

REVIEWS

Krištof Kintera “THE END OF FUN!” at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

Share

by Alice Bucknell

A family of sinewy black branches scuttles across a polished gallery floor, emitting a nauseating battle cry, like nails on a chalkboard. Their globe heads teeter back and forth, fiberglass arms akimbo, scratching walls and colliding with each other—alien life forms stuttering to life and dying off at whim. These anthropomorphic agents are part of an infinitely expanding network of *Nervous Trees* (2013–17), a sculptural series by Prague-based Krištof Kintera and just one of the pseudo-sentient creations dotting the Czech artist’s solo show at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham.

THE END OF FUN!, an exhilaratingly ambiguous slogan that may as well be airlifted from the pages of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), is an appropriate title for an exhibition taking place at a time where little is clear. Best known for his large-scale public installations, here Kintera has conjured a small army of multimedia kinetic works: postapocalyptic cities, bewitched mob boss crows, head-banging anarchists, and a techno-Goliath made from some 250 lamps are but a few of the characters awaiting visitors to this nineteenth-century neo-Gothic school turned gallery. Like a high-tech Noah Purifoy infused with the playful radicalism of Gutai group, Kintera muddies the lines between human and animal, public and private, organic and artificial in his quest to complicate popular understandings of the relationship between nature and technology.

The artist's interventions begin outside Ikon's spaces. *Paradise Now* (2009), an unruly series of crowd-control barriers sprouting antlers, is scattered down a thoroughfare that has become the gallery's post-pandemic exit route. Ascending to the exhibition hall, the first work awaiting visitors is less a polished project than an in-situ presentation of Kintera's artistic process. *Postnaturalia Laboratory* (2016–17) offers a transplanted studio setup: wooden scaffolding and a makeshift workbench frame the room, which is piled high with boxes of hard drives, old batteries, and frayed copper cables scavenged from junkyards in the artist's native Prague. Preparatory drawings for sculptures, scraps of interviews, and clippings from various research materials are tacked to the walls. Exhibition notes are scribbled on greasy pizza boxes, while foam sponges and cast-resin shrooms poke out of whey protein tubs lined with empty spray-paint bottles. Earbuds, USB cables, and aux cords seemingly defy gravity, rising up from a tangled mass of black cables stationed atop a mobile dolly in the center of the room.

Scooting past the studio, visitors will notice that the false wall that typically splits the exhibition space from Ikon's loading zone has been removed. *Prayer for Loss of Arrogance* (2013), a taxidermied fox perched atop a partially deflated exercise ball, tumbles out from a wooden shipping container while the guts of the gallery and its installation hardware are here laid bare. Kintera seems to take a particular delight in exposing the hidden seams of exhibition operations; indeed, peeling back the surface veneer of the white cube reveals a much more interesting architectural anatomy.

The same can be said of *Postnaturalia* (2016–17), a sweeping techno-dystopian landscape that unfurls in the next room. Made of discarded electrical components, the work constitutes only one third of the actual sculpture—and required use of the Czech Embassy's diplomatic lorry to arrive safely in Birmingham (shipping artwork in a pandemic, it turns out, is a fiendishly difficult endeavor). This is a topography of welded motherboards, zip-tied cable highways, and battery islands sprouting copper flowers. Recalling the view out of an airplane window, the sprawling mass of *Postnaturalia* dilates the longer you look, as additional details come into focus from the writhing mass of hardware. TV boxes split at the seams while rusting transmitters, cooling fans, and

stacked corroded batteries find an unlikely counterpart in the artificial nature of coral, sponges, and cauliflower florets cast in semi-opaque acrylic resin. These organic forms burst out from the motherboard metropolis, rising skyward in clusters. It's impossible to tell how many layers of technological flotsam lie underneath the surface; the sculpture is like a sedimentary rock sample of the Anthropocene era.

A jittery encounter with the anxious planets next door primes visitors for what follows. The Gollum-like croak of an ominous raven echoes down Ikon's glassy stairwell; reaching the second floor, visitors come face-to-beak with a feathery salesman perched atop the building's steel bracing and dressed in an appropriately seedy leather jacket. "Big value, small value, no value!" the raven barks to an imagined audience, swinging its feet with gusto while rattling off a litany of various corporate slogans, from Nike's to Philips's.

