



Fabulator of the Liminal

Essay by Ariane Koek

Post

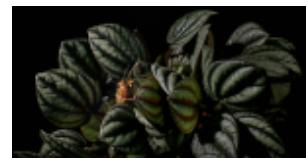
An essay by Ariane Koek

"Storytellers rule the world" (attributed to the Greek philosopher Plato)

"There is an ambiguity in the activity of story telling...Storytelling is an activity that faces in two directions. On the one hand it is connection with the idea of truth. On the other hand, its connection with an idea of invention, imagination and lies." (Susan Sontag - in conversation with John Berger To Tell A Story 1983)

Maija Tammi is a fabulator of the liminality of existence. As an artist, she forensically investigates mortality and our categorization of what constitutes life by composing new stories in film, videos, books, photographs and installations which take us right to the very edge of what it means to be human. She first came to international attention in 2017 with her award-winning photograph One of Them Is a Human #1, Erica, from a series of four. This series deliberately challenged the idea of portraiture as being drawn from life with a living sitter. (1) Three of the photographs in her series depict portraits of androids, whilst one other shows - possibly - a human. The series raises questions about our definitions of what it means to be alive and our existence in a future where technology plays an increasing role.

Humankind has been defined as being a story-telling species - 'homo narrans' (2) - and according to the Jamaican novelist and thinker Sylvia Wynter, stories are so much in our bones and blood



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Nature Documentaries Also Record Culture
Tiina Rauhala and Maija Tammi in conversation with Kristiina Koskinen

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Interviewee: Kristiina Koskinen (K) Doctor of Arts - her dissertation examines the conceptions of nature in TV nature documentaries and how those conceptions are formed. Interviewers: Curator Tiina Rauhala and Artist Maija Tammi, Doctor of Arts (T&MT): The ...

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that she writes "Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities." (3) The writer Jonathan Gottschall argues that stories help us navigate life's complex social and psychological problems – just as flight simulators prepare pilots for difficult situations. (4) Stories can also be a means of deception, manipulation and control too. Nevertheless, storytelling has evolved, like other behaviors, to ultimately ensure our survival, which is paradoxical when one considers that being alive also means at the end of the day we do not actually ultimately survive. We all die. Scheherazade may have saved her life by telling tales over a thousand and one nights, according to the Arab fable, but the irony is that does not stop her from being mortal and dying later.



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One of Them Is a Human #1, Erica, 2017. Installation image by Miikka Pirinen.

