

artistic research does #3

Anita Seppä's "Art as an act of love with the radically other" opens up for the statement that there is a transformative power in opening up. Otherness appears at the centre of this thought in terms of the meanings of sharing, giving, and including. *Artistic Research Does #3* is developed from these concerns, from the prospect of artistic possibilities – but also, of existential affirmations – to experiment with the limits of existing and relating, experiences transformative of the considerations and figurations in which we conceive and render the other visible.

Anita Seppä's text adds complexity to the understanding of experience, as a place where ontologies of theory and practice meet (as seductively point by Janneke Wesseling in *Artistic Research Does #2*). Seppä's argument furthers experience as a meeting of effects and doings between and by agents that need not be exclusively human, the consciousness of a perspective on experience that is beyond the human. It is the recognition of who or what triggers an encounter that the artist meet. According to Seppä, this is a matter of mediation from the impressionable affective where the placement (the

hierarchy) of things can be reordered. This artistic mediation is an experience that seeks not an exhausted documentation of the other, but acknowledging it, even in its incomprehensibility, an experience where the apartness from the other is trivialised.

Seppä aesthetic vision (of existence) is one where richness replaces divisions, where versions of subjectivities are rethought. The existence of the body is a condition for this mediation of distance between parts, but also where the affective, as the mediating imprint where one becomes present, exists. It is this ethical-agential property of affect – of being affected and to affect – that defines the existential and aesthetical responsibility that Seppä tells us, ought not to be restrained but strived as a ceremony of giving.

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Art as an Act Of Love with the Radically Other

- The Post-Humanist Art of Terike Haapoja

— Anita Seppä

In the current world, the activists of artistic research must react to a series of extraordinary changes that are largely results of human activities. We, the human-animals, have created a globally-spread and constant drive for economic growth, an acceleration of life-style, and an unforeseen consumption of fossil fuels (that is, fossil subjectivity) that places our generation historically at the top of material binge eating. The balance of the earth as we now know it is seriously threatened by an astonishing growth of economic inequality, massive diaspora, and by an ecological crisis that we are clearly not able to halt. This has brought with it the painful awareness of the fact that we might be living in the end times, and that there is not necessarily anything waiting for us at the end of history (reason, heaven, a perfect society, etc.).

In the midst of these confusing contemplations many contemporary artist-researchers have started to consider art and aesthetic knowledge from partially new angles. They are no longer aiming to manufacture new laboratories and showrooms for white, elitist, and male-centred Enlightenment thought, but to discuss and practice various kinds of experimental activities in ways that pay homage to unknown others, be they other human beings or some other animals, spirits, dark material, trees, air, historical ghosts, or what have you.

The principles that motivate the narratives of human sciences have also changed, one could even say radically. Epistemologically more multifaceted, even messy forms of knowing, participating, and presenting have substituted the positivist and utopian tones of modernity that place the “man” and his creative, rational reasoning at the top of the universe. The potentiality inherent in this new logic can only be developed further by refusing to represent issues and phenomena

that in themselves escape representation. In other words, we definitely still need logic, but one that grasps the “innermost depths of life and death without leading us back to human reason”, as Gilles Deleuze notes (1997, 82).

The eco-feminist and post-humanist trends in contemporary artistic research are also largely grounded on these epistemological premises. Against the Cartesian idea of a mastery of nature that has for centuries associated nature with uncontrollable, “feminine”, and “savage” ways of existing (that the male reason is supposed to dominate and educate), many artist-researchers have started to reconsider reality, art, existence, and meaning in terms no longer defined by the logic of domination (self over other, reason over nature, human over nonhuman).¹ In their visions, our mind-bodies consist of complex *assemblages* that do not only mix the humans with other humans, but also with the nonhuman.²

This decentring of the human subject has radical effects for the definition of artwork. For if the human mind-body is denied its status as the individual source of meaning and becomes understood instead as impressionable, as sensitive to nonhuman actors and things, the locus of artistic meaning turns out to be, above all, *the affective transfer of energy from one site to another*. This notion bears anti-capitalist and ecological implications since it opposes the modern aesthetic ideology that has for centuries defined artwork as either a fixed object of human contemplation or as an instrument of capitalist exchange: we are used to either commodifying art or, under exceptional circumstances, freeing it from the domination of commodification. In the latter case, however, the exceptional cultural exchange value of the art object remains (Bennett 2015, 100).

