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Carbon Synthesis: Spatial Dissonance

Donna Franklin, Tracy Hill, Sarah Robinson

Birley Street Preston PR1 2QE



Carbon Synthesis: Spatial Dissonance

“First came the Wind, then Reindeer, then Humans” Leena Valkeapää (2024)

The Carbon Synthesis project evolved during 2020, three artists Dr Donna Franklin (AU), Tracy Hill (UK), Dr Sarah Robinson (AU) shared collaborative conversations exploring how creative arts practice can reveal invisible narratives and innovative ways of witnessing climate change.

In September 2024 Franklin, Hill and Robinson joined the International Ars Bioarctica artist residency programme in northern Finland, a long-term art-science initiative hosted by Kilpisjärvi Biological Station of the Faculty of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Helsinki.

The sub-arctic Kilpisjärvi region is a litmus paper for highlighting impacts of global disturbances on northern and southern ecosystems. Carbon Synthesis: Spatial Dissonance explores and reveals invisible narratives and micro-environments, requiring us to feel and see in new ways.

Specifically, this joint project explored a sub-arctic landscape which resisted being fully understood and challenged our usual perceptions, imagination and human timescales. Likewise, by its very nature bioarts contests anthropocentricity and generates ecological empathy. Through nuanced encounters with other beings, provocation and questioning, it refuses to reduce life to a capitalist bioresource.

Informed by ecology, geology, culture, and politics, this exhibition brings together new artworks and installations created through entangled approaches to research undertaken on Sáná Fell, Malla nature reserve, Kilpisjärvi Lake and surrounding birch forests.

Gilbbesjávri/Kilpisjärvi in Sápmi is the cultural region of the Sámi people, stretching across the state borders of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. A site of intense observation and international attention, it is perceived as a landscape which holds both clues and answers for our most pressing global environmental questions.







Dr Donna Franklin

Donna Franklin is a bioartist, curator, and researcher. Her fungi and microbiological art politicizes living materials, advocating empathy for nonhuman ecologies.

Wait! I dropped an organ

As you enter the forest, microbes sense your presence, spores dance in the air, rest on your skin, and mingle with your breath. They have been a part of you from the beginning...Here, eons before the naked ape descended, they will continue long after our own demise.

Clambering through the wilderness of Gilbbesjávri / Kilpisjärvi I try to tread lightly.

Placing organs, and bones into the environment, I captured sounds from other-than-human entities as they responded to these fleshy interventions. The undifferentiated tissue occupies an in-between state, as the separated animal parts return to the Gaia body, reforming and feeding new lives.

