



## Marianne Vlaschits

### A New Home

9 March - 21 April 2018

At the spot where the two white glowing lightsabers meet on the screen, the dark purple sky opens up to reveal a glittering universe. The guardians of this magic portal are two frog-faced goddesses in pink raiment; swords drawn, they flank the wondrous gate like a pair of sphinges. To get sucked in is to find oneself in the midst of the fantastical cosmos of Marianne Vlaschits (\*1983).

One aspect of the Austrian artist's modus operandi involves using installations to take the narrative threads that run through her paintings and spin them further. In her solo show "A New Home" at Galerie Nathalie Halgand, she once again transformed the exhibition space into a brimming, atmospherically dense installation. The gallery windows were darkened and the walls were covered with an extraterrestrial desert nightscape. This mural creates a background for some dozen canvasses lit by individual spotlights. Immersed in this arrangement as if in a rocketship, visitors are sent plunging through an imagined deep space. But unlike the infinite depths of space, this artistic cosmos is densely populated. We see a gallery of ancestral portraits dedicated to the residents of multiple planets and galactic habitats: Vlaschits has covered her canvasses with polymorphic lifeforms, extraterrestrial landscapes, and visionary flying objects in an interplay of gradual progressions and pastose, extensively applied paint with powerful tones.

While visitors to Vlaschits' past exhibitions already encountered space travellers, spaceships, and floating cities, in "A New Home" she has expanded her solar system even further. Androgynous creatures, oceanic proliferations, galactic holes – her images harbor speculations of multiple sexualities, future worlds and parallel universes ruled by powerful femininity. Her allusions are many, and readers of feminist science fiction from the last four decades will recognize several figures. Enthroned on a mountain rising up from an icy landscape covered in blue crystals beneath a pink sky is an androgynous figure in a white cape – a resident of the planet Gethen, perhaps, the scene of Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel "The Left Hand of Darkness"? Neither man nor woman, the creatures at home here are ambisexual. Once a month they go into "kemmer," a phase of sexual activity during which their bodies take on either male or female characteristics. Marianne Vlaschits illustrates this moment on Gethen, a planet whose society is not based on a permanent dualism of the sexes.

Another work shows a grey-blue tentacle-creature tightly entangled with two anthropomorphic figures. It seems to have attached itself to their necks with its long arms. This scene was inspired by the visions of non-hierarchical alien sex described by Octavia E. Butler in her novel trilogy "Lilith's Brood" (1987-89). Butler develops an alternative concept to binary reproduction mechanisms in a post-apocalyptic age in which human

relationships have expanded to include liaisons with migrating Oankali aliens and reproduction has become a question of genetic exchange:

„She jumped when Nikanj touched her with the tip of a sensory arm. She stared at it for a moment longer wondering how she had lost her horror of such a being. Then she lay down, perversely eager for what it could give her. She positioned herself against it, and was not content until she felt the deceptively light touch of the sensory hand and felt the ooloi body tremble against her.”<sup>1</sup>

In taking up this story's motifs, "A New Home" becomes a strategic site for the representation of love, sex and forms of life outside patriarchal, heteronormative worlds of imagination.

The motifs of feminist space utopia and of journeying through strange galaxies also contain concrete references to the economic, social and political present and to the history of space travel. In the early 1970s, then-Nasa chief James C. Fletcher proclaimed: "We earthlings should regard the solar system as our domain. We should go out and stake our claim – because we are the only ones here."<sup>2</sup> Today, in times of resource scarcity, global warming and impending nuclear conflict, this claim is being boldly asserted once again – in the form, however, of a private-sector undertaking driven primarily by US tech billionaires from the new space industry, not least – as they claim – in order to secure the survival of mankind against home-made planetary collapse. At present, however, the ticket price for a Mars mission is around 10 billion dollars. SpaceX announced that, in order to make the trip to the red planet "affordable for everyone,"<sup>3</sup> it would get the price down to \$200,000 – still beyond the great majority of the world's population. This is thus still the narrative of a privileged elite preparing its own flight to space, to conquer foreign planets and dig up metals on distant asteroids.

