

# **Peggy Ahwesh**

# **Vision Machines**

## **24.02–29.05**

Exhibition guide  
English

# **Kunsthall Stavanger**

Peggy Ahwesh  
*Vision Machines*  
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*Vision Machines* is the first survey exhibition in Scandinavia by the groundbreaking American artist and experimental filmmaker Peggy Ahwesh. Focusing on a selection of works made between 1993 and 2021 that explore the relationship between technology and the body, the exhibition explores ideas as diverse as gender, climate change, war, and the increasing virtualisation of everyday life.

Having engaged with the changing media landscape throughout her career, Ahwesh appropriates images and conventions associated with media forms that others might consider disposable or unserious. For Ahwesh, experimenting with these media often leads to a playful unravelling of the politics of representation across so-called 'high' and 'low' forms of culture.

Ahwesh is a widely celebrated experimental filmmaker who has had a profound influence on younger generations of artists and filmmakers. Her early works often feature non-professional performers, many of them women and girls, who offer up improvised presentations of the self. In her later works, the driving force becomes the formal exploration of new technologies and their relationship to artificiality and crisis. Across her practice, Ahwesh brings into focus the materiality of bodies and shifting media technologies, articulating a feminist commitment to the marginal and the minor.

#### GALLERY 1

##### 1. *Smart Phone* (2014)

HD single-channel video on iPhone, 01:00 mins

In 2014, Ahwesh began a series of works using images appropriated from a single archive: animations of contemporary news events produced for online circulation by the Taipei-based Next Animation Studio. By adopting multiple forms of presentation for this cycle of works—including CRT monitor stacks in *Re: The Operation* and *Lessons of War* and large-scale projections in *Verily! The Blackest Sea*, *The Falling Sky*, or as in this case, a tiny iPhone screen—Ahwesh gestures to the capacity of her source images to circulate widely across diverse platforms. In *Smart Phone*, the device in question is associated with commerce, surveillance, and self-destruction.

##### 2. *Verily! The Blackest Sea, The Falling Sky* (2017)

Two-channel video installation, 09:30 mins

In this video installation, animated news clips have been appropriated to craft an eerie indictment of contemporary existence. On adjacent screens, the installation presents the sea and the sky as landscapes of human tragedy, spanning ideas as varied as global warming, police violence, the migrant crisis, surveillance and technologized life. The computer-generated re-enactments are drained of specificity and accompanied by the melancholic grandeur of composer Ellis B. Kohs's 'Passacaglia for Organ and Strings', which contributes to the

sinister feeling that underpins the work. When reframed by Ahwesh with the lightest of touches, these seemingly cute depictions take on a sinister pall, spotlighting the problematics of witnessing, the increasing speed of image consumption, and the fantasy of mastering the world by algorithmic means.

##### 3. *Re: The Operation* (2019)

Four-channel HD video on stacked CRT monitors, 08:02 mins

The four channels of *Re: The Operation* present two competing narratives of the assassination of Osama bin Laden. One pair shows the 'official' version publicised by the US government, and the other a conflicting account proposed by analyst Raelynn Hillhouse and journalist Seymour Hersh. In an age of 'fake news' and 'post-truth politics', Ahwesh points to the prevalence of conspiracy, myth, and misinformation, while underscoring how storytelling and video editing are used as tools to shape perception.

##### 4. *Heaven's Gate* (2000–2001)

Video, 03:53 mins

Founded in 1974, Heaven's Gate was a religious group known for the 1997 mass suicide of 39 of its members in San Diego, California. The event was timed to coincide with the approach of the Hale-Bopp comet, which the group's followers believed was tailed by a UFO that would carry their souls to a new, post-human universe. In this work, Ahwesh presents the keywords used for search engine indexing on the cult's website. This creates a synoptic, text-based portrait of an organisation that theorist Paul Virilio called a 'cybersect', owing to its embrace of the internet as a means of recruitment and income generation in the mid-1990s.

#### GALLERY 2

##### 5. *the third body* (2008)

Video, 09:00 mins

Appropriated images from a low-budget film depicting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden are juxtaposed with early virtual reality demonstrations to explore how ideas of discovery, knowledge, and paradise figure in the conceptualisation of cyberspace. As Ahwesh puts it, "The trope of the garden, the originary moment of self-knowledge and gendered awareness of the body (what is traditionally called sin), is mimicked in the early experiments with virtual reality. The metaphors used in our cutting-edge future are restagings of our cultural memory of the garden".

#### GALLERY 3

##### 6. *Lessons of War* (2014)

Five-channel HD video on stacked CRT monitors, 05:34 mins

Ahwesh's first installation using animated news footage focuses on the 2014 Gaza War: an attack the Israeli military named Operation Protective Edge. Information concerning the conflict, in which over two thousand Palestinians were killed, is repeated in a simplistic and abstracted way, distancing the viewer from the horror of what took place. Ahwesh has said, "My intention is to

force the source material to point back to itself and lay bare the gap between that sketchy cartoon world and reality." Although the smooth, synthetic surfaces of these animations depart sharply from the aesthetics of live-action news, they also figure as an exaggerated imitation of how the mainstream media packages war for consumption.

#### 7. *Poses* (2021)

Colour laser prints on Xerox paper, dims variable  
In the animated news footage Ahwesh has worked with since 2014, the human figure is subject to tremendous simplification. Bodies become generic forms scrubbed of any detail that might lend them a sense of corporeal particularity. Many are rendered in monochrome, like small toys cast in plastic. The *Poses* series extracts a selection of these non-persons from the image stream and throws them into a black void, absent of any context.

