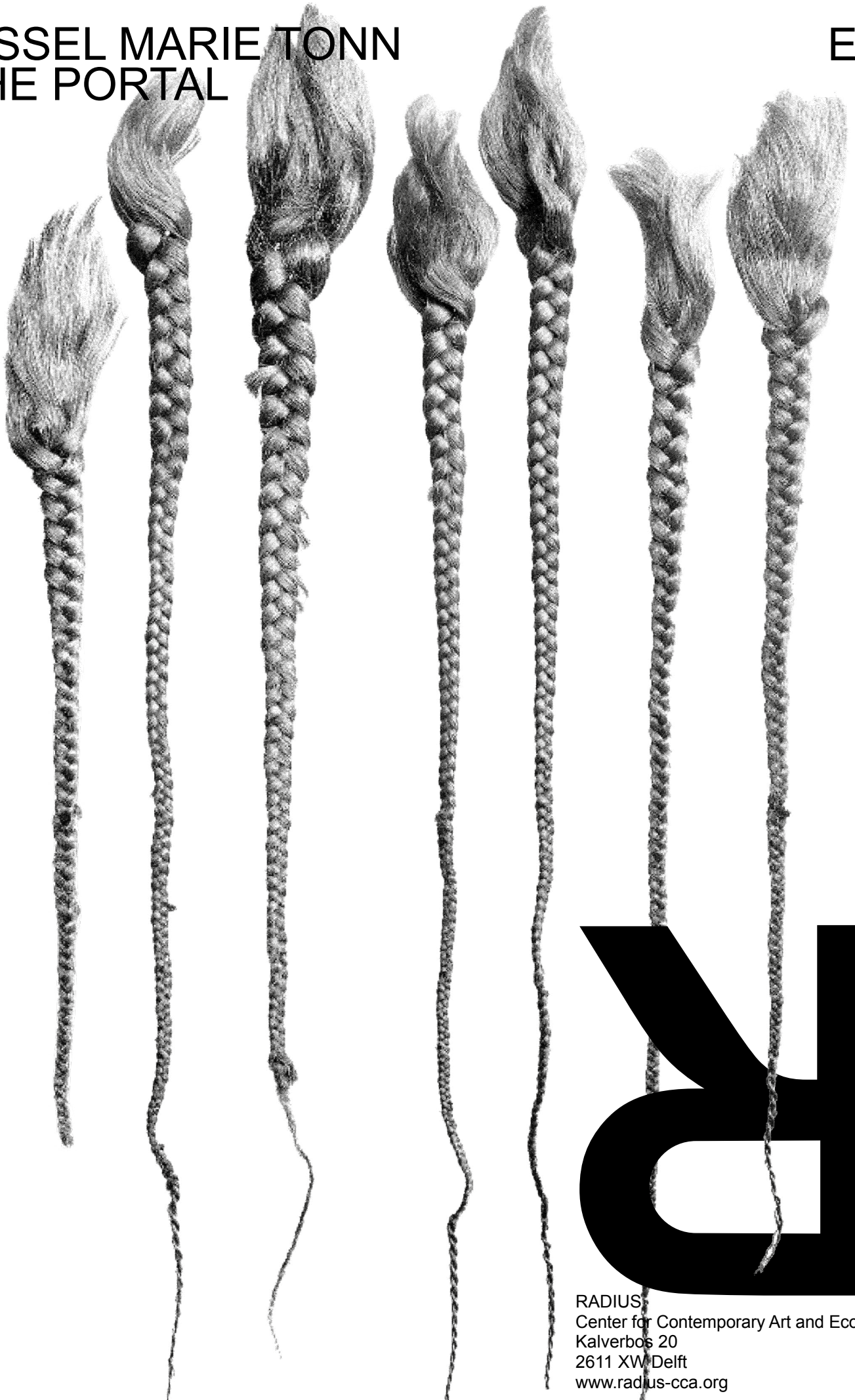


SISSEL MARIE TONN  
THE PORTAL

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Photo by Sissel Marie Tonn. Yde Girl, detail, Drents Museum. 2021



