

SENTIENT ENCOUNTERS

A hand is holding a white sign with a simple smiley face drawing on it. The hand is positioned in the foreground, reaching towards the sign. The background consists of a window with a grid pattern, through which a bright, overcast sky is visible. To the left of the window, there is a tall, green, columnar cactus in a white pot. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the window.

First edition: A film series on plants, spooks, ghosts and demons of liminality

@ AKI Auditorium, Enschede
On: 28 April 2022
16:30-20:30

Toin or Spurl or Plinuckment (ver.ii)

In the short story *The Sound Machine* by Roald Dahl, Mr. Klausner tinkers with his invention, a black box 'designed to pick up sound vibrations that are too high-pitched for reception by the human ear, and to convert them to a scale of audible tones.' Standing in the garden with this black box he hears 'a frightful piercing shriek' when his neighbour Mrs. Saunders cuts a yellow rose and places it in her basket. Overcoming his initial shock, Mr. Klausner revels in the possibilities of this discovery. Through further 'testing' he questions if these severed flowers really 'expressed pain' and hypothesizes that they 'didn't really express any of the feelings or emotions known to a human being.' He continues: 'a flower probably didn't feel pain. It felt something else which we didn't know about – something called toin or spurl or plinuckment, or anything you like.'

It's difficult not to read Mr. Klausner's statements as anthropocentric hubris. He obfuscates his hand's action and his responsibility in causing the shrieks in his experiments by making the shaky claim that the flowers 'probably' didn't feel pain. His actions seeking data beyond human sense, and his technological apparatus feeding him results, create a feedback loop. It seems as though his experiments reveal more about his desires and impositions. However, there are gaps in the feedback loop where more-than-human data does come through, even if it can't be analyzed or deciphered. The shrieks still resonate. Through Dahl's use of 'non-sense' language for the un-named feeling of the flowers he creates a placeholder. 'Toin or spurl or plinuckment' become variables open to being renamed and filled with meaning by the flowers, or just plainly ignored. Either way, the agency and voice of the flowers has its own rhythm and logic despite any human claims.

Programme Part I

Conversation with a Cactus,
Elise Florenty & Marcel Türkowsky, 2017,
45:00

Part II

PWDRE SER: the rot of stars,
Charlotte Pryce, 2018,
6:44

Songs from the Compost: Mutating Bodies,
Imploding Stars, Eglė Budvytytė with
Marija Olšauskaitė and Julija Steponaitytė, 2020,
30:00

A Paradise Out Of A Common Field,
Bassam Al-Sabah & Jennifer Mehigan, 2020,
5:32

Holobiont, Jenna Sutela, 2018,
10:26

*Note: The first version of this programme premiered in the context of the exhibition *All Flesh is Grass* at Kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga, 2020.

Programme Notes: Part I

Part I of the screening is comprised of one work, *Conversation with a Cactus* by Elise Florenty and Marcel Türkowsky. The film, as described below, engages with plant sentience, plant-as-witness, and the conundrum of bridging interspecies communication. Shown in the first iteration of *Toin or Spurl or Plinuckment* in the context of the *All Flesh is Grass* exhibition at Kim? Contemporary Art Centre in Riga, *Conversation with a Cactus* in part echoes another film shown in the public programme, the 1978 'botanical thriller' *The Kirlian Witness (aka The Plants are Watching)* by Jonathan Sarno. In this film, a potted fiddle leaf fig tree (*Ficus lyrata*) originally sourced from the spiritual eco-community of Findhorn in Northern Scotland is the only witness to a murder, and the victim's sister attempts to find answers through various methods of communicating/discerning information from the plant, including Kirlian photography. A potted *Ficus lyrata* became a crucial component of the exhibition in Riga as well. Additionally, the concept of a 'plant witness' and the need for interspecies communication also featured prominently in the online video conferencing LARP/RPG (Live Action Role Play/Role Playing Game) *A Corpse at Findhorn: The Symbiotic Garden*, which was co-developed through the *All Flesh is Grass* project with artists Una Hamilton Helle, Eltons Küns and Uma Breakdown. The game had players embody alternating characters, human beings investigating a corpse found at the Findhorn commune, and the plants that surrounded the scene.

