

“...outside the restrictions of time”

Essay by Lucia Longhi

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Humans are time-based creatures. We shaped ourselves on time, thus time took our shape. The human tempo measures human and non-human lives and sculpts theories. What happens if we remove the time factor from our perception, from our lives?

A new phase of human evolution has started, in which new entities enter the scene thanks to the advancement of scientific and technological research. They are creatures of the macrocosm and microcosm: black holes, electrons, stars, the forest's giant plants, artificial intelligences, etc. These entities contain a different time in them – immensely distinct from ours. Time itself has changed; research in quantum physics has returned a multifaceted, malleable, relative time.

Maija Tammi and Charles Quevillon explore alternative existences. They observe nature and technology from a reversed perspective in order to activate new hierarchies and test the ideas of life and death. Festinger's theory, according to which self-knowledge occurs through comparison with the other, resurfaces. The artistic duo dive into a dimension inhabited by beings imbued with a temporality which is different from ours: the *Hydra vulgaris* – a freshwater polyp that doesn't undergo aging and death – and technology, which, like a new divinity, has no age and is immortal. Two beings forcing us to reexamine time, and therefore existence. In the exhibited works, the ultra-human characteristics of these beings are exposed: containing the infinite and the immortal, they rise to divinity. Consequently, our whole identity is questioned. As a variation on a theme, different nuances of the concept of existence are performed, both from philosophical and social perspectives.

We are invited to relate to nature and technology in a new way – a path which discloses the corporeal, the technological, and the divine traversing different temporalities. An exploration “outside the restrictions of time”. In this path we are guided by the words and thoughts of biologist Cornelia Dulac, who devoted her research to *Hydra vulgaris*. Her scientific and intimate journey is distilled in Maija Tammi's immersive narration, which takes the form of a book, a video, and a set of photographs. The examination of temporality is at the basis of her artistic work, aimed at dissecting, by means of narrative and aesthetic tools, the essence of existence. While studying the hydra, isolated in a remote cabin in the woods in Finland, Cornelia underwent a process of experimental research and at the same time inner scrutiny. Her encounter with the small polyp turned into a rite of initiation to immortality.

By emphasizing the very peculiar relationship between the human being and the hydra, Tammi intends to unfold the diverse questions arising from this encounter. Dulac's scientific and yet very personal approach to the analysis of the hydra displays many layers of significances: biological hierarchy, motherhood, aging, divinity, and, above all, immortality. While dissecting the polyp, she is also dissecting her innermost, vulnerable matter. The gap between her mortal condition and the hydra's immortality seems to dissolve in the disappearance of



the professor herself. Swallowed into the hollow of temporal suspension, we are left with the wonder of Cornelia finding immortality in disappearing.

Charles Quevillon's work also introduces a new vision, in which technology ceases to be a tool and turns into a living creature. Although we cannot attribute it a conscience, it remains inescapable that technology is affecting our faculties, such as abstract thinking and emotions, thus becoming an autonomous being. Quevillon aims at establishing a physical interaction with electronic technologies in order to activate a new level of familiarity with them. His musical performance is engendered by the conception of technology as a new divinity in our lives, and thus develops as a collective ritual incorporating the human body within the machine. It results in a new existence, outside the restriction of human limits, as technology has its own tempo.

A philosophical and religious approach informs the artists' discourse, inviting to a sort of ritual in which time is erased and a non-human perspective emerges. Indeed, the hydra, with the metaphorical load contained in its name and its ability to regenerate, brings us to a divine dimension. Challenge to death is contained both in its biological structure and the mythological origin of its name. Killing the Hydra, a nine-headed monster that regenerated after decapitation, was part of the twelve endeavors Hercules had to face to atone for the guilt of killing his family. The labors of Hercules represent the epitome of the human's challenge to death and the divine. Hercules succeeds in killing the Hydra and interrupts its immortality. Nevertheless, this does not bring his family back to life, nor does it make him immortal.

A chain of life and death enwraps the figure of the hydra. This is precisely the background of Tammi's proposition, which intertwines history and mythology, biology and chronicle, where the impermanent comes to assimilate the eternal. Both Tammi's and Quevillon's works stage the human aspiration of uniting with the divinity in order to soar to its timeless condition. Thus the scientific practice turns into a religious act, recalling the ritualistic gestures in which the human incorporates the god in an attempt of perfection, redemption, and immortality. "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:54) Cornelia's gesture combines a desperate eucharist and the utmost hybris: the assimilation of the eternal body within the human body, epitomizing the primordial desire of immortality. The longing to liberate oneself from time and walk that third path which is "not past, nor future"; it is the eternal present.

If religion is the activation of the divine within the human dimension – then Quevillon's interactive sound installation also stands as a ritual, in which the human body intertwines with the god's body: the technological device. Just like Cornelia with the hydra, Quevillon's installation sutures the gap between human and divine. A new scenario opens up, in which humanity, nature, and technology exist freed from time.

The mythological hybris has expanded to this day, leading to dramatic emergencies, such as climate change. The installations therefore encourage a rethinking of our empathy for nature and technology, ultimately evoking immortality. Nevertheless, it is a type of immortality that detaches from hybris, standing for liberation from the human time, and therefore from a human-based perspective. In such times of crisis, the exhibition invites us to renegotiate our role, to extinguish the current anthropocentric vision, and ignite new evolutionary horizons in which man, nature, and technology are equal agencies in shaping existence.