

# Institute of Contemporary Arts

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Metahaven: **VERSION HISTORY**



3 October 2018 - 13 January 2019

**Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)**, 2018

Digital film installation on a 16 channel video wall  
64 mins

Russian, English, French, Italian, Chinese, German,  
Macedonian, with English subtitles

Produced by the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London,  
and co-commissioned with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam  
and Sharjah Art Foundation. Supported by the Museum  
of Modern Art in Warsaw and Creative Industries Fund NL  
and generously assisted by Strelka Institute, Moscow.

**Infra Ultra**, 2018

Tufted carpet

**Version History**, 2018

Podium and Upper Gallery murals

Acrylic paint and charcoal

**Interwoven**, 2018

Woven webbing and crowd barriers

**Digital Tarkovsky: Rolling Titles**, 2018

Multi-channel video

**Hometown**, 2018

Two-channel digital film installation

30 mins

Russian and Arabic with English and Ukrainian subtitles

Commissioned and produced by Sharjah Art Foundation for

Sharjah Biennial 13, Tamawuj, 2017. Additional production

support from Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam.

**Information Skies**, 2016

Single channel digital film

24 mins

Hungarian with English and Korean subtitles

Commissioned by the 11th Gwangju Biennale, *The Eighth*

*Climate: What Does Art Do?*, 2016. Made with the support of

Gwangju Biennale Foundation, Mondriaan Fund.

*VERSION HISTORY* is an exhibition of the work of artists, filmmakers and designers Metahaven (Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden). The exhibition spans the ICA's Podium and Upper Galleries, and centres on three recent films, including the newly produced *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)*. These works form part of an expansive and hybrid practice that investigates overlapping geopolitical, technological and emotional conditions.

Metahaven identify as a collective, centred on the collaboration between Kruk and van der Velden. With shared backgrounds in graphic design, they first met and worked together while at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht in the early 2000s. Their joint research focused on an approach to graphic identity as propositional and multivalent, with design operating as an investigative and speculative medium.

Van der Velden and Kruk's first project together addressed the Principality of Sealand, a former World War II sea fortress in international waters off the coast of Suffolk. Established as an (officially unrecognized) independent state in 1967 by its occupiers, between 2000 and 2008 Sealand was home to a 'data haven' offering an unregulated environment for data hosting. Manifesting in a series of hypothetical proposals for adverts and a website, a 'shadow emblem' in place of a logo, and the trappings of sovereign statehood such as coins and stamps (what Kruk and van der Velden termed 'fact-fiction mythmaking icons'), the *Sealand Identity Project* articulated the tension between territories, and flows of information, data, identities, images and capital.

The Sealand project offered up the name Metahaven, adopted from 2007 on, and established a mode of working that exists across multiple channels, spinning off in directions that are at once analytic and expressive – from graphic identities, spatial installations and publications, to essays, garments and music videos. Metahaven's work has developed around a highly distinctive and maximalist aesthetic vocabulary, which draws on the vernacular of digital design as an intrinsic force within contemporary struggles around information transparency and interface politics.

Since 2015, Metahaven have notably concentrated on the production of films and moving-image installations. These works have maintained hybrid methodologies, combining forms of deep research, collaborations with interlocutors from diverse disciplinary arenas, an engagement with different registers of media production, and a multi-layered aesthetic. Metahaven's films engage fictive, factual and poetic forms of narration – they extend out from investigations into mythmaking and branding, the increasingly fragmentary narrative effects of cloud platforms, and the epic linguistic and visual textures of the cinematic. Metahaven's engagements with Sealand and other entities that have promoted transparency and freedom of information through spaces of exception, such as the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative and WikiLeaks, have articulated how 'the internet employs a new form of information: "hypothetical truth"', and the degree to which this new informational regime has become a geopolitical tool as 'governments turn to mythmaking to justify their actions.'<sup>2</sup>

*VERSION HISTORY* features the films *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)* (2018), *Hometown* (2018) and *Information Skies* (2016). These works share a vibrant aesthetic language that combines cinematic imagery with graphic, animated layers and immersive soundscapes. They deploy what Metahaven have termed 'truth futurism' – a mode of speculation on an altered cognitive order, in which the lack of accountability of the 'post-truth' era has become emotionally processed. The exhibition title itself suggests two possible readings. It references an interface providing a timeline of previously edited versions of a document, but it can also be read as a verb: to actively generate versions of history. In concert, it shows how ideological and political narratives have sought to rewire history; to work in competition with empirical reality, but also, how there are realities in which this appears to matter less. *VERSION HISTORY* speaks to a form of simultaneously affective and analytic field reporting from within this complex and thickened state of the 'now'.

