

HUMBER STREET GALLERY

EXHIBITION GUIDE
GALLERY 1 & 2

ANIARA OMANN

EQUANIPOLIS

12 OCTOBER – 29 DECEMBER 2019

For *Equanipolis* Aniara Omann has developed a new body of work that questions and tests our ability to conceive of futures and alternate realities. Working with objects and materials that are at once familiar and alien, the artist alludes to a radically different future, in which traces of cultural history are morphed and the boundary between symbol and material is blurred. This two-floor exhibition uses sculpture, costume and robotics to imagine what the future of humanity might look like, pointing to the possibilities beyond our current bodily existence, through an aesthetic reminiscent of special effects in science-fiction, and using innovative bio-conscious and biodegradable materials.

Throughout *Equanipolis* the artist evokes and questions different aspects of the human body with sculptures that at once resemble and mutate the human form, as well as our relation to ecology through her choice of material.

Across Gallery 1, the artist presents an atmospheric environment comprised of sound, light, robotic sculpture and cast found objects that explore her research into "conscious futurism". Drawn from the artist's interest in shamanic and spiritual practices the sound work acts as a form of framing. Referencing the tradition of chanting, a way of creating a monotone that allows us to draw away from the idea of the ego. Continuing the approach to the idea of connectivity of humankind with our future selves the artist has used eco resins and bio-mechanical animatronics to consider our sustainable future.

The exhibition continues in Gallery 2 with a collection of hardwood sculptural pieces that resemble the human body, animal and insect like forms draped in garments from 1890 – 1980. These vintage pieces draw on the artist's interest in fashion with one piece produced in collaboration with artist & designer Zephyr Liddell created from *Piñatex* – a natural leather alternative made from cellulose fibres extracted from pineapple leaves. Here the artist continues her exploration of futurism, with mounds of seaweed harvested in Scarborough. Known for its sustainable properties and used as early as the stone age as a source of foraged food, seaweed is one of the main CO₂ inhibitors and is a naturally organic as it cannot be conventionally manufactured with pesticides. It's cellular structure also provides a point of intrigue, with green seaweed having a plant like structure and

brown seaweed more closely related to animal molecular biology, a sort of hybrid being.

In the future, will we be able to live harmoniously with the natural world? Or will we bio-hack to become ideal versions of ourselves? And if we do will we still be human? *Equanipolis* invites us to extend our imagination, and to pay attention to the limits and barriers that we find in the world and ourselves.

un/imagining "us" or the stories we live by ESSAY BY GREG NIJS

Upon acquainting with a slice of the entities populating Aniara Omann's *Equanipolis*, you may find yourself telling stories. Stories of origins, evolutions, transmutations, stories of alternative futures and otherwise possible presents, stories of interdependencies, entanglements, intimacies, and the differences within. Stories imagined, skilfully crafted, enacted convincingly, elegantly worn.

Amidst the current period dubbed the Anthropocene, marked by the rapid decline of biodiversity and changing climatic conditions due to human activity, making and relaying stories has considerable importance. For stories are big. They're bigger than science, society, economics, politics, and all the stuff that makes up our contemporary human lives. This is because stories have capabilities, which are world-making, empathy-shaping, complexity-fostering. Stories affect, guide and enable us, not just as individuals, but as communities, societies and cultures.

Let us loop this huge potential back through Aniara Omann's *Equanipolis*. Exploring Omann's current work cannot be done without bringing up science fiction. Sci-Fi is usually understood as a literary or film genre and is mostly seen as an attempt to imagine the future of our social system. However, both Sci-Fi writers and cultural critics alike concurrently frame Sci-Fi as a method, more precisely "a structurally unique "method", for apprehending the present as history". Sci-Fi can also be understood as a way of reading the present through the lens of an imagined future.

Omann's approach hovers between 'soft' and 'hard' Sci-Fi. That is to say, she brings together bio and techno-oriented imaginaries, thereby navigating the intersection of "art in the biological, ecological, and cyborg modes"ⁱⁱ. Furthermore, the tropes of Sci-Fi movie blockbusters are sidestepped; the typical tales of human triumph or unambiguous dystopia, of quickly unfolding cataclysm or simplistic techno-heroism. Instead, Omann's focus stands 'besides'ⁱⁱⁱ what is usually highlighted; epochal fashion garments, algae, the dreamlike state of a cyborg.

OF CYBORGS AND SEAWEED

The cyborg that Omann has created for *Equanipolis* presents an anthropo-zoo-technological knot – tackling questions of post/humanity, deep time and nonhuman justice-to-come^{iv}. As in a backward and forward-looking archaeology, this cyborg contracts origins, evolutions and transmutations in one figure, spanning from our deep past to a deep future. We are thereby reminded of the importance that origin stories have for understanding "us" as a species and their role in determining the fault line of subjectivity^v.

