

Rise of The Tidal Island Queens

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Abstract

The XR work “Rise of the Tidal Island Queens” initially developed during a digital residency with Agora Digital Art, a London based organization that advocates the work of women and non – binary artists. The project took inspiration from a series of performative self-portraits that the artist took at age 50 and the myth of Aphrodite’s violent birth; how the goddess of Love and Fertility was born a grown woman shaped form the white foam of the sea. Adding narrative from the “surreal artist Ithell Colquhoun with her vision of divine femininity, in which the woman becomes a landscape and merges with earth an entity alive inhabited by spirits. The audio part is a virtual continuation of Frigga Hauge’s “memory work” and built upon anonymously collected written and oral reflections of middle-aged women and how they feel in their body and mind.

“In this metaphor, the work question’s themes related to mature women such as ageism, body confidence, and criticism of the eternal youthful representation of the female body. The clash between the two players: the body and the mind” [4]

Keywords

Memory-work, Women, Middle-age, Non-linear Narratives, Interactive Storytelling, Futures, Resilience, Collective Action, Nature, Ritual

Introduction

I am writing the artist talk while staying at Moskosel Creative Lab in Lapland/ Sweden to re-adapt my work “Rise of the Tidal Island Queens” for iM konsthall an immersive mobile gallery that will travel through Sweden this year. Lapland, Sweden is also the home of the Sami people, who are the only Indigenous culture in Europe and who live in the Northern part of the Scandinavian peninsula and large parts of the Kola peninsula like Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia. [1] I found this an interesting coincidence while at the same time my work has been accepted into the ISEA2024 symposium, which is held in Meanjin on the lands of the Turrbal and Jagera peoples, the First Nations custodians of the lands and waters of Brisbane. [2]

During my stay in Moskosel, I would like to collect impressions and materials and do research on Sami culture to adapt the project to the Northern landscape. I believe that particularly immersive works can be adapted to multiple locations which echoes the “Everywhen”, and the concept of all time simultaneously present in a place and at any given location. The Island Queens could exist anywhere and everywhere, they could roam the Northern and the Southern hemispheres.

Creative and Conceptual Development

Self Portrait of the Artist Aged Fifty

My work was inspired by one of my “Mental Photographs” (2016), a series of self-portraits in English landscapes enacting spontaneous performances that express how each landscape made me feel, how one responds to the light, clouds, skies, trees, sounds and smells of a landscape that does not spark any childhood memories. The title was inspired by Gurdjieff’s writings to observe oneself in every given moment and take a mental picture of it. [12] I had turned 50, separated from my partner, and moved to the English seaside. During a hike with my friend Pat, we discovered a nudist beach and in a spontaneous act of freedom we took our clothes off and walked into the sea. I felt like Aphrodite, like a Venus born out of the sea, yet I have gained weight, and I am not at the reproducible age anymore, but I am strong and free, and it is exciting! At that moment I started taking photographs for my self -portrait project.

I researched the mythology of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sexual love, beauty, and fertility who emerged naked and as a grown woman from the water around Cyprus. Apparently, Aphrodite was born from the white foam produced by the severed genitals of Uranus. His son Cronos had castrated his father to separate heaven from earth and had thrown the genitals into the sea. [3] I used the self-portrait I took on the beach to make a photo collage, and painted parts of the sea red like blood, added some islands looking like pink breasts and blue semen floating around with a tiny figure descending out of the sea. This image was the main inspiration for “Rise of the Tidal Island Queens” (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Photocopy, gouache, black liner, 2016. ©Andrea G Artz

Digital Residency, Agora Digital Art

In 2022, I applied to a call out for a digital residency by Agora Digital Art, a London based organization that advocates the work of women and non-binary artists to develop a new VR project on the Mozilla Hubs platform. [4] I instantly chose the photo collage/ self portrait of Aphrodite's violent birth as inspiration to build a world solely inhabited by a tribe of Amazons, strong and free women. I imagined visitors of the VR experience to find themselves stranded on a remote tidal island when a gang of naked middle-aged female avatars with different body shapes descend from an ocean interspersed with blood. They are playful, jump, dance, and shake their crowns underlined by the sound of the ocean. When the playfulness ends, they squat, and the folds of their bellies resemble the folds of the rocks and become frozen in time. The repetition of the tidal cycle is endless, and the women live in a timeless world in the past, present and future (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Unity Video Still, Rise of the Tidal Island Queens, 2023. ©Andrea G Artz

