

# Tanja Vujinović: Elixir Agens

7 September–6 October 2018  
KiBela / MMC KIBLA

Elixir Agens is a set of installations dealing with the construction of a technological »other« using various anthropomorphic and abstract agents.

The exhibition is part of the multi-year project Anthropomorphic Machines, which was created on the twentieth anniversary of Tanja Vujinović's artistic practice. It covers the monograph and exhibition series, which are partially retrospective in character, and through the new installations on elixirs summarizes the key thematic elements defining her works.

From ancient mythological creatures to agents that enable us to simulate intelligence in virtual domains, these emergent creatures cycle across real, utopian, and dystopian realms. The works examine various roles of technological agents ranging from Taoist Immortals, Telesphorous and similar entities from Greek mythology, dwarfs, automatons, avatars and robots all the way to contemporary AI creations through which we attempt to imitate characteristics of human consciousness.

Conceptual Objects A and B appearing in the project are inspired by the history of anthropomorphization and are, as Sherry Turkle would say, "objects-to-think-with". Object A represents our striving towards the creation of a synthetic being, while Object B stands for the human being in transition – a robomorphic being, a cyborg-becoming-a-thing.

Throughout history, the quest for both a philosophical/spiritual or actual "elixir of life" motivated and brought about countless experiments and works in proto-scientific context and philosophy, religion and mythology.

## Elixir

The mentioning of Elixir immediately echoes the mythical origin of the word itself – originally derived from the 7th century Arabic name for miracle, it is always a rich metaphor that re-emerges throughout world religions, mythologies, popular culture and fairy tales. Throughout history, whether placed within plant or mineral matter or tied to a physical origin in a tree or a well, for example, there have been many instances of the quest for the ultimate medical elixir or panacea – from various forms of elixirs that were prepared by monks deep within numerous monasteries and the royal apothecaries in China that housed various nearly inaccessible herbal, mineral and animal components to Theriac, originally formulated by the Greeks in the 1st century AD whose recipe changed over time and included dozens of steeped elements. Other such historical potions range from Tar Water, Water of Anise, Mithridatium, Blue Mass, Oxymel or Jerusalem Elixir (made of palm wine, aloe vera gel and hemp), just to name a few, of which many included the practice of collecting "The Water from Heaven" to be used as a medium for delivery of the elixir pill. The quest for healing ranges from realistic to mythological. One of the most important features in the Taoist world-view is the belief in physical immortality. The development of an "elixir pill" in Taoistic practices has matured through the ages, from preparation of various medicaments back to the internal development of spiritual and physical practices and a conduit of human life called Neidan; this is believed to offer the open-ended system for supreme development of the spiritual and physical body. The human body becomes a furnace, through which one works on internal cultivation and "produces its own internal pills" or "spiritual elixir".

Depending on the dosage, the elixir or medicament has frequently oscillated between poison and remedy. Another approach that appears in homeopathy and similar proto-science phenomena, which extend to some instances of contemporary science, is the usage of the method of treating a disease with the very substance that was believed to have provoked it. The contemporary research, life-extension and biohacking scene is nowadays burgeoning, with new treatments, drugs and food supplements being invented on a daily basis through the help of the latest technologies.

## Garden

Central to her practice, the author employs various forms of anthropomorphic agents in order to explore the relationship between body, mind and technology. Within this installation the agents are placed within the setting of a symbolical garden, where they serve as our negotiators within the philosophically poetical rethinking of the current technological roles of such agents.

The gardens of China were always built with multiple intentions of providing sanctuaries, segmented sceneries meant to be developed during meditative walks and creation of significant spots for observation of minute details. Representing the crossroads of nature and culture, they explore the natural world and strive to provide us with the framework for deepening our placement and role in the universe according to the Taoist principles of basic elements, laws of never-ending change, energy circulation and phases of life. Whether within the parks, floating islands, forests or mountain palaces within clouds, quests for the utopian paradise and home of the Immortals all seem to represent the constant ideal of the philosophical quest for wisdom and conduct of healthy life. Careful placement of elements involves relations of rocks to water, islands, bridges and plants that are cultivated natural models holding many poetic stories involving immortal fruits, elixirs or the simple enjoyment of ephemeral and recurring events. This particular installation takes the idea of such a garden as a model of various cosmogonic metaphors and stretches this idea to include agents of artificial intelligence as actors within them. Eastern philosophies and popular beliefs do allow for such thinking to occur, as it is being reflected in, for example, understanding robots as creatures who have souls.

## Randomness

Algorithms of randomness function as structural rhythms of the world and are often reproduced and used as a seed rhythm in building virtual environments. Tao Te Ching is the essential Taoist text attributed to the legendary thinker Lao Tzu whose origin is still unresolved, as there are three main stories that supposedly define who this mythical person was. Signifying the movement from the creation of the external elixir pill towards the internal rethinking and meditation in Chinese philosophy and proto-science, the textbook was, throughout the history, used as the scaffolding in the search for meaning, simplicity, beauty, mindfulness, and truth. Within the installation, by recombining this essential material into the conversation of the three instances of the virtual mind, we face the segments and new structures from this text, re-generated through the usage of the Markov Chain algorithm.

Installations: Garden of the Elixir Pill, Spiritus Agens, Elixir Machine and Elixir Station (objects, generative software applications, electronics)

Author: Tanja Vujinović

Production: Ultramono, 2018

Co-producer: ACE KIBLA, Maribor

Executive producers: Tanja Vujinović, Jan Kušej (Ultramono)

Software, electronics, objects: Tanja Vujinović, Miloš Roglič, Borut Savski, Stefan Doepner, Pero Kolobarić, Roman Bevc, Bevec d. o. o.

Project consultants: Jan Kušej, Lenart Krajnc, Derek Snyder, Urška Dremelj, Stefan Doepner, Borut Savski, Jelena Guga, Miloš Roglič, Maja Kodre, Tomaž Smrtnik, Aleksander Rečnik, Aleš Rode

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Opening on Friday, 7 September 2018, at 7 p. m.

The exhibition will be showing until 6 October 2018

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MMC KIBLA / KiBela, space for art, Maribor, Slovenia

Open on weekdays between 9 a. m. and 10 p. m., Saturdays between 4 p. m. and 10 p. m.

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