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ALMA
HEIKKILÄ:
INDIVIDUALITY,
IDENTITY, AND
RELATED
METAPHYSICAL
IDEAS

RADIUS
Center for Contemporary Art and Ecology



ALMA HEIKKILÄ: INDIVIDUALITY, IDENTITY, AND RELATED METAPHYSICAL IDEAS

31 May — 24 August 2025

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This exhibition has been made possible with the support of:

Frame Contemporary Art Finland

Mondriaan Fund

Municipality of Delft

The Finnish Cultural Institute

RADIUS

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Alma Heikkilä's works are often attempts to represent things that cannot be experienced by the human body and its senses. These include microbial life forms too small to be consciously encountered in everyday life; forest ecosystems where important processes occur underground and within plants; and many large-scale phenomena that occur at speeds and dimensions beyond our comprehension. For her solo exhibition at RADIUS, Heikkilä presents new work that explores the entanglement of the human body with the environment. For this occasion, the emphasis will be on humans and the often unnoticed importance of microbial life forms that make human life possible—think, for example, of bacteria in the intestinal flora, or phytoplankton in the production of oxygen. Mixing ideas around philosophy of biology, biological individuality, metaphysics, and personal identity, the works in the exhibition confuse and challenge the understanding in both the oneness and sameness of who we are.

For Heikkilä, art is a domain for multispecies collaboration and communality. By connecting with an array of different modes of being, ranging from bacteria, fungal spores, and other agencies that conjointly are and shape the fundamental building blocks of life on Earth, her role as an artist seems modest: extending an invitation to gather and connect. However, this invitation is not necessarily meant as to solely have an experience of something or to make an appointment *with* thought—as an individuated and intellectual exercise, joining with our preconceived knowledges and epistemological maps in hand—, but equally serves to make our *feedback loops* come full circle: the embodiment of the brain *and* the 'embrainment' of the body. Whilst usually embedded in the shared living environment, concepts like these are here solidified in the shape of an exhibition. This invitation is thus formulated and extended in diametrical opposition to the conventional anthropocentric, western, and modernist notion of art as a cultural field of inter-human energy-exchange, where intentionalities are unveiled in the shape of objects, and receptions and understandings govern through apprehending and grappling human subjects.

In line with the previous, art and life coincide in Heikkilä's artistic practice, quite literally, as her work is both indebted to and engrained with the different other-than-human-agencies that co-author the work—including microorganisms she carries within her own body, including bacteria indispensable to human health and wellbeing. Heikkilä literally works with the materials; they are not merely resources, but co-agencies. From this symbiotic and reciprocal understanding, the large-scale painting works presented at RADIUS thus bypass a mere representational field and painterly pictorial regime, to their recovery in the key of being and becoming sites of multifarious ontological grounding, in the plural. In other words still, painting is not a metaphor, image or mirror, but a multispecies site of becoming-with, of worlding-possibility.

In times of increasing ecological breakdown, it seems more and more difficult to uphold a dual approach to our surrounding environments and continue to rest overly comfortably in our respective categories as cultural beings. Moreover, our cultural self-image as humans stipulates that we do not see ourselves as living beings

and therefore often put ourselves outside of the equation. If we just think about the ways in which 'nature' has re-entered 'human' history and 'culture' through climate change, we simply cannot continue to 'see double' and must confront that we humans are an integral part of the world that is actually lived by us. By extension, and analogous to the human body, our cultural institutions, like this exhibition space, have become equally porous and susceptible to a world that is toxic, irradiated, and full of injustice—to pretend that all is business-as-usual, and staying with autonomy instead of the trouble is truly ignorant in times where science facts are dripping from our ceilings.

Moving back-and-forth between domains and scaling between agencies—of scientific knowledge, personal experience, and philosophy—Heikkilä underwrites the importance this porous share, of interdependence, mutualism, reciprocity, and symbiosis in moving away from the feigned and fictitious categories of individuality and purity. On the level of the work presented, the human bodies in their and each other's proximity, and the space in which these entities coalesce, it becomes clear that collaboration is first and foremost a process of giving and taking, processes of differing beyond reductive notions of radical otherness. Hence, to accept this invitation, is to enter the exhibition as a metamorphic zone. A space—in the words of philosopher of science Bruno Latour—"where humans and non-humans keep exchanging their properties; that is, their figurations. A non-anthropomorphic character is a character all the same. It has agency. It moves. It undergoes trials. It elicits reactions. It becomes describable. This, however, does not mean that we are 'projecting' anthropomorphic features on what should remain an object; it simply means that the shape—that is, the morphism of the human character—is just as open to inquiry, to shape-changing, as that of a non-human."¹

1 Bruno Latour, 'How Better to Register the Agency of Things', *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 22.

