

XXXTitel

MIKALA
HYLDIG DAL



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Mikala Hyldig Dal (left) and curator Katharina Koch (alpha nova & galerie futura) during the *Berlin Utopian Tours* in front of an AR sculpture at the construction site "Cuvrybrache" (Cuvry wasteland) in Berlin-Kreuzberg. As part of a performative tour with activists and members of citizens' initiatives, 4D images of an imaginary history and scenarios of a utopian future are projected onto urban sites that embody

local communities' struggles against gentrification. Slipping into the role of a tour guide from the year 2099, Hyldig Dal accompanies visitors on a bus tour that narrates the coming 80 years of Berlin's urban history in the form of a retrospective from a futurist-visionary perspective. For more information on the *Berlin Utopian Tours*, visit Galerie Futura, <http://www.galeriefutura.de/en/zukunftsland-2099/>.





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4

A visual marker attached to Bismarck monuments throughout Germany reveals an alternative, transmuting monument that uncovers hidden stories in and around the body of the memorial and speaks to its colonialist implications via virtual avatars. Download the *Monuments AR* app and scan the image above to activate XXX. Print the image and mount it to a Bismarck sculpture near you to make the artwork accessible to others.



5

Documentation of activist graffiti on Bismarck monuments in Berlin and Hamburg, intersected with 3D models of prehistoric fertility goddess figurines (Madre Dea, Sardinia, Italy; Venus of Willendorf, Austria) and AI-generated personas.



6

Alternative Monument for Neukölln connects migration histories, testimonies, and visual memories of migrants and refugees living in Berlin in a series of audio-visual interventions in virtual space. The title suggests an alternative to xenophobic right-wing movements like Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany). The monument was developed in collaboration with Ikram Labouini, Isaac Silva Looker, Siska, Fatma Mubarak, Wala Said, Jota Aamos, Natascha Vergilio, Dan Caetano, and Mubaraka Farahmand in a process hosted by Oyou Cultural Center in Neukölln. The work was inaugurated on Hermannplatz as part of the art festival *48 Stunden Neukölln* (48 Hours Neukölln), June 23–25, 2023.





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- 1 Mikala Hyldig Dal, *Berlin Utopian Tours*, 2019, ongoing, performance and augmented reality sculptures, Cuvrybrache (Cuvry wasteland), Berlin-Kreuzberg. © Mikala Hyldig Dal. Photo: Mikala Hyldig Dal
- 2 Mikala Hyldig Dal, *Berlin Utopian Tours*, 2019, ongoing, performance and augmented reality sculptures, artist-run space Flutgraben, Berlin-Treptow. © Mikala Hyldig Dal
- 3 Mikala Hyldig Dal, *XXX (Alternative Bismarck Monument)*, 2022, ongoing, augmented reality installation and interventions in public space. App designed and developed by Farhan Khalid. © Mikala Hyldig Dal. Photo: Mikala Hyldig Dal
- 4 Farhan Khalid and Mikala Hyldig Dal, QR code serving as AR marker for the *Monuments AR* app, 2022. © Farhan Khalid and Mikala Hyldig Dal
- 5 Mikala Hyldig Dal, *Visual study for XXX (Alternative Bismarck Monument)*, 2022. © Mikala Hyldig Dal
- 6–9 Mikala Hyldig Dal, *Alternatives Denkmal für Neukölln (Alternative monument for Neukölln)*, 2023, performance and augmented reality sculpture, Hermannplatz, Berlin. © Mikala Hyldig Dal
- 10–12 Stills from video documentation of Mikala Hyldig Dal's performance during the inauguration of *Alternatives Denkmal für Neukölln (Alternative monument for Neukölln)*, June 23, 2023, Hermannplatz, Berlin. © Mikala Hyldig Dal. Photos: Siska

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Goddesses's Folds of Time

HELEN STARR

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The Twelfth Berlin Biennale, held in 2022, featured *Monuments AR #1 BERLIN CONFERENCE*, an augmented reality installation by Mikala Hyldig Dal in collaboration with Farhan Khalid.¹ This work and the related *Monuments AR #2 STASI HEADQUARTERS* were accompanied by “Berlin Utopian Tours,” which enabled participants to interact with virtual objects titled *Monuments of the Future* via an app for iOS and Android. Developed to support Mikala Hyldig Dal’s critical fabulation of a utopian future, the app features Hyldig Dal as a bus tour guide from the year 2099. This use of digital technologies to augment the real, social parts of the city with 3D images seamlessly expanded the alternative narrative of what Berlin *could* become [→1–2].