Conversation with a Cactus,
Elise Florenty & Marcel Türkowsky, 2017,
45:00

Mei, a 30-year-old woman from Tokyo, sends a message to her friend Toshi in Hamburg, telling him about haiku, strange recollections from their youth, and the last muggy summer night. Shocked by the death of the journalist Iwaji Masaki known for working on the Fukushima disaster, she falls into a dream-like hallucination bringing back various testimonies of the legendary 1970s Hashimoto experiment. The attempt was to manifest plant consciousness and to use cacti as potential witnesses in the investigation of future crimes. Part media history, part ghost story, the film interweaves science and mythology to lead us into an animist space beyond language and reason. (EF & MT)



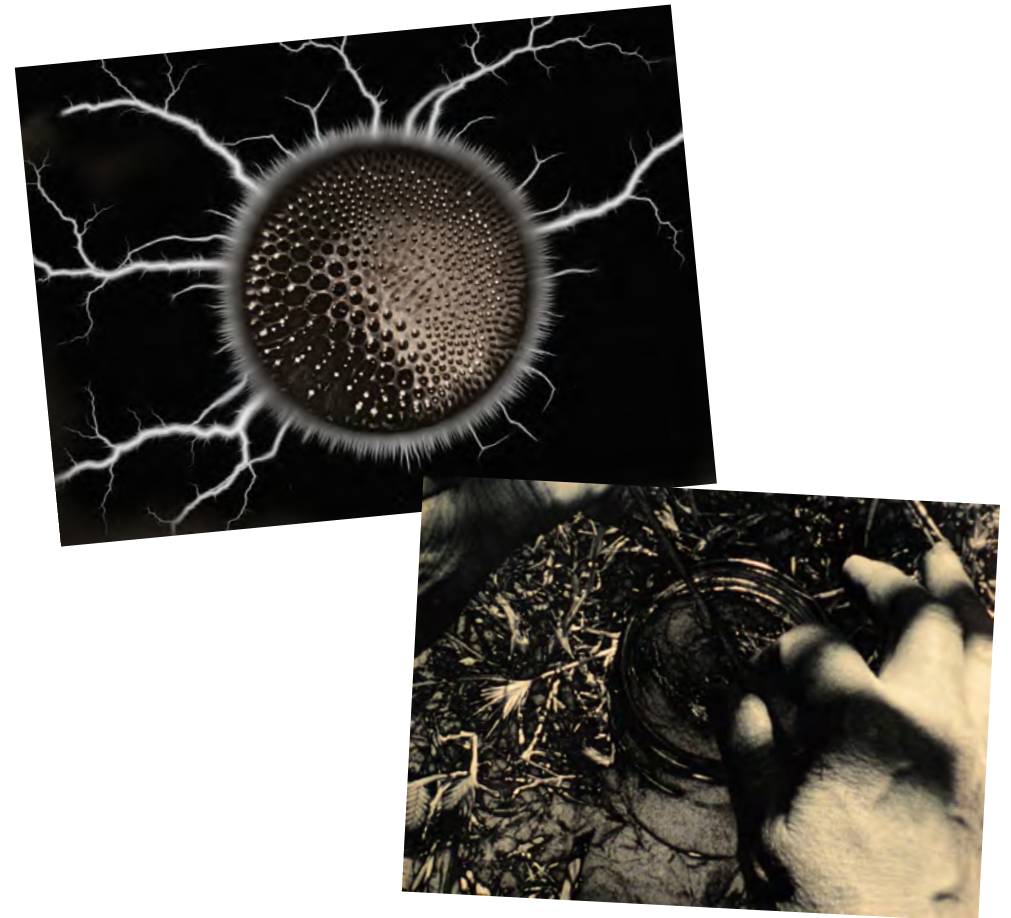
Part II

Part II of the screening is comprised of four works including *PWDRE SER: the rot of stars* by Charlotte Pryce (part of the first iteration of *Toin or Spurl or Plinuckment*); *Songs from the Compost: Mutating Bodies, Imploding Stars* by Eglė Budvytė with Marija Olšauskaitė and Julija Steponaitytė; *A Paradise Out Of A Common Field* by Bassam Al-Sabah & Jennifer Mehigan; and *Holobiont* by Jenna Sutela. In this slate of works the 'gaps' between human and more-than-human are regularly transgressed, and these categories are often collapsed into one another. There are 'aliens' or biological stowaways within our bodies, part of us. There is so much life travelling between not-so-autonomous beings, between the stars. There is so much life in decay, in rot, and stardust permeates through it all.