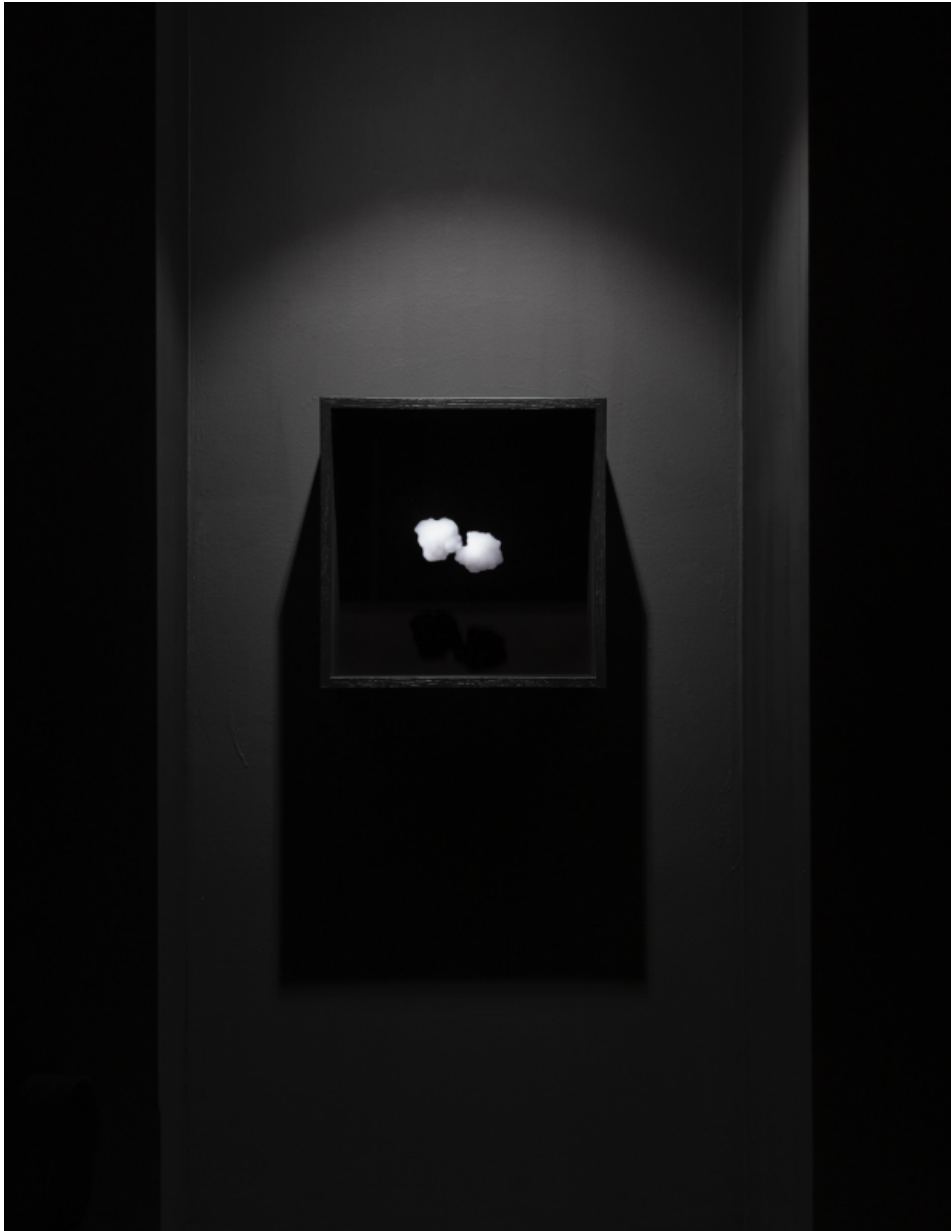
In investigating life as being a liminal state which is a constant navigation between life and death, Tammi draws on protagonists from the more-than-human world – insects, reptiles, the microscopic world and technology – as the main characters in her stories. In doing so, she also implicitly challenges the impulse to separate ourselves from other species whilst gently mocking our narcissistic drive to project ourselves onto other beings. She combines this with being curious and playful about the different mediums and methods which humans employ when telling tales, and teases with the inbuilt tension between fact and fiction which all storytelling contains, even when it purports to tell the truth. Underlying all her stories is an implicit critique of the primacy we give the sense of sight as the means by which we think we can adequately assess the world and detect truth. Instead sight, and by implication, the human brain which processes it, are revealed as easily tricked and unreliable. What you see is decidedly not what you get as Tammi's stories reveal. You always must think – and dig – deeper.

Take for example the installation *Hulda and Lilli* which is shown at MU Hybrid Art House. It seems at first sight to be an installation which has as its subject the lives of a locust and a chameleon, given endearing human names, Lilli and Hulda respectively. Their individual stories are laid out in beautiful photographs which resemble 17th century Dutch still-life paintings, accompanied by words which tell their individual tales, placed in two separate routes through the installation. The audience is invited to exercise free will by choosing which story to follow on one of the paths. At the end, the two different lives of the reptile and insect are brought together on a single screen, where their combined story and its consequences unfold paradoxically in both inevitable and unpredictable ways.

An inherent paradox of the installation is that the creatures may seem to be the subject of the story, but in reality the audience is just as much so, too. The installation is an inventive human experiment in how to create empathy, which aims to draw out this emotional reaction from the audience and encourages them to probe into the making of their feelings. It is the audience's invisible and silent inner worlds, their experience and emotions, which are the core of the installation. It deliberately uses story-telling techniques of anthropomorphism and character-building of the creatures, often used in nature documentaries, to elicit human responses and feelings.



Hulda & Lilli (detail), 2023. Image by Maija Tammi.



Bathing Brains (detail), 2023. Installation image by KUNSTDOK / Tor S. Ulstein.

At the end of the installation the audience is asked to probe even more deeply into their feelings and consider which creature they felt empathy towards, and why, in a debriefing room. The debriefing room contains extra written and recorded materials which give scientific as well as philosophical context for their consideration. At MU there is for example an interview with the scientist Floortje Bouwkamp, Doctoral researcher at the Donders Institute in the Netherlands who is investigating the role prediction plays in the human brain when it processes sight. Thus Tammi's installation subverts the notion of subject and object, human and non-human, by placing the audience in a new liminal state of in-between-ness, in which they are ultimately just as much the subjects of the story as the artwork's protagonists themselves. Separation and classifications are revealed as deeply flawed human concepts. We are all subjects and objects in this experiment and process we call life.

