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produced by Sarah Bijlsma and Morris Clay

Edited by Sarah Bijlsma

Artwork by Isabel Cavenecia

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www.tera.institute
editorial@tera.institute

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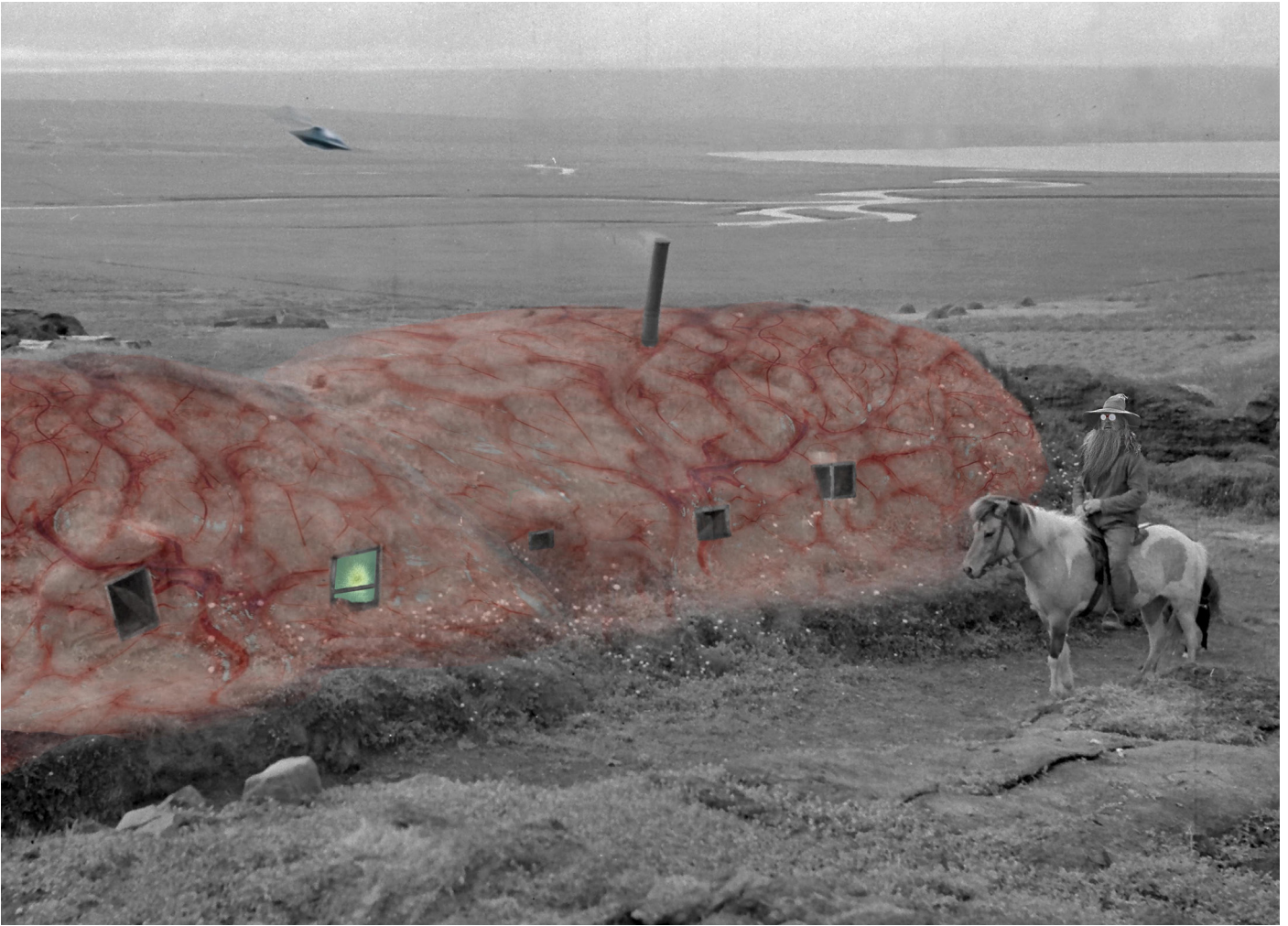
Pulses for Future Architecture

TINNA GRÉTARSDÓTTIR
AND SIGURJÓN BALDUR HAFSTEINSSON

“Humans are like insects that are transformed from one state to another in their evolutionary process. Some transform by going through other animals.”

