



Gilda Williams visits the first edition of the ARoS Triennial in Aarhus, Denmark

G BY [GILDA WILLIAMS](#) IN [CRITIC'S GUIDES](#) | 16 JUN 17



There must be a special circle in heaven reserved for those rare art devotees who, in this busy year dubbed 'Art-Mageddon' (with biennales in Venice, Istanbul, Sharjah; Documenta 14, this year split between Athens and Kassel; Skulptur Projekte Münster) also made the long trek to Aarhus, Denmark, 100 miles north of Copenhagen, to visit the first-ever ARoS Triennale. Exhausted art-circuit members were probably more likely to visit inaugural editions of the Honolulu or even Antarctica Biennales than take this northern pilgrimage to Aarhus, 2017 European Cultural Capital of the Year.

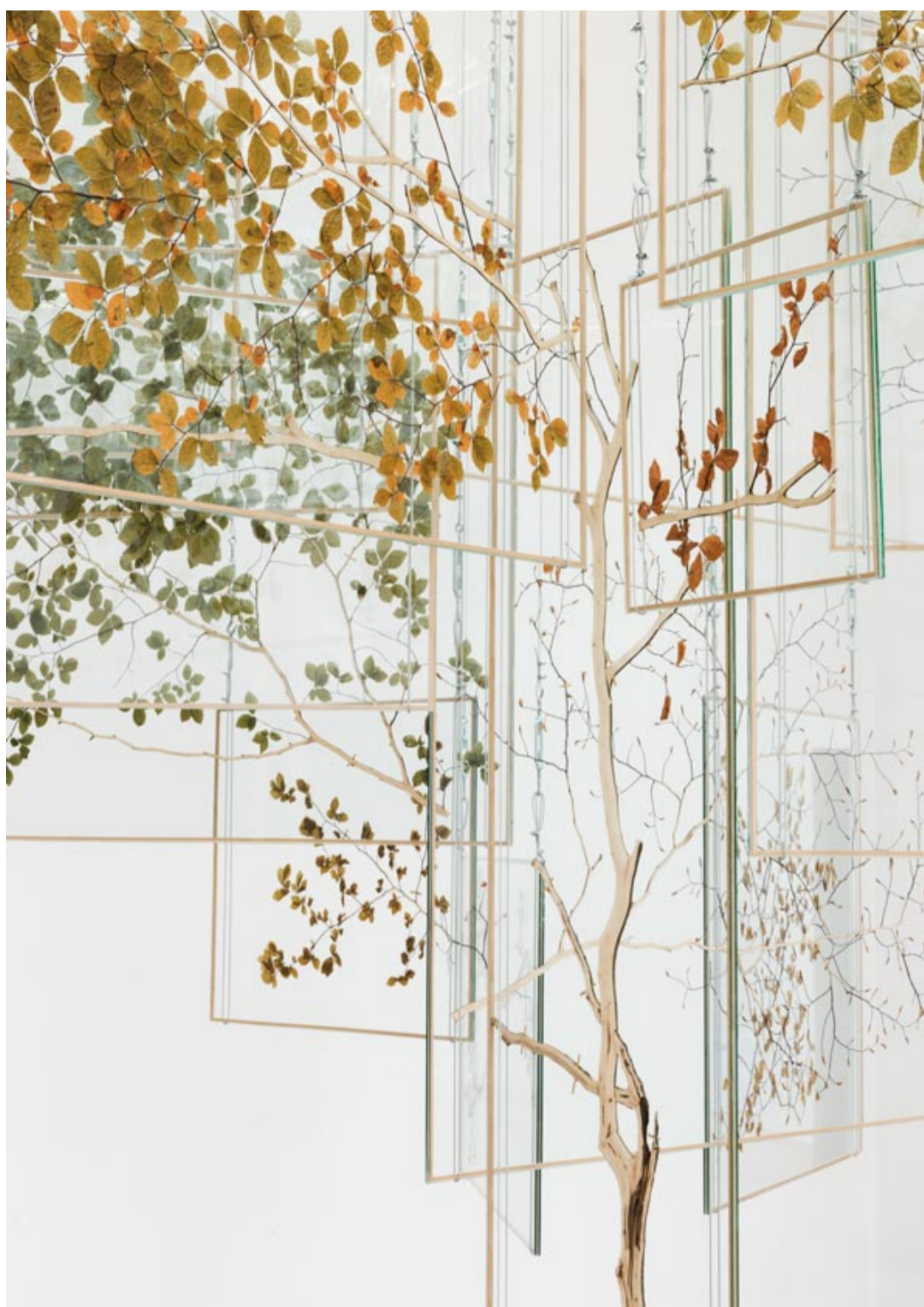
Rumour had it that ARoS's choice of 'The Garden' as its opening theme came down to the average Dane's alleged preference to potter in his or her beloved garden than bother visiting some damned art exhibition. Solution: transform the ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum into a garden, complete with potted plants in the gift shop and the lobby given over to Norwegian artist Per Kristian Nygård's large grass-growing sculpture, *Not Red But Green* (2014) – a cross between a Dr Seuss-type lumpy landscape and a room-sized grassy knoll. Not far is Meg Webster's psychedelic pink greenhouse, *Solar Grow Room* (2017), and Harrison Studio's growing *Hog Pasture: Survival Piece #1, 1970-71* (2017). The museum's hired a gardener to keep the show from wilting.