In the following, I consider the works of Finnish visual artist-researcher Terike Haapoja (1974-) within this context. In many of her works, Haapoja includes organic, natural processes, such as entropy, dying, inhaling and exhaling, in the compositional processes of her art. By so doing, she brings forth new orders of things. Orders that do not objectify nature and the material

¹_For early ecofeminist discussions of these issues see, for example, Gaard and Gruen (1993) and Shiva (1988).

²_As Tarsh Bates comments in her text “HumanThrush Entanglements”, a normal human body is thought to be composed of over one trillion cells, of which only about 10 per cent are animal (i.e., human). Some of these have been proven to “profoundly influence” human metabolism and physiology (Bates 2013, 3). As Donna Haraway asks: How do we understand human subjectivity and identity in this cacophony if “to be one is always to become with many?” (Haraway 2008, 4).

world, but present our existence as part of a much wider whole in which all living organisms are principally of the same value. In this way, her aesthetic epistemology creates space for the voices of others to emerge – voices that we as humans will never be able to fully comprehend or even hear. But which, through their mere existence, demand we re-think the ways we perceive art objects, reality, knowledge, and ourselves.

In Haapojä's works human history and natural reality are not seen as playgrounds of undifferentiated human connections, but show themselves instead as complex assemblages of *actants*. That is, they are sources of action that can be either nonhuman or human. In these assemblages both human and nonhuman actants have the power to produce *effects* and *do* things, thus altering the course of historical events and political space. Seen in this way, history and its political and rational formation are presented as an interplay of human and nonhuman forces that effect the constitution of "ourselves" and "reality".

An interesting question that arises from these new aesthetic structures of the art object is: Could this perspective also function as a basis for understanding what counts as love or an act of love. For if we take seriously the idea that human nature is not merely based on our individual, desiring bodies and spirits but consists of much more complex assemblages that are necessarily both human and nonhuman, is it not so that whenever we enter stimulating relations with the other called love, we are also dealing with the nonhuman aspects of existence, both within ourselves and around us?

Transgressing the Man

One of the most challenging ideas in contemporary posthumanist research concerns the perception that our bodies are not merely affecting and being affected, but *realise themselves as waves of uninterrupted reconstitutions* (Kwek 2015; Bennett 2015 and 2010; Bates 2013). This demands we rethink our earlier visions of human subjectivity. In the play of material engagement, different kinds of units – comprehended as actants that endure in ways that are rather unresponsive to the division between animate and inanimate or organic and inorganic – are seen as confronting and interweaving with each other. This creates them as living assemblages, in which a nonhuman thing can become an extension of a human body, and the other way around (Bennett 2015, 96). As Lambros Malafouris formulates, “there are no fixed agentic roles in this game, but only an uninterrupted racing for a maximum grip” (Malafouris 2013, 147).

The notion that the human has intimate relations with the nonhuman inspires one also to reconceptualise early poststructuralist and existentialist considerations of the other. Perhaps the most important change has been the shift from transgressive human language and representation towards more bodily and affective ways of existing and knowing, which also pay homage to the nonhuman.

For example, Michel Foucault (1926–1984) has emphasised in his now famous archaeological essays “A Preface to Transgression” (1963) and “What is an Author?” (1969) that the human

subject is not a fixed being but something that proceeds, testing and overcoming, endlessly towards its own limits. The ethical promise of this process lies in the possibility of discovering new ways of existing and relating, and as a result of this offering a new art and philosophy that “regains its speech and finds itself again only in the marginal region which borders its limits” (Foucault 1999, 78). As Foucault notes, two essential inquiries arise from these notions. First, what kind of artistic language can arise from such a nonappearance of the knowing or mastering subject? And, second, who is the artist or the philosopher who will now begin to communicate? (Ibid.)

In Foucault’s view, replacing the Cartesian knowing subject with the transgressive subject who disappears in language births a new philosopher who is aware that we are not everything, and who learns that even the philosopher can never inhabit the entirety of his language like a “perfectly fluent god” (Foucault 1999, 78). For next to himself he recognizes the existence of language that also communicates, but that which escapes his domination or manipulation. A language that “strives, fails, and falls silent”. A language that he perhaps spoke at one time but which has now separated itself from him, gravitating to a space progressively more silent. (Ibid., 78-79.)