It may be suggested that Omann relays the cyborg environmentalist posture advanced by literary and cultural scholar Ursula K. Heise – whereby bio- and technologically generated life-forms are not put into opposition, but they are rather seen as allies in repairing the fallacy of human exceptionalism. Heise proposes that "the animal cyborg can take us, through the discovery of otherness in our own technological creations, to the recognition of and respect for the nonhuman others we did not make"^{vi}. Thus, re-reading the animal cyborg, not as a replacement for bio-species but as a co-shaping agent that queries our current take on more than human ethics.

All the while, like a hauntological thread looping back through a deep future, wonder glimmers underneath about the existential status of "us" as a cyborg–splice "of imploded (not hybridized) human beings–information machines–multispecies organisms"^{vii}. The entity's dreamlike state solicits questions about the extent to which human selves will dissolve. Would such bio–technological cross–platform architectures "burst forth a wholly different subjectivity, or none at all"^{viii}? Will a constant state of pure experience be the rule rather than the exception? Pulsing a pure in which self, other and world are undifferentiated. Like a mosaic without seams. Whatever the case, it will entail considerable boundary work between "us", "it" and "them". For now, suffice it to say that we are all always already prosthetic. Most of it depends on just how — or how just — we name and qualify our entanglements.

The abundant presence of seaweed in *Equanipolis* signals another current world–making dilemma. By way of "thinking–with"^{ix} — that is by describing and connecting situated stories to foster their "contagious potential" — we can thicken the plot. To that end I want to relate Omann's seaweed to science historian Leah Aronowsky's "real" astronaut–algae–spacecraft story^x. Although we associate spaceflight with human's ultimate break from nature, with the space cabin as proof of human technological mastery over their environment (without the help of their earthly fellows), "the story "could have been otherwise"^{xi}.

In the 1960's NASA considered and earnestly researched the possibilities of a bioregenerative life–support system based on algae. Algae would "inhabit the spacecraft and, through a series of interspecies symbiosis, maintain cabin conditions and sustain astronaut life"^{xii}. Aquatic systems with bacteria–algae compositions would digest human waste, dispense drinkable water and produce oxygen to keep the astronauts alive in space. The test results proved very promising, but the systems were prone to instability. The algae thrived so well that they needed to be culled by the astronauts to keep them at the optimal bloom state. More generally, the daily human maintenance was extensive. The demands of interspecies reciprocal care were deemed too high. It was not worth the risk. In the years that followed, NASA's interest and funding for algae research faded. Were it not for the care bias, the story could have continued otherwise. As Aronowsky notes: "the history of American spaceflight as we know it today was not at all inevitable, and in fact it could well have been a thoroughly multispecies affair"^{xiii}.

Let's make a speculative wager here and take Omann's *Equanipolis*' seaweed as a material metaphor. The sheer abundance hints at a reversal of the "backgrounding of herbality"^{xiv}, by literally spreading it around the entire exhibition. In enveloping everything, not only are we drawn into an encounter — drawn into granting due attention — but we are also confronted with an oblique reminder: that we're all astronauts and Earth is a space cabin running on a bioregenerative life–support system.

... AND FASHION GARMENTS

Since its conception from early capitalist modernity, fashion has been an agent of change. As a nexus of creative imagination and social self–differentiation it has afforded humanist emancipation across race, class and gender. In its late postmodern phase, unfettered imagination cut loose representation from substrate. This turned out to be both a blessing and a curse. Im/material resources and labours became more and more invisible and thus were unaccounted for. Anything goes and all is possible, production nor matter holding the flux back. Or so it seemed.

What if we were to take the best of both worlds, yet with a twist? As in Omann's vestimentary applied speculative fabulation. To unleash an unbridled imaginary for emancipation once over — actually attempting to do it, not just referencing^{xv}. Yet this time affording more than human emancipation. We'd arrive at something compostmodern going composthuman, in which "us" is not "us" is "us" again.

Upon acquainting with a slice of the entities populating Aniara Omann's *Equanipolis*, you may find yourself telling stories, telling stories after stories told. In the process, you may be touched, thereby potentially transforming yourself, and touching, thereby potentially transforming the world. Subsequently you may solicit others around you to be and do equally so. And this, my dear fellow human, may turn out to be crucial, in some future past. Seriously, it's the stories we live by that can invigorate us towards another here and now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Nijs is a researcher, curator, teacher and writer. He was trained as a sociologist, and is currently working as a researcher at Urban Species – a Brussels-based academic action-research collective focussed on citizen participation and technology development. Nijs is the co-founder and co-director of c-o-m-p-o-s-i-t-e, a Brussels-based contemporary art space, where he has created specific work protocols, which allow curator and artist to engage intimately, both conceptually and materially, in the production of exhibitions.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Aniara Omann (b. 1987, Denmark) lives and works in Glasgow, UK. Omann's practice evolves around themes of interconnection, ecology and social fictions. Working across sculpture, writing, drawing and live performance Omann seeks to expose and question the apparent boundaries of individual objects and their projected identities. The work is often produced using methods and materials found in manual special effects and prop making.

