

Do You Speak Synergy?

Harlan Levey & Denis Maksimov



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Do You Speak Synergy?

In his essay “Cézanne’s Doubt,”¹ French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes Cézanne’s impressionistic and paradoxical approach to painting, and implicitly draws a parallel to his own concept of radical reflection. Looking at the relationship between science and art in the context of Cézanne’s struggle to apply “intelligence, ideas, sciences, perspective, and tradition” to his work, he concludes that theory and practice stand in opposition to each other. He sees art as an attempt to capture an individual’s perception, and science as anti-individualistic. From this perspective, natural science cannot grasp the profundity and subjective depth of the phenomena it endeavors to explain.

Art and science may indeed oppose each other in certain senses, but they also share many things, for example a vigorous research drive that goes beyond practicality. In the currents of contemporary cultural discourse, this characteristic is becoming challenging to maintain, for science and art alike. “Key performance indicators” are applied literally to everything, including the traditionally metaphysical subjects of love and death. Art risks leaning towards the language of “social engagement” in regard to state funding, falling into categories of purely utilitarian design or vanity symbols for luxurious consumption. Science, on the other hand, is getting cornered exclusively into the “applied” category. This process is not a novelty: with constant re-learning and easy forgetting, valuable insights and original perspectives are often lost in favor of the “mode du jour” – sometimes by chance, sometimes in result of deliberate decisions by dominating institutions of a particular time.

Imposed planning and bureaucracy turn both artist and scientist into “eternal applicants” for grants rewarded to visionaries for design “solutions.” Research, findings, and output of each are quickly translated to market speak: Where is the business case? What is the product?

Is there a customer for this? How are you going to promote it? The discourse of market economy is perhaps the most crippling enemy poetry has ever seen.

Both art and science resist. Fundamental scientific research eludes pressure by forecasting long-term outcomes to illustrate a future where we’re all dead already anyway, and artistic energy continues to insist on the power of purposelessness in unveiling the truth-content in art and commodities in general. A growing number of collaborations between artists and scientists, formed under the flag of “artistic research” firmly establish a vocabulary for this discourse. Following the logic of Merleau-Ponty, “Do You Speak Synergy?” aims to “return to phenomena.” It does this through a transdisciplinary conversation about the poetic essence of scientific and artistic investigation. The notion of “transdisciplinary” investigation is used more and more often in discussions about the future of research. However, the pathway towards meta-levels of inquiry is not so straightforward. Research has become the victim of an obsession with efficiency, predictability and target driven utilitarianism.

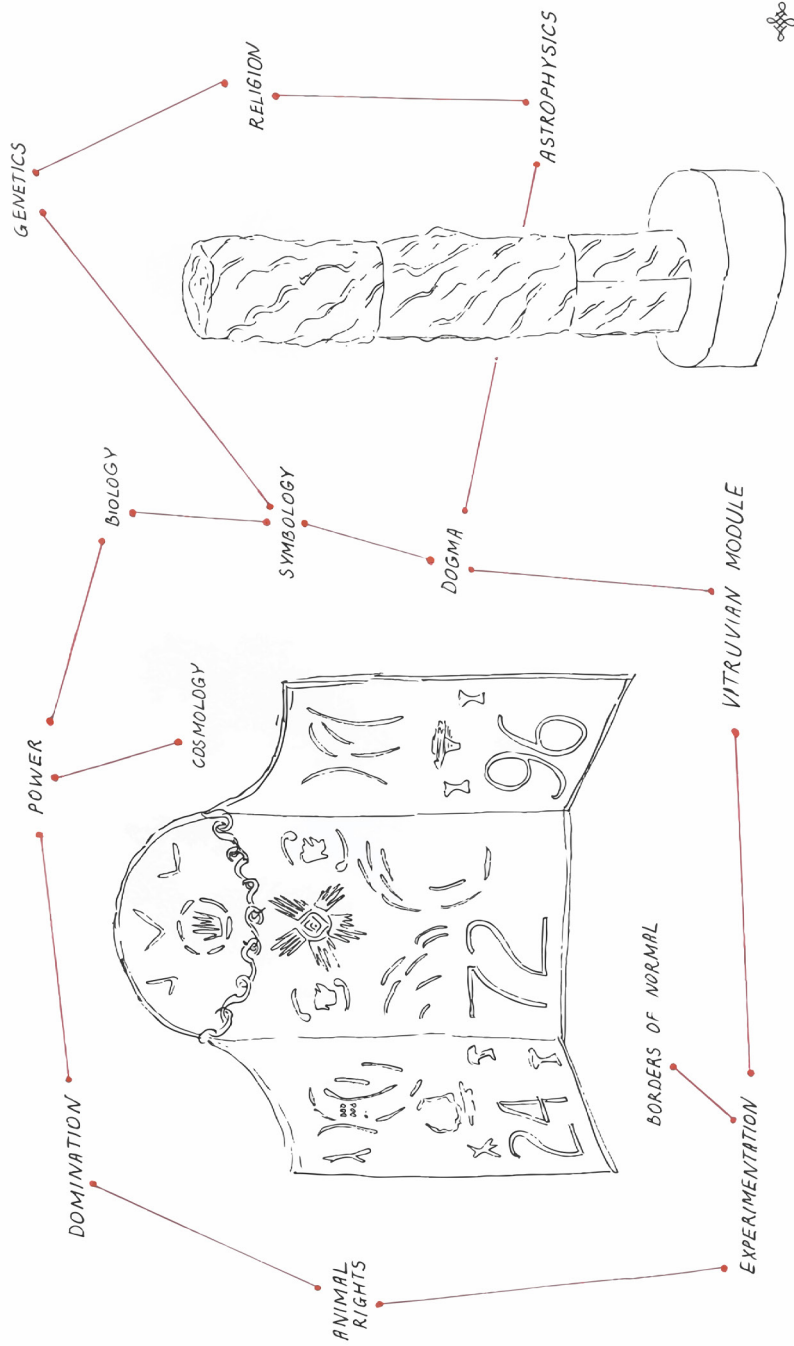
The selected artists share the research language of transdisciplinary inquiry while remaining free from any disciplinary or corporate mandates. Modern physics calls this their “unified field,”² which we refer to as “synergy,” where fundamental forces and elementary particles are approached as if they compose a single field – a field of truly universal language.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le doute de Cézanne” in *Sens et non-sens*, Gallimard, Paris, 1945. English translation by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus in *Sense and Non-Sense*, Illinois University Press, Chicago, IL, 1964.