Foucault also calls this affective linguistic structure the mad philosopher who does not find his way in language and is not a subject mastering his thinking and speech. He (or, possibly better, it) disappears in communication to make way for philosophical language that proceeds as if through a labyrinth, losing itself to the point where it becomes “an absolute void – an opening, which is communication”. (Foucault 1999, 79-80.) Again, this is not the end of philosophy but, rather, the end of the philosopher as “the sovereign and primary form of philosophical language” (ibid. 79).

In a similar spirit, Jacques Derrida’s notion of hauntology emphasises the importance of human responsibility with respect to the unknowable and unrepresentable. In his *Specters of*

Marx (1994), Derrida writes:

No justice – let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws – seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any other form of totalitarianism. Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those *who are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question ‘where?’, ‘where tomorrow?’, ‘whither?’ (Derrida 1994, xviii).

Our responsibility towards the unknown and unrepresentable other was also already strongly emphasised in the 1940’s by French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1983). In his posthumously published *Cahiers pour une morale* (1983) [Notebooks for an Ethics], which features writings from 1947-1948, Sartre rewrites the idea of the human subject by including in it aspects of otherness, and by replacing the sovereign man-subject with a heterogeneous and fleeting subjectivity. He links ethical ways of existing with notions of generosity, self-sacrifice, the gift, love, and artistic communication (Sartre 1992, 282-286, 376, 417-418, 507).

Even though Sartre never explicitly takes up the issue of nonhuman existence in this context – and can therefore be criticized for having a human-centred perspective, just like Foucault and Derrida – his descriptions of the other seems to offer several tools for discussing the issues that are of interest here: the possibility of feeling empathy and sharing with the other. In his ethical notebooks and literature theory, Sartre describes this relation in terms of the matriarchal ceremony of giving.

Love as Matriarchal Ceremony of Giving

In a key argument for his ethics, Sartre suggests that “I” is always already, in its very origin, something other. That is, a free being whose identity or essence can never be fixed to any stable formula or name. To prevent possible violations of this radical freedom, Sartre suggests in his Notebooks for an Ethics that in order to cherish our freedom we need to create new ways of relating to others as well. For Sartre, freedom exists “only in giving”, and “devotes itself to giving” (1992, 282). This giving must be concrete, not abstract, because freedom is always realised in specific situations whose difficulties and finitude we are invited to comprehend. Loving the other means, therefore, attempting to protect the other’s fragile bodily existence.

I love if I create the contingent finitude of the Other as being-within-the-world in assuming my own subjective finitude as in willing this subjective finitude [...] Through me there is a vulnerability of the Other, but I will this vulnerability since he surpasses it and it has to be there so that he can surpass it. [...] This vulnerability, this finitude is the body. The body for others. To unveil the other in his being-within-the-world is to love him in his body (Sartre 1992, 501).

To practice love demands that we love others physically; caress them, feed them, and protect them. In this respect, I am a gift: A hand that stretches out to embrace the other. An act that my

hand toward the other so that s/he may transform it into a body for others. As Sartre suggests, I offer this hand so that “he will take hold of it just like a drowning man who clings to a branch, and so that he perceives it just like a branch. I freely make myself a passivity. The help here is passion, an incarnation” (Sartre 1992, 285-286).

When the other enters the medium of artworks, he figures in the work as an uncontrollable freedom whose acts cannot be predicted or mastered by the artist. Hence, each interpreter of the artwork changes everything he touches, and it is always he who actually finishes the work, each time differently, adding the complexity of his own existence to the material frames of the work (Sartre 1976, 45; Seppä 1999). As a result, multiple meanings of the artwork are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Sartre also explains relations between the other, art, and generosity by saying that art is both a demand and a ceremony of gift giving, and that the gift itself already intermediates a metamorphoses (Sartre 1992, 141).

This generosity mirrors, to some degree, the idea of matriarchal succession: the mother does not possess the name, but she is a necessary medium between the uncle and the nephew. (Sartre 1976, 55.) Due to artwork’s ability to mediate generosity between freedoms, the engaged artwork (engaged to our situated bodily being, the priority of the other, and incompatible freedoms that participate in the construction of the work) can also be termed a matriarchal ceremony that operates under the mother’s law of generosity.