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'The Garden – Past' is spread over two museum floors and stretches back historically from those living sculptures to Nicolas Poussin via Edvard Munch, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Darren Almond's eerie *Sometimes Still* (2010), shadowy films of endurance-testing Tibetan monks racing through the forest at night, and more. Taken together, these 100 artworks narrate what

Q [MY MEMBERSHIP](#) ARoS Festival's founding director Erlend Høyersten describes as: 'the long unhappy romance between Art and Nature, 400 years in the making'. In fact, the exhibition's working definition of 'garden' or even 'nature' is indecipherable; any meaning, from 'public art' to 'natural process', is game, stretching elastically from Friedrich's sublime sea-scape and de Chirico's metaphysical piazza to Diana Thater's post-apocalyptic *Chernobyl* (2011) and Joan Jonas's abstract *Ice Drawing* (2011). A big deal is made at the outset differentiating between French formal gardens and the English romantic style, but this conceptual distinction vanishes instantly to become just an oddly overstated paean to conventional art history. An unfortunate opening sequence of galleries sees large light-box photographs from Thomas Struth's series 'New Pictures from Paradise' (1999/2002) looking formally identical to giant illuminated photographs of Versailles or Stourhead found online by the curators, making actual artworks and curatorial pedagogy almost indistinguishable.



Rune Bosse, *Tempus Circularis. Fagus Sylvatica (Tid...)*, 2015-16

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garden purely for the pleasure of painting it. The Triennial becomes considerably more coherent once you leave the building and roam 'The Garden Present and Future', a selection of some 30 site-specific works that have been scattered in the city proper, the old industrial port, and along the shore into the forest. The best works optimistically mused on eco-rebirth rather than eco-gloom:

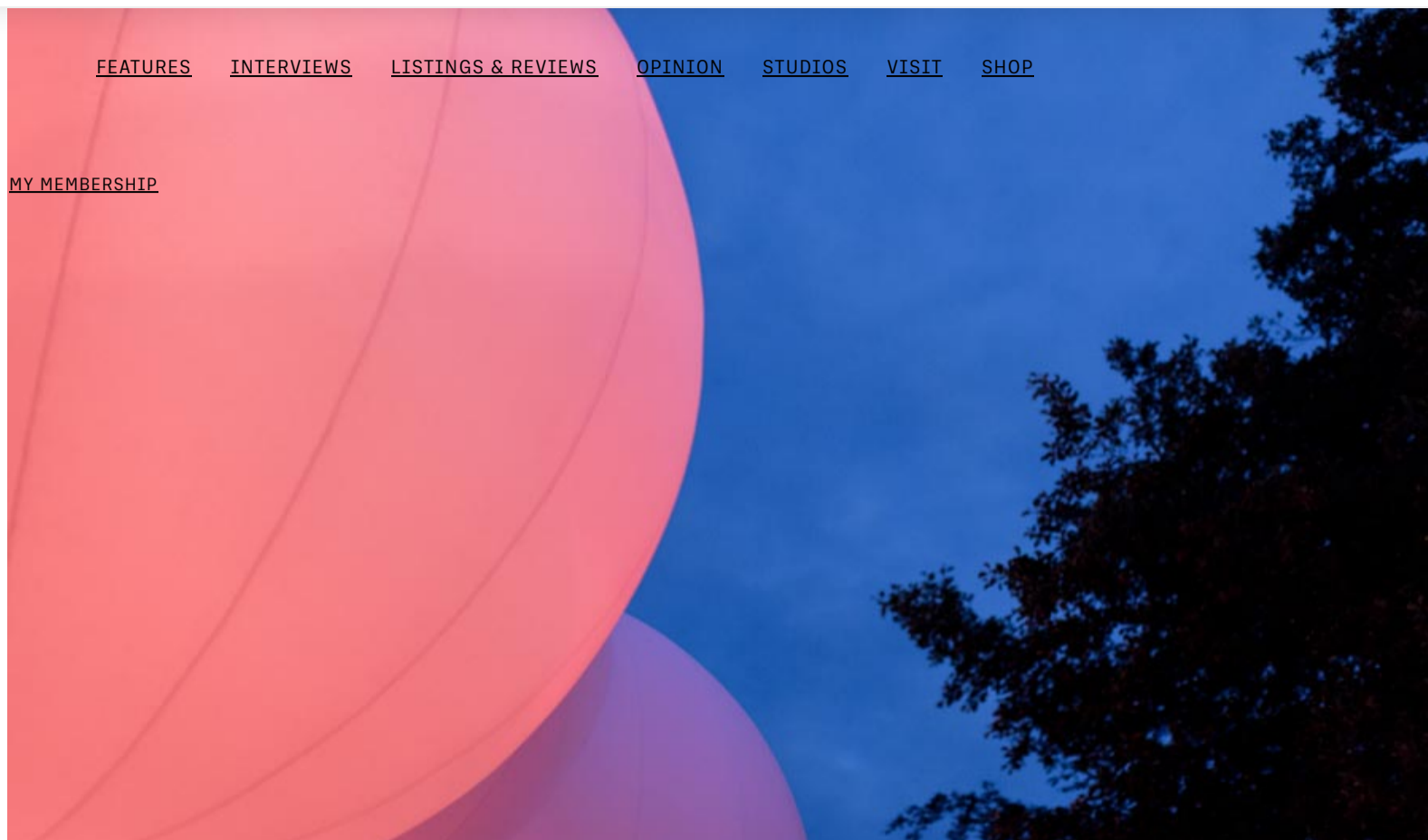


Cyprien Gaillard's film *KOE* (2015) on the thriving Paris parakeet population; or Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's extraordinary, epic documentary *Leviathan* (2012), about the centuries-old Massachusetts fishing industry. (Like Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* [1968] – but on a feature-length budget.) Another highlight was Danish-Bosnian artist Ismar Cirkinagic's *Herbarium* (2013), wherein delicate plant life is dried, framed and carefully captioned, to locate each sample at the mass grave in Bosnia where it was harvested. Top-lit in a tall, chapel-like cement chamber, *Herbarium* inspires a cross-historical connection with the magnificent hand-coloured botanical drawings, Georg Christian Oeder's *Flora Danica* (1766-70), on view back at the museum.



Doug Aitken, *The Garden*, 2017, installation view, AROS Triennial. Courtesy: the artist and AROS Aarhus Kunstmuseum; photograph: Anders Sune Berg