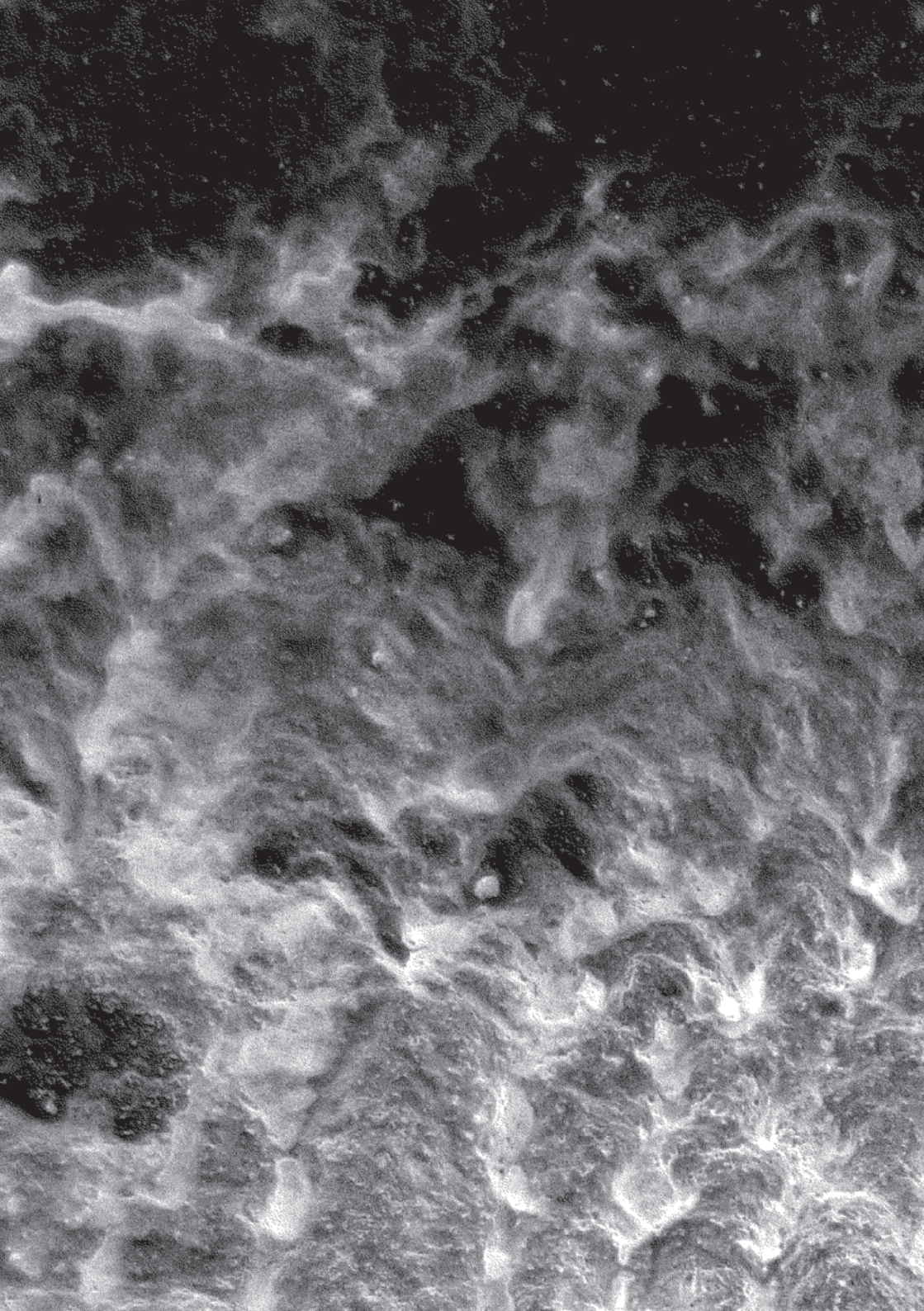
Deep within their core living cells remain