- HALLDÓR LAXNES¹

Entering an Icelandic turf house opens a passageway into a super-organism. The turf house, built of wetland turf, stones, and timber, is a multispecies assemblage of entangled roots, soil, fungi, mycelium, microbes, plants, lichens, stones, wood, insects, mice, dogs, cows, sheep, and humans to name a few. While soil, microorganisms and rhizomatic root growth are the key builders of turf, the turf house architectonic space is also formed by interspecies collaboration. The *baðstofa* (the human communal space), for example, was occasionally built on top of the space that housed cows and sheep. This interspecies collaboration served to warm the *baðstofa*. The earthen passageway of the turf house connects all of the spaces of the turf house. The air is saturated with the smells of soil. The soil lends the space its hues of brown, and light and dark grey from volcano ash. The turf house is a form of architecture that is at once human and non-human, co-produced and co-habited.



Untitled. 2018. Hannes Lárusson, Hildigunnur Sverrisdóttir, Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson and Tinna Grétarsdóttir.

The turf house may come across as a silent and static culture but it is indeed a moving and acting living being; a giant in terms of skill, intellect, and the power of fabulation.² Thus, conceiving the turf house as simply a noun or an object, as architecture is conventionally understood, is to distort the reality of the turf house as a living super-organism involved in eco-systemic acting including photosynthesis, respiration, signaling, and biogeochemical processes, to name but a few doings. The super-organism, which takes its shape from wise beings and matter, is a vital force in the process of world-making. On this ground we argue that the turf house should be recognized and comprehended as a verb, taking our inspiration from Robin Wall Kimmerer's sharing of Potawatomi philosophy and language. Kimmerer, an ecologist and a member of the Potawatomi Nation, explains eloquently how "grammar of animacy" reflected in the rich use of verbs in the Potawatomi language³ makes perceivable "the life that pulses through all things."⁴ For example, a bay, *wiikwegamaa*, is a verb – "'to *be* a bay'–releases the water from bondage and lets it live. 'To be a bay' holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between the shores, conversing with cedar roots and a

flock of baby mergansers.”⁵ However, “a bay is a noun only if water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word.”⁶

The Turfiction (turf fiction) project moves in and out of the turf house as a way of engaging and articulating possibilities for architecture of the future.⁷ There are two components in particular that will be discussed in this essay and are intrinsic to the turf house; the act of re-membering and diverse temporalities. Both are crucial to understand the political role of architecture as a practice of “making time”⁸ opposed to “freezing time.”⁹ Such forms of architecture rest not only on “hold[ing] open space in the world for other living beings”¹⁰ but on forming new relations by facilitating practices of caring for what other beings long for. We argue that the turf house contributes towards shaping human senses, transforming communities, and distracting predominant timescales, designs, and innovations.¹¹

