Katja Novitskova and Timur Si-Qin in conversation

Katja Novitskova, born in 1984 in Tallinn, is currently based in Berlin, and Timur Si-Qin, born in 1984 in Berlin, is based in New York. Katja and Timur's long friendship stems from their shared passion for nature and philosophy. Here, in the second issue of Living Content, they reminisce about their beginnings in art, their community spanning Berlin and Amsterdam, and they also discuss their interest in deep time, ecology and evolution. They reflect on why the theory of New Materialism resonated best with their practices and how this was what ultimately distinguished them conceptually from their

peers.

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Living Content   I know that you both have interesting backgrounds, can you tell me a bit about how you ended up becoming artists.

Katja Novitskova   I basically wanted to study graphic design in Estonia after high school and I wasn't accepted in the graphic design department at the main art school because there were very few free spots. So I went to study Semiotics instead, because it was fascinating, free and I got accepted together with my best friend. I did that for 3 years but I knew I couldn't become an academic, and a few years later I ended up studying graphic design for my Master's in Amsterdam, in the Sandberg Institute. I chose graphic design because I was always interested in visual culture and the contempo-rary meaning of it. The degree always had to have the practical aspect to it figured out, so I would always tell to myself and to my parents that I will end up working in an advertising agency or something similar. In Amsterdam I made a lot of friends who were artists and I got to see more closely what they were doing. I allowed myself to try to do some art stuff and see what kind of feedback I would get. And it felt good. Plus, I would have been kind of a mediocre graphic designer in a way because I didn't develop a real passion for typography and layouts.

Timur Si-Qin   I went to high school in Tucson, Arizona, and at that point I thought I wanted to do design. So I moved to Essen, Germany, to study Industrial Design but I was there for only a few months before realizing that (having spent my childhood in Berlin) I couldn't live in another German city other than Berlin, and that I actually didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do at that point. So I left Essen, went back to the desert, to the University of Arizona where I got a free ride.

KN   Didn't you study photography there?

TSQ Yes, but it wasn't up until a couple of years after coming back to Arizona that I decided to do art. First I was "undeclared" which gave me the opportunity to take a wide range of courses outside of art. Looking back I'm grateful for this period for helping me expand my horizons beyond making art about art. When I declared a fine arts major, I chose photography because it was the most open and digitally-oriented track they offered at the time.

LC   Now - inevitably we have to talk about the net art era of Berlin. You were both part of this early social media or net art community of artists that brought together crossovers between Europe and the US mostly.

KN   A lot of it was specifically related to certain schools in the US and Europe, like SAIC or Städelschule. I probably met everybody through my Dutch friends.

TSQ   Yes, Katja was still in Amsterdam, but it was basically still the same community. When I went to Berlin I was already second-wave of

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this community.

KN   Me too — the first wave of work that I've ever come across was basically AIDS-3D and Helga Wretman on MySpace, and then, a few months later, I met them all irl.

TSQ   Nick and Dan [AIDS-3D], Oliver Laric, Aleksandra Domanovic, Harm van den Dorpel, Constant Dullaart, Petra Cortright, Rafael Rozendaal....

LC   And what were the differences between these two waves?

KN   I was already inspired by what other people were doing. I was inspired by Petra Cortright's website for instance. I was studying graphic design and Harm was already doing these amazing projects online, Kari Altman's R-U-INs tumblr blog network, Damon Zucconi, Emily Jones, etc. So I was responding to all this. That's how I got excited about art in the first place: it was seeing their work, not seeing Joseph Beuys, not seeing Tracey Emin.

LC   But you two specifically, have in common philosophy as a starting point. When did you realize that you were both on the same wavelength with New Materialism?

KN   In the beginning, we didn't use these terms. I remember, Timur, you did this kind of realflow, 3D video, in a group show. I was visiting Anne de Vries when he was doing his residency in Berlin and we were all just hanging out. Even when I was making the Post-Internet Survival Guide as my graduation

project, there was no clear mention of New Materialism. Well, actually there was, but my own intuitive first discoveries of it. It was only later that you basically dropped De Landa on us, but I don't remember how.

