

Eternal Return, **2019**

**Shortlisted for the 2020 Lumen Prize,
Eternal Return is a choreographed multi-sensory XR
collaboration between ScanLAB Projects and Lundahl & Seidl.**

With the visitor's body and senses as active medium, triggered through VR, hyperconnected objects and live performance, the artwork reveals how memory allows for a string of data to be passed through matter, across time. From Earth's deep past as unicellular cyanobacteria, through to its post-anthropocene future, the living is tightly connected with geology: the surface of the earth, and matter stored within a lineage of objects and tools: the hammer, the piano, and the radio technology of Marconi.

Eternal Return by Lundahl & Seidl and ScanLAB Projects is accompanied by *The Memor*, a speculative fiction text by Malin Zimm, as an expanded narrative framework. Objects and scenes in the installation thus take on a multitude of experiential modes: physical, virtual, narrative, emotional. The fiction expands as the art installation evolves, yet its parts can be read and experienced in any order as a non-linear envelope. As a piece of speculative fiction, the text moves from the old world to the new, weaving history and fiction together by picking up facts floating in the tide, and finding new use for them in the narrative. The narrative contains numerous references to demonstrate the method of "playing" the internet for facts and news, encyclopaedic knowledge and archives. The various references are composed together to form a new interpretation of the events in and around the world as it is presented to our senses.



Eternal Return / *The Memor* 2019 - by Lundahl & Seidl and ScanLAB Projects. Part of the exhibition *Monograph* at Norrtälje Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden, 2020.

The virtual is oftentimes a rather lonely endeavour. Sometimes this means groups being lonely next to each other, unknowingly being part of an art installation. And so the first encounter with the artwork *Eternal Return* is seeing other visitors with headsets already immersed, being physically guided by experienced performers facilitating an improvised choreography: a relationship of curiosity, trust and attention to also translates to outside spectators of the installation. On the inside, high-end isolating headphones cancel out all sound from the external world and the visitor can “see” the performers who interact with them by a virtual proxy: a moving and vibrating cluster of points with a voice projected inside the virtual space. Augmented by the analogue touch of the unseen performer and digital code, the cluster leads the way, but also listens and corresponds to touch, vibrations, scents, movement and other sensory additions to conjoin the virtual and physical worlds.

The space makes no divisions between individual artworks, functional objects and tools, the visitor’s own body, or the

technology in the room. Without bibliographic references to their origin, objects oscillate between being props, tools or reproductions. Partly obscured by fog, resting on a sound absorbent carpet, objects become ghostlike empty shells, on an abandoned scene at night where everything is hallucinatory and a shared reality seems inaccessible. The VR technology is here offering a different interface to the room, perhaps more similar to AR extending beyond visual augmentation, giving it another layer of time and movement, revealing how memory allows for strings of data to pass through matter, across time. From Earth’s deep past as unicellular cyanobacteria, through to its post-anthropocene future, the living is tightly connected with geology: the surface of the earth and matter stored within a lineage of objects and tools: the hammer, the piano, the wireless radio technology of Marconi, and indeed, the faculties of perception of the visitors themselves and the VR device they now wear. The room scent of petrichor (water and soil) and fresh, cold ozone). All the above drives the potential narrative, constantly in negotiation and friction between objective and subjective realities, where the visitor’s body

and senses are used as an active medium to produce, experience and become aware of the workings of memory and time within the artwork and, indeed, within themselves. Space is distributed between several presences at once, yet traced and felt by the body in every instance.

In digital online space, things that happened ten years ago are equally present to that which was added today. For the digital user they are both rendered as the "Digital Now." We tend to see the things happening now - right at this moment - as "real," not the things that have existed in the past or that will exist in the future. We say that those experiences or events "will" or "have been" "real." In philosophy, this is called presentism and suggests that reality only develops in series of "nows." Yet this obviously only works if that present is defined as Prae sense: before our senses, in close proximity and in approximate terms. As soon as we speak of a "now" that is undefined and far from us, it falls apart. For example a star that died lightyears ago but still keeps shining. Spacetime after Einstein - the

merging of Newtonian, Aristotelian and Augustinian time - is both experienced and called into question on a phenomenological level in this VR-experience where both time and space are destabilised.

In the central part of the installation, The Memor, the visitor sees a grid with digital objects created with high definition



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point-cloud data collected with a Lidar terrestrial scanner, surveying different places, buildings, landscapes and even traces of moving people. The point cloud environments are at times stable, appearing as the “solid” interiors of digital buildings in which the visitor moves around.

If a visitor comes close to an object, the grid of the object archive deconstructs itself and becomes a portal to other realities. The grid can dissolve, implode or expand into a room.

