

# **Pögult vor** Silent Spring



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# Introduction

*Silent Spring* is an exhibition by three female artists, Lilja Birgisdóttir, Katrín Elvarsdóttir and Hertta Kiiski, curated by Daría Sól Andrews. The exhibition is part of the Icelandic Photography Festival and is set up in the main hall of Hafnarborg. The artists have previously worked together in Finland and this exhibition draws inspiration from that collaboration, without repeating itself.

There are two main themes at the basis of the exhibition concept, on the one hand the photograph as a medium, with which the artists work, and on the other hand environmental issues as a challenge. Artists, museums and cultural institutions are now trying to deal with the looming environmental threat. This is done by both tackling the issue in works and projects and by considering the environmental footprint of individual works and exhibitions. We certainly do not want to run the risk of creating some kind of trash monster or an overgrown environmental footprint, due to transport and production of works.

In preparation for this exhibition, this has been taken into consideration and the production of the works arranged so that their environmental footprint is minimized. This is in line with Hafnarborg's environmental policy, which states that the environment has to be taken into consideration in both the daily operations of the museum and in the content of exhibitions. But does this matter at all in the larger context

of things – can one small museum in Iceland and three artists really change something? Sure, everything matters and if anything can change the world, it is art that has the freedom to speak up and remind us of what is most important.

Ágústa Kristófersdóttir,  
Director of Hafnarborg

## Silent Spring

*Silent Spring*, a group exhibition with works by Lilja Birgisdóttir, Katrín Elvarsdóttir and Hertta Kiiski, invokes a questioning of how we as artists, curators and humans, could begin to counteract a growingly wasteful and consumer-oriented art market and global society on the whole. These three artists work within the lens of photography and apply a caring, nurturing attention to depleting environments. Through this they inspire an attention in the viewer to aspects of waste in our existence. *Silent Spring*, the title of the exhibition, comes from a book published in 1962 by Rachel Carson, about the adverse environmental effects caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides. This text held large influence in the United States at the time and led to a nationwide ban on DDT for agricultural uses. It invokes something nuclear, a shifting of seasons, where there is no new growth, only a toxic silence imbedded in a disappearing landscape. In terms of artistic creation, buying less and using less does not have to equate to creating less or creating lesser. Amidst the unsustainable practices we engage in as artists and art producers – and the waste the art world produces – how can we reorient our creative minds to more environmentally caring mindsets and nourishing behaviors? Perhaps through these small efforts of cultivation, we can begin to understand the waste we produce at a larger scale, in every sense of the human footprint.

A companion to the physical exhibition, this publication presents a conversation between the curator and the three

artists of *Silent Spring*, alongside images of works in the exhibition. In a collaborative interview format, artists and curator talk through the themes of the exhibition, potentials for actions, wishes and hopes. Following, Jaakko Pallasvuo presents an eerily apocalyptic imagining of a disastrous future, much like the implications of Carson's text suggest. His story is both amusing and yet disturbing in its potential in a future reality. Jaakko combines physical elements from the works in this exhibition to string together a story of part reality, part fiction. He effectively points to the absurdity of our actual reality in regards to the state of climate change in society today. Finally, curator Essi Vesala focuses in on curatorial and institutional practices in a contemporary art sphere and on how they could better foster ecological artistic practices from a theoretical perspective. She examines the shift to ecological practices at different levels of art creation and institutionalization, presenting a compelling theoretical analysis on the concept of eco-curating.

At the scale of museums, art corporations, art consulting agencies, art auction houses, etc., the carbon footprint skyrockets. Think global art shipments, mass sales of works, openings and receptions and production costs at the mass scale – and so on. We can only begin to imagine the impact beyond the individual, if these larger players in the artworld would implement practices of minimal waste production and how this could impact our global carbon footprint. These are steps of change in the right direction and they are happening, just not quite fast enough. Like quite everything surrounding the climate crisis, there is always room for critique, improvement and irony in preached method vs. actual practice. It is this irony that we have to reconcile somehow, this impossibility of a perfect action despite the right mindset.

The human is in a climate – pun intended – of an imminent urgency to avert disaster. How do we respond, what responsibility does the artist have at stake? I personally feel the weight of artists and curators to use art to make a difference, to raise a voice, to enact a change. In a way this is a responsibility some put on themselves, but it is also ingrained societally, historically. Does art exist without critique, without criticism? As artists and as art professionals, there is always this question about calling attention, to inequalities, social issues, political incorrectness, etc. With regards to climate change more specifically, of course the impact of the arts may be read as less meaningful or impactful than that of a scientist, or a policy maker, a nation leader, or a corporate manufacturer. And yet there is this classic notion of the voice of one, enacting an implementation of change at the grander scale, which still always rings through. In all hopes, this exhibition will add to those voices.

