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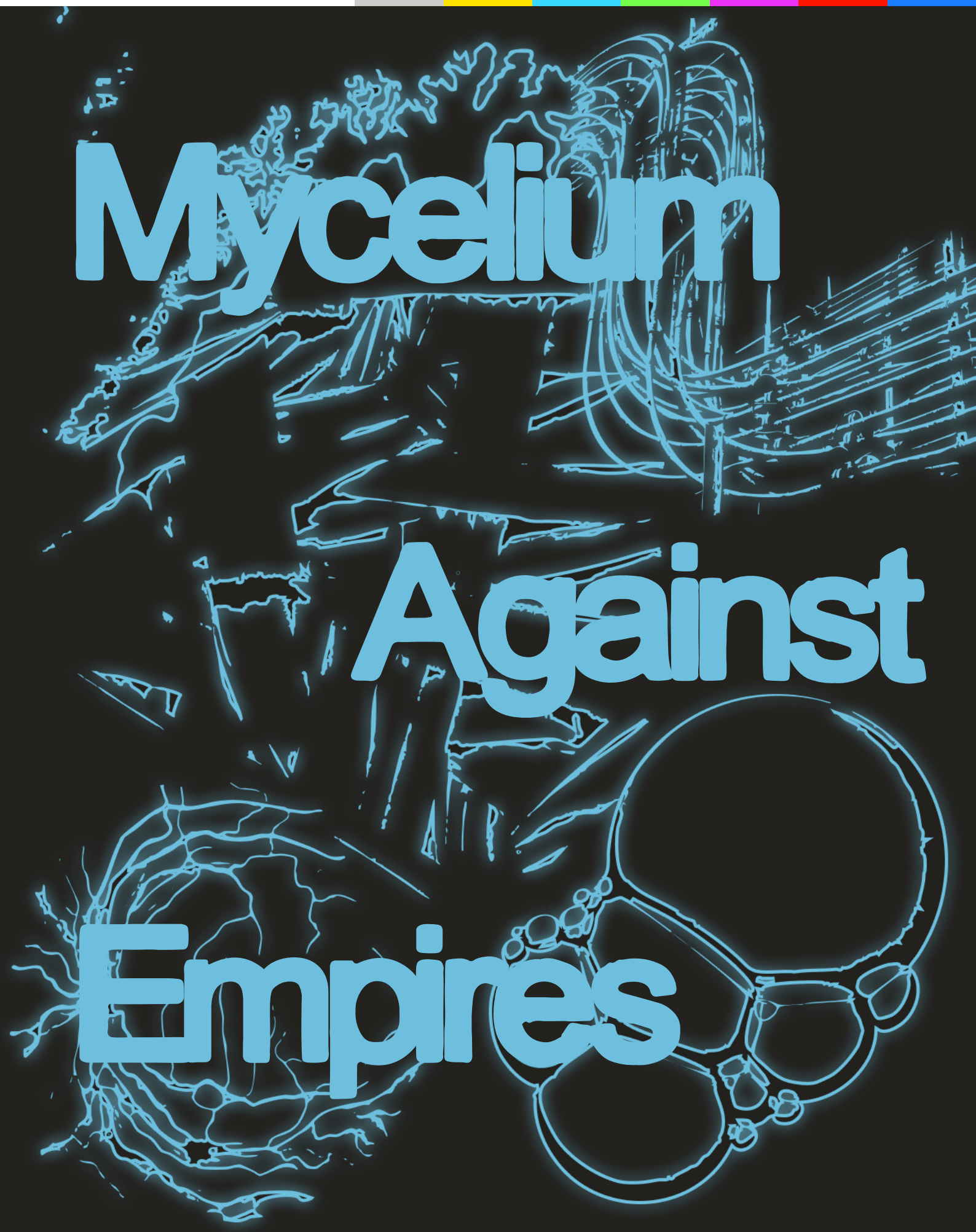

Mycelium Against Empires

Infrastructures of Dependency and Solidarity

AWC Journal #2: Mycelium Against Empires. Infrastructures of Dependency and Solidarity is a collaborative edition with **Mycelium [Грыбніца]** – decolonial research lab, whose methodology, tracing infrastructures, dependencies, and possible tactics of resistance and solidarities, provided the navigational logic for the journal. The issue examines how infrastructural violence intersects with the possibilities of solidarity amid extractivism, militarisation, and colonial persistence. Solidarity appears not as an abstract ideal but as a fragile, lived, and often contested relation, explored through practices from Ukraine, Belarus, India, Chile, Hong Kong, Argentina, Finland, Kazakhstan, and beyond. Bringing diverse perspectives into dialogue, the issue maps how artistic, intellectual, and activist practices imagine forms of resistance, and interconnected survival, opening space for imperfect solidarity and translocal politics of care.

Created by Stichting antiwarcoalition.art & Mycelium [Грыбніца] – decolonial research lab

Edited by Antonina Stebur

With contributions by Ana Laura Cantera, Youngsook Choi & Jessica Wan, Espen Johansen, Victoria Jolly, Sofiya Sadouskaya, Olga Shparaga, Tanja Sokolnykova & Mariia Vorotilina, Aruna D'Souza & Asia Tsisar, Antonina Stebur, Lizaveta Stecko, Poornima Sukumar, Aigerim Tleubay, Darya Tsymbalyuk, Dzina Zhuk

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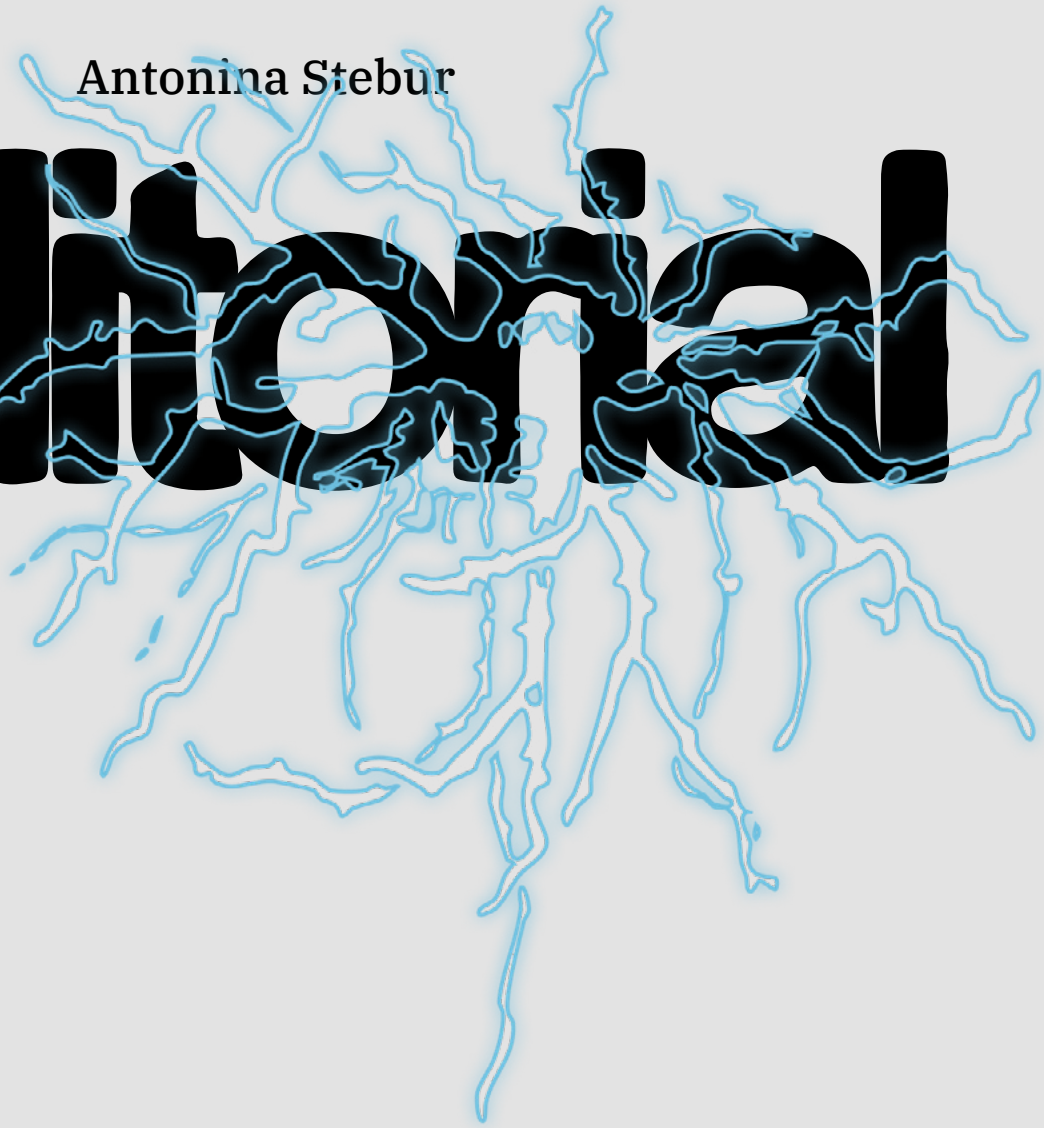
Content

