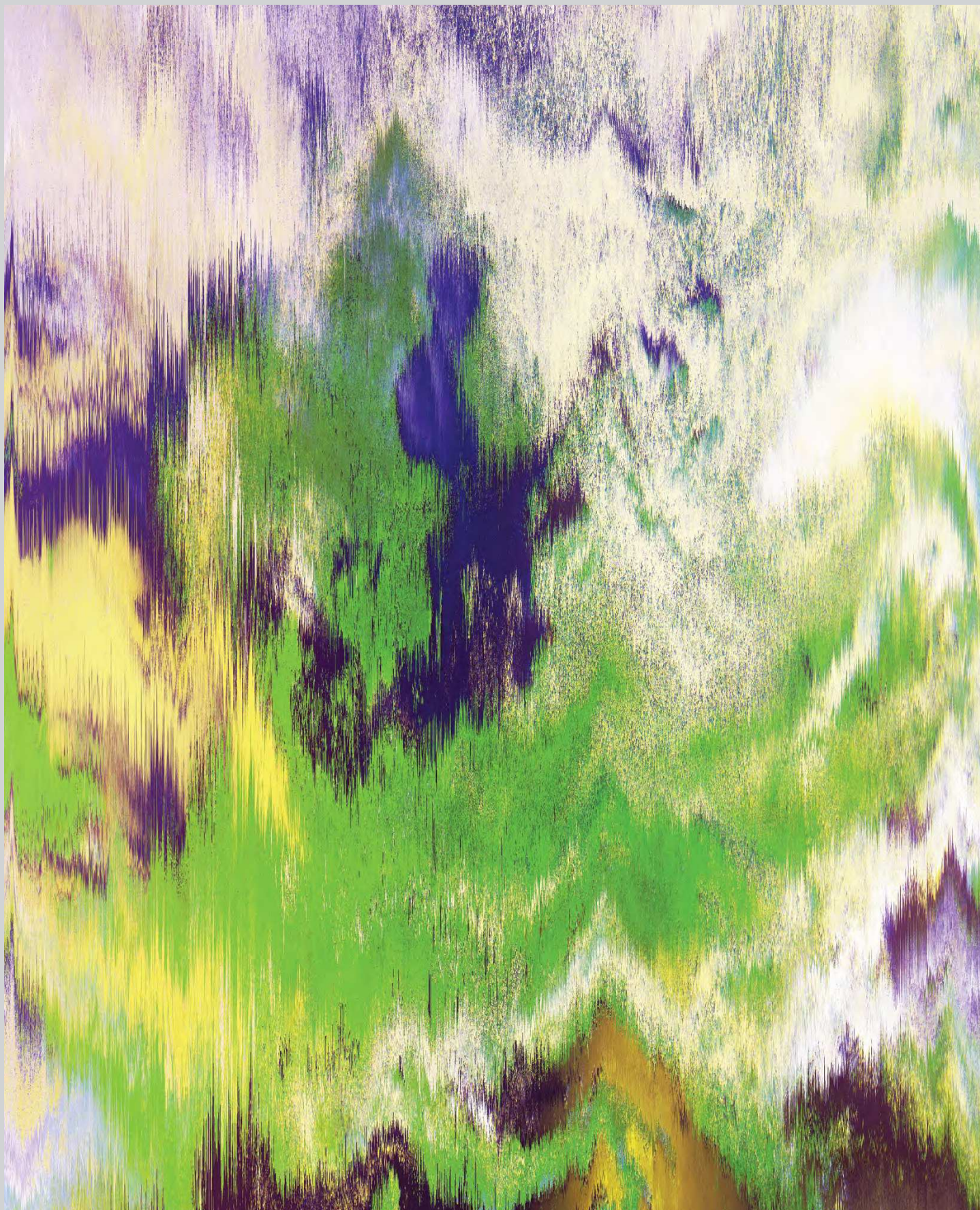


2/2017

Estonian Art



the structural resemblance highlights the semantic analogy, proposing that similar ideas can be expressed in certain visual forms for example: a balancing of opposites in the universe, or the void as infinite potential. In this approach, some parallels with Aby Warburg's "Mnemosyne" Atlas project can be found. The Belt of Lielvārde acted as a multimedia atlas, as it used cinematic language for the purpose of systematising and juxtaposing different images. In a very dynamic way it demonstrated via formal resemblance the conceptual similarity of various images by allowing them to melt or grow into each other. Theoretical arguments were almost fully replaced by suggestive visual representation, empowered by the technical means of cinematic montage. Philippe-Alain Michaud has described the "Mnemosyne" Atlas as the notion of "image in motion," projection and montage.¹