This ability to disrupt and defy expectations with a lightness of touch is a hallmark of Tammi's work, as is her deep engagement with the sciences in the process of making her art whilst asking focused philosophical questions which are then expressed in works which defy any easy reading. For example the making of *Hulda and Lilli* began with profound philosophical questions - how do we feel empathy? How do we feel it for other species? Can empathy be manufactured and manipulated? What are the secret ingredients? And how do nature documentaries elicit empathy

for other creatures from us? (5) Tammi then worked very closely with scientists working on empathy and effective emotion at the Swiss Centre for Affective Emotions in Geneva, Switzerland, including Dr Marius Voilberg, and Joni Ollonen, doctoral researcher in biology.

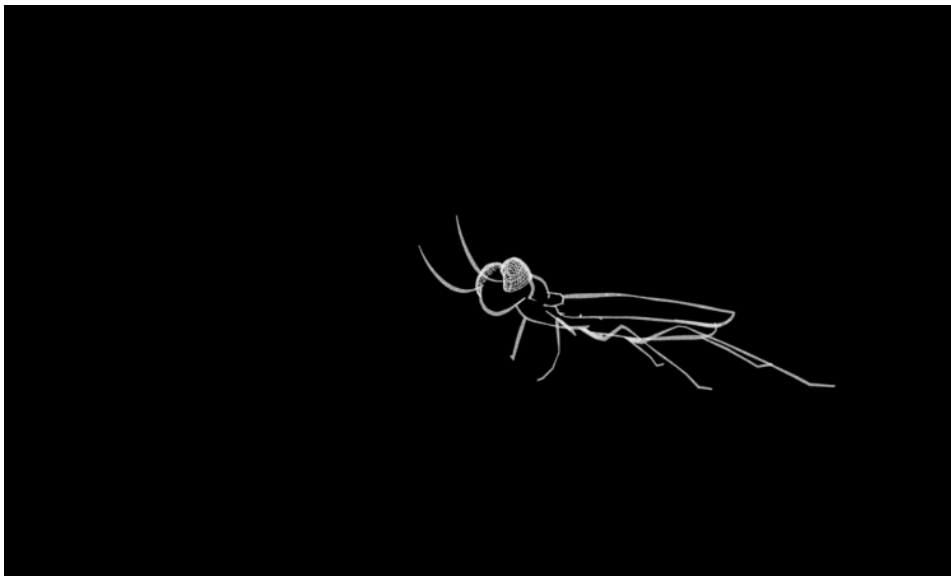
Tammi's work called *Bathing Brains (2023)* (which is not in the exhibition at MU) appears to be beautiful white clouds floating in a black sky. In reality they are images of brain organoids UV-printed on glass, suspended in the middle of deep frames. painted with the blackest black paint on the planet. These images are in fact of brain organoids aged 8 to 12 weeks old which were artificially grown outside the body from actual human cells that were manipulated to start specializing/growing into a brain for research purposes at the Neuroscience Center, HiLIFE at the University of Helsinki with whom Tammi worked. There Takashi Namba's research group investigates human brain development to find new causes of neurodevelopmental disorder. The organoids were a natural subject for Tammi's ongoing investigations into the questions of what constitutes life and where the borderlines between technology and nature lie.

These very targeted questions, and the subsequent deep dives into the latest scientific research reveal Tammi's original background as a journalist prior to focusing on art as a career as well as her love of facts. But her approach is always to make us curious, too, about the science underneath her work by using her imagination and a poetic sensibility which piques our curiosity and which she combines with a complex and tantalizing aesthetics which often combines beauty with the powerful and visceral emotion of disgust.

MU's new commission is a clear example of the complex aesthetics which Tammi employs with such effect in her work. Called *On The Third Day*, the commission consists of two parts: a video and an animation. The title of the piece evokes stories from the past which have significance in terms of life and death: the Egyptian god Osiris who arose from the dead on the third day, as did Jesus according to Christianity. The third day is also when, according to Christianity, God created grass, flowers and trees and gave them life. The video section of the installation shows beautiful flower petals moving and swaying en masse as if by their own agency. It is uncanny - both heimlich and unheimlich - placing the viewer in a suspended and unsettling liminal state of being in between the homely/familiar and unhomely/strange. (6) The choice of rose petals renders the video piece one of great beauty, and roses, of course, are symbolic of love, life, regeneration - and death. The rose petals are also both dead and alive at the same time: in the digital realm of the video, they are immortal and endlessly alive, whilst in the realm of reality they have been plucked from flowers and will have already inevitably withered and died. They are thus rendered liminal.

