

Pauline Julier
A Single Universe
8.6. – 27.10.2024

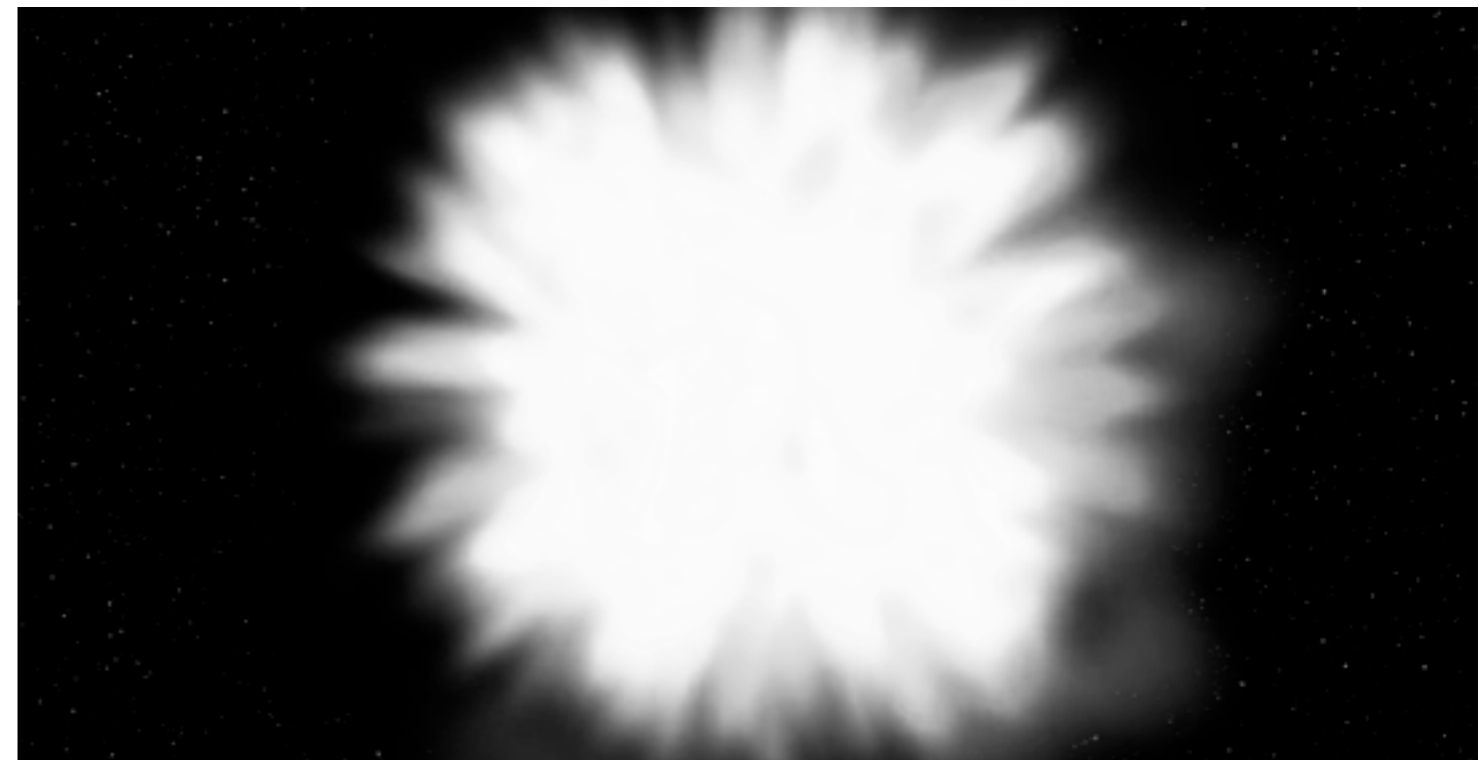
E

The artist and filmmaker Pauline Julier (*1981, Geneva) develops immersive video installations that blend fiction and documentary. In two major research projects, she invites us to reflect on how we look into the world.