These works seek to disrupt the patrimonialization of Berlin by launching familiar social spaces into a speculative schemata. Blanketing historic monuments with digital material and materially light forms, they allow us to scry through (liquid) crystal screens into a possible future, like witches before they were burnt out of existence by Western science. Patrimonialization is a term used to describe the process by which something is designated as cultural heritage or considered part of a nation or community’s cultural and historical legacy. It involves the recognition and formalization of certain objects, places, traditions, or practices as having cultural, historical, or social significance. Like the Canalettos of Venice and the multiple statues of Prince Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor of the German Empire, which litter the German landscape.

The first time I watched a video capture of the particular AR work which corrupted the Bismarck Memorial, my mind labored to extract meaning from the unfolding 2D scene [→3]. The Bismarck Memorial is a prominent statue in Berlin’s Tiergarten. Resting against the railings around the gargantuan stone statue, the small circular AR trigger featured a pixelated print of the *Venus of Willendorf* rendered in soft green [→4]. The original 11 cm-tall (4 3/8 in.) stone Venus figurine was estimated to have

been made around 29,500 years ago. Despite the lo-fi quality of the trigger, one could still make out the low hanging, pendulous breasts of a post-menopausal woman whose stomach curved into the soft flesh of a smile. Ripe with knowledge from a time where to be old was to be worshipped. A time before the crone, the hag, and the witch.

A robotic voice spoke the words “Simulation complete,” and just like that a dancing goddess bursting from lotus like pods covered the scene—like Venus emerging from a flytrap. The shapes and colors of the pods are reminiscent of the aroid plants found in North America, whose fleshy, heat-producing spathes melt their way through the frozen ground. Magenta, saffron, and ivory Eastern skunk cabbages, which belong to this family of plants, have been used continually by Indigenous Americans for herbal medicine and talismanic purposes. Referencing the talisman from the Ozieri, the pre-Nuragic Sardinia culture (3,200–2,800 BCE), the virtual amethyst colossus of Hyldig Dal’s imagination bounced and swayed in ruptured rhizomatic movements [→5].

Above the rhythmic soundtrack, a curator can be heard explaining the history of the memorial, with the claim that the half-forgotten Otto von Bismarck is now an obscure figure. Similarly consigned to the past by contemporary decolonial re-memorialization movements is the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, organized by Bismarck at the request of King Leopold II. This colonial conference, also known as the “Scramble for Africa,” split the already slave-shattered world into more colonies of the West. However, just as the dark materials of the Bismarck Memorial haunt the backdrop of Hyldig Dal’s utopian artwork, we know that the old boundaries and economic systems imposed by imperial Germany inspire the politics and economy of African nations today. A deleterious hauntology. The work reminds us that the manacles of Germany’s dark ontology flowing across time and space are as real and as hard as cold stone.

The Brain as a Reality-Rendering Machine

My practice as a commissioner and researcher revolves around highlighting my Afro-Carib

¹ Monuments AR, Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 2022, https://12.berlinbiennale.de/about/projects/monuments_ar/.

Trinidadian ethnicity and in particular what it means to be born of a Carib mother. Trinidad and Tobago gained its independence from the United Kingdom on August 31, 1962. Although officially a republic, the twin island state retains an elected queen whose title was established in 1875. The Carib queen is the leader of the Indigenous community of Trinidad and Tobago. This is a matriarchal lifetime appointment where each predecessor nominates her successor. Affirmed by the council of elders, Carib queens are role models of the highest order. They help and advise members of the tribe who are in trouble and make sure our traditions are upheld and passed on into the future.

Our people are become in a manner like yours, since they came to be acquainted with you; and we find it some difficulty to know our selves, so different are we grown from what we were heretofore.

Carib man to M. Du Montel, 1665
(De Rochefort 1666, 250)

Central to the principles upheld by the Indigenous Caribs of the Caribbean is the understanding of the brain as a rendering machine with the ability to create intricate and multiple tapestries of reality. Within this paradigm, a fundamental belief emerges—that the brain’s rendering process is heavily influenced by onto-epistemological structures, shaping our perceptions and experiences. One of the most remarkable aspects of this perspective is the rejection of a division between the body and soul, transcending the conventional Judeo-Christian binaries that have historically confined postcolonial praxis. This profound belief resonates with the many philosophical works originating from the Global South.

