

# Introduction: Beautiful world, where are you?

This volume brings together ideas and projects that emerged from the public programme of the 10th anniversary edition of Liverpool Biennial (July-October 2018), responding to a line from the poem *The Gods of Greece* by German poet Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805): ‘Beautiful world, where are you?’ The line evokes the lost grandeur, beauty and meaning embodied by mythical Greece, translated to our contemporary not-so beautiful reality.

At irregular intervals between May and October 2018, an eclectic list of speakers from fields as diverse as economics, biology, linguistics, media theory, architecture and painting were invited to directly address or indirectly refract Schiller’s question, as part of the new programme of talks curated for Liverpool Biennial 2018 by The Serving Library.[2] Designed to run in parallel with exhibitions and projects elsewhere in the city, the programme was presented at Exhibition Research Lab[3] alongside The Serving Library’s collection and an installation of Paul Elliman’s new work commissioned for Liverpool Biennial 2018 entitled *Vauxhall Astra 2020*. [4] Developed and expanded from this initial context, the contributions to this volume include **Morehshin Allahyari** in conversation with **Christiane Paul**, as well as from **Ryan Avent**, **Jessica Coon**, **Meehan Crist**, **Candice Hopkins**, **Mark Miodownik**, **Jussi Parikka**, **Alexander Provan**, **Forensic Architecture** (presented in the talks programme by Eyal Weizman) and **Paul Elliman**, whose graphic identity for Liverpool Biennial 2018 is represented in the cover image. The volume is conceived by Joasia Krysa.

The volume opens with **Jussi Parikka’s** text ‘Beauty: A Logistical Imaginary’ that introduces a discussion of the location of beauty and aesthetics – from the theories of Karl Marx and Theodore Adorno to Max Horkheimer’s ‘Culture Industry’ and Frederic Jameson’s writings on postmodernism, to Ned Rossiter’s ideas connecting software, labour and logistics today. Parikka goes on to focus on the recent film *Unravelled* 2017 by Unknown Fields Division, ‘a nomadic design research studio that ventures out on expeditions to the ends of the earth to bear witness to alternative worlds, alien landscapes, industrial ecologies and precarious wilderness’. [5] The film serves as a case study to unpack the logistical infrastructures of production and circulation of beauty through the lens of the fashion industry, tracking ‘the movement of bodies, movement of images and the movement of beauty as products across the geographical locations of the planet’.

In the edited excerpt from her talk ‘Climate Grief and the Visible Horizon’ (2018), **Meehan Crist** takes the story of Phaethon and Phoebus from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as a metaphor for climate change. But unlike in the more obvious reading (as in Ted Hughes poem), where the boy, Phaethon, depicts ‘human hubris and a desire to take control of a thing that was never meant to be ours and running the world into destruction’, for Crist, the attention shifts to ‘marginalised people who aren’t the ones responsible for the destruction they’re seeing and living through but who ultimately remain voiceless’. She asks: ‘What does it feel like to witness that kind of destruction?’ at a time when ‘collectively and individually we’re experiencing what no generation of humans has ever faced, which is grieving the on-going loss of the planet as we’ve known it’.

Marginalised people – those who have only recently begun to gain a voice – is also the subject of **Candice Hopkins’s** text ‘Outlawed Social Life?’ (originally published in 2016 in *The South as a State of Mind* magazine in connection with Documenta 14, Athens/Kassel 2017) that became the basis for her subsequent presentation for Liverpool Biennial 2018 entitled ‘Native Economies: from the Potlatch Ban to the Masks of Beau Dick’. Here, she focuses on Native people of Canada, and the complex stories that their objects such as masks and regalia tell as well as discussing social structures and governance, communities of sharing, of language and law, cultural and economic value, forms of control and inherent resistance, transformation and survival.

In ‘Re-figuring Ourselves’, curator **Christiane Paul** and artist **Morehshin Allahyari** discuss her works *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015–16) and the series *SHE WHO SEES THE UNKNOWN* (2017–present), both responding to the cultural and political context of recent events in the Middle East. The latest work in the

Allahyari's series *SHE WHO SEES THE UNKNOWN*, entitled *The Laughing Snake* was co-commissioned for Liverpool Biennial 2018 with The Whitney Museum of American Art and FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology). The conversation explores the works in terms of modes of archiving and documentation, engagement with the materiality of artefacts and figures, the recreation and reinvention of material forms and bodies (re-figuration), and ultimately activation and preservation – retrieving forgotten or destroyed stories. Employing 3D scanning and printing to recreate dark goddesses and monstrous female figures of Middle-Eastern origin, the latest work *The Laughing Snake*, uses the traditions and myths associated with them to offer what Allahyari describes as a 'ficto-feminist and activist practice to reflect on the effects of historical and digital colonialism and other forms of oppression and catastrophe' in contemporary societies.

**Forensic Architecture** is both the name of an agency established in 2010 at Goldsmiths, University of London, and a form of investigative practice into state violence and human rights violations that traverses architectural, journalistic and legal fields.[6] The contribution here entitled 'Forensic Aesthetics' is derived from the talk delivered by Eyal Weizman for Liverpool Biennial 2018 and expanded by extracts from the Forensic Architecture website. It catalogues briefly four projects that serve to unpack the term 'forensic aesthetics', one of several key concepts that underlie the group's approach, and the technologies of weapons and tools of recording.

The question of technologisation and industrialisation, advances in science and technology, and the ultimate sense of loss of meaning and mystery in the world are the subject of **Ryan Avent's** 'Technology, Magic and the Quest for Meaning' (2018). In his abstract, while 'today's advances in Artificial Intelligence mean that much of how technology will work in the future is entirely mysterious to all but a few experts, [...] creating spirited creatures, like cars that drive themselves and robots that walk among us' is not necessarily dystopian and there are perhaps ways to turn it into something beautiful and affirming, too.