² Peter Weibel, *Beyond Art: A Third Culture. – A Comparative Study in Culture and Science in 20th Century Austria and Hungary*. Passagen Verlag, Vienna, 1997.

Haseeb Ahmed

HASEEB AHMED





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Haseeb Ahmed

Fish Bone Chapel



HASEEB AHMED (b. 1985) is a research-based artist. Born in Toledo, Ohio USA, and now lives and works in Brussels and Zurich. Ahmed received his Masters in Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in sculpture and architecture in 2008. As a researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht (2011-2012), the Netherlands Ahmed won the “Designers and Artists 4 Genomics Award” and initiated the project *Has the World Already Been Made?* which has been exhibited internationally.

Since January 2013 Ahmed has worked closely with the Size Matters research team at the Zurich University of the Arts and works on a PhD in Practice-Based Arts with the Sint Lucas-Antwerpen School of Art, the University of Antwerp, and NATO-Von Karman Institute for Fluid Dynamics outside of Brussels. Ahmed’s writing has been published internationally including *FUSE Magazine* (CA), *the New Literary Observer* (RU), and *MIT Thresholds* (US), among others. He has participated in solo and group exhibitions internationally and his artwork has been reviewed in *Art in America*, *After Image*, and *Wired Magazine*. He is represented by Harlan Levey Projects.

Haseeb
Ahmed

“The grotesque in art and architecture always reveals a truth about beauty,” Haseeb Ahmed stated in his application for the 2013 Designers and Artists for Genomics Award (DA4GA), which he received for his project *Fish Bone Chapel*.³ Specifically for this exhibition, the artist has developed certain aspects of this work that draws on the symbolic aesthetics of religion, applying them to the pristine power of emerging biotechnology and toxico-genomics. Mutation is the essential motor for the development of biological life. However, in the context of a chemically saturated environment it is considered dangerous. *Fish Bone Chapel* uses mutations in Zebra Fish skeletons, chemically induced by researchers at the Netherlands Toxico-Genomics Center (NTC), as a sculptural vocabulary. Zebra Fish are a popular model for genetic testing as they are not considered to be animals for the first four days of life, but rather as organic material. This legal loophole makes the Zebra Fish the perfect test subjects for genomics, more specifically in this case, the effects of exposure to toxins on the genome. Zebra Fish die en masse before they are legally even born. Paradoxically, this same law, the 17th amendment of the European Union Constitution, prevents animal testing and protects abortion rights for humans. *Fish Bone Chapel* incorporates all of the morphological stages of development within these first four days of testing. Like a biological organism itself, Ahmed’s project continues to grow, taking on a more extensive architectural form in order to literally inhabit the results of genetics research. Vertebrae vaults, friezes of exploded embryos, and spiraling columns made of mutated spinal columns, all compose parts of the *Fish Bone Chapel*. The installation makes explicit reference to the Capuchin Crypt in Rome and traditional Christian Ossuaries found throughout Europe, which the artist visited while researching the project. Originally a setting for remembrance of the

Fish Bone Chapel





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dead, they now address the new stages between life and death introduced by bio-tech research and the policy that surrounds it.

Ahmed uses genomics as Gaudi used physics when designing the “gravity arches” of *La Sagrada Familia*. “This is an exploration, the forms that emerge will each be a revelation,”⁴ he explains. Toxins produce radical shifts in the development of Zebra Fish skeletons and might have the same impact on humans. Working with the Zebra Fish Labs of the NTC, Ahmed created mutations suitable for use in architecture and used 3D printing and other digital fabrication techniques to create the elements of his installation. Nature is commonly conceived of as producing perfect systems and structures. What if these biological systems and structures could be altered (at the genetic level) according to the needs or desires of artists or designers? The *Fish Bone Chapel* literally allows the public to view genomics research in all of its technical, ethical, and formal capacities.

