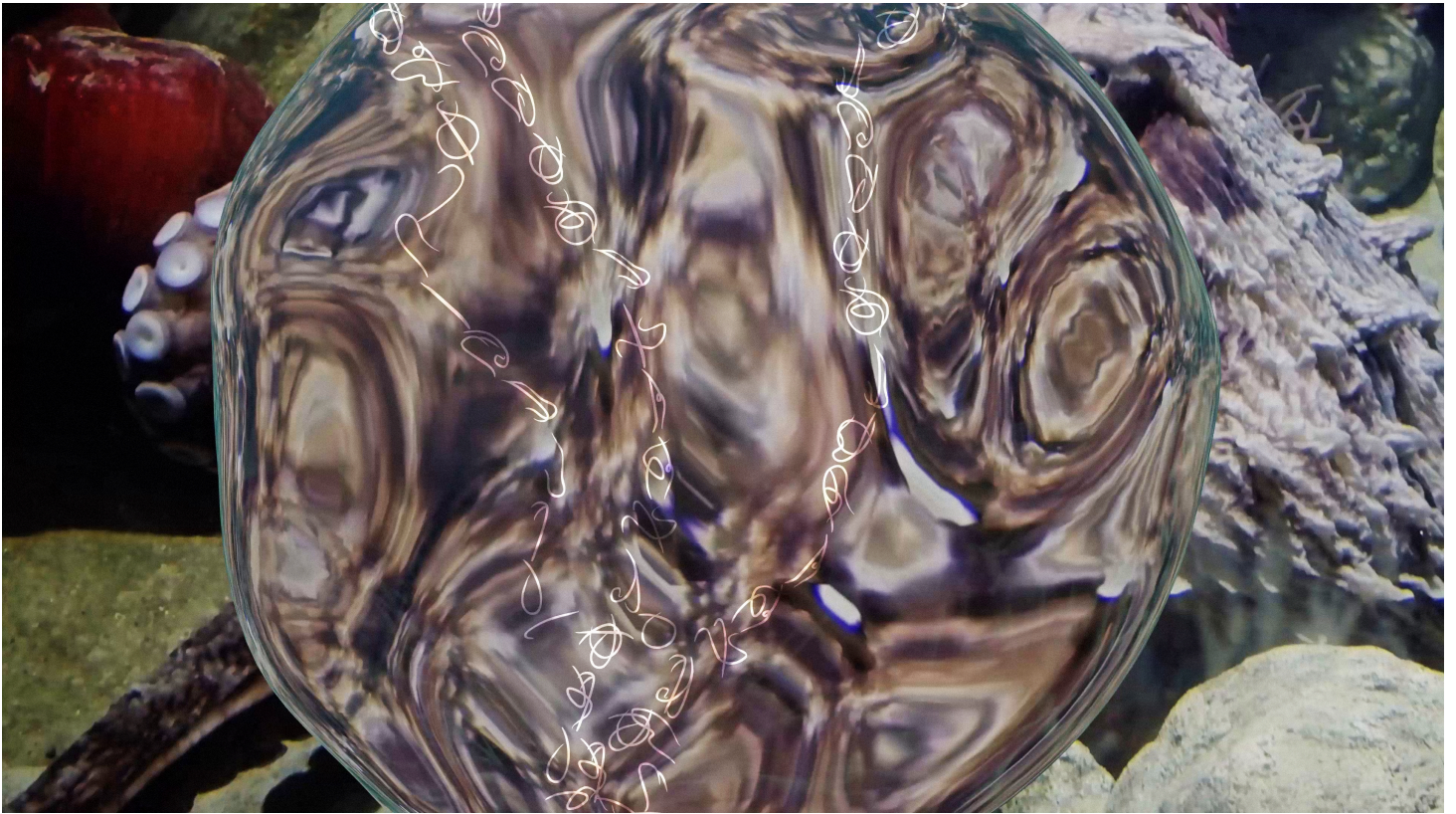


HOME | ART IN AMERICA | FEATURES

Reaching Beyond the Human

By *Louis Bury*

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Tuomas A. Laitinen, *Haemocyanin*, 2019, video, 8 minutes.
Courtesy Helsinki Contemporary

A SERIES OF TEN TUBULAR BLOWN-GLASS sculptures, each the size and shape of an internal organ, sat on curvy, custom-built fiberboard tables distributed like islands in an archipelago throughout the Yeh Art Gallery at St. John's University in New York this past fall. Part of Finnish artist Tuomas A. Laitinen's beguiling exhibition "The Boneless One," the knotty sculptures—some of them splotched with algal color—contain as many as five internal chambers and are designed to be playgrounds for octopuses. When at rest on the tables, the

sculptures, titled collectively “A Proposal for an Octopus” (2016–), produce faint shadows and prismatic glints; they also possess a material heft in pleasing tension with those diaphanous effects.