The notion of the other also functions for Sartre as a principle that is larger than the notions of dialectics and history. With this in mind, he argues in that it is actually otherness that works as the true engine of history. For Sartre, the idea of historical progress created by the Enlightenment philosophers is not much more than an intellectual illusion: it kills history by forming an abstract synthesis out of it (Sartre 1992, 46-48). The rationalised principle of historical development does not even notice what is left outside: women, children, other nations, other classes, etc. (ibid., 47).

What Haapoja’s artworks add to this list of subjectivities excluded from history (that also Foucault, Derrida and many

other poststructuralists speak of) is the notion of nonhuman otherness. This problematic is well presented in two of her art projects, *Closed Circuit – Open Duration* (2013) and *The Museum of the History of Cattle* (2013).

Closed Circuit – Open Duration

³ Webpages of Terike Haapoja: terikehaapoja.net and historyofothers.org.

Discussing her solo exhibition *Closed Circuit – Open Duration*, shown in the Nordic pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennale, Haapoja³ declares that the most important motivation for her works is questioning the human-centred aesthetics and politics that has for ages differentiated an imaginative creature called “man” from the rest of the universe. As Haapoja formulates:

I wanted to adapt the building into a sort of ‘pavilion of the species’ and to challenge the familiar human- and nation-state centric approach, which is often found at the heart of the exhibitions at the Biennale. A human being should be examined as an ecosystem and a part of nature, not as an individual. We are not beings separate from the rest of the environment, and neither are we the only ones to communicate their needs and keep in contact with each other. (Haapoja 2013).

In a work called *Entropy* (2004), the death chill of the horse is visualized with the help of the infrared video. The corpse’s warmest areas are signified with red and the coldest areas with black and blue. Visual proof of life’s presence gradually evaporates as heat flees from the horse’s body. Even though the work is not portraying us, the human-animals, our similarity with the dying animal is demonstrated in a thought-provoking manner. When the corpse gradually melts into the blue background, the image turns into a seed of nostalgia – as if we, the gallery visitors, had shared some specific moment of togetherness, or being-in-the-world with this living creature that we would never truly get to know.

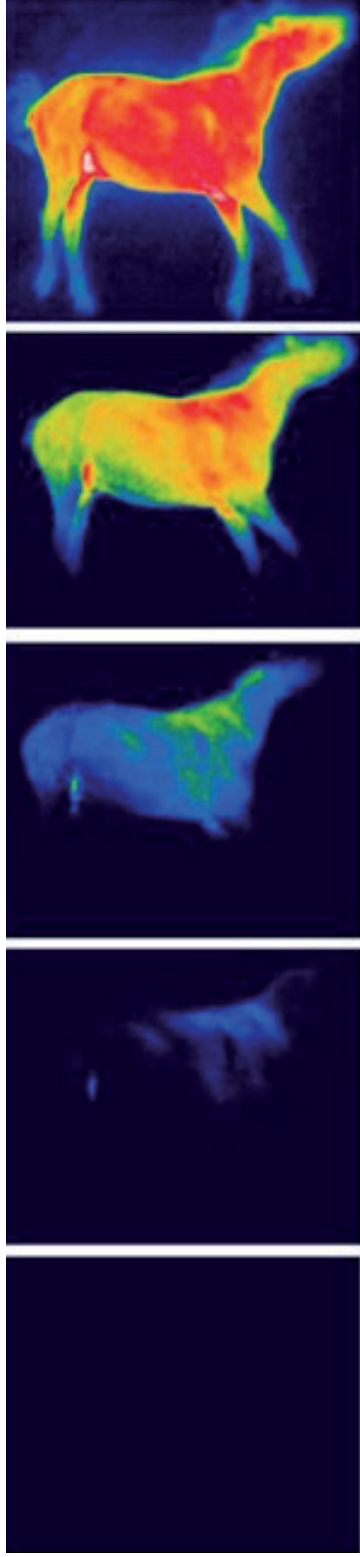


Fig. 1_Terike Haapoja
Entropy, 2004
Video installation
© Terike Haapoja

From an aesth/ethical point of view, Haapoja's visual ode to dying horses, cats, calves, dogs and birds is just as affective as any great poets' rhymes to a lost beloved human or a dear friend. Listening to the echoes of these visual verses allows us to cease, for a short moment, those understandings of animals as mere producers of meat and instead realise the beauty and uniqueness of their existence.