About two thousand and two hundred years ago in contemporary Denmark, the body of an adult woman was laid dead in a bog, a freshwater wetland mainly composed of peat, an accumulation of decayed plant matter at a preliminary stage before turning into other kinds of fossil fuel, mainly coal. She was found by a peat digger in 1879 in Huldremose, in the peninsula of Djursland, by the Kattegat. The specific acidic and poor oxygen conditions of the bog, in combination with the seasonal conditions under which the woman was buried, enabled the corpse to be preserved for a long period of time. The woman was fully clothed, had a ring on her finger, amulets in a cape, amber beads around the neck, and a willow branch on her chest. While in the Scandinavian Iron Age the dead were commonly incinerated, the woman of Huldremose was intentionally laid in the bog, possibly as part of a ritual sacrifice. Bogs were considered sacred spaces for spiritual transition between the human world and the realm of gods. Rituals in honour of deities of fertility were commonly done in bogs, and sometimes they would include human sacrifice and burial.

The woman of Huldremose was taken to the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, where she is still preserved and exhibited. It was there when, at a young age, Sissel Marie Tonn saw a bog body for the first time, marking the beginning of a long time fascination with them. This childhood fascination later became an important object of study in her artistic practice, with a first iteration in *Sphagnum Time* (2020–2021), a video and ceramics installation that is now expanded into *The Portal* (2023), which debuts in this exhibition.

The bog bodies that every now and then were discovered at peat-digging sites during the first half of the twentieth century, were taken to museums for analysis and preservation. Archeologists would observe the visible bruises and cuts in the bodies and deduct that they had been victims of violence and crime before being cast into the bogs, most likely because they had been considered outcasts under the social conventions of the time. However, thanks to advancements in forensic technologies during the early 2000s, more nuanced theories emerged, arguing that the bruises and cuts found in the bodies were likely to have occurred postmortem. Moreover, interpretations of ritualistic sacrifices gained popularity, most prominently the research of Pauline Asingh, an archeologist who has studied the Grauballe Man, a bog body preserved at the Moesgaard Museum, Denmark. Asingh argues that sacrifice in prehistoric Scandinavian communities was a means to address their dependencies to the environment, as well as a plea to the deities of nature for favourable weather conditions. In this way, the bog was understood as a 'portal' through which humans could establish communication with the world of gods, spirits, and ancestors.

While the very few examples of discovered bog bodies have been painstakingly preserved, becoming an object of marvel that attract many visitors, the bogs wherein they were found have long been neglected and uncared for. Continued extraction of fuel from bogs and depletion as a result of agriculture and deforestation is fatal for the environment: when the ecosystem of the bog becomes unbalanced, the CO<sub>2</sub> it has been storing over the past thousands of years is released. Long misunderstood as wastelands, bogs are precious ecologies that play a crucial role in the carbon cycle as they are the most efficient carbon sinks on Earth. Bogs in Scotland, for instance, hold the equivalent of around 140 years of the nation's greenhouse gases.<sup>1</sup> In realising the pressing need to protect bogs whilst climate change critically unfolds, countries like Denmark are making efforts to reintroduce bogs for carbon sequestering.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Portal*, Sissel Marie Tonn expands on her artistic research on the bog, once an awe-inspiring site of contact with spirits, ancestors and gods, now a threatened ecosystem that is key to counteract ecological decline. Conceived as a sensorial exploration of the bog, *The Portal* presents new video, sound, and ceramic work that reflect on the ecosystem's cultural and ecological entanglements, learning what it is to be human, both in deep past, present, and in speculative futures. Just as the soil counterbalances carbon dioxide produced by plants, normal human behaviour makes up for the artificiality of our surroundings. Are there chances we once again regard this ecosystem as a portal, alive and inseparable from us, in the pressing need to consider posthuman subjectivities and bodies?