The exhibition begins in the ICA Podium with Metahaven's latest work, *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)*. Presented on a 16-screen video wall, the film combines

cinematic sequences, found footage, animation and graphics with a soundtrack by electronic musician Kuedo. Through its different visual, aural, linguistic and material textures, *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)* moves between the distinctive temporality of a YouTube viral video, a poetic and folkish mode of science fictional storytelling, and moments where the film seems to overlap with experience in real-time, destabilising the hyped-up editing of its neighbouring sequences.



In the speculative narrative that underpins the film, the continent of Eurasia has assumed the name 'DVD Zone 5', with regional empires, breakaway states, and petty-nationalist republics engaged in fights over resources. The film riffs off Emile Durkheim's 1914 text 'Variations of truth', as well as 'How the Enlightenment Ends', a recent essay by Henry Kissinger on the subject of artificial intelligence.

The film's evolving narrative is framed by three poems: Marina Tsvetaeva's 'I know the truth' (1918); Fyodor Tyutchev's 'Silentium!' (1830); and Alexander Vvedensky's 'Snow Lies' (1930). Each of these poems, all read in voice-over, embodies a distinct position of the poet as a filter of reality. In the exhilarating 'Snow Lies', Vvedensky denies language its pretence to convey any coherent meaning, running away with the listener's imagination as well as with the concept of poetry itself.

In a passage of the film shot in Russia's Ural region, a Black Magic 4K digital camera mounted on a tripod is filmed at dusk, overlooking a steppe at the meeting point of Europe and Asia, accompanied by Durkheim's treatise

on truth, read in French. Bookending this eerily sublime vision are two pieces of found television footage: in one, the Russian Eurasianist philosopher Natella Speranskaya expounds on the eschatology of Lars von Trier; in the other, the Italian comedian-turned-populist politician Beppe Grillo cracks a joke in the European Parliament about Europe as a 'mosaic'.

The continent of Eurasia, as both geographical and geopolitical concept, is a locus for the grand claims of projects of unification, and the hyper-fragmentation of an increasingly neo-medieval political order. Featuring a cinematic sequence shot in Veles, Macedonia – the infamous home of websites that circulated manufactured stories during the 2016 US election – the film hints at fake news being a man-made proxy for the indifference an artificial intelligence may feel toward the human condition.

In its combination of visual and communicative registers, *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)* speaks to the manner in which political ideology and thought on the internet are inseparable from their encoding as specific forms of media production. Wrapping facts in fictions, and fictions in facts, the film renders an immersion in a material, temporal and emotional state of 'epistemic uncertainty'<sup>3</sup>, brought about by an ever more pervasive data-driven cognitive order.

Metahaven's work has often sought to echo and exaggerate the manner in which the digitally designed image or interface is increasingly projected onto multiple surfaces, across a plurality of platforms. In *VERSION HISTORY*, this is taken into the space of viewing: *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)* is presented against the backdrop of a wall mural, on a raised stage covered in a hand-tufted carpet, and surrounded by crowd barriers that are repurposed to form networks. These designed elements bring a symbology evident within the film into the physical space – from fragments of stylised landmasses and digitally-filtered faux architectures, to vortices that encircle the gallery windows. One of these graphic spheres appears to hover somewhere between a representation of the topography of a planet and a Rorschach ink-blot. As Metahaven have consistently

articulated in their work, it is in the space between the map and felt reality where forms of iconographic, mythic and symbolic mediation take hold; where 'informational and emotional realities become bubble-shaped half-dreams'.<sup>4</sup>

Occupying locations in the ICA Canteen, Metahaven's essay *Digital Tarkovsky* (originally published by Strelka Press in Moscow) is presented as scrolling text on multiple monitors. In this form, the reading of the text becomes defined by a fixed pace and duration, and inevitably fragmented. The temporality of screen-based viewing is at the centre of the essay itself, which addresses a contemporary relationship to digital devices and the platforms they provide access to as a 'patchwork that blends in and out of reality'.<sup>5</sup> Such a fragmented temporal experience, one that Metahaven defines as an 'undeclared cinematic time span'<sup>6</sup>, is considered in *Digital Tarkovsky* in direct relation to the films of the eponymous director, known for the ways in which his films render a heightened sense of the flow of time.