The scenario was inspired by my own experience on the nudist beach, its playfulness, and feeling of freedom and being a Venus and an Amazon all at the same time not thinking of my middle-aged body but being in the moment. MiMi, curator of Agora Digital Art writes “In this metaphor, the project question's themes related to mature women such as ageism, body confidence, and criticism of the eternal youthful representation of the female body. The clash between the two players: the body and the mind.” [4]

Another source of inspiration was the surrealist Ithell Colquhoun's paintings, and her vision of divine femininity, in which the woman becomes a landscape and merges with earth – an entity alive inhabited by spirits. [5] In the last decade, esotericism in art was reconsidered and artists like Ithell Colquhoun, Emma Kunz and Hilma af Klint and became more widely known. I was interested to explore our relationship with cycles of nature; the contrast between the web3 revolution and the world ever becoming more digital, and at the same time us humans having even more so the need to reconnect with nature, mythologies, esotericism, and spiritual practices.



Figure 3. Unity Video Still, Ritual in the Cave, Rise of the Tidal Island Queens, 2023. ©Andrea G Artz

After visitors have witnessed the emergence of the Tidal Island Queens, they float towards a cave system where they discover giant Venus sculptures and observe groups of amazons celebrating rituals accompanied by a multi-layered audio piece woven with oral quotes of middle-aged women and the sound of the ocean (Figure 3).

The audio piece was inspired by Frigga Haug's writings on “memory work” and is a virtual continuation of her ideas and built upon the oral reflections of middle-aged women and their feelings towards their body and mind. [10] I encountered lots of resistance when I asked women my age to participate with the project and realized what a touchy subject I had approached. Finally, I created an anonymous survey to collect written quotes and give women the chance to participate without judgement.

“Radiating center of heat and light that expands beyond my being and into the atmosphere. Energy circulating like a whirlpool around my body inside, pulsating at low or high vibration depending on my energy levels. All knowing energy that is old - dates to first women walking on earth - it is full wisdom, wise and ancient.” [9]

Throughout 2022, I continued work on the project and used Blender and Unity software to create the world and its inhabitants. I also collected more quotes via the anonymous survey and got composer and musician Isa Suarez on board to help manage the audio recordings and to develop the sound design for the final audio piece. The quotes were recorded by middle-aged friends and other women who were interested to participate with the project. Hereby, the final creative work is no solo achievement but a collaboration with other women to create a web of stories using nonlinear storytelling. Rise of the Tidal Island Queens is a collective action and an act of resilience of women from all places and periods of time.

At the beginning of 2023, the project was shortlisted for the VR art prize 2023 awarded by DKB in cooperation with CAA Berlin, and besides residing on the Mozilla hubs platform was made available on the research platform Radianc VR. [7]

Artist Residency iM konsthall, Lapland, Sweden

At the end of 2022, I answered a residency call to develop a work for iM konsthall, an immersive mobile gallery that will tour the landscapes of Northern Sweden and showcase digital artworks encompassing performance, music, and visual art. [6] I had applied with the XR project “Rise of the Tidal Island Queens”, and finally in March 2024, I am here at the residency space to re-adapt the project to the stories and landscapes of Lapland, Sweden.

I have already witnessed Aurora Borealis twice and will visit the Ajtte Museum Jokkmokk to do research on Sami people and their culture. [8] I am currently recording 360 videos, taking photographs, and scanning the environments to build a new virtual world for the Island Queens covered in ice and snow and skies illuminated by Aurora. The outcome of this residency is still in the future, but I wish to think of the future as something that is happening now while I am writing the artist talk.

