

Ursula Mayer
ATOM SPIRIT

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Textbook

**SALZBURGER
KUNSTVEREIN**

A few notes on Ursula Mayer's *ATOM SPIRIT*

Text by Séamus Kealy

The end of the world started long, long ago. In fact, the apocalypse happened before ideas of modernity first set their course. Colonial powers swept through and wiped out over 95% of the peoples then inhabiting the Americas only in the one hundred years after Columbus' arrival. With this massive genocide, forms of knowledge and possibilities of a different humanity were simply eradicated. An entire people were effectively extinguished. Therefore our contemporary imagining of an apocalypse caused by climate change is a very late imagining indeed. Or so writes Pedro Neves Marques, in his text "Look Above, The Sky is Falling: Humanity Before and After the End of the World."¹ From the perspective of the Amerindians, we are in a post-apocalyptic era.

Without digressing too much, it is important to firstly state that humanity has known and understood the reality of climate change since the mid-19th Century. Climate change has been considered a global peril since the 1960s. The reaction has been slow, but so then might a productive realisation about the tendency for humanity to destroy everything it touches. Another apocalyptic nightmare is not merely science fiction, it is again unfolding.

The question thus, as always, arises: What is to be done?

Although specific solutions are not offered, the film skirts through speculations about humanity's future by casting its eye upon a small, quasi-imaginary community in the West Indies. Ursula

¹ Pedro Neves Marques. "Look Above, The Sky is Falling: Humanity Before and After the End of the World." *Eflux Journal*, 56th Venice Biennale, 2015: <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/look-above-the-sky-is-falling-humanity-before-and-after-the-end-of-the-world/>

Mayer collaborated with a group of queer and transgender individuals as well as her regular collaborator, the transgender actor and model Valentijn de Hingh, to make this film. What emerges is a set of images and connecting narratives, as well as many references to politically-motivated avant-gardism in cinema and black alternative or popular culture, for example, that adds up to a hopeful science-fiction tale motivated by the causes of humanity's tendency to wreak chaos and destruction.

In her work, Ursula Mayer works across film, sculpture, photography and installation to create "kaleidoscopic" spaces where multiple references converge and boundaries dissolve. Her films fuse formal experimentation with myth, biopolitics and the semiotics of cinema, to visualize and ruminate upon posthuman ontology.

Set in Trinidad and Tobago, ATOM SPIRIT is a large-scale film installation which, in the artist's words, acts as a nexus where race, gender, humanisms and technology meet. The film depicts interpenetrating realities where interrogations of legacies of postcolonialism and realities of ecology intersect with a queer avant-garde that merges with science and biology especially. The "Other" (as in the people who are cast as different and immediately non-permeable to homogenization) are the central figures of this film, and they represent and seek to harness the future of humanity. It has not been unusual and it continues to be a reality in many parts of the world that the misfits of society and those who do not immediately fit into societal expectations are vanquished because they do not so easily fit. We see this especially with those who present sexual and especially racial difference immediately in themselves as a symbolic representation indigestible to a self-perceived, homogeneous entity. The most current example are Syrian or Afghan refugees in Europe, for example. Their *difference* may be seen as a threat, and their presence may become intolerable. This was certainly the case already in a modern history of genocide.

But it is their very difference that is our single hope, this film asserts. Instead of singularity, we see multiplicity as it is represented parallel to complex eco-systems, even if this multiplicity artists from and consumes the colonial histories that had always threatened it. With this politicization and symbolization of the Other in mind, ATOM SPIRIT comments upon and explores politicized ecologies of our times. The possibilities and perils regarding our shared techno-natural future appear between the activities of the film's characters. The Other is presented as the holder of a newly formed version of power. The exhibition's immersive space invites a bodily confrontation of this dynamic. We are also implicated in this making of our future world. We must be. Combined with the film's speculative narrative, the stages and character's activities in the film emphasize the necessity of reconceptualising and radically reforming our relationships with the environment, non-human entities and each other. The film asserts a politics that both takes apart patriarchal taxonomies and builds up queer ecologies in their stead.

What is important to consider, is that this emergence of a new politics and scientific awakening comes from the periphery. The Other must imagine itself as *difference* in order to survive and perpetuate new notions and realities. This active imagining is not merely depicted in Mayer's film, it is generated. Here, in Trinidad and Tobago, Ursula Mayer spent a year and worked with a collection of queer and transgender artists and musicians. Trinidad and Tobago's history is intensely bound up with colonial and post-colonial matters. From 1498 to 1797, the islands were a Spanish colony, whereupon they were conquered by the British. During the resulting period, Tobago changed hands among Spanish, British, French, Dutch and Courlander colonizers, more than any other island in the Caribbean. The ethnic composition today of Trinidad and Tobago reflects a history of conquest and immigration. While the earliest inhabitants were of Amerindian heritage, since the 20th century the two dominant groups are

South Asian and of African heritage. The latter were brought to the islands as slaves, while the former were brought over from British colonialized India to replace the slave workforce that had liberated itself. The country Trinidad and Tobago only obtained independence in 1962, becoming a republic in 1976. Despite embodying a carnival culture incarnate, homosexuality still however continues to be illegal in this country. The setting of this film therefore naturally supports a staging of a carnevelesque future, where power actively shift into the hands of the Other. Ursula Mayer also introduced a white character in the film, herself also transgender and of Dutch origin (the actor and model Valentijn de Hingh), as not merely a means of reversing the colonial gaze, but affirming a collective, even blissful awakening. All these legacies and contradictions of culture as a hybrid entity convalesce in this film into notions of a collective, complex future humanity.

