Tanja Vujinović: ‘Elixir Distillers'

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

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, automatons, avatars and robots all the way to contemporary AI creations through which we attempt to imitate characteristics of human consciousness.

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.
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.

Within the installation called Spiritus Agens, which belongs to the Elixir Distillers project, alcohol runs through Object A, which contains charcoal particles, and then drops into the container that preserves the
other object – Object B, which is immersed in the processed alcoholic “quintessence”. Using Morse code, Object B emits “a signal of life”, in the form of the statement “I am still alive”, borrowed from famous conceptual artist On Kawara who used this maxim as part of his art practice.

The legendary and eccentric scientist Nikola Tesla, famous for his inventions and numerous forecasts of the developments of future technologies, noted in one of his interviews that alcohol is, in a way, an elixir of life. Many alchemists, the forerunners of contemporary scientists, used to assign all kinds of properties to alcohol and considered it as the “quintessence of life”, especially if it was distilled seven times. The exact procedure for producing this mythical substance is described in The Book of Quintessence from the 14th century. Medicinal alchemists tried to extract and isolate this substance to be able to use it in the production of medicaments – on account of its cosmic purity, this “quintessence” was supposed to cure all diseases. Aqua vita, or the water of life, an archaic and generic name for all types of alcohol distillates, originated in the Middle Ages when it was used as a treatment for the bubonic plague. Nowadays, alcohol is synthesised in various forms and used in the food industry, in medicine and in various fields of research. In nature it appears as a by-product of fermentation and metabolic processes in microscopic organisms. Traces of alcohol have even been found outside of the solar system, in faraway star-forming regions of the universe.
Another installation developed as part of the project, Elixir Machine is an installation containing both physical and virtual components. The physical installation is an apparatus for the delivery of previously prepared elixir. Multiple substances collected over time due to their health enhancing properties were steeped in solutions of alcohol, and small quantities of these are further diluted within the installation and purified by passing through Objects A and B, only to be dispersed into the air through an evaporator. Components of the elixir are some of the most used herbal and mineral substances in folk, alternative, homeopathic and allopathic medicine, and similar to homeopathic preparation of remedies, very small amounts of the substances are used and diluted numerous times. Also placed on the machine, the camera “transfers” visitors into a virtual space, where their presence leaves a trace in the installation’s database in the form of a unique geometric object. The accompanying Elixir Station displays elements that went into the research and development of the whole project.

Garden of the Elixir Pill is another installation belonging to this project within which physical and virtual worlds overlap. Bots seem to be organizing their garden and re-thinking the nature of their existence. According to Taoist philosophy, the ultimate elixir, that of immortality, is a creation arising from a complex physical, spiritual and philosophical practice evolving throughout history. Installation entails many corresponding elements that make up for the small universe inspired by the Chinese “scholar’s garden”, zen gardens and the practices of internal and external Taoist alchemy. The physical installation consists of anthropomorphic and abstract agents, the “fountain of youth” and “tree of life” and contains pills and concoctions made of substances significant for historical alchemical practices. The virtual segment of the garden brings forth “higher” forms of objects that generate new content based on the legendary book Tao Te Ching. Animism, omnipresent in eastern mythologies and popular cultures, offers an alternative understanding of artificial intelligence agents as autonomous beings, potential carriers of consciousness, or as artificial personalities worthy of respect.
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 Theriaca, 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. 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.
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.

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.
"On the twentieth anniversary of my artistic creation, I returned to the key topics that I dealt with in the past, and through this experience of analyzing previous projects, I have developed the work Elixir Distillers. The emphasis is on the relationship between body and technology, the history of medicine, temporary observation stations, parks, forests, noise, and cosmology.

The devices are a result of my reflections on the body and technology from the perspective of history of official and alternative medicine.

Anthropomorphic agents, in this case objects A and B, through which research takes place, are inspired by the long history of animism as projections of consciousness into nature and mythology (particularly Greek mythology), and are related to medicine and Taoism, as well as modern artificial intelligence agents. As I explore and analyze the past and the present, I am also thinking about the state of things and postulating/proposing/imagining possible scenarios for the future. Ancient history is part of this relationship between the body and medical technology, although it now sits at the core of modern science, inhabited and intertwined with the mythological and magical attributes of plants and minerals, inter alia, perpetually relevant through their hallucinogenic and mitigating effects.

