

BURLINGTON
**CON
TEMPO
RARY**

The Otolith Group: Xenogenesis
Frank Wasser

Exhibition Review
24.08.2022



Title

The Otolith Group: Xenogenesis

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Article DOI**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/the-otolith-group-xenogenesis>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Frank Wasser: 'The Otolith Group: Xenogenesis', *Burlington Contemporary* (24th August 2022),

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/the-otolith-group-xenogenesis>

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Cover image:

The Otolith Group: Xenogenesis

by Frank Wasser • 24.08.2022

In the 1960s the philosopher Marshall McLuhan identified two types of media: 'hot' and 'cool'.¹ 'Hot' media emphasises one sense over the others, engaging the viewer or listener while requiring minimal participation – for example, film elevates sight and radio prioritises sound. By contrast, 'cool' media, such as phone calls or comic books, requires more conscious participation in order to extract value. If one were to apply McLuhan's sixty-year-old distinction to social media, Twitter could be classified as 'cool' and Instagram would perhaps be described as 'warm' if not entirely hot. However, the binary nature of McLuhan's thesis does not take into account the sensory engagement that is generated when one critically engages with the provenance of the information technologies used to support such media, as well as their relationship to external factors. Such analysis is at the heart of the work of the collective known as The Otolith Group.

The Otolith Group was formed in 2002 by the artists and theorists Kodwo Eshun (b.1967) and Anjalika Sagar (b.1968). The collective takes its name from the small carbonate structures in the inner ear that allow organisms, including humans, to perceive linear acceleration and gravity; people with damaged otolith organs have impaired balance and ability to sense motion. Biologists often use otoliths to estimate the age of fish, a process that is referenced in the exhibition under review by a sculptural platform displaying the otoliths of various species of fish, which can be viewed through a set of magnifying lenses [FIG.1](#). From the outset then, visitors are invited to look closely and magnification is a tactic to which the group often returns. Shown alongside these tiny otoliths is a schedule that details the timings of the moving image works in the exhibition, which total roughly nine hours. Given the dedication this demands, visitors are encouraged to return using the same entrance ticket. This reflects the group's commitment to providing a platform for discourse, fostering prolonged study and scrutiny. The exhibition is also accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue, which includes contributions from Fred Moten, Denise Ferreira da Silva and the late Mark Fisher.²

Xenogenesis is not a retrospective per se, but rather a configuration of projects created by the collective between 2011 and 2018, which platform a diverse set of voices that have been marginalised over the past century. There are three figures who permeate the exhibition in various ways: Octavia Butler, whose trilogy of books, *Xenogenesis* (1987–89; now known as *Lilith's*

Brood), gives the exhibition its title; the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore; and the oft-overlooked American composer and performance artist Julius Eastman. Each of these figures is referenced not only in the works but also through portrait photographs that have been enlarged and pasted onto the walls of the institution, most notably a photograph of Butler, by Patti Perret, which greets the viewer upon entering the building **FIG.2**.



Fig. 1 Fish otoliths installed in *The Otolith Group: Xenogenesis* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2022. (Courtesy the artists; photograph Ros Kavanagh).

Although the exhibition contains mostly large-scale moving image works, it is nonetheless heavily object-orientated: there are lightboxes, large letters, floating screens, furniture and architectural interventions. The narrow galleries of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (IMMA), have been transformed, such that they appear as portals into a nether world, skewing relations between the macro and the micro. The exhibition unfolds in a darkened space, illuminated by the light emanating from the many projections and screens, the glow of which pulls viewers into the small rooms that branch off from the main corridors of the museum. Each room contains a formally diverse work. *Who Does the Earth Think It Is?* **FIG.3**, for example, is a display of scanned letters sent by members of the public to the United States Geological Survey Pasadena Field Office at California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, between 1993 and 2007, each of which predicts an earthquake. One dated 21st September 1992 reads: 'I am one of those people who get irrefutable precursors before earthquakes. They label people like me as "sensitives". I first experienced precursors when I was 6 years old'. The process of scanning recurs throughout the works on display in various ways.

