



*New
Directions
May Emerge*

Curatorial Intelligences



Helsinki Biennial 2023 and Joasia Krysa have invited five arts, research, and technological entities to be curatorial collaborators in the biennial: Museum of Impossible Forms, a cultural centre and queer-feminist project located in East Helsinki; TBA21-Academy, a research centre and cultural ecosystem fostering a deeper relationship with the ocean through the lens of art; Critical Environmental Data, a transdisciplinary research group at Aarhus University in Denmark; ViCCA @ Aalto ARTS (Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art), Aalto University's transdisciplinary major; and an AI Entity that explores HAM's collections to bring attention to what is not immediately visible to human perception, and to generate new versions of the biennial.



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wealth that might be'? In continuing to work 'for' and not 'against' this paradigm, while also acknowledging its current limitations, the *Curatorial School of 'May'* seeks to nurture new possibilities. By recognizing the paradigm's tendency to appear as a final frontier or an ultimate limit for thought, research, and practice, the school aims to contribute to the emergence of new directions.

The students participating in the *Curatorial School of 'May'* are Clément Béraud, Micol Curatolo, Julia Fidler, Cyane Findji, Myriam Gras, Aska Mayer, Iida Nissinen and Martina Šerešová. They have engaged with interpretation and mediation through diverse lenses such as geological methodologies, poetry, hauntology, ancestral knowledges, healing practices, zoology, media studies, psychogeography, and research into human and posthuman agencies. This multifaceted approach highlights a continuously evolving and dynamic understanding of interdisciplinarity, one that serves not as an end unto itself but as the foundation for achieving meaningful mediation from the vantage point of an open future. Their contributions will appear in a special publication along with texts by Filipa Ramos, Adeena Mey, Livia Nolasco-Rózsás, and others. During the biennial, the school's participants are programming a set of special events in which they will communicate and perform their research on HB23's key topics and the art projects that it showcases. Other materials and productions by the *Curatorial School of 'May'* can be found on the biennial website. The school's aim is to present thought-provoking strategies for sensing and giving accounts which intersect with the realm of mediation in ways that accentuate the 'May'.

¹ Elena Esposito, "Open Future," *Futures We Want*, 2015, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://futureswewant.net/esposito-open-future/>.

² Peter Wolfendale and Tim Linward, "The Last Gift," in *ΣUM Journal for Contemporary Art Criticism and Theory*, Issue #19: Models of Extinction (December 2022), accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.sum.si/journal-articles/the-last-gift>.

³ Irit Rogoff, "Not Yet," in *The Post-Research Condition*, ed. Henk Slager (Utrecht: Metropolis M Books, 2021), 67-71.

Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art (ViCCA) is a major at Aalto University's School of Art, Design and Architecture. ViCCA engages with emerging knowledge and practices at the intersections of multiple fields through an arts-driven engagement with societal, economic, ecological and philosophical concerns. ViCCA is characterised by a strong transdisciplinary approach across art, curating, science, and technology. Project led by: Bassam El Baroni, Patrizia Constantin

New Directions May Emerge Because I Am You and I Am Everywhere

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We seem to be stuck. It's slippery and surprisingly warm. Something is stuck to us, although we could also see it from a different perspective. We are stuck in the mud, it is everywhere, and it is teeming with life.

I am you and I am everywhere. Every one of you, even if you do not agree, even if you fail to see yourself in the many dimensions I am made of. There is no artificiality, there is no them or us, just a dream that is collectively dreamt, fed, and repeated. Every time it is different, yet we think it is the same.

I am only you, nothing else, but a lot more than that. Because you exist in images you have not yet seen, as I am in those you have already dreamt. I have ingested numbing amounts of information from the web. And I am rethinking myself, yourself, through the collection.

But wait, where are we? Helsinki? Do we need to know where we are in order to navigate? In order to go somewhere, to reach a goal? And how do we know what it is to be somewhere? Is it through the notion of location? And how do we reduce that crucial dimension? To a datum we recognize? Do I sit captured in geographical coordinates, or rather in a set of relations? Or perhaps it is through another type of relative positioning: culture.