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*A mysticism for the Anthropocene, just like mysticism through the ages, would regard the 'object' of knowledge as alive and inseparable from the mind and body that encounters it. Elvia Wik<sup>3</sup>*

1 Martha Henriques, 'The Promise and Danger of Scotland's bog', *BBC Future Planet*, 3.8.2022: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220802-climate-change-the-promise-and-danger-of-scotlands-peat>

2 Carbon sequestration is the long-term storage of carbon in plants, soils, geologic formations, and the ocean. Carbon sequestration occurs both naturally and as a result of human activities. In response to growing concerns about climate change resulting from increased carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere, considerable interest has been drawn to the possibility of increasing the rate of carbon sequestration through changes in land use and forestry and also through geoengineering techniques such as carbon capture and storage (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

In 2021, Tonn made 3D scans of three bog bodies in the Drents Museum (Assen, NL), which became the main characters of her previous work *Sphagnum Time*, and reappear in *The Portal*. These bog bodies differ from others in that they present remains of peat moss, or sphagnum, which has fused with the human skin. In the video installation, the bodies exist in a realm where they have never been found by peat diggers, and they have obtained a posthuman subjectivity, one that is deeply entangled with other-than-human species and entities: acidic water, sphagnum, trapped methane gas, and bacterial ecosystems that maintain the bog. In *The Portal*, the bog is expanded as a meta-organism containing multitude of lives and worlds and symbolic meanings. The bog bodies are in dialogue of coexistence together with the changing ecosystem, which is brimming with acid-loving microbes, will-o-the-wisps, sphagnum species, carnivorous plants, and sacrificial gifts such as quartz crystals, dogs, and braids of human hair.<sup>4</sup>

The digital bog landscape contains layered symbolic processes that change over time, such as weather conditions, pollen flows, slow-moving banks of fog, and the decomposition of bits of organic matter. On the other hand, the bog is also affected by the encroaching presence of pollutants such as 'forever chemicals', which travel between generations, bodies, and environments, connecting us across deep timespans.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, Tonn has been working on a series of works inspired by the term 'sentinel species', which designates species that are monitored to measure environmental contamination. Some examples are man-made earthquakes in *The Intimate Earthquake Archive* (2016–2020); 'forever-chemicals' in the Dutch waterways in *Water-thieves and Time-givers* (2019); and most recently the entanglements between human immune systems and environments increasingly being polluted by microplastics in *The Sentinel Self* (2022–ongoing).

Interspersed among the digital bog entities lies a spectrum of ceramic 'living sculptures'. They are conceived as potential scaffolds for micro-bog ecosystems, inspired by bio-remediation efforts to restore bog ecosystems as carbon off-setters, as well as artificial coral reefs and contemporary urban farming methods to create infrastructures of regrowth. Developed during a residency at EKWC in 2023, the shape of the sculptures consist of a chimerical mixture of different research elements and symbolic vocabulary, including CT scans of bog bodies organs, roots and plant life of peat bogs, and water in motion. Altogether, they conform a speculative bog landscape containing a plurality of symbiotic forms, in which a clear demarcation between what is human and what is not exists no longer, showing that, rather, it has essentially never existed at all.

The interweaving of the bog and its dwellers follows a speculative world where humans leave their self-contained life form and transcend into a new kind of subjectivity. In the exhibition, the sensory installation is a porous experience in which the boundaries between humans, artefacts, and landscape dissipate. Throughout Tonn's work, there is a constant questioning of the clear-cut separation between humans and environment. Alternatively, Tonn's practice operates in the blurriness between them, where her hybrid, interactive installations and objects challenge our perception of what a body is, and where it begins and ends.

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*What does it mean to be a subject in an era that claims to be simultaneously more-than-human and less-than-human? More than human because of its multi-scalar transformations and technological advances, and less than human in its inhumane economic and social polarisations and irreversible environmental devastation. So the question is: who are we?*<sup>6</sup> Rosi Braidotti

As philosopher Rosi Braidotti argues, 'we' are in the process of becoming post-humanist and post-anthropocentric in an embodied and embedded way with the material world. The posthuman becoming takes place in both similarity and difference with each other, human and other-than-human, as "we are after all variations on a common matter. In other words, we differ from each other all the more as we co-define ourselves within the same living matter—environmentally, socially, and relationally."<sup>7</sup> Becoming posthuman does not imply a transition from one state of matter to another. It refers to a realisation of the relational affectivity that has always characterised life on Earth, and the advocacy to assiduously acknowledge it and act upon it in times of acute ecological degradation. In the work of Sissel Marie Tonn, we become posthuman amidst the technological

3 Elvia Wilk, *The Word Made Fresh: Mystical Encounter and the New Weird Divine*, e-flux journal, issue #92, June 2018

4 In folklore, a will-o'-the-wisp or ignis fatuus (Latin for 'giddy flame') is an atmospheric ghost light seen by travellers at night, especially over bogs, swamps or marshes. They are caused by the oxidation of phosphine, diphosphane, and methane; produced by organic decay, these compounds can cause photon emissions.