During the video, however, the viewer becomes aware that all is not as it seems: something is lurking beneath the undulating petals and is in fact making them move. A visceral feeling of unease begins, and now and again there are glimpses of something alien and strange poking through, which eventually mixes unease with a new feeling of deep disgust - like that felt when looking at the work *Bathing Brains* after the viewer realizes what they are really looking at. In fact, Tammi, like in much of her work, is deliberately playing with disgust, which radically disrupts the aesthetic of beauty which the rose petals symbolize, revealing it to be an aesthetic which is duplicitous. Beauty is not necessarily to be trusted at face value, because who knows what lies beneath it? However, disgust is not simply a negative emotion which pushes us away from a subject. It also enlists our curiosity, as the writer Carolyn Korsmeyer astutely observes in her book *Savoring Disgust: the Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*:

"Aesthetic disgust is a response that, no matter how unpleasant, can rivet attention to the point where one actually may be said to savour the feeling."



On the third day (video still), 2024. Image by Maija Tammi.

Disgust compels our attention, interest and curiosity, and exerts an inescapable fascination. Disgust as a driver for curiosity and discovery gets further harnessed in the deceptively simple animation which accompanies the video. We learn during the course of the animation and the story which unfolds with the stroke of a pen and in accompanying words and sounds, that the cockroach in the film is prey to an insect which may eat it alive by a method which elicits our powerful disgust and a sense of victimhood. The cockroach is in a state of what the French theorist Julia Kristeva calls 'abjection' - it is both subject and object, potential hero and victim. It is in a liminal state, suspended between life and death, so that any meaning, derived from easy, clear-cut definitions and classifications of the cockroach, threatens to break down (7 We empathize with the cockroach's suspended state because maybe we recognize its state as one familiar to us all, and thus we in effect become it. This is because we are forced to stare into the abyss of death by being made aware of the cockroach's impending fate - which it may - or may not - survive and triumph over.

The cockroach is a creature which has long fascinated Tammi because it is reviled and yet should be respected when one looks at their lives. The Czechoslovakian writer Franz Kafka in his seminal novella *Metamorphosis* (1915) put the insect center stage when a man wakes up one morning to find he has turned into one. This leads to him inevitably to be avoided by his family and society because cockroaches evoke disgust in humans. Cockroaches are often synonymous with dirt, disease and poor hygiene, and thus often used as a term of abuse, yet they are the ultimate survivors. Cockroaches existed over 300 million years ago, before and after dinosaurs, and can survive nuclear blasts. We humans are late comers on this planet compared with them, and they, not us, are the ultimate victors over catastrophe. So how can human beings think they are so superior and consider themselves to be the most alive when this humble creature has such a triumphant prehistory spanning over many millennia? Is our definition of life as connected with consciousness, merely a way of humanity trying to exert a false control over other species, as well as displace our own impending and inevitable death? These are just some of the questions which come out of encountering Tammi's work which engages in the liminal space of a radical in-between with all its compelling and complex strangeness whilst resting on a bedrock of science.

But there is one being on earth which does not exist in this liminal state of hovering between life and death, and this creature is known as the hydra. It is immortal. It was first discovered by scientists in the 18th century and is a small fresh-water polyp that does not age - at all. In addition, it can regenerate itself from a small cluster of cells, even when cut into pieces. It simply carries on living, does not have a brain or consciousness, yet taxonomically it is classified as a small, predatory animal. It is the subject of Tammi's extraordinary multi-part piece *Immortal's Birthday* (2020), which comprises videos, photographs, installations and an artist's book which examines the practical and metaphysical questions raised by this being which does not grow old. After all, as the title of the series invites you to consider, what date do you pick to celebrate a

birthday for a being which is ageless? And how do you celebrate it? A photograph which is composed as a still life and which features a birthday cake, party hats, garlands and balloons, is as fantastical as it is absurd and comical because it plays into human being's fantasies of birthdays. Like the many-headed serpent or monster of Greek Mythology, which sprouted yet more when each of its heads was cut off, and which the hydra was named after, the works in this series also sprout endless questions and reflections on what constitutes being alive.

