

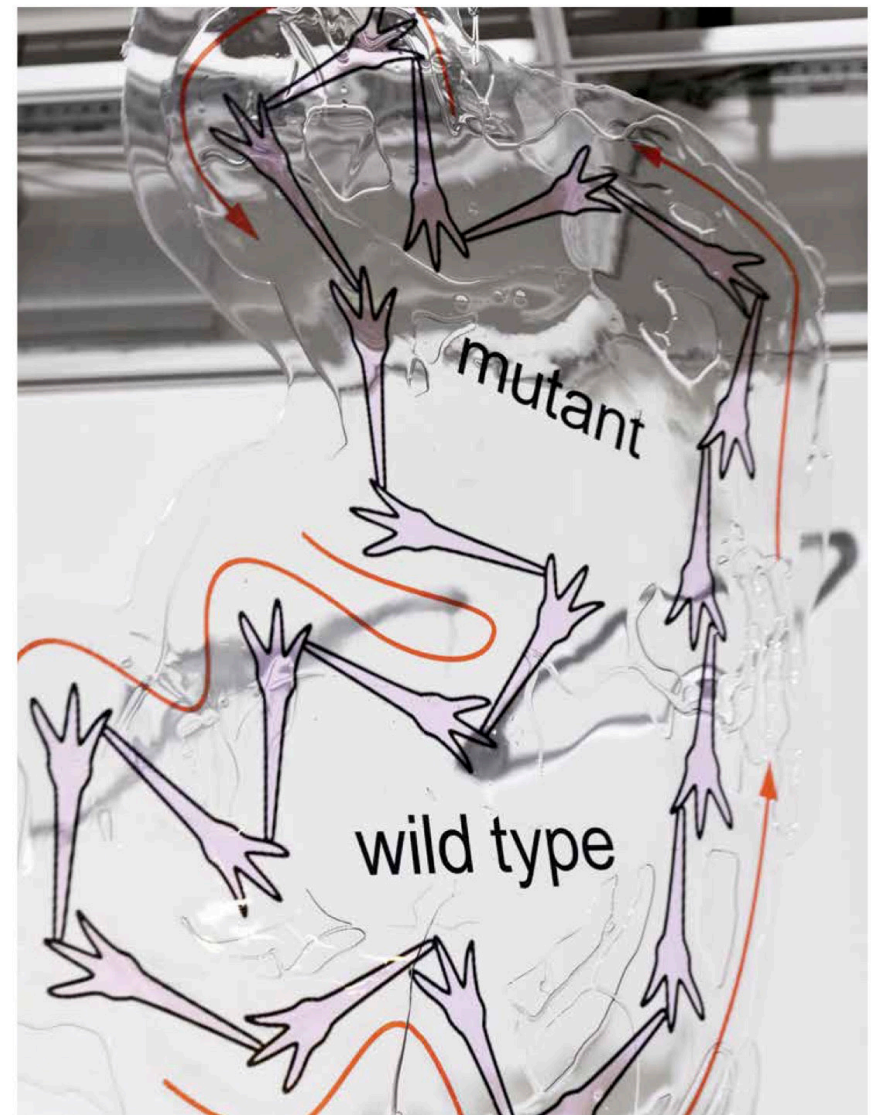
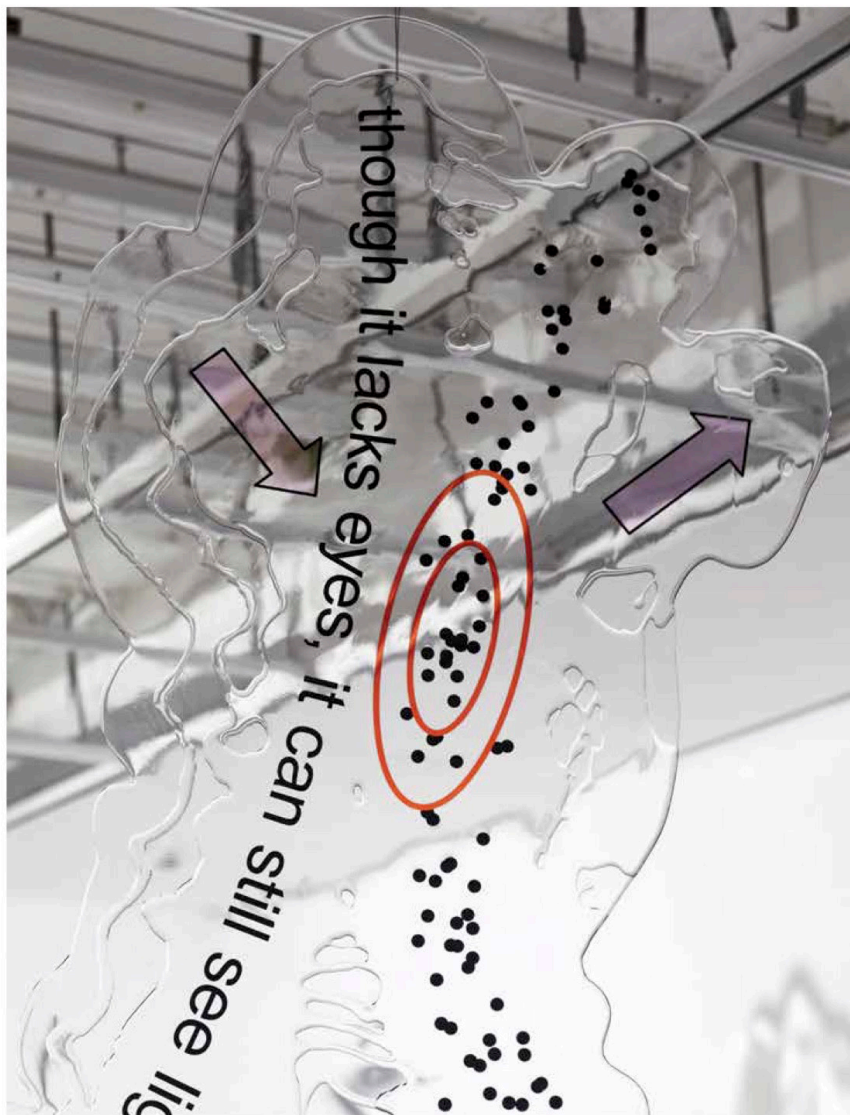
FOCUS 135