A nearby screen played *Haemocyanin* (2019), Laitinen’s short video depicting an octopus swimming in and around one such sculpture, its arms probing the contoured glass with orgiastic flurries of touch. The mollusk’s big, vulnerable brain and soft, pliant skin contrast with the sturdy glass. Overlaid on this footage are numerous visual and sonic effects: translucent CGI bubbles that distort the scene’s appearance, serpentine CGI glyphs and squiggles, textual interludes set like poems, and a soundscape of high-pitched synthetic beeps and boops that suggest melodious sonar and contribute to the alien mood.



View of “The Boneless One,” 2021, at the Yeh Art Gallery, New York.

Photo Phil Hinge

The glyphs also appeared on the gallery wall as the characters in a large, six-line block of text rendered in shiny purple vinyl. In 2018, Laitinen invented an asemic typeface, Ctongue, whose sinuous flourishes are based on the gestural movements of octopus arms. The Yeh Art Gallery show featured an expansion of the typeface, designed in collaboration with the Schick Toikka type foundry, based in Berlin and Helsinki: each line of text used a slightly different version of Ctongue, progressing from indecipherable glyphs in the top line to cursive English-language letters in the bottom line. The characters didn’t become recognizably alphabetic until about line four or five, where the words BONELESS ONE became legible. This continuum

of characters exemplified the way Laitinen's work uses human language to render the other-than-human world intelligible to varying degrees.

A similar spectrum of legibility is at play in how Laitinen presents and talks about his own quicksilver practice. Like many contemporary artists, he bases his multimedia installations on extensive research, and fabricates them in collaboration with experts in other disciplines. To produce his futuristic collection of glass masks, *Sensory Adaptation Devices* (2015–), for example, Laitinen solicited the help of glass blowers to design sculptures that, when worn, alter the wearer's vision and speech. Yet, unlike artists who conduct research for discrete projects, Laitinen understands any given exhibition as merely one step in an ongoing process. His research into glass's technological applications grew out of his early-career line of inquiry into copper mining and the metal's use as a conductor, which also led to his preoccupation with cephalopods (whose blood contains high levels of copper).

When explaining his work, Laitinen often references concepts from feminist post-humanist philosophy, particularly those strands of it attuned to nonhuman agency, such as Donna Haraway's multisensory "tentacular thinking." ("The tentacular are not disembodied figures; they are cnidarians, spiders, fingery beings like humans and raccoons. . . . Tentacularity is about life lived along lines—and such a wealth of lines—not at points, not in spheres," Haraway writes.) The artist also offers a cornucopia of other metaphors to describe his practice. He refers to himself as a gardener who nurtures multiple life-forms simultaneously, and, in a nod to novelist Ursula Le Guin's 1986 essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," refers to his installations as "carrier bags of ideas" that allow "multiple timelines to operate at once." His obsession with "how language corresponds to the artwork" prompts him to characterize his oeuvre "in a way that provides a sense of the work but lets it remain open." His interest in naming and description also derives from philosophy, notably Karen Barad's work on the co-constitutive—entangled, inseparable—nature of matter and language.



View of *ΨZone*, 2021, at the Helsinki Biennial.

Photo Maija Toivanen/HAM/Helsinki Biennial 2021

Laitinen's theoretical descriptions, though intended to orient audiences, can come off as abstruse. *ΨZone*, his installation at the 2021 Helsinki Biennial, for instance, comprised ambient recordings of the sounds of chemical reactions played through directional speakers, projected 3D animations evoking cells as seen through a microscope, and bi-level glass tables displaying glass sculptures structured like protein molecules. The airy works contrasted with the arched, red-brick room in which they were installed, as though a mystical lab experiment were being conducted in an abandoned factory. Yet Laitinen's statement on the Biennial website sticks to abstract language—"the underlying idea concerns the formation of knowledge within an unstructured realm"—that makes it hard to discern how and why the works interweave ideas from alchemical proto-science with concepts from modern biology.

That disconnect, while potentially perplexing, is intentional. Laitinen prefers for his exhibition didactics, whoever authors them, to eschew long-winded explanation so that the work can speak for itself. In "The Boneless One," for instance, the sculptures' prismatic chambers allude to Barad's concept of diffraction—the distortion of light waves, a physical phenomenon that the theorist considers foundational to ontology—without announcing the allusion. Other seemingly minor details contain similar references and philosophical intentions. The video's intertitles ("you have sent your minds out into / the environment to meet it halfway") suggest a release from the confines of the body, while its soundscape begins with frequencies around 600 Hz, the optimal frequency for

cephalopod hearing. While most of these rationales would be hard for a viewer to pick up on from the work itself, this taciturn quality feels refreshing at a time when the language surrounding art routinely overpromises on the art's ability to convey big ideas.

