

## ***Are We There Yet?***

Are we there yet? was among the most googled questions in 2021. It is a trivial yet ambiguous statement about how far we still are from our destination – as individuals and as a species. From a macro perspective, the question has an existential dimension which sums up our impatient approach to the present and the future as a finishing line. With its open and questioning phrasing, the exhibition title thus establishes a reflective framework for the works, which are all based on modified everyday objects that cut across geographical barriers. Whether it be a psalm, software or faux flora, the exhibited works are all cultural modifications of existing symbols of nature – and thus undergo a marked semiotic transformation. In this negotiation of material and connotations, each artist reflects on the ecological conditions under which we live. The exhibition moves like turbulence in the air between prediction and future reality. Have we already entered the Eremocene epoch – ‘the Age of Loneliness’ as described by the American biologist E.O. Wilson – or are we on our way?

The exhibition brings together seven artistic positions and spans painting, drawing, sound, sculpture, installation and text with works by Andreas Albrechtsen (1986, DK/BR), Allora & Calzadilla (1974, US/1971, CU), Paul Fåggerskiöld (1986, SE), Ceal Floyer (1968, UK), Jone Kvie (1976, NO), Eau Pernice (1989, DK) and Maša Tomšič (1986, SLO).

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In **Ceal Floyer's** work *Warning Birds*, the silhouettes of buzzards encircle the windowpanes of the gallery. This kind of sticker is usually placed individually to scare birds away and thus prevent them from colliding with the glass. In the exhibition, however, the warning birds appear in droves, preventing passers-by and visitors to the gallery from looking through the apertures of the space. The flocks surround all the windows like a dense, unpredictable decoration, and their presence creates an alarming atmosphere reminiscent of the black-and-white scenes of attack in Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 horror film 'The Birds'. By increasing the number of warning birds there is a marked psychological shift in the way we experience the silhouette stickers, and with this shift Floyer creates a potentially wider range of associations. Hitchcock constantly alludes to the similarity between humans and birds; the murderous flocks of ravens may be interpreted as violent manifestations of the main characters' internal conflicts. Floyer's *Warning Birds* provokes an ominous effect in both passerines and people – hence both species share a common primal instinct that causes us to feel vulnerable outside the flock. A total absence of birds is an ecological threat to our very existence. A case in point is the famine that broke out in China between 1958-1961 after Mao Zedong had ordered a systematic mass culling of the country's sparrows, which were considered pests. This led to an ecological imbalance, where the absence of sparrows, in turn, caused an explosive increase in the number of insects. Floyer's myriad of buzzard shadows may act as a catalyst for a subconscious and irrational ornithophobia, but in nature they would indicate a mounting external threat. During natural disasters, animals are always the first to sense when danger is in the air.

By measuring the weather, we adapt to climate change – for now – because the consequences of global warming are accelerating faster than ever before. When the ancestors of the birds, the theropods, ruled the Earth, the planet's CO2 levels were much higher than now, but climate change was so slow that the evolution of species could keep up. Today we find out about the weather, indoors, from a screen. We may make use of satellites and complex probability calculations but we still live isolated from the grim reality that our society cannot continue to keep up with the climate unless we change our collective consumption patterns. We hang on to the notion of 'doomsday soon, but not today'.

There is something eerily scenic about the massive installation *Graft* by **Allora & Calzadilla**. As in the wake of a storm, thousands of pink flowers form a scattered trail on the floor of the exhibition space. The flowers, made to resemble the blossoms of the Caribbean oak tree *Tabebuia heterophylla*, are rendered in seven different stages of decomposition. Twenty-one gradations of colour appear, from the hues of freshly fallen leaves to withered and brown ones, lending the artificial flowers an air of hyperrealism. Like the title, the artist duo refers to grafting or cloning, and this extreme presence of flowers in the exhibition space brings to mind man's exploitation of natural resources and the climate changes that this has brought about. Despite the systematic depletion of Caribbean flora and fauna by colonial rule, the area remains a biodiversity hotspot. *Graft* demonstrates the vast scale of the consequences of rising temperatures, mirroring how increasingly frequent occurrences of devastating weather are changing the landscape – an almost blaring silence after more and stronger storms.

In **Andreas Albrechtsen's** work *Untitled (Elke)* we are presented with a pencil drawing of a weather chart showing the wind directions above Europe on 14 October 2022. Albrechtsen used computer-animated graphics from ECMF (European Centre for Medium-Range Forecasts) as the model for his work. It is a diagram based on data from satellite monitoring and then mapped by hand, using pencil on paper. The eddies and changing air pressures are represented by greyish patches plotted faintly in across national frontiers. The hundreds of arrows, forming a dense pattern of movement, follow the atmospheric logic of the wind. But, at the same time, it is tempting to see the arrows as tumultuous connections between nations. The arrow is a universal symbol of direction but also, ultimately, a weapon. One meteorological consequence of war is the destruction of weather stations and observatories, leaving the scientists with 'blind spots' and thus making weather forecasts less reliable in the absence of data.