PWDRE SER: the rot of stars,
Charlotte Pryce, 2018,
6:00

The film depicts an encounter with a mysterious, luminous, electrical substance. Inspired equally by medieval accounts of visionary experiences and by 19th century photography of the invisible, *Pwdre Ser* joins Kirlian photography with hand-processed images.

Pwdre Ser is the Welsh name for a mythical substance that has been observed by many since the 1400's. (CP)



***Songs from the Compost: Mutating Bodies, Imploding Stars*, Eglė Budvytytė with Marija Olšauskaitė and Julija Steponaitytė, 2020, 30:00**

The film, shot in the lichenous forests and sand dunes of the Curonian Spit, is a hypnotic exploration of the darker aspects of symbiotic life in the forest: interdependence, surrender, death and decay.

The film slowly builds along the intimate lyrics of a song that channels the desires of the narrator, shape shifting between different genders, voices, and beyond- human embodiments. The lyrics of the song draw from the ideas by the biologist Lynn Margulis, celebrating the role of bacteria in making life possible and collaboration between the one cell organisms, as well as concepts by the science-fiction author Octavia Butler who employed tropes of symbiosis, mutation, and hybridity to challenge hierarchies and categorisation. (EB)



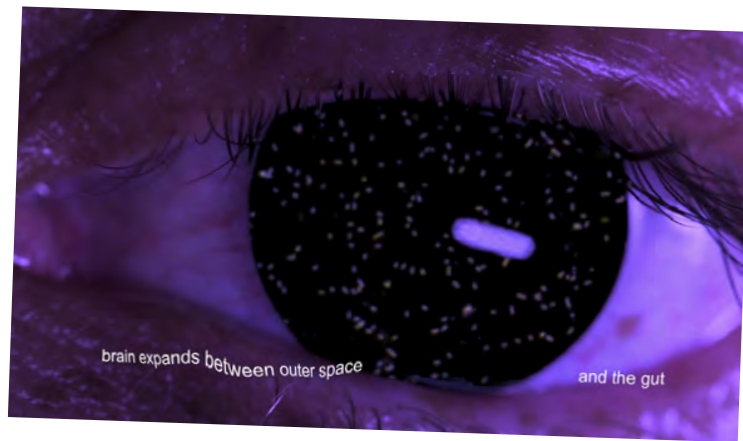
***A Paradise Out Of A Common Field*, Bassam Al-Sabah & Jennifer Mehigan, 2020, 5:32**

A Paradise Out Of A Common Field is a short animated film by Jennifer Mehigan and Bassam Al-Sabah that explores the iconography of the zombie. The origin of the zombie in general cultural history is relatively unknown, but within the confines of this film, she emerges from a lush garden and is submerged into the ocean. Playing with dream worlds that consist of feral horses and writhing flowers, horizons and image planes unfold to disorient viewers, while the audio transports you through an interpretation of the history of the Irish graveyard and its relationship to trauma. (BA & JM)



Holobiont, Jenna Sutela, 2018,
10:26

Holobiont considers the idea of embodied cognition on a planetary scale, featuring a zoom from the outer space to inside the gut. The video documents Planetary Protection rituals at the European Space Agency and explores extremophilic bacteria in fermented foods as possible distributors of life between the stars. *Bacillus subtilis*, the nattō bacterium, plays a leading role. (Vdrome)



About the film series Sentient Encounters

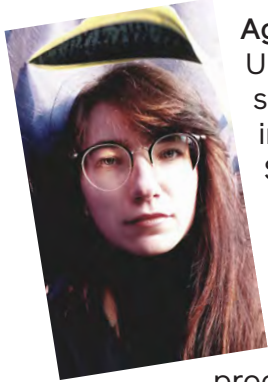
The word sentient denotes a conscious feeling and an awareness of one's carnal experience as well as one's existence. For this reason, the word sentient was equated to intelligence and awareness, and was deemed to be characteristic of only select bodies—human bodies. The word became a means to order matters of the world and enforce (existing) taxonomies and hierarchies between species and their differences. As such a regulator of order between bodies, the word sentient became to enforce anthropocentric worldview – the belief that the human is the measure of all knowledge about the world.

In this series of film screenings and discussions, we propose to reimagine and reclaim sentience to describe relations with bodies that are still excluded from meaning-making practices. We will encounter bodies that are ignored and not recognized as existing because of these taxonomies, and because of power structures and hierarchies that define what a body can be.