#### GALLERY 4

##### 8. *She Puppet* (2001)

Video, 16:00 mins

To make *She Puppet*, Ahwesh edited screen recordings of her own play of the video game *Tomb Raider III*, pairing them with borrowed music and a voiceover in which three women read excerpts from the modernist poet Fernando Pessoa, the jazz musician and Afrofuturist Sun Ra, and feminist science fiction writer Joanna Russ. Ahwesh has called the game's protagonist Lara Croft a 'virtual girl-doll of the late twentieth century', discerning in her 'an unstable yet powerful triad of outsiders: the alien, the orphan, and the clone'. Here, Ahwesh's interest in female performers and her love for the assisted readymade come together, as she examines the aesthetics of computer-generated imagery (CGI) and investigates the capacity of media technology to simulate life and defy death.

##### 9. Selections from *The She Puppet Sourcebook*, 2002

Colour laser prints on Xerox paper, dims variable

Ahwesh's practice involves extensive research into her subject matter. The *She Puppet Sourcebook* is a collection of materials related to her video *She Puppet*. It includes references to the texts cited in the video's voiceover and various other touchstones dating back to the nineteenth century: from images of female automata and the "vanishing woman" of pre-classical cinema, to quotations from cyberfeminist theory and discussions of artistic appropriation. The sourcebook unfolds a media archaeology of Lara Croft, shedding light on Ahwesh's attraction to this character and suggesting that the ostensibly 'new' medium of the videogame has profound roots in older media forms.

#### GALLERY 5

The following films play on loop. Please be aware that these films include language and images unsuitable for children and vulnerable adults. Please ask the receptionist if you have any concerns.

##### 10. *The Scary Movie* (1993)

Super 8 film transferred to digital video, 09:00 mins

Martina and Sonja cross-dress and make-believe for the Super 8 camera, approaching the horror film as a storehouse of conventions to raid. They mess around with an array of phallic props so detached from masculine potency as to court comedy. Although Ahwesh makes use of an intimacy typical of home movies, she strongly works against any claim to authenticity, emphasising performativity instead. By engaging children, the video sets the scene for a non-authoritarian approach to representation through play and laughter.

##### 11. *The Color of Love* (1994)

16 mm film transferred to digital, 10:00 mins

This 16 mm film was created by optically printing a Super 8 reel of pornography, which came into Ahwesh's possession in an advanced state of decay. Ahwesh gives new life to rain-damaged footage in which two women engage in sexual acts around a male corpse, slowing its motion and enlarging selected details to highlight its ruination. One of Ahwesh's most celebrated works, *The Color of Love* is a performance of erotic spectatorship made material, in which pornography's demand for hypervisibility gives way to revelation and concealment.

##### 12. *THE VISION MACHINE* (1997)

16mm transferred to digital, 20:00 mins

Borrowing its title from Paul Virilio's 1988 book, in which the author attempts to outline the intellectual consequences of technological development upon visual perception, *THE VISION MACHINE* explores gender and humour through a mixture of 16 mm film, Hi8 video, and Pixelvision (a camera for children made by Fisher-Price and launched in 1987 to poor commercial results). References to the films *Viridiana* (1961) by Luis Buñuel and *Anemic Cinema* (1926) by Marcel Duchamp appear amidst classic pop songs, a raucous party, and scenes of young women telling jokes in which sexuality is at stake. Leaving behind notions of avant-garde seriousness, Ahwesh delves into the relationship between language, the unconscious, and technology.

Peggy Ahwesh is an American experimental filmmaker and video artist. Born 1954 in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, she received her BFA from Antioch College in Ohio and got her start in the 1970s through feminism, punk and Super 8 mm filmmaking.

Retrospective exhibitions include: *Girls Beware!*, Whitney Museum of American Art; Filmmuseum, Brussels; Anthology Film Archives, New York; *Peggy's Playhouse*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University. Screenings include: the Whitney Biennial (1991, 1995, 2002); New York Film Festival (1998, 2007); Flaherty Film Seminar (2003); Pompidou Center (2002, 2004); Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival (2017). Film festivals include: Berlin; London; Cairo; Toronto; Rotterdam; and Creteil. *Certain Women* (co-directed with Bobby Abate)(2004) was an official selection at the Rotterdam International Film Festival and the opening night film at the New York Underground Film Festival (2004). Other films include: *Martina's Playhouse* (1989), *The Deadman* (co-directed with Keith Sanborn) (1987), *Strange Weather* (1993), and *Nocturne* (1998), all of which are in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. Ahwesh has received grants from Jerome and Guggenheim Foundation fellowships, Alpert Award in the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, and Art Matters. She is Emeritus Professor in Film and Electronic Art at Bard College, New York.

Peggy Ahwesh, *Vision Machines* is co-curated by Erika Balsom and Robert Leckie, and was first on view at Spike Island in Bristol, UK, September 25, 2021–January 9, 2022.

On the heels of Kunsthall Stavanger's multimedia and moving image exhibitions *LEAN* and *Swinguerra* (both in 2021), *Vision Machines* is exemplary of the institution's heightened focus on screen-based works and digital native exhibitions. The 2022 programme will continue to explore new formats at the forefront of exhibition-making in the digital age, culminating in the forthcoming debut of the Kunsthall's online-only exhibition platform and new website later this year.

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