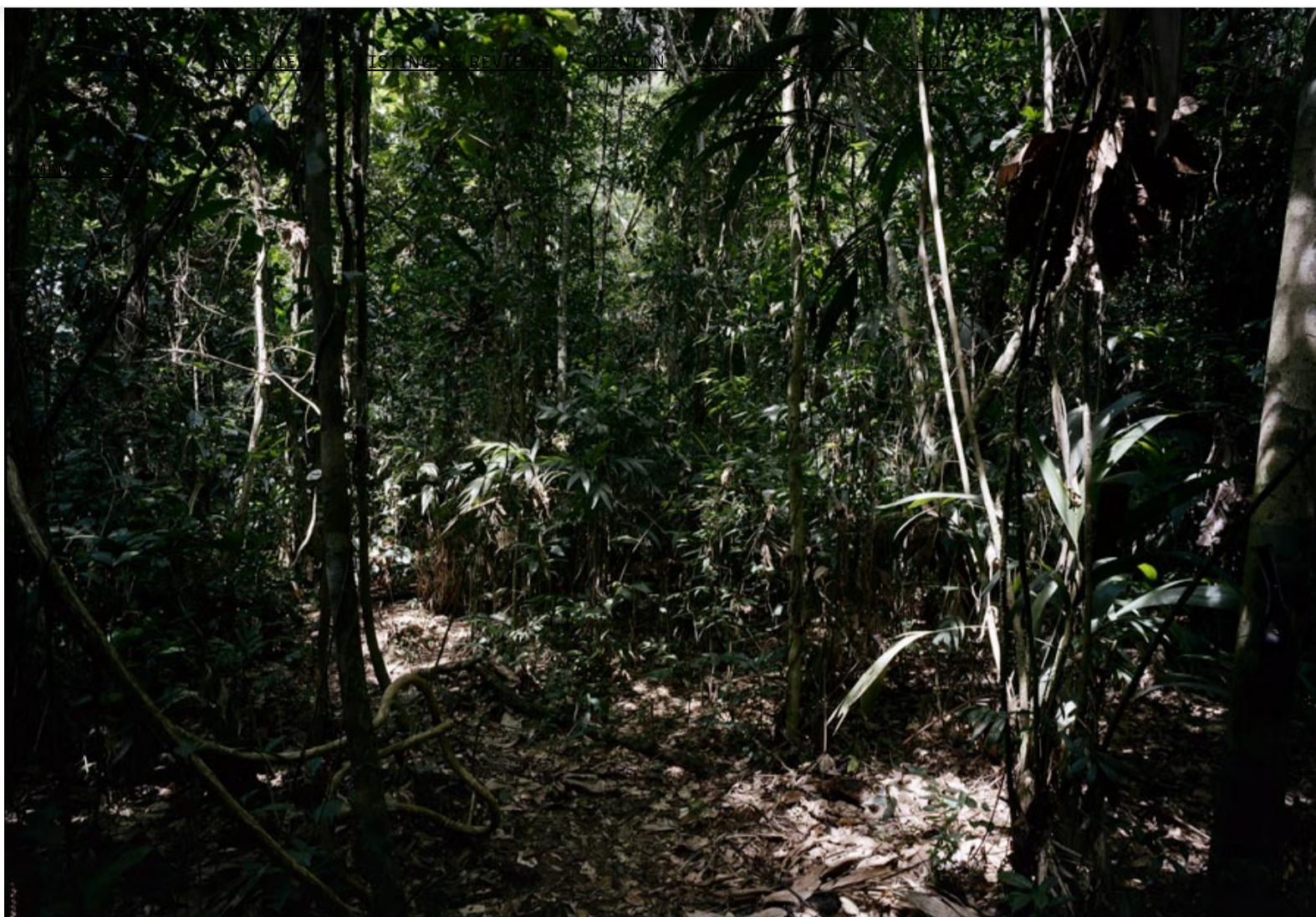
'Most Misguided Artwork' must go to Doug Aitken's eponymous *The Garden* (2017): a resource-intensive indoor garden of potted plants surviving under battery-operated grow lights. These surround a life-sized, all-white, glass-boxed house stocked with IKEA-style plates, glasses, linen, table, bed, chairs. Once a day a volunteer can smash it all to pieces with a baseball bat, a live-streamed performance that apparently replicates the phenomena of 'anger rooms'. The contents are regularly replaced in order to fuel the next day's destructive venting. My thoughts drifted to the boatloads of displaced refugees who long for a simple home like this one, as Aitken's garden – in practice an elaborate landfill-generating apparatus – jarred badly with the Triennial's claimed concerns about immigration or the anthropocene. If I were the curator, I'd try to convince Aitken to call the performances off.