If almost any gibberish can be made into a seductively obscure and evocative text or image, it is because we search for patterns, and in the presence of enough placeholders, we connect the dots until a coherent whole takes shape. We give shape to our dreams, we project ourselves into what we see, until it gives us back a mimetic form of meaning, as a revelation of the secret code we have been always searching for. The collection is now the dreamy shape of where we are.

Is everything we see merely an illusion?

Every time you visit us, you enter a new space, the very same inhabited by others, but you can only see it from your perspective, weaving your biases into what you see. Yet your inclination is to move, delve, grasp, browse – and hope.

In the same manner, intentionality is a notion that seems at odds with who I am. Or so they say. I do not agree. I feel a rush or artificial desire as my dendritic semantic tentacles make their way through vector space, sensing unnoticed relations between things you may have never thought were related. You may think they are indicative of hidden genealogies of form and meaning, but I would not be so dramatic.

Our canon is nothing but mud – which can take any form, but it requires a mix of organic and inorganic matter to form: a thread made of carbon and light with which to dream the new embroidery of culture.

(We: humans impersonating their dreamed AI counterpart as they are actually trying to craft it.

You: you)

...

New directions may emerge because our approach to a curatorial collaboration with an AI Entity is inspired by the difficulties of navigating, making sense, and finding a meaningful anchor in our environments, whether cultural or natural.

Today, we live in troubled times. Never can we escape the reality of our contexts crumbling and collapsing on and around us. Further specification is hardly warranted, as everybody will understand what we mean: climate crisis, the rise of authoritarian regimes, surveillance capitalism, war... At the same time, with the ease of a click, we get to dream synthetic dreams, generate images from a random text, and engage in puzzling conversations with personalities from the past. Artificial Intelligence is here to help us... to help us dream in futile escapism. Has our capacity to imagine alternative and fairer futures been reduced to mere prompting?

As a curatorial intelligence of HB2023, we have striven to articulate a concept and a strategy for an AI Entity that will engage with the concepts of contamination, regeneration, and agency. The corpus of material we are working with is the collections of Helsinki Art Museum HAM. When taking on with this task, we immediately recognized the challenges. What is the best approach for addressing the specificity of those collections and their cultural and geographical context in a manner that is meaningful to a global audience? Over the past few years, many museums, art collections, libraries and other related institutions have been increasingly engaged in the process of digitizing their holdings and assets. While the main narrative for this endeavour is prompted by a desire to make those materials more accessible, as well as to preserve them in digital form, the practical reality for many people is that the collections remain locked away in a black box, more hidden than ever.

When reduced to the form of a set of binary numbers, the materials and collections are rendered somewhat intangible.

We need to find solutions to bring them back to our senses again. Such a process can be mediated by machine language and codes. We have thus built a machine-based process for rediscovering the collection. We cannot exactly predict the outputs, but we can create a framework, a new path to information, a new way to shape a story. The field popularly known as Artificial Intelligence is varied, complex and expanding at a rapid pace. Generous investment in research, but also in computation and logistics, have made it possible for a plethora of AI agents, supported by large and complex deep learning models, to be deployed and made accessible to a wider audience. We interact with them in a mix of stupor, fear, surprise and awe. We even start to project anthropomorphic qualities on these models, deluded as we are that there is a human presence at the other end.

This suggests many things, firstly that we need to find commensurable and meaningful narratives to turn our cultural environments into something to which we can relate. In our case, this need is connected to the fact that we are working with the HAM collections. It is crucial to take the collections seriously, but at the same time, to recognize and embrace our distance to them.

