

# Kunsthall Stavanger



Peggy Ahwesh, still from *Lessons of War* (2014).

**PRESS RELEASE**  
January 2022

Peggy Ahwesh  
*Vision Machines*  
February 24 – May 29, 2022

The first survey exhibition in Scandinavia of the groundbreaking artist and experimental filmmaker.

Opening: February 24, 6pm  
Limited capacity

Kunsthall Stavanger presents *Vision Machines*, the first survey exhibition in Scandinavia of the groundbreaking American artist and experimental filmmaker Peggy Ahwesh (b. 1954, Pennsylvania, USA). Featuring single-channel films and video installations made between 1993 and 2021 that explore the relationship between corporeality and technology, *Vision Machines* identifies key points in Ahwesh's exploration of the representation of the body in the moving-image.

Considered a pioneer within the fields of experimental film and video art, Ahwesh has questioned the politics of image-making for over four decades, forging a distinctive moving image practice in the ruins of originality and authority.

Whether by working with nonprofessional performers or by repurposing existing images—such as a decaying pornographic film, the video game *Tomb Raider*, or computer-animated news coverage—Ahwesh embraces improvisatory strategies that probe the critical potential of play. With keen attentiveness to the materiality of bodies and media technologies alike, her works articulate a feminist commitment to the marginal and the minor.

Even as Ahwesh rejects the notion of style as authorial signature, her concerns with sexuality, subjectivity, and troubling the boundary between the animate and inanimate have remained constant across the decades. Focusing on a selection of works that explore the relationship between the body and the technologized image, the exhibition at Kunsthall Stavanger spans issues and ideas as diverse as gender, climate change and war.



Peggy Ahwesh, still from *She Puppet* (2001).

#### IN THE RUINS OF POPULAR CULTURE

The main work in the exhibition—*Verily! The Blackest Sea, The Falling Sky* (2017)—is a two-channel video installation that transforms animated news reports from YouTube into a personal story based on actual events related to the Syrian refugee crisis and other current global disasters. On adjacent screens, the video presents the sky and the sea as a broader framework for human tragedies, spanning ideas as varied as global warming, police violence, surveillance and the migrant crisis.

#### CONSTRUCTION AND MYTH CREATION IN POLITICS AND MEDIA

*Re: The Operation* (2019) focuses on two conflicting narratives about the military operation that "took out" Osama Bin Laden: the official American version vs. the one that appeared in investigation reports. Here, Ahwesh explores the thin line between official history and myth-making in one of the biggest news stories of the post-9/11 era, which triggered strong reactions and conspiracy theories around the world. The work also considers the ways in which storytelling and video editing can be used as means to steer away from or approach the truth.

#### TOMB RAIDER AS FEMINIST CRITICISM

In Ahwesh's most famous work—*She Puppet* (2001)—we follow Ahwesh as she plays the video game *Tomb Raider*, which was a popular cultural sensation at the turn of the millennium. Here, Ahwesh brings the game's cinematic aesthetics to the fore, thus escaping the pre-programmed "mission" of the heroine Lara Croft. The work is a feminist critique of Croft's problematic identity, but also deals with how we as individuals live in an increasingly artificial world.

Peggy Ahwesh, *Vision Machines* was produced by Spike Island in Bristol, UK, and is co-curated by Erika Balsom and Robert Leckie.

On the heels of Kunsthall Stavanger's multimedia and moving image exhibitions *LEAN* and *Swinguerra* (both in 2021), *Vision Machines* is exemplative of the institution's heightened focus on screen-based works and digital native exhibitions. The 2022 programming will continue to explore new formats at the forefront of exhibition-making in the digital age, culminating in the forthcoming debut of the Kunsthall's online-only exhibition platform and new website later this year.

#### FROM THE PRESS

"It's a selection that well displays how Ahwesh's work epitomizes and processes three dense decades of media history."

—Ed Halter on *Vision Machines* at Spike Island, Mousse Magazine, 05.10.2021

"...the exhibition illustrates how moving image technology has structured our desires, subjectivity, and citizenship, our very corpus, as individuals and as a social body."

—Rachal Bradley on *Vision Machines* at Spike Island, Texte zur Kunst, 01.12.2021

#### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Peggy Ahwesh is an American experimental filmmaker and video artist. Born in 1954 in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, she received her B.F.A. at Antioch College, Ohio. Retrospective exhibitions include: *Girls Beware!*, Whitney Museum of American Art; Filmmuseum, Brussels; Anthology Film Archives, New York; *Peggy's Playhouse*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University. Screenings include: the Whitney Biennial (1991, 1995, 2002); New York Film Festival (1998, 2007); Flaherty Film Seminar (2003); Pompidou Center (2002, 2004); Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival (2017). Film festivals include: Berlin; London; Cairo; Toronto; Rotterdam; and Creteil, France. *Certain Women* (co-directed with Bobby Abate) (2004) was an official selection at the Rotterdam International Film Festival and the opening night film at the New York Underground Film Festival (2004). Other films include: *Martina's Playhouse* (1989), *The Deadman* (co-directed with Keith Sanborn) (1987), *Strange Weather* (1993), and *Nocturne* (1998), all of which are in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. Ahwesh has received grants from Jerome and Guggenheim Foundation fellowships, Alpert Award in the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, and Art Matters. She teaches Film and Electronic Art at Bard College, New York.

#### ABOUT KUNSTHALL STAVANGER

Kunsthall Stavanger is a contemporary art institution in Stavanger, Norway, that serves as a platform for the production, exhibition, and distribution of artworks that are part of a large international discourse. We collaborate with artists and guest curators to develop solo and group exhibitions with the goal of creating transformative experiences and in-depth audience engagement.

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