The silent black-and-white looped video *Sovereign Sisters* FIG.4 shows digital scans, produced using a LiDAR scanner, of Rene de Saint-Marceaux's 1874 granite and bronze sculpture in Bern, which was erected to commemorate the founding of the Universal Postal Union, the organisation that standardises the postal communication of the United Nations.

In the video installation *Anathema* FIG.5, the collective reimagines the microscopic behaviour of liquid crystals as a sentient entity. Footage of the crystals undergoing turbulence is spliced together with close-ups of human eyes, mesmerised by the screens of communicative capitalism. About this work Fisher wrote:

One way of seeing *Anathema* is as a glimpse into capital's own dreaming. This world of smoothly yielding orifice-interfaces, of instantaneous contact of hard surfaces dissolving into liquid when touched, may be how the communicational matrix looks (and feels) to capital. But the experience of its human users is somewhat different (p.40).

Made in 2011, the work and responding text by Fisher anticipated the increasing dependence upon such technological sorcery that unfolded over the following decade. While these objects are designed, distributed and packaged in a slick, fluid aesthetic, this was, and remains, at odds with the violence from which they emerge and the various crises that they operate within – from the sourcing of raw materials in Congo and the exploitation of assembly workers in China to the dependence upon smart phones during moments of political upheaval.

Many of the works on view make reference to periods of political disruption and conflict. A series of lightboxes, *Statecraft: An Incomplete Timeline of Independence Determined by Digital Auction* FIG.6 extends across the main room of the exhibition. Each lightbox contains postage stamps FIG.7, acquired by the group through online auctions, which were originally issued to commemorate the independence of African nation-states – the establishment of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011 and the centenary of the founding of the Republic of Liberia in 1847, for example. The elaborate display of the stamps fosters connections between the Pan-Africanist Pop Art associated with the independent state of Ghana from 1957 until the overthrow of its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, in 1966, with Social Realist portraiture. The installation is positioned at a slight angle, so that it points towards *In the Year of the Quiet Sun* FIG.8, a twenty-seven-minute moving image work that instigated the collective's ongoing analysis of the imagery of African emancipation. The video contains large-scale close-ups of stamps, another example of utilising a magnified focus, which here reflects the viewer's experience of looking closely in *Statecraft: An incomplete Timeline of Independence Determined by Digital Auction*.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *The Otolith Group: Xenogenesis* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2022. (Courtesy the artists; photograph Ros Kavanagh).

Despite the clear interrelatedness of many of the works in the exhibition, there are some that are more self-contained. For example, the feature-length video *O Horizon* (2018) derives from the group's longstanding interest in the work of the writer and educator Tagore, who Sagar described as 'a polymathic figure, who wanted to complicate the relationships between traditional distinctions and understandings of art and craft in the context of the British imperial education in Bengal' (p.16). *O Horizon* depicts the Visva Bharati school in Santiniketan, West Bengal, which was founded by Tagore in 1921. He was a vital figure in guiding India towards cultural independence and social transformation, anticipating key contemporary issues, such as the environmental crisis. Constructed using a vast montage of styles and registers of

film-making, from documentary to experimental, the film guides the viewer through the campus of the school and its daily rituals. There is footage of indoor and outdoor classes, conversations between pupils, plays and poetry readings, all of which is spliced together with images of vegetal depths, natural surfaces and the silent gazes of animals. The film does not have an overarching, linear narrative; rather, it is a multi-layered analysis of how a school can integrate its external environment into its pedagogical structures. It is not didactic or authoritarian and examines decolonisation in a way that many teachers and art-school educators, notably in the United Kingdom, could learn from.