Antonina Stebur

Editorial



Antonina Stebur is a curator and researcher who explores contemporary art as a tool for infrastructural and political imagination. She is Editor-in-Chief of AWC Journal and founder of Mycelium [Грыбніца], a decolonial research lab. Stebur has co-curated numerous exhibitions and research-based projects, including What Are Our Collective Dreams? (2025, Warsaw), If Disrupted, It Becomes Tangible (2023, Vilnius), Sense of Safety (2024, Kharkiv), etc. Stebur is curator of the transmediale 2027 exhibition. She organised the interdisciplinary conference Feeling Machines: Gender, Technologies, and Capitals and has contributed to documenta 15, Manifesta 14, ZKM, and Theatertreffen Berlin, among others.

In 2024, the decolonial research lab Mycelium [Грыбніца] took part in the *Decentric Circles Assembly* [1] in Warsaw. While our practice usually unfolds through research-based and discursive encounters, this time we proposed a different format – one grounded in embodied knowledge. Rather than allowing knowledge about colonial entanglements and violence to circulate only through language and concepts, we sought to practise it materially – through shared food, collective presence, and the organisation of a temporary infrastructure of care.

We invited the Assembly participants to a collective picnic, with the potato as its central focus. The potato itself is a product of colonial violence. Extracted from its ecological and cultural context in the territories of present-day Bolivia and Peru, it was transformed into a resource through the destruction of Indigenous worlds. Displaced to Europe, the potato carried with it not only calories but colonial mechanisms [2]. It became a tool of population management. Crucially, it did not eliminate hunger; rather, it rendered poverty sustainable by enabling survival at a minimum threshold.

This logic becomes particularly visible in the case of Belarus. Once the potato's caloric value was recognised, it was first integrated into the military machine. Compared to wheat, it was more caloric, resilient, and easier to prepare, allowing

Mycelium [Грыбніца] Gathering at Decentric Circles Assembly, Roma Community Centre, Warsaw, 2024. Photo by Andrei Stseburaka

armies to expand without increasing provisions. Through military infrastructures, the potato was then imposed on peasant life. As an object of colonial violence, it became embedded in broader biopolitical regimes that organised survival, labour, and dependency.

Materially, the potato functions as a cheap calorie. Symbolically, it is marked as food of the “poor,” the “rural,” the “backward,” requiring management and control [3]. It is not merely food, but an infrastructure for reproducing poverty and dependency, sustaining bodies while lowering the cost of their reproduction. Poverty was not abolished; it was made manageable and enduring.

Through the picnic, where the shared consumption of diverse potato-based dishes was combined with mapping practices and a lecture on colonial violence, Mycelium [Грыбніца] demonstrated that colonisation is not primarily an image or a symbolic space of power. As the history of the potato shows, it is a material process through which different geographies and temporalities are bound together by infrastructures. Extracted from its original context through colonial violence – a form of infrastructural destruction that did not require total physical extermination – the potato was transported to Europe together with the continuation of colonial domination. Colonial violence, we argue, is organised through infrastructures and, in turn, produces its own: agriculture, military systems,

and regimes of governance. These infrastructures remain deeply entangled across regions.

The potato picnic was not an isolated artistic gesture, but a condensed illustration of the question that runs through this issue: how colonial violence is organised, sustained, and normalised through infrastructures — and how solidarity can be practised at the same material level. What unites the contributions in this issue is an understanding of infrastructure not as a neutral system, but as a material arrangement of power that organises survival, dependency, access, and exclusion. Across different geographies and contexts, the authors examine how colonial infrastructures continue to shape bodies and territories, and how practices of solidarity attempt — often imperfectly — to interrupt, repurpose, or reassemble them.

This practice, together with the longer history and organisational logic of Mycelium [Грыбніца], forms the conceptual foundation of this issue of *AWC Journal: Mycelium Against Empires*. Conceived as a long-term research and learning ecosystem rather than a single project, Mycelium operates through collective inquiry and situated knowledge. The lab brings together researchers, artists, and activists to examine how colonial, extractivist, and imperial infrastructures continue to shape bodies, territories, and social relations, while simultaneously experimenting with alternative infrastructures of care, knowledge production, and solidarity.

The issue connects two interrelated vectors. On the one hand, it examines colonial infrastructures that organise dependency, extraction, and control. On the other hand, it asks what forms of solidarity emerge in struggles against colonial violence. The issue opens with the interview *Imperfect Solidarities* with Aruna D'Souza and Asia Tsisar, which interrogates how the seemingly emancipatory concept of solidarity can itself function as part of colonial violence and racial or ethnic discrimination. D'Souza

Mycelium [Грыбніца] Gathering at Decentric Circles Assembly, Roma Community Centre, Warsaw, 2024. Photo by Andrei Stseburaka

proposes the notion of *imperfect solidarities* as a way to rethink solidarity beyond empathy. As she writes, "the essence of solidarity – not merely empathising with others, but recognising that their safety is essential to mine."

This line of inquiry is further developed in the contribution by Belarusian philosopher Olga Shparaga, who traces the historical politicisation of solidarity and, from a feminist perspective, conceptualises the political actor as a fragile, embodied agent. From this position, solidarity implies the construction of infrastructures of care. Such practices always remind us of fragility, while simultaneously exposing the uneven and unjust distribution of responsibility for care. Solidarity, Shparaga argues, must aim to transform unwarranted privileges into unconditional support for those who need it, grounding solidarity in material and infrastructural relations rather than abstract ideals.