In Vint's documentary we can see all of them in action, similarly to Warburg's technique as characterised by Michaud: not an interpretation or analysis of the visual facts of the past, but the reactivation of the past through a re-presentation taking place on a stage. On the whole, not only "The Belt of Lielvārde", but also other Vint practices can be seen as attempts at re-presentation, the re-enactment of the history of images the author believed to exist.

The text is partly based on the publication Elnara Taidre's "Synthesis of Visual Art Forms as the Total Work of Art: The Case of Tõnis Vint's Art Practices in Soviet Estonia," (lagatud praktikad: kunstiliikide põimumised sotsialistliku Ida-Euroopa kultuuris = Shared Practices: The Intertwinement of the Arts in the Culture of Socialist Eastern Europe.) Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia, 6 [11] 2016. Ed. Anu Allas. Tallinn: Art Museum of Estonia, 2016, pp. 111–139.

¹ Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*. New York: Zone Books, 2004.

Elizabeth McTernan (b.1981) pursues research over land and sea, processing it through actions, installations, drawing, printmaking, texts and artist's books.

Taavi Suisalu: Love at Last Sight

I first met Taavi Suisalu in 2013, in an old schoolhouse on a hill in the highest village in England. Soon after our arrival, a group of us artists descended into a defunct mine nearby. Snaking through a tangle of narrow hand-hewn tunnels in this cold bowel of the earth, we were eventually spit out into a vast empty space, nicknamed "The Ballroom." We turned our headlamps off. Pitch black, the scope of the cavern was only detectable by sound. Obsolete mining objects and debris were strewn about. Taavi herded the group into motion, taking up and activating found objects against the clammy surfaces of the cave. A wooden beam thudded ominously against the bedrock. Puttering hands clasped nondescript matter as it chirped and chalked along the walls. Taavi's resulting recording, "The Ballroom Improvisation", both carved out an acoustic space and filled a long-empty cavity buried in the earth. The action brought the stuff of air into the underworld, into a deep time now interrupted by scuffling rhythms of human life.

Taavi was not new to this kind of re-functioning of space and matter. When confronted with an object, however familiar, he asks himself, "How do I use this thing? Do I throw it? Do I put it on my head?" He considers the possibilities that are not presumed; he performs the uncanny on the mundane. A prime example is his piece "Noisephony of Lawn Mowers", a work that scrambles the values of functionality and labour in an orchestration of bodies wielding motorised lawn mowers as both musical instruments and chisels, mad petrol-fueled woodwind players sculpting their own stage, somewhere between leading and being led by the apparatus. The instruments here are not inherently dysfunctional; they are actively *dysfunctioned* by the players.

Grass is a relatively tame material for Taavi in light of his other works. He once declared to me with a smirk, "We Estonians are proud peasants." Indeed, something subtly agrarian "crops up" repeatedly in his

choices of urban architectural frames and mechanical processes, but he explicitly refrains from indulging nostalgia. Meanwhile, with his background in new media, he is (thankfully) less a nouveau-tech fetishist and more an off-modernist. His practice transcends the moment of medium to include multiple lattices of historied tools and techniques, creating a field of time-bending reflection rather than a single plane of reference. This is visible in his ambitious curatorial work from 2014, “Project of Non-existent Villages”, as well as in his most recent exhibition, “Landscapes and Portraits”. And with every new project, in addition to media history, territory features more and more prominently as the subject itself.

