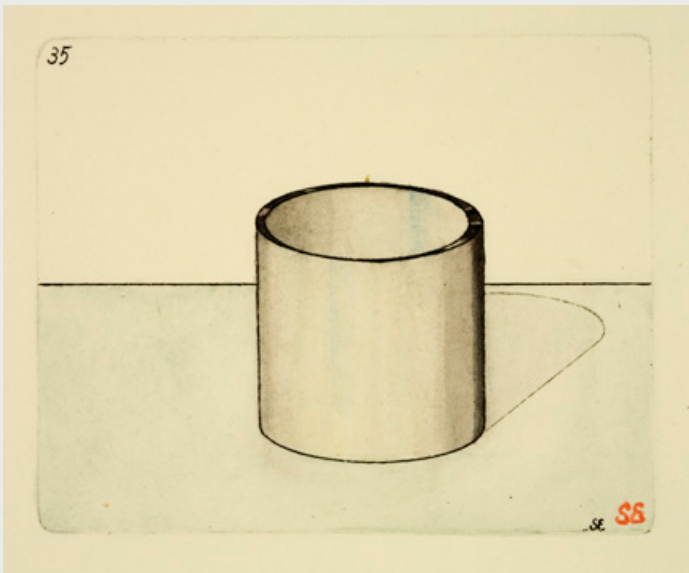
What were Sten Eklund's reasons for creating this enigmatic series? Sten Eklund describes how he juxtaposed fantastical stories like Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* with theses on natural sciences and illustrations of Uppsala, with its dire legacy after Carl Linnaeus.¹⁰ Paléen is driven by the same scientific impulse to collect, describe and analyse. On the other hand, Eklund often dwells on Paléen's shortcomings. He describes his own disciplinarian school years and the inadequacy of language when expressing feelings:

“Kullahuset describes my experiences and my memories. Paléen goes around with my biases. In school, I was taught: Factuality, objectivity and self-control, all valuable characteristics in a modern society. But I am incapable of relating my sorrow, or my longing, or my dreams, or my misconceptions (not to mention love or tenderness) other than as functions in a social context. Myself I cannot relate at all, since language belongs to society.”¹¹



Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*. 27. *Siphium connalum*.

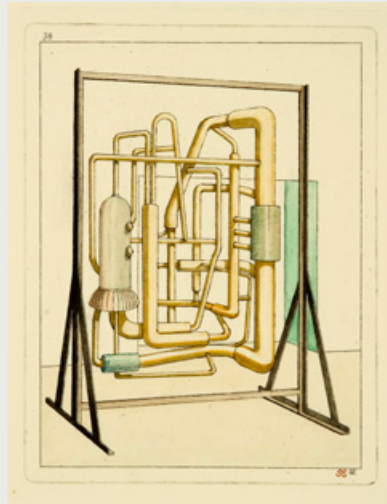
This statement clearly shows that Eklund was influenced by Wittgenstein, whose essay *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) also explores language: “What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.”¹² We can talk of material things, but we cannot make any definite statements on abstract phenomena such as feelings. However, Eklund’s quote leaves room for a broader criticism of society at the time, relating to how rationalism replaced “the old romantic notions of life and the world”.¹³



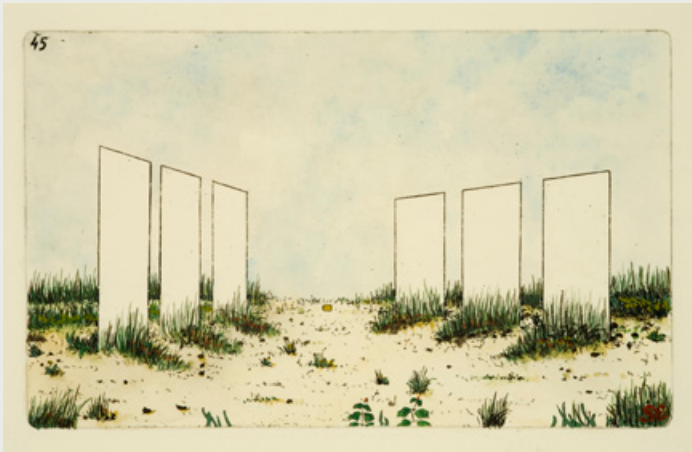
Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*.
35. Container.