As a final thought around the contextualization of this exhibition, I think *Silent Spring's* grounding in Iceland holds a unique point of comparison that must be addressed. Specifically I want to point to a certain irony in Icelandic social behavior found in the quite non-sustainable practices of Icelanders, in an eco-friendly country. Some of these wasteful practices would never be accepted or even heard of in other countries where water and energy waste is taken more serious – in countries where we are not privileged with an (seemingly) endless supply of natural resources. Despite our country being quite environmentally sustainable, thanks in part to our geothermal gases and renewable energy, we can be shockingly wasteful. Just because certain resources, like water, heat and geothermal energy, are readily available to us in our country, at the moment, doesn't mean there is a need to be unnecessarily wasteful. This is especially necessary to consider in the face of a large proportion of

countries across the globe that are in dire need of these resources we so readily waste without a second thought.

In Iceland, we pride ourselves on the beauty of our natural landscape and our respect of it, so it seems just that much more necessary to engage in a conversation around how we can contribute to a less wasteful environment. At the crux of the matter, climate change is a matter of the human ego. Of the human ego not being willing to experience the slightest inconvenience, the slightest change in habit, in routine, in the comfortable. In the ego of not being able to look beyond oneself. This is the ego of the artist as well, to be sure, and the curator. This is the human flaw – and its consequences are dire.

## A Conversation Between the Partici- pants of *Silent Spring*

**How do you approach environmentalism, as an artist, in your practice?**

**Hertta:** Even though my work does not look like “eco-art”, its central themes include animal rights and the climate crisis. I draw inspiration from posthumanism and ecofeminism. My pieces approach the ecological catastrophe through the emotions it awakens. Climate change is the unnerving undercurrent behind the pastel-coloured world. Rising alongside the dark visions of the future is empathy, the deeper understanding of the feelings of others. My artistic practice focuses on love, empathy and the relationship between the human and the non-human. It also reflects the aesthetics of Western consumer culture, so familiar to us all. My work is based on the notion that empathy can be a way to make the imaginary border between humans and nature dissolve. It can stop the culture of repression and instrumentalization and act as a bridge towards a more compassionate and fair coexistence. All of my works in *Silent Spring* linger around guilt and shame, but also love and hope for a better future, highlighting the fact that our children have to deal with the catastrophe we are leaving to them.

**Lilja:** I try to think carefully about what I produce. I do sketching and visualisation of my ideas and how they would fit in the space. It’s not necessary to make every idea come to life –

that’s too wasteful. You keep them alive in your books or in the back of your head. It’s only for exhibitions that I make these ideas into material where they actually gain a purpose. I try to source most of my material locally, or reuse material or artwork, if it is in continuous dialogue with past exhibitions. Performative works have the least waste, as they involve movements of people. This is why I decided to use a choir that I am in, with wonderful artists and musicians that care about nature and were so kind as to help me make it come to life. Scent also has no carbon footprint, since the elements are locally sourced and harvested by hand. I work with essential oils that are all handmade here in Iceland and put them together to create a scent for each flag, or worry. Scent has a direct connection with memory, where our emotions dwell. I find it to be very grounding when I smell the scent of the ocean or burnt wood, for it connects me to my feelings and helps me deal with my anxiety. I hope the scents in the exhibition can help guests, who share the same worries, feel more grounded.

**Katrín:** My works also address the current dialogue about the climate crisis – animals on the brink of extinction, the acidification of the oceans and the impact of climate change on the future of our children. *Memories of a Polar Bear* is a series of photographs depicting a polar bear’s fur, paws, claws and other body parts. The parts belong to Knut, the famous polar bear born in 2006, who at the time was the first bear cub to survive past infancy at the Berlin Zoo in more than thirty years. Knut’s life ended tragically at age four, when he drowned in the pool in front of hundreds of Zoo visitors. Knut’s image has been used in several environmental campaigns, including a German stamp with the slogan “Preserve Nature Worldwide.” The title of my triptych *There Is No Planet B* refers to the statement “There is no planet B,” a quote that has been used extensively in the fight against global climate change in recent years.

**What are your thoughts, or anxieties, around the term *Zero Waste*? How could this be counteracted at an individual level, in its practicalities? The implications are so massive that it feels so daunting.**

**L:** Just buying groceries, for example, is extremely wasteful, with the endless plastic packaging materials, which are imported to Iceland from around the globe. I recycle all my plastic, but I am very well aware that of that only 10% is actually recycled in Iceland. The only way to answer this question positively is if the government steps in and taxes toxic products and waste. For example, over the past ten years, I have read about amazing people who are coming up with biodegradable materials that can replace plastic. But you never actually see it implemented in the real world, because plastic is still the cheapest material out there, so of course companies will still use it. Everything you do as a human being in our society today is wasteful – it all adds on the pile. By showing responsibility in what I make, I can at least clench down my guilt, but it is still there nonetheless.