Naturalis Historia questions our perception of landscape. *Occupy Mars* takes us to the universe, examining the Red Planet as a mirror of the Earth. In collaboration with other artists and scientists, Pauline Julier explores the boundaries between knowledge, belief, and poetry.

The title of this exhibition is inspired by a quote from Karen Luza, an activist from the indigenous Atacama people in Chile. Luza fights for water rights and says in the film *Follow the Water* "We must consider the Earth as a body, a human body. I have thousands of veins and thousands of arteries, but I cannot live with veins and arteries alone, they communicate with each other. There is a saying that goes like this: 'As above so below. As outside so inside.' And so, a single universe."

Bon voyage!



Supernova, 2023

Room 1

The extensive video work *Supernova* (2023) greets us at the start of the exhibition. It shows a small red ball that keeps growing until it ends in a blueish flash of light of mesmerising beauty. It is the explosion of a Supernova, a giant star, in slow motion. The video is a metaphor for a slowly developing catastrophe and sets the tone for the tour: Science and poetry are not opposites. Life and death are in close proximity. Destruction can also mean a new beginning. All the living world is interconnected, transcending the boundaries of time and physics—humans, water, Earth, animals, plants, even Mars rovers.

→ Supernova: the self-destroying explosion of a star. Supernovae that occur in the Milky Way can be visible to the naked eye. Reports of observed supernovae can be found over several millennia and in different regions of the world.

Room 2

Naturalis Historia (2017–2019) is the first of Pauline Julier's two big and long-term research projects. The work cycle questions our perception of nature and landscape: How can we observe nature if we "only see what we have learned to see", if our perspective is a construct of our respective era or culture?

The film *Doha* (2017–2019) runs without any images. In short and concise sentences, Julier recounts a personal experience. The eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull affected air traffic worldwide, and the artist got stranded in Doha. At the airport hotel, an excerpt of Beethoven's piano piece *For Elise* plays on repeat. Over breakfast with an Italian man, a French professor, and a Chinese paleo-botanist, Julier philosophises about volcanoes and eruptions that spark the invention of stories (from Mary Shelley to Jules Verne) and about the absence of the word "landscape" in the Chinese language. While reading this story that reminds us of the forces of nature, we listen to the piano music—muffled by the background noise of unintelligible mumbling, a ringing telephone, and the footsteps of other hotel guests. Images appear in our heads as if we were part of the conversation, and we wonder whether we, too, are involved in the construction of narratives about nature.



The World's Oldest Landscape, 2017 – 2019

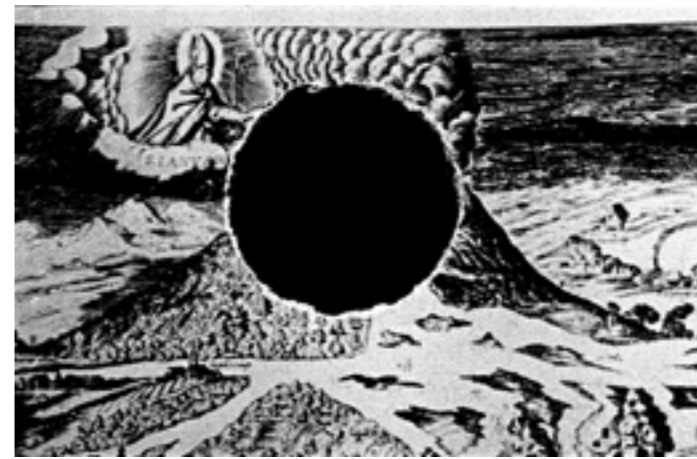
The video work *The World's Oldest Landscape* (2017–2019) is installed on a monumental wallpaper. It is a reconstruction of the “world’s oldest landscape” in northern China, where a 300-million-year-old fossilised forest was discovered in 2010. In the video, we hear the sound of regular strikes on rock in an open-pit coal mine—a landscape both barren and rugged. Professor Jun Wang pauses what he is doing and steps in front of the camera. He tells of the time when the scenery was still surrounded by water and dominated by a volcano at the centre. We follow him into the laboratory, see fossils and fragments of leaves and branches that were preserved in a hard layer of volcanic tuff. This is how the researchers managed to reconstruct the forest—Ren Yugao, the lab’s illustrator, created a visual image of it. The discovery of the illustration of this forest in a scientific magazine, of this “vegetational Pompeii” stood at the beginning of Pauline Julier’s work cycle, *Naturalis Historia*.