THESE DIFFERENCES IN HOW LAITINEN CREATES, presents, and speaks about his work make more sense once you understand these qualities as parts of the same package. Laitinen's artistic training has been open-ended and self-defined to an unusual degree: he earned his MFA in University of the Arts Helsinki's delightfully ambiguous Time and Space Arts program in 2008, and his current course of doctoral study at the same university is a practice-based program in artistic research. He also plays jazz drums and the harp, and produces electronic music, including a recent debut album, *Sapiduz* (Svart Records, 2022), a stuttering remix of choral samples and dancehall pulses. For an artist trained in this way, and working with a broad range of subjects and media, labels can feel both necessary (so that others can grasp your work) and limiting (because they imply the work can be pinned down to this or that category).

Laitinen's reticence is notable with respect to *Haemocyanin*, the only artwork he has made to date that focuses on video footage of an octopus. (A prior video, *Receptor*, 2017, included brief, obscured depictions.) The modest extent of such production is striking, given that the artist's research on the animals spans five years and has yielded several installations in addition to "A Proposal for an Octopus." At just eight minutes long, *Haemocyanin* is brief enough that it could easily be mistaken for an excerpt from a longer work. The video's blurred and layered visuals obscure many glimpses of the octopus that the artist does allow. Again, the aesthetic and ethical reasons for these choices are left unstated, but the visuals themselves convey Laitinen's hesitant approach to his subject: from the start of his research into cephalopods, the artist has had reservations about whether and how to work with living octopuses, as well as how to document any such work.

I learned about these reservations when the feminist scholar and molecular biologist Deboleena Roy drew them out of Laitinen during their November 2021 conversation at the Consulate General of Finland in New York. She asked if there were times when his work with a nonhuman species gave him pause. Laitinen revealed that it took him "a long time, maybe two years" to feel comfortable filming an octopus, for two reasons. First, he had doubts about even introducing his

sculptures to octopuses, given that it was logistically impossible to do so in the animals' natural environment and "ethically precarious," due to the uneven power relations, in an aquarium. Second, he has mostly stopped using a camera in his practice because he considers it a "problematic tool," reproducing the dynamics of objectification that his incorporation of aesthetic diffraction and CGI video-making seeks to oppose. Both reasons evidenced the extent to which Laitinen values ethics just as much as output.

Laitinen overcame these reservations when he "got to know the octopus"—named Napoleon by its caretakers at an aquarium in Helsinki—over the course of numerous meetings. What it means for a human to get to know a nonhuman entity, and vice versa, is an implicit concern behind not only Roy's question to Laitinen but also the many recent anti-anthropocentric philosophies, from object-oriented ontology to feminist new materialism, that place nonhuman entities on an equal footing with humans. Laitinen's answer, however, centered on intuition rather than theory: once he felt comfortable enough to introduce a glass sculpture into Napoleon's tank, he sensed the octopus "didn't want to give it back." Laitinen then left the artwork in the tank for one month and filmed on a handful of occasions. He is aware that humans can't access the thoughts and feelings of nonhumans in any way other than by conjecture—even among humans, access is limited, largely funneled through language. His film stages the ethical dilemmas inherent in any such interspecies encounter.



Tuomas A. Laitinen, *Biomipeli/The Game of Biomes*, 2019, public installation at Jätkäsaari Comprehensive School, Helsinki.

Photo Maija Toivanen

All art, including plenty of contemporary work, requires contextualization to be comprehensible. Yet Laitinen thematizes this predicament through his conceptual focus on the difficulty of communication, his aesthetic use of obfuscation, and his calculated approach to framing the work. Laitinen's principled reservations are best understood as efforts to relinquish control over aspects of the work and its surrounding discourse. *Biomipeli/The Game of Biomes* (2019–20), his recent permanent commission for Helsinki's Jätkäsaari comprehensive school, for example, comprises not only a cryptic installation component (glass eggs, streaked with alien combinations of colors and shapes, that he metaphorically refers to as

“biomes”) but also an open-ended social practice component: a contract that gives students resources to create their own ecological projects, which Laitinen will respond to during annual visits. The contract creates a structured institutional space within which unpredictable artistic outcomes can emerge. Laitinen considers the resultant community engagements a type of collaboration, albeit not always a symmetrical one, much as he considers his work with Napoleon, and the interactions between Napoleon and the glass sculptures, to be collaborations.

Here, again, semantic questions with philosophical implications abound. If collaboration between human and nonhuman beings, or among nonhuman species, is meant in a literal sense, how and what can humans know about it? If “collaboration” is intended as a metaphor for relations that don’t depend on human, or any, consciousness, similar epistemological questions arise. Visual artworks have indeed been a popular focus for exponents of anti-anthropocentric philosophies. But the push-pull between explanation and elision, intellect and intuition in Laitinen’s approach demonstrates the all-too-human linguistic binds in which these questions become entangled. His practice constitutes less a demonstration of philosophical principles than a series of stress tests of them. The work’s intrinsic and extrinsic ambiguities allow it to remain open to how matter and language structure the world, in ways that exceed what artist or audience might know or intend.

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