

*XVII. The Age of Nymphs* explores human and insect affects and the archaeology of trauma. The exhibition looks at cycles of history and the possibility of regaining time through repetition and doubling. Confronting the stagnation of our time, the artists consider posthuman gestures and insect behaviour as a way of subverting human politics.

'XVII' refers to the year of the Russian Revolution and to cicadas which live underground for 17 years before reemerging and completing their life cycle shortly after. Nymphs are both immature forms of insects and female divine spirits of nature in Greek mythology. The title also relates to the seventeenth year in power of Russia's present ruler.

The exhibition layout is divided between two spaces representing antithetical states of agency in historical and biological cycles. The lower gallery space is the "underworld," a territory of stagnation and slow time, where history repeats itself and insects go through their long 17 years underground. The shapes and materials are soft and ambiguous. It's a space of passivity and suspension where actions are replaced by gestures, dispersed in an endless repetition. The upper gallery space represents the accelerated overground section of the life cycle, the space of emergence and exit. Shapes obtain rigidity and borders solidify to reclaim their territory.

*DARIA to OLGA: In your recent essay 'The Split' you talked about the monument in St. Petersburg dedicated to Igor Kurchatov and his splitting of the atomic nucleus. In your description of the monument you mention how it is reflected in the still waters of the oval fountain beneath. Your story creates a very vivid image of the monument in our minds, but in reality there is no fountain under the monument. This creates the split you refer to in your text – between an existing object and its reflection in an imaginary fountain, between reality and fiction. It made me think of a quote by the entomologist William Morton Wheeler: 'no two events are identical, every atom, molecule, organism, personality and society is an emergent and, at least to some extent, a novelty'. What this suggests is that repetitions are always repeating a difference.*

*In your new video work 'The Ice Rink' (in which you also convey the image of a self-contained elliptical shape, this time filled with still frozen waters), there is a hypnotic repetitiveness of phrases, gestures, and wandering around without direction. It evokes a state of stagnation without exit or hope, emphasised by the glacial theatricality of the play.*

*Repetition is a key element in your works: what are you trying to get at through its insistent use?*

**OLGA:** In structural linguistics, a word takes on its value because it is different from other words. A single word thus becomes an element in the discontinuous system of differential elements, a system with many gaps and spaces. For me those gaps are akin to cuts between the shots in the digital timeline, voids separating the 'before' and 'after' and silences in conversation which conceal the absence of that which cannot be spoken.

The same act repeated can never be the same because it already carries the context of the first. The context is words in the shape of memory, which moves alongside us like a moving mirror, as Bergson puts it. Thus we are not capable of total repetition in the way algorithms are, for example.

In 'The Ice Rink', the continuous circular motion of the camera is interrupted by cuts, repeatedly returning the viewer back to the starting point whilst the dialogue carries on. When I think of it, I imagine walking backwards in an airborne plane or in a Sputnik. The language is the orbit we circle, a key to the systems we inhabit. In the case of this video, language quite literally materialises as a key that one of the characters places in the other's mouth.

*DARIA to OLGA: The two protagonists of 'The Ice Rink' remind me both of Chekhov's 'Three sisters' and Bergman's 'Persona'. Isolated, stuck and lost thus living in a blissful oblivion, they reflect one another in what*

*they say and do. Their closeness suggests sexual tension (reinforced by phallic figures of the big chocolate key and the potentially injuring icicle).*

*I am interested in the physical and the transcendental elements of the work. The ritual involving the chocolate key and the protagonists's attire of catholic nuns references a history of the bodily vs. the spiritual. What does this mean for you in the context of this exhibition?*

OLGA: The characters in *The Ice Rink* are positioned inside the space of the digital video: a disembodied, timeless and transcendent form of representation. Their unnatural and overtly feminine screen makeup echoes old cinematic conventions, an era when film possessed materiality. To make cuts in the celluloid is a different montage process compared to the contemporary video editing, which allows constant rearranging and duplication. In the film one of the characters mentions the surface carved by the blades echoing both the surface of ice and the physical film, which is missing.

The conflict between the physical and the transcendent has long occupied the Christian tradition and has been dealt with through rituals, which use language as means to escape corporal reality. Fasting and celibacy are the means for the expelling of the bodily excess. The body however returns as the body of Christ in the Eucharist. In the film it is acted out with a chocolate key. As Kristeva puts it: "By the very gesture...that corporealizes or incarnates speech, all corporeality is elevated, spiritualized, and sublimated."