In *The Memor* a piano workshop from Steinway & Sons’ legendary London workshop emerges from a teacup, and the room spirals around the visitor until she is fully immersed inside it. When the visitor touches the workshop interior they simultaneously, from an outside perspective, also touch the sculptural abstractions in the physical installation of the work. The object materialises in the surface contact with the visitor’s hand. Letting go of the object collapses the world of the piano workshop into a dark void where the small points of sea dust particles move in rhythm with the movement of waves under water.

Inside the dimly lit piano-tuners’ workshop, the visitor will discover an abandoned tool: a hammer (metaphorically, Heidegger’s Hammer (1)). While the hammer will appear

visually complete within the virtual environment, if the participant tries to pick it up it will physically feel incomplete; a negative empty space of the hammer is carved out of the workshop-table (visible in the physical exhibition). In this manner, a bifurcated self is composed where the physical and virtual are in conflict with each other, yet it is ultimately up to the visitors in which realm they are most present, depending on the sensory modality they are most conscious. Here the visitor participates in evoking a world which without them in would be incomplete. In the act of failing to bind together the conflicting input, creating a coherent experience in time they instead have the novelty to embody a metaphysical concept somewhat in between what Heidegger calls ‘ready-to-hand,’ (picking up the hammer - assuming we know how to use it) and ‘present-at-hand,’ (trying to make sense of the hammer as an object through intellectual analysis). By intentionally leaving gaps in both structure and narrative, the artwork thus invites visitors to temporarily lend their consciousness and body where the artwork can take place. The artwork and the technology containing it have no autonomy on their own but rely on the visitors’ attention for how the artwork is received, appearing as sensations within the body (2).

1. In short, Heidegger’s idea is that it is not until the hammer loses its function as a hammer that it needs to be identified as such in language. We can in other words either pick it up and use it, or we can contemplate it from distance. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

2. VR Point cloud environments made by Lidar 3D-laser-scanning; three dimensional sound processed in Unity. Material/medium: Stereolithography/resin print on steel scaffold; and Stromatolites: 3 billion year old fossilised microbial mats. Instructed choreography of movement and synchronised touch from unseen guides.

Waves are the lingua franca of the universe, spoken in all frequencies and amplitudes. Waves are what keep us together. From the wriggling vibrations of the quantum particles that constitute our physical existence, to the seismic movement inside Earth, the ocean waves, electromagnetic waves of sound, light and heat carrying information to our senses. Waves also keep us apart. Gravitational waves keep us grounded, making any displacement on earth an energy cost for all beings. Space and time are possible thanks to gravity, keeping them apart, stretching them out to "take place", preventing everything from happening at once, in the same place. A wave is, in science, defined as a transfer of energy. An ocean wave moves the energy, not the water. Sound is a disturbance travelling in air, not the displacement of air.

In the waves of history, there will be the occasional ship, connecting the old world with the new. Energy will travel and build up to a point, followed by a release of power in a different place. Tides will lay things bare and dry, as well as hiding everything under a forgiving veil of water. With the arrival of the water, some lifeforms will populate the biotope, and with the withdrawal of the sea, other lifeforms will occupy the same place. The tide is time counted by the moon. Over the years and decades, the sea will redraw the outline of land, reach and claim some structures, spare others. We will live in this interface and take it for granted, by virtue of its scale and age. We will get used to the sounds and temperatures of this world and its cyclic wonders. We will admire its calming vistas and curse its unforgiving claims. The waves will keep coming, some of them will take us out, some of them will bring us back.

Speaking with Nietzsche, Eternal Return is an existential waveform, sending humans into cyclical patterns of life and death, moving the energy from one world to another, while the matter stays behind. In the exhibition narrative, Eternal Return is a wave that disrupts the social orders of the world, and an unexpected opportunity to contact the past and the future of Earth. The novel tells the story of how we got to know the universe around us as a resounding archive of life on Earth, capable of putting us in touch with the past, as well as the future.

Preludium to The Memor: a companion to the exhibition Eternal Return. The Memor, the book, is written by architect theorist Malin Zimm Ph.D

German philosopher Thomas Metzinger has argued that the feeling of being embodied is a pre-reflective, pre-linguistic form of selfhood, a sense that our ancestors must have had long before humans gained the capacity to use the personal pronoun in phrases like "I think." There is no narrative in this kind of bodily self; just the ability to feel anchored in a body and distinguish between the self and the non-self (Metzinger, 1995).