A similar insistence on the concreteness of solidarity runs through the practice of *Cooking with Mama*, a series of community encounters in Berlin. Gathering through cooking and shared stories about food, the initiative reflects on memory, transgenerational and local knowledge, decoloniality, and resistance across Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Northern and Central Asia. Food becomes a site of care and transnational solidarity. As the collective notes, "Solidarity is never abstract; it demands concrete actions."

Continuing the trajectory of the previous issue, this volume also examines infrastructures as configurations of power – structures that organise everyday life, produce lines of exclusion and access, and shape relations of dependency. The contributions attend to infrastructures not as abstract systems, but as material, historically layered formations through which colonial violence persists.

Texts such as *War in the Steppes* by Darya Tsymbalyuk; *Scene: Walking / Listening / Assembling underneath the "Druzhba" Oil Pipeline* by Dzina Zhuk; *Colonial Persistence and Decolonial Possibilities in Finnmark* by Espen Johansen; and *Extractivism and Exhaustion through an Anthropofungal Speculative Perspective* by Ana Laura Cantera immerse the reader in concrete infrastructures and processes of slow, often imperceptible violence [4]. As Johansen observes, colonial violence frequently unfolds not through spectacular events, but through incremental and bureaucratic procedures – permits, consultations, environmental impact reports – articulated in the language of progress. Tsymbalyuk similarly traces how environmental terror [5] emerges where war, extractivism, and ecological collapse intersect, particularly in the steppe regions of Ukraine.

Together, these contributions invite a rethinking of solidarity not as an aspirational concept, but as a grounded practice, one that begins with standing on contested ground,

Mycelium [Грыбніца] Gathering at Decentric Circles Assembly, Roma Community Centre, Warsaw, 2024. Photo by Andrei Stseburaka

on soil that has become a primary site of extractivist violence. In doing so, the issue shifts the conversation away from imaginative exercises and towards an urgent necessity: the development of decolonial practices capable of confronting infrastructural violence and sustaining life within and against it.

Decolonial practices, understood in this way, necessarily contain a practical dimension. If colonial violence is organised and sustained through infrastructures, resistance cannot consist of isolated heroic gestures. Rather, it takes the form of building counter-infrastructures: spaces of community, initiatives, and assemblies where decolonial practices are already being enacted, tested, and invented.

The issue brings together not only theoretical reflections, but also a constellation of artistic and activistic practices realised through initiatives in Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Chile, India, Hong Kong, and beyond. These practices unfold diverse tools and strategies of decolonial struggle, while also sketching potential networks of collaboration, reminding us that decolonial work does not emerge in isolation, but through relational, translocal, and infrastructural forms of solidarity.

Finally, the contributions by Chilean artist Victoria Jolly (*The Absent Body – Ciudad Abierta [Open City]*) and by researcher Aigerim Tleubay (*The Persistence of the Imperfect in Grassroots Solidarity*) raise crucial questions about how even emancipatory

counter-infrastructures can reproduce their own lines of exclusion and discrimination. They draw attention to moments of tension, silencing, and the inability to speak openly, situations in which entire groups may be excluded or significant feminist nuances erased. These reflections insist on the necessity of an ongoing critical perspective and on understanding decolonisation as a process that unfolds in multiple, sometimes conflicting directions.

This issue of *AWC Journal* is a collaborative effort between Stichting antiwarcoalition.art and Mycelium [Грыбніца]. Emerging at the intersection of conversations, practices, and research developed within both initiatives, the journal creates a hospitable space for other researchers, artists, and activists. Here, decolonisation and solidarity are approached not as ready-made tools, but as practices that unfold over time, constantly re-examining their own limits.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my colleagues at Mycelium [Грыбніца] – Amilia Stanevich, lisa deikun, Viktoryia Hrabennikava, tony lashden, Marie Manushka, Olga Mzhelskaya, Varvara Sudnik, and Vera Zalutskaya – with whom I have shared deeply supportive and intellectually generous conversations. My special thanks go to Taras Gembik, whose sustained work over the years has been instrumental in building the infrastructures of care that made the Mycelium gatherings possible.

Endnotes

1. Decentric Circles Assembly, 2024 Warsaw. – https://workhardplay.pw/en/2024/#mycelium-and-yulia-krivich-mycelial-gathering-one

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4. Nixon, R. Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, 368 p.

5. Matviyenko, S. Speeds and Vectors of Energy Terrorism. e-flux Journal, no. 134 (March 2023). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/134/525421/speeds-and-vectors-of-energy-terrorism.

Aruna D'Souza & Asia Tsisar

Imperfect Solidarities.

Aruna D'Souza in conversation with Asia Tsisar

Aruna D'Souza, photo by Dana Hoey

Asia Tsisar, photo by Olena Mart

Aruna D'Souza is a critic who is interested in how art can offer ideas for navigating an increasingly untenable world. She is a regular contributor to the New York Times and 4Columns, and has contributed to numerous books and exhibition catalogues. Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts (Badlands Unlimited) was named one of the best art books of 2018 by the New York Times. Her most recent book is Imperfect Solidarities (Floating Opera Press) from 2024.

Asia Tsisar is a Ukrainian curator, writer, and researcher specializing in Central and Eastern Europe. Her practice combines art, cultural studies, and political history. She was the chief curator of Secondary Archive, the largest digital archive dedicated to women artists from Central and Eastern Europe. Her projects have been presented at Manifesta 14, the 14th Gwangju Biennale, EVA International – Ireland's Biennial, and the Mystetskyi Arsenal National Museum in Kyiv. In 2025, she initiated the Radio Unheard podcast to explore ethical dilemmas at the intersection of art and politics; its first season focuses on the question of international solidarity in art.

This conversation between US-based writer and art critic Aruna D'Souza and Ukrainian curator Asia Tsisar takes *Imperfect Solidarities* — D'Souza's recent book — as its point of departure to reflect on empathy, power, and the fragile architectures of solidarity. Moving between personal reflection and structural critique, they ask whether empathy can truly undo systems of injustice or merely delay the harder political work of change. Their exchange connects art, activism, and politics — from cultural boycotts to global responses to war and racial violence — and reimagines solidarity beyond power and resource imbalance, as a sustained practice of shared vulnerability and mutual recognition. Together, they explore what forms of solidarity might exist when empathy is no longer its moral center.

Originally recorded for the opening episode of the Radio Unheard podcast, the conversation is available in audio at radiounheard.org. This publication presents the full dialogue, including parts not featured in the podcast's episode.

Asia Tsisar: As we are going to talk about empathy, solidarity, and social media, I deliberately opened my Instagram feed to take a conscious snapshot of the content I consume every day. In a nutshell, I'd say it rests on three pillars: my friends' career updates, niche clothing brands, and what could broadly be described as crimes against humanity.

Aruna D'Souza: [laughs] That seems to be the case for a lot of us. I think that's almost exactly what my Instagram feed looks like these days too.

Asia Tsisar: From the perspective of a writer and someone who works with visual culture, what do you think about the coexistence of these visual narratives in our everyday lives? Should they be separated or mediated?

We are living through wartime—and yet I still have to deal with the two hundred emails in my inbox every day, meet deadlines for writing about art, or go see museum exhibitions—it creates a kind of disconnect

Aruna D'Souza

Aruna D'Souza: Well, look, I think life is complicated. One of the strange things about living in today's world is the way we are, in a sense, coerced—even in the most dire circumstances—to act as if life is normal. And certainly, in the U.S., "normal life" means consumption, continuing to hustle to do our professional work, and hopefully paying some attention to the world around us. What's clear to me is that social media reinforces the need to experience all those things simultaneously, which is bizarre, right?

