BERGEN KUNSTHALL

English

Iter Subterraneum
16 January — 5 April 2025
Curatorial Essay

This text accompanies "Iter Subterraneum" as an independent supplement for readers who wish to delve deeper into the literary and theoretical sources that inspired the exhibition. The text unfolds some of the perspectives that have informed the curatorial work regarding Ludvig Holberg's *Niels Klim's Underground Travels* (1741), radical botany, utopian thought, and questions of the body, transformation, and coexistence.

"Iter Subterraneum": Radical Botany, Utopian Strata, and the Nonconformist Body

In 1741, Ludvig Holberg published *Niels Klim's Underground Travels*—a novel that begins with a fall through the earth beneath Bergen and continues into a luminous world populated by thinking trees. What appeared to its contemporaries as a satire of human folly and social hierarchies can also be read today as a visionary reflection on ecology, speculation, and identity. The exhibition "Iter Subterraneum" borrows its title from Holberg's Latin original, *Nicolai Klimii Iter Subterraneum*, pointing to a descent into the geological strata where other forms of knowledge, desire, and imagination take root.

Recent readings of Holberg make it possible to approach *Niels Klim* as a multifaceted work that anticipates several of our time's most pressing questions. In "Holberg's Enlightened Trees: Biopolitics and Ataraxia," published in *Radical Botany* (2021), Holberg's underground society of sentient plants is understood as an early experiment in ecological thinking. By attributing moral consciousness and political agency to trees, Holberg rebels against the Enlightenment's anthropocentric worldview. The vegetal citizens live according to the logic of growth and branching, not that of power and conquest. What was once read as parody appears today as an ethics of coexistence. An enlightenment turning inward, where light is filtered through roots and leaves rather than through the abstractions of reason.

Where Holberg's botanical fantasy anchors the work in the living, Peter Fitting's essay "Buried Treasures: Reconsidering Holberg's Niels Klim in the World Underground" (1996) places the novel within the tradition of utopian literature and early science fiction. Fitting shows how Holberg transformed the contemporary Hollow Earth theory into a philosophical stage for examining the limits of reason. The balanced and tolerant state of Potu—the first realm Klim visits—expresses measure and equality, while the many provinces that follow caricature the Enlightenment's faith in progress. Holberg's "world within the world" reveals that utopia is not an endpoint, but a volatile experiment, on the verge of collapse. The underground becomes both a mirror and an inversion—a place where reason encounters its own shadows.

In Jørgen Magnus Sejersted's *Nonkonformisten: Ludvig Holbergs skeive selvfremstilling* (2025), Holberg emerges as an unexpectedly queer figure in the Scandinavian literary canon. Sejersted identifies what he calls queer moments—situations in which Holberg's language slips, allowing humour and irony to bring the unspeakable into view. Holberg's comedies and essays are full

of gender transgressions, ambiguous friendships, and disguises that challenge the moral order of the time. Central to this is Holberg's own description of himself as a "nonconformist" in his final autobiographical epistle—a word which, in 18th-century French and English slang, could also mean a sodomite. Read in this light, the declaration "my body makes me a nonconformist" becomes a coded self-presentation, a confession from a thinker who refused both dogmatic and sexual orthodoxy. In Sejersted's view, Holberg's underworld therefore becomes not only an ecological or philosophical space but also one where bodily and sexual otherness can emerge in coded, ambiguous forms.

These three perspectives—the botanical, the utopian, and the queer—form a foundation for "Iter Subterraneum". Together, they show how Holberg's journey beneath the earth was also a journey beneath the smooth surface of the Enlightenment. The fictional narrative weaves together the vegetal and the social, the scientific and the sensory, the moral and the comic. It sketches a politics that grows sideways, like roots; a philosophy that seeks balance but thrives in contradictions; a self that evades definition through its nonconformity.

In the exhibition, Holberg's text becomes a generative starting point for contemporary art. The underground is understood not as darkness, but as infrastructure—a space for soil and mycelium, for archiving, sediments, and subcultures. The artists respond to this ecology of depth by exploring connections between plants and politics, bodies and minerals, queer desire and the earth's slow intelligence. From Holberg's enlightened trees, an ethics of multi-species coexistence is inherited; from Fitting's *Buried Treasures*, a geologically speculative gaze is drawn; and from Sejersted's *Nonkonformisten*, an awareness that the body itself is an underground text—not as a narrative, but as a structure: layered, partially inaccessible, and continuously in motion.

Viewed from our own time of planetary unrest, *Niels Klim's Underground Travels* appears less as a satire on human vanity and more as a precursor to the idea of interdependence. Holberg's thinking trees herald a vegetal intelligence that many artists and theorists today seek to rediscover; his hollow earth anticipates the planetary consciousness of the Anthropocene; his self-proclaimed nonconformity resonates with today's queer ecologies, where boundaries between species and genders are no longer fixed. The descent beneath the ground becomes a curatorial gesture—a movement toward the hidden yet load-bearing, toward the marginal yet vital. "Iter Subterraneum" follows this movement downwards and inwards, guided by Holberg's imagination and the luminous paradoxes that still branch out from it: that satire can nourish empathy, that darkness can illuminate, and that the future may already be quietly sprouting—beneath our feet.

Reading list:

Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Futures (Fordham University Press, 2021), Natania Meeker and Antonia Szabari.

Peter Fitting, "Buried Treasures: Reconsidering Holberg's Niels Klim in the World Underground," *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 7 No. 2 (Penn State University Press, 1996).

Jørgen Magnus Sejersted, *Nonkonformisten: Ludvig Holbergs skeive selvfremstilling* (Fagbokforlaget / University of Bergen, 2025).