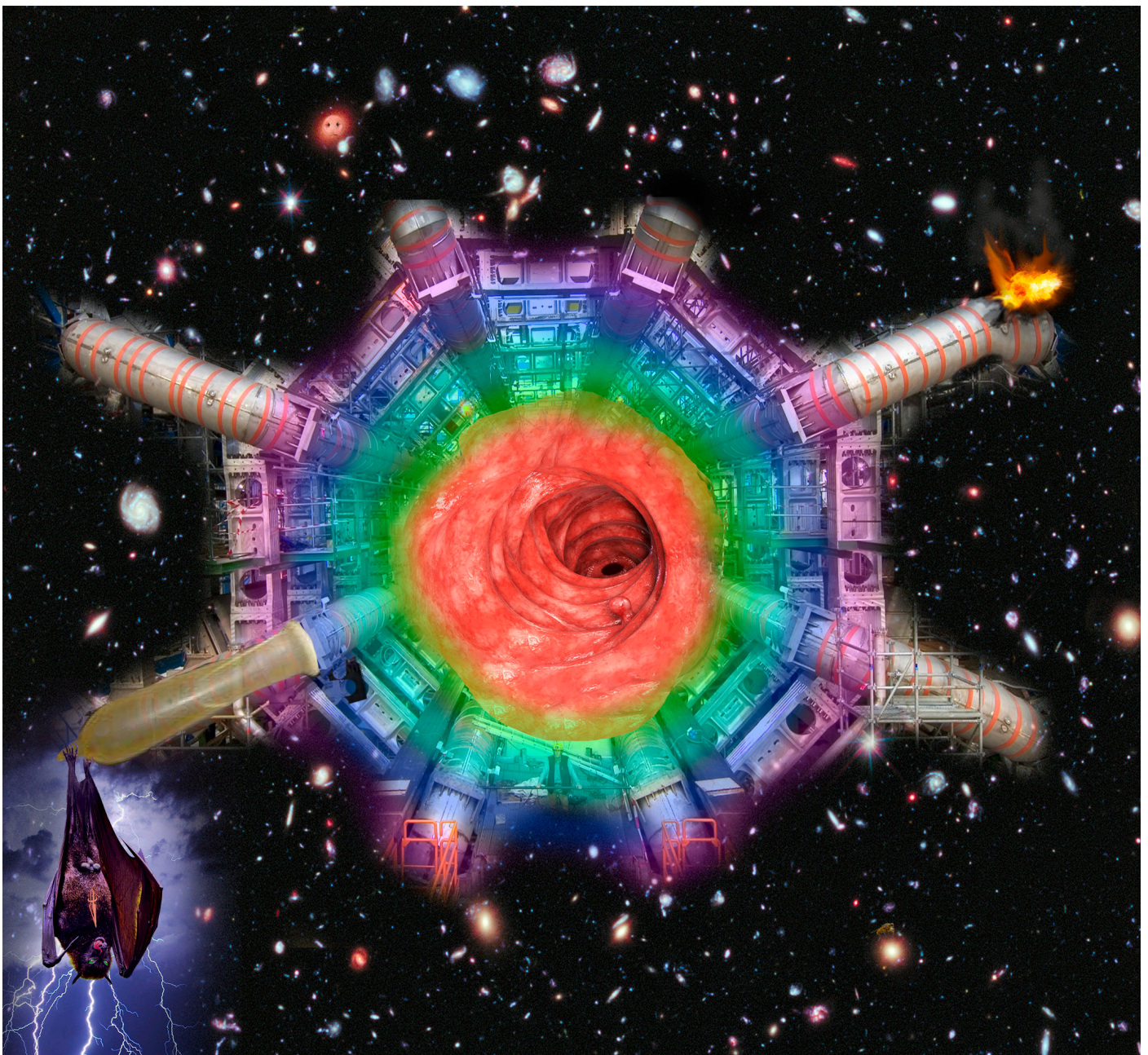
I

Architecture as an act of re-membering¹² refers to ways to sense, think, and engage in relations and with the abilities of non-human members intrinsic to human existence. It is an ethical commitment that involves “responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.”¹³ Humans are membered by non-humans in and out their bodies. “Human nature is an inter-species relationship” as Anna Tsing states.¹⁴ So too is the turf house. The growth and well-being of the turf house hinges on multiple relations that occur in collaboration with and beyond human agency; no plant or animal is ‘out of place.’

The legacy of modern architecture is grim with respect to the role of non-humans in built environments. Modern architecture dismembered non-humans in architectural practice. Forms of human collaboration and cohabitation with animals, plants, fungi, soil etc. were edited out on the basis of hygiene; even bacteria regardless whether they are harmful or beneficial to human lives were labeled as a threat to humans. Moreover, the history of architecture primarily presents narratives based on human methods of construction,¹⁵ where the human reigns as a parameter for scales, aesthetic, and material attributes, and desired experiential and moral effects of building.¹⁶

Eduardo Kohn, author of *How Forests Think* (2013), states “that learning again to think with and like forests should be part of an ethical practice for the Anthropocene.”¹⁷ In this way, learning and thinking with the turf house is part of

an ethical practice that rests on “open ended performative exploration of alternative possibilities of collective existence.”¹⁸ The turf house, consisting of clusters of houses connected by a passageway, represents a building without a blueprint. The clusters differed in number and size depending on social need and economy. Moreover, every house is distinct and constantly transforming with the advent of future generations and new compositions of organisms. Organisms, such as sedges of the wetland body, retreat and aerobic microbes take over, replacing anaerobic inhabitants. A process of succession occurs as seeds and plants take root over time resulting in a total species turnover and the formation of new interspecies connections. Thus, the turf house is always in a process of becoming, making visions and relations with the future.