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*tangible, concrete, and changing
entities - nails, mirror, culture (2025)*

pigments and inks, rice glue and acrylic polymer on
polyester, 200 x 290 cm

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*both the oneness and sameness of who we
are forehead, brain cells (2025)*

pigments and inks, rice glue and acrylic polymer on
polyester, 200 x 290 cm

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human hand and belly (2025)

plaster, polyester, inks and pigments, styrofoam, resin
116 x 87 x 40 cm

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mouse hand and belly (2025)

plaster, polyester, inks and pigments, styrofoam, resin
100 x 47 x 42 cm

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mitochondrion (2025)

plaster, polyester, inks and pigments, styrofoam, resin
43 x 47 x 42 cm

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cellular respiration (2025)

pigments and inks, rice glue and acrylic polymer on
polyester, 200 x 290 cm

ℒ

subsumed (2025)

pigments and inks, rice glue and acrylic polymer on
polyester, 200 x 290 cm

8

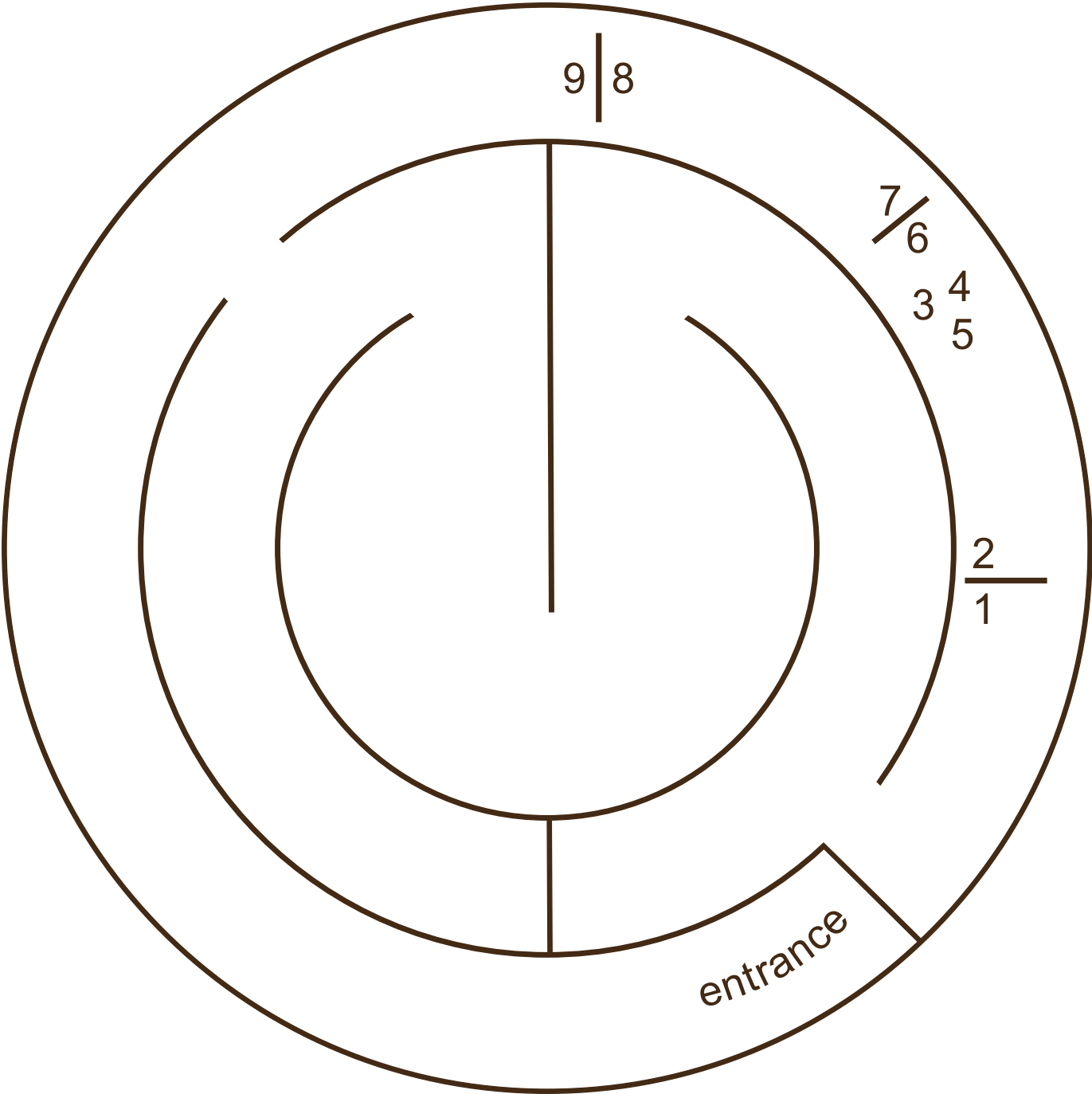
*personal identity and being a part of
integrated whole a living being (2025)*