On the basis of intensive research, Marianne Vlaschits' latest works also deal with these neo-colonial fantasies of space conquest by asking probing questions and developing counter-narratives. Which of our visions of the future of humankind in space and on earth are connected to space travel, especially the privately financed variety? What are the military, neoliberal and neo-colonial interests that are inscribed in these projects? Oh, and by the way: Who will even be able to afford to be considered a human being when it comes to exclusive rescue scenarios?

For what is considered "human" is often defined in white male SF narratives from an androcentric perspective and based on "othering," a strategy of differentiation with the goal of asserting "normality" and thus the predominance of one's own position. Le Guin explains this in her 1975 essay "American SF and the Other":

„Male elitism has run rampant in SF. But is it only male elitism? Isn't the "subjection of women" in SF merely

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1 Octavia E. Butler: *Lilith's Brood*, Dawn. New York, 1989, S. 421.

2 *Millionenstädte im Weltraum*, *Der Spiegel*, H. 25/ 1974, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41696594.html>

3 *The first Mars-Tickets cost 200.000 Dollar*, *Welt.de*, 28.09.2016, <https://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article158416493/Die-ersten-Mars-Tickets-kosten-200-000-Dollar.html>

a symptom of a whole which is authoritarian, power-worshipping, and intensely parochial? The question involved here is the question of The Other — the being who is different from yourself.”<sup>4</sup>

These “others” are the ones who are feared, whose participation is restricted and whose power is suppressed, whether as sexualized, racialized, naturalized, or technological others. Unfortunately, the sci-fi genre is still used all too often today as an instrument for reproducing normative, xenophobic messages and patriarchal, sexist stereotypes. At the same time, it offers a boundless space for speculating on other forms of coexistence, love, sexuality, political organization and possibilities for resistance and reappropriation of history and the future.

Marianne Vlaschits' work shows this. She is developing a form of artistic expression that points to the resistant potential of the imagination. The philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway describes the active and responsible shaping of this process as a collaborative string game: „it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.“<sup>5</sup> Taking up and further developing this string game is one way to interfere with the stories and practices of the New-Space-Sci-Fi-Valley Boys' Club. For what it lacks are the various voices of the unwanted “others”: queer and feminist perspectives and critical, hard-charging objections. In this sense, the exhibition “A New Home” is, to quote Le Guin once again, an “exercise of imagination,” and one “[that] is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary.”<sup>6</sup>

Text: Nada Schroer

#### About Marianne Vlaschits

Marianne Vlaschits (\*1983, Vienna) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Most recent exhibitions include „Queer Encounters – Vienna Trans L. A.“, (group exhibition), CALARTS, Los Angeles; „Promises of Monsters“, Kunstverein Hildesheim, Hildesheim, (2017); „Venus City“, Kevin Space, Vienna; „A disturbance traveling through a medium“, Duve Gallery Berlin, (2016); „Welcome to the Jungle“, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; „Panama“, One Work Gallery, Vienna (2015); „Pas de Deux“ (group exhibition), Cairo (2014); „Praxis der Liebe“ (group exhibition), Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg, 2013. Marianne Vlaschits lives and works in Vienna.

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Galerie Nathalie Halgand, Stiegengasse 2/3, Mezzanin 1060 Vienna, Austria, +43(0)650 244 4779  
[info@galeriehalgand.com](mailto:info@galeriehalgand.com)

Wednesday until Friday 12-18 h  
Saturday 11 - 15 h and by appointment

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4 Ursula K. Le Guin (1975): American SF and the Other, Science Fiction Studies, No. 7, Vol. 2, Part 3, <https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/7/leguin7art.htm>

5 Donna Haraway (2013): SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far, Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology, No. 3, doi:10.7264/N3KH0K81

6 Ursula K. Le Guin (2004): The wave in the mind: talks and essays on the writer, the reader, and the imagination, New York, S. 413.