**K:** The process of creating these works of art raised for me a number of difficult questions, for which thorough answers may not even yet exist: could I be using more environmentally friendly materials that nevertheless meet the requirements of museums and collectors about durability? How bad for the environment is the work I created for this exhibition – does anyone know for sure? How environmentally unfriendly is this exhibition as a whole? Does the awareness that such an exhibition raises possibly counteract its negative environmental impact? It should. Ideally, it would. There are apparently no ready answers to these questions, probably because they involve a multitude of interacting forces, materials, components and chemicals.

**H:** The eco-crisis and climate change have forced me to take sustainable thinking into the creative process and to consider the

materials I use. Diasec prints, which contain acrylic and aluminum, will take forever to biodegrade. Crocs and Diasecs will probably be the last things left on Earth. It is not exactly a sustainable choice. Making any new objects hardly is. However, I do not think I can talk about the things I want to have an impact on in a totally zero-waste way yet, but I hope I will be able to in the future.

**K:** Of course, we have thought about the environment in the process of making the art, but in the end I think my work for this one is not much different from that of my other exhibitions. I mean, the material that I use is the same. I considered using Hahnemühle natural papers (made from hemp or agave), but ultimately the images looked better on Fine Art Baryta and in the end I have to be satisfied with what I put on the wall. This is such a delicate topic and it's so easy to feel guilty and give up! I think you have to stay true to your own art practice, but of course not be wasteful and recycle and upcycle as much as possible. We have to rethink everything and redesign how we live our daily lives. That gives our children more possibilities and a deeper meaning. As opposed to when people of my generation were born and the main purpose was to get a good job, make more money and buy more stuff!

**I think we have all individually had difficulty coming to terms with this throughout our collaboration in this project – being forced to face how wasteful our practices are when we begin examining them with this necessary microscope.**

**L:** I have been dealing with *eco-anxiety* for a while now and I am constantly stressed about the extreme rates of consumption in our culture. I find myself worried and agitated about how slowly everything is happening and we are reminded everyday that our world is going down the drain. I have been reading about climate anxiety and it's definitely a real thing – 70% of young people share the stress. That's why I wanted to address this issue in

*Silent Spring.* As part of my work, I have created flags with screenshots of the most googled climate change worries that people are looking up. I found it quite comical to portray the dichotomy between this vast crisis that could destroy the planet vs. a single person, in their little apartment googling it. It's way too much for a single human to wrap their head around.

**H:** It all comes down to the climate anxiety, guilt and shame. Even if you don't eat meat, avoid flying and recycle everything, in this western consumer society, you almost have to have a smartphone and a laptop – and so on. It would require a complete break from urban life to be able to live completely sustainably. And we are constantly aware of doing wrong and not being good enough. That is one central theme I have been processing. Feelings of despair and guilt – both deserved. But the responsibility should not rest on individuals only. The pressure has to be put on companies, institutions and governments to make systemic changes. I feel that the aesthetics and the way I process it go hand in hand with the feeling of guilt. If I only used natural materials in my work, it would not only look different but would also tackle different issues. It is a spiral I am trying to escape, but at the moment I still feel that the issues I discuss require material output and cannot be entirely immaterial. I recycle, remodel and borrow as much as I can. I use my older artworks as a part of new ones. I also adopt a lot of things from home, which can then continue their life in everyday use later.

**Do artists have a responsibility, a duty, to be political?  
A duty to climate change?**

**L:** If I am being honest, I've never seen myself as being a political artist, but as I get older I understand that every decision that you make is political in a way. Choosing not to eat meat is political, boycotting companies that engage in illegal practices is political,

supporting environmentally friendly produce is political. It's an underlying notion in all my thought processes, as I try my best to limit waste both in my personal life and in my work. It's just now that I am addressing it in a straightforward manner. I am afraid of how slowly the government moves and we certainly need much more radical changes from industries.

**K:** Yes, I think artists have both a personal and a professional duty to be responsible inhabitants of planet Earth. I recently attended a lecture about art and climate change where the subject was how complicated it is to make a green exhibition. One of the artists talked about trying to send his artwork from Europe to Japan by train, but it turned out to be more complicated than it sounds because in the end no insurance company was willing to insure the works. Artists can – and should – influence the government and big companies to behave responsibly.

**H:** As the world faces changes the art world must change too. I think it is crucial to examine one's own practice and recognize what could be improved. The ecological and ethical questions can not be disregarded. The change doesn't have to happen suddenly, but it has to happen. We need discussion, action and transparency.