Visionaries such as Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter have extensively contemplated the multifaceted ways diverse groups of people conjure distinct realities and move between them without pathology. Their reflections echo the imperative to deconstruct the oppressive hegemony of the patriarchal West. At the heart of their ideologies lies the understanding that multiple realities can exist simultaneously, each holding its unique validity and significance. This concept defies hierarchical structures, inviting us to embrace perspectives that challenge normative paradigms and illuminate the rich diversity of human existence.

For Wynter, the work of scientist Humberto Maturana was particularly important. Maturana was on a research team that authored a classic

article entitled “What the Frog’s Eye Tells the Frog’s Brain” (1959). Central players in the Macy science and technology group, including Warren McCulloch, Walter Pitts, and Jerry Lettvin, demonstrated, with great elegance, that a frog’s visual system does not so much represent reality as construct it. Maturana used this work as a springboard into a new scientific understanding of what is real and what is true.

Wynter draws on Maturana’s insights, in particular his work on autopoiesis, which uncovers the interconnectedness of “seeing” the world and “knowing” the world: specifically, he shows that what is seen with the eyes does not represent the world outside the living organism; rather, it is the living organism that fabricates an image of the world through the internal/neurological processing of information.

(Mignolo 2015, 107)

Wynter harnessed Maturana’s radical epistemic shift to challenge the very scaffolding of Western secularity. And thus she grounded the Afro-Caribbean epistemic revolutions against the Eurocentric concept of Man in the very science which had been used to demonize those who were taxonomically labelled as Other.

Monuments AR by Farhan Khalid and Mikala Hyldig Dal as a Parallel to Totem Poles

It is through the Indigenous lens that I understand *Monuments AR*, the independent non-profit app by Farhan Khalid and Mikala Hyldig Dal, as a *totemic intervention* that inscribes a lineage between the contemporary artwork and the *Bismarck Memorial* situated in Berlin’s Tiergarten.² Totem poles communicate messages and meanings through their artistic forms, holding cultural significance within their respective contexts, and, as objects, have a set of attributes that are necessary to their identity. Known for their narrative quality, the arrangement of the figures and symbols is carefully crafted to convey realities as not set in stone.

This prominent stone-carved monument is dedicated to Prince Otto von Bismarck, minister president of the Kingdom of Prussia and the first chancellor of the German Empire.

² For more on the Monuments AR app, for which Khalid serves as lead designer, and ongoing, site-specific digital interventions, visit: <https://monuments-ar.com>.



Fig. 1 From left to right: Montage of two Ozieri figurines of the mother goddess, 4th century BCE, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cagliari, Sardinia; Reinhold Begas, *Bismarck Memorial*, 1897–1901, Berlin, detail showing the allegory of Germania; Photos: Shardan, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Right: Daderot, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Meanwhile, the material intervention by Hyldig Dal and Khalid is an augmented reality sticker with the Paleolithic figurine *Venus from Willendorf*, which acts as a trigger for the virtual experience. This particular figurine is referred to metaphorically in archaeology as a “Venus” figurine, due to the widely held belief that depictions of nude women with exaggerated sexual features represented an early fertility deity or mother goddess.

The animation of the mother goddess of Hyldig Dal’s imagination bends and folds in a joyous dance in virtual space-time, breaching the layered histories which emanate darkly from the statue of Bismarck to create a lavish and grandiose experience of Baroque delight, appearing like magic to delight the viewer with rainbow colors and a seductive techno beat. Hyldig Dal contends that the expansion of the Goddess movement is a response to the male-godded Abrahamic religions, and that this shift in culture signals the futurist return to pre-Christian matriarchal or heterogeneous belief systems—like the pre-colonial Carib queens.³ For Hyldig Dal, this is a utopian vision of the future and one based on community accord.

Incorporating audio-visual cognition transcripts from collective sessions and communication games, the *Monuments AR* app finds parallels with totem poles, which are often created by multiple carvers. Their work on different sections of the pole may operate collaboratively or successively. Similarly, the app integrates continuously updated audio input of concerns, unspoken desires, and imagery derived from deep-sleep dream states of participating groups. For Indigenous artisans, when a community experiences significant events, new sections can be added like a choreographed score to the curves and folds of an existing totem pole, always connecting the past with the present. This is a way of understanding the livingness of the past as compared to a set of artificially created periods as written by the “Great Men of History.” This fluid and continuous dance, which always changes and often returns in synonymous form, allows for the expansion of storytelling and representational changes in cultural identity. As a result, totem poles become complex and multi-generational monuments that archive the multiple past and present in a nonlinear way. They are a physical representation of how we become who we become through the ages.