Rather than rejecting the word sentient, we propose to contaminate it with multiple relations, which are present in more than visual encounters. Importantly, we aim not to expand the definition of sentience while keeping the division between sentient and non sentient intact. Rather, by multiplying it, we want to shake and reimagine different understanding of bodies and our practices as 'liminal' – as already in a state of in-betweenness of fixed categorizations and identifications. By naming encounters rather than bodies as sentient, we pay attention to modes of practices and relations that generate and mutate these bodies. The way we practice bodies, the way we relate, does matter. All relations are sentient, and all relations are risky, as they may lead to creation or may cause harm, as they may make bodies flourish or perish. By recognizing encounters as sentient, we aim to reimagine and bring together differing stories of how to live and practice multispecies bodies and our becoming.

Sentient Encounters is a collaboration between Sjoerd van Oevelen (Department head of Moving Image, AKI Enschede), Agnieszka Wolodzko (initiator and lecturer AKI BIO MATTERS), and supported by ArteZ studium generale.

Biographies



Agnieszka Anna Wołodźko holds a PhD from Leiden University. Her research focuses on new material studies, affect theory, posthumanism and on the intersection between art, ethics and biotechnology. She is an artistic and a public curator of exhibitions and events on art working with living matters and art and science relations. Since 2016 she works at AKI ArtEZ as a lecturer and teaches courses on philosophy of art. She established, and coordinates BIO MATTERS artistic research program that works with living bodies. Here Wolodzko explores ways of bringing into artistic practice different knowledges, forgotten rituals and wisdoms. Next to theoretical and material experimentation with forgotten or neglected ideas as well as materialities of bodies, it challenges existing assumptions of who creates knowledge, of what deserves to be known and how we can pursue practices defined as marginal.



Erik Martinson (Canada/Latvia) is an independent curator and writer. Current research threads include: Speculative fiction(ing), genre conventions (and their subversion) as productive restraints (with focus on Science-Fiction, New Weird, Horror, and Folk-Horror), example: screening 'Not really now not any more', Kunsternes Hus, Oslo, 2019; plant sentience, empathy, interspecies relations, examples: 'All Flesh is Grass' exhibition project/online LARP-RPG with public programme, Kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga, 2020, online/mail art project 'Suggested for You' with Sandra Kosorotova, part of History of Joy, Part 4, 2021; Stone Tape Theory – ghosts as recordings/traces in physical objects, forensic as well as supernatural approaches, examples: screening 'Like slow breathing, it seemed to emanate from inside the walls' at LUX, London, 2016, 'Stone Tapes' exhibition/publication project in development; Remote Viewing/Astral Projection as metaphor for exploring diasporic experiences,

examples: screening 'Tell me about the ones who sleep through storms: Films and Videos from the Baltics' at Toronto International Film Festival's Wavelengths Series, 2017, exhibition 'The Surface of the Sun' at Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM), Tallinn, 2018, screening/live-reading 'There was a Forest in the Ceiling' at Rupert, Vilnius, 2019; and Language-as-a-virus, examples: screening series 'Its origins are indeterminate' at Whitechapel Gallery/Close-Up, London, 2018, screening/performance/live-reading 'Self Does Not Understand' at Cubitt, London, 2019.
www.erik-martinson.com



Sjoerd van Oevelen (1974) is a visual artist and researcher based in Amsterdam. He studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and the Architectural Association in London. Since 2001 he has been collaborating with artist Elodie Hiryczuk under the name Hiryczuk/ Van Oevelen.

Their photographs explore the workings of perception and systems of perspective, as well as humankind's relationship to nature and the landscape. The differences and similarities between Western and Eastern traditions of painting and photographing nature deeply shape their work and thinking. Hiryczuk/ Van Oevelen regularly publish essays on their blog *The Detached Gaze* and in magazines such as *Philosophy of Photography* and *EXTRA – Photography in Context*.

In addition to making art he co-founded the practice and research-based art platform *Radical Reversibility* co-curating international art exhibitions *Seeing Without A Seer* (2018) and *From Seeing To Acting* (2021). He is head of the Moving Image BA at ArtEZ AKI Academy of Art and Design and currently pursues a PhD research entitled *Towards A Gaze Multiple* at LUCAS Center for the Arts in Society at Leiden University.
www.hiryczukvanoevelen.com / www.radicalreversibility.org