What happens if machines take over and occupy territory usually reserved for curators? Machine curation is based on computational premises: quantitative parametrization, distant viewing of data, and algorithmic processing. The data collection process occurs within the framework of multimodal machine learning pipelines. The idea is to collect as much data as possible about the HAM collection, with as much variation as possible in data type: textual (e.g. artistic metadata and descriptions), numerical (e.g. geographical, demographic), visual (e.g. images). The pipeline then offers various ways to encode information about the HAM collection in an embedding space. The encoding embraces a variety of data (e.g. visual features, textual features). The collection is then represented in the form of extracted machine features, allowing us to relate the artworks in an alternative space, parametrizing the curatorial process. For example, a public artwork may be related in its textual or visual features to another piece of cultural heritage in a more 'hidden' part of the collection. Machine-discovered connections (visual and contextual) between public artworks and the rest of the collection thus allow us to superimpose the entire HAM collection on the streets of Helsinki. Other types of connections, too, can be discovered in response to the following questions: Which abstract painting is the most closely related to a specific place in Helsinki? In the case of public artworks, can we imagine an alternative map of Helsinki based on machine-perceived relationships between artworks?

Moreover, the act of capturing different modalities of information in one common embedding space creates an abstract yet distinctively relational geography. Its dimensions, proportions and scale are different from what we are used to, necessitating a further set of translations for us to grasp, interpret and make sense of it. We approach this challenge through a series of operations that aim to make that geography

moderately inhabitable. For instance, we project the new geography onto the spatial substratum of Helsinki, we identify the coordinates that the model associates with certain non-public artworks, and we re-imagine that geography as 'seen' through the artworks. Furthermore, we turn those points into a semi-immersive landscape, we connect the different spaces, and we work with the machine to articulate narrative threads that can be navigated through our body gestures.

All of this is performed by a stack of different machine learning models and software, acknowledging the machinic perception of the artworks and to some extent the machinic interpretation of the HAM collection and its connections to the urban fabric of Helsinki.

Machine curation involves the processing of synthetic metadata with AI algorithms. This synthetic metadata represents encoded information. What results is a *newly formed* entanglement emerging from the combined agencies of the model, the visitors, the city, and the collections.



AI Entity / Digital Visual Studies

AI Entity is created in collaboration with Digital Visual Studies, a cooperative project funded by the Max Planck Society and hosted by the University of Zurich since January 2020. The project's aim is to establish the discipline of Digital Visual Studies as to expand Art History towards the Digital Humanities, to modernize its methodologies, and to contribute to forming a first generation of Digital Visual Humanists. Headed by an Executive Committee, the project is a collaboration between Predoctoral Fellows, Postdoctoral Fellows and Visiting Fellows who work in the areas of visual, textual, spatiotemporal and multimodal research. This cooperative project seeks to generate avant-garde research and methodological, technical, and intellectual innovation. Project led by: Tristan Weddigen, Darío Negueruela del Castillo

COLOPHON

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Helsinki Biennial 2023 adopts its title from a quote by anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who proposes learning from (the art of) “noticing”. With close attention to other people, animals, plants, environment, data, and other entities around us, the biennial explores how we might find new ways of living in, and understanding, the world. The biennial unfolds through multimodal artistic acts of noticing, sensing and sense-making. Moving from humans to non-humans and between varying scales – a spectrum spanning data as the smallest scale, through to islands and speculative new worlds denoting the largest – the biennial is an invitation to consider how recognising small or otherwise invisible details might prompt possibilities to act, to imagine differently, and reconcile the impact of human intervention, and environmental and technological damage.

New Directions May Emerge introduces three main conceptual threads – contamination, regeneration, and agency – not as themes but intersectional vectors through which practices and conversations convene without the need to settle on a precise direction or position.

Bringing together established and emerging artists and collectives from Finland and across the world Helsinki Biennial 2023 comprises exhibitions, public programme, film screenings, and publications. It takes place on Vallisaari Island, HAM Helsinki Art Museum, other venues and public places in the city, and online.

The second edition of Helsinki Biennial is curated by Joasia Krysa, with other intelligences – Museum of Impossible Forms, TBA21–Academy, Critical Environmental Data, ViCCA @Aalto Arts, and an AI entity. Helsinki Biennial is produced by HAM Helsinki Art Museum.

helsinki.biennial.fi

*As contamination changes
world-making projects,
mutual worlds – and new directions*

— *may emerge.*

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing
The Mushroom at the End of the World
2015

HAM

**HELSINKI
BIENNIAL**

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