Modern rejuvenation practices include extreme forms of nutrition, the use of large amounts of dietary supplements and sports activities in order to achieve and maintain excellent mental and physical fitness. Medical interventions include both cosmetic corrections of the body, as well as systemic interventions, which at least for most of us are in the domain of futurism, where part of the world is pursuing the treatment of disease via stem cells and genes, the application of nanotechnologies, the cultivation of substitute organs and the development of new kinds of medicines, including novel applications of already known remedies and substances. Above all lies the possibility of cryo-body preservation, supplemented by speculation on the possibility of an individual's consciousness persisting in virtual worlds."

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

Author: Tanja Vujinović
Production: Ultramono, 2018
Executive producers: Tanja Vujinović, Jan Kušej (Ultramono)
Software, electronics, objects: Tanja Vujinović, Miloš Roglić, Borut Savski, Stefan Doepner, Pero Kolobarič, Roman Bevc, Bevec d. o. o.
Project consultants: Jan Kušej, Lenart Krajnc, Derek Snyder, Urška Dremelj, Stefan Doepner, Borut Savski, Jelena Guga, Miloš Roglić, Maja Kodre, Aleksander Rečnik, Aleš Rode, Maja Berločnik, KAP Jasa (Saša Iskrič, Janez Vizjak)

The Elixir Station album contains a collection of quotes from “The Book of Nine Elixirs”, which was translated by Fabrizio Pregadio (http://www.goldenelixir.com/press/occ_02_nine_elixirs.html) and Samuel Hahnemann's work “Materia Medica Pura”.

Generative segment of the installation Garden of the Elixir Pill uses the text of Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching translated by Tim Chilcott, 2005 (www.tclt.org.uk)

Installation Spiritus Agens uses a text-to-Morse code translator developed by Stephen C. Phillips
https://morsecode.scphillips.com/translator.html
Substances collected during research

ELIXIR N#1_2018

Steeped for two months in 96% alcohol

From 2015 to June 2018

Rights, Responsibilities

Electronic personhood

Bio-Hecking

Object B

RE CREATION

and

CREATION

Anthropomorphic Agents

Object A
REFERENCES to my own previous projects & INSPIRATION in ELIXIR DISTILLERS

- A Project, Perfect Frequency
- Pictograms, Medical Diagrams
- Water hygiene
- Taoism, Golden Elixir
- Mythology
- Proto-Science

- Universal objects
- Petries, Consciousness
- Deads
- Anthropomorphic Agents

Internal Elixir

- Bigu ("grain" avoidance)

(TAOISTIC) ALCHEMY AND ELIXIR

- First experiments with minerals, herbs, extractions, water
- Wudang vs. Shaolin
- School of External Pill
- Qigong/Breathing/Food
DIY BIOHACKING

Meal replacement (Soylent...)
Self-Experimentation
“magical” supplements - promising - usually very expensive
Fitness
Keto-diet
Calorie Restriction (CR)
Raw Food
Supplements (big doses, liposomal...), Nootropics
Regular monitoring (weight, blood results, medical check-ups)

PANACEA (ELIXIR, PHILOSOPHER’S STONE)

Greek goddess Panacea
Mythical substance
Cure-all

Mixtures, concoctions, systems (ways of life), raw food movement...
Ethanol
Extracting "Essence", "Spirit"

AQUA VITAE
Water of Life, Akvavit, Aqguvite, Eau de vie, Vodka

HISTORICAL PANACEA

Black Drink
Blue Mass
Cold Food Powder
Oxumel
Kyphi
Tar Water
Mineral Water

Patented Medicine
Daffy's Elixir
Beecham's Pills
Pop Art/TED/Herbalism/Animism
NEW THERAPIES

- Extreme Supplements
- Replacement Organs
- Gene Therapies
- Stem Cell Therapies

Metformin, Nicotinamide Mononucleotide, Rapamycin, Resveratrol

Future Research - new companies researching ageing