We are invited to climb to the hut over a wooden ladder to explore the work *Le Malentendu paysager* (2017–2019). In this tree-like observatory, we see a projection of slides that contain excerpts from a lecture by the French anthropologist Philippe Descola on “misunderstanding landscape”. He relates a personal experience, which he documented in the Amazon several decades ago. After a two-days hike through the dense rain forest and a steep

ascent, a seemingly endless scenery opened before his eyes. Years later, he realised that this perspective was a cultural construct.

Room 3

Neapolitan Triptych (2017–2019) is a video installation comprised of three 16-mm films. Between mythology and science, they tell old and modern stories about Mount Vesuvius. In one section of the triptych, the eyes of the faithful witnessing the miracle of San Gennaro are reflected in the scientists’ attention at the volcanological observatory. We get insight into Naples’ ritual to seek protection against volcanic eruptions: The vials with the dried blood of the city’s patron saint, San Gennaro, are pulled out to liquify the blood three times a year. Further along in the films we learn about the tragic end of Pliny the Elder who died because he came too close to the object of his studies—namely Mt. Vesuvius. His goal had been to create an inventory of the world with his encyclopaedic *Naturalis Historia* (about 50 AD). The soundtrack—sounds coming from playing old film reels—stands as reminder of the images’ fragility.



Neapolitan Triptych, 2017 – 2019

Room 4

Two works by Caspar Wolf (1735–1783) from the Aargauer Kunsthau collection are also included in the exhibition. The pre-romantic artist is considered the inventor of Swiss landscape painting. The painting *Western Entrance to the St. Beatus Cave with Ivy Tree* (1776) is an example of Wolf’s fascination with caves. He was not only interested in depicting nature, but also in exploring its inner life all the way down to the geological layers. That, in turn, connects us to Pauline Julier’s method and her work *La Grotte*.