The drawing encapsulates both a forecast and a process – a before, during and after all in one. The precise date of the forecast is not in itself significant and should be seen rather as a geopolitical prediction and a need to put this particular period of time into perspective. The autumn of 2022 was marked by major ideological power struggles in Europe, Brazil and the US, where both climate and democratic principles were key voting issues. The title of the work (*Elke*) refers to the name of an actual windstorm that hit Scandinavia,

the UK, Estonia and Russia in the middle of October. Elke was not in itself disastrous, but may be seen as a proxy for the sociostructural currents that, in the long run, may prove to be so.

The wind is only manifest in the objects it moves or if it has sufficient strength to cause something to break. But it is also a symbol of progress. Among the oldest and best-known representations of wind are Leonardo da Vinci's *Deluge* drawings from about 1517-19, in which he combined a scientific and artistic interest in the wind's undulating patterns of movement. In 1805 Rear-Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort devised a scale for estimating wind velocities so that it became possible, finally, to speak of its speed objectively – whereas before one man's breeze might have been another man's hurricane. In the Beaufort Scale all numbered wind levels from 0-12 are accompanied by a short description of their impact – level 4, for example: 'raises dust and loose paper – small branches move'. Dust and paper – an apt and precise description of Albrechtsen's typical choice of materials.

Digital representations of the world have also altered our experience of time. They have expanded our notion of 'being present' to include multiple locations simultaneously. In **Paul Fägerskiöld's** painting the large horizontal canvas appears as an abstract composition, without an end or a beginning. This is so despite the fact that the title of the work indicates a very specific place on the planet. Using computer software called 'Starry Night', Fägerskiöld constructs images of the cosmos in the future. The programme can calculate precise star constellations from any location on Earth and nearby galaxies at any chosen date, thousands of years into the future as well as in the past. Although the title *South Tarawa. Kiribati Islands. View East. January 1 2100* evokes a specific place, the painting shows little more than a composition of holes through to the canvas where the layers of pastose oil paint have not been applied. Despite a very concrete starting point, the painting does not show a discernible figure or landscape. Rather, it incorporates human behaviour and language; a representative image of gaining access to the future in an attempt to understand the present. Imagining the future is in itself abstract. The very emptiness of the painting inevitably becomes an image of where man is right now – the absence of figuration becomes an image of our severed relationship with nature. If, instead, you go back 80 years, man could navigate by the stars. Today some people associate the reading of the constellations with superstition. Because we no longer, in densely populated cities, have access to the starry sky the way we used to, we may have forgotten that the stars can predict weather change. The constellations are obscured by smog and the extreme amount of light used by big cities, which is why the stars may be the perfect image of the man-made climate change that has altered the living conditions on our planet.

The Swedish playwright August Strindberg is little known for his periods of intense dedication to painting and photography during the 1890s. His artistic experiments, however, show evident interactions between technology and nature. In particular, his celestographs, for which he would place a photographic plate in the window and expose it to the starry sky, seem to be in physical alliance with nature. With their weathered

surfaces the photographs actually resemble celestial scenes. But you might just as easily see dust or a bit of earth. The singularity of such images, whether in film, photography or painting, rests on their offering this double vision where the starry night and matter are connected, and microcosm and macrocosm affect us equally. Kiribati is deeply affected by climate change because of sharply increased water levels and its culture is at risk. It would seem impossible to live there in the future. Will we still be here then? Will our children be here – will they even perceive our world in the same way? The works confront us with our own situation in life. That is what makes them so credible.

**Jone Kvie's** work series *Second Messenger #1, #4 and #6* explores the relationship between body and landscape. The sculptural group consisting of untreated basalt, a volcanic rock type, seems joined in mystical union with aluminium casts of man-made surplus materials such as plywood structures and leftover packaging. Basalt is formed by the rapid cooling of magnesium-rich lava ejected from the Earth's interior and is thus eruptive unlike other rock types such as sedimentary rock. Lying there, alongside representations of man-made material, the elongated and soft basalt shapes could resemble body parts or torsos. On some level they might be exactly that: basalt consists mainly of calcium and is in certain ways identical to the calcium ions that enable signals from the brain to the body's nervous system. This could explain why the sculptures form a subconscious connection to the body in the exhibition space – as a representation of the meeting between nature's unprocessed forms and man-made casts of a man-made material.