*Hertta Kiiski*



*Lilja Birgisdóttir*



*Katrín Elvarsdóttir*



*Katrín Elvarsdóttir*



*Katrín Elvarsdóttir*



Ég vaknaði við að grá birtan streymdi inn um þakgluggana á safninu. Út um einn gluggann sá ég flaggið sem við höfðum hið upp á þak safnsins. Það var svo stórt og skærlið að hin nærsýnustu augu gátu jafnvel numið það. Það dansaði í vindinum eins og þykk móða. Þetta var ekki svartur fáni anarkismans eða hvítur fáni uppgjafar heldur marglitaður fáni þess að halda áfram, að vita ekki, að vera tilbúinn að verða hvað sem er. Hvað sem framtíðin myndi krefjast af manni.

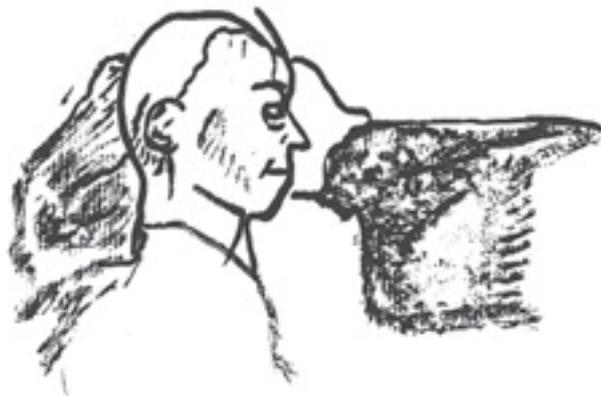
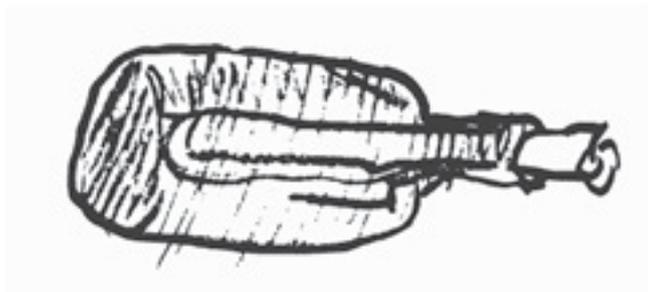
Mér datt í hug að skrifa þér bréf. Í bréfinu myndi ég lýsa ástandinu með höfrungana, háttum nýja heimilis okkar, kannski myndi ég spyrja þig út í mýsna, hvort þið væruð með mýs á meginlandinu, hvort þið hefðuð samið frið við þær.

Ég myndi rúlla bréfinu upp og setja það í flösku. Ég myndi fleygja flöskunni á haf út og vona að hana myndi reka í áttina til þín. Þetta var það næsta sem við höfðum í líkingu við pósthjónustu.

Aðeins í lok bréfsins myndi ég skrifa það sem mig langaði að segja áður en skorið var á öll bönd:

Þakka þér fyrir að þola mig þegar ég elskaði þig svo skelfilega heitt.

*Þýtt úr ensku.*



## Zero Waste

I was staring at the grey distance. No ships had passed in months. The seascape was a blur. My glasses had broken and there was no one on the island who knew how to craft lenses. I focused on temperature, smell and sound. Then I went home.

We lived in an abandoned natural history museum on the edge of town. We had squatted it some months earlier. There was no need for timelines, epochs or dioramas now. Natural history was happening to us and everything was present tense. We were in this shit.

We were a group of seven anarchists. We had named ourselves after the fruits and medications we no longer had access to, now that global supply chains had been broken.

Our names were:

**KIWI SEROQUEL**  
**TOMATO WELLBUTRIN**  
**NECTARINE AMBIEN**  
**AVOCADO IBUPROFEN**  
**CLEMENTINE LIPITOR**  
**GUAVA KLONOPIN**  
**PINEAPPLE EPHEDRINE**

We lived on the museum floor dedicated to marine life. There were giant fibreglass whales hanging from the ceiling. One of them had been deceived by the wires that were suspending it mid-air and had fallen to the floor. Now it rested there, fractured, inhabited by the mice we heard moving around at night. The mice were little Jonahs and Jesuses, living in the cave of this giant belly, eternally emerging. Every night was their resurrection. They were hungry.

We did not want to set traps for the mice. They had as much right to the museum as we did. Still, we feared the diseases they might bring. We talked about befriending a cat and inviting it for a little visit.

A memory: eating whale meat at an opening in Helsinki. An Icelandic artist had smuggled it into the country. A frozen abstract shape melted and served raw with soy sauce. The taste lingered between beef and tuna. A mouthful of sin. It was better to consume it than to let it go to waste I guess. The memory flickered on and off like a light bulb.