Bjarke Ingels, *Skum*, 2016. Photograph: Jesper Palermo

But let's not belabour the inevitable weak spot. Three years in preparation, the AROS Triennale is ambitious and civic-minded, with plenty to enjoy. *Do We Dream Under the Same Sky* (Nikolaus Hirsch, Michael Muller, Rirkrit Tiravanija, 2017) relocates the urban piazza they built in Basel in 2015 to an ideal beach setting: a summery seaside event space offering a chance to watch films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul or Superflex – as well as some of Aitken's more successful works, such as *Altered Earth* (2012). Alicja Kwade's mirrored rock, *Be-Hide* (2017), offers a rethink of the 3D digital copy as an uncanny doppelganger, while Sarah Sze's supremely delicate *Untitled* (2017) – a hammock of Klein-blue threads hanging in the forest and dripping with minute golden detail – looked the perfect 21st-century flying carpet.

One can imagine the countless administrative hoops the AROS team have had to leap through to produce this Triennial: concocting a theme able to embrace historical artworks alongside new commissions; inserting artworks into the city without alienating the citizenry; plus hitting the required visitor numbers, deadlines, budgets – the usual. We may one day pine for the worldwide faith displayed this year in places like Aarhus in the benefits of contemporary art. Our era may well be remembered for the ubiquitous public artworks scattered across the planet, all screaming that vintage year: 2017. We should probably rejoice our state of peak-Biennale, rather than just grow jaded.



Thomas Struth, *Paradise 27, Rio Madre de Dios, Peru*, 2005 © the artist

Even so, proceeding from sculpture to sculpture with yet another press group, I began thinking we really were repeating some ritual, some holy procession – like the Stations of the Cross, to be exact. At each artwork we stopped to reflect solemnly, each of us reading from identical short guides as if consulting a hymnbook, and a special prayer was recited called The Curator’s Talk. When we finally reached Norwegian artist Hans Rosenström’s *Shoreline* (2017), a replica of an 18th-century church-inspired, ruin-like garden folly, complete with Gothic arch, framing the sea – basically an artificial, artificial ruin – the sensation of a religious pilgrimage was literalized. It was spooky.

Well done, ARoS, for pulling this off, however, I find myself awaiting ‘Mocumenta’, a *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) style mock-doc film on the by-now ritualized city-wide art event. Maybe next year.

*‘The Garden’ ARoS 1st Triennial runs at [ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum](#) from 8 April to 10 September.*

*Main image: Meg Webster, Solar Grow Room (detail), 2017, installation view, 1st ARoS Triennial, ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum. Photograph: Anders Sune Berg*

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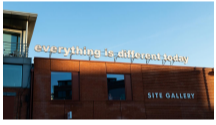
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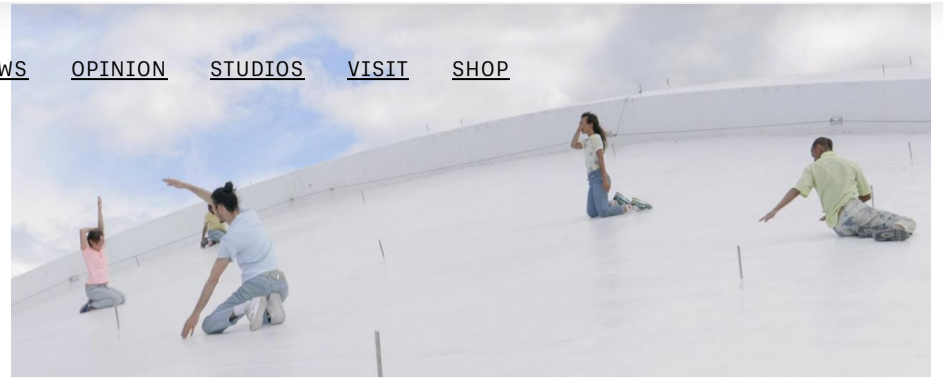


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