Fish Bone Chapel

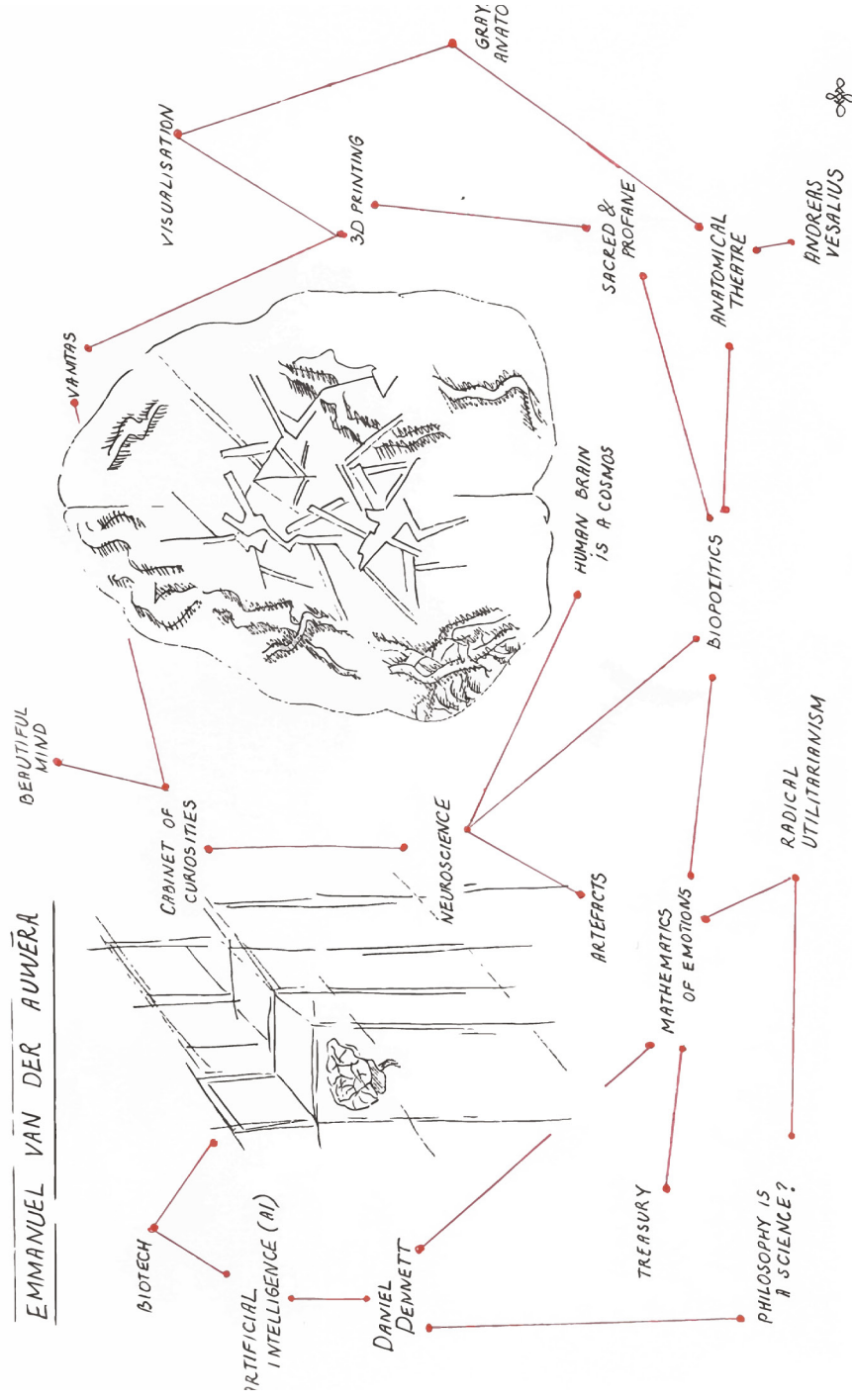


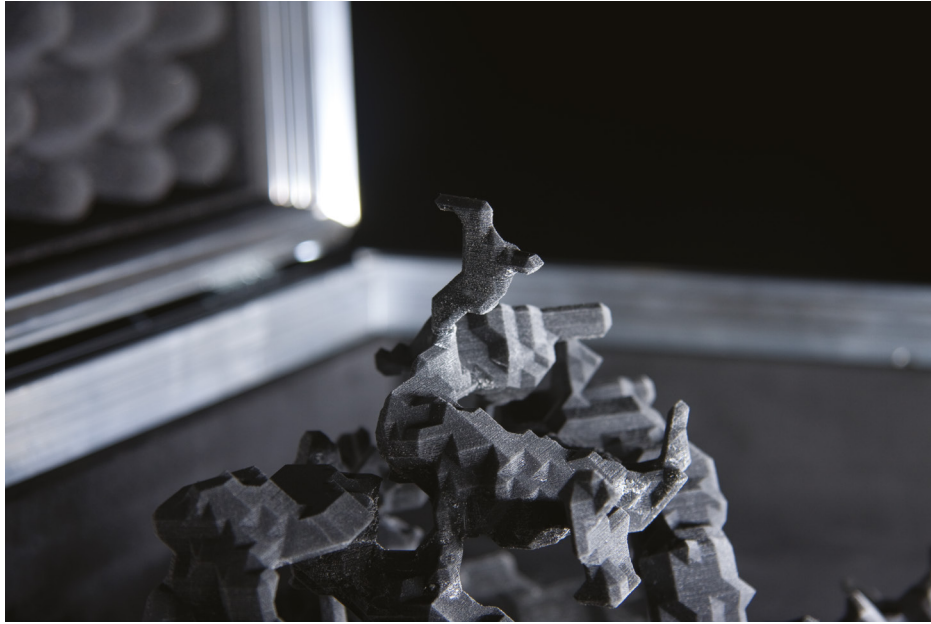
Haseeb
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⁴ Ibid.