In 1971, the year Kullahuset was conceived, Eklund graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. Alongside Ulf Linde's influence on art theory, with his passion for Duchamp's conceptualism and a mystical tendency, the 1968 student revolts also impacted on the times. In 1963, Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* was published in Swedish. Maybe even the embryonic Swedish

environmental movement indirectly influenced him. Regardless, Eklund was far from the pamphlets and collective rebellions. His series is more an expression of the individual's struggles with life's eternal questions. Like Stalker's wanderings in the radioactive zone in Andrey Tarkovsky's film from 1979, he was on his own desert quest. The series can also be read like a warped reflection of modern society's seemingly rational and incessant efforts to extract and refine.



Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*. 38. From the inner parts of Kullahuset. Scaffold with pipes.



Sten Eklund. Paléen's figures. *Notes on Kullahuset*. 45. Area for seed dispersal.

Astroecology

Like Sten Eklund, the artist and poet **Johannes Heldén** embraces fiction and writing in his broad artistic practice. It includes delicate, detailed watercolours in assemblage techniques, programming and translating between the computer-generated and the handmade. Influenced by the fragmented worlds of science fiction, Heldén also employs the recognisability of a plant such as marsh cinquefoil, the overgrown garden where weeds and saplings slowly take over. The drastic changes that the earth is undergoing today, with mass-extinction of species, is juxtaposed with lightyears in space and long cosmic sequences. Everything is familiar yet strange. In the series *Meditations*, briefcases with plant fragments, animations and poetry become time capsules for a future museum. Or are they survival kits for establishing life on other planets?

The manta ray is one of the largest fish in the Pacific Ocean, with a wing span of seven metres. This remarkable creature, an oceanic space ship, crosses large expanses of subtropical waters. The manta ray is red-listed, since it is popular both for eating and in traditional Chinese medicine. Today, it is also exposed to plastic particles in the seawater. It is believed to be unusually intelligent. In Johannes Heldén's sculpture with the animation *Manta Ray (Untitled)*, the ocean waste transforms the fish skeleton for a moment into a futuristic armour.



Johannes Heldén. *Manta Ray (Untitled)* sculpture, animation 1.47 min, 2020.
Courtesy: Cecilia Hillström Gallery.

A more direct link to natural science practices is evident in the work *Encyclopedia*, which Johannes Heldén made together with the artist and programmer **Håkan Jonson**. This algorithm-generated card index contains fragments of taxonomic details, of extinct species with weird features in a motley fauna. They are mourned posthumously, we never knew them, and now they are gone. All we can do is preserve the index cards, mute in their black ink on yellowed paper.

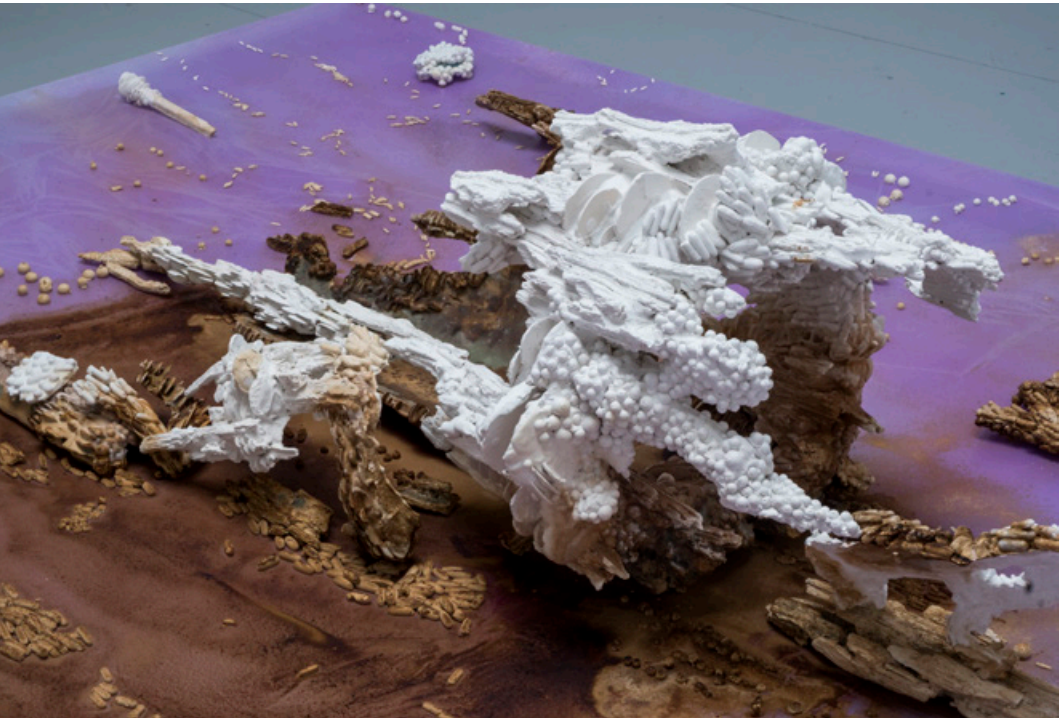


Johannes Heldén. *Meditation (Yarrow)*, sculpture, collage i watercolor, animation, sound, text, 2019. Courtesy: Cecilia Hillström Gallery.