There was beauty and sadness to life. Maybe it wasn't too late to be happy again. In the summer, a hundred dolphins had stranded themselves on the island's shores. There had never been sightings of dolphins in these waters before.

The dolphins were neon pink, glowing even after the sun had set, like light was coming from within them. We didn't know what had changed them. We were afraid of contagion and didn't want to touch them. All summer their bodies rotted on the beach, reeking of synthetics, forcing swimmers to relocate to the other side of the island. Now temperatures had dropped and what remained of them would freeze over, halting their decomposition.

When I was thirteen a classmate told me about his weekend: his father had taken him hunting. His father's friends, middle-aged white-collar men, had drunk blood straight from a wound opened into a freshly killed deer. The classmate seemed amused as he described the way a man's moustache was dripping with thick blood when he lifted his head off the deer's body. My classmate laughed the uncloaked laughter of the initiated. What the fuck, I thought. I never learned anything. I never truly committed to anything.

Animals had been shot, both with guns and with cameras. Any device to capture and freeze them. But it was different to enjoy an image, a pose, than to skin, cut open, consume, suck up. This is what one had to believe.

A memory: watching a YouTube video of the death of Knut, Berlin's former child star polar bear cub, now moody and teen-aged, having a seizure, drowning, as children began to cry on the audio, the birth of a new viral trauma, as Knut's brief life in the limelight flashed before the eyes of his spectators. Even in death, Knut was not afforded the luxury of privacy. His body was stuffed and staged to serve as a 1:1 image of his former living self.



In the abandoned museum, I was knitting. I liked my friends, but they refused to keep me warm at night. I probably smelled funny. I was knitting a whale for company and comfort. Once in an art show, I had seen a baby whale made from fine vegan yarn. The only yarn I had access to was wool. I thought of a sheep being sheared. Standing naked, freezing, maybe never having known nudity before.

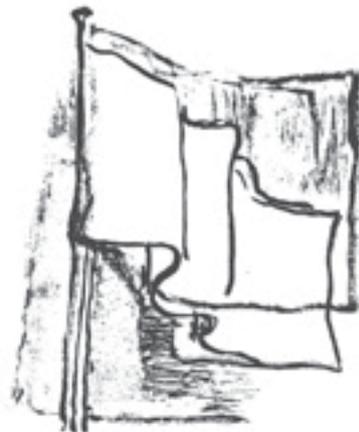
The sheep's fleece was graded, sorted, cleaned, scoured, carded and spun into yarn before it ended up in my hands. Just imagining the process was exhausting. Now I was knitting its fibre into the shape of another mammal.

A memory: seeing Jan Van Eyck's giant altar painting in Ghent. Its wings were closed and then a church worker came and folded them open. One could see the smiling lamb in the heart of the painting. On a pedestal, worshipped, bleeding sacred blood into a goblet. It wasn't really a lamb I guess, but an allegory, a stand-in.

That night I dreamed of cooking fish fingers. Their breadcrumb surface was neon green and the fish meat inside a bright neon pink, suspiciously close to the tone of the stranded dolphins. I bit into a fried finger and to my horror noticed it was my own.

Then I was knitting. The whale had come alive, even though it was only half-complete. It was singing furiously in an attempt to motivate me to finish the rest of its body so it could leave me. My fingers were shedding breadcrumbs and had no joints, which made the work harder.

I woke up to grey light shining through the museum's skylight windows. Through one window, I could see the flag we'd hoisted up on the museum's roof. It was big and bright enough that even nearsighted eyes could perceive it. It danced in the wind as a large blur. It was not the black flag of anarchism or the white flag of surrender, but a technicolor dream flag of staying-



with-it, not-knowing, ready-to-become-whatever. Whatever one needed to be in the future that would come about.

I thought about writing a letter to you. In the letter, I would describe the situation with the dolphins, the architecture of our new home, maybe I would ask you about the mice, if you had them on the continent, if you had made peace with them.

I would roll the letter up and put it in a bottle. I would throw the bottle into the sea and hope that it would drift in your approximate direction. This was the closest thing we had to a postal service.

Only at the end of the letter, would I write what I had wanted to say before all ties were cut:

Thank you for tolerating me when I was desperately in love with you.

## Speculations on Ecology, Time and Action

A lot has been said and done around ecology in contemporary art discourse, as we're in the middle of an accelerating climate crisis and other environmental and social injustices in our planetary being. *Ecology* holds a magnitude of meanings: it can be understood as a discourse, a theme, a practice, an ontology, a speculation, an action, a way of thinking. In best cases, it can take the form of all of the above. Through ecology, it's possible to encounter alternative practices and structures of thinking – I will introduce some ideas regarding those. I have found it important to research ecology related to not only artistic, but also curatorial and institutional practices – discuss ecological perspectives on the level of mediators and facilitators.