TSQ   Carson [Chan] was the one who gave me the DeLanda book.

KN   Oh yeah! That's how it started: from reading DeLanda, then relating the work to it. There was not much other theory that would resonate with what we were doing at the time. And then we started to read more, but at the same time, we had no idea that somewhere in Goldsmiths they were holding some conference that was the official 'philo-sophical initiation' for a lot of what we've been discussing between each other.

TSQ   Yeah, Speculative Realism was already a thing. I think this was what separated us conceptually from our peers in Berlin. Because most people at the time were in the NetArt mindset - where the subject matter was specifically about the effects of technology and the internet and about -

KN   Distribution. A lot of it was about image politics.

TSQ   - and Seth Price's dispersion.

KN   Exactly! The source of theory for that was basically Seth Price. And then we were like 'nah maybe something else'.

TSQ   The topic at the time was the distri-

bution and circulation of images. It got me thinking that there was an existing framework for this that wasn't being talked about. Instead of thinking about versions, if you think about culture as variation - variation, mutation, replication - then ecology and evolution come into play. And this was a thing that was present, that I think people didn't put into words back then, and the term 'meme' had yet to catch on. This is also why I don't think the term post-internet is entirely appropriate for us, as it still indicates this relation to, or lens of, technology. But I think our work is more about the collapse of the natural and cultural. The collapse of dualism.

KN   Yeah, the reason that I called Post-Internet Survival Guide a "survival guide" was because it already felt crucial to be approaching things from this ecological perspective. That whatever contemporary art is going to emerge from now on, it has to be self-aware and rendered as deeply connected to flows of capital, data and technologies, images and attention economies, the various materials that are sourced from the planet by humans, followed by the exploitative and complex chains of synthesis and production, as well as the nonhuman beings who are forced to co-exist with all of this, and so on... As you said, going beyond binaries and hierarchies. And out of various trends in the online art practices of the time, certain networks of Tumblr blogs were already capturing this, one image at a time, through their platform-specific, open-ended visual assemblages, in simple yet profound ways. My premise for the book was to generate a

manual of sorts, in order to begin processing the state of the world and one's position in it, as it has been unfolding in its full complexity. These are the art-works and filtered material that will hopefully activate your senses.

LC   Regardless of people being familiar or not with this philosophy that you have in common, and that also serves as the backbone of both of your practices, you have exposure. How do you address the misinterpretations of your work?

TSQ   I think the most common misconception of my work has been that it strives to belong to the category of mimetic or immanent critique. Whereby the "signs of capital" are pushed or "accelerated" to absurdity and therefore are meant to reveal and critique the contradictions and hidden "logic" of capitalism. But having read DeLanda, I don't really subscribe to this conception of capitalism in the first place. We tend to think of capitalism as a monocausal system. Almost a consciousness in itself, with its own wants and desires, whose psychic resonance can be psychoanalyzed from the objects and images that populate our world. But in reality, this is a reification of diverse and radically heterogeneous processes. We uncritically equate markets with monopolistic corporations and believe that everything that humans create that has something to do with commerce in some way, is infected by the hidden "logic" or "modalities" of some demon-like force. Instead, I think that there are some latent western/ Christian reasonings at play in this analysis, and that it leads to a stereotyping

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of images. Evidence shows that cultural and commercial images are much more determined by the dynamics of cognition rather than any single ideology. In my use of commercial aesthetics, I'm more interested in the anthropological, psychological, and material dynamics of images.

KN   There are many mechanisms at play and I also realized that a lot of time the people who will be deeply engaging with your work and the people who are helping it to be "successful", are two different kinds of people. It doesn't always overlap. For me, these disparities and partial understandings are interesting in themselves, as they also expose a bit the system in which the art-works exist. A misunderstanding can be perhaps predicted and played with. Lately, I've been using a lot of images of processes or animals most people have very little cultural literacy of: like protein structures, visualizations of image-processing algorithms and various lab organisms. All these things are crucial to the social issues that will become important in the nearest future if not yesterday, yet the modes of creation and distribution of these images perhaps exist outside of the domain typically seen as cultural. And as such are sometimes assigned stereotypically negative readings like 'something related to biotech = sciencey, scary, evil' or 'dystopian AI' without a proper further unpacking. In this context, something like DeLanda's weaving of germs, human languages, and economies into intercon-nected maps of relations, seemed like a very good tool for me to help and articulate what's going on.

