

A duo of Lithuanian artists Neringa Černiauskaitė and Ugnius Gelguda have been working together since 2012. In their oeuvre – which includes installations, video, objects, and photos – they use things and materials that, having shed their original *raison d'être* in this world, enter novel political, cultural, and economic contexts. Pakui Hardware is the brand name of a collaboration between Ugnius Gelguda and Neringa Černiauskaitė set up in 2014. The following interview is a result of two conversations.

Inesa Pavlovskaitė-Brašiškė: Your latest projects *The Metaphysics of the Runner* (CAC, Vilnius and 321 Gallery, NYC) and *Shapeshifter, Heartbreaker* (Jenifer Nails Gallery, Frankfurt/Main) have a different aesthetic and theme than your previous works, projects like *Now More Than Ever* (*Lietuvos Dailė* 2012, CAC), *Reflection Wood Chronicles* (2012), *In the Highest Point* (2011). In your latest work, the visionary mood comes to substitute the retroactive gaze: signs of the past give way to those of exponential technological advancement, post-humanist presentiments. The past-present dialectic is replaced by the present-future one. What instituted this turn, if this is indeed a new direction in your work? How significant were the last few years that you spent in New York City?

Neringa Černiauskaitė: I'd have to start by saying that it seemed to us too that this was a huge break with what we did before. However, having reflected once more on the themes that had interested us in our previous work, we realized that the current project actually carried on with the same question, dealing with the relation between imagination and the future. What interests us is the gap between imagination, the present and the future. For example, *In the Highest Point* analyzed how the future was imagined back then. In fact, we are now living in the future that was merely imagined at the time. In *Reflection Wood Chronicles*, the [Europe] Park and its sculptures were used as a background for post-history, we tried to imagine, using cinematic means, how these sculptures would appear to the eyes of future people, i.e., used by them as picnic sites or shelters from rain. New York made a huge impact on our work, as Vilnius had before. The city itself, its omnipresent advertising as well as dominant artistic currents did influence our aesthetic.

Ugnius Gelguda: New York artists reflect a great deal on the situation of the city, everything around them. Interestingly, there's a direct connection linking exhibitions and galleries, each show is a turn in dialogue, indiscernible though it might be to a naked eye.

I.P.B: At a closer inspection, though, it seems that what may link your previous and current artistic practices is the running motif of utopia or, rather, dystopia. When you reflect on the future in your two exhibitions *The Metaphysics of The Runner*, your starting point, in part, is the singularity theory by the US scientist and futurist Ray Kurzweil, who says that, in 2045, people and machines will merge. It seems that the vision for the future in your show is a threatening one, even apocalyptic. Is it so?

U.G.: There's this concept of post-irony. The video piece where we use sounds made by

Kurzweil's synthesizer is quite ambivalent. Each sound carries an ominous vision, *Drone Harmonics* is very sad, but at the same time it contains wittiness of sorts; the sounds are as much ominous as they are witty.

N.Č.: I wouldn't say it's utopia or dystopia – it's absolutely realist, preparing very rationally for a future; an anthropocentric "mess-up" that we now have to deal with. It's clearly pragmatic and perhaps less utopian. Kurzweil himself reflects on the future very pragmatically, he sets out a clear-cut program. Kurzweil's future holds little promise of anything good. Humans will be a backward species. His visions help re-evaluate what a human being is, what we call human and what we are reluctant to call human. In order for Kurzweil's projections to come true, we need to come up with positive definitions of human. The issue at hand is very slippery. Positive definitions are dangerous, too. We know from history what definitions of a human being, race, etc. can amount to. Our relation with technology becomes increasingly integrated, sharp; technology comes to help us define ourselves: what I am, what I'd like to preserve and what I'd like to leave behind.