Untitled. 2020. Ásmundur Ásmundsson, Hannes Lárusson and Tinna Grétarsdóttir.

The future is made in architectural practices; if guided by the turf house the architecture speaks to the stories of beings, material force and relations to come. Such practices are to recognize non-humans *on their terms*, or as Natasha Myers argues, they will “dictate the terms of the encounter.”¹⁹ Furthermore, let us keep in mind, as Manuela Rossini and Mike Toggweiler note, “the human is not necessarily the maker of history and the future, and might not even have a place in it.”²⁰ Committing to practice architecture that facilitates, carries, and relies on new kinds of human and more-than-human relationships rests on human heightened sensitivity of the non-human sphere and the power of creativity to make worlds on the grounds of “making-with.”²¹

II

The turf house is at once impermanent and perpetually unfinished. It is unceasingly evolving, expanding, and retreating, existing in a state characterized by the need for constant concern and responsible repair. In this way, the turf house opposes conventional architectural approaches centered on material endurance and preservation in favor of constant change.

As opposed to “freezing time”²² or “ignor[ing] temporality or to reduce it to the measurable and the calculable”²³ as architectural practice is often accused of, the turf house unfolds “a diversity of coexisting temporalities.”²⁴ Moreover, the turf house, cultivated for over thirty generations of humans, hundreds of generations of lichens, thousands of generations of plants, and billions of generations of microbes, brings today’s “bottomless instantaneity”²⁵ into conversation with other than human temporalities. As such, it involves revolutionizing perceptions of the anthropocentric timescale of the capitalist present, with progress as its pointer in its colonial quest. The diverse timescales of the turf house stretch from hours to a hundred thousand years. At once the turf house embodies the deep geological time of eroding stones and the shorter biological life cycles of protozoans, nematodes, arthropods, microbes, plants and many others measured in years, months, weeks, days, and hours.²⁶ On an evolutionary scale, the turf house elders have existed millions and even billions of years longer than humans. In other words, the turf house, “a world of many worlds,”²⁷ is embedded with multiple temporalities of non-human others and their diverse ways of existence, life history, and relations. Recognizing and relating to the temporalities of non-humans, including their different forces and ways of existing, has “implications for how we live together and how we belong in communities, that is, in creating ‘temporal belongings’ for both humans and

non-humans.”²⁸ Relating to more-than-human temporalities obliges us to articulate time in a way “that can ‘coordinate’ us in a complex multi-species world, in which there are co-occurring and conflicting actions.”²⁹ In this essay we have used a system of measure determined by minutes, days, or years to give insight into the diversity of turf house human and non-human timescales attempting to underline the importance to connect with the temporal range of humans and non-humans. Addressing time in units such as minutes, hours, days, however, fosters the idea of “moments exist one at a time, everywhere the same, and replace one another in succession.”³⁰ Karen Barad reminds us that time is not absolute and the nuclear explosions of 1945 have still not passed. Temporality, as she argues, “is constituted through the world’s iterative intra-activity”.³¹

The turf house architecture rests on human and non-human coordination grounded in temporalities of care.³² The turf house, where some species immigrate and others disappear, matter shifts as stones move, and organisms and plants decompose, is in constant need for attention, care, and repair. If not cared for, the turf house will collapse. Thus, the turf house, is an architecture calling for practices of sensing and caring for other-than-humans, not as a liability or to be reduced to moral basis.³³ It is an active and transformative engagement in making and sustaining livable worlds and thus enhancing all beings.³⁴ As Puig de la Bellacasa states, “ecological interdependency is not a moral principle but a lived material constraint—required and obliged.”³⁵ Thus, thickening Kohn’s statement above, recognizing non-humans is not simply an ethical exercise; it is an obligation, as without them, there is no turf house, no home, no future. What is needed in today’s “one-reality world”³⁶ is an architecture nurturing complexes of pluriverse and growing coexistence. The role of architecture to “hold open space” for non-humans and their needs³⁷ when communities, ecosystems, and species are increasingly sinking in devastation has never been as great.