TSQ   What connected with me was that it no longer was casting history as an escha-tological struggle of good vs evil but rather returning the human to the realm of the natural behavior of animals, materials, and systems. How the properties and capacities of materials shape us, our cultures, our languages, and our economies. But often this conceptual collapse of the human and the natural is met with suspicion because of an unchecked naturalistic fallacy: equating natural with morally correct.

KN   I mean, the biggest argument that is often made here is not that "natural is good", but that if you describe something as natural you induce that it has to stay this way. And that basically negates the possibility of active participation and social change.

TSQ   Right, determinism. But of course nature is anything but static. I think what lies at the heart of both of our practices is this collapsing of the technological and the biological which often is misinterpreted as …

KN   Techno-optimism …

TSQ   Techno-optimism, exactly. That our naturalization of the technological is fetishistic. But what I think is really happening is that people are inherently uncomfortable with moving past the human/nature dualism at the heart of western thought. Whereas that's something that is really grounded in our work: this idea that ultimately the synthetic and the natural are false categories and that for the

good of the planet we can no longer think in these terms.

LC   Maybe we can discuss more specifically on both of your current projects and the new directions that your practices are taking. Katja, for your last exhibition at Greene Naftali in New York and for the Venice Biennale you created these sculptures based on automatic baby cradles - where do these elements come from? And Timur you re-branded Peace to New Peace - a fictional brand that has been the foundation of many of your works so far - I'm curious about the difference between them.

KN   Every time I do a show I introduce a slight novelty or new element that I haven't tried before. I started to work with resin - then the next step is how do I use it further. I came to this understanding that it has to be a kind of dynamic-motion based object that would still retain some qualities of an animalistic form. So, as I was watching some youtube videos, I noticed these baby swings in someone's house, in the background. I did some research and I ordered several of them to my studio and bared them down to their bones. When you take all the soft baby fabrics and baby stuff off them, they actually looked like very crude skeletons - and their motions are very raw as well: just back and forth or around. So I was like "That's perfect; that's my machine, it reminds me of ancient life forms". If initially these baby swings were designed for caretaking and imitation of bonding, once you have a bunch of them together it really does become quite haunting. I wanted to go more towards an uncanny zone, to work with forms that provoke and unsettle

without originating directly from a military context or something that appears 'strong and masculine'. At some point in the last couple of years, a lot of people would come to me and say: "Oh I like your cute animal sculptures!" I knew that I had to change directions. I didn't want to play that game: to produce a thousand sculptures of cute animals and then just get trapped in that. With the swings, the first reaction is always "What the fuck is this?" Which is great! It's not like "it's a cute animal, it's mine, I want to buy it".

LC   It's funny because I recognize the same starting point in both of your practices. Experimenting with what attracts people's attention in a very psychological way: cute animals, direct gaze portraits, innate maternal feelings… and it works out so well it seems… People do fall for it.

KN   Yeah, ultimately it is this fascination with the history of morphogenesis: how forms emerged on this planet. From the millions of species of animals and coral reefs to art, digital images, and robotic machines. And how humans are obviously entangled in all of this but it's really not just about them.

TSQ   I think Katja and I were both interested in this idea of the structure of the possibility space of attention, and we were thinking about the real material story behind the ubiquity of certain kinds of images. I think that we both felt like it's that ubiquity and that pattern that ultimately can't be explained by what critical theory was purporting: that

ideology is behind everything. And I'm not saying that ideology isn't part of it but…

KN   It's just not a complete picture.

TSQ Exactly.