Third Part of The Third Measure (2017) focuses on Eastman, a queer composer who was one of the few African American artists to gain prominence in the minimal music scene of the 1960s, which included Philip Glass and Steve Reich. Although Eastman wrote some of the most radical and innovative compositions of the twentieth century, he did not receive the recognition he deserved in his lifetime; even today high-quality recordings of his work are difficult to find. He died largely unknown at the age of forty-nine. The multi-screen installation presents what the artists call 'an experience of watching in the key of listening'. It includes a re-enactment of a controversial speech Eastman gave in 1980 before a concert at Northwestern University, in which the composer responded to the venue's decision not to print the titles of his musical compositions in the programme as they were deemed to be racist. In his titles, Eastman reclaimed racial slurs as a way to explore the fundamental nature of the United States economy, and also more broadly what he termed the 'basicness' of all people and things.³ This re-enactment is followed by four performers playing one of his fast tempo compositions. In relation to other works in the exhibition, *Third Part of The Third Measure* is engrossingly intimate and angry in tone. In the catalogue Sagar states: 'The violence required to erase Eastman's name and the forces required to keep the reputation of Reich and Glass really confronts you. It is terrifying and enraging' (p.20).



Fig. 3 *Who Does the Earth Think It Is?* by The Otolith Group. 2014. Scanned letters, wooden shelves and vinyl design, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artists; photograph Ros Kavanagh; exh. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin).

While the research practices and methodologies developed and applied by The Otolith Group could be compared with recent forensic approaches in artmaking, architecture and design – such as that of Forensic Architecture and Lawrence Abu Hamdan – the collective’s work is not didactic. The research they embark upon and the resulting abundance of information that emerges is not flattened, diluted or dissolved into linear frameworks or infographics, nor is it made abstract. Their work simultaneously deploys several formal approaches, which fosters dialogues with a wider audience – conversations that are often inconclusive. In this meticulously realised and seamless arrangement of works that untangle and question histories of power and oppression, the viewer is invited to interrogate how they orientate themselves in relation to selected materials, technologies, politics and ideologies. This is one of the most comprehensive exhibitions of contemporary art practice and research to be staged in Ireland, the relevance of which should not go unnoticed by viewers in neighbouring countries.

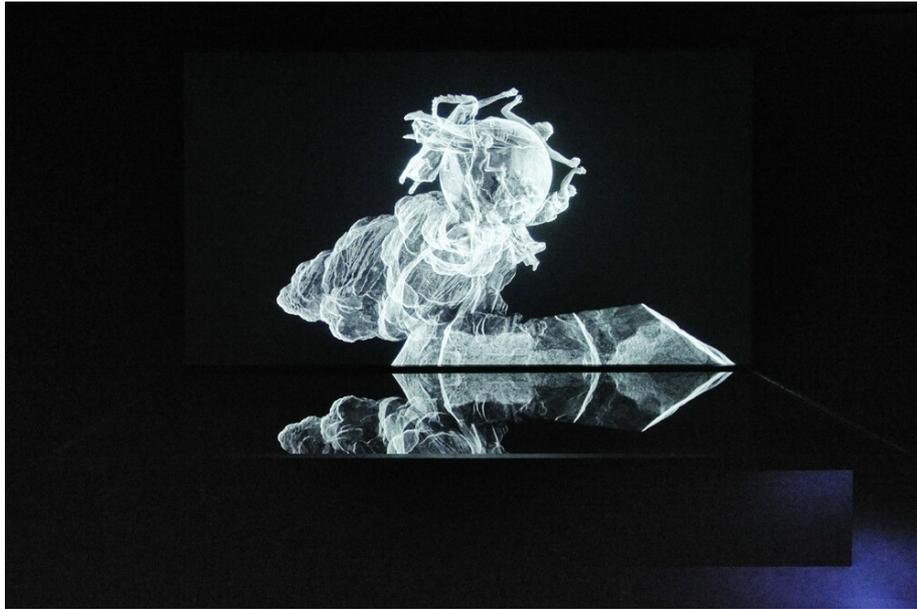


Fig. 4 *Sovereign Sisters*, by The Otolith Group. 2014. Video installation, duration 3 minutes and 47 seconds. (LUX, London; courtesy the artists; photograph Ros Kavanagh; exh. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin).