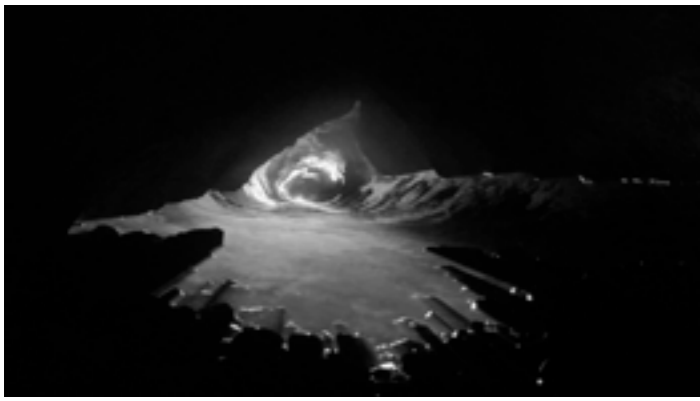


Room 5

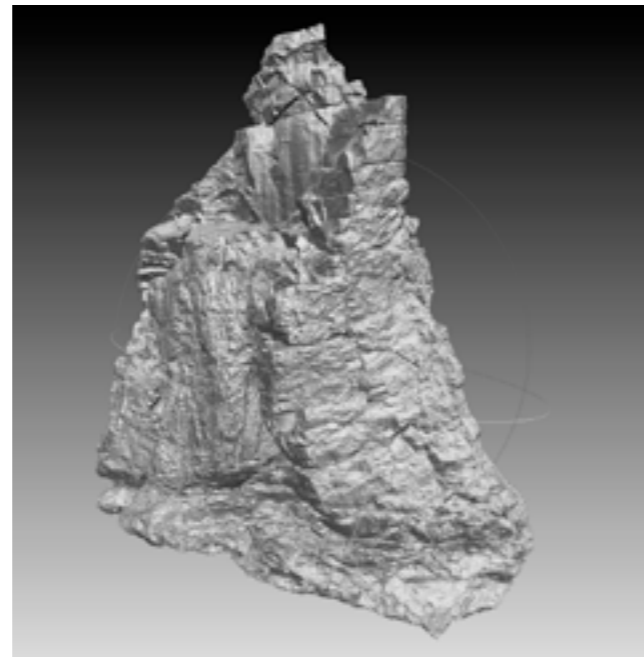
Water, fog, smoke, clouds: The immersive video work *La Grotte* (2017–2019) pulls us into a mesmerising vortex. From the inside of a cave, the Grotte aux Fées in the Valais, the blue suspended matter flows into the distance, capturing our gaze. Is it the centre of the Earth or a cosmos far outside the solar system? Do we see skyscrapers against the light or the inside of a body, of a living being? In the darkness of the exhibition room, accompanied by spherical music, we feel as if we are losing our bearings, as space and time dissolve around us.

The pull of the image stream reminds us of nature’s both creative and destructive power. Humans are part of nature, breathe in and out with it, are born from chaos and will dissolve in it again.

→ Universe: comes from the Latin term *universus* and means “all in one” or “total”. This refers to the totality of existence within the existing temporal and spatial dimensions. However, humans can only perceive the universe to a limited extent, so the perceptible parts are considered the “observable universe”.



La Grotte, 2017–2019



Trunk, 2024



Cercate Ortensia, 2021

Room 6

The video work *Cassini's Suicide* (2017–2019) shows the American space probe *Cassini*, which burned up as planned when it entered the atmosphere of Saturn in September 2017. For the video, the artist included images provided by NASA, allowing for a combination of imagery from several sources: videos from the space probe take-off in 1997; photographs of the planet, its rings and moons shot from the space probe; animated images of the space probe. Like with *Pliny the Elder*, the *Cassini* story tells us how it is possible to get burnt by the very object of our study. The video also expands on the issues of the Anthropocene—the geological epoch in which the influence of human activity has become significant for the Earth system. It carries it into the realm of speculation as it takes the gaze off Earth and follows human tracks all the way into space.

Room 7

The sculptural work *Trunk* (2024) is based on 3D-scans of the oldest tree in Switzerland. It is a replica of a tree fossil 300 million years old and weighing 1.8 tonnes, currently housed at the Naturmuseum Wallis. This ceramic replica – created in cooperation with the artists Aline Morvan and Claire Mayet – translates the research of the work cycle *Naturalis Historia* into a new medium. Comparable to the process of fossilisation, which takes thousands of years to complete, the production of ceramics is based on a permutation of the material—from a soft state to a hard state. At eye-level with this large tree fossil, we humans become aware of our impermanence.

Room 8

Cercate Ortensia (2021) is structured like a collection of memory fragments colliding with one another— first shots of the atmosphere, a fireman walking over burning coal, stone statues with empty eyes, burning hydrangeas, tired fathers, reddened skies. Images from the artist's personal archives alternate with material from the Internet or from scientific and public collections. Connected by poetic text elements, they suggest a story, albeit not a linear one. Layer upon layer, a multitude of metaphors give rise to a critical reflexion on our patterns of perception, on our relationship with the environment. The video work was inspired by *La Libellula (Panegirico della Libertà, 1958)* [The Dragonfly (Panegyric of Freedom)], a political, feminist poem by Amelia Rosselli (1930–1996) and constitutes a visual meditation on disappearance, loss, and disaster, but also on resistance and freedom.

Room 9

Pauline Julier works with resonances and echoes. She often blends micro- and macrocosm. *Là où commence le ciel* (2024) consists of a wooden dome, textual work, and a medical video showing an eye during cataract (formerly called “grey star”) surgery. The analogy between eyeball and globe, between the circularity of the wooden structure and the endless loop of the text, becomes apparent as soon as one reflects upon the title of the work. The artist's poetry brings us closer to the place “where the sky begins”, somewhere between our cornea and the line of the horizon.