The concept of the Everywhen as described by first Nations people it is believed that “... all creation was made and manifest in the landscape; that all stories, art, song ... technology ... was made complete in the time before time and can be seen in the topography, plants, animals and natural world.” [2] Here I am in Lapland which is the home of the Sami people, and I am curious to explore if there are similarities between the traditions and beliefs of First Nation and Sami people. I have read that their tradition until the 1950’s were oral traditions. [1] I am particularly curious about the role of women and want to read Ann – Helen Laestadius’s book *Stolen*, where she portrays a woman’s struggle to defend her heritage in a world where climate change looms and the tensions that arise when modern ideas come up against traditional culture. [11]

The XR project “Rise of the Tidal Island Queens” is an ever evolving, site-specific work that dynamically adapts to each environment that it inhabits and became the VR experience “Rise of the Tidal Ice Queens” to travel with iM konsthall, an immersive mobile gallery through the landscapes of Northern Sweden (Figure 4). [6]

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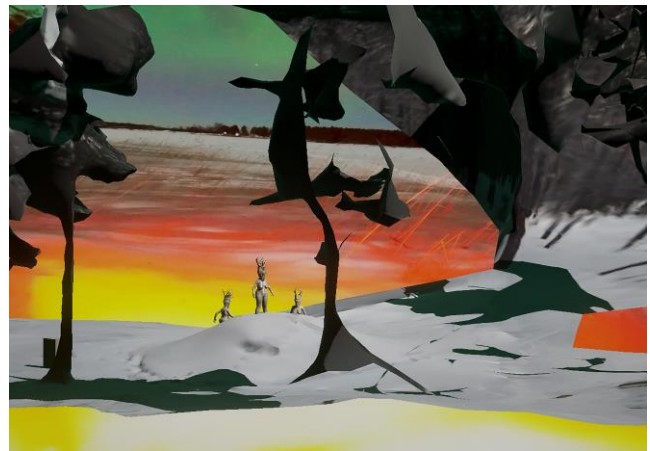


Figure 4. Unity Video Still, Rise of the Tidal Ice Queens (Work in Progress) Moskosel, Lapland/ Sweden, 2024. ©Andrea G Artz

Acknowledgements

The work would not have been possible without the help of a multitude of women who anonymously contributed to the audio piece with their written and oral reflections and how they feel in their body and mind. In addition, several women lend their voices to the audio piece. I want to thank MiMi from Agora Digital Art for hosting the initial digital residency and metaxustudio for helping to create the space on Mozilla hubs. The digital residency was supported by a time-space-money bursary from a-n The Artists Information Company and Arts Council England. Kindly, Isa Suarez, composer, and musician, helped with the sound design, and Veronica with the original proposal and title of the work. Tina Sauerlaender made the work available on the research platform and app Radiance VR.

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Author Biography

Andrea is a German/ British multimedia artist, Media Design lecturer and photographer based in London. Recent awards and commissions: shortlisted for Artists Meet Archives, Photoszene Cologne; VR Art Prize Berlin awarded by DKB, 2023; bursary a-n Artists Information Company, 2022; Commission Covid Responses, Grain Projects, 2020; Arts Council England Lottery grant, 2020; Mac Dowell Colony Fellowship Award, 2018; DYCP Arts Council grant, 2018; Ecce (European Centre for Creative Economy) award, 2017. Solo exhibitions: Neuland Projekt Raum, Bochum, Germany; Coleman Project Space, London, 2021; Foyer Gallery, School of Design, University of Leeds, 2019; and Rottstr5 kunsthallen, Bochum, Germany, 2017. Artist residencies at iM Konsthall, Lappland, Sweden, 2024; Agora Digital Art, 2022; Yucca Valley Material Lab, California, USA, 2020; and Mac Dowell Colony Residency, Peterborough, NH, USA, 2018. Andrea’s work is in the collections of the Museum of London; Charles Dickens Museum; MFAH Houston, USA and Museum Kunst & Gewerbe, Hamburg.