The German artist Josef Beuys conceived of basalt as a representation of Earth's energy and planned to place this stone next to each of the seven thousand oak trees he intended to plant in the German city of Kassel for his work *The End of the Twentieth Century* (1983-85).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the *Second Messenger* series is an expression of a practice that seeks to re-establish modern man's lost connection to nature by aligning his work with it. Kvie's works are situated at the threshold between culture and nature. It is as if he explores all possible meanings of the word nature, thus showing that the understanding of this ambiguous concept takes on specific meanings depending on whether the word with which it is juxtaposed is associated with culture, society, awareness or morality. Therefore, the works can also easily be regarded as an investigation of the very foundations of artistic creation, namely the, ontologically speaking, sharp distinction between nature and culture as two basically different forms of existence.

By repeating the repetitive pattern of nature, the works require us to move beyond the limitations that individuality conjures up. As if to insist that the separation of nature and culture is a fiction.<sup>2</sup> The rocks of basalt remain as an apocalyptic element of the landscape to remind us that the environment and man, as well as the things we leave behind, are part of a fragile symbiosis.

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<sup>1</sup> Magnus af Petersens: Jone Kvie: A Glossary, p. 113. Jone Kvie, Here, here (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Latour: *We Have Never Been Modern*. (He insists that the separation of nature and culture is a fiction).

*Haneloså Eat Sundnis* is the title of a sound installation by **Eau Pernice**, featuring a recording of the psalm, in three voices, *Se, nu stiger solen af havets skød* (*Look, the Sun Is Rising from the Bosom of the Sea*), a Danish song with lyrics by a Danish pastor and author, Jakob Knudsen, from 1890 and melody by Oluf Ring from about 1915. The title of the work, like the sound image, does not make immediate sense. It is sung backwards, so that phrases like '*Lysvæld bag ved lysvæld i himlen ind, did, hvorfra den kommer nu, morgnens vind (...)*' become sound words without any real meaning. The work consists of two audio tracks played synchronously.

One speaker plays the song forwards, while the other plays the same song backwards. The meeting of the two soundtracks creates a captivating soundscape where words dissolve into sounds and breaths resemble wind or breeze. The phonetic reversal rephrases the song, making it sound as if it is spoken backwards. The new lyrics that are created make no overall sense, whereas individual words reappear as new, already familiar words such as *eat*, *days* or *platform*.

The original song is a hymn to God's creation with nature as the primary metaphor. In the rearrangement of the song the landscape descriptions are dropped in favour of a new mystical text without a consistent coherent content. Written more than a hundred years ago, the lyrics present a language that for most people of today means something else, or perhaps has no meaning at all? Pernice's sound work is like a translation of an obsolete language which creates new meanings or perhaps even attempts to predict the future of nature. Updating an old song about nature can in itself be seen as a consequence of the fact that current stories about the world's oceans, the wind and the sun have changed our understanding of them. The way we humans understand natural phenomena today is inspired by a different narrative, one that is determined to a much higher degree by the climatic changes that nature is undergoing. Arguably, the words *Haneloså Eat Sundnis* have no concrete or intelligible meaning. Nevertheless, the text prompts us to search for meaning – as when we notice individual words that mean something, albeit in a different language. The sound work may actually be an expression of the fact that, as human beings, we must embark on the journey of re-appropriating and understanding nature anew. New readings are needed so that new narratives may emerge. It is odd that the Danish language consists of an overabundance of fixed expressions in which the weather or nature is used as a metaphor for something that does not make sense; 'en sang fra de varme lande', which translates as 'a song from hot countries', is a saying referring to a meaningless answer or 'søforklaring', literally a 'sea explanation', used to denote prevarications. A word like 'mundsvejr', literally 'mouth air/breath' or 'mouth weather', in English 'hot air', is also used for statements without real content, as a conceptualisation of the air that flows out of one's mouth during speech.

The wind as a phenomenon and metaphor performs multiple roles in the exhibition. **Maša Tomšič** is a researcher and contributes the essay *Anemometry*, which refers to the perceptual aspects of measuring wind. In this context the text works as a parallel reading that deals with the very same considerations regarding the experience or perception of natural phenomena. Tomšič has reproduced her written

contribution to the exhibition in the format of an A5 flyer. The flyer is an early form of mass communication whose purpose it is to cover as wide an area as possible and reach as many people as possible. Throughout the world wars of history this little paper flyer has been a vehicle of propaganda which could be spread from the sky by aeroplane. In more modern times the flyer is better known as a colourful hand-out from the advertising industry to draw our attention to a product or an event. In Tomšič's flyer the deadpan blue colour refers to a fatal system fault in the Windows operating system which is known as the 'Blue Screen of Death'. The same monochrome colour tone is also used in the production of weather forecasts on TV where the satellite map is often inserted in the background by using a blue or green chromakey screen.