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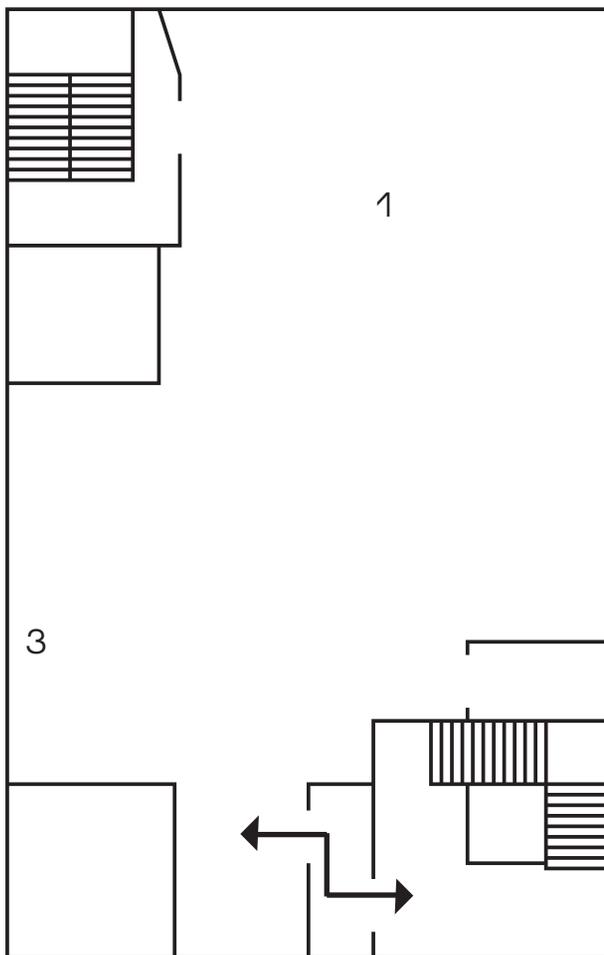
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- i. Jameson, 2005: 288
- ii. Haraway, 2011: 2
- iii. see Hache, 2015
- iv. see Barad, 2015
- v. see Yusoff, 2018
- vi. Heise, 2003: 78
- vii. Haraway, 2011: 6
- viii. Gruber, 2011
- ix. see Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017
- x. Aronowsky, 2017
- xi. *ibid.*: 361
- xii. *ibid.*: 361
- xiii. *ibid.*: 361
- xiv. Houle, 2011
- xv. Aniara Omann, pers. comm

WORK DETAILS, GALLERY 1

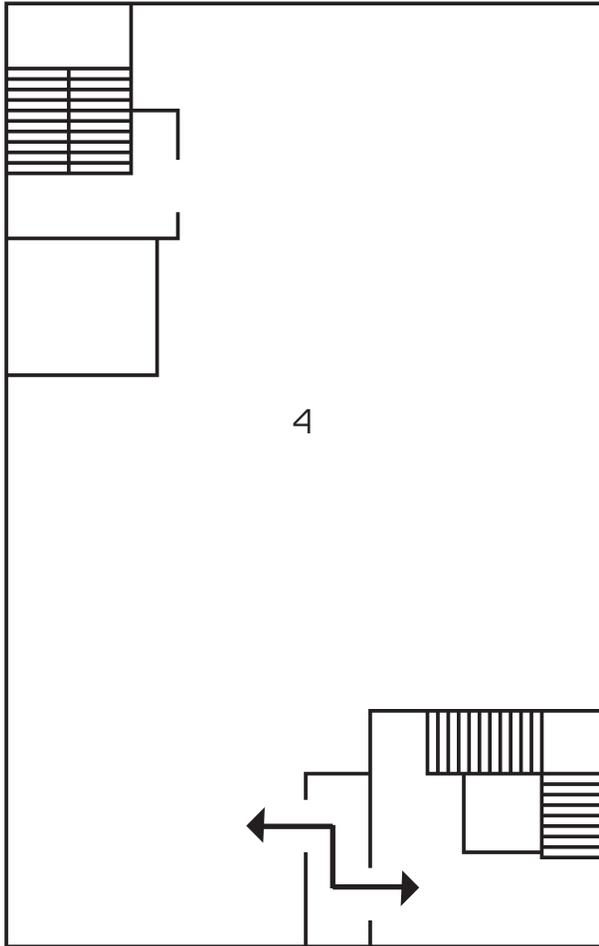


1. *Lucy*, 2019
Eco-Resin, Silicone, Robotics
56 x 130 x 84 cms

2. *I am ॐ*, 2019
Looping sound 6 mins

3. *Equanipolis*, 2019
Eco-Resin, seashells
Dimensions variable

WORK DETAILS, GALLERY 2



4. *Unname the World*, 2019

Mannequins: cherry wood, bolts

Garments: Custom made Pinatex and hemp fibre collar, 2019; Wool, lined jacket, 1980s; Wrangler denim jeans, 1970s; Wool mini dress, 1960s