**Mark Miodownik's** contribution 'Self-Repairing Cities' reviews the science behind new understandings of matter, and material technologies resulting from blurring the distinction between animate and inanimate in a new materials age: 'Bionic people with synthetic organs, bones and even brains are becoming a reality. Just as we are becoming more synthetic, so our man-made environment is changing to become more lifelike: buildings, objects and materials that heal themselves are being developed. The question then becomes whether ... creating self-repairing cities is achievable.'

**Jessica Coon's** 'Alien Speaks', [7] based around the recent science-fiction film *ARRIVAL*, touches on speculative and real questions: if aliens arrived, could we communicate with them? How would we do it? What are the tools that linguists use to decipher unknown languages? How different can human languages be from one another? These questions attempt to offer another set of tools to understand the world through the lens of the linguist.

Following the thread of language and communication, **Alexander Provan** presents what can be described simply as a playlist – a list of chart-toppers, with their lyrics and number of Spotify plays, as a response to the question: why (more) Katy Perry? His 'Outside the Hit Factory: The Playlist', originally presented as performance talk, serves to reflect on the use of consumer-behaviour data and neurobiology research in the production of pop songs to guarantee pleasing as many listeners as possible.

Finally, this volume's cover image draws upon the work of **Paul Elliman**, who worked with Sara De Bondt and Mark El-Khatib on the graphic identity of Liverpool Biennial 2018. It is based on letter-like shapes and symbols gathered as part of a durational work – a 'found font' – what Elliman calls *The Day Shapes*. [8] Like these shapes on its cover, the diverse contributions in this volume offer a snapshot of a current state of things – the world that is complex and unpredictable, entangled and fragmented, in turmoil – yet with some sense of hope emerging from the chaos.

[1] The 10<sup>th</sup> edition of Liverpool Biennial was held between July – October 2018. The full programme of talks is available at <https://www.biennial.com/events/series/public-programme>

[2] The Serving Library is a non-profit organisation founded in New York in 2011 to develop a shared toolkit for artist-centred education and discourse through related activities of publishing and collecting. It comprises an annual journal ( *The Serving Library Annual*) published simultaneously online and in print, an archive of framed objects on permanent display, and a public programme of workshops and events. It is run by Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey, Stuart Bertolotti-Bailey and David Reinfurt. For Liverpool Biennial 2018, The Serving Library curated a series of free public talks hosted at Exhibition Research Lab, part of the John Lennon School of Art and Design at Liverpool John Moores University. <https://www.biennial.com/2018/exhibition/artists/the-serving-library>

[3] Exhibition Research Lab (ERL) is an academic research centre and public exhibitions venue, founded in 2012 as part of Liverpool John Moores University's School of Art and Design. ERL is uniquely positioned across academic research and cultural ecology of Liverpool, underpinned by collaborative posts held by staff with cultural organisations in Liverpool including [Tate Liverpool](#), [FACT](#)(Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), [RIBA North](#) (The Royal Institute of British Architects), John Moores Painting Prize, and [Liverpool Biennial](#). ERL develops work through research projects, fellowships and residencies, education programmes on postgraduate and doctoral level, as well as a year-round programme of exhibitions, public events and publications. <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/research/centres-and-institutes/art-labs/expertise/exhibition-research-lab>

[4] Paul Elliman's installation for Liverpool Biennial 2018 entitled *Vauxhall Astra 2020* is a re-construction of the forthcoming and newest model of a car available since 1979 when General Motors launched the Vauxhall/Opel Astra, now the only car produced at Ellesmere Port. The Astra 2020 is offered as a constellation of raw materials, half-a-dozen boulders and rock-like lumps of the car's constituent parts at original scale, made of steel, iron ore, glass, plastic, aluminium, rubber and electrical components. The installation was presented at the LJMU's Exhibition Research Lab, Liverpool School of Arts and Design. <https://www.biennial.com/2018/exhibition/artists/paul-elliman>

[5] Quoted from: <http://www.unknownfieldsdivision.com>

[6] Forensic Architecture: <https://www.forensic-architecture.org>

[7] Originally commissioned by and published in *Sloan Science & Film* as part of its 'Peer Review' series, 2016, <http://scienceandfilm.org/articles/2802/alien-spea...>

[8] Pursuing the mechanisms of language as a mode of economic production, Elliman has spoken about how the origins of his work with object letters began when thinking about the path of his father's migration: from the Merseyside car industry (1962–78) via a year in Detroit in 1979, to California's Silicon Valley, where he worked for Apple as a production engineer from 1982–2005. <https://www.biennial.com/video/paul-elliman-liverpool-biennial-2018>

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## Joasia Krysa

Joasia Krysa is Professor of Exhibition Research at Liverpool John Moores University, a position she holds in partnership with Liverpool Biennial. Formerly, she served as Artistic Director of Kunsthall Aarhus, Denmark (2012-2015); co-curator of Documenta 13 (Kassel 2012) and Liverpool Biennial 2016. Recent publications include edited books *Systemics, or Exhibition as a Series* (Sternberg Press, 2017), *Writing and Unwriting Media Art History* (MIT Press 2015, co-edited with Jussi Parikka) and chapters in *Networks* (Whitechapel/MIT 2014) and *Routledge Companion to Art and Politics* (2015). She is Series Editor of *DATA* Bowser books (Open Humanities Press) and Commissioning Editor of online contemporary art journal *Stages* (Liverpool Biennial).