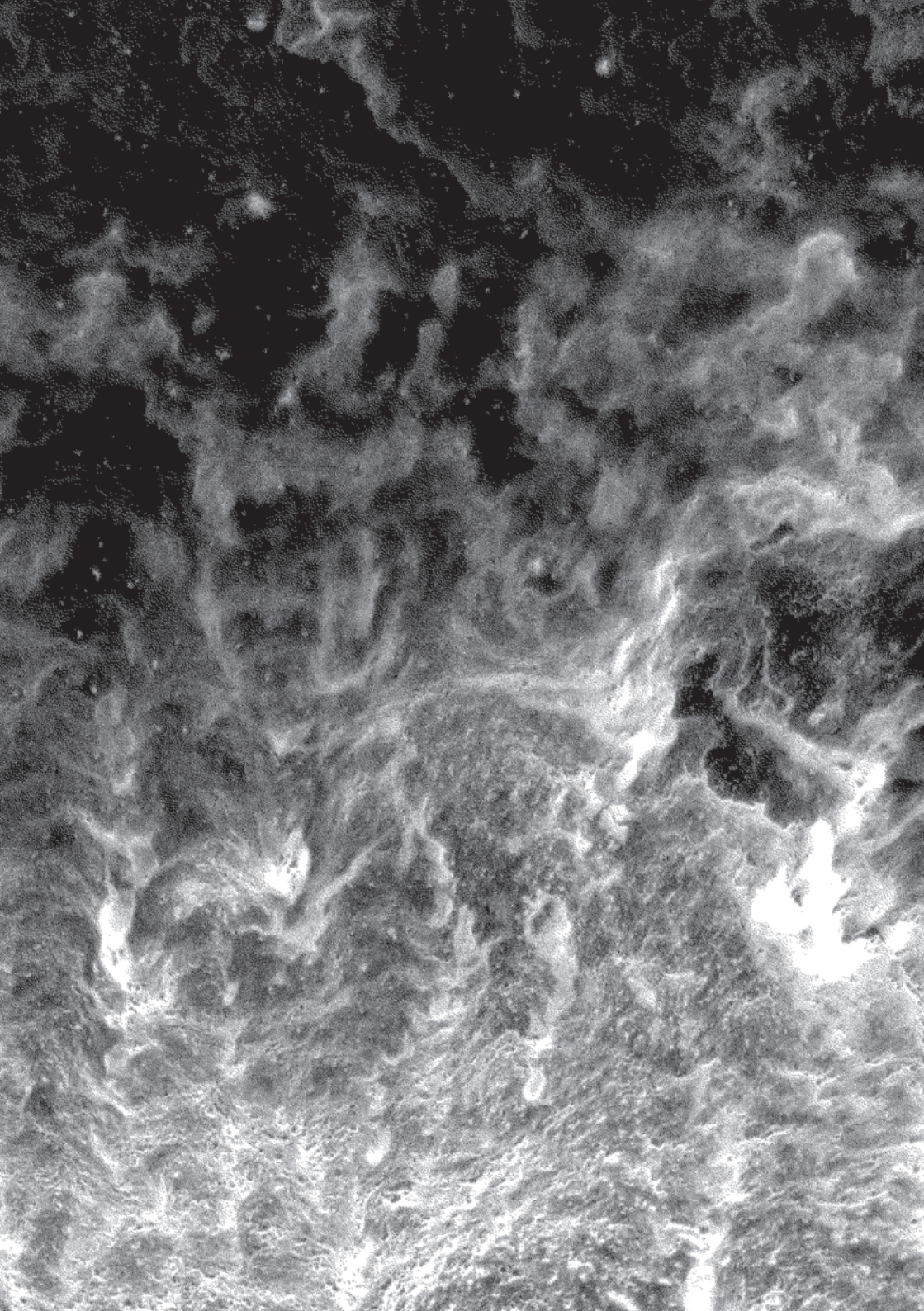
Likewise, Xenobots cultured from skin cells of dead frog embryos challenge traditional classifications of life and animation, quickly adjusting to unfamiliar environs of the laboratory. 1 Speculating on ethics of the uncertain this art research posits that microorganisms have sentience.