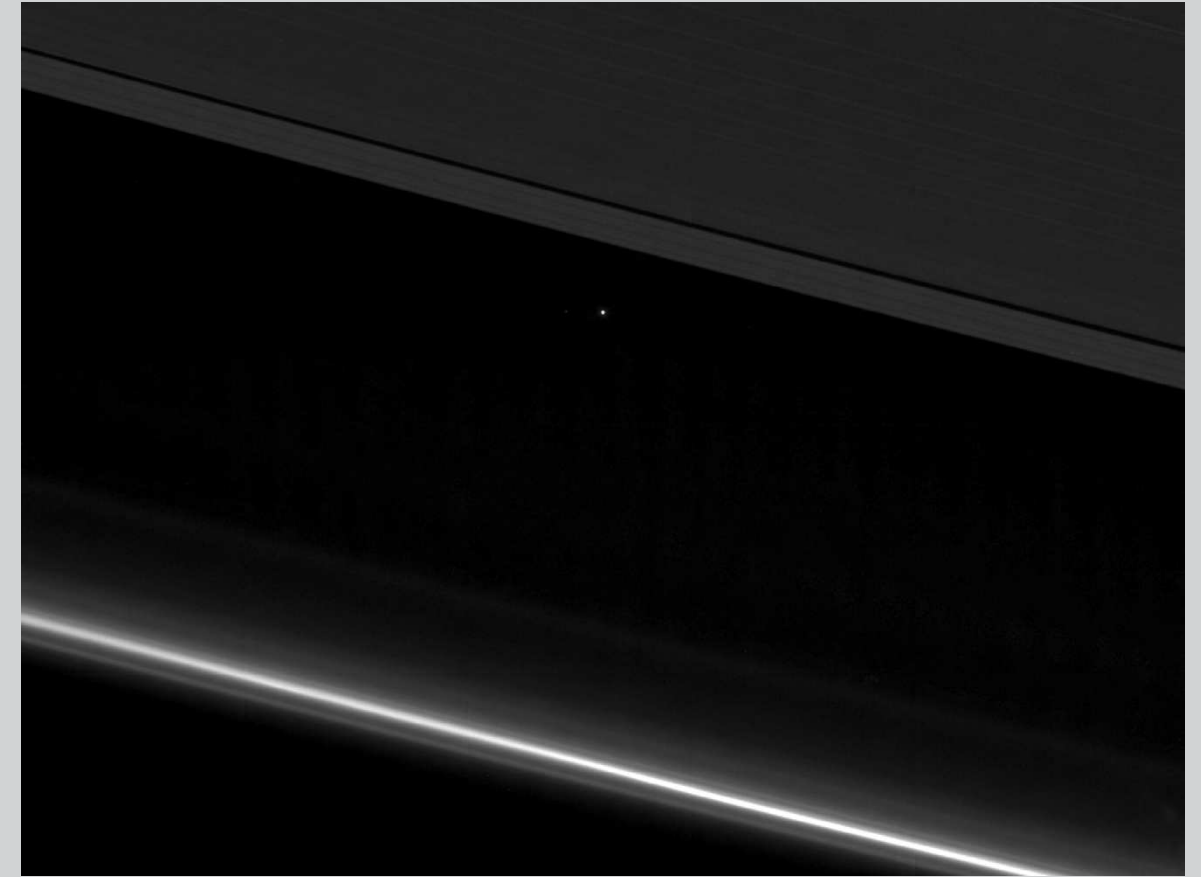
In John Durham Peters’ latest book, “The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media”, the author refers to the sky as the “extraterrestrial commons.”¹ Both the ancients and the moderns have looked to the wild blue yonder for prediction and orientation: whether for purposes of agriculture, migration or meaning. In a sense, it is a canvas we have gained access to only recently. Until space exploration, humans did not have the capacity to alter the sky as we did the earth and seas. Sky was a true other. But when we were finally able to escape the atmosphere, “the satellite was a human work in the heavens. The eternities had become susceptible to fabrication.”² In the race of nations to territorialise space, we essentially became able to plant stars. And consequently, in that newly claimed territory, those implants became another kind of farming mechanism. With satellites, we were now able to harvest the earth from above, but instead of a harvest of grains from farmland, it was and still is that of information from (commercialised and politicised) territories: pixels for seeds. And those who hold instruments to sow the seeds of information hold the power.

For his piece “Distant Self-portrait”, Taavi momentarily wrests satellite power from the state to take his own self-portrait. He has developed a method to tune into dysfunctional satellites (Russian-owned and operated) as they orbit directly overhead, usurping image data of the earth, with himself located at the very centre, pulling the camera trigger. With a strong background in experimental sound, his artistic practice is largely about the acoustic signature of space, about transmission: material and history together shaping phenomena in the zone between source and receiver. As part of the exhibition, he includes a vinyl press of sounds captured during these satellite sessions, called “Études in Black”.