As the crisis is all-encompassing and pierces through every experience, it seems relevant to ask: what does the current state of the world mean for artistic practices, curating, institutional structures and experiencing art? Artists and curators have started to take on issues around the climate crisis with different approaches and pragmatic shifts. Art and curating can be fertile grounds for knowledge-creating and embodied knowledges, finding and creating meanings and communities for ecological resilience. According to my own previous research, ecological thinking within curatorial work and in institutional practices in general, entails ideas from feminist new materialisms, as well

as decolonial and post-fossil thinking. All of the three immense theoretical frameworks connect to each other through their aim of questioning, challenging and dismantling dominating Western-hetero-patriarchal power structures and fossil-capitalist world order. Within this set of ideas, theory and practice are not fully separated, but feed into each other – by the same logic as there's no binary between mind and body, or mind and matter.

### More-than-Human Ontologies

Ecological thinking has its roots in very tactile problems that our being, as such, is facing. However visible these questions are in the contemporary art discourse, understanding of ecology is oftentimes reduced to the *Anthropocene* or an overall theme in exhibition practices. The Anthropocene thesis fabricates a single narrative – the story of humankind – out of complex phenomena and includes everyone in the *Anthropos*. In reality, the myriad of situations, effects and impacts of climate collapse and ecological crisis happen simultaneously in many planes of existence, experience and time. Ways and means of ecological thinking and practices are always situated differently in different bodies and timespaces. Thus, the present should be regarded as multiple simultaneous realities at once and ecological thinking as first and foremost a relational practice. In *Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism* (2017), Rosi Braidotti articulates the current post-human shift in research as *post-anthropocentric turn*, which calls for “becoming relational in a complex and multidirectional manner.” It's important to see the bigger picture, turn to a different ontological perspective and ask: what happens when we move forward from humanism, individualism and technocratic solutions?

Theories of feminist new materialisms challenge the Western object-subject-based ontology, through paradigms of think-

ing beyond binary and anthropocentric ways. The set of theories unearth a way of delving deeper into ecological questions of sensing the Earth and its materialities. “Taking matter seriously,” as Alaimo and Hekman propose in *Material Feminisms* (2008), “entails rethinking the fundamental categories of Western culture”. Matter is seen as more than a mere resource, more than a passive backdrop to our human activities: matter in itself carries transformative power and agency. This view of the more-than-human world challenges the way of seeing “nature” as a resource or a site for extraction and exploitation. Feminist new materialisms propose a possibility to place ourselves in the middle of bodies and bodyminds we coexist with, in the world, to surrender our human and subject-centric paradigms.

### Pragmatic Shifts

The ecological crisis calls for profound changes in the fabrics of our societies. The transition from our deep oil dependency asks more than solely relying on technofixes and switching to renewable energy sources – it will be a deep cultural change, a transformation and a reconstruction. In essence, we have to change the way we perceive life on Earth. Independent research unit BIOS has worked effectively in Finland to introduce and bring forth vocabulary and discourse around ecological reconstruction of the society. They have proposed tentative solutions and tools for the transformation, from infrastructure and food production to use of lands and forests. BIOS also discusses the role and potential of art in the transformation, as they write:

Art cares for meaningfulness by holding a constant inner and interpersonal dialogue on what is important in individual and common life. In art, the dependence of one human on other humans and nature becomes recognisable, accept-

able and even enjoyable. Art expresses the fragility, finiteness and mortality of all life and the necessity of change.

It is acknowledged that art, by no means, *needs to* influence or discuss certain topics, but artistic practices have the potential to propose new ways of being and render our understanding of the world. It holds space for dealing with certain topics and affective responses to those, be it about ecological transformation or our relationship to the more-than-human world. Curators, too, have taken a turn to think and work around material bases of practices, which emerge from material realities of the world. However, on a larger scale of exhibition practices, ecology needs to shift from a conceptual starting point to be implemented in everyday practices, on the level of the artist, curator and institutions at large. Many artists already pay attention to the changing environments, energy bases of practises and materials, as well as the relationship to more-than-humans. Curators and institutions should carve space and engage in experimental, post-fossil fuel and new materialist working methods.

Institutional structures and exhibition making are often harmful in themselves: they can have negative impacts on the environment, create emissions and waste, be profit- or goal-oriented and don’t always enable equal chances to POC, women and LGTBQ+ artists. We have to ask more from our institutions and ourselves, if we are holding positions of power: to look beyond sustainability, beyond quick fixes and green capitalist intentions. Ecological practices are not a trend, a buzzword or a single project, but a paradigm shift, which concerns everyone. The burden shouldn’t be on the shoulders of artists only, since artistic practices are intertwined with institutional structures and have to reside within their heavy energy, labour and material consumption and rigid infrastructures.