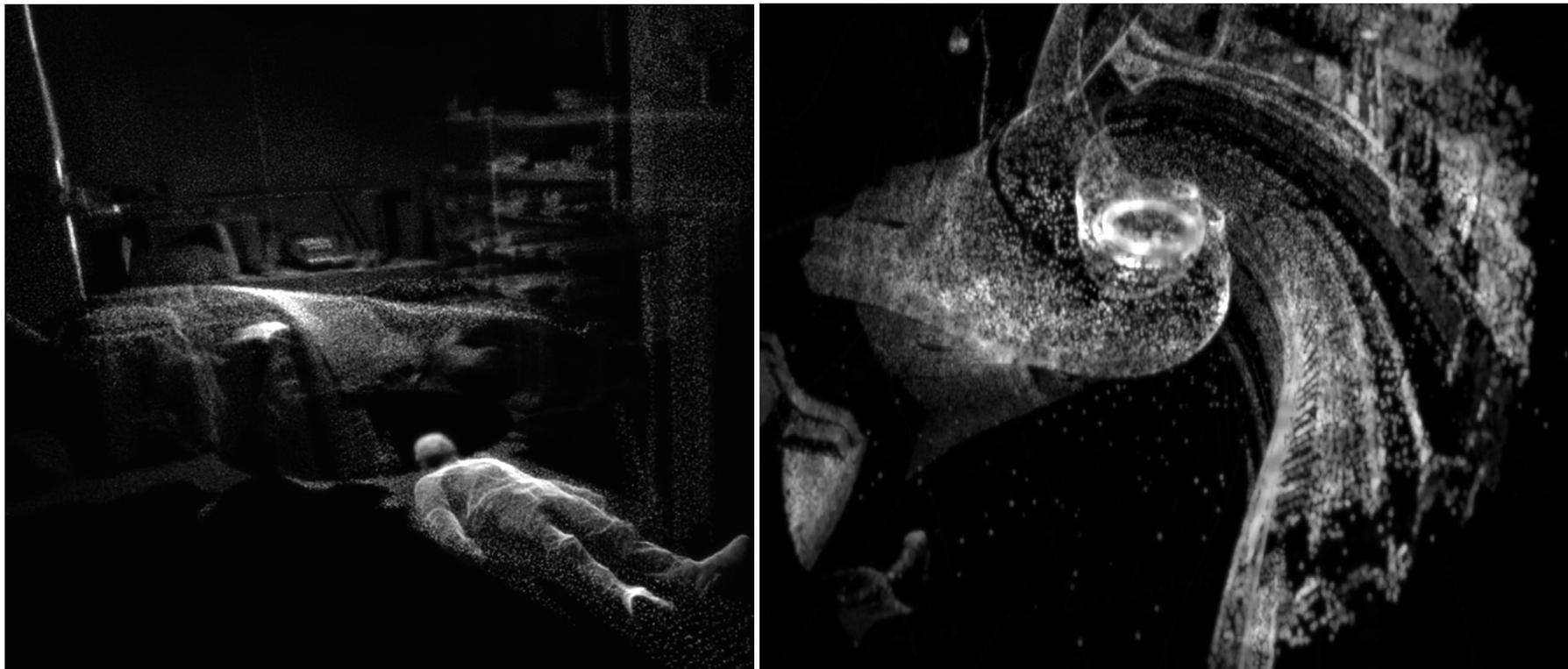


Image:
Within VR headset

Voice in headphones: *Although you can see, there is no light in this room. What you see is heat emanating from the objects. The body on the floor will be you in 1 minute and 24 seconds. Lay down into the body.*

Image: Stromatolites at Shark Bay, Australia.

The artwork *Eternal Return* explores the tight connection between geology and life through the workings of memory.

Memory allows for a string of data to be passed through matter, across time. From Earth's deep past as unicellular cyanobacterias, 'Stromatolites', through to its post-anthropocene future, as matter stored within a lineage of objects, tools and technologies.

Much like the Stromatolites did not evolve to understand their purpose or importance in the universe, equally, Sapiens, human beings might never fully understand how actions or inactions will play out in a far future, where they may no longer be.