Though it is certainly not the most interesting aspect of Taavi’s artistic perspective, one cannot ignore his position (however incidental to his birth) as a citizen of a post-Soviet country. If the MIR space station was the monument *par excellence* to Soviet modernity, both figuratively and physically transcending Earth and therefore nature, as per the Soviet credo, then one can view satellites as a kind of offspring of this vision, an army of modern monoliths in motion. And so, these old decaying satellites are perhaps vestiges of Soviet-era hubris. Since the advent of modernity, grappling with it has become, needless to say, a tricky business, whether for nations or cultural practitioners. In the introduction to her book “The Future of Nostalgia”, which deals extensively with our amnesiac fondness for the obsolete materials of fallen empires – depending on how you look at it, beautiful decay or ruin-porn – Svetlana Boym proposes the term “off-modern” in a critical reflection on the problematics and potentialities of a hindsight-view of modernity: “The adverb ‘off’ confuses our sense of direction; it makes us explore sideshows and back alleys rather than the straight road of progress; it allows us to take a detour from the deterministic narrative of twentieth-century history. [...] In the off-modern tradition, reflection and longing, estrangement and affection go together.”³ Part of this proposal suggests a kind of looking forward towards history.

Similarly, the satellites that Taavi has employed in “Distant Self-portrait” are both meant to be switched *off* and are *off*, as in *off-kilter*, not quite right, not functioning correctly, if not simply *off-track*. And this mutual reflection of the portrait and the landscape in his work embodies the paradox that Boym describes: it is an infinite ricochet of the subject; the image becomes a *mise en abîme*. It is a self-(re-)figuration of identity through the *off*-state apparatus, all ground and no figure, such that figure and ground collapse into each other. In “Distant Self-portrait” and “Landscapes and Portraits”, the artist is the territory and the territory is the artist. Meanwhile, he smuggles in humour with the titles, a tongue-in-cheek nod to the artistic tradition the work stands on.

There are two steps to this re-figuring: first the satellite photo, then the animation Taavi applies to that image data. This animation stems from the original installation of the image projection in an ambivalently-functional seed-sorting facility in the Estonian countryside. The imagining of seeds being sifted was applied to the sorting of pixels. One formal decision that I find compelling is that, instead of a slurry of



NASA's "Cassini" spacecraft captured this view of the planet Earth as a point of light between the icy rings of Saturn on 12 April 2017. Credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/Space Science Institute

moving pixels that resembles the surface turbulence of atmospheric weather patterns, the animation mobilises a cascade of pixels, verticalising the horizontal surface of the landscape and creating a strong formal relation between the movement in the image projection and the original transmission of the data from sky to earth. And so it happens that the work, when re-contextualised in another gallery space, naturally departs from its specific architectural and agricultural origin to inhabit new associations, new conditions.

In this sorting of pixels, the information no longer operates under the illusion of being fixed parcels of meaning to be delivered to us or, for that matter, to be delivered to the state for purposes of surveillance or capital. Like the artwork itself, they mix and recombine into infinite possible futures. Could this be autonomy? What other kinds of knowledge and meaning can be reaped and gathered via human exercises of dysfunctioning? In this mix is the spatial dichotomy of up and down, outer space and earth; the cultural-historical dichotomy of satellite and star, seed and pixel; the identity dichotomy of human and landscape, subject and other. With Taavi's bodily occupation of these continua as the trigger point and editor of the image data, as source and receiver, he straddles not only scales of human experience and planetary motion, but also – and more essentially – the abstract versus the specific, the universal versus the situated, “the eternal versus the perishable.”⁴

On 12 April 2017, a photo of Earth was taken from the unmanned NASA spacecraft “Cassini” before its final descent towards its “planned destruction” upon entry into Saturn’s atmosphere.⁵ It shows the Earth as a fleck of light viewed from between the icy rings of Saturn, which themselves look like digital glitches, framing, if not overtaking, said fleck. Unlike the iconic “Blue Marble” photo taken in 1972, the Earth here is but a distant star, its continental and atmospheric distinctions imperceptible. It is like the last sighting before the planet falls out of sight forever. A non-expert would likely not even recognise it as Earth without the help of the story. It is the most remote selfie taken by any person or state to date.⁶ Usually, selfies are associated with the close-up documentation of an individual’s private life, selected specifically for public self-presentation. In the case of “Cassini”, it is a selfie remotely taken through a state apparatus, by the state, also for self-presentation, but instead of the subject of an individual human face or body, it is the body politic of the whole Earth. In his own work, Taavi hijacks and occupies this subjecthood normally