Microbiotic worlds

The artist **Alma Heikkilä** is fascinated by the beauty of the crucial worlds that are invisible to the naked eye, processes involving the bacteria and fungi that decompose and create balance. The work *' , /~` flashing decaying wood, / / ^ _ / ~ . * || * _ _ _ . . * ,* is made of plaster that resembles the shape of a decaying tree trunk that can be found on the forest floor. It emphasises that this type of biodiversity is vital if we want to retain and even revive sustainable ecosystems in the future. The sculpture is placed in a pool of ink that has been produced out of alder tree cones. During the exhibition, the ink will get sucked into the plaster and dry out, coloring the plaster part in an unpredictable way and give colour to this society, which is utopian in its diversity and intricate functioning.

Alma Heikkilä's microbiotic worlds also exemplify symbiosis, in maritime environments, and in the human body. In a newly-produced installation *Animals cannot be considered individuals*, sculptural objects about bacteria from human organs unfold on a wall. Bacteria are essential to our immune system and many other bodily functions. An adult body contains some 1,000 varieties of bacteria, weighing around two kilos. Today, many scientists are studying the importance of bacteria, for instance in how monocultures affect bacteria diversity in the longer perspective.



Alma Heikkilä. ' , ' /~` flashing decaying wood, / /` _/~ . *|| * ___ .. *, mixed-media, 2018.



Eglė Budvytytė. *Songs from the Compost: Mutating Bodies Imploding Stars*, 4K video, 2020. In collaboration with Marija Olšauskaitė and Julija Steponaitytė.

The posthuman

Bacteria are also celebrated as utopian in **Eglė Budvytytė's** performative video *Songs from the Compost: Mutating Bodies Imploding Stars*. The work was shot in a pine forest and on the sand dunes of the Curonian Spit in Lithuania, a unique landscape, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Symbiotic relationships, decomposition processes and machine-morphing – in the choreography, the young dancers approach extra-human states of consciousness. The lyrics were inspired by Lynn Margulis's tribute to the importance of bacteria and the interaction between monocellular organisms.

Another influence is the sciencefiction writer Octavia Butler and her use of metaphors for symbiosis, mutations and hybrid forms to challenge power structures in gender and ethnicity. Biogenetically, we evolve together.

With sensuality and rich detail, Eglė Budvytytė portrays a posthumanist philosophy, where the human body both migrates towards the cyborg and is an organism among organisms in an extended collective nervous system.¹⁵

Environmental resistance

In the video installation *What Remains at the Ends of the Earth?* **Imani Jacqueline Brown** delivers a personal and sensual story about the more-than-human inhabitants of Louisiana's coastal wetlands. There, 90,000 oil wells and 16,000 kilometers of canals dredged by the fossil fuel industry have ravaged the landscape and caused environmental disasters. As saltwater invades freshwater wetlands, plants and soil sediments that prevent coastal erosion disintegrate into the sea.

Hurricane Katrina and subsequent storms like 2021's Hurricane Ida have devastated residential areas. The region along the Mississippi



Imani Jacqueline Brown. *What Remains at the Ends of the Earth?* HD-videoinstallation, sound, 2022.



Imani Jacqueline Brown. *What Remains at the Ends of the Earth?* HD-videoinstallation, sound, 2022.

River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is now called Cancer Alley. The black population – descendants of historically enslaved people – is exposed to hazardous petrochemical gases from the oil refineries built atop plantations that adjoin their homes. “What remains is ecological resistance,” says Imani Jacqueline Brown. She sees ecological resistance in the magnolia trees planted by enslaved people on plantation burial grounds. A gesture to remember their loved ones becomes an act of resistance against the monoculture of sugar plantations.

Posthumous potential

The artist **Signe Johannessen** also navigates historical strata, in long temporal perspectives, from cretaceous fossil remains to ancient burial sites with human and animal bones. We are walking on organic biomass, in the footsteps of previous generations.

Signe Johannessen has previously reflected on wetlands as an environmental resource and studied museum collections of bones from domestic animals.



Signe Johannessen. *Re-resurrect*, work-in-process site specific installation, 2022.


With herself as the starting point, she explores power structures and how anthropocentrism informs our relationship to other species and our understanding of ourselves.