The research project *Occupy Mars* (since 2022, co-initiated with Clément Postec) includes the following works, which explore the Red Planet as a mirror of Earth. How far is mankind prepared to exploit its resources—reaching even into space? What narratives do we invent to be part of it?

→ *Occupy Mars*: Elon Musk founded SpaceX in 2002 with the aim of colonising Mars. The plan to make the planet an attractive place to live relies on a hypothetical terraforming process. This would involve pumping enough gases into the Martian atmosphere to make the planet more Earth-like. Musk claims that this could be accelerated by dropping nuclear bombs. According to experts, however, it is unclear whether Mars even has enough resources to make terraforming possible.



Follow the Water, 2023



↑ Follow the Water, 2023
 ↓ A Million-Year Picnic, 2024

Room 10

The monumental film installation *Follow the Water* (2023) asks timely questions about the exploitation of resources, escapism, and the colonisation of space. In the Atacama Desert in Chile, where one of the largest lithium mines of the world is located, different stories intersect: the fight of an indigenous woman for water rights; the doubts of scientists exploring the desert as a terrain comparable to the planet Mars; the hopes for profit by industrialists. This is where the ghosts of colonisation blend with the tales of the new explorers. Together with the filmmaker Clément Postec, the artist follows the traces of water and life—on Earth and in the universe. The video has the form of a triptych with overlaps and multiple perspectives, video cameras are often visible. The three viewpoints sometimes blend into one, only to break apart again. The voices, too, become entangled, and the discussions come to a halt. The desert landscape, where Mars rovers obey the mantra of “Follow the Water” and practice seeking out water, soon fuses with the Red Planet.

→ Follow the Water: In order to evaluate the possibilities for life on Mars, NASA named its exploration strategy “Follow the Water” in the early 2000s. The Mars program investigates features that indicate a past presence of water, such as dry riverbeds. It searches for ice on the polar ice caps, hot springs, hydrothermal vents, or underground water reserves.

→ Rover: A remote-controlled vehicle made to explore foreign celestial bodies, e.g. the moon, Mars or asteroids. Rovers are often powered by solar energy and have a varying life expectancy. Equipped with tools and high-precision measuring instruments, they are able to collect data from the surface they are scouting. The *Opportunity* rover died in 2019 after 15 years of activity. The rover called *Perseverance* is currently exploring a region of Mars.

Room 11

In a Mars-like scenery or on an unknown planet, three scientists talk about the challenges of space research, about recent discoveries and imaginary mindscapes. Didier Queloz, a Nobel Prize-winning astronomer for his discovery of exoplanets—planets outside our solar system—encounters cosmologist Camille Bonvin and Violaine Sautter, planetary geologist and member of NASA’s *Curiosity* and *Perseverance* missions.

The title of the video installation, *A Million-Year Picnic* (2024) refers to the eponymous short story by Ray Bradbury from 1946, which is part of his *Martian Chronicles* in which a family must leave Earth and finds its own mirror image while looking for Martians. Nowadays we ask: How much of ourselves do we recognise when we look at Mars? What kind of past or future life are we looking for in the universe? The video installation is the outcome of a polyphonic and interdisciplinary work process created in collaboration with the dramaturg Eric Vautrin at the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne.

Room 12

My battery is low and it’s getting dark (2024) is about the life and death of the *Opportunity* rover on Mars. The departure point for this textile work are the 3D-simulations and images of Mars made by NASA rovers. Here, Pauline Julier combines scientific imagery with a story that articulates around the relationship between humans and machines: Are rovers alive, do they even have a soul? Are they more than machines, more than humans?

Pauline Julier’s art asks questions. She sparks curiosity. The artist responds to the unease towards the current ecological situation with a sense of humour. This is what she says in one of her works: “I participate in the invention of narratives to get the better of our finite nature and to enclose nature in landscapes or definitions in order to keep her quiet.” (*Naturalis Historia*)

Biography

Pauline Julier (*1981, Geneva) is a Swiss-French artist and filmmaker. Before following the Art and Politics Experimental program at Sciences Po Paris under Bruno Latour, she studied Political sciences at Science Pro Grenoble and Photography at the École nationale supérieure de la photographie in Arles. Her films and installations have been shown at exhibitions and festivals around the world. In addition to winning the Swiss Art Award in 2010 and 2021, her solo show *Naturalis Historia* opened at the Centre culturel suisse in Paris in 2017 and then toured other venues, as well as forming part of the group exhibition *Critical Zone* curated by Latour in 2020 at the ZKM Karlsruhe. *A Single Universe* is her largest institutional show to date.