Emmanuel Van der Auwera

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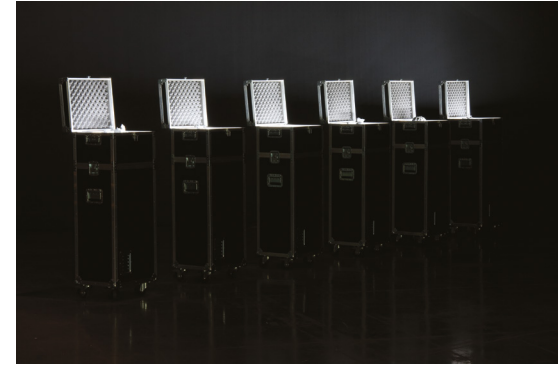




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Emmanuel Van der Auwera

Cabinet d'affects



Emmanuel Van der Auwera lives and works in Brussels. He studied in France at the École Supérieure d'Art in Clermont-Ferrand (2005–2008), at Le Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains in Tourcoing (2008–2010) and is a 2015 laureate of the Higher Institute of Fine Arts (HISK) in Antwerp. In the same year he was invited to represent the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles at Art Brussels. In recent years he has had solo exhibitions at ESA, Tourcoing (2013); La Mediatine, Brussels (2013); Iselp, Brussels (2013); Wiels, Brussels (2013); Fondation Roche, Basel (2012); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2011). He is represented by Harlan Levey Projects.

Emmanuel
Van der Auwera

“One way to fossilize or petrify emotions and prolong the relevance of scientific imagery, is to explore it with poetics.”, Emmanuel Van der Auwera stated in an interview with Marie Lechner in 2010.⁵

For the project *Cabinet d'affects* the artist worked with neurologists from the University Hospital of Lille and the French National Center for Scientific Research, serving as his own experimental subject in an attempt to capture (i.e. scan) brain areas activated in various emotional states through functional NMR (nuclear magnetic resonance). Van der Auwera then used 3D-prototyping to cast these scans in resin, converting them into sculptures to allow viewers to see “the materialization of emotions.”

In his research, the artist departed from the premise that the brain wears different configurations depending on the emotions felt. The artist’s sculptural reconstructions of the skull appears as a kind of contemporary vanity, exhibited in padded, aluminum flight cases, which are both the pedestal and base of the works.” Aesthetic reference to the concept of the German Renaissance Wunderkammer in the context of modern medical research of physics behind the emotions is more than up-to-date. Daniel Dennett, philosopher and cognitive scientist from Tufts University, insists it is necessary to demystify phenomena like the existence of sommeliers.⁶ We love certain wines not because of their hints and accents, but due to quite concrete chemical reactions in our brains, which are communicated by our taste buds. Dennett sees liberation from mystification as a way to

⁵“Une manière de fossiliser, de pétrifier les émotions et de prolonger dans le champ poétique cette imagerie scientifique.” *Libération*, June 11, 2010

⁶Daniel Dennett, “Conditions of Personhood” in: *The Identity of Persons*, edited by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1976.