In the old Victorian building's most church-like room, sixty-some "drawings" made by Kintera over the past thirteen years are shown in a salon-style hang. Like an overworked internet browser with dozens of open tabs, the drawings—more like 3D collages—pull at whim from popular aphorisms, personal reflections, and political debates in the media. A rigged-up lighting system gone haywire adds a frenetic energy to the already schizophrenic work, which is equally playful and self-effacing: sagging pillows nailed to painted plywood spout phrases like "I Doubt My Contribution to Evolution" and "Do Not Overestimate Your Own Existence." Much less complex than the artist's larger-scale sculptures, the one-to-oneness of these works may seem less interesting to some. But in an electrified, buzzing, maximalist show, the drawings' pared-back and low-tech approach creates a space for the artist's creeping anxiety to briefly touch down.

Kintera's techno-dystopian architecture hits Gotham City heights in two new sculptural works squaring off in the next room: *Tower of Unsustainability Development* and *Neuropolis* (both 2020). Made from his signature scrapyards, the wall-based *Neuropolis* is like *Blade Runner* meets Miami Beach. A graveyard of soldered Nokia flip phones, camera viewfinders with the retail tags still on, and burst cables bristling neon pink like palm trees frame vertical fluorescent tube lighting that mirrors a city skyline. *Tower of Unsustainability Development*, meanwhile, plunges down like a subterranean skyscraper crossed with rhizomatic patterns of mycelial networks. Both sculptures hint at the idea that the true environmental debt of human actions remains to be seen, festering far beneath the surface.

Viewers will hear the staticky hum and feel the electric heat given off by Kintera's *My Light Is Your Life – Shiva Samurai II* (2009) before entering the final room. Two hundred and fifty salvaged lamps comprise this hulking four-meter-tall beast, which flickers and glimmers to its own tempo even as it seems primed to short-circuit Ikon's power grid.

Seen from various vantage points, the anthropomorphic figure dissolves into a sea of luminous parts: chalet-style chandeliers, sticker-coated school lamps, and IKEA clip-on spotlights emerge from a mangled mess of extension cords and power sockets.

Like a supersize Gutai suit, the sculpture is both vampiric and benevolent. Sucking light and heat from the rest of the building, it wields an old Prague streetlamp, which periodically illuminates the room in a dazzling brightness. More than any of the other works on show, this one encapsulates Kintera's constant battle between individual cynicism and collective hope. The enormous creature embodies the waste of a plugged-in society, and its frantic flickering frame is also a visualization of the human nervous system under a constant state of panic. There's a cruel irony to this pathetic fallacy: in order to educate us on our own systems of waste, *Shiva* generates heaps of wasted energy. Is there any way out of this apocalyptic jumble? Perhaps the clue is to be found in the show's title—to begin with an ending.

Krištof Kintera (b. 1973, Prague) lives and works in Prague. His works refer to doubts expressed in societies under authoritarian or communist regimes that find themselves in economic boom, yet leave behind local concerns. Everyday objects cleverly diverted, and a sense of (often caustic) observation, help to establish a critical distance between oneself and the world. His recent solo shows include *Am I also responsible for all that shit around?*, Kali Gallery, Lucerne (2019); *No One Has Nothing*, z2o Sara Zanin, Rome (2019); *Do Not Litter, Do Not Feed Birds and Do Not Push the Help Button Yet*, Czech Center New York (2018); and *Naturally Postnatural*, Galerie Ron Mandos, Amsterdam (2018). His works reside in several prestigious public and private collections, among them Maramotti Collection; Barbierato Collection; Boghossian Foundation; Rosenblum Collection & Friends; Jerry Speyer Collection; Rubell Family Collection; and the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Alice Bucknell is an artist and writer based in London. Her background in social anthropology and critical practice informs her current work, which uses speculative fiction to investigate the role of architecture in contributing to the climate crisis and systems of global inequality. She participates in international exhibitions, symposiums, and residencies, most recently in/at Ars Electronica, Linz; White Cube, London; Annka Kultys Gallery, London; the Canadian Center for Architecture, Montréal; Serpentine Galleries, London; and MAAT, Lisbon. Her writing has appeared in *frieze*, *PIN-UP*, *Rhizome*, and *Architectural Review*. She is currently a staff writer at *Elephant Magazine* and *Harvard Design Magazine*, and she is a member of the artist-run collective HQI in London.

at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

until 22 November 2020