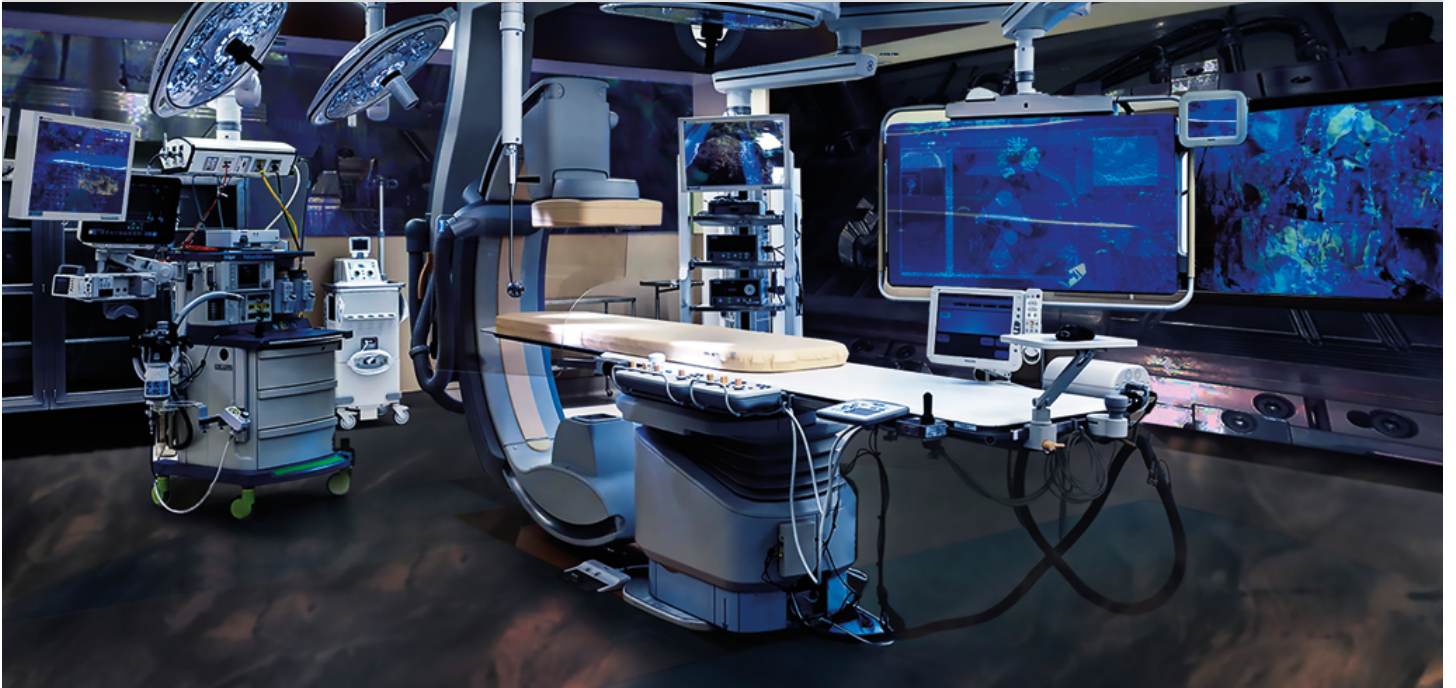


FRIEZE.COM



FEATURE - 26 SEP 2016

The Mutants We Will Become

Envisioning hybrid ecologies of the next age: Rachael Champion, Joey Holder (currently in Deptford X festival, London) and Rolf Nowotny

BY CHRIS FITE-WASSILAK

A man contracts an unknown illness: rainbow-coloured, rotting boils begin to cover his face and body. Afraid of being infected, his neighbours cast him out of the village, to live alone in a hut in the nearby forest. There, he swells and mutates into a reeking, globular mass, his distended form almost seeming to merge with the mushrooms and moulds that have grown in his fetid dwelling, as he spends his days painting flowers and animals. Hideshi Hino's manga fable *Zoroku no Kibyō* (*Zoroku's Strange Disease*, 1969) culminates in the villagers marching into the woods to kill the deformed man. What they find in his stead is a giant turtle with a magnificently bright shell – the colours of which match Zoroku's psychedelic pustules – who then disappears. All that remains is a series of luminous landscape paintings made with blood and pus.