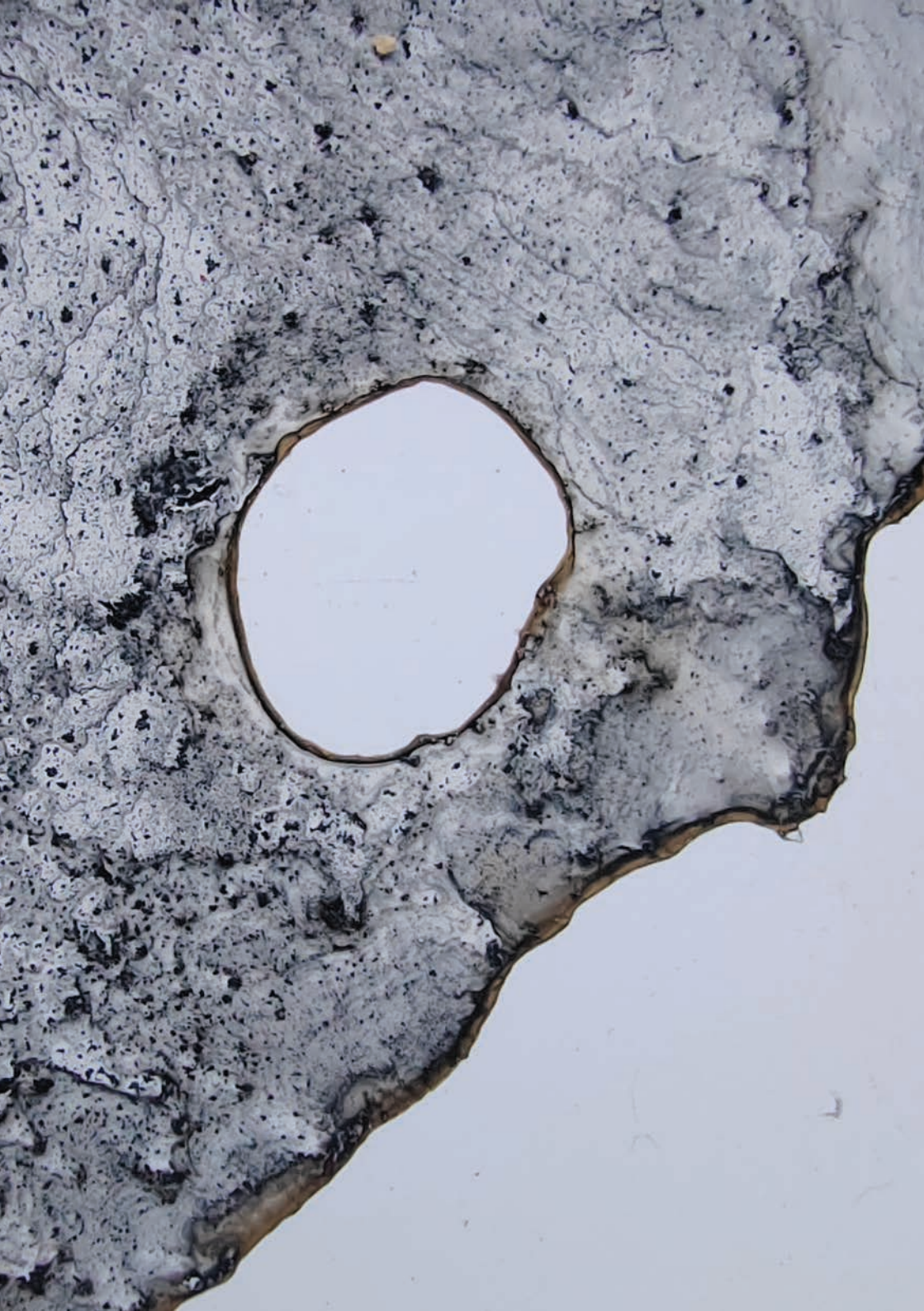
A Pond Within - Valerie Schneider

A filmed micro-performance wherein cells from distinct biological kingdoms are brought together in a petri dish. Specifically, involving multiple encounters between Human Dermal Fibroblast (HDF) cells, and Diatoms. This work serves as a critical inquiry into the anthropocentric tendency to marginalise plants and non-human organisms, questioning the process of "othering" within posthuman perspectives.

1. Noble, P. A., Pozhitkov, A. (2024). Biobots arise from the cells of dead organisms - pushing the boundaries of life, death and medicine.







Tracy Hill

*'Everywhere where there is interaction
between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy,
there is rhythm.'*

*Henri Lefebvre. 1992. Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday
Life*

Combinations of drawing, print and installation reconsider perceptions of landscape. The intersection between our sensory, aesthetic and digital worlds is where I situate my art works: a hybrid space where a geological understanding of the land informs an embodied experience of the energy contained within it.

The walking body acts as conduit, connecting rhythms and vibrations exploring spaces which resist being fully understood or contained without challenging our usual perception, imagination and human timescales.

Responding to the imperceptible energies, which underscore our human experience, new works explore the possibilities of linking art and science to reveal our fragile relationship with global living systems, visualising the (in)visible.

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Carbon Synthesis AN blog

Ars BioArctica blog







Dr Sarah Robinson

Sarah Robinson is an artist and independent creative practice-led researcher, curator and project manager. Intrinsic to her creative practice Robinson endeavors to ask complex questions that challenge our ways of seeing in an overly digital world.

I could not fly my drone...

As a curious artist, my inspiration was drawn from observing Kaarrekarve (Finnish name for the lichen species *Arctoparmelia centrifuga*), which rots at its centre yet continues to grow outward in concentric rings.

These growth patterns are considered by some to be a metaphor for Russia's continued shifts in dominance. Overwhelmed by Kilpisjärvi's unique sub-Arctic environment, the physical and metaphorical boundaries were everywhere: at the level of lichen; in the remnants of history, from WWII dugouts to rusting aircraft parts scattered across the Malla Fell; and in enforced boundaries affecting Sámi culture and traditional reindeer-grazing lands.