Those structures can and should be contested: they exist, because they are lived real through everyday actions. Even if institutional structures and their values are produced by complex socio-political and economical interrelations, they can be reconstructed. How we, as curators and artists, discuss ecology, bodies and beings matters. Likewise, how we perceive and actively dismantle prevalent harmful norms matters.

Usually in ecological practices things like material dimensions of exhibition making come into question. Especially large-scale, international exhibitions, which function within fossil-capitalist structures, start to feel outdated, when they are looked at from an ecological perspective. The flow of energy, materials, people and objects can be immense. It's clear that material realities of exhibitions should be thought about in more depth: how exhibitions are built and installed, what materials are used and where they are sourced from. Priority should be given to reused or reusable materials and those that are locally sourced. Degrowth and post-fossil thinking can be implemented in infrastructural decisions, funding and programming, as curator Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez did with *Contour Biennial 9 – Coltan as Cotton*.<sup>1</sup> Petrešin-Bachelez wanted to rethink the whole biennale structure: unlike many biennials that last for a few months, *Coltan as Cotton* spanned over a year. The biennale was not active for the whole time, but it was divided in three phases, which followed the lunar cycle. Not too often, it's questioned how biennials or exhibitions should be produced and how production cycles work. With *Contour Biennial 9*, artists had more time to produce their work and there was more time for curatorial research. For Petrešin-Bachelez, slowing down practices means adapting to changes inevitably caused by climate crisis and engaging and committing in practices that also take social and cultural issues into consideration.

One other example of a paradigm shift, regarding funding: some Finnish funding bodies have started to award higher travel grants for art professionals who choose to travel by land and sea rather than fly to their residencies and other international projects. These kind of initiatives underline that changes shouldn't happen on the level of individuals but overall systems.

Post-fossil thinking and degrowth are perhaps not seen as overly inspiring ways of perceiving art and curating, because of the ethos of scarcity, cutting down and refusing. However, it's more than letting go of familiar and harmful ways of doing – experimenting with new possibilities that the paradigm opens up. Art is fluid – a process, a ritual, an act, a sensation, an idea – art, if anything, has a potential to separate itself from fossil structures.

### **Speculative Turn in Ecology**

Ecology-oriented practices in the arts are often future-oriented. The view of the future takes different shapes and forms, even if the consensus seems to be that the future is more or less doomed – at least if no proper actions are taken on national, intra-national and infrastructural levels. However, the view of the future is relational. Climate related catastrophes are already present especially in the Southern parts of the world. Effects and urgencies of climate crisis happen in different time scales, which should be taken into consideration when we talk about ecological issues, as the history of climate change has been evolving hand in hand with the history of colonization.

A growing number of artistic and curatorial research around ecology speculates different ways of how the world could evolve. There's a turn to speculative fiction and world-building, as we lack the words or specific means in the current state of the world. I find it important to be immersed in

speculative realities, as often those imagined worlds open up a myriad of possibilities and speculative knowledges.

In Ursula K. Le Guin's short story *She Unnames Them* (1985), the protagonist decides to unname all the beings of the Earth that they encounter – creatures like dolphins, whales, yaks and sheep no longer are known by their given-names. The story poses a new possible reality: what if all the beings of the Earth would have the right to name themselves? By unnamming the earthlings, the protagonist feels immediately closer to them, like there are no more boundaries dividing “them” from “us”:

They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to feel or rub or caress one another's scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another's blood or flesh, keep one another warm [...] that attraction was now all one with the fear.

In the story, naming and categorization serve towards othering: seeing those *other* creatures inherently different from *us*. Just like when we talk about *nature*, we automatically assume it to be outside of ourselves – somewhere out there. In Le Guin's story, “unnaming” works as a counter-mechanism to othering – it could be perceived as a decolonial act. What if we, in the Western parts of the world, would look to our colonial pasts and use the same kind of counter-mechanism to recognise the rights of those who have been *othered* with violent acts and oppression? What would Western modernity look like after those pasts, presents and realities have been acknowledged? Possibly, new ways of being in the world come true not only through speculative futures, but also speculative presents and pasts.

Through speculative practices, it's possible to imagine a more intimate relationship with the Earth and earthlings. Feminist new materialisms, speculative fiction and working towards a post-fossil world all ask for an open mind. It comes down to changing one's perception, be it through a shift to post-anthropocentric ontologies or accepting a fundamental transformation in the fabrics of our societies.