LC   Timur, we're approaching the end of the interview and we haven't had the chance to talk about New Peace…

TSQ   I guess with "Peace" I was thinking about trying to explore new classes of materials and thinking about a brand as a class of material that has its own tendencies and capacities. A brand as an ecological sculpture that is expressed through an ecosystem of signifiers. With the Peace brand, I was trying to bring all these different signs together in an effort to reveal their lack of permanent identity and also, at the same time, continue with this investigation of patterns in image space and of the genesis generic forms. Now with "New Peace", I want to use the tools of branding and advertising to synthesize and popularize a new spiritual relationship to matter. I feel like this dualism at the heart of western thought is really preventing us humans from properly under-standing our role and relation to the rest of the material universe. It separates us from the rest of life, other animals and ecosystems.

KN   And I find this question fascinating and important: what is an ecological sculpture that doesn't necessarily look like 'eco-art' but addresses the idea of ecological systems

throughout their whole spectrum of relations.

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New Peace

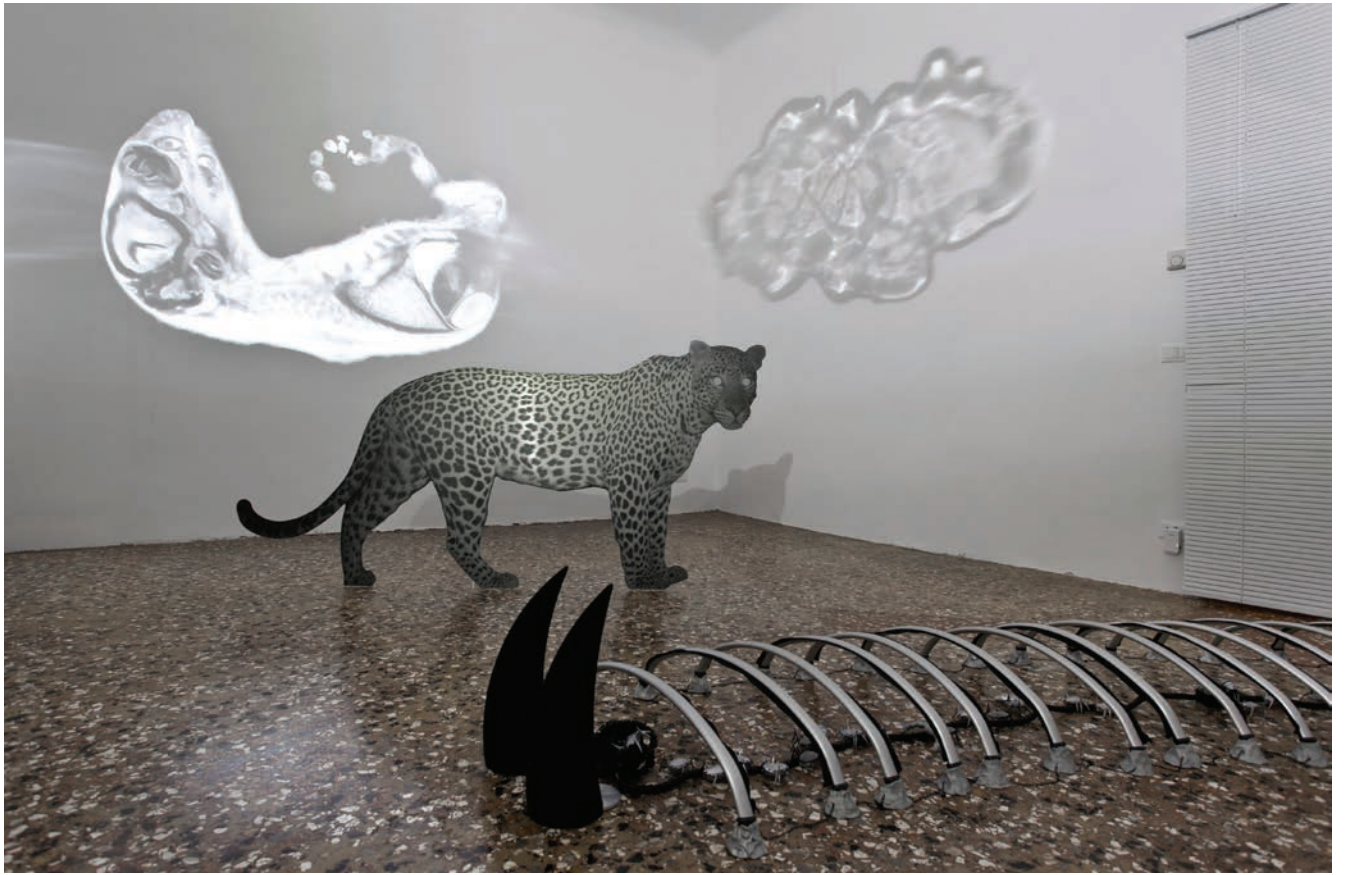Radical Immanence, Infinite Difference.