Rolf Nowotny, 'CONKCLOACA', 2016, installation view at Christian Andersen. Courtesy: the artist and Christian Andersen, Copenhagen

The nuclear age of the mid-20th century inspired artists, writers and filmmakers to imagine a host of new creatures that would be created by this harnessed energy, from *Godzilla* (1954) to the radiation-empowered superheroes that still dominate multiplexes today. Hino's gruesome horror comics of the 1960s and '70s drew on the birth deformations and mysterious afflictions following the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to depict nightmares of cannibalistic lizard babies and sadistic zombie children. His tale of Zoroku stands out from his other work for ending on a more ambiguously upbeat note – despite the villagers' violent fear of the unknown, the 'strange disease' leads not only to a kind of re-integration with the woods and its non-human animal occupants, but also, in Zoroku's paintings, to new ways of representing the world. Now, in an age of synthetic meat, fracking and cyborg stingrays built with rat muscles, a set of younger artists is envisioning the hybrid ecologies of the next age.

The word 'ecology' was coined by German botanist Ernst Haeckel in his *General Morphology of Organisms* (1866): 'By ecology, we mean the whole science of the relations of the organism to the environment including, in the broad sense, all the "conditions of existence."' Haeckel was a proponent of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories and, although he was largely ignored by the scientific community – being apparently much more skilled as a draftsman than as a scientist, creating vivid, intricate drawn studies of plants and marine life – the word stuck. More recent ecological thinking (from Félix Guattari to Stacy Alaimo) tends to focus on a flattening of ontology: reversing Enlightenment assumptions to recognize that humans are on the same level as everything else in the world – whether animal, vegetal or mineral. But what does this mean when our contemporary 'conditions of existence' are environments built entirely out of plastics and concrete? What sort of new organisms might come to exist when, as was discovered earlier this year, a bacteria can already digest polyethylene terephthalate – used in plastic bottles and polyester clothing – and human transplant organs can be grown in pigs? Exploring the construct of 'Nature' and the issues of our changing planet, artists such as Rachael Champion, Joey Holder and Rolf Nowotny are projecting beyond the present to imagine seething, fecund new landscapes that might exist both in spite, and because, of synthetic, abrasive materials and human byproducts. In immersive, mixed-media installations, these artists suggest surprising, mutant future ecologies.

The alien isn't in the far future or on another planet; it is under a leaf, in the depths of the sea, already inside us.

At Nowotny's exhibition at Tranen Contemporary Art Centre in Hellerup, Denmark, last year, 'Sur Pollen', a number of green dumpsters gathered in a small flock all faced a banged-up yellow monochrome painting at one end of the gallery. Each sprouted a messy mannequin's head stuck on the end of a metal pole: one had a wiry, tousled, sandy-blond wig and a smudge of red marker pen for lips; another, a yellow flower planted in the middle of its face. In the documentation for the show you could even read these creatures' thoughts – which were, in fact, dreamed-up by the US writer and video-game designer Porpentine Charity Heartscape. Turning the tables on commonly held attitudes around disposal, one declared: 'I have nothing against your kind, but there is simply a divide between those who were biologically predetermined to contain trash and those who weren't.' Nowotny's exhibitions often feature pseudo-outdoor settings, in which the ground is littered with dried leaves and weeds, peopled by similar hybrids of metal and plastic that might be harbingers of a rubbish awakening to come.



Rachael Champion, *New Spring Gardens* (detail), 2016, building-site rubble from the BT telephone exchange, Vauxhall, London; wheat grass; rubber bark chipping; water bags, 1.5 x 9 x 28 m. Courtesy: the artist and Nine Elms, London and New York; photograph: Toni Marshall

When Nowotny's parents began remodelling the family's semi-rural home with mounted gazelle heads, ox skulls and imitation snakeskin wallpaper last year, the Danish artist responded by holding a one-day exhibition in the house, 'Støbt Ustøbt Støbt Igen' (Cast Uncast Cast Again). The artist added several sculptures and whited-out all the windows, but otherwise left the house as it was. An unlikely family occupied the back porch: four metal frames, each in the pose of an animal on all fours, supported buckets filled with cloudy water mixed with chalk and were mounted – again – with a human head, which rotated slowly. These creatures seemed peaceful, like the pets of the multi-headed, mixed-up safari chimera that was the house itself. Chalk water, held in containers to approximate the weight of an adult human, appeared again in his exhibition 'CONKCLOACA' at Christian Andersen in Copenhagen earlier this year. *Unending Poverty* (2016) comprises four scuffed plastic jugs filled to varying levels with the opaque liquid, mixed with knots of both plastic and real hair. Each jug – a simplistic alien interpretation of what might pass for a human: a bit of hair and water held together by some form of skin – appeared to look at a set of watercolours on the wall hung at their 'eye' height. One of the paintings, *No Bodies Food* (2016), states its case pretty baldly, depicting a tree, every branch bearing a factory spewing smoke: in this future, plant and industrial life have merged.