There are no quick fixes to solve these multiple entangled crises and circumstances at once. There are different ways of relating to our planetary being, though. The epoch of the individual often lacks perspective beyond one's own experience, beyond what could mean to be truly relational. What I'm rooting for is active curiosity, seeing past limits of a capital-driven, patriarchal and Western worldview, past the limits of what it means to be a human – what it means to be a rock, a centipede, a river or a lizard? Speculative ecological practices seem vital in redefining what kind of worlds we could aim for. I like to think of speculative fiction and world-making as action: without speculation there is no space for becoming and without action there is no transformation. Thus, every action against oppressive forces proposes a multitude of new possibilities and new collective realities to arise. The Earth we live true today is one of a myriad of possible earths. In coming together and sharing our speculative pasts, presents and futures, lies potential for change.

<sup>1</sup> Based on Petrešin-Bachelez's interview in the dissertation *Practicing Coexistence: Entanglements Between Ecology and Curating Art* (2019). More about Contour Biennial: [www.contour9.be](http://www.contour9.be).

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## Participants

**Hertta Kiiski** is a Finnish artist working with photography, moving images, objects, space, as well as with animals and her daughters. Her works deal with love, empathy and the relationship between the human and the non-human, being influenced by ecofeminist thinking. She has an MFA from the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts (2015) and a BA in photography from Turku Arts Academy (2012). Her work has been presented in galleries and museums in Finland and internationally, including a retrospective solo exhibition at the Finnish Museum of Photography in 2019. Her second book, *I Was an Apple and I Got Peeled – but It Was a Good Thing*, was published in 2016 by German publisher Kehrer Verlag.

**Katrín Elvarsdóttir** completed a BFA degree from the Art Institute in Boston in 1993. She has had many solo exhibitions, both in Iceland and abroad, including *The Search for Truth* at BERG Contemporary in 2018, *Double Happiness* at Gerðarsafn in 2016, *Vanished Summer* at Deborah Berke, New York, in 2014 and *Neverland* at the Reykjavík Art Museum in 2010. Katrín's works have been featured in many group exhibitions, such as *EIKON Award* in Künstlerhaus, Vienna, 2018, *Cyclone* at Forum Box, Helsinki, 2018, *Human; Nature* at Martin Asbæk Gallery, Copenhagen, 2017. Four books have been published featuring Katrín's photographs: *Revenants – Proximal Dimension* (2005), *Equivocal* (2012), *Vanished Summer* (2013) and *Double Happiness* (2016). Katrín has been nominated for various awards, like the EIKON Award in 2017, Deutsche Börse Photographic Prize in 2009 and the Honorary Award of the Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association.

**Lilja Birgisdóttir** studied photography at the Royal Academy of Arts, The Hague, Netherlands, and graduated with a BA in fine art from the Iceland Academy of the Arts in 2010. From that year, she has been a member of Kling & Bang, an artist-run gallery in Reykjavík, where she takes part in selecting artists and curating exhibitions for the space. Recent exhibitions include *Love Me Back*, a solo exhibition in Rawson Projects, New York, in 2017, and a solo exhibition called *Moment Gone* in Ultra Super New Gallery, Japan, in 2016. Lilja lives and works in Reykjavík.

**Daríá Sól Andrews** is an art writer and curator, whose focus lies in examining art and its emotional impact, in a critical, public context. She completed an MA in curating and art history from the University of Stockholm in 2019, as well as holding a BA degree in rhetoric from UC Berkeley (2015). She is the director of Studio Sol, an experimental exhibition space in Reykjavík. She has worked on various curatorial projects in San Francisco, Reykjavík, and Stockholm, like the IASPIS Open Studios Program and a collaborative exhibition with Konstfack, both in Stockholm. Most recently she curated the exhibition *Icelandic Meat Soup* at the Reykjavík Museum of Photography. Daríá views herself and her practice as globally based, navigating the political capacities of art, with an emphasis on the photographic medium. In her writing and research, she focuses on essential tools of expression and communication within our cultural and visual world, working to understand how functions of power and persuasion are manifested in different creative outlets, like contemporary art and film.

**Sýning í Hafnarborg**  
**18. janúar – 15. mars 2020**  
Exhibition at Hafnarborg  
18 January – 15 March 2020

**Listamenn** Artists  
Hertta Kiiski  
Katrín Elvarsdóttir  
Lilja Birgisdóttir

**Sýningarstjóri** Curator  
Daría Sól Andrews

**Ritstjórn** Editing  
Daría Sól Andrews  
Hólmar Hólm

**Þýðing** Translation  
Helga Soffía Einarsdóttir  
Hólmar Hólm

**Myndir** Images  
Ýmsir

**Hönnun** Design  
Ármann Agnarsson

**Prentun** Printing  
Prentmet

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**Forstöðumaður** Director  
Agústa Kristófersdóttir

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