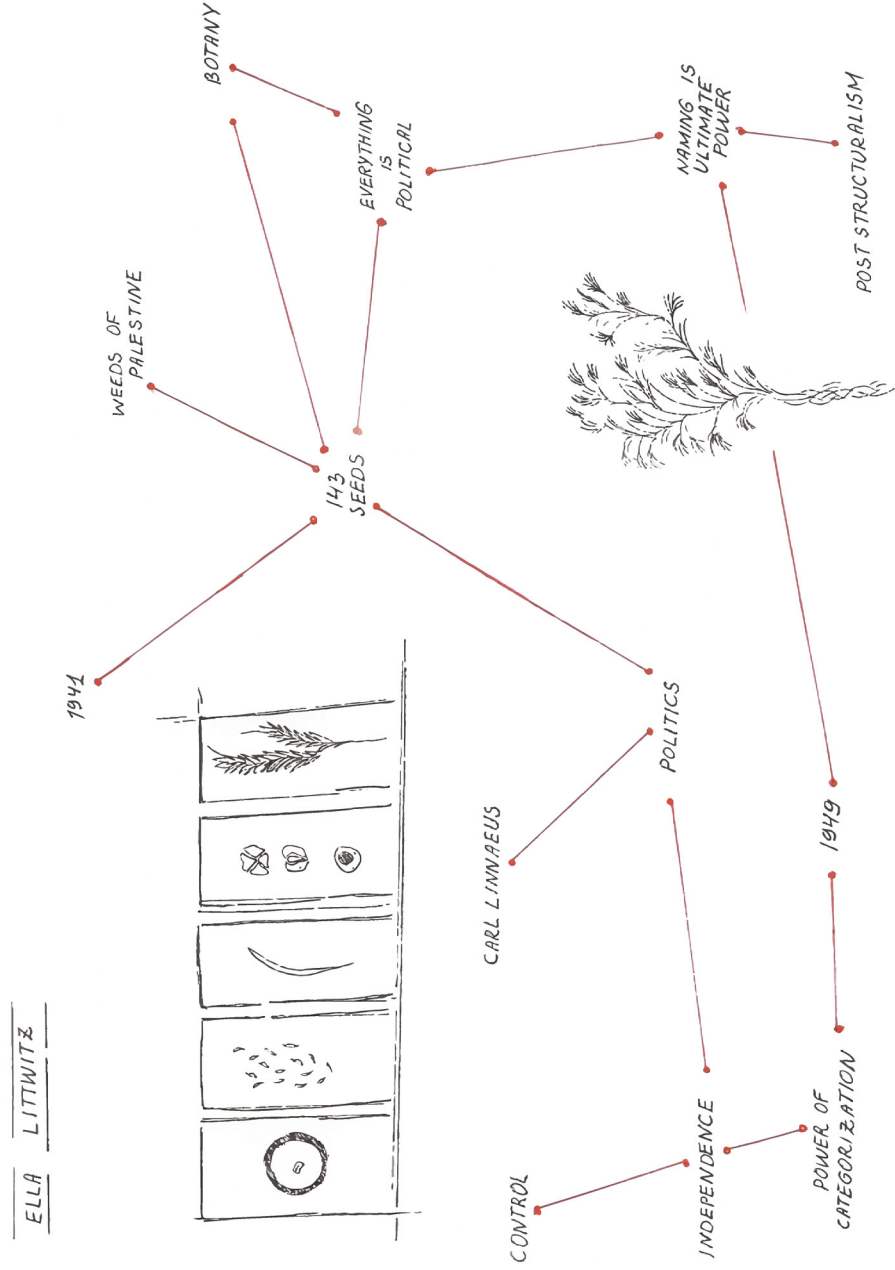


release the human mind from the atrocities of potential manipulation and the abuse of power. But this logic, while indeed providing a relevant argument towards advancement of the Enlightenment mission, poses a danger to the artistic and poetic quality of humanity. This issue brings out an important question: Is it the ultimate goal of reflection and Enlightenment to “kill” the impractical and absurd aspects of human existence? If we break down into an emotional spectrogram, how can we retain core human notions such as “unconditional love?”

Van der Auwera’s research covers a vast amount of contemporary cultural phenomena, including the deconstruction of political simulacra, ideology, and identity: “The things I interact with are on the verge of change, engaged in a metamorphosis... These phenomena question the multiple dimensions of reality and produce situations, which deconstruct and expose their own logic, inviting us to question our own relation to the world. Mirrors don’t necessarily have to reflect something to show reflection. I reflect on this internal contradiction, exploring, amongst others, the dimensions of the intimate and the collective, defining the hybrid territories at the crossroads of sciences, mythology and history. I explore borderline states and the phenomena occurring on the fringes of law, the self and identity...”⁷

Ella Littwitz

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Do You Speak Synergy?

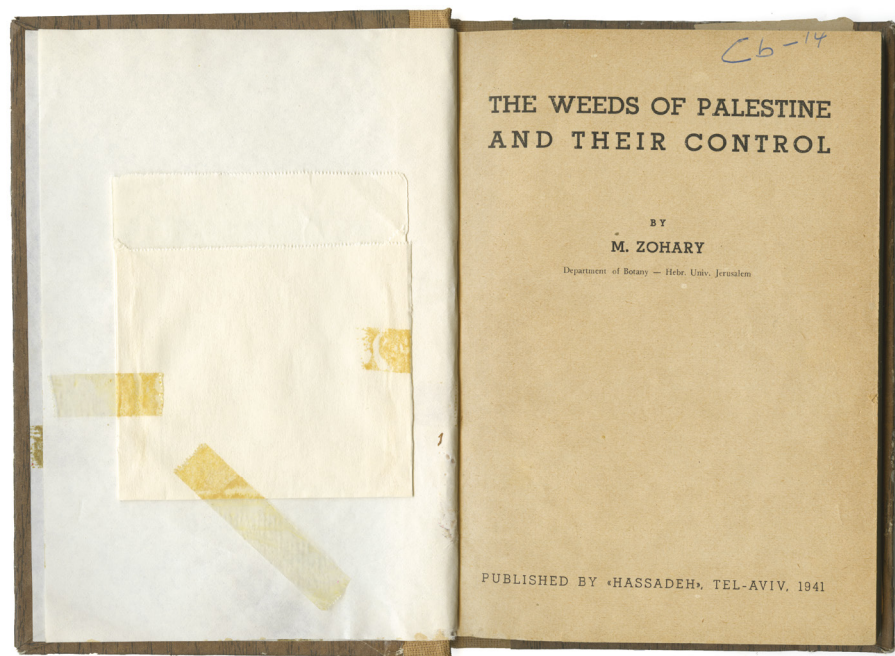
Ella Littwitz



Sticky Mud

Ella Littwitz

Ella Littwitz is an Israeli photographer and visual artist, living and working Berlin, Ghent and Israel. She graduated with BFA from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in 2009. She is a laureate of the Higher Institute of Fine Arts (HISK) postgraduate program, 2015.



Ella Littwitz's comprehensive artistic research explores archeology, history, botany, culture, and politics. In the context of this exhibition, she presents the work *Uproot*. In 1941, the botanist Michael Zohary published "The Weeds of Palestine and Their Control," where he described 143 weeds that needed to be eradicated for the sake of the successful agricultural endeavors on the soil that would several years later become the State of Israel.