Publication

Pauline Julier: *and so on, a single universe* (2024), German/English, publisher: Scheidegger & Spiess. Graphic design: Julia Born

In conjunction with the exhibition there is a richly illustrated bilingual publication. It is arranged like a kaleidoscope of different views and perspectives, focusing on Pauline Julier's work of the last decade. The publication includes a text by curator Céline Eidenbenz, an essay by the author and curator Chus Martínez, a dialogue between biologist and scientific theorist Donna Haraway and the artist, as well as an exchange between Julier and anthropologist and writer Nastassja Martin. The publication also features selected images and poetic selections by the artist.

Acknowledgments

Sponsor: Kanton Aargau, Aargauischer Kunstverein

With generous support from:

Swisslos Kanton Aargau, Stadt Aarau, Federal Office of Culture, Binding Sélection d'Artistes, Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia, Fondation Philantropique Famille Sandoz, Ernst und Olga Gubler-Hablützl Foundation, Dr. Georg and Jodi Guggenheim-Foundation, Société des arts de Genève, and especially Videocompany, Zofingen.

Media partner: Aargauer Zeitung

Special thanks to:

Florian Amoser, Julia Born, Arnaud Bruckert, École Camus, Centre national des arts plastiques (Cnap), Nicolas Chapoulier, Pierre Desprats, Emmanuel Favre, Fondation Bruckner, Fondation des Artistes, Fondation du Jubilé de la Mobilière Suisse Société Coopérative, Fondation Leenaards, Fonds Cantonal d'Art Contemporain DCS Genève, Fonds d'encouragement à l'emploi des intermittent-es genevois-es (FEEIG), Fonds Municipal d'Art Contemporain de la Ville de Genève, Sebastian Hoggenmüller, Institut d'art contemporain (IAC), Villeurbanne, Laura Arminda Kingsley, Nicolas Kramar, Nina Leger, Claire Mayet, Mondes nouveaux – Ministère de la culture français, Aline Morvan, NEOLICE (François Samoullier & Marion Barbier), Clément Postec, Pour-cent culturel Migros, Sister Distribution (Abel Davoine), Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne, especially to Vincent Baudriller and Caroline Barneaud, and Eric Vautrin

Curator
Dr. Céline Eidenbenz

Assistant Curators
Sarah Mühlebach,
Sandrine Huet

A selection of events

Tour and dialogue
Sunday, 9 June 2024, 1 pm
With Pauline Julier and
Dr. Joël Vacheron, sociologist,
ECAL, Lausanne, and Dr. Céline
Eidenbenz (in English)

Lebendig! (Alive!)
Fermentation workshop
Sat 29 June 2024 2–5 pm
With Maya Minder, artist

Meet the Artist
Thursday, 5 September 2024, 6 pm
A conversation between Pauline
Julier and Dr. Sarah Burkhalter,
with Listening Session by
Sandar Tun Tun

Exhibition closing & water tasting
Sunday, 27 October 2024,
from 2 pm

All events can be found on our
website: aargauerkunsthaus.ch

Aargauer Kunsthaus
Opening Hours

Tuesdays – Sundays 10 am – 5 pm
Thursdays 10 am – 8 pm
Closed Mondays

Free admission
Thursdays 5 pm – 8 pm

Special Hours of Operation
10 am – 5 pm
Eve of the Maienzug, 4.7.2024
Maienzug 5.7.2024
National holiday 1.8.2024

Aargauer Kunsthaus
Aargauerplatz, CH–5001 Aarau
+41 62 835 23 30
kunsthhaus@ag.ch
www.aargauerkunsthhaus.ch