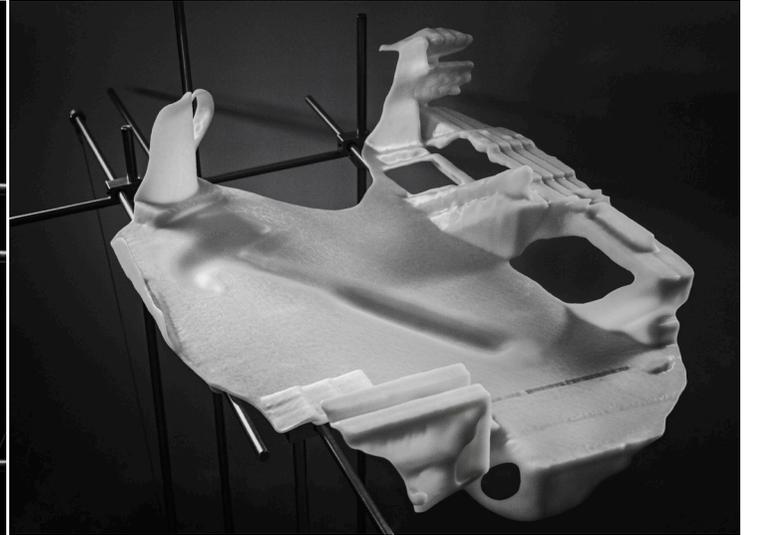
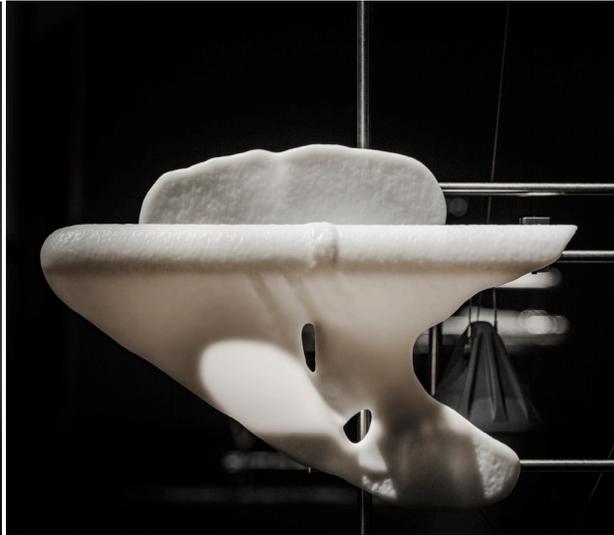


ETERNAL RETURN
IS FORMED OF
III PARTS:

STROMATOLITES / This part of the installation is an encounter with a digital entity modelled after the first form of memory, the single-cell bacteria, the oldest trace of life on earth: 3.5 billion year old Stromatolites (Greek for “layered rock”). Stromatolites grew in shallow pools using water, carbon dioxide, and sunlight to create their food. As a by-product of photosynthesis they expelled oxygen as waste into the atmosphere, raising levels from 1 percent to 20 percent. With a changed climate, more complex lifeforms started to evolve, but the living environment changed so drastically that the stromatolites’ diversity and abundance declined to the verge of extinction. The stromatolite was a probability engine: an actualizer of life. This lifeform enables more advanced cells to form. A collaborative symbiotic community of cells, packed together and exposed to friction, were the first step towards consciousness.

THE MEMOR / Memory is the biotech of Eternal Return. Every object in the installation is the imprint of different layers of time. The state of a memory in The Memor is much like the human mind: a stable structure of a neural network as it is NOW, but every return to that memory changes it, and not only it, but the whole system that produces it. Mirrored in The Memor are the ways in which traces of the earth’s past are recorded in rocks and fossils, as arrangements of minerals in stable structures that we examine in the present. Collective memory is the bank from which we pass knowledge over and across generations: what to fear, what to value, how not to die, how to care for the world of tomorrow.

THE FUGUE / “Memory allows us to die from something new every day, until we don’t...” Inside The Fugue, pianist Cassie Yukawa-McBurney performs J. S. Bach’s Fugue in A Minor BWV 543, written for the organ, arranged by Liszt for piano. Fugue or Fugue State is the psychological term for when the brain does not find where memory is. For the pianist, the fugue played is like a process of remembering. For her audience, the electromagnetic waves of sound carry information to our senses. Remember - only the disturbance is travelling, not the air. In the time theory of the speculative fiction novel: The Memor, exhibited as a companion to Eternal Return, the unbodied human consciousness is the disturbance travelling from the old world to the new. Echoing Nietzsche, Eternal Return is an existential waveform, sending humans into cyclic patterns of life and death, moving the energy from one world to another while the matter stays behind.





Eternal Return / The Memor 2019 - by Lundahl & Seidl and ScanLAB Projects. STRP Biennale of Art and Technology, 2019. Photo: Soma Sato

Material / medium: Stereolithography / resin print on steel scaffold; and Stromatolites: 3 billion year old fossilized microbial mats. VR: Point cloud environments made by Lidar 3D-laser-scanning, three dimensional sound processed in Unity. Instructed choreography of movement and synchronized touch from unseen guides. Scent: Petrichor, ozone.

Title: Eternal Return

Creators: Lundahl & Seidl & ScanLAB Projects*

Script collaboration and author of accompanying fiction novel: Eternal Return – the Memor: Malin Zimm

Dramaturge: Rachel Alexander

Pianist: Cassie Yukawa-McBurney performs J. S. Bach's Fugue in A Minor BWV 543 written for the organ, arranged by Liszt for piano.

Performers: Pia Nordin, Rachel Alexander, Sara Lindström, Lena Kimming, Helena Lambert

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