For the exhibition, the artist created the installation *Re-resurrect* from fragments of stucco from the 1580s church of Uppsala Castle which is where the Uppsala Art Museum is housed today. The fragments were collected during excavations in the area in the 1940s. Shards of divine beings and plants have morphed, offering contact with bodies from another era, but also reminding us of the evolutionary processes of matter. Signe Johannessen asks: “What is the potential of the posthumous in a broken world? How can art disturb old myths of genesis and historical truths in order to make new narratives about the world emerge?”¹⁶

There was now

My Lindh's artistic practice balances on the line between everyday life and fiction, exploring our struggle to take in and grasp long causal chains and still live in the here and now. Through temporal shifts, she illustrates these paradoxical mental processes.

In her recent work *There was now*, she lets visitors encounter text fragments in different places around the Museum. The work highlights our collective consciousness, where the oscillation between apparent calm and concern for the future cuts through both political debate and the lives of individuals. Where is the scope of action for change? the artist asks, and how can the performativity of art help us find alternatives?



de kunde inte ana hur deras liv skulle komma att se sig

My Lindh. *There was now*, "they could not imagine how their lives would turn out", work-in-process site specific installation, 2023.

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- ² Glissant, Édouard, *Philosophie de la relation. Poésie en étendue*, 2009.
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- ⁵ Steffen, W., Broadgate, W., Deutsch, L., Gaffney, O. & Ludwig C., “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration”, *The Anthropocene Review*, 2(1), 2015, pp. 81-98; Elhacham, E., Ben-Uri, L., Grozovski, J. Bar-On, Y. & Milo R., “Global humanmade mass exceeds all living biomass”, *Nature* 588, 2020, p. 442-444.
- ⁶ See the IPCC’s reports on biodiversity.
- ⁷ Jonsson Stefan, “5 saker konsten vet om demokratin”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 2019-01-04. The article is based on a book by Jonsson Stefan, *Den ottyglade skönheten, 5 saker konsten vet om demokratin*, Stockholm, 2022.
- ⁸ Glissant, p. 48.
- ⁹ Lotass, Lotta, ed, p. 47. The text was published in an exhibition catalogue for Riksställningars touring exhibition in 1972, *Kullahusets hemlighet; J M G Paléens märkvärdiga resa* by Sten Eklund.
- ¹⁰ SR P4 Uppland. Interview with Sten Eklund 2007-04-23.
- ¹¹ Lotass, Lotta, ed. p. 107.
- ¹² Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Karlshamn, 1921.
- ¹³ Lotass, Lotta, ed. p. 112.
- ¹⁴ Bojs, Karin, “Ännu charmigare tarmar i Amazonas regnskog”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 2015-04-26.
- ¹⁵ Haraway, Donna, “A Cyborg Manifesto, Science Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the late twentieth century”, *Manifestly Haraway*, Minneapolis, 2016. Haraway also bases her theory on, and refers to, Lynn Margulis and Octavia Butler.
- ¹⁶ The questions are formulated by the curator Caroline Malmström who has been collaborating with Signe Johannesson for many years. Together with researchers and writers they have formed the magazine *Hornvännan*, e-mail 2022-12-09.

Literature

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Elhacham, E., Ben-Uri, L., Grozovski, J. Bar-On, Y. & Milo R., "Global human-made mass exceeds all living biomass", *Nature*, Volume 588, 2020.

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Kullahusets hemlighet; J M G Paléens märkvärdiga resa, företagen 1849, i text och bild beskriven av Sten Eklund, exh. cat. for Riksställningar's touring exhibition in 1972.

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Unprinted source

SR P4 Uppland. Interview with Sten Eklund 2007-04-23.

E-mail conversation with Caroline Malmström 2022-12-09.

Exhibition

Curator: Rebecka Wigh Abrahamsson, Uppsala konstmuseum
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Brochure

Text: Rebecka Wigh Abrahamsson
Graphic design: Kicki Liljebblad

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Bo Gyllander, p. 1-3, 5-8, 10-13. Cecilia Hillström Gallery p. 14-15.
Christine Winkler p. 16. Rolf Schuurmans p. 22. My Lindh p. 21.

Thanks to

Christian Chambert, Staffan Cullberg, Mira Eklund, Kjell Eklund, Karolina Uggla, Cecilia Hillström Gallery, Mistra Miljökommunikation, SLU –Sveriges Lantbruksuniversitet - Hanna Berggå, Sofie Joosse, CEMUS - Daniel Mossberg, Uppsala universitet, Hornvännan – Caroline Malmström.



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