pigments and inks, rice glue and acrylic polymer on
polyester, 200 x 290 cm

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*in Earth that is synergistic, complex and
self-regulating (2025)*

pigments and inks, rice glue and acrylic polymer on
polyester, 200 x 290 cm



BOUNDARY ISSUES

Daisy Lafarge

If I tell you what to do, will you be good? Now. Hold your arm out in front of you, back of your hand to the ground, palm up. Like that. The knuckles curl in because they are used to forming a claw around your phone. But no, no looking. Your device is confiscated until we are done here. You flex the fingers open like a crab on its back, feel the tight pads of your hand unfurling, the muscles stretching to a new neutral. Good. The joints crack; maybe you like that. But did I say you're allowed to enjoy it yet? Pull up a sleeve. Show me the inside of your arm where the skin is softer, the hairs grow in finer and the visible veins watch you back. Blood vessels are a dichotomy of kinks, you know. Venous, arterial. I am still deciding on yours. The arterial sensibility: *reoxygenated, assertive, active, progressive, optimistic*. The venous: *nostalgic, tired, wavelike, fighting against gravity and inertia, a little homesick and full of longing*. I can make do with either, but I think that flight of colour from your cheeks just betrayed you. This is going to be a lesson in boundaries. You're human, so of course you have issues. Some of you more than others. There's your skin – it looks inevitably membranous, lid-like enough. Now with the fingernail of your other hand – or someone else's, don't make me do it for you – I want you to draw. Scratch a line from the middle of the forearm to the inside of the elbow. A line like a vein returns to the heart, nostalgic for oxygen. Hard enough that you can feel the cells clump under the nail, but not so hard it makes you gasp. Not yet. Now watch it. Did I say you could look away? I want you to tell me everything. First it goes white. A little sediment dislodged by the nail, a fine powder of skin cells. Or maybe a line never appears in the wake of your nail; maybe it bloomed and then fizzed out like a contrail in a blue sky. But for *you* – yes you with the boundary issue – I know you saw it, are seeing it still. How long did it take for the line to get excited, blush pink, then red, then pucker up over the surface, pushing its shape into the air like that, like it loved it, like it doesn't know about discretion, about shame? It's okay – I want you to enjoy it. Now we are going to see how long it lasts. Ten seconds, thirty, a minute – the longer the scratch gleams red, the better. At least for the purpose of our exercise. Maybe now you're beginning to wonder why? It would be more understandable if the line turned red from a cat scratch, a dog bite, a nettle sting, or if you'd dipped your fingernails in something irritating. But no – it would appear that this allergy response – if we can call it that – is provoked by the closed circuit of your own touch. Now we are getting down to it. We can talk about allergies, or we can talk about boundaries, the suggestibility of matter, the body as a baroque edifice, a bricolaged environment of ancient cells and newborn plastics. In dermatographia – skin writing – the world engraves itself on your body. Your flesh is the thirsty page and the ink is histamine, flushed from mast cells at the hint of a touch. I see you're getting excited now, curious. Do you find it hot to make yourself bloom like that? Supreme sensitivity. I know you like it when I talk about the intricacy of matter, about the total promiscuity of cellular life, how it got under and into your skin. How the mast cells are the most ancient part of the immune system, a primordial fossil from half a billion years ago. Those histamine-flushing cells that make