Haapoja's art seems to be motivated strongly by both empathy and love, and its dialectical counterpart, violence. By drawing our attention to the fragility, beauty, and uniqueness of the living creatures, she invites us to care for various nonhuman others. By participating in her artworks, we see sensuousness and reason in new ways, no longer as abstract principles that separate the passive from the active and man from nature, but are enactments of endless becoming (deterritorialisation), through which we open ourselves to the existence of the unknown others.

In another work titled *Inhale / Exhale* (2008/2011) Haapoja presents decomposing soil and dead leaves in three transparent, coffin-like glass cases. This durational sculpture links automatic ventilation fans with the decomposition processes. Production is measured with sensors and transformed into sound. The ventilation doors on both sides of each glass case act as grills that regulate the level of CO₂ inside the case: when the doors are open and the ventilation is on, the CO₂ level decreases, and the opposite – when they are closed the CO₂ levels rapidly increases. The CO₂ level is sonicated and made audible as a deep, continuous breathing sound that is amplified and silenced. As a result, the glass “coffin” appears to slowly exhale and inhale as the CO₂ level increases and decreases.



Seen in the actual ecological context, *Inhale / Exhale* is inspired by the biological concept of soil respiration, which refers to the flow of carbon from the soil to the air. As we know, soil respiration is a key in climate change: when permafrost is melting, more carbon flows to the air. In this installation, the artwork actively participates in the production of the climate, and, at the same time, symbolically references the actual ecological crisis. The division of art objects and perceiving subjects becomes effectively blurred, and an assemblage of actants that transfer energy from one site to another takes its place.

Fig. 2_Terike Haapoja,
Inhale / Exhale, 2008/2011.
Mixed media: glass, mdf,
soil, electronics, sound.
© Terike Haapoja.
Photo by Sandra Kantanen

The History of Others

In their large-scale installation work *The Museum of the History of Cattle* (2013), the first part of a larger, ongoing, collaborative art and research project called *The History of Others*, Haapoja and writer Laura Gustafsson transgress the man-centred perspective by playing with the idea of a history parallel to that of the mankind. The exhibition includes performances, publications, images, and seminars that imagine histories according to species other than human, analysing problems that arise from an anthropocentric world view and showing how language, industrialisation, and biotechnologies produce othering, oppression, and violence against other human beings and other animals.



Fig. 3_Terike Haapoja and
Laura Gustafsson
*The Museum of the History
of Cattle*, 2013
© Terike Haapoja

As the title of the show hints, the exhibition serves as an ethnographic museum of the history of one of humanity's most valuable and ancient companion species: cattle. When looking at the ways human beings have treated cattle, the artist duo brings

forth links between scientific theories of evolution, technologies typically linked with it (breeding), and urbanization to show how humans have upset the ecosystems that bovines need to blossom. Moreover, greatly valued, human-centred concepts of heritage, history, and time are rethought from a twofold cattle viewpoint: from the perspective of cows who have been forcefully controlled by humans, and from the view of cattle who have not been suppressed to systematized human domination.

Fig. 4_ Terike Haapoja and
Laura Gustafsson,
*The Museum of the History
of Cattle*, 2013
© Terike Haapoja



By telling history from the perspective of cattle, Haapoja and Gustafsson make visible the violence of the objectifying gaze and language regarding non-human animals that Western human cultures have normalised. The Museum of the History of Cattle also opens up perspectives on existential space or place through which nonhuman standpoints become visible, or at least imaginable. By representing forms of historical human-human violence alongside the brutal oppression of cattle, Haapoja and Gustafsson demonstrate effectively the destructive aspects of human civilisation. At the same time, the question of alternative futures and more caring ways of relating to others is intimately present.