Following the language of Carl Linnaeus⁸, Littwitz raises important questions about contemporary political cleavages. She collected an archive of the seeds listed in Zohary's book as well as creating her own book with new drawings of the same plants. Botany takes surprising narrative turns when political connotations are considered, particularly in the survey of fauna growing on the borders of Israel. Like the control of occupied territories in the complicated political geography of the region, the seeds acquire a human quality, representing the "unwanted" native biology of the landscape. While Zohary's original research was intended to serve agricultural development, whether he was conscious of it or not, it directly relates to the notion of creating an organized, anthropologically controlled "civilization" according to the specific understanding of the political actor "civilizing" the area. It is interesting to note, that a direct translation of the book's original Hebrew title, would read: "The bad weeds of Israel and how to get rid of them."

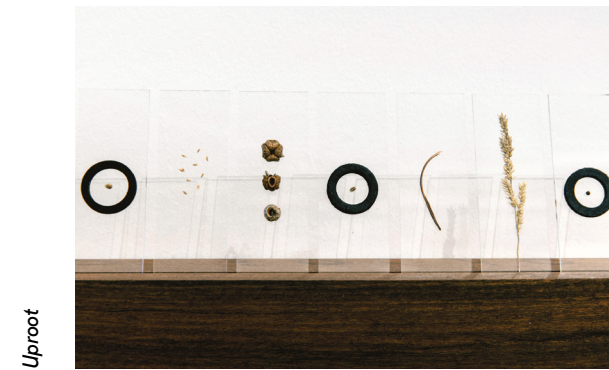
The installation title *Uproot* poetically suggests a multiplicity of possible interpretations of the political narratives behind the botanical research. Classification and naming is the ultimate power, as structuralist philosophers and critical theorists demonstrated in their analysis of political regimes and historical processes in the 20th century. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's

analysis of modern ideology⁹ refers to the invisible layers of control created by a matrix of hierarchical knowledge, which, although it is axiomatic, is beyond questioning. While we praise the increasing role of knowledge and enlightenment in societies all around the world, science itself provides a fundamental layer of oppressive unconscious ideological narratives. This is particularly interesting in the context of the immensely complicated flux of cultural, political and civilizational crisis in the modern Middle East, where there is a constant battle over meanings and appropriations, that define claims of multiple “truths.”

In addition to the presentation of the seeds on the beautiful four-meter plank, the exhibition also features bronze cast of *Dittrichia Viscosa* - ‘the first plant’ to grow in Israel if the soil is disturbed. One of the very few pioneering plants in the community, it has an ‘allelopathy’ character: it does not allow other flora to grow around it. The title of the sculpture *Sticky Mud* is a result of a structural linguistic play. The Hebrew name of it is ‘Tayun Davik’, where ‘tayun’ is a made up word that sounds like Arabic ‘tin,’ ‘mud’ in English, and ‘davik’ translates as ‘sticky’. When Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai was asked about his favorite smell, he said: “The smell of the Tayun, it’s the real smell of the Land of Israel, a little sweet and bitter, too dry, hard and desperate.”¹⁰

Littwitz’s gesture of monumentalizing the plant in triumphal bronze sends a strong trigger for reflection on the problematics of memory, symbology, and historicism, among other issues.

The bronzes’ outstanding detailing almost definitely tricks the viewer into perceiving the casts to be real herbaria. This strategy opens a line of questions to fundamental issues of aesthetics, such as notions of a copy and representation.