Cotton lace shirt, 1940s; Wool embroidered top, 1930s; Silk lace cape, 1890s

Dimensions variable

GLOSSARY

ANIMATRONICS: (*used with a singular verb*) the technology connected with the use of electronics to animate puppets or other figures, as for motion pictures.

ANTHROPOCENE: a proposed term for the present geological epoch (from the time of the Industrial Revolution onwards), during which humanity has begun to have a significant impact on the environment.

BIO-CONSCIOUS: a recent term that may refer to the use of machine learning in medical treatment, as well as materials and technologies that exist in harmony with biological processes.

BIO-HACK: biological experimentation (as by gene editing or the use of drugs or implants) done to improve the qualities or capabilities of living organisms especially by individuals and groups working outside a traditional medical or scientific research environment.

BIODEGRADABLE: capable of decaying through the action of living organisms.

BIODIVERSITY: diversity among and within plant and animal species in an environment.

EPOCHAL: extremely important, significant, or influential.

BIOREGENERATIVE: bioregenerative life support systems (BLSS) are artificial ecosystems consisting of many complex symbiotic relationships among higher plants, animals, and microorganisms.

DEEP TIME: deep time refers to the entirety of geologic history, an unimaginable length of time that goes far beyond our human scale.

ECOLOGY: capable of decaying through the action of living organisms.

EMANCIPATION: to free from restraint, influence, or the like.

FABULATION: to tell invented stories; create fables or stories filled with fantasy.

HAUNTOLOGY: coined by Jacques Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* (1993). In the 2000s the term was taken up by critics in reference to paradoxes found in late modernity, particularly contemporary culture's persistent recycling of retro aesthetics and incapacity to escape old social forms.

INTERDEPENDENCY: mutually dependent; depending on each other.

POSTMODERN: noting or pertaining to architecture of the late 20th century, appearing in the 1960s, that consciously uses complex forms, fantasy, and allusions to historic styles, in contrast to the austere forms and emphasis on utility of standard modern architecture.

SUBSTRATE: the surface or material on or from which an organism lives, grows, or obtains its nourishment.

TRANSMUTATION: the transformation of one species into another.

VESTIMENTARY: relating to clothing or dress.

RELATED EVENTS

BEYOND HUMAN: MUTANT CINEMA
CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON
(1954)
Thu 24 October
6.30pm
£6, booking required

DISCUSSION FORUM: 'THE POSTHUMAN'
Thu 7 November
6–8pm
Free, booking required

HARLAN WHITTINGHAM: *COLLECTIONNEUR*
(2019) & *COLLECTORS* (2019)
Thu 21 November
6–8pm
£4, booking required
(AGES 18+)

BEYOND HUMAN: SYNTHETIC CINEMA
HER (2013)
Thu 28 November
6.30pm
£6, booking required
(AGES 15+)



British Sign Language and School tours available on request.

For further booking information, please visit humberstreetgallery.co.uk/events

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

A huge thanks to all of the Absolutely Cultured volunteers who have helped with the installation of this exhibition: Angela Wrightson, Trevor Sylvester, Matthew Smith, Katharine Chadwick, Diane Matthews, Mark Roper, Isabel Carrick, Phillipa Wray, Gary Ward, Dorothy Screeton, David Thompson, Keith Howes, Chris Howes, Andy Fairburn & Allison Parker.

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ABOUT US

Humber Street Gallery is an Absolutely Cultured project, bringing a vibrant, high-quality contemporary art space to Hull. The gallery's free programme of exhibitions is supported by a series of talks, performances, screenings and workshops.

Absolutely Cultured puts culture at the heart of Hull's ambition and aspirations, commissioning and producing a programme of events and projects which are ambitious, surprising and imaginative. In addition to the gallery and our broader cultural events, we continue to develop our world-class volunteer programme, to deliver initiatives to support the cultural sector and to offer access to creative learning opportunities.

OPENING TIMES

GALLERY & CAFÉ

Mon: 10:00 – 18:00 (Café only)

Tue – Sun: 10:00 – 18:00

First Thu of the Month: Until 20:00

(During Exhibitions)

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