In the next room, a large hole cut out of a sheet of MDF that covered most of the floor and a scattering of brittle twigs and reeds turned the gallery into a small marsh-pond setting. Inspired, in part, by the atmosphere of *Zoroku's Strange Disease*, this pond was occupied by an infestation of mutant slugs with human faces, *The Meek* (2016), their blank eyes and sagging white bodies dotted with faint splotches of green, pink and turquoise. Despite the horror-movie hamminess of Nowotny's mannequin mutants, there's a quieter, more diffuse unease that underlines the way the drawings and seemingly inert objects sit together. His work often

positions us as the villagers in Hino's tale: still only human, equal parts repulsed and in awe, unsure of how to communicate with these new entities, and suddenly feeling not so welcome in a situation that, until a moment before, we had assumed we controlled.



Rolf Nowotny, *No Bodies Food*, 2016, watercolour, inkjet print, 21 x 15 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Christian Andersen, Copenhagen; photograph: Malle Madsen

Another kind of oversize slug thrived in the rubble and buckwheat grass of Champion's *New Spring Gardens* (2016). A landscaped environment that was temporarily tucked indoors in a railway arch in London, Champion's installation was a well-ordered set of crisp paths and clearly delineated patches of freshly grown grass, with the occasional mangled electrical wire or rusty bolt sprouting from a white pile of rocks. Eventually, it became clear that the grey, black and oddly luminescent dark-green stone paths were all made from clumps of painted rubber. The rock mounds were actually concrete, created from the remnants of nearby Keybridge House in Vauxhall, a Brutalist former telecoms building that was recently demolished to make way for the large-scale redevelopment of the area. In this reconfigured landscape, a few wisps of grass sprouted improbably from the concrete, while the main occupants were a swarm of long, thick black, matte-gold and

blue plastic bags filled with water. Often used as weights for swimming pools, here they appeared more like giant molluscs that no amount of gardening tricks would ever get rid of.

Holder seems to fetishize the extremes of science and draw from these current developments a darker vision of where we, as a mutant planet, are headed.

Much of Champion's work suggests that our hyper-designed, corrosive constructions might take on a biology of their own; that, despite humanity's deleterious use of the planet, life will keep evolving, ingesting and incorporating the materials we've fashioned around ourselves and our cities. Pebbledash hives sprouted from the corners and walls of a Notting Hill home in her installation *Unbuilt Visitors* (2013), as if an infestation of wasps had learned to mimic 20th-century urban design. Two years ago, Hales Gallery was filled by *Primary Producers* (2014), a tiered, pebbledashed Brutalist-style sculpture pocked with small circles of water blooming with bright-green algae. The sculpture created its own accidental ecologies: dragonfly and mosquito eggs hatched during the exhibition, as well as causing a fly infestation in the gallery. Champion's work often gives the appearance of a being self-sustaining miniature ecosystem, playing nicely on our ideals of home gardening and self-sufficiency; but, of course, algae can't survive for long in a puddle in the pallid lighting of the art galleries and art fairs where Champion has set up such laboratories. These installations, rather, are deliberate representations of near-fantasy ecologies, pointedly artificial temporary mock-ups. Placing photosynthesizing bacteria alongside urban construction materials, such as aquamarine-coloured mosaic tiles, the artist's work often suggests a posturban landscaping, in which, after an undefined cataclysmic event, we might have to make use of the most ancient of life forms along with whatever other synthetic junk is ready to hand – whether rubber mulch, turf or concrete. Champion doesn't spell out is who, or what, is doing the landscaping.

Advertisement



<<https://www.ruinart.com/en-uk/erwinolaf>>

It begins to become creepingly apparent among these future ecologies that whoever we currently imagine as human, and whatever we consider alive or organic, will inevitably change. These artists envision a productive merging of what were formerly deemed discrete concerns: biology, synthetic chemistry, geology and robotic engineering, all melded in a voracious process of adaptation. Joey Holder presents one version of this in an image of a purple, swelling mass that could be a sea floor or a living goo, labelled with the words 'environmental metagenomics'. The image is part of a recent body of work that explores the potential of extant genetic mapping projects. 'Ophiux', the artist's current exhibition at Wysing Arts Centre, is filled with medical equipment, including an MRI scanner and a rounded X-ray machine: this could be either a place for diagnosis, or creation. Diagrams and obscure symbols line the walls, while a video gives an extended sales pitch for Ophiux, a hypothetical future pharmaceutical company that has mapped the genome of all life on the planet. In the video, urchins and crabs are picked from the ocean floor for genetic sampling; later, strands of

DNA writhe and slither like snakes. 'We develop solutions to accelerate human health and evolution,' they promise. But the emphasis feels more on the 'evolution' in this space – you might be healed with DNA from a bioluminescent eel, say, but you get the sense you might not recognize yourself afterwards.