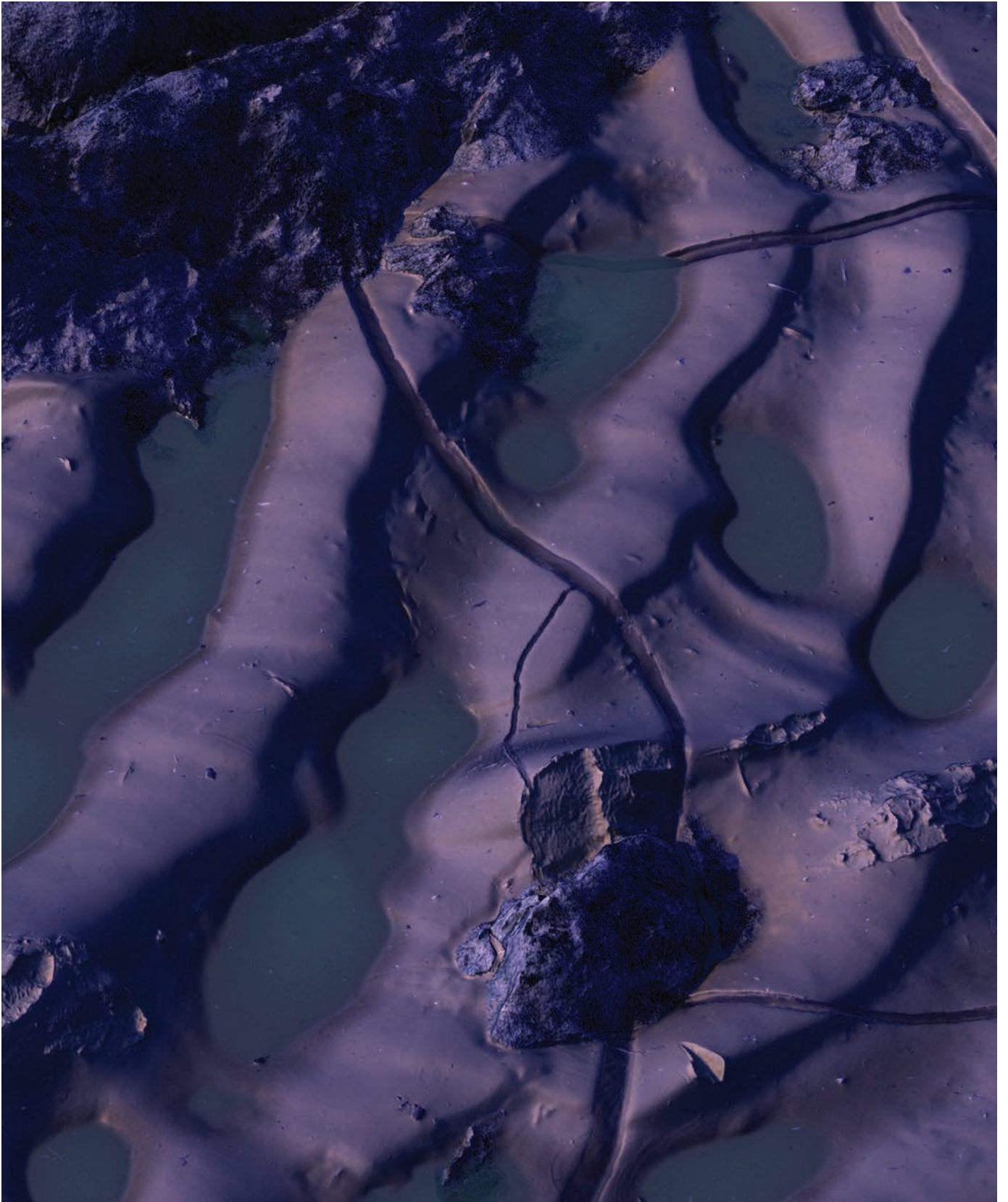
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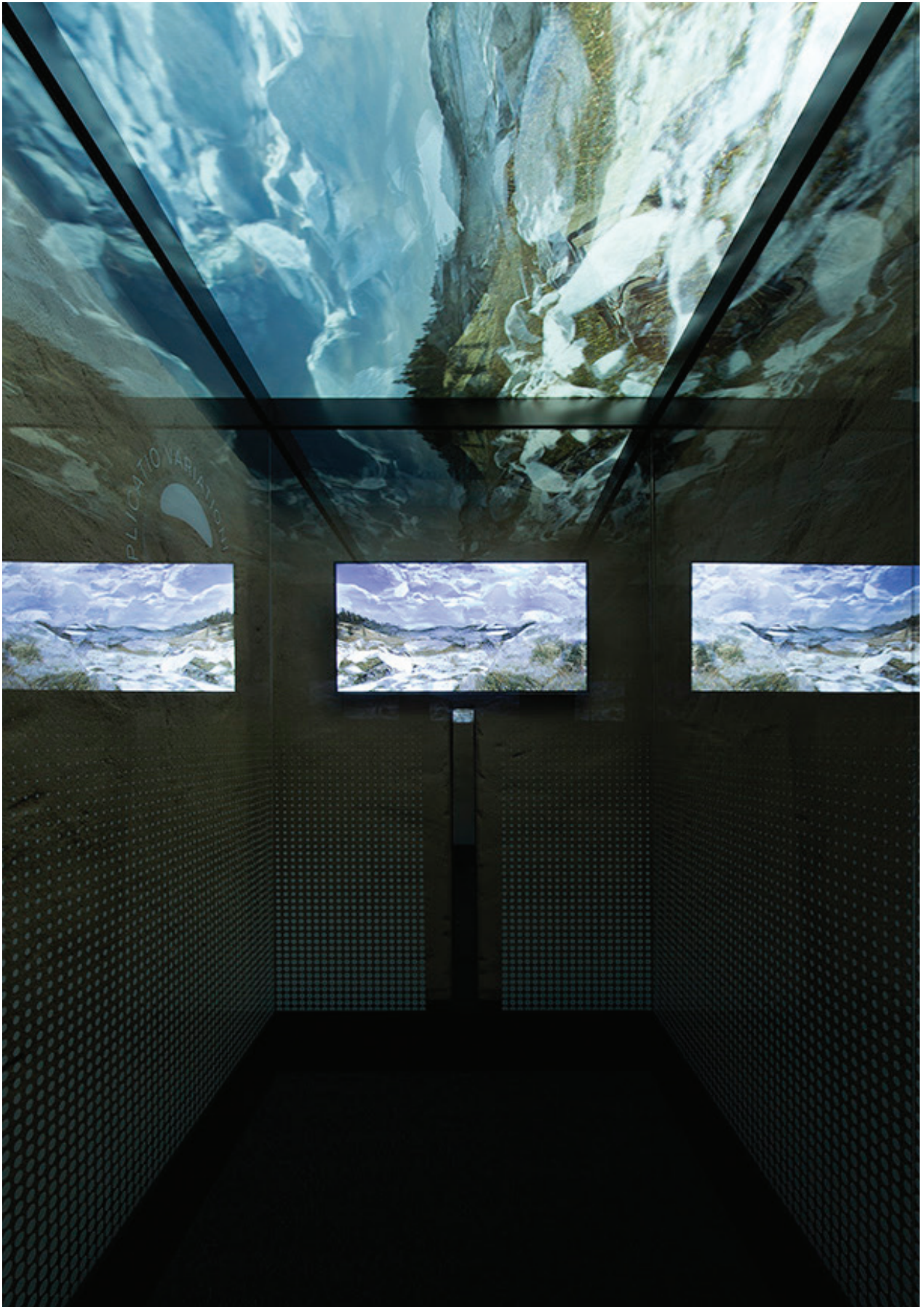
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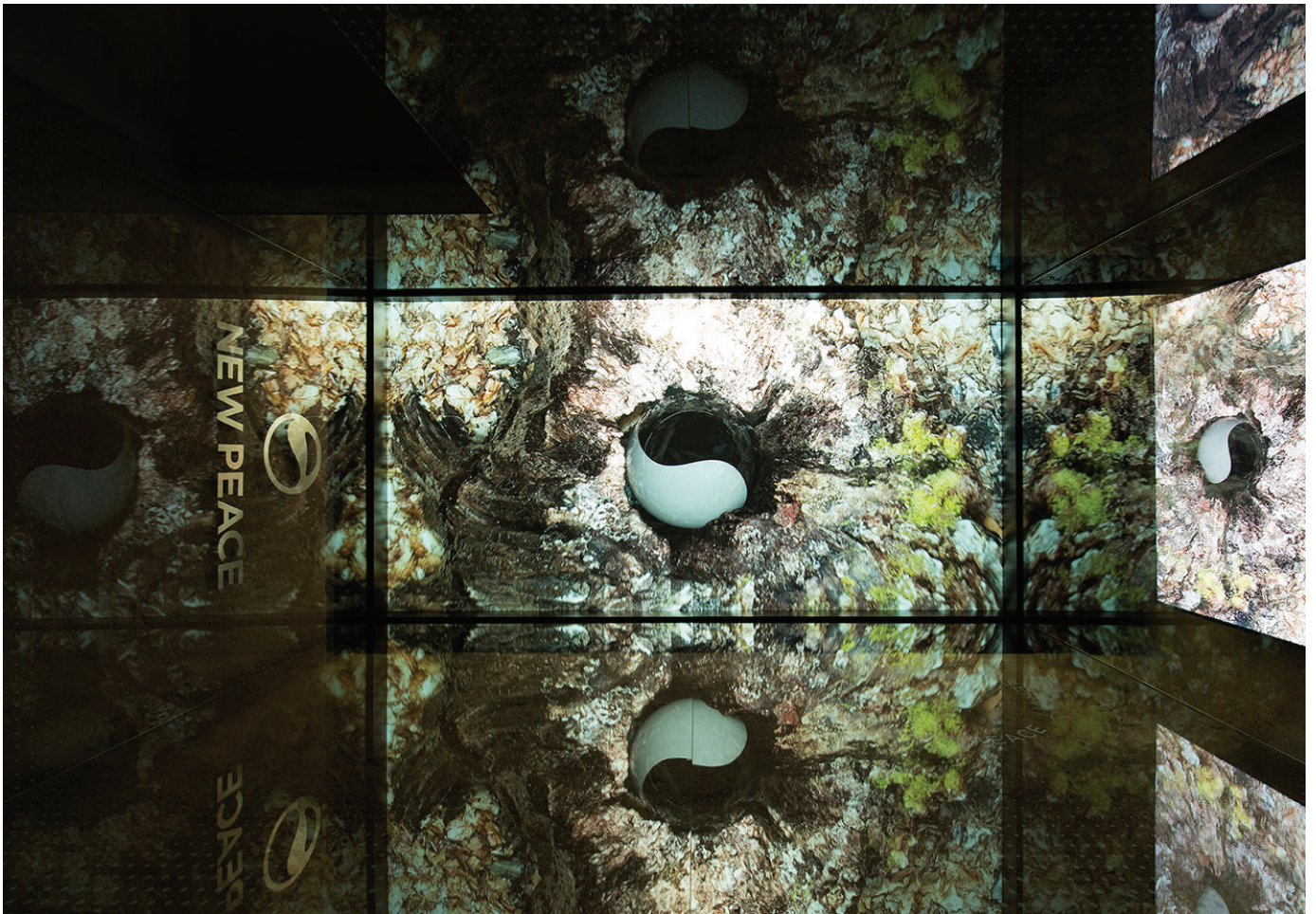
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Mamaroo (Storm Time, Robotic Bugs), 2016
Electronic baby swing, polyurethane resin,
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