DARIA to NIKA: *I know you did extensive research into cicadas for your new audio work. I'm fascinated by some of the facts about cicadas I learned thanks to you. For instance, that nobody can explain what makes them emerge all together at a specific moment in time. The same holds for the mysterious temporality and collectiveness of swarming. Lastly, the coded ways of their acoustic communication are equally elusive.*

*Instinctual and intelligent in dealing with organisation, space and temporality, insects and their behaviour were used as models for technological and political systems. What has inspired you to study cicadas and which element of their life have you chosen as the basis for your works in the show?*

NIKA: When humans were first introduced to music, some became so enthralled by it that they lost interest in everything else in life. They slowly wasted away, their bodies transcending their physical presence, to reach a higher level of unity with sound. To reward them for such devotion, the Muses transformed these humans into cicadas.

The magicicadas – otherwise known as 'periodical cicadas' – spend seventeen years underground to emerge as nymphs in springtime, synchronously and in swarms of prodigious numbers. After several weeks of fervent, delirious mating, their life cycles are complete and the new nymphs mature underground waiting to emerge again in their seventeenth year. Observations that cicadas were 'born of the earth' led to beliefs that they were capable of resurrection; they therefore became symbols associated with immortality, spiritual realisation and spiritual ecstasy.

It is thought that predators have difficulty predicting the emergence of their prey on prime number years and 17 is a natural prime number. In numerology, it comes down to number 8 which is the sign of mathematical infinity or the lemniscate – the external and continuous spiral of perpetual motion which is the supreme signature of all evolutionary cycles.

Russian Cosmism predicted a future where people would eliminate their gender differences and become transsexual. By defying and redefining their relationship to nature they will thus reach immortality and reproduce infinitely throughout the universe. Today only technology and technological reproducibility offer the promise and charge of immortality. Fear of death is what separates us from machines. As human corpses lay decomposing underground, the cicada nymphs are preparing for another cycle of mad emergence. Such

opposed practices of burial rites point to other non-anthropocentric cycles occurring on earth and the distant possibility of finding synergies and intersections with non-human beings.

Mimosa derives from the Latin for 'mime', so-called because some species fold their leaves when touched, seemingly mimicking animal behaviour. In my new audio work, made collaboratively with Mira Calix, two women replicate the mating calls of male and female cicadas. Through imitation and technological reproduction their voices dissolve into a cicada chorus. Humans that were once cicadas become humans mimicking cicadas.

DARIA to NIKA: *In your new work 'Folded Rooms' in the upper space of Mimosa House you reference Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own" which suggests that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". This quote refers to female labour and personal and political freedoms. I like how your sculpture obtains definite shape and versatility, expanding itself within the existing gallery space, in comparison to its vulnerable and transparent 'shadow' 'Exuviae' in the downstairs space. The quote also suggests that creating fiction is a form of empowerment. You mentioned that the contour of 'Folded Rooms' reproduces the exact perimeter of your studio, and inside its folds is a shifting fictional space dreaming of new configurations.*

*Here another Woolf's quote comes to my mind: "Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners". How do you envisage the potential of the above mentioned fictional space in the context of female empowerment? Is there a chance of its transition from fiction to reality?*

NIKA: In her essay Virginia Woolf suggests that having a private space is one of the basic requirements for creativity and freedom of expression that were historically denied to women. A room of one's own is the metaphorical space separated from the rest of the world assuring the possibility of female empowerment and not complying with generally accepted norms. Tracing outlines and borders is a way of suggesting a transition from the rest of the world to a defined area of difference - tracing the limits that defy other limits. *Folded Rooms* is seemingly reclaiming the territory of my studio by retracing it in Mimosa House. It is attempting to escape the confines of its allocated space, not aligning itself firmly to the architecture of the building. Only fully unfolded it takes up the perimeter of a room. A room that suggests the possibility of a constant search for new configurations, dreaming of being transformed and reborn. It is attempting to reinvent itself through its forms and folds and thereby generate new fictional spaces within itself. Through shape shifting it assumes and follows contours of imaginary spaces developed through its proposed transformations.