I returned with a reindeer skin, I named 'Gregor' (after Kafka's *Metamorphosis*) brought back to somehow honour this place. Through drawing this skin, I connected to the underlying ills of the world, as physical and metaphorical boundaries continue to shift rapidly. My drawing holds stories of reindeer huddling on the last patches of snow as climate change disrupts sub-Arctic seasons.

Nothing is stable.

sarahrobinsonprintmaking.com

Carbon Synthesis

The works in this exhibition offer an entry into the fragile and wonderful ecologies of nonhuman species in a world that is going off the rails. Perhaps the blatant power games around narcissistic geopolitics, will eventually become too much, and lead us to find smarter, decent ways of being with the hurting critters and cultures of the planet.

Aligning with the hope of a rising ecological smartness is a cross-disciplinary interest in articulating spaces where human and nonhuman are indistinguishable. This is of interest among philosophers, environmentalists, ecological art historians and others. It is artists like those in this exhibition, who confront and manifest ideas of extinction, emotion and climate transformation. They make generative works that speculate ways of thinking differently and moving forward.

Donna Franklin's film carries through the concern of her creative practice with other-than-human entities that connect intimately to her. The still image of a shrew having a Viking-like send off on Lake Kilpisjärvi is a gesture respecting a creature that, for a moment, formed part of her sub-Artic experience.

So too, we can understand her care of wet life housed in the gallery, her petri dish growing, xenobots, bacteria, reindeer moss, and blood, pike bone, and human hair. The sentience attached to the regard given to this synthesis seeks to frame cultural practices distant from the western mindset. An action performed on the border of Norway, Finland and Sweden, where the artists undertook the residency that informs this exhibition.

A micro-performance film and living sculpture by invited artist Valerie Schneider questions whether human cells and diatoms can coexist. Diatoms a measure of ecological health are often overlooked.

Tracy Hill's works offer a poignant way into vast micro worlds and invisible energies. We cannot see these energies given our limited eyesight, but through her process of manipulating digital technology her prints often become large, endless landscapes. Through quiet observation her work arises from walking across the land, dowsing and field recording. From these unique perspectives Tracy creates reimagined microbial landscapes; giving vitality to invisible bacterial forms that connect human and nonhuman worlds.

The task of making work that excises the anthropocentric ego from the visual is difficult for a self-centred species. There is something hopeful therefore about Sarah's empty body suit floating on the Lake. It carries the notion of removing the human from the centre of the picture. This is the body suit Sarah wore during her project residency. She discards the material in the end, and this gives the work a nod to science fiction, as if the occupant has vaporised.

In this sub-Arctic vanishing, Sarah references a lesser-known novel by John Wyndam 'Trouble with Lichen'. The ominous science of his fiction echoes in the body suit; there is the sense of the artist pretending to be a scientist. And then letting it go.

Sarah's lichen images respect Sami culture, while a large graphite drawing references Rembrandt or Soutine. Even here, the western canon has cultural resonance. In her large reindeer skin drawing, she regards the reality of climate change, which is impacting on reindeer behaviour and therefore touching on Sami cultural practices.

The drawing has a raw beauty, that links the tactile skill of the artist with her materials, and the confronting reality of the skinned animal.

Dr Janice Baker, Curator and Art Writer. March 2026

Acknowledgments:

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Image credits:

Donna Franklin, Sound Artist W. Sze Tsang. *Wait! I dropped an organ*, 2026, installation, sound. Living moss, reindeer blood, "xenobots", laboratory glass, hand-blown glass, human hair, pike jawbone, recycled metals.

Donna Franklin, *Kunnioitus Ode beginning*, 2025, Lake Kilpisjärvi, film, sound, river stones. Field Hydrophone – Tracy Hill, Vocalist / Composer – Tina Stefanou, Sound Artist / Film Editor – W. Sze Tsang.

Sarah Robinson, *HETI*, 2026, Graphite, Fabriano, 150 x 280 cm

Sarah Robinson, *Indications of Trouble are Everywhere*, 2026, Lake Kilpisjärvi, performance. Photograph Tracy Hill

Tracy Hill, *Conversations with Stones*, 2024, Lake water, tusche and stone drawings

Tracy Hill, *Kaje*, 2024, Resonance wind and ice drawing

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