

## CAVEMAN BLUES

Saim Demircan on Edith Karlson and Dan Mitchell  
at Temnikova & Kasela, Tallinn



"Edith Karlson & Dan Mitchell: The End," Temnikova & Kasela, Tallinn, 2019, installation view

Artist collaborations can be tricky, and they can be surprising, but they are rarely boring. That said, nothing could prepare one for the mixture that Edith Karlson and Dan Mitchell cooked up in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, where linguistic and hominid mammoths faced off with one another. Curator and writer Saim Demircan traveled to the Baltic state to report on the results of this joint endeavor.

Oversized Soviet-red letters that spell out "THE END" dominate Temnikova & Kasela's space, which just so happens to be located in one of Stalin's former palaces. A life-size Neanderthal stands among these characters with his arms aloft, as if preparing to throw a large rock in the visitor's general direction. He appears harmless enough, even comically dismissive at first sight. It is clear, though, that the arrangement of words has been scattered and dismantled, as if smashed apart by the caveman. Some letters are left upright, while others fall against the gallery walls, or have toppled over. Small pockets of cardboard flames appear throughout the installation. Have I just walked in on some barbaric fit of rage? The



Neanderthal's paroxysm suggests something else is going on, something psychologically deeper than a temper tantrum. There is no rational reason to be frightened, because it's his own fear with which he's catastrophizing his surroundings. He's scared of his current status, the prehistoric moment that forever traps him, and of the people-yet-to-come. Too much of a troglodyte to understand why, he knows, however, that he is no match for the Homo Sapiens that will replace his kind. The end of his time on Earth has been signaled – literally spelled out – against a background of the collapse of his own doing.

"The End" is a collaboration between Edith Karlson and Dan Mitchell, two artists with very distinct practices whose respective ways of working would not immediately lead one to think of them as potential collaborators. Yet their meeting point is this sculptural installation, in which viewers become imagined participants in a scenario where shrewd psychological fantasies are played out. What is this "the end" of, though? History, civilization, end of days? The artists seem to be asking questions of art, too. Not so much of its active role within the market (the gallery is on fire but it's still business as usual), but perhaps of a destructive impulse that has propelled it to rethink itself over and over again through various different movements and guises, often with the intention of destroying past forms or in self-interest. With "The End," however, they find in one another a humorous counterpart that understands the exhibition as a stage upon which the audience is invited to engage in theatrics of the absurd, as opposed to a soapbox to bring about art's demise.

Within this scenography, the artists' respective contributions are individually recognizable:

the words are the handiwork of Mitchell, whose graphic design-inflected practice, in both art-making and self-publishing, makes cryptic or ominous use of potent language (in a recent show at Filet in London, he also rendered the word "NOTHINGNESS" three-dimensional). The Gill Sans Ultra font used in the show is a recognizable staple of modernist typography, though here the "N" in "The End" is fittingly reversed, turned into a Cyrillic "И," which when spoken sounds nothing like the English "N." Meanwhile, Karlson's figure, made from plaster, continues in the vein of her recent sculpture of a Tyrannosaurus Rex (*Drama is in Your Head V*, 2018); together, they could be understood as manifestations of predatory fears.

Yet what both artists share here in this mischievous joint effort is more allegorical than aesthetic. Karlson and Mitchell pair two concepts – change and evolution – as intrinsically and violently linked, and then attempt to trouble or rebuke this relationship through comedic interplay. Their protagonist (or antihero?) is threatened by modernity and wants to kill the future – he is both dumb and revolutionary, and millennia ahead of punk's "no future" sloganeering. However, the dichotomy the artists dance around is neither defeatist nor nihilistic, precisely because of the Neanderthal's defiance. He's no Nietzschean "last man." He's just unable to comprehend the species-level threat about to happen and thus reverts to violence rather than seeking mutual recognition, which, because he is cognitively impaired, he is simply incapable of processing. His forlorn, blank expression is almost sympathetic, but not to a degree that would stop us from poking fun at him.





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Seen through the lens of the present, the peril is open-ended, politically speaking, and in this respect might connect to the fact that the vanguard of current political change is conservative and right-wing (though "The End" is by no means a provocative show). Instead, the exhibition is almost a punchline to what is subconsciously now becoming a familial joke during these reported end times. Humor, too, at least in its well-worn versions of satire and mockery especially, also seems at an impasse right now, inspiring the necessity for new forms that can unreasonably contend with current affairs. By using the contradiction of the Neanderthal's position as a symbolic characterization, are Karlson and

Mitchell suggesting that change is unavoidable in the course of human history, the realization of which perhaps leads to a fear of freedom that causes the individual to act out against society? The primal, as a transmutative state, is intriguing ground to cover, particularly its reversion or even devolutionary manifestations, which surmount boredom. On this point, in *Kingdom Come*, J. G. Ballard has Dr. Maxted, a psychiatrist, introduce the idea that "elective insanity is waiting inside us, ready to come out when we need it. We're talking primate behaviour at its most extreme," to describe how a "willed madness" is a potential way out of catastrophe (chiming a little too unfortunately with a recent P&O Britannia cruise



ship punch-up). Their Neanderthal also wants to be free, freed from being relegated to the annals of history, from inevitability, and maybe from the shortcomings of his own intellect, but he is nevertheless also the instigator of his own downfall. As he appears here, unstuck in time, he is a rogue interloper bent on destruction.

An end insinuates a beginning and a middle before it. In other words, a narrative (which capitalism thrives off, according to Chris Kraus). As such, "The End" shares a dimension of cinematic storytelling, its fin lending the exhibition a backstory. If the exhibition was a film in this respect then it would, inevitably, be the final scene, only one with which Karlson and Mitchell have left the proceedings of its arrival to the audience to construct for themselves. "Postmodern temporality is captured by Fukuyama's claim [...] that we have reached the 'end of history,'" writes Mark Fisher. "This is not only the conclusion of the process, but also the final cause to which everything has always been tending. End, then, in a double, appropriately Hegelian, sense: the terminus and the teleological goal." By asking how we got to the end knowing what we already know, and what the Neanderthal doesn't, is necessarily inconclusive rather than redemptive.

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