Coordination of humans and more-than-human worlds of the turf house presents a challenge as no determinate passage exists; temporalities of care unfold through embodied engagement, situated and intra-active practices, and rhythms.³⁸ Such practices rest on tempo that is not tuned to master narrative of architecture and predominant speed of capitalistic progress. Attending to a building that fosters human and non-human coexistence requires time, labor, and affection to adjust to the diverse temporal actuality, condition, and necessity of the cohabitants.³⁹



Untitled. 2016. Ásmundur Ásmundsson, Hannes Lárusson and Tinna Grétarsdóttir

Relaying on the non-humans as co-makers demands knowledge of matter and species; to comprehend the many ways of life and the effort of each being in its web, such as pollinators, plants, moss, cyanobacteria, algae, soil, fauna, microbes, cows, sheep etc., in making a livable habitation. Thus, the involvement of humans and non-humans in the turf house can be both exhausting and pleasant and can involve prosperous and difficult togetherness, even death.⁴⁰



Untitled. 2016. Ásmundur Ásmundsson, Hannes Lárusson and Tinna Grétarsdóttir.

The turf house, impregnated with the stories of multiple beings and narrators with no aspiration other than to live and die, is today at most an image in the minds of the Icelandic nation. After over one thousand years of existence, the turf house has become a site of ruination on Iceland's landscape. Seen as an obstacle to modern progress and associated with shame, foulness, and disease, turf houses were brutally bulldozed over in the early 20th century.⁴¹ Consequently, very few turf houses remain standing. Still hostility towards the turf houses is ingrained into local language as an idiomatic expression for decline or regression. After the 2008 economic meltdown, the image of the turf house was frequently used to signify the country's setbacks, a potent symbol of the nation's struggle and decline.

The phrase “would you like us to go back to the turf house?” was used in public discourse against those who took a stand against neoliberal social and cultural restructuring schemes. “At least we are not going back to the turf house” stood as a reassurance of the status quo, a benchmark against which progress could be measured.⁴²

With the Turfiction project, we advocate for renewed interest in the turf house, for the sake of future architecture and multispecies politics. We suggest that there is an urgent need to comprehend the loss of its ontology and understand the practices, dependencies, and relations embedded in it as a way to guide us in our quest to find better ways to live in the future. Specifically, we want to challenge current conceptions of architecture and instead explore how architecture can become accountable for presenting more than human temporalities, alternative ontologies, and “more ecological ways of encountering citizenship.”⁴³ Elements, webs of species and matter, from the turf house can enrich future architecture in terms of co-making and cohabitation of humans and non-human others. Reflections on the eco-systemic thinking of the turf house can guide us as we develop an imagery that reacts to the urgency of the present and the need to change the story and who belongs in it.



Untitled. 2016. Ásmundur Ásmundsson, Hannes Lárusson and Tinna Grétarsdóttir.

Tinna Grétarsdóttir is trained as an anthropologist and seeks new ways of combining research and art. She has researched, published and curated exhibitions on art and neoliberal cultural politics, competing discourses of creativity, human and nonhuman ecologies and death. She has done fieldwork in Canada, Iceland, Greenland and Finland. She is co-director of art-led research projects *Turfiction* and is currently co-writing a book on architecture as multispecies organism. She is a caregiver of four children, a cat, plants, grows red beets and has been a compulsive tree planter.

Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson is a professor at the University of Iceland. He has engaged in fieldwork in Canada and Iceland on indigenous media, deep democracy, neoliberal cultural politics, heritage, and death. His books in English include *Unmasking Deep Democracy: An Anthropology of Indigenous Media in Canada* (2013) and *Death and Governmentality in Iceland: Neo-liberalism, Grief and the Nation-Form* (2018). His latest book in Icelandic is the edited volume, *The History of Art Museums in Iceland* (2019).

Endnotes

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³ About 70 percent of Potawatomi words are verbs, in comparison to 30 percent in English.

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⁶ Ibid.

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