KATJA NOVITSKOVA

THE WORLD
BODY UNIVERSE

BY
PENNY RAFFERTY









Our world is made up of stories; mutated views, hallucinations we tell ourselves, references we repeat to others and anecdotes we call truths. They make up a semi-consensual reality both on and offline, they also filter reality... denying some stories, whilst inflating others and attaching the tag of conspiracy to a few in between. This modus of a narrative is to simply search for meaning and understanding, which is inevitably a human trait. Without it we find ourselves gasping for air in the abyss of the existential nightmare, completely atomized from any sense of The Self or meaning. Yet this state of being tethered to reality is not something one does alone, it's a collective process. When you have a conversation, read a book or see a piece of art you are being led through a narrative composition that others have constructed for you and you are interpreting through your own personal narrative lens. Today, more than ever before, we have an unprecedented abundance of narrative arcs that are encapsulated and spread via media artifacts and these digital chronicles are exactly where artist Katja Novitskova mines her nature-culture from. Starting over a decade ago, she edited and published the *Post Internet Survival Guide* which was 272 pages of artistic interpretations of the contemporary human condition in an accelerated world. The book asked questions like: How do we survive? What is this world? What will become of it? With material not only from Novitskova but also from emerging artists like AIDS-3D, Brad Troemel and Lauren Christiansen (The Jogging), Emily Jones, Jon Rafman, Iain Ball, Kari Altmann and R-U-In?S, Jaakko Pallasvuo, Timur Si-Qin, Artie Vierkant and others, it instantly became a cult classic and led Novitskova into the decade-long practice of research and digital collages that try to speculate on the future of image and the nature of images in a digital attention economy. Since 2016-2017 Novitskova has begun to concentrate on a new body of work which both maps unique synthetic territories around bio-technologies and creates new models to view them.

Katja Novitskova's practice often concludes in coherent ecosystems that jam hard at the intersection between technology, sentience and art. She uses the web as her sole window to the world, articulating sets of data which most commonly engage with speculative near-futures. Screenshooting them and liquidating their pixels, she mutates her sources into models of advanced synthetic nature cultures. Her latest works, which were exhibited at Hamburger Bahnhof as part of Preis der Nationalgalerie, explore the long-term aftermath of global collapse. The installation is a mock-up of a laboratory which has been destroyed through some unspecified disaster, and which is now beginning to birth new life from the debris complete with animatronic babies and metallic worm embryo cell farms. Novitskova collaborated with PWR Studio to create the generated graffiti fonts that adorn the lab walls, seeing the texts as plot devices that carry the vector of meaning, thought and mood. Novitskova explains: "In computer games, you always find graffiti telling you what went wrong, why you are here, it allows you to mentally construct the narrative." In chromatic dripping sprayed words, the phrase "Receptor Fatigue" slips down the wall. She explains this is about overlooking biological aspects that have become the norm. Running along an opposite wall the quote "Activation Patterns" glistens: this is a phrase that has come up in Novitskova's work since 2014 as a direct reference to image processing in machine learning tropes and human attention economies (within *Pattern of Activation* series of works). The

Installation view, Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, 2019-2020 (pp. 138-137) Though it lacks eyes, it can still see light, 2018 (p. 138) Wild type, mutant, 2018 (p. 139) Photos: dell image Courtesy: the artist, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin

Approximation (C. elegans Embryogenesis), 2017 (pp. 142-143) Photo: Gunter Lepkowski
Installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2018 (pp. 146-147) Photo: Andrew Radford

graffiti generative font technique has also been used to create the silver etched stick figures that are added to the animal habitat images taken by automatic night cameras. Novitskova always pulls these images from online databases and digitally collages other insignia onto the final composition. "My thesis on these generative drawings is that they synthetically blend the historical, human, organic, non-human and pervasive technological processes onto an anthropomorphic figure which make sense to my work as I try to stay away from the representation of the human body per se. This is a new route for me, but it's still not explicitly human." One can also find this in the nursery. "The robotic baby swings were birthed from the trash after the apocalypse, not straight away, but years later. I wanted to stay away from hazmat suits and Chernobyl aesthetics, these babies emerge as if an artificial womb was mixed with a robotic vacuum cleaner which has, in turn, created a synthetic and unpredictable sentient being."