your skin turn scarlet were doing so long before humans existed. They weren't exactly organisms unto themselves – like your mitochondria that swam freely in ancient waters before rooting into your cells – but they had other things to take care of. They poised in ancestors of sharks and hagfish, waiting to engulf any pathogens that came their way. Then they got used to engulfing, and by the time you came along, they'd become stubborn, fixated on a role already mostly outdated. The rest of your immune system evolved around them, regarding the mast cells as antiquated – a touching reminder of simpler times. Look – they're blushing again. Is it really surprising that cells know when we are talking about them? The mast cells are just hungry to engulf, hungry to be useful. You should admire their appetite. In you who are dermatographically blessed, the mast cells are exquisitely subtle. Or maybe they're addicted. Anything can trigger them to rush up to the surface – a touch, a whiff of perfume, a squeeze of lemon. Hives bloom all over you like jewels, your pulse races, you are too exhilarated to sleep. Fog rolls over your thoughts like a cloud of unknowing. Do you like how it makes you feel special? I know you do. Good. I know you're itching to scratch again but I won't let you just yet. We can do it all over again, but different this time, if you'd like that. Okay. Now you're no longer human but a beautiful starfish larva. Soft and diaphanous; clear, glittering flesh in place of muscles, sinew and bone. Mobile cells move through you like wandering stars. You're my favourite specimen, making shapes while I watch through the eye of my microscope to make sure you're being good. I know you like me looking like that. What else? Do you like it when I set the scene? It's 1881, not far from Christmas. I'm the father of immunology Élie Metchnikoff. I've been studying you for a while, but for some reason, on this particular afternoon, I have a new idea for something we can try together. Maybe it's the season, maybe it's because all my family are out at the circus watching performing apes, so we are finally alone. I think about your flesh, transparent as water. It makes me shiver all over. Suddenly I know what to do. I go out into the garden and over to my wife's bed of roses. I pluck half a dozen thorns – she won't miss them. By the time I get back to you you're trembling. I know – you're being so patient,

* On the occasion of this exhibition we have invited Daisy Lafarge to contribute a text to coincide with this exhibition. Daisy Lafarge is a writer and artist based in Glasgow, Scotland. Born in Hastings, England, she has lived in Scotland since 2011. Her writing on ecology, art and literature has been widely published. One of these works is *Lovebug* (2023), a book on the poetics of infection, which we considered resonant in relation to the work of Alma Heikkilä.

so well-behaved. It's almost time to reward you. Now. Take a deep breath and hold still. This might hurt a little or it might not – after all you have no blood vessels, no nervous system. Either way I want you to take it. Slowly, I push the rose thorn into your side. Breath out as you feel its tip pierce the delicate membrane. Good, keep breathing. Now take it as I push harder, until your flesh engulfs the rest of it. Don't struggle. There. Good. And now I'm going to leave the thorn there until I say so. I'm going to go to bed, although I'm so excited it will be difficult to sleep. And when I come back in the morning I expect you to still be here, taking it. I'm going to watch and I'm going to make notes. I'm going to describe what I'm seeing: the wandering cells of your body swarming around the thorn, eating away at the troubled tissue. Is that you enjoying it, contracting around the entry point, tasting its bite? The difference between penetration and circlusion; in the former I break into you, but in the latter you pull and tighten yourself around me. Circlusion makes you gasp, makes your mouth water. The problem is that no one will believe me, and I need them to. So I spin a different story. I tell everyone that the roses were incidental – of course there was nothing romantic about it. I christen your cells phagocytes, devourers of cells. I say that you were trying to defend yourself. I become the father of the immune system, and I explain that it's all about attack and

defense. The boundaries are perfectly clear – no issues. It's absurd to think it might be more complicated. What? Don't look at me like that. Aren't you proud to be part of the story, just by being good? Think of all the lives we'll save by understanding that we are under attack. I don't care if you felt otherwise. We're done here. Progress is arterial; there's no point being maudlin and venous about it. So go back to being yourself, to touching yourself like an allergen just to feel something. I'm busy. The world already writes on your skin like it's obsessed with you. So what do you need me for?

* Italicised descriptions of arterial and venous blood are adapted from Mary Ruefle's *Madness, Rack and Honey: Collected Lectures* (2012).