The concept of *Digital Tarkovsky* is for Metahaven a means to conceive of the discrepancy between the speed of the digital platform and that of lived experience. The weight of evermore encompassing 'computational force' enables a form of media production that is incessant and personalized, instilling a sense of ideological distortion in the user as both recipient and participant. The presence of the *Digital Tarkovsky* text at a bridging point of the exhibition, marks the importance of Tarkovsky's films for Metahaven, due particularly to his use of a 'soft sci-fi' devoid of techno-fetishism in which 'suspension of disbelief [is shifted] to the situation itself'.<sup>7</sup> It also highlights the endeavor within Metahaven's work to find lyrical means to express 'a gravity between the computational assemblage, and its human and non-human inhabitants'.<sup>8</sup>

In the ICA Upper Galleries, the films *Hometown* (2018) and *Information Skies* (2016) share a distinction from *Eurasia* (*Questions on Happiness*) in that they occupy a purely fictional space, one without the presence of found media footage or commentary that reflects on a present political reality. They instead project into a psychological, abstract

space of 'soft sc-fi', portraying urban spaces and forested hinterlands populated by avatar-like figures. Influenced by poetics, particularly absurdist Russian children's poetry, these lyrical narratives accompanied by immersive soundscapes are monumental while intensely personal. They reckon with contradictory lived experiences of disorientation and belonging, in the thick of digital and physical layers. Carrying through from the Podium, the architecture of each room bears fragments of murals – simulations of layered textures that mimic the distressed state of the walls themselves, filtered through digital image software.



Filmed in Beirut and Kiev, *Hometown* shows fragments of these cities as if to create a composite that stands for the single eponymous town. The camera lingers on liminal spaces and areas of exposed infrastructure – hanging cables, satellite dishes, the detritus of a crumbling building. Sections of pooled water are a recurring motif, the reflective surfaces creating formal compositions emphasized in the structure of the film. Projected across two screens with a narrow split, *Hometown* builds on moments of both division and doubling.

Two young women, Lera and Ghina, appear moving through the cityscape. They act like aliens within their environment, interacting with it as if experiencing its codes and phenomenology for the first time – measuring the length of a distant hanging cable between two fingers, or running their hands through a plant's leaves blackened with pollution. In one scene, Lera is filmed from an elevated position moving quickly through the busy Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the main square in Kiev that was a gathering point for protestors during the Ukrainian 'Revolution of Dignity' in 2014. She bumps into people and sits uncomfortably close to one, seemingly unaware of the social codes of conduct in public space.



Spoken in Arabic and Russian, the women read a disorienting and at times contradictory poetic text, which nevertheless conveys within its lyrical imagery a first person narrative of growing up amidst a dissolved symbolic order. The social world of linguistic communication, the acceptance of law and knowledge of conventions such as time, appear to have broken down. The women speak of a meeting point at the fork of two roads; a moment of familiarity and belonging shared with an unnamed other and the town itself, yet also a point of splitting.

*Hometown's* images of grey concrete buildings and overgrown peripheries are interspersed with psychedelic animated sections, in which liquid colour-bleeds are overlaid with simple graphic geometric shapes. These abstract, almost transcendental sections suggest intersections with the spoken narrative – an absurdist story of a caterpillar 'murdered in cold blood' is echoed in the aligning of five spheres into a segmented body that seeps a pulsating liquid. In these moments, *Hometown* seems to invoke a speculative form of shared knowledge, a liminal interface that molds aesthetics with a sentient materiality. The idea of the caterpillar that is also the possibility of butterfly, forms an allegory of the transitional state of childhood, a state that the narrative holds up as one of vulnerability and awakening criticality:

They forgot about,  
how children taught them,  
what cannot be taught:  
a dawn of morality from within.