Fig. 5 *Anathema*, by The Otolith Group. 2011. Video installation, duration 37 minutes. (LUX, London; courtesy the artists; photograph Ros Kavanagh; exh. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin).



Fig. 6 *Statecraft: An Incomplete Timeline of Independence Determined by Digital Auction*, by The Otolith Group. 2014–19. Lightboxes, postage stamps and LED lights, 100 by 500 cm. (Sharjah Art Foundation Collection; courtesy the artists; photograph Ros Kavanagh; exh. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin).



Fig. 7 Detail from *Statecraft: An Incomplete Timeline of Independence Determined by Digital Auction*, by The Otolith Group. 2014–19. Lightboxes, postage stamps and LED lights. (Sharjah Art Foundation Collection; courtesy the artists; photograph Ros Kavanagh; exh. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin).



Fig. 8 *In the Year of the Quiet Sun*, by The Otolith Group. 2013. Video installation, duration 33 minutes and 57 seconds. (LUX, London; courtesy the artists; photograph Ros Kavanagh; exh. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin).

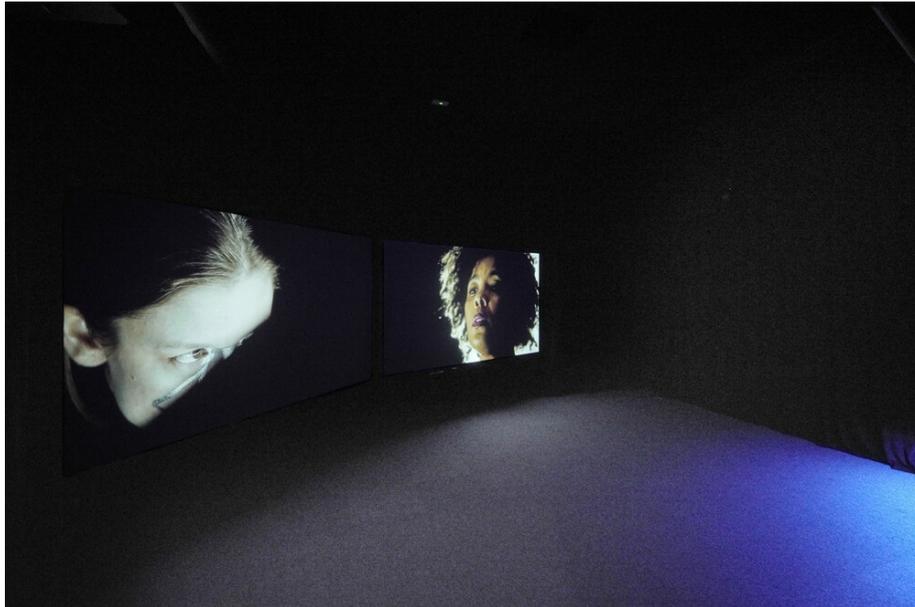


Fig. 9 *The Third Part of the Third Measure*, by The Otolith Group. 2017. Two-channel video installation, duration 43 minutes. (LUX, London; courtesy the artists; photograph Ros Kavanagh; exh. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin).

Exhibition details

The Otolith Group: Xenogenesis
Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin
7th July 2022–12th February 2023

About this book



Xenogenesis - The Otolith Group
Edited by The Otolith Group and Megs
Morley
Archive Books, Berlin, and Irish Museum of
Modern Art, Dublin, 2022
ISBN 978-3-948212-33-9

Footnotes

- 1** See M. McLuhan: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York 1964.

2 Catalogue: *Xenogenesis – The Otolith Group*. Edited by The Otolith Group and Megs Morley. 432 pp. incl. 118 ills. (Archive Books, Berlin, and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2022), €36. ISBN 978-3-948212-33-9.

3 See 'Julius Eastman's spoken introduction to the Northwestern University concert', available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3LZeDF0sA8, accessed 23rd August 2022.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