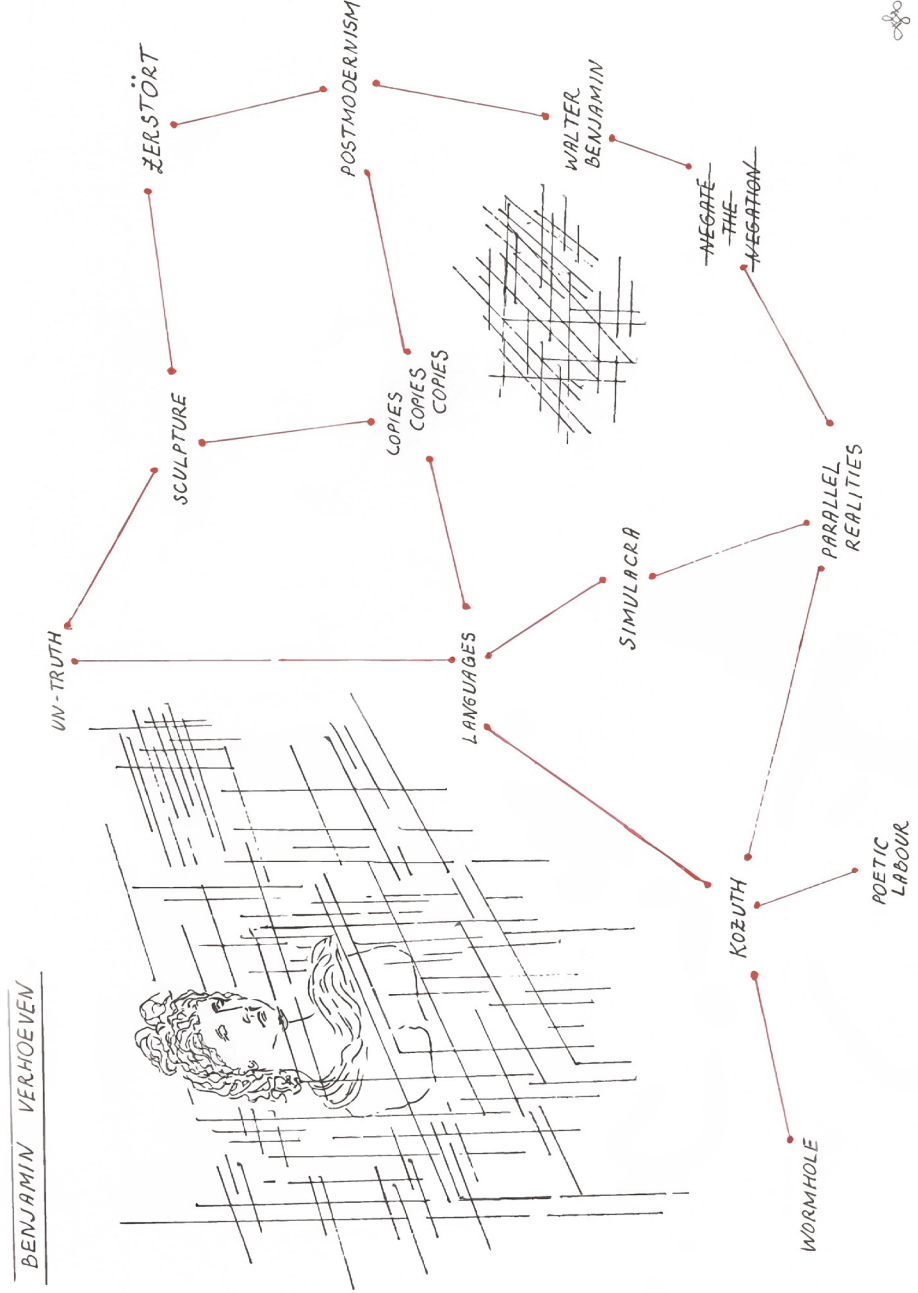
Uproot

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso Books, London, 1989.

¹⁰ מגו קותמ תצק, לארשי ׳רא לש יתימאה חירה הז, ׳ויטה חיר״ר- רמ לירפא, בירעמ, יחימע הדוהי ״שאוים מגו קזח מגו שבי מג, רמ 1986

Benjamin Verhoeven

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Benjamin Verhoeven

Sculptural Movement



Benjamin
Verhoeven

Benjamin Verhoeven lives and works in Ghent. In 2012, Verhoeven was selected to participate in BYTS in 's Hertogenbosch and that same year he had a duo exhibition together with Katrin Kamrau at Hopstreet Gallery in Brussels. He also participated in the "Limited Access Festival" in Tehran (2014) and "The Plateau Effect" in Ghent (2013). He is laureate of the Higher Institute of Fine Arts (HISK) postgraduate program, 2015.



The earthly notion of a “year” is constituted by one complete turn of the planet around the Sun. Pluto takes 248 earthly “years” to complete its orbit of the Sun. Research reveals that the rate at which animals perceive time varies substantially. Commenting on the findings of research conducted in 2013, Andrew Jackson from the School of Natural Sciences at Trinity College in Dublin remarks: “Our results suggest that time perception offers an as yet unstudied dimension along which animals can specialize, and there is considerable scope to study this system in more detail. We are beginning to understand that there is a whole world of detail out there that only some animals can perceive and it’s fascinating to think of how they might perceive the world differently to us.”¹¹

How can we experience this difference of perception in time and space? Benjamin Verhoeven’s artistic research practice suggests one of the possible ways to visualize the idea of “vortex” in the dimension of time that are currently available to us. If Christopher Nolan’s movie *Interstellar* had been filmed while entering a wormhole, Verhoeven’s video works may be what the audience would have seen. The artist seems to reinvent the medium of video, allowing us to see the world, culture and specific stories with different eyes through his alternative forms of narration. In his research and production strategies, Verhoeven mixes the hard labor of a traditional craftsman obsessed with detailed, repetitive work, with modern technologies that allow easy modes of reproduction.

In this exhibition, Verhoeven presents the video work *Sculptural Movement*, created by scanning copied pages from a book about classical Greek and Roman sculpture. In a labor-intensive process of digitalization, these deconstructed images are formatted into a narration

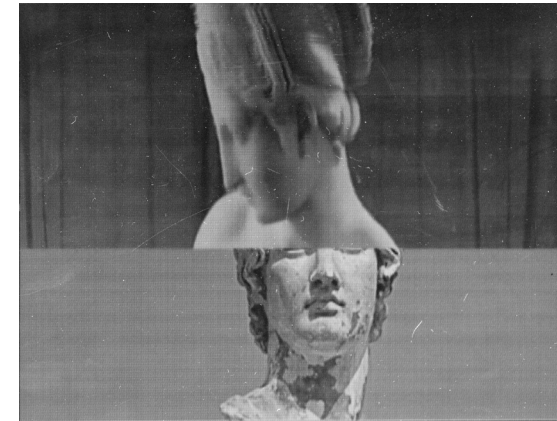
¹¹ Trinity College Dublin, “Time is in the eye of the beholder: Time perception in animals depends on their pace of life,” *ScienceDaily*, September 16, 2013.

of cinematic “moving images,” which according to Walter Benjamin¹² is the most powerful medium. Watching the film, we find ourselves in another dimension with parallel laws of time and space, displaced from the comfort zone of certainty as the film challenges reality as caught by our eyes.