Rachael Champion, *Raze Bloom*, 2015, turf, rubber bark chipping, gravel, pebbledash, concrete, aluminium scaffolding, liquid storage tanks, aquatic plants, CO₂, solenoid valves, air pump, vinyl tubing, air stones, dual-spectrum grow lamps and reflectors, 3.4 × 3.8 × 8.2 m. Courtesy: the artist and Hales Gallery, London; Photograph: Charlie Littlewood

Holder's work deals primarily with the limits of human knowledge systems: the alien isn't in the far future or on another planet; it is under a leaf, in the depths of the sea, already inside us. In projects that move between video, installation and online platforms, documentary footage often becomes the basis for finding the point where things start to blur. Images of oblong-horned insects, slimy reptiles and innumerable fanged fish might be real creatures or convincing collaged illusions. The artist's fast-paced videos combine these with thumping electronic music and arcane iconography to create the sense that science is merely a kind of conspiracy theory, secretly working towards a manipulable – and marketable – collection of biodata. In Holder's exhibition 'BioSTAT.' at Project Native Informant last year, footage of deep-sea life was overlaid with a running line of text: items like 'protein phosphatase' and 'oxytocin receptors' were followed by numbers and an up or down

arrow, as if a ticker tape from a biochemical stock market. While working closely with computational and biodiversity biologists on her projects, Holder seems to fetishize the extremes of science and draw from these current developments a darker vision of where we, as a mutant planet, are headed. The truth is stranger than fiction, and it's only going to get weirder.

The landscapes Champion, Holder and Nowotny create aren't so much warnings or musings on the spectre of humanity's demise: an environmental apocalypse is only just the beginning. Instead, they embrace artificiality and synthesis, offering a kind of optimism, where at least our DNA, along with our latex and cellophane, are another tributary into the nascent mutant ecology. In a video excerpt that appears in several of Holder's works, an electronic snake – its front end a circle of LED lights, its body composed of gear-like segments – swims around a small tank. I might have seen too many sci-fi films, but it seems on the hunt, eager to escape the confines of the small laboratory environment it has been brought up in. It's not hard to imagine it escaping and eventually, somehow, mating with its biological counterpart and thriving. All we might be able to do in this new landscape is to accept and live as the mutants we will inevitably become.

Rachael Champion lives in London, UK. Earlier this year, she was commissioned to create a work for New Spring Gardens, Chelsea Fringe Festival, London, and her work was included in the group show 'Table' at Tannery Projects, London.





Joey Holder lives in London, UK. This year, her work was included in the 9th Berlin Biennale, Germany, and the 5th Moscow International Biennale for Young Art, Russia. She has solo shows at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, UK, (until 20 November), and at ANDOR Gallery, London, (14 October – 12 November). Her work is included in Deptford X, London, (until 2 October), and 'Winter is Coming', at Georg Kargl, Vienna, Austria, (until 15 October).

Rolf Nowotny lives in Copenhagen, Denmark. This year, he had a solo show at Christian Andersen, Copenhagen, and his work was included in 'Solvang', organized by Squash Club, Amor Parken, Copenhagen, and 'Artist Books, Growing Wildly', Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen.

Lead image: Joey Holder, Ophiux, 2016, film still. Courtesy: Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, ANDOR Gallery, London, and Deptford X, London

CHRIS FITE-WASSILAK

Chris Fite-Wassilak is a writer who lives in London, UK. His new book of essays, *Ha-Ha Crystal* (2016), is published by Copy Press.

TWITTER FACEBOOK EMAIL PINTEREST
TO

ECOLOGY

ROLF NOWOTNY

JOEY HOLDER

RACHAEL CHAMPION

CHRIS FITE-WASSILAK



frieze magazine

First published in Issue 182

October 2016

London

1 Montclare Street

London

E2 7EU, UK

+44 (0)203 372 6111

New York

247 Centre St

5th Floor

New York, NY 10013

+1 212 463 7488

Berlin

Zehdenicker Str. 28

D-10119 Berlin

Germany

+49 30 2362 6506