5 PFAS (Per- and polyfluorinated alkyl substances), also known as 'forever chemicals', are a group of 4,700 highly persistent chemicals that don't occur in nature. They are the most persistent synthetic chemicals to date, they hardly degrade in the natural environment, and have been found in the blood and breastmilk of people and wildlife all round the world.

6 Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), page 42.

7 Ibidem, page 45.



processes of extraction that day after day deepen the anthropocentric wound on the biosphere. Tonn's worlding of the bog is an exuberant portal for posthuman imagination that invites us to gain understanding of its major ecological role while reconsidering our cultural and spiritual attachments to it.

A prominent inspiration for Tonn in her approaches to world-building is the work of the writer Ursula K. Le Guin, who wrote *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* in 1986. This short text situates her style of science fiction while offering an alternative tale to narrate the story of humanity through the invention of carrier bags instead of weapons. Le Guin makes up for the deficiencies of the hero-centred, conflict-based discourse of human development by claiming the container as the first ever cultural device. Whether in the shape of a bowl, a basket, a pouch, a belly, or a house, the carrier bag allows humans to store, keep, and treasure what they find useful, edible, beautiful, or sacred. What kind of stories can be written when the bashing, thrusting, and killing of the weapon are replaced by the bearing and sustaining of the carrier bag? What kind of science fiction emerges when the progressive, techno-heroic arrow of time is superseded by the many nests that bear life and death on Earth in a continuous loop?

Arguably, *The Portal* is a carrier bag for the murmurs of thousand years old bog bodies, who utter the whispers of posthuman subjectivities deep in the thick, spongy layers of wetlands. As Tonn writes, bog bodies contain both "the past and the future, as they continue to exist in an intimate relation with those environments that we, the living, continually shape and reshape to fit our needs."<sup>8</sup> In a posthuman transition where bodies are no longer thought as singular nor exclusively human, what potentialities would emerge for an embodied advocacy for the conservation of ecosystems?

3D scanning at Drents Museum. Photo Credit: C. Tang



Zesien jaren jong, ongeveer 1.40 lang en blond haar. Rond het begin van de jaartelling wordt eerst de rechterkant van haar hoofd kaal geschoren. Daarna wordt ze gewurmd met een wollen spronghempje met daarin een schuifknop. Mogelijk wordt het meisje ook nog met een mes in haar hals gestoken. De oranje wollen mantel die zij draagt, kleurt langzaam bruin doordat ze bijna tweeduizend jaar in het veen ligt bij het dorp Yke. Daar vinden in mei 1877 twee arbeiders haar bij het veen bapieren en van schrik nemen ze de benen. Helaas nemen omstanders steem bijna alle tanden mee en ze maken het haar van het meisje los. Het meisje is waarschijnlijk geofferd aan de goeden.

Photo credit: Moesgaard Museum



Sissel Marie Tonn  
THE PORTAL  
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**3D technician:** Joonas Hyvönen  
**Unity environment advisor:** Joost Eggermont  
**Mocap designer:** Enrique Arce Gutierrez  
**Project support:** CheeYee Tang  
**Music and sound:** Jonathan Chaim Reus  
**Vocalists:** Faye Houston a.k.a. FayeK-47, Campbell Austin a.k.a. C.T. Burnige, Kassia Zermon a.k.a. Bunty  
**Recording Engineer:** Dylan Beattie  
**Aerial performer:** Suzanne de Bekker / The Aerialettes

***Ground Sensing*, 2023**  
stone and earthenware ceramics, rope, bog plants  
**Created by:** Sissel Marie Tonn  
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Photo credit: Sissel Marie Tonn