reserved for the state, taking his own selfie to enter it into a complex aesthetic schema for the viewer’s consideration. Perhaps it is appropriate that Taavi’s “Distant Self-portrait” is featured at Bozar, in Brussels, the seat of the European Environmental Bureau and governance of the future of our planet. It is certainly a different kind of portrait than one would normally expect to find in those formal halls.

In a way, both Taavi’s and “Cassini’s” images are impressive in scale while tenderly melancholic, and they bring to mind the phrase “love at last sight,” an expression Walter Benjamin used when considering Charles Baudelaire’s poem “À une passante.” Unlike love at first sight, love at last sight comes at the moment before disappearance; it is the last hope for the rescue of something lost, through its remembrance; it is the antidote to historical alienation. Boym concludes, “‘Love at last sight’ strikes the urban stranger when that person realizes he or she is onstage, at once an actor and a spectator. [...] Love at last sight is the spasm of loss after the revelation; the tenderness of exiles is about a revelation of possibility after the loss.”⁸

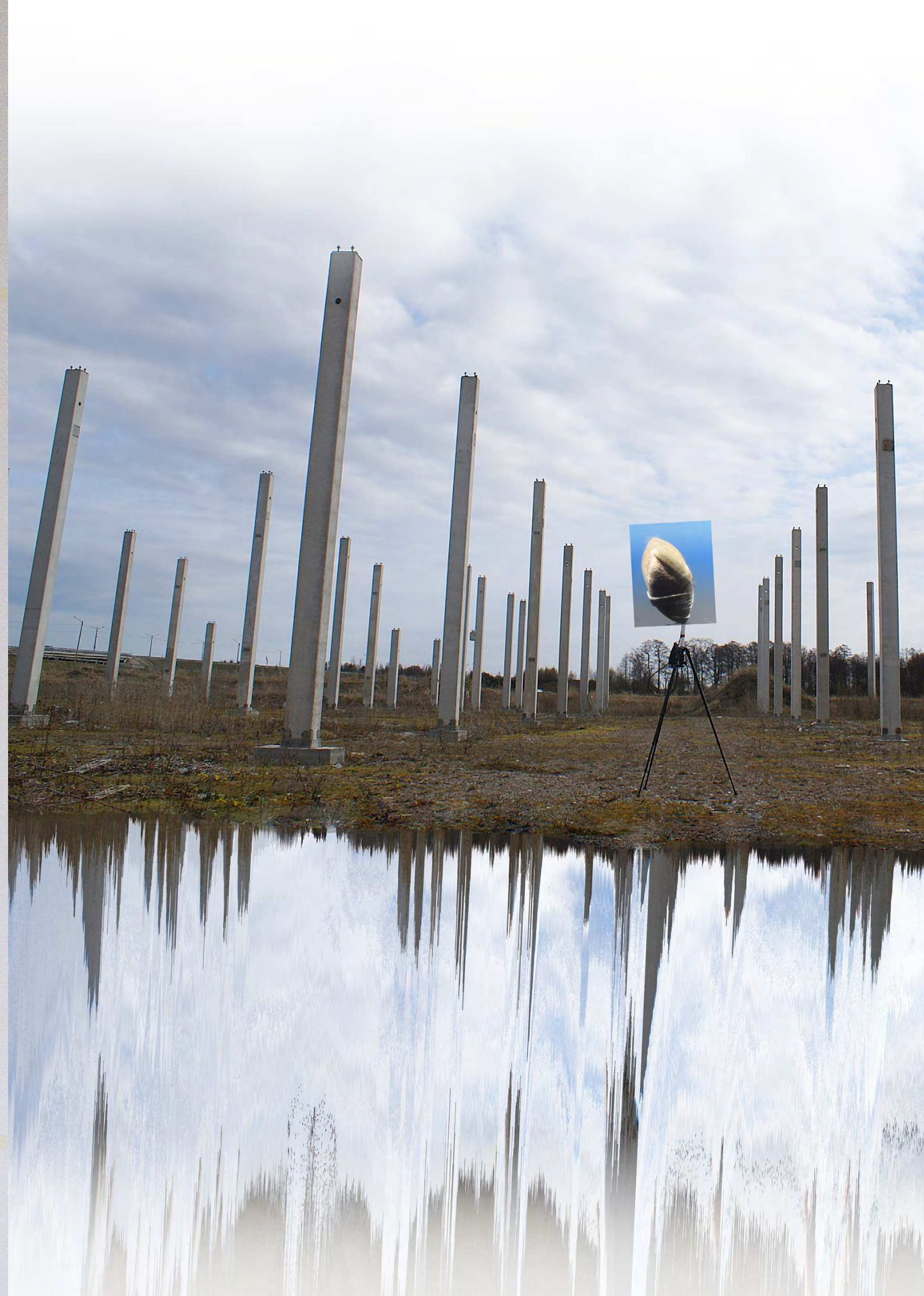
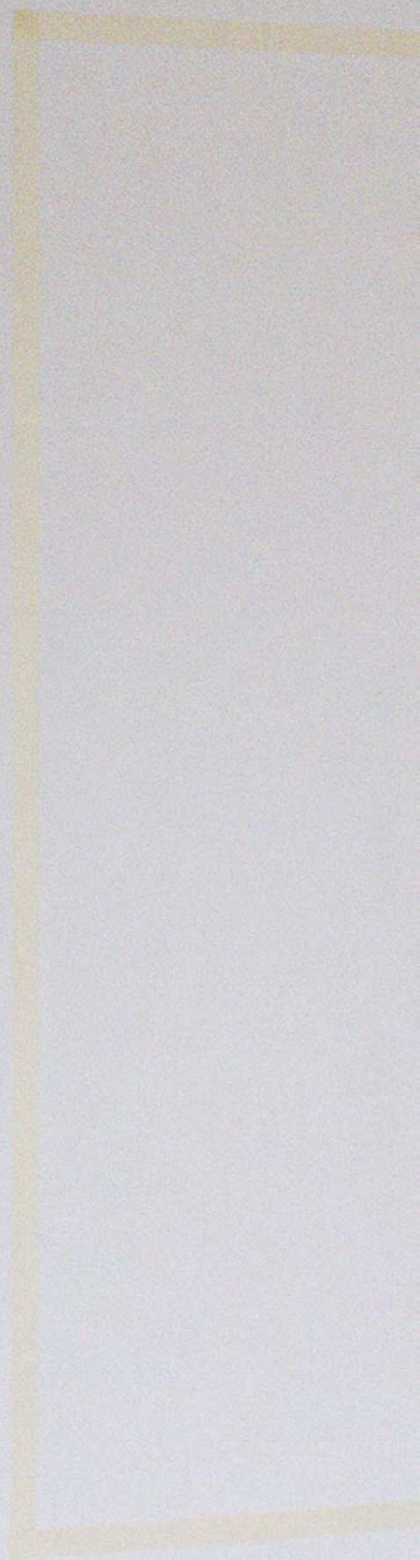
- 1 Durham Peters, John. *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. The University of Chicago Press, 2015, Chicago, p. 167.
- 2 Durham Peters, John. *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. The University of Chicago Press, 2015, Chicago, p. 175.
- 3 Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001, New York, p. 30.
- 4 Durham Peters, John. *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. The University of Chicago Press, 2015, Chicago, p. 178.
- 5 Spilker, Linda. “Cassini Extended Missions.” *Outer Planets Assessment Group*, http://www.lpi.usra.edu/opag/march_08_meeting/presentations/spilker.pdf
- 6 The first selfie from space was taken from NASA’s Voyager 1 as it passed Neptune in 1990. This was at the request of Carl Sagan, who later wrote a book about it called *Pale Blue Dot*.
- 7 Benjamin, Walter. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyrical Poet In The Era of High Capitalism*. Verso, 1983, London, pp. 124–25.
- 8 Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001, New York, p. 254.