For Novitskova the key phrase in this work is "LAB RATS". She explains she first found the phrase written in a gimmicky 'molecular' font on a subreddit community chat channel, which basically caters for lab workers who post memes about their work. She recognizes the human as the scientist but also as the lab rat. "The colonialist expansion of giant corporate and governmental agents is done globally not only through land or mineral resources but also through genomes of living things and people. I mean this in a sense of eugenics, crop monopolies, invasive species and commercialization of biological matter. Historically these agents have been acting through procedures like forced sterilization, exposure to harmful chemicals like pesticides and extreme environmental pollution. As biology and computation merge into a new industry, this expansion can potentially gain an unprecedented scale and reach." She adds: "For me, the speculative aspect of the new work delineates from my artistic research into bio-technologies. I assume gradually we will severely lose control over our genetic information and even tissue as new forms of corporate bio-property will emerge, in similar ways to how we have voluntarily given up our online data. I would also guess that most people aren't going to be equipped to fully comprehend the implications of the decisions that are being made in relation to their future bodies and their environment. People don't know about who patents what, what kind of experiments are undertaken and what pharma companies really own and develop. This biotech angle has been present in my work for some years now, but with COVID-19 public consciousness to the topic has exponentially risen, which hopefully allows for more nuanced narratives to emerge."

It is an interesting intersection to which COVID-19 becomes part of Novitskova's work. Under the COVID-19 lockdown the only way in which we were given news was through digital outlets and most of the larger newsrooms declared there was strong evidence that the virus originated in bats. Yet the mystery still remains how it got from bats to people. Researchers think that it's a wild virus,

which probably passed to people through an intermediate species. But no one has found the virus in the wild yet, so other explanations cannot be ruled out entirely. This brings about questions of future interspecies existence and technology which the theorist Donna Haraway addresses in *A Cyborg Manifesto*: "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs." This begs the question: What industry supports or extracts from these new chimera bodies? Novitskova's work points the attention of the viewer to the industrial scale of model organism involvement in laboratory research, in which humans actively manipulate animal bodies of various species. This also refers to the aforementioned double-bind phrase "LAB RATS". She goes on to say: "The core of the new work is still done on the Internet, I don't really go to labs or scientists directly, I go to the web where I can find a mix of available databases and publicly released research that establish the overall trends... There is an important side to science that provides constructed narratives in response to our ignorance about the world and need for simple interpretations." She adds: "I have also noticed when I browse the web I find all sorts of exaggerated headlines of articles about scientific papers. There is always a need for the paper to go viral in order to gain access to the next level of funding. And so these narratives are never divorced from the socio-economic conditions they emerge in." One tends to normally assume science to be above and beyond such corporate attention economy click-baitables. Yet when we loop back round to discussing science as a narrative, we quickly link up with the new technosphere and the hegemonic groups that run it, who are profoundly white, cis males and who seem to take most of their new models of technology from dystopian sci-fi narratives (the so called Silicon valley ideology). Novitskova explains: "Progressively utopian narratives rarely gain the same level of attention as dystopian ones, the working models are seldomly 'sexy' and basically those boys are not interested in them: we are living in a world where very specific sci-fi narratives are highly effective in shaping reality and establishing ruling ideologies. The dark future scenarios are the most common trajectory of technological advancement today, becoming self-fulfilling prophecies." She continues: "I am not interested in the synth-corporate hubris of the future, the dark side of enlightenment is very clear to me. The idea that the human trumps any other animal on this planet, or that the ultimate goal of technology is to automate life is not something I align with."

This direction to which Novitskova is taking in her work can be read as a politically astute moving from the exposure of images that are directly applied to our retinas to gain attention, to images that are largely hidden from the public yet are created and shared with equal furor and scale within certain groups and institutions in order to author the next chapters of human and nonhuman existence. It is true that our bodies are continually being rewritten, but who gets to pen their progress should be a matter of public debate and individual choice, not only some obscured corporate lab experiment played out in real-time.

Earthware (a deer caught on an automatic camera), 2019 (pp. 140-141) Photo: Gunter Lepkowski Courtesy: the artist, private collection, Zurich

Installation view, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, 2020 (pp. 148-149) Photo: Lorenzo Pusterla Courtesy: the artist, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin



