

Pakui Hardware

Virtual Care

For their first institutional solo exhibition in the UK, the Lithuanian duo Pakui Hardware (Neringa Černiauskaitė & Ugnius Gelguda) present a new installation specially commissioned for BALTIC's level 2 gallery. Their work considers how our realities are shaped by the relationships between economics, technology, bodies and materials. Recent work has explored contemporary medicine, imagining possible futures where human beings live beyond the limits of the physical body.

Often reminiscent of futuristic or biological settings, their hybrid sculptures and installations use materials such as glass, artificial fur, textiles, leather, chia seeds, soil, silicone, metal and plastics. In a process of assemblage, the earthily organic is brought together with the sleekly manufactured, resulting in something that feels familiar rather than fantastical.

Recent installations such as Underbelly (2018) at MdbK, Leipzig, evoked the organs of the lower abdomen, with eight chambers suspended from the ceiling containing organ-like prostheses and silicone arteries. The work explored the artists' interest in bodily experiences and transformations, the digitisation and quantification of health, data gathering and private sector companies sharing data for public benefit or data philanthropy.

At BALTIC, the artists consider another, ever more present, layer of digitisation: robotic and virtual care. The space is transformed into an environment that resembles a sterile clinical surgery room where human presence, with the exception of the visitors' own physicality, is replaced by technology. Suspended between physical and virtual, bodily and digitised, the space is populated by transparent thermoformed plastic 'bodies' abstracted into sculptural biomorphic shapes.

Influenced by Lithuanian artist Teresė Rožanskaitė's paintings from the 1970s and 80s, there is a sense that the sculptures are living, breathing and metabolising, not just human, but also bacterial and mechanical bodies. The translucent quality of the plastic suggests that they are the traces or brittle shells of 'flesh'. In a microclimate under their surfaces, colonies appear to bloom while industrial light is emitted from their underbellies.

Overhead, the spidery arms of the hanging surgical lamp focus their glass lenses on the bodies below. The warm glow of the lenses evokes a feeling of care. In contrast, there is an alienated coolness to the steel arms of the sculpture in their translucent sleeves, which are reminiscent of a surgeon's hands. The organ-like glass objects that nestle on the surface of the plastic bodies, recall the models of plant and sea life produced by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for natural history museums all over the world. The placement of the glass organs suggests that the bodies are there to be examined, studied and quantified.

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Isora x Lozuraityte Studio for Architecture

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Each element of the installation is inter-connected. Black power cables make sinewy tracks from the bodies to the 'central brain' and thin wires like ligaments connect to its limbs and to the supporting walls of the space. This suggests that these are in fact organs of a single body in balance or symbiosis. The translucent and permeable materials invite us to ask ourselves if we can begin to think of the thresholds of our own bodies not as boundaries but as places of transformation.

As researcher in the anthropology of care, health and the body Jeannette Pols notes, there is no pure 'cold' technology and 'warm' human body – it is always a subtle and complex interaction between these poles. Virtual care is not seen here as something inherently threatening, but as a mesh of relationships between humans, technology and economics.

The work asks prescient questions around health data gathering and exploitation. It speaks to the urgent problems of access in neoliberal health care systems for poor, remote and marginalised groups, to which virtual care technology can be seen as a possible positive solution, and as an opportunity for the system to support the most vulnerable through technological care.