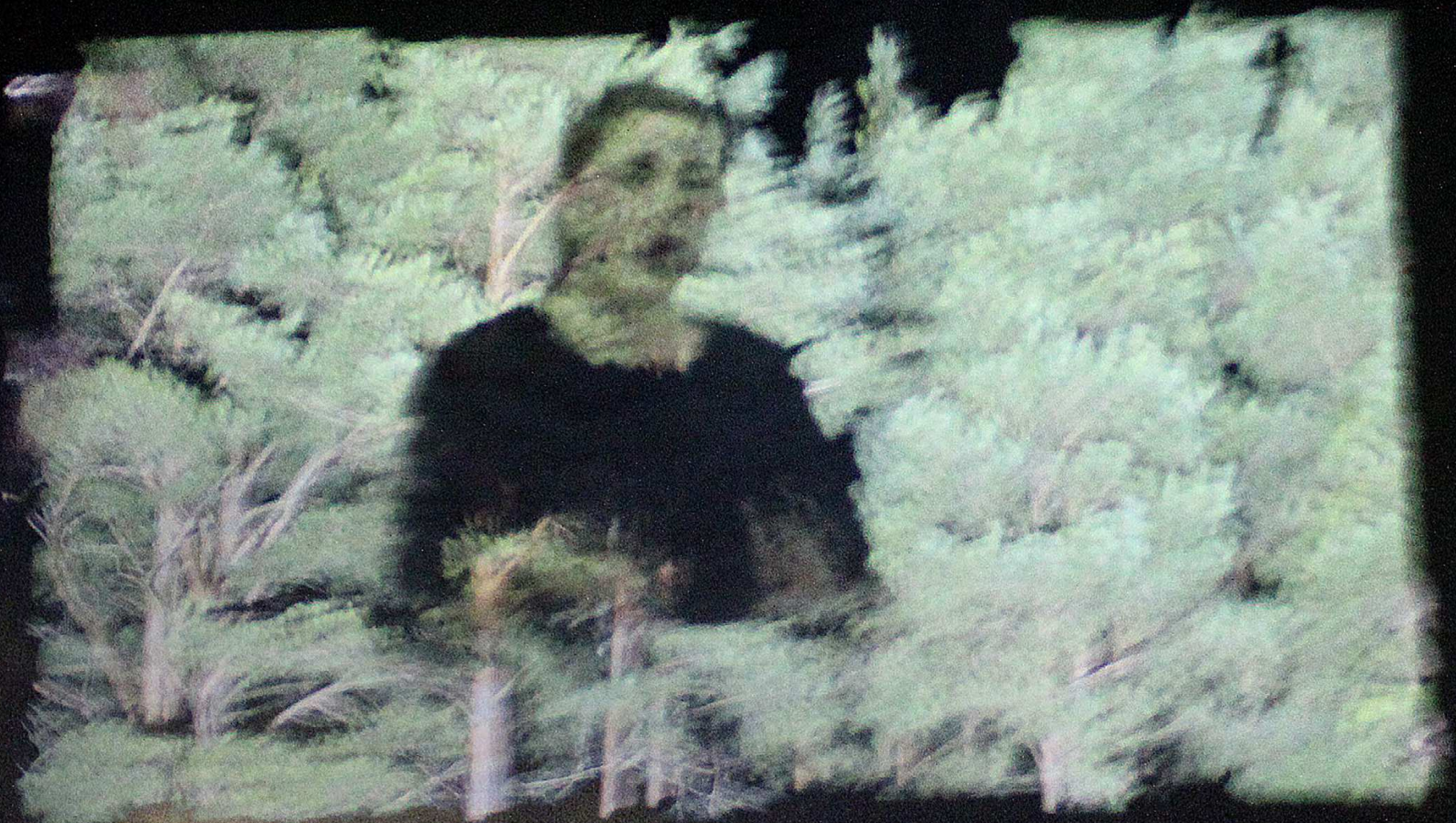
Taavi Suisalu (b.1982) works in the contexts of technology, sound and performance, mixing traditional and contemporary sensibilities and activating peripheral spaces for imaginative encounters.

Pixel Geographies

Field guide to distant selfies and pixel geographies.









16.02.2018 —
29.04.2018

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Estonian Institute
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Annika Toots and Gepard OÜ

Web Design

Teeet Laja

Printed at

Aktaprint

Print run

4500 copies

Cover

Taavi Suisalu “Landscapes and Portraits” (detail), 2016

Back Cover

Marge Monko “Dear D”, 2015. Video still

ISSN: 1406–3549; ISSN online-version: 1406–5711



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