The Metaphysics of the Runner, 2014. Exhibition view at Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), Vilnius

I.P.B.: Thinking of the context of your recent works, what comes to mind are artists like Pamela Rosenkantz, Timur Si-Qin, Josh Kline. These artists take noticeable interest in the latent synergy of human body and technology and its consequences. In your shows too, it seems, you focus on prosthesis, extending the body, the relation of the organic and the technological. You mostly employ synthetic materials; there are many references to a "clash" of technology and the body.

N.Č.: Yes, structures that extend the body, used to help hold our balance, lean against, etc. When you take away all of their details and functions, these generalized motifs from exercise machines turn into abstract minimalist sculptures, a little ironic, since they presuppose active use, stretching and bending. There are also screens that are usually found on treadmills, simulating landscapes and urging one to keep running – when you stop, the screen shuts down and the reality you were running from all along sets in. You are running in order to evade that reality.

U.G.: In creating the object of a garment, something we collaborated on with the New York-based artist Jeannine Han, we attached great significance to selecting a synthetic fabric. She wanted to laser-cut a motif or two in the garment, but she couldn't because of the toxicity of the fabric. A piece of clothing turns into an object, it is not worn.

N.Č.: The sculpture of a runner is made of resin, while molds of the branches from Central Park are porcelain. At the same time, it is hard to distinguish porcelain and resin. The materialist aspect is very important indeed.

I. P.B. Let's talk about one of the basic forms that you use in your oeuvre, digital manipulation (Shapeshifter, Heartbreaker, 2014, In the Blink of an Eye, 2014). How do you understand this technology? Is 3D motion graphics the optimal form to represent our reality and future?

U.G. The works you've mentioned permitted us an interesting opportunity to rethink and to test the potential and specifics of digital materiality – what bodies phenomena like “predator” algorithms or “prey” algorithm could take, how they would interact with one another. Digital materiality merely strengthens the already intertwined inseparability of virtual and physical realities. It is important to emphasize that just like our previous digital manipulation pieces in *The Metaphysics of the Runner*, in *Shapeshifter*, *Heartbreaker* they do not work as flat pieces, but rather as integrated into physical structures/sculptures. In *The Metaphysics of the Runner*, these were fragments of exercise equipment, while in Frankfurt we've got a closed system-desk, reminiscent of stock exchange trading floors in Frankfurt, New York and elsewhere. The pieces operate as one installation, while at the same time we highlight how screens are entangled with the physical material, hardware, how they are dependent on energy sources, etc.

I.P.B.: Twenty-first-century advances in science, technology, digital communication and information technologies bring essential changes to aspects of the human environment, body and language. Could we speak of the recurring runner's motif as a metaphor for the millennial person? It seems that speed is a defining aspect of her condition.

N.Č.: This is our self-portrait (laughs). We call ourselves the long distance runners.

It's interesting how physical speed becomes an obstacle for making money in high frequency trading (HFT). We talk of the speed of light between matching engines and the server in which share trading *AlgoBit* algorithm is running. The later makes predictions about trade. The further it is from the motherboard, the longer it takes for data to come, losing a tenth of a millisecond – in contrast to those that are closer. Physical parameters simply prevent you from trading faster than you could. Once upon a time it was people with phones, who would close and open their eyes very slowly, there are loads you could do in that fraction of a second. Physical speed is a nuisance for capital flow. Technology, which we make in order to keep producing, plays a great role in this. Speed must overtake itself in order to become something else. The metaphysics of the runner is about pushing forward, exceeding yourself, stepping into post-organics, consuming additives.

I.P.B.: Extending the body.

N.Č.: Yes, and replacing it. Bringing the body and the world into sync. Bernard Stiegler says that it's in human nature, we were born into technology, our memory is prosthetic; we exist only by using external devices.

I.P.B.: Art historian Alexander Alberro, who gave a lecture in Vilnius, employed the notion of speed to describe the contemporary art recipient. According to him, it's someone who's super fast.

N.Č.: I think it has also to do with the way we experience art shows. Just flip through the pages of *Contemporary Art Daily* or *Mousse*. In New York City, there are several institutions that meticulously photograph a show and publish the images even before it opens. It's a flat experience, sometimes perfectly sufficient. We can see five exhibitions in one swipe on our touch screen, take them in and draw inspiration.