Made two years previously, *Information Skies* is a sister film to *Hometown*, one that similarly seeks a vocabulary where criticality is embodied within lyricality. As with the later film, it is structured around a poetic text read in voiceover and the otherworldly presence of two figures, this time a young woman and man. *Information Skies* is set on the periphery of a forest landscape with visible fragments of an encroaching (or perhaps receding) built environment – a pylon, an overgrown building and the verge of road. Shots that dwell on mist drifting through a clearing or the muddy edges of a pond, are redolent of the post-apocalyptic area called The Zone in Tarkovsky's

1979 film *Stalker*. These images suggests the land and its flows and cycles are an autonomous force, persistent even in the science-fictional future.



The two characters in *Information Skies* occupy this landscape as if dislocated from it. In some shots they are seen wearing futuristic-looking virtual reality headsets, in others, the idea of a removal from one reality to another is conveyed through a silk blindfold covering a face or a circular mirror held up to obscure a character's body. The narrated poem summons an idea of digital distraction that extends beyond the technological:

Our laptops, our visors, globes turn dark,  
short on imagination  
movable titanium  
switch off the haunted gaze.

Metahaven have spoken of finding inspiration for *Information Skies* in YouTube videos of pro-Russian fighters in the Donbas, a southeastern region in Ukraine where armed conflict broke out after the Ukrainian revolution in 2014. They have highlighted how the presence of propaganda on YouTube from both Ukrainian and pro-Russian sources, constitutes a 'fight over filter bubbles: both the idea of a "natural" Russian ownership of Ukraine, as well as the "original" mythologies of Ukraine as a ur-homeland.'<sup>19</sup> The characters in *Information Skies* seem to exist within such a bubble, intent on maintaining their own version of truth – 'a plot formerly known as dream'. As with *Hometown*, the poem's recurring return to the subject of family and generational knowledge implies both the parental figure as a source

of social and spiritual cohesion, and a nostalgic drive towards something imagined that was never there – within nationalistic narratives, the imagined ‘motherland’.

Sections of black, red and white anime-style graphics break into the cinematic sequences of *Information Skies*, forming a stark contrast with the gloomy forest scenes. Angular horizontal faces double as stylised rising mountain ranges. A ground of sparkling minerals (or inversely, a starry sky) is cut into by a spade-shaped geometric form. The monumental scale and grandeur of these simplified images evokes renderings of heroic fighters and nationalist symbology, as well as the familiar formal tropes of anime identified by Metahaven as an ‘international style’ of propaganda circulated through online platforms.

*Information Skies* addresses what remains below the technological superstructure, with data as the material driving belief systems that sustain different versions of reality. The overlapping visual and conceptual textures across *VERSION HISTORY*, and throughout Metahaven’s work, articulate the importance of thinking beyond attempts to map the complex conditions of the ‘now’. They encourage instead to look to the speculative as a means to apprehend the textures of felt experience, within an increasingly fragmented symbolic order.

1. Metahaven, *Uncorporate Identity*, (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2009), p.43
2. Ibid., p.44
3. Metahaven and Suhail Malik, ‘Propaganda is Now Another Name for Communication Itself’ in *PSYOP: An Anthology*, (Cologne, Amsterdam: Koenig Books & Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2018), p. 34
4. Metahaven, synopsis for ‘Bubbles and Netwars (The New Cold War is Philosophical)’, a seminar at European Graduate School, 2016
5. Metahaven, *Digital Tarkovsky*, 2018
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Metahaven, Anastasiia Federova and M.E.S.H, ‘The New Easthetic’, in *PSYOP: An Anthology*, p. 48

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The exhibition is organized concurrently with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam exhibition *Metahaven: EARTH* opening Saturday 6 October, 2018 and running through 24 February, 2019.

*Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)* (2018) is produced by the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and co-commissioned with the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and Sharjah Art Foundation. The film is supported by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and Creative Industries Fund NL and generously assisted by Strelka Institute, Moscow.

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