The artist also references the feminist scholar Donna Haraway, who declared in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, that, “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.”² In a contemporary moment of impending ecological disaster and manifold technological advances, the film ruminates upon our need to embrace and evolve our ontological status as hybrids further and, critically, to resist nationalistic and homogenizing narratives, especially those pumped out today by political forces.

In their stead, the artist represents a political laboratory. Ursula Mayer writes, “Mimicking the methodological practices of biotechnology, *ATOM SPIRIT* pastiches what Bruno Latour terms “laboratory life” - the space for the production of empirical scientific ‘truth.’ Rather than being the locus of the rational instrumentality of scientific procedure, the lab becomes a haven

² Donna Haraway. „A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century.“ in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181.

for dismantling the privileged category of the human, mutating instead into an experimental cocoon for further developing hybrid ontologies.” This lab fuses with the carnival of these people, along with their dialogue, poetry and rapping, to the drum and dance tracks that suture the film together, as we witness them produce field recordings of rainforests to producing sound alongside lab instruments, and using the movement of dance to suggest a celebratory unshackling from a static, outmoded version of humankind.

The film’s title is firstly a reference to astrophysics, the building blocks of life, and the vastness of space within the minuscule form of an atom. ATOM SPIRIT ultimately plays on intermingled notions of science, creation and spirituality, and the in title, we also might find an association to the first man, Adam, as represented in the Bible. Asserted in his stead in the film is a new humanity that is outside the boundaries of male and female, as so clearly demarcated by the likes of Adam and Eve, or outside those of male and female, black and white, and mainly held throughout systems of taxonomy. Here is a new fangled creationism, based on a new fangled science, that conjures up images of life born outside of sexual intercourse, for example. The usual sci-fi association with futuristic test-tubes babies is in ATOM SPIRIT flipped into a notion of hope and tolerance, rather than the usual associations with totalitarianism, extermination and bleak dystopia such as in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* or the 1999 film *The Matrix* by the Wachowski brothers. Power has been taken by the new humans in ATOM SPIRIT, and they are on the verge of creating a post-human world that will harmonize with the vastness of this finite planet, taking the entire enterprise of life and civilisation in a better direction. We might hope that mercy is shown for those who have failed humanity and this world until now. Surely, until then, we will all have more important things to focus on.

Ursula Mayer completed her MFA at Goldsmiths University London in 2004. Recently her work has been shown in SeMA Biennale Mediacity, Seoul; *THE NEW HUMAN* in Moderna Museet, Stockholm & Moderna Museet Malmö, and at the Hayward Gallery, London. Upcoming shows include TANK, FHNW, Institut Kunst, Basel; Vleeshal, Middelburg, and at HOME, Manchester. In 2014 Mayer was awarded the “Derek Jarman Award for Radical Filmmaking.”

Filmcredits

ATOM SPIRIT

CAST

VALENTIJN DE HINGH

AMANDA MCINTYRE

JILLIA CATO

OMAR JARRA

ZELECA JULIEN

PRODUCER

URSULA MAYER

LESLEY-ANNE MACFARLANE

SCRIPT

RACHEL CLAIRE HILL

URSULA MAYER

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

MARGARET SALMON

CAMERA ASSISTANT

JEREMY FUSCO

CASTING

TIMMIA HEARN

SET DESIGN

ABENNA CHEVANNES

WARDROBE SUPERVISOR

MEG ANDREW

WARDROBE ASSISTANT

JODIE MARIE

MAKE - UP ARTIST

ONIKA EDWARDS

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR

SAHRI

PETTI DAINIA WRIGHT

RHONDA CHAN SOO

SOUND RECORDIST

KERRON LEMESSY

LOCATION SCOUT STEPHEN BROADBRIDGE

NATURE GUIDE CARL FITZJAMES

EDIT

MICHELLE DEIGNAN

URSULA MAYER

KONRAD WELZ

SOUND MIX & GRADE

KONRAD WELZ

MUSIC & DRUMS

JOSUHA SUPAYOUTH SALCEDO

RAP SONG

SWEET LIZZIE

ANIMATION iBIRD

KONRAD WELZ

FOR FILM LONDON JARMAN AWARD

FILM LONDON FOR CHANNEL FOUR

SPECIAL THANKS

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IGUANA IGGY FROM SERPENTARIUM TT

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DEVINE BERRY

DJ CEL

MOVIETECH

PETE MOORE

KODAK FILM

SIMON MAHARAJ

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Opening hours exhibition: Tue–Sun 12 – 7 pm
Opening hours Café Cult: Mon–Fri 11 am – 11 pm