I.P.B.: It's noteworthy that your own exhibition documentation plays into such a strategy, your shows become mediated. In *The Metaphysics of the Runner* exhibition that you held in Brooklyn, you invited a model to document it, someone who animated the exposition. One photo got included into the show in Vilnius.

N.Č.: Yes, it was our intention to reveal how documenting is a form of deceiving. It's not an objective gaze.

U.G.: Looking at magazines like *Mousse*, etc., you notice that, over the last three years, there has been a qualitative change in documenting exhibitions. They employ tricks not unlike those in advertising – additional lighting, etc. – in order to make a painting look impeccable, even though it might not have looked like that in reality. In the case of photographing *The Metaphysics of the Runner* at 321 Gallery, we treated the process as a (meta)performance of documentation.

N.Č.: Moreover, documentation again removes the human body. What we get is an idealized image for a person who does not participate. There's only the eye that "walks"

across the screen. This is exactly the viewer that such shows are intended for. Speaking of the links between commerce and art, interestingly, the prevailing view is that real things, things that are experiential, are true and resist commerce. Is such a view naive? It reveals reluctance to admit that these experiences are just as commodified. Those who engage in obvious production at least are open and frank about it. This amounts to active adoption of capitalist strategies in an attempt to somehow change or critique it instead of allegedly resisting it while in fact fully participating therein. The distinction here is between active and reflexive action. We would prefer to highlight the active one. An ad in an art exhibition might seem irritating to the eye for many. It's like you come to have a break from advertising, from commercial clichés, but it's exactly what you find here. Adopting this aesthetic is a conscious move, so we can speak the same language rather than engaging in abstractions and distancing ourselves from all that. Doing things instead of talking.



Shapeshifter, Heartbreaker, 2014. Exhibition view at Jenifer Nails, Frankfurt, Germany

I.P.B.: *As I was thinking about your latest exhibitions (The Metaphysics of the Runner, CAC, Vilnius, and Shapeshifter, Heartbreaker, Jenifer Nails gallery, Frankfurt/Main), it made me ponder on a wider intellectual movement, acceleration-ism, a leftist movement which sees capitalism as a system that is not just unfair, perverse, but also inhibits progress. Therefore, in order to transcend capitalism, one has not just to do away with the material base of neoliberalism, one must repurpose it, actualize untapped technological potential, transcend the limits, “win the class war” and enter the post-capitalist era. This project also marks the end of the human as organic body – in the accelerationist manifesto, Alex Williams and Nick Srnecik write: “We believe it [accelerationism] must also include recovering the dreams which transfixed many from*

the middle of the Nineteenth Century until the dawn of the neoliberal era, of the quest of Homo Sapiens towards expansion beyond the limitations of the earth and our immediate bodily forms.” Let me ask you frankly: how do you relate to this theoretical paradigm?

N. Č.: Ever since *The Metaphysics of the Runner*, we’ve given a fair deal of thought to our relation to this theory/movement. Even the title of the project, *The Metaphysics of the Runner*, is an indirect reference to the acceleration of current conditions. Even though the theory is still quite new and has already been criticized for being rather abstract or failing to appreciate the role of the commons or the body in the project, there were still a number of aspects we found interesting. First, we considered how an accelerationist aesthetic might look like. Is the use of technology enough to make it accelerationist? Is there, in this case, an overlap of strategies of making and spreading art? Second, sure, the manifesto was relevant and interesting as yet another promethean project – after all, transcending the organic body is something that Ray Kurzweil habitually promotes in his writings and speeches. What interests us in this promethean project is probably precisely this perpetual struggle with the biological body, with matter, while using this same matter to achieve the set goals.