On Becoming Another Reality

But one may also inhabit the limen, the place in between realities, a gap “between and betwixt” universes of sense that construe social life and persons differently, an interstice from where one can most clearly stand critically toward different structures. Other worlds provide one with syllogisms that one can attempt to make actual in the worlds in which one is oppressed, given one’s critical understanding of each world. The critical understanding is made possible, in part, by the going into the limen when one “travels” to the other worlds. The limen is the place where one becomes most fully aware of one’s multiplicity.

(Lugones 2003, 59)

The limen refers to a conceptual space or state that exists between different realities or dimensions. It is described as an intermediary zone where one can perceive and comprehend various social structures, perspectives, and possibilities. This liminal space allows individuals to critically engage with different worldviews and gain a deeper understanding of their own multiplicity. It serves as a vantage point from which one can analyze and challenge oppressive systems in their own reality by drawing upon insights gained from other worlds. Essentially, it represents a threshold or threshold-like state where one can transcend conventional boundaries and explore alternative ways of perceiving and experiencing the world.

Interesting parallels to the decolonial feminist philosophy of the Global South, such as that of Argentinian thinker María Lugones, can be found in the works of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who was also a psychoanalyst. Namely, the idea that reality is composed of a multitude of interconnected, overlapping elements is linked to the idea of the Deleuzian fold. These elements continuously change and become something different—like the folded shapes or skeleton hidden within the body of Hyldig Dal’s animated Mother Goddess. The process of becoming is central to Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy, as they emphasize the dynamic nature of

³ Based on notes by Mikala Hyldig Dal given to the author. The Goddess movement is “a novel, non-centralized religious current of neo-pagan origin that worships the Divine as feminine.” (Nicolae 2023, 130)

reality and reject fixed stable constructs such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, or other conventional categories. Their work highlights the concept that individuals are in a constant state of transformation and change, and that their identities are not rigid but rather fluid and influenced by various factors and interactions. Rather than a return to lost, ancient values, perhaps the real hope in Hyldig Dal’s AR artwork lies in how it fosters our understanding of the act of “becoming.”

The connection between Deleuze’s fold concept and Hyldig Dal’s time-traveling artwork lies in their mutual emphasis on embracing diverse perspectives and engaging with the intricacies of lived experiences of the past and present. *Monuments AR* introduces us to time-travelling as a means to navigate and comprehend various social and cultural realities, their synchronization and merging with and from each other. This involves moving across different cultural frameworks, adopting varying subjectivities and ways of existence. It encourages individuals to step beyond their own viewpoints and empathetically interact with others’ perspectives. Integrating the notions of folding space-time and historical recurrence, such as return to matriarchal societies. This underscores the brain’s role in perceiving time, history, and reality. These concepts propose that the brain doesn’t just passively absorb linear temporal information but actively grapples with intricate folds of time, interpreting recurring historical patterns, and thereby contributing to the construction of personal and collective realities—out of which new cultural concepts can emerge.

Thus, in 2023, through the technology of augmented reality, *Monuments AR* becomes a totemical addition to the *Bismarck Memorial*, manifesting another poetic reality. To go back to the beginning of Bismarck-time is to understand that Prince Otto von Bismarck was best known for the unification of Germany in 1871, and he was also the architect of the so-called Congo Conference of 1884–85, which divided the African continent into zones for colonial exploitation. This memorial in Berlin portrays Bismarck in his ceremonial garb as chancellor standing above statues of Atlas, showing Germany’s world power status at the end of the nineteenth century; Siegfried, who is shown forging a sword to show Germany’s strong industrial and military might; and a sibyl reclining on a sphinx and reading the book of history. And horrifically, the metaphorical goddess

Germania is portrayed crushing a giant, writhing leopard underfoot as she gazes into the distance. Within the cruel physical symbolism of the Bismarck statue, we find the reality of enacted violence. Even in a state of decay, these forms carved in stone retain their beauty. The perception of a monument’s beauty is heavily influenced by cultural norms and societal values, and this subjective response is often molded by the prevailing historical, cultural, and social circumstances of a society.