How to Caress the Other

Thinking about possibilities for creating caressing relations with others, Brian Massumi goes back to Bergsonian ideals of intuition and empathy. As Massumi proposes, our consciousness always exists in an in-between. This in-between is multi-faceted – and the “between two” that dialectics takes as primary (between me and you, or me and the other) is more an exception (Massumi 2014, 36). “Life”, in this context, becomes understood as differential, mutual inclusion. That is, as an assemblage that is at once our own image and an image of everything that relates to us.

Life lurks in the zone of indiscernibility of the crisscrossing of differences, of every kind and degree. At each pulse of experience, with each occurring remix, there emerges a new variation on the continuum of life, splayed across a multiplicity of coimplicating distinctions. The evolution of life is a continual variation across recurrent iterations, repeating the splay always with a difference. Because of this recurrent crisscrossing of coinvolved differences, evolution is never linear (Massumi 2014, 34).

Similarly, Henri Bergson has developed the idea that what makes us able to meet the other is our ability to feel sympathy. He suggests that since instincts and intuition are sympathetic in themselves, they are therefore also modes of thinking. In his words: “We call intuition here the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of the [other] object in order to

coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it” (Bergson 1998, 176).

It is important to stress that the otherness that might raise intuitive sympathy in us is doomed to escape, as Sartre stresses (1976) – for otherwise the otherness of the other would become destroyed. Seen in this way, loving and caressing the other means, first of all, the endless work of connecting, reconnecting and inhabiting; a continuous striving to maintain a sense of a (lovable or loving) self (territorialisation) amidst unending self-alterations (deterritorialisation).

This uncontrollable dialogue or endless formation of new assemblages challenges not only the romantic ideal of love, but also modernist and capitalist notions of the artwork. Haapoja’s artistic assemblages do not differentiate between the animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman, or art and nature, but feel what is shared by living beings and things. In her works, all these sets become seen as conative bodies that might be described as being occasionally supportive of one other. From this perspective, the humans who articulate their relations to “art objects” must take on new shapes for their “selves”: they must move out of the positions of (normal or pathological) subjectivity and dwell within something of a lived space of artwork (see Bennett 2015, 100). In this responsiveness to what emanates from artworks, human and nonhuman mind-bodies create new encounters, foregrounding new ways of understanding the existences of both artworks and human subjectivities.

Concluding remarks

In Haapoja's artistic research, our aesthetic and political Umwelt is presented as an endless series of uncontrollable assemblages constructed of multi-species ecologies. Following Michel Serres, we could describe this viewpoint as an artistically constructed "natural contract" that will bring about a fresh conceptualisation of our relation with material objects and nonhuman life forms (Serres 1990). Just as social contracts have instructed human relations, this natural contract can produce stability and reciprocity in our relations with the planet that gives us life.

Haapoja supports this natural contract by creating more empathetic and embodied ways of meaning-making and existing with various others, be they human or nonhuman. In this sense, her art creates space for even more radical antagonisms than, for example, Chantal Mouffe's theory of "radical democracy" that limits its focus to a human-centred vision of the political and grants only human beings the status of political subjectivities. This standpoint is also, in many respects, essentially anti-capitalistic and politically green, for it works to free artworks from the reign of commodification and to strengthen the ecological awareness of audiences (See also Bennett 2010; Bennett 2015, 99-100; and Lerner 2013).

In Haapoja's artistic research practices, we can witness a loss of faith in the official, celebratory rhetoric of man-centred humanism, capitalism, and rationalist (male-centred) modernity, and an

attempt to elaborate a creative consideration of different modalities for expressing hope, depression, and political critique in a world that continues to massively ignore the existence of various others. Although the sum of this resistance is difficult to empirically estimate, it may be suggested that Haapoja's art presents a loose figuration of a critical reaction that circles into other systems (state power, forces behind human-centred rationalism, capitalism, and so on), and serves to critique them.

Such artistic practice is not a mere writing down of the phases of history. Rather, through both poetically and politically transgressive forms of expression and action, Haapoja invites us to reimagine and reconfigure our ways of being in the world and our ways of relating to others. Moreover, her art provides the conditions of possibility needed for a growing political consciousness that understands the political both as an artistic counter-discourse that criticises the structures of state power and dominant (capitalist/consumer) ideologies, as well as something that grounds our being-in-common in the separation and intimacy of the world.

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Anita Seppä

short bio

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