U.G.: In our exhibition *Shapeshifter, Heartbreaker* at Jenifer Nails, Frankfurt, we looked at this dynamic relation through the High Frequency Trading phenomenon. It encompasses nearly all the aspects of this problem – there’s this drive to keep increasing the speed of algorithm-performed operations and information transfer, but what impedes this drive is basic physics, distance and the speed of light, so they are looking for ways to resist it, which is done by tweaking hardware, special cables, etc. Human beings get replaced by servers ever frequently, offices are hollowed out to make space for shelves with silently humming machines. Even the shortest humanly perceptible time segment, the blink of an eye, is hopelessly protracted compared to algorithmic speeds... But we do not dramatize it, we simply observe, study, test, and integrate it into our work.

I.P.B.: *Just a few days ago, I was reading an interview with British philosopher Benjamin Noys, who says that accelerationism in art should be considered in the context of other avant-gardist attempts “to not only represent social forms, but to intervene or create something by cutting into those forms”. Have you ever thought of your latest works as politically and socially engaged art?*

N.Č.: Before answering, perhaps it is worth considering what it means today - to cut into the social fabric and what it looks like. If one of the ways might be active participation in the message formation and broadcasting system, then we indeed take part in it with our works. Say, not just in our exhibitions, but also in our lectures (the last three ones were held in Sweden, Moderna Museet, Malmö, IASPIS centre in Stockholm, etc.) we allow the public to reflect on the complicated and changeable human-body-technology-economy relations, which forces the public to rethink how they relate to technology they consume or how they neglect to consider the principles of economic functioning. At the same time, we use our works to redefine the notion of the social sphere itself - today. Our installations are less attempts to reflect upon than to create situations that disturb our

conceptions of the social field: should we perhaps start talking about a new social form, a techno-sociability?

I.P.B.: *What is the relation between fantasy and realism in your works (and work process)?*

U.G.: The relation, if you will, is a direct one – phenomena in reality trigger imagination, as otherwise there is no way to grasp them or to clearly see what they are going to develop into. At the same time, the direct relation, for instance, manifests itself in how active elements in reality (like market data, or, to be more precise, the flash crash moment in the US bonds market in October, 2014) are subordinated to the movements of imaginary digital “organisms” and their interactions in *Shapeshifter*, *Heartbreaker*.

N.Č.: Another expression of this imagination-realism proximity in our work is the way we choose particular materials (matters) and combine them. Unexpected combinations (like expensive porcelain and mass-produced rubber bands) or a fragment of the familiar runner’s legs, moulded in epoxy resin and covered with carbonic “skin”, stir imagination, force us to look at the present from the point of a possible future. We are interested in how reality provokes our own imagination, that of the subjects we study and are inspired by, as well as the audience.

I.B.P.: Thank you for the interview.

Ugnius Gelguda and Neringa Černiauskaitė began to collaborate in 2012. **Pakui Hardware*** (*courtesy of Alex Ross) is a brand name of their collaboration set up in 2014. Both artists are based in Vilnius and Brooklyn, New York. The work of Pakui Hardware* spans around the relationship between materiality, technology, and economy. Solo shows of the artists’ duo include venues of kim? Contemporary Art Center, Riga, Jenifer Nails, Frankfurt, Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), Vilnius, 321 Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, NADA New York (2014). Other projects include Popcorn, Pepsi, Petabytes: Intro, Cage, New York, Anything is Always Nearby or Next to Something Else, Microscope Gallery, Brooklyn, New York (2013). The artists have participated in group shows at Moderna Museet, Malmö, Sweden, CCS Bard / Hessel Museum of Art, New York (2014), and ar/ge Kunst Gallery Museum, Bolzano, Italy (2013). The artists were IASPIS grant holders in Sweden for the fall of 2014.

Inesa Pavlovskaitė – Brašiškė co-runs a project space The Gardens in Vilnius, works as a curator at Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius and occasionally writes and translates texts on contemporary art issues. She has organized the lecture series on the issues of contemporary art theory and history with participation of David Joselit, Dieter Roelstraete, Alexander Alberro and others. The topic of her interest is a historical and social phenomenon of contemporary art and contemporaneity as such.