These visceral symbols aged in weathered stone echo the transformative themes represented in the augmented reality intervention of the animated mother goddess in *Monuments AR*. But where we sense the joy of dance in the augmented intervention, we simultaneously sense colonial violence through the display of the crushing touch of Germania’s foot. Diametrically opposite emotions are simultaneously felt through realities that exist in parallel space-time. When the Bismarck Memorial was unveiled in 1901, the Anyoto (leopard men) were active in striking fear across large swathes of Africa. In response to the forced labor, resource extraction, taxation, land expropriation, and crop production quotas imposed on the local populations by the colonial governments (including the German Empire, Belgium, and Great Britain), the leopard men rebelled. Between 1890 and 1940, they morphed into an epistemological category that represented a Robin Hood-type banditry that threatened the colonial order. Answering to their own chieftains, the leopard men came to represent a resistance movement, disrupting the normative structures and unsettling the very foundations that upheld Germanic—and European—supremacy.

Within the ongoing, ever-revisionist dance of historic memory, this particular statue was originally sited in front of the Reichstag building and was (totemically) relocated to Berlin’s renowned city park, the Tiergarten, in 1938 under the aegis of the twenty-fourth chancellor of Germany: Adolf Hitler. The Tiergarten (translated in English as zoo) traces its beginnings to 1527, when it was founded as a hunting ground for Prussian nobles.

In pursuit of transforming Berlin into the capital of his pan-Germanic empire, Hitler appointed his close ally, Minister of Armaments and War Production Albert Speer, as the “first architect of Germany.” Although only a few of Speer’s many drawings and plans were built between 1938 and 1943, it is notable that Speer

was able to strategically reposition the *Bismarck Memorial* at the physical center of what was planned to be the Greater Germanic Reich of the German Nation. Speer's theory of ruin value drew inspiration from the opulent and grand seventeenth-century Baroque style as well as the rationalist philosophy of art and science, aiming to evoke a sense of historical coherence through monumental designs. Tied to a vision of a futurist thousand-year Reich, Speer saw architecture as a way to convey the grandeur and permanence of the Nazi state. He believed that buildings designed with ruin value in mind would stand as monuments to the power and greatness of the regime, even if it were to fall.

Another parallel can be drawn between Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the fold and the baroque intricacy of the *Bismarck Memorial*. The fold challenges linear narratives, proposing that history and space-time can be intricately intertwined. Nazi architecture's aspiration to weave time and history aligns with Deleuzian thought, both emphasizing intricate narratives and complexity. The fold concept mirrors the aesthetic principles of the Baroque, known for its elaborate, ornate, and intricate forms that challenge conventional ideas of order and symmetry. The fold can be seen as a philosophical extension of these artistic notions. In simpler terms, despite the destruction of the Nazi party, the values of Nazi society would be preserved within the concept of hegemonic beauty, implying a return to those values in a future hence—a return can also be conceptualized as a fold in time.

Breaking This Paradigm

With the augmented intervention of *Monuments AR*, which embeds the statue / totem with the values of the mother goddess, Hyldig Dal and Khalid transform the paradigm of the *Bismarck Memorial*. Their experience replaces the ideological, political, and social framework of a time of extremist ideologies and the consequences of unchecked authoritarianism. The leopard and the mother goddess symbols represent two very different cultures existing side by side in this augmented totem, as politics of refusal come to the fore while Hyldig Dal and Khalid's joyous rapture folds around the baroque curlicue of stone.

We can probe the psycho-geographical purpose of this heavy, cold-to-the-touch stone monument, around which a speculative

world-dominating future was built. These evocative emotional sites shape the emotions of the citizenry and coax the brain to render secret realities. Their aesthetics touch us in ways we struggle to articulate.

The ability of this communal AR artwork to animate time travelling to help us engage with the prehistory worlds of the mother goddess disrupts not only spatial perception but also the linear nature of reality. Including the ideas of folding space-time into discussions about multiple rendered realities emphasizes the complex ways in which we perceive time, history, and reality. These concepts propose that we are not merely passive recipients of linear temporal information but that we actively engage with the intricate folds of time, interpreting recurring historical patterns, and thus contributing to the construction of individual and collective realities. The distinction lies in whether it's sufficient to merely evoke an earlier time as utopic and reorient toward that imagined future-past. Because without reconfiguring these patterns in a different way and breaking open the poetics of the *new*, there remains the real risk of repeating the inequity of the colonial past. From 1868 onward, 250 Bismarck monuments were erected across the German Empire in a constellation that worlded the very consciousness of the German people. They could all do with the transformational augmented magic of *Monuments AR* by Farhan Khalid and Mikala Hyldig Dal.



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