In biology, moulting is the manner in which an animal undergoes transformation by casting off parts of its body, either at specific times in the year or at specific points in its life cycle. *Exuviae* is the soft replica of the studio sculpture, its casing, its discarded skin. Disposing of the harder geometrical angles in favour of softer folds, it is retreating back into a vulnerable residual state. Focusing on the 'skin' of the contours is an attempt to break down the layers that constitute limits and expose the different components of borders that establish the 'aesthetic distance' between different states. As Timothy Morton states in *Hyperobjects*, "[i]n the jungle lifeforms abolish all sense of aesthetic distance. The temperatures is roughly human body temperature, constantly, so it becomes hard at the level of deep sensation to maintain a boundary between where one's skin stops and where the rainforest starts".

DARIA to YELENA: *I recently reread 'The Spiral', a short story by Italo Calvino, and it made me think of your 'Evaporating Paintings'. The story deals with the evolution of molluscs and how at some point they start secreting in order to produce their spiral shell. The shells are striped and colourful and never the same; they help to distinguish one mollusc from another. The creation of shells resulted in the production of shell images and it played an essential role in the formation of sight for the species. Referring to his beloved female mollusc, the protagonist mollusc says: 'And I felt at the same time she was radiating an image of herself so perfect that it would impose itself on my foggy, backward senses, developing in me an interior visual field where it would blaze forth definitely.'*

*Likewise, your 'Evaporating Paintings' transmit primordial, formless and essential images, which could further take shape on our retina and develop in our imagination.*

*Your work is often viewed in the context of nonhuman world of technology. I wonder how the nonhuman nature of the animal is reflected in your work?*

YELENA: What a beautiful idea, that of secreting in order to produce an image: a caterpillar spinning a cocoon around itself, a spider weaving a web as if following certain rules, or a painter revolving around the work. The image grows from the gestural process of layering thin veils of shapes, and then later the image comes into being through the experience of looking.

The 'Evaporating Paintings' series started with my awareness of a painting's temporality. A lot of images are now available online and as soon as an image becomes digital it somehow enters eternity as a fixed or permanent entity. But a painting is much more than its own image. A painted canvas is burdened with its own materiality and it slowly changes in accordance with the law of entropy. Still, most paintings can outlive their makers and collectors – traditional painting materials last longer than human flesh. So I dreamt about making a series of paintings with a much shorter life span, like that of a butterfly perhaps, for the duration of a show or a season. However, I felt it was important not to use any chemical tricks or light-sensitive pigments in the paintings but to work with traditional and natural foraged materials like local soil, calcined shells and wood ash. The present continuous title ('Evaporating Paintings') suggests the paintings are changing or have already changed. As viewers we don't really know. Just as when looking at paintings by old masters we don't know if the image we see today is the same as the image when it was first painted. Or has the passage of time changed the image in unexpected ways?

DARIA to YELENA: *The titles of your evaporating paintings in 'XVII The Age of Nymphs' refer to the notorious folklore Russian character Alyonushka, most commonly known from the depiction by Viktor Vastetsov in 1881. Melancholic and passive, she is believed to be a holy fool and is a typical representative of a female peasant, whose image was romanticised and manipulated by liberal intelligentsia in pre-revolutionary times. Looking into the stagnated waters of a lake, she does in fact look quite foolish and helpless. I find it alarming that these are the female characters of the stories we were brought up with in Russia - helpless and waiting for a miracle or a prince. Why and how has this character inspired you considering your feminist-aware practice?*

YELENA: I was struck by Alyonushka when I saw it in the historic context. She could easily be a feminist antihero. While thinking of the show we were talking about 1917 and Russian Revolution and the events and ideas which led to it. Such is Chernushevsky's novel *Chto Delat (What Is To Be Done?)*, 1863). A whole generation of Russian artists and intellectuals, Vasnetsov among them, were inspired by this important feminist text. Vasnetsov paints a peasant girl as a model of the female suffering which the hero of Chernushevsky's novel Vera Pavlovna escaped: marriage, the circle of pregnancies, births and children, endless house work, harassment, no voice, no education or chance to change her life.

Recently the #metoo campaign made visible the scale of the harassment still present in our lives. But even when we discuss violence against women it is a passive construct. Those who conduct the violence are not often mentioned as if violence just happens to women. So I was interested in the passivity and invisibility. But also in a female model as the objectified body.