But there is more to Verhoeven’s work. Besides showing us familiar images in a manner we haven’t experienced before, the video suggests an analysis of history and aesthetics through the lens of existential melancholy. The classic Greek and Roman sculptures seem to dance. This invokes nostalgia for a past that is lost forever and yet present as the video communicates the actual spirit of former time. The work offers a vividly poetic presentation of the almost horrific realization that we cannot escape the media and narrative of the now. It reverses yesterday and tomorrow, suggesting that it is not a question of how aesthetics and philosophy have influenced us, but rather how we influence interpretation and meaning a posteriori. Political and cultural history are written by those who produce and pay for the ink.

¹² Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” first published in a French translation in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Frankfurt am Main, 1936. English translation by Harry Zohn: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in: Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1968.

Sculptural Movement



Prof. Dr. Beatrice de Gelder

“The tradition of intense conversations between artists and scientists can be traced back for centuries. With the rise of neurosciences this can only intensify. Over the course of the past decade, engaging with artists has become an increasingly present activity in our center. The objectives of research in art and in science are similar, but artistic methodology is different, it tends at times to appear more intuitive, personal and able to contradict itself at any given time. Collaborating with artists is an example of knowledge sharing and investigation that transcends established boundaries. As long-term cultural investment is criticized and easily cut by funding bodies, subsidizing the so-called creative industry and matching artists with organizations where their work might help bring forward results with social applications is much more difficult to contest. This relationship benefits science, art and society in ways that may not immediately be obvious. Connections between art and emotional responses are of particular interest to my team’s research at the University of Maastricht. Art triggers biological and social emotions that are not conveniently labeled with the all too familiar everyday concepts. Artists have been able to provide insight to the imaging technology, behavioral methods and communication processes, which all play a large role in our research. Working with artists may result in contributions to science and in the process busts the myth that art is not useful. Art does not need to be useful. Its being useless is one of the unique and somewhat overarching sources of fascination with art. It does not at all however mean that art is without use. That use may be pleasure. It may be self-reflection and facilitation of critical thought. Like science, art strives to address the big questions surrounding human existence. In doing so, it is able to offer new strands of knowledge that can be built in to existing empirical workflows.”

Beatrice M. L. de Gelder is a cognitive neuroscientist and neuropsychologist. She is professor of Cognitive Neuroscience and director of the Brain and Emotion Laboratory at Maastricht University (Netherlands), and was senior scientist at the Martinos Center for Biomedical Imaging, Harvard Medical School, Boston (USA). She is currently the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Frontiers in Emotion Science*. Her research interests include behavioral and neural emotion processing from facial and bodily expressions, multisensory perception, interaction between auditory and visual processes, and visual nonconscious perception in neurological patients. She is author of numerous books and publications, most recently, *Emotions and The Body* (OUP, New York, 2016).

About the Exhibition

Harlan Levey Projects
46 Rue Jean d'Ardenne,
1050, Brussels

February 26th – April 1st 2016

The ambition of “Do You Speak Synergy” is to demonstrate the transdisciplinary potential and impact of contemporary art. We invite viewers to analyze and deconstruct the invisible matrix of the acceptable, logical (one-dimensional understanding) and “normal” modes of thinking. One plus one does not necessarily equal anything at all. Thinking beyond definite answers to questions, and challenging the known by un-knowing and re-learning is probably one of the most unique human capabilities. Humans are uniquely able to adapt. The very possibility of acting beyond evolutionary practicality and asking seemingly absurd questions constitutes our humanity.

Poststructural thinkers opened doors to rooms without walls and windows. This line of thought is widely criticized by many representatives of analytical philosophy, but also provided a point of entry for contemporary art to become the freest platform for research activities. The only platform that extends beyond the boundaries of established academic hierarchies.

In science, Erwin Schrödinger is still sorry for leaving us in the dark as to how the cat can be dead and not at the same time. Astrophysical theories of vortexes and black holes suggest that we might live in just one of an infinite number of universes. Our perception of time and space, even from the perspective of “science,” seems to be ideological in its very core.

Pairing science and the arts is nothing new. Science and technology are part of a larger cultural discourse with which art can engage. From Leonardo DaVinci to Mike Kelley, scientific ideas and technological developments have long inspired enduring works of art that capture the zeitgeist of their time. Kazimir Malevich, while preparing his manifesto of Suprematism,¹³ notably claimed that in order to create something new, we

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need to free our hands from the burden of customary and necessary references, and literally burn all museums and their collections. Pablo Picasso made a break to Cubism through the process of “un-learning” and returning to the simple forms beyond direct representation. The list of innovations resulting from radical negation is long and the questions posed here is just as critical: Are we doomed to the eternal dialectics of repressive power structures (political, scientific, artistic, etc.) contrasted by avant-garde opposition, which loses potency the moment it enters the mainstream?

¹³ Kasimir Malevich, *Die gegenstandslose Welt*, Bauhausbücher, Munich, 1927. New English translation by Antonia W. Bouis: Kazimir Malevich, *The World as Objectlessness*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2014.

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