These reflections get further amplified in the art book, which starts untying reality and fact even further by posing a story which at first may feel real: it purports to be the diary of a scientist who is studying the hydra. She is on the ultimate quest to find the source of its immortality. After a while, clues are dropped into the text that all is not as it seems. She is an unreliable narrator, maybe even on the verge of insanity, and the boundary between the scientist and the object of her enquiry may be dissolving into one another due to over-identification. The quest of science to understand the mysteries of existence are revealed to be as obsessive and as beset by potential fictions and flaws as storytelling itself. Clarity which is fixed, and stable forever is an illusion, and telling tales is a double-edged sword. Can we ultimately ever truly know reality?

Sight has always been seen as the sense which is the most immediate and direct way to perceive reality. But as the interview with the scientist Floortje Bouwkamp in the debriefing room of *Hulda and Lilli* reveals and asks us to consider, our scientific understanding of sight has undergone a revolution. Whereas before the brain was thought to be passive in its reception of sight, in fact it is far from being neutral and takes an active part in creating what we see by predicting what we see by what it has seen before in our lives. This is what is called the predictive brain and has a relationship with storytelling too. Storytelling, just like sight, is a way of human beings gathering and assessing knowledge. Like storytelling, the brain is open to fictionalizing, hallucinating in effect what it considers it sees by shuffling through what we have seen in our lives to select the most likely image we are really seeing. (8) Thus, Sylvia Wynter's assertion about storytelling being part of our flesh has a special resonance and magic with the scientific understanding too.



Immortal's Birthday, 2020. Installation image by KUNSTDOK / Tor S. Ulstein.

The magic of Tammi's own investigations into the power of storytelling through her art, is that she inspires us to re-enter with her a childlike state of curiosity, wonder how we perceive the world around us and consider the science behind it. Her storytelling provokes us to ask questions, to dig deeper into our own experience, and to seek new knowledge and ways of knowing. We may get disturbed in the journey she takes us on. We might even be disgusted. We are certainly always surprised. But with a lightness of touch, playfulness, and a compelling combination of technical skill, imagination and a poetic sensibility, all founded on a bedrock of scientific and philosophical investigations, her work makes us experience in our encounters what it is to be truly alive – even when we daily face the limits of our own inevitable mortality.



Hulda & Lilli (detail), 2023. Image by Maija Tammi.

This essay is written by Ariane Koek for the exhibition *Hulda, Lilli & The Roach* by Maija Tammi. On show at MU Hybrid Art House from 5 July until 15 September 2024.

FOOTNOTE

(1) *One of Them Is a Human*, #1 Erica won third prize in the 2017 Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize and in the same year won the John Kobal New Work Award for a photographer under 35.

(2) The first use of the phrase *homo narrans* is a subject of dispute whether it was created by the ethnologist Kurt Ranke in 1967 or the American communications theorist Walter R. Fisher

(3) Quote from Sylvia Wynter 1995: 35, drawing on Aimée Césaire.

(4) *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* by Jonathan Gottschall January 1, 2012, by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

(5) The title of Maija Tammi's first solo exhibition at The National Museum of Photography in Helsinki 2021 *Empathy Machine* shows her interest in exploring if empathy can be artificially created in human beings and featured amongst other works *Hulda* and *Lilli*. She observed that nature documentaries inspire our care and attention by using story-telling techniques and character-building sequences which make us relate to them and their situation.

(6) See Sigmund Freud's essay *The Uncanny* The first part explores the etymology of the words 'heimlich' and 'unheimlich' (or 'homely' and 'unhomely', as it directly translates into English), their uses in the German dictionary and how these words are used in other languages. This must have been an unimaginable challenge for the translator! In the second part, Freud begins to tackle people, things, self-expressions, experiences and situations that best represent the uncanny feeling.

(7) The abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. See Julia Kristeva - *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press 1982)

(8) Sight always gives us the illusion of seeing a whole image in the present moment. But as science reveals, what we see is always in the past, when one takes into account how long it takes light to travel across the universe, bounce off the object we are looking at and then be processed in our brain. Equally we always think we see one whole image, but the process of seeing this is complex. The human eye is made up of cones or rods, which each see a different part of the image which are then shown upside down in our brain and are then processed by the brain to become one image the right way up.

MU Hybrid Art House

MU Hybrid Art House, located in Eindhoven, zooms in on the hybrid visual culture of now and later. MU is an adventurous guide to all art lovers with a keen interest in the energetic mix of art, design, popculture and new media.

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