A friend of mine said the other day, "It may not look like it on paper, but we're actually living through wartime." Hearing that was revelatory because it put things into perspective. The U.S. is not literally under siege, but Americans *feel* very much under siege right now—because of Trump's policies across the board, from attacks on immigrants and green card holders to assaults on institutions and everything else. And if I think we are living through wartime—and yet I still have to deal with the two hundred emails in my inbox every day, meet deadlines for writing about art, or go see museum exhibitions—it creates a kind of disconnect. Social media, I think, really reinforces, or even normalizes, that disconnect. It normalizes the idea that all of these things have to go on simultaneously, as if that's simply what it means to exist in the world today.

Asia Tsisar: Once a reel appeared in my Instagram feed—a video of someone tending to their beautifully kept backyard garden. The image of a person watering plants and caring for trees was accompanied by a voiceover saying something like: "We, as humans, were created to live in small communities. We have the capacity to care for a small piece of land and the people around us. We were not designed to carry all the pain and emotions of the world. Social media convinces us that we should—but we don't have to. It's okay to feel confused by global politics, or not to get involved in conflicts happening far away from us. We are only capable of doing what we can: caring for our friends, animals, families, and the nature around us—and we shouldn't invest our emotions in tragedies we cannot influence." I wonder what you think about that?

When you build community around such narrow definitions, you leave out all sorts of other people who are, in fact, part of your interdependent relationship with the world, even if you don't want to admit it

Aruna D'Souza

Aruna D'Souza: I think I understand the impulse. Certainly, with everything going on in the world, it's hard to know where to begin when it comes to caring—and perhaps starting with one's own community makes sense, as long as one understands who that community is. What worries me is that people might hear a message like that and think, "Well, I only have to care about the people I already know—the ones who are part of my social circle." But when you build community around such narrow definitions, you leave out all sorts of other people who are, in fact, part of your interdependent relationship with the world, even if you don't want to admit it. In the U.S., for instance, that includes undocumented immigrants who do so much work to sustain your community, even if you don't recognize them as part of it.

Thinking back to this example in relation to your first question, one thing I would add is that when I say social media normalizes the disconnect we experience between consumer culture, work culture, and the horrors unfolding in the world, it does so by turning everything into a single form of spectacle. It doesn't just acknowledge that these things are happening—it places them on the same level. We consume an ad for a niche clothing brand in the same way we consume videos about the atrocities happening in Gaza, Ukraine, or elsewhere.

And I think that a reel of an influencer working in her garden, talking about making our world smaller and focusing on our immediate surroundings, is another form of consumerism. They're promoting that message in order to build their following. So, in a sense, they're selling a product too. And that's where the reality of how much damage social media has done really comes out. We're witnessing events around the world in which people are suffering to horrific degrees—not only wars, but also environmental damage and many other crises that cause genuine and deeply felt suffering. And we are being exposed to all of it through this numbing device of spectacle.

The people who have experienced trauma are put in the position of having to re-narrate that trauma in order to convince others that what's happening is real

Aruna D'Souza

I'm someone who has used social media extensively and, in many ways, built my career through it. My book *Whitewalling*—its first chapter—was largely developed out of my online interactions on Facebook, which I was using at the time as a platform for art criticism. So I've been deeply involved in, and have benefited from, the connections that social media offered.

But I think that at this moment, the effects of social media's role in surveillance, in narrowing discourse, in amplifying certain issues while suppressing others, has really surfaced for many people—especially since October 7, when social media companies, particularly U.S.-based ones, seemed to have a vested interest in promoting the interests of Israel and limiting the ability of people to speak freely about what was happening in Gaza. You really started to see the ways in which these platforms—sites that many people had imagined were going to be public squares or spaces for public discourse—were emphatically not that. And now, for people in the U.S., especially those who aren't citizens, the fears about social media being used to trigger deportations and other forms of surveillance are very much on people's minds. And I include myself in that—I'm a green card holder here, not a citizen.

Asia Tsisar: I think a lot about this uncomfortable role of the spectator when scrolling through social media. So, in this regard, I wonder—do you believe that watching something on social media places the observer in the position of a witness?

Aruna D'Souza: I think that social media, in relation to wartime conflicts, has played an important role in helping people understand what's happening in the world—in Ukraine, in Gaza, in Sudan, and so many other places. This has been particularly important given how

legacy media often fail to show events in their full accuracy. For those of us in the U.S., if you rely solely on outlets like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, you're getting a very partial view. Social media has played a crucial role in broadening that view, especially when it comes to the Palestinian perspective in Gaza. So, on one hand, the role it has played in moments of siege and genocide has been extremely important. I don't want to undermine that. The journalism carried out by Palestinian reporters in Gaza has been absolutely crucial for anyone trying to understand what is actually happening there.

I believe the idea that our hearts and minds should be changed through confession or through revealing our own trauma, getting people to understand our situations — this putting the onus on the victim is very much part of Western liberal thought and empathy building. But it's also very much part of the algorithmic structure of social media as well.

Aruna D'Souza

What I'm troubled by—and I'm not troubled by it in terms of people creating the content, but rather from the perspective of those consuming it—is the way social media encourages a kind of self-revelation around the horrors one experiences in order to generate empathy in the viewer. We saw this long before Ukraine or Gaza. The rise of the MeToo movement took hold on social media largely through women publicly sharing their own experiences of sexual harassment and violence. In the face of long-standing skepticism toward women's experiences, the antidote was seen to be in this mode of confession: *This happened to me; I promise you this happened to me.* And then hundreds of thousands of voices saying, *This also happened to me.* After the murder of George Floyd, when there was again skepticism about the Black experience in the U.S.—"Oh, it can't be so bad"—hundreds of thousands of people began sharing: *This is what happened the last time I was stopped by the police; this is how I was abused.*

What worries me is twofold. First, the people who have experienced trauma are put in the position of having to re-narrate that trauma in order to convince others that what's happening is real. That, to me, feels a particular kind of cruelty—that in order to be treated as fully human, people must relive and display their suffering. The other part of it is that, for the viewer, this reinforces something very subtle: the idea that empathy is something they *own*—something they can dole out. It places them in the position of needing to be

As an individual quality, empathy is very important; it does make us better people. But I've been thinking about the way it has come to structure our political landscape. That, to me, is a problem.

Aruna D'Souza

convinced to act in a human way by caring for others. And I always say: I don't want your well-being to depend on my capacity to empathize; I don't want my well-being to depend on your capacity to empathize. I think our well-being should simply be guaranteed by the fact that we are living beings, right?

This kind of empathy-building on social media—especially when it comes from people in genuinely life-threatening, dire situations—makes them realize that they can only be saved by displaying their suffering in the hope that empathy will emerge. To me, first of all, that is not a short-term solution. In triage situations, waiting for people to change their hearts and minds is not sufficient. But second of all, it eats away at my soul a little bit to see, for example, children in Gaza on social media explaining their fear, their deprivation, the details of their day-to-day lives. I think: *Why should I need this in order to care for them? Why should anyone need this in order to care for them?*

But the algorithms on Instagram and TikTok are designed to promote these confessional modes of address. Anything from makeup tutorials or celebrities apologizing for their last gaffe to testimonies from victims of war—all of these are forms of confessional videos. And because of how they're structured, the algorithm amplifies them. People are trained both to watch and expect them, but also to make them, because that's what gets the most reach. I believe the idea that our hearts and minds should be changed through confession or through revealing our own trauma, getting people to understand our situations — this putting the onus on the victim is very much part of Western liberal thought and empathy building. But it's also very much part of the algorithmic structure of social media as well.

Asia Tsisar: This is very interesting, because in your book you also write about something that, on the one hand, seems very obvious, but on the other hand is not so obvious at all — that our ability to empathize with someone also depends on that person's race, nationality, political views, gender, and hundreds of other circumstances. Which is... so strange. In a sense, I think it's natural to empathize with someone we understand — or at least think we understand — but, at the same time, it literally creates a situation in which your life depends on another person's ability to feel empathy to you.

Aruna D'Souza: I always think about this in relation to hiring practices. In the U.S., when companies hire white men, it's often because the person doing the hiring recognizes themselves in that candidate — this is who I used to be at that age; I can see where he's going to go. In contrast, when women, and especially women of color, apply for jobs, they have to submit résumés that are ten miles long. They must demonstrate a track record of what they've already accomplished, not just what they're capable of achieving. That's because the person hiring has empathy for the white man, but not for the woman of color or even the white woman. In fact, empathy is responsible for many of the inequalities and injustices we see in the world — not only because of personal preferences for those who look like us or share similar backgrounds, but also because empathy has historically been weaponized. For instance, the Catholic Church's mission in relation to empire-building and slavery was framed around a supposed empathy for other peoples — a desire to "save" them from themselves.

I don't think the outcome of any war — or the fate of any people — should be determined by the sympathies of governments or people across the globe

Asia Tsisar

I love empathetic people, and I try to be empathetic myself. As an individual quality, empathy is very important; it does make us better people. But I've been thinking about the way it has come to structure our political landscape. That, to me, is a problem. As I said, I don't want to have to wait for my empathy to "kick in" before I can act to preserve lives. When the siege on Gaza began, many people were saying, "You're not empathizing with the right side," or "You're not understanding the complexities of the situation." My response was: I don't need to understand all the complexities to demand a ceasefire. There was — and still is — a widespread notion among those empathizing with Israel that what Israelis endured during the October 7th attack justifies supporting a military assault on Gaza. To me, one can empathize without endorsing the destruction of human life. But if empathy is used to justify or enable such destruction, that's a perversion.

Asia Tsisar: What really troubles me here is that the gaze of the observer — or the witness — somehow becomes what legitimizes suffering. In other words, empathy ends up measuring how valid your experience is, how real your struggles are. As you mentioned *Me Too*, I think most women have had moments in their lives when they experienced discrimination or harassment, and there's someone — a colleague, a passerby — who acknowledges it. Their support can mean everything. But their denial can make you question your own

perception — even the reality of what you feel.

The idea of empathizing with the desires, the trauma, or the suffering of the perpetrators of violence is now being used to justify that violence

Aruna D'Souza

When russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the internet exploded with calls for people to take to the streets. I was in Warsaw and I joined the protests too — partly because it was comforting to be surrounded by like-minded people. It felt like a form of validation. But at the same time, I remember feeling confused, unable to understand why the number of people on the streets should determine whether my country deserves to exist. What I'm trying to say is that I don't think the outcome of any war — or the fate of any people — should be determined by the sympathies of governments or people across the globe. But right now it looks like we, as humankind, have not been able to devise a better system than: "If you're my friend, I'm going to help you kill those guys." That, basically, is the level of international politics we're facing today.

Aruna D'Souza: And that's the most crazy-making part of all this. I think we've reached a point where the ongoing violence we see — whether it's the so-called "war on terror" that we've been living through since the '90s, or the normalized, everyday violence of today — has somehow become accepted as the price of being in the world. But it just isn't. It doesn't have to be — except that we tolerate it. And yes, you're right: the idea of empathizing with the desires, the trauma, or the suffering of the perpetrators of violence is now being used to justify that violence. It's perverse — it really is.

At the same time, what's interesting from a U.S. perspective — and this was also very clear when russia launched its full-scale attack on Ukraine — is how this strangeness of empathy reveals itself. Americans were being told that we have to care about this because Ukrainians are white.

Asia Tsisar: Literally?

Aruna D'Souza: I'm not sure if this was fully apparent in Ukraine, but there was a well-known incident involving a reporter — I think he was from CNN — who was in Ukraine covering the attacks. He said something like, *"We've seen wars like this in other parts of the world, but what makes this one so upsetting is that the victims here are blonde and blue-eyed."* For many people, it was striking how whiteness was being deployed by politicians and the media as a reason to care more about this war than others. For me, we should care about

all wars — so the whiteness of the victims shouldn't be understood as a reason *not* to care. But it was striking to see how empathy was operating here — the assumption that, of course, we'll care more about this war because of who the victims are.

Victims are often put in situations where they're forced to — let's say — fight for the attention of the observer. It creates something people sometimes call the "Genocidal Olympics."

Asia Tsisar

I think there's a similar dynamic with Israel: we are urged to care more because Jewish people — whether or not they're Israeli — are provisionally coded as white, in the U.S. at least. There's this underlying idea that our empathy should be directed toward white victims. The problem for those who are victimized by this logic is that these discourses around empathy can be manipulated in countless ways. On one hand, what we see on social media can function as a form of witnessing — a way to become aware of what's happening in the world. But it's also a tool of manipulation. And I'm sure many Ukrainians would be appalled to learn that they were being presented as somehow "good" victims, in contrast to the "bad" victims elsewhere.

Asia Tsisar: I think not only Ukrainians, but many people from outside the so-called "first world," have faced this side of international solidarity — when your whole world is crumbling, yet you find yourself sitting in a nice suit at some round table, performing and playing a kind of mind games: explaining yourself, decoding the cultural codes of your listeners, and fighting the narratives that have been projected onto you.

While I cannot deny the fact that the majority of Ukrainians are white —

Aruna D'Souza: Nor should you have to!

Asia Tsisar: — basically, we were objects in these conversations, in this discussion.

Aruna D'Souza: Absolutely.

Asia Tsisar: And also, I think because of these objectified positions, victims are often put in situations where they're forced to — let's say — fight for the attention of the observer. It creates something people sometimes call the "Genocidal Olympics." You basically have to show that you're suffering the most, that you most deserve attention. And I believe neither the people of Palestine nor the people of Ukraine wanted this. But we were put in this competition with each other. It's observers who began to compare the situations in Ukraine and Palestine, deciding who

deserves support more, who deserves attention more. But for the observers, all of this is happening on their phone screens — so it ends up looking like people are just ranking their favorite Netflix show.

Aruna D'Souza: I don't blame you for thinking that. I personally feel a huge amount of guilt for not paying nearly as much attention to what's happening, say, in Sudan, as I have to what's happening in Palestine or Ukraine. Partly, that's because there's so much less news about Sudan, it hardly ever crosses my social media feed. And the absence of coverage has a lot to do with the fact that these are Black African victims. So, in that "Genocidal Olympics," they're very low on the list, right? At least for the West, which tends to assume that, well, Africans will just go on killing each other and there's nothing to be done about it.

I like what you say about the objectification of victims in these conflicts and the lack of agency they're afforded. But I also think there's something deeper — a way we imagine justice as a finite quantity that can only be distributed in limited amounts. There's a scarcity mindset behind how we distribute empathy. For example, much of the debate around the war in Ukraine revolved around how much money the U.S. should give to help Ukraine defend itself against the Russian invasion. There was a sense of, *Why are we, the taxpayers, paying all this money?* In Gaza, all the U.S. had to do was shut off the tap to Israel. It wouldn't have cost a penny, yet people are still caught in this scarcity model, as if there's only so much empathy to go around, only so much support, only so much justice to go around.

That comes straight from the scarcity model — the idea that fighting for one another has to be an exchange, that empathy is something you trade

Aruna D'Souza

I think the danger is that people in positions of oppression start believing that. There was this famous incident where a woman—an actress—stood up to receive an award, I think it was an Academy Award or an Emmy. And in her speech, she said something like, "We've been fighting these past few years for Black people to get more roles, to be more present, to be a bigger part of the film industry. And now it's your turn to step up for us women." This was a very highly paid actress who had starred in major television shows. But she was thinking of it all in terms of this *quid pro quo* logic — you got yours, now I need mine.

I think in the U.S. that same logic resurfaced around Israel and Gaza, when some people were saying, "I've been on the front lines fighting for racial justice for Black people, so

now you have to support Israel in this moment of crisis." As if solidarity itself were transactional. That comes straight from the scarcity model — the idea that fighting for one another has to be an exchange, that empathy is something you trade. And that, to me, feels like… I keep using the word "perversion" today, but it really does seem the most accurate to describe the world we're living in — where the ways we're being asked to relate to one another feel not only inhumane, but almost inhuman.

Asia Tsisar: I believe this is also connected to something you describe in your book as "the problem of translation." In other words, it's the need to explain yourself with the words of the observer. And I agree that this is probably a legacy of colonialism — and also it's a game that's impossible to win. Because when you're trying to fit into a cultural code that wasn't designed for you, you'll always remain in a secondary position.

I shouldn't have to understand everything someone else is thinking, feeling, or going through. I shouldn't need to know every detail of their history or what makes them tick in order to say: this person should not have to die

Aruna D'Souza

I think this problem is familiar to many people who come from marginalized geographies or communities. From the very beginning, you're not treated as an equal. You have to spend time learning, adjusting, and you'll be judged by how well you perform this cultural code. And that's clearly unfair.

I used to think of it more as a cognitive problem — that translation is what makes understanding possible. So, if we can uncover the potential of untold stories, we can make more things "normal." And with a broader concept of normality, we can accept more possibilities, more solutions. I also used to think about it — unconsciously — from a position of trust: you attempt to understand in order to be able to trust the person. But your perspective is completely different.

Aruna D'Souza: Well, my perspective is—and this might mean I'm way too trusting—that in certain moments, I shouldn't have to understand everything someone else is thinking, feeling, or going through. I shouldn't need to know every detail of their history or what makes them tick in order to say: this person should not have to die.

For people who live in powerful countries—with powerful passports, powerful economies, and all of that—we've been spoiled into thinking that everyone has to come to us to make themselves heard and understood.

I'm really speaking from the perspective of someone trying to reach those who, like me, are on the privileged side of the conversation about understanding—the ones who are invited to understand, not the ones who must constantly make themselves understood

Aruna D'Souza

One of the reasons I often talk about Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* is because it's such a powerful exercise for those who imagine themselves masters of the English language. You have to read a book in which English is spoken in so many different forms, or not spoken at all—many of these languages and dialects are completely incomprehensible to most of us. And yet, you have to keep going, trusting that you'll understand enough to grasp the story and what's happening. That's a position so many English speakers—so many Americans, Western Europeans, Canadians, Australians—rarely have to be in. People from minoritized places—and "minoritized" has nothing to do with population size; India has a billion people—still face a great obligation to translate themselves into the normative codes that, as you say, are rooted in colonialism.

So, I'm not suggesting that we can come together without knowing anything about each other. But I do think we don't have to understand everything about each other. And I would hope that, when faced with human suffering, we at least understand humanity—as the most basic, minimum quality. Of course, I know that the very definition of humanity is always contested—it can be as exclusionary a term as it is an inclusive one. But let's at least start there, and then, hopefully, get better as time goes on.

When I talk about translation, I'm really speaking from the perspective of someone trying to reach those who, like me, are on the privileged side of the conversation about understanding—the ones who are invited to understand, not the ones who must constantly make themselves understood. Because, to me, that becomes an ethical question of privilege. So, it's interesting to hear you speak from the context of the war in Ukraine, but also in terms of how Cent §§§ ral and Eastern Europe are, in many ways, marginalized within broader political landscapes.

Asia Tsisar: We've been saying that empathy is not the most solid ground to build political structures. But if we try to imagine a form of solidarity that isn't built on empathy—then what would it be?

Aruna D'Souza: Well, I think one of the problems—and I say this as someone who's not an activist or an

organizer, so I'm speaking here as a kind of non-expert—is that solidarity built on empathy presupposes an alliance based on similarity: an alliance grounded in my ability to understand you—everything you want and everything you need. And I actually think that's part of why solidarities so often break down, or why we end up caught in purity politics—where I can only be in alliance with you if we agree on everything, if you conform to all my ideals of what an ally should be.

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Aruna D'Souza

It seems to me that what we need instead is to find the moments, the issues, the single things we agree on—and to build strategic action from there. In the U.S. in the 1970s, there was a movement called Third World Feminisms, and groups like the Combahee River Collective—a collective of Black feminist Marxists—were theorizing exactly this. One of the things they advocated for was coming together around specific urgencies. Whether it was about Black women's healthcare, access to certain services, or protesting a particularly egregious act by the police, the idea was to come together in those moments—but not to imagine that you had to stay tied to one another forever.

You build momentary solidarities that help you respond to a crisis—and then you move on. To me, that seems, paradoxically, a more resilient model, because it doesn't require everyone to agree on everything. It allows people to preserve their differences, their motivations, their needs. I don't have to suppress what I want to see in the world to enter into solidarity with you—and you don't have to do that either. We can come together when the time is right.

And right now, what's interesting in the U.S. is that, in the face of Trump, we're seeing people who voted for him—people who were absolutely on board with many of his racist and xenophobic policies—now saying, "My God, I might have my healthcare taken away," or "I might lose my social security." To me, those are the moments when you have to say, okay, I disagree with these people in a million different ways, but on this, we agree. And so, on this, let's find ways to gather strength in numbers—and then sort out the policy consequences later. Right now, let's deal with the urgency of the situation. I think that's one of the things that might begin to fill the gaps.

And something I found really interesting—if I remember correctly, it was in Minsk—is that instead of organizing one massive march, the strategy was to stage many smaller, thousand-person protests across different parts of the city. That approach, in a sense, overwhelms the system, rather than concentrating everyone in a single location where law enforcement can easily contain it. I find that a fascinating model—not only for physical protest in the streets, but also for political thinking more broadly. It suggests new ways of organizing, where different groups mobilize around different issues simultaneously and, together, overwhelm the system.

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Asia Tsisar: What you're saying is interesting to me also in the context of polarization, which has become one of the most striking features of the contemporary political landscape. As we can see, almost every election now reveals a nearly 50–50 split between opponents positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum. So I wonder—can this idea of translation also be applied to attempts to build dialogue with someone you fundamentally disagree with?

Aruna D'Souza: You know, I wonder that too. And I'll tell you a story that always blows my mind. So, I grew up in Canada, but my family has a cabin in Montana, in the U.S. After Trump was first elected, there was this guy, Richard Spencer — a white nationalist figure who was very influential in the neo-Nazi milieu in the States. His parents lived in the same town where our cabin is, and for a while he was living in their basement. While he was there, he was encouraging white nationalists from all over the U.S. to gather for a big rally in Montana. Some of the flyers they distributed to attract people to the movement said things like: *Join a movement that will offer you free healthcare, free education, free childcare.* You know, all the things the left wants. The difference was that the white nationalists wanted all of those things for themselves — they just didn't want anyone else to have them. And this cracked me up. It was so funny because political polarization in the U.S. isn't really about people disagreeing on what they want — most people want the same basic things — it's about who they think should have them. They don't want immigrants to have those things, or Black people, or other people of color. But as white people, they want all of those things. What I found really interesting about Bernie Sanders' campaign, for example,

was that he recognized that even the most radical right-wing people actually want those same things. So his approach was: let's foreground those shared needs — healthcare, education, housing.

Even within the limited political power afforded to citizens in democratic countries, we still have the ability to make some pretty basic changes

Aruna D'Souza

But at the same time, I don't want to pretend that the real issue is simply economic or ideological. I think that across all Western countries, there's a deeply entrenched xenophobia and racism driving this polarization—far more than any abstract disagreement about the role of the state. And I don't think you can deal with racism through appeals to empathy. I'll say that outright: I don't think that's possible.

Many Black historians have written extensively about this—about how racist discourse, and by that I mean the idea that Black people in particular, but also other people of color, are somehow less fully human than white people, whether for medical, spiritual, or other supposed reasons—emerged from the needs of empire-building nations to justify slavery. In other words, the Portuguese had to appeal to the Catholic Church to justify their desire to begin the slave trade. Since the Church at that time prohibited the enslavement of other human beings, they developed the notion that Africans were not fully human.

In a sense, the institution of slavery created the need for racist theories as justification, rather than racist theories leading to the institution of slavery. And while slavery as a formal institution may have been abolished, its structural effects continue to this day—certainly throughout the Western world. You can't simply "understand" your way out of them; structures have to change. If everything in your system treats Black people as less human, as it does in the U.S., then it's impossible to get people to recognize them as fully human. They are structurally placed in that position. So the idea that the more I empathize, the less those structures will affect people, is simply not true. You have to undo the structures—and those can be changed far more easily than people's empathy can be cultivated.

Asia Tsisar: Because I think in recent years there's been this idea that we can actually undo structures of injustice through empathy.

Aruna D'Souza: Yes. And that empathy has to precede the undoing — to me, that just seems like a delay tactic. It's the argument that we have to change people's hearts and minds first. But no — you can actually make

the police stop killing Black people before you wait for people's hearts and minds to change. Even within the limited political power afforded to citizens in democratic countries, we still have the ability to make some pretty basic changes. We just lack the political will and pretend it's more complicated than it actually is.

Asia Tsisar: I agree that our current strategies of solidarity depend on empathy. But I also think that this kind of solidarity can itself become a mechanism of division — separating people into those who are able to show solidarity and those who need it in order to survive. And to deserve solidarity, you're expected to behave according to a certain set of rules — to fit into a narrow framework of what a "victim" should be.

For example, at least until Donald Trump's recent interviews, Ukraine was privileged to be recognized globally as the "victim" — it was clear who had attacked and who was defending themselves. But in the case of Gaza, that clarity doesn't exist for many people. So those who express solidarity also end up prescribing what the victim can or cannot do. The victim, for instance, is allowed to die, but not to be angry or violent — not to act according to their own sense of strategy.

The concepts of nationhood — in terms of the modern idea of the state — are built on a great deal of violence and imposed homogenization: bringing together people with very different understandings into the artificial formation of the nation-state

Aruna D'Souza

Connecting this to what you said earlier, I wonder — are those with whom solidarity is expressed ever allowed to set the terms? To decide how they should be treated, how their situation should be understood, or how it should be resolved?

Aruna D'Souza: I think — and I was actually thinking about this when we were talking about translation — that the ultimate solution to all of these kinds of problems, including the ones you're talking about, with the limited set of actions available to a victim, is to privilege people's sovereignty and self-determination.

And if I say that people have a right to sovereignty and self-determination, that goes directly against what both the country I grew up in and the country I live in now were founded on — namely, the suppression of Native American and Indigenous people's sovereignty and self-determination, and the suppression of the enslaved and their sovereignty and self-determination. And yet I know that sovereignty and self-determination are correct. So if I fail to recognize someone's

sovereignty and self-determination, and they react — even violently to me — I can suffer from that, and maybe I will suffer from it. But I can still recognize their need to do so. I can recognize that they are being denied something very basic to the human condition.

There's always this sense of precarity—of needing to keep working to survive—which makes sustained political action difficult

Aruna D'Souza

That's also why I think that, as a political subject, I can live without requiring myself to understand everything about someone else. I can simply take as a given that part of the human condition is the right to sovereignty and self-determination. So, in cases where people don't have it and they're fighting for it, I can accept that — even if it goes against my sort of enlightenment culture's predilections toward calm and the lack of conflict. I can recognize that the concepts of nationhood — in terms of the modern idea of the state — are built on a great deal of violence and imposed homogenization: bringing together people with very different understandings into the artificial formation of the nation-state. At the same time, that process often suppresses or even making illegal those differences by repressing them, right? And so I can say that as long as I remain aware of people's right to sovereignty and self-determination, that is the fundamental thing I have to recognize. So, I can hold my judgment in suspension.

Now, I can still look at a situation and say, strategically, maybe that wasn't the best thing to do — in cases of violence, attacks, or extrajudicial actions. I can say, okay, strategically I might not agree with what this person, group, or political entity has done. But I can recognize the logic of their doing so. I can recognize that they're doing it from a place in which their sovereignty and right to self-determination has been trampled upon now, for decades, for centuries, whatever. And I think part of this comes from not privileging the *state* as the thing that has to be protected, but privileging *people* as the entities that have to be protected. Once you do that, you're left with a very different moral calculus than if you start from the idea that the state must be protected at all costs. Does that make sense?

Asia Tsisar: That makes a lot of sense! But I wonder how this actually works in practice. When I say "is it allowed for the victim to set the rules," I mean — can the side whose rights have been violated decide how the situation should be defined, addressed, and resolved? And should those expressing solidarity ultimately accept these terms, or are they also allowed to question them?

A concrete example that comes to mind is the culture of boycotts in

the art world. When the full-scale invasion began, for instance, the Ukrainian art community declared that it was not the time for Russian culture. Many of us said we wouldn't share platforms with Russian artists or demanded that international institutions exclude Russian projects from their programs. From the perspective of the Ukrainians, this was a strategic move — a way to demand consistency between the words and actions of international cultural actors. Instead, this became a subject of international debate — about whether those who express solidarity have the right to do so on their own terms. I'd be happy to bring up examples from other contexts, but unfortunately, I don't really know them.

Aruna D'Souza: You know, certainly in the States there's been an active boycott movement within the arts community for some time—particularly in protest against the occupation of Palestine and the violence there. There have also been protest movements around Russia's participation in international art events, like the Biennale, and similar actions. The argument often made against these boycotts is that by cutting off the cultural sphere of an aggressor state, you also silence the people working from within to oppose their government's actions. I don't necessarily think that's true. There are plenty of people within national art communities who fully support their governments. In New York's art world, for instance, there are some very vocal supporters of Israel. So I think these boycotts can be absolutely useful—not primarily as a means of exclusion, but as a way to build solidarity among those protesting, and to raise awareness about these issues in cultural spaces that often prefer to deal with them only superficially or performatively. Boycotts force people to quite literally put their money where their mouth is.

If we look at solidarity not as a momentary gesture but from a long-term perspective, it often appears more like a situational performance aimed at building one's own social capital rather than a tool for achieving tangible, systematic change

Asia Tsisar

At the same time, here in the U.S., there was a very public boycott of *Artforum* magazine after its publishers fired the editor-in-chief, David Velasco, for publishing an open letter condemning Israel's response to the Hamas attack. The letter was signed by many in the art world—writers who refused to contribute further, and artists who forbade *Artforum* from reproducing their work. It was a strong, widespread reaction. But now, even as the situation in Gaza continues to worsen, many of those same people are quietly breaking the boycott.

I think this reflects a broader problem in the art world. It's an industry that has a huge amount of money attached to it, but that money doesn't trickle down in very equitable ways. Emerging artists, writers, whatever, they don't receive many benefits of the fact that this is a multi-billion dollar industry. There's always this sense of precarity—of needing to keep working to survive—which makes sustained political action difficult. People often participate in the easy phase of a boycott, but once it becomes hard or inconvenient, they quietly step back and hope no one notices.

My condition in the world is sustained by ensuring that others have what they need to survive and thrive. That, to me, is what solidarity truly means: recognizing that connection and acting on it

Aruna D'Souza

We saw something similar with the Black Lives Matter movement: many people supported it when it was publicly fashionable, when it looked good to be "on the right side." But once it became uncomfortable or risky, they disengaged. We're seeing that again now, as institutions roll back their diversity initiatives—not because they're forced to, but because the political climate has shifted and it's no longer seen as necessary.

Asia Tsisar: This is exactly my observation — if we look at solidarity not as a momentary gesture but from a long-term perspective, it often appears more like a situational performance aimed at building one's own social capital rather than a tool for achieving tangible, systematic change. So, my last question would be: can we try to imagine solidarity beyond the usual framework of power and resource imbalance? How could it function in practice? For instance, can solidarity work in reverse — from those in what's usually seen as "less privileged" conditions toward those in more privileged ones? Take the current situation in the U.S., for example — do the protests happening there need international solidarity?

Aruna D'Souza: You know, one of the things that I feel many Americans—not the American government, but ordinary Americans—don't fully recognize is how often people around the world step up for us, and how rarely we step up for them. When the Black Lives Matter protests erupted in 2020 after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, it was extraordinary to see demonstrations take place across the globe. People were not only expressing concern for the victims in the U.S. but also for victims of the same kind of anti-Black violence in their own countries. It became a truly global movement. When I learned that Gaza and the West Bank are filled with memorials for people like Trayvon Martin and George Floyd, I burst into tears. These are people living under the most brutal conditions of occupation, and

yet they're showing solidarity with Black victims of state violence in the U.S. That, to me, is extraordinary.

To me, that's the essence of solidarity — not merely empathizing with others, but recognizing that their safety is essential to mine

Aruna D'Souza

When I was in school, I learned a statistic that in Canada, poor and working-class people give a greater proportion of their income to charity than the rich. And I realized that, in a sense, this is the definition of solidarity — recognizing that our individual well-being depends on the safety and prosperity of others. My condition in the world is sustained by ensuring that others have what they need to survive and thrive. That, to me, is what solidarity truly means: recognizing that connection and acting on it.

At a certain point in my career, I mostly stopped writing about white artists and began focusing on Black artists and artists of color. That decision didn't come from a sense of doing good or bestowing anything on others. It came from self-preservation. I had just experienced a painful episode of employment discrimination because I'm not white, and I realized that the only way to protect myself was to work toward dismantling the structures that make such racism possible. The only way I could be treated better was if Black people were treated better — if discrimination became unacceptable for everyone. So for me, centering the work of Black artists was about survival. And I don't think enough people understand that — that *your* safety is the only thing that will ever ensure *my* safety.

More and more people are beginning to see this, as privilege becomes less and less of an insulation from the crises of the world. But we still have a long way to go. Take what's happening in Ukraine, for example. I'm Canadian, and since Trump took office, he's made all kinds of remarks about wanting to "go after" Canada. He's clearly enamored with Putin — with that exercise of power. And it's become obvious that the world's tolerance of Putin's invasion of Ukraine is precisely what enables Trump to make such threats. The same logic applies elsewhere: the tolerance of Israel's actions enables Modi to bomb Pakistan — a nuclear-armed country.

These examples show that the safety and autonomy of Ukrainian people are directly tied to my own safety and autonomy. The safety of Kashmiri or Pakistani people is inseparable from that of Indian people. To me, that's the essence of solidarity — not merely empathizing with others, but recognizing that *their* safety is essential to *mine*.

Tanja Sokolnykova and Mariia Vorotilina

Cooking with Mama:

Recipes from unearthed (home)lands

Tanja Sokolnykova (she/her) is an arts educator, facilitator, and intersectional feminist engaged in creating spaces of solidarity and decolonial transformation. Tanja's perspective is informed by an upbringing in the South-East of Ukraine in a mixed Ukrainian–Russian–Mari family, and later migration experience to Germany.

Mariia Vorotilina (she/her) is a curator, cultural manager, and activist from Ukraine, currently based in Germany. Her work lies at the intersection of arts, theory, and activism, approached from queer-feminist and decolonial perspectives. Mariia engages with topics such as translocal solidarities in complex political contexts, practices of care, the notion of "Eastern Europe" as an invented concept, and the Western gaze on the region.

In this text, we mention the endonyms Sakartvelo, Qirim, and Qazaqstan to follow the ways communities self-identify and relate to their land, acknowledging that these terms are part of ongoing debates, decolonial struggles, processes of reclaiming self-determination. We also recognize our limitations: we are not aware of all the nuances of different struggles, and we honor that each community is at a different stage of asserting its identity, navigating distinct political realities and urgencies, with what is central for some being less so for others.

Dedicated to our mothers - sometimes physically present, sometimes appearing only through memory, sometimes felt in the silence of conflicting relationships, sometimes in thoughts of caretakers who were not mothers, absent fathers, or never-seen grandparents. We remember how their hands, advice, recipes, and gestures carry the weight of everyday labor, survival, violence, resilience and care, stretched across generations.

Cooking with Mama is a series of community encounters in Berlin and beyond that weaves personal and collective hi/stories often underrepresented, erased or overlooked. The gatherings reflect on memory, transgenerational and local knowledge, decoloniality, and resistance through food and cooking across Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Northern and Central Asia, creating a site of care and transnational solidarity. These gatherings have been organized by Maryna Markova (koopkultur e.V.), Tanja Sokolnykova (Political Kitchen) and Mariia Vorotilina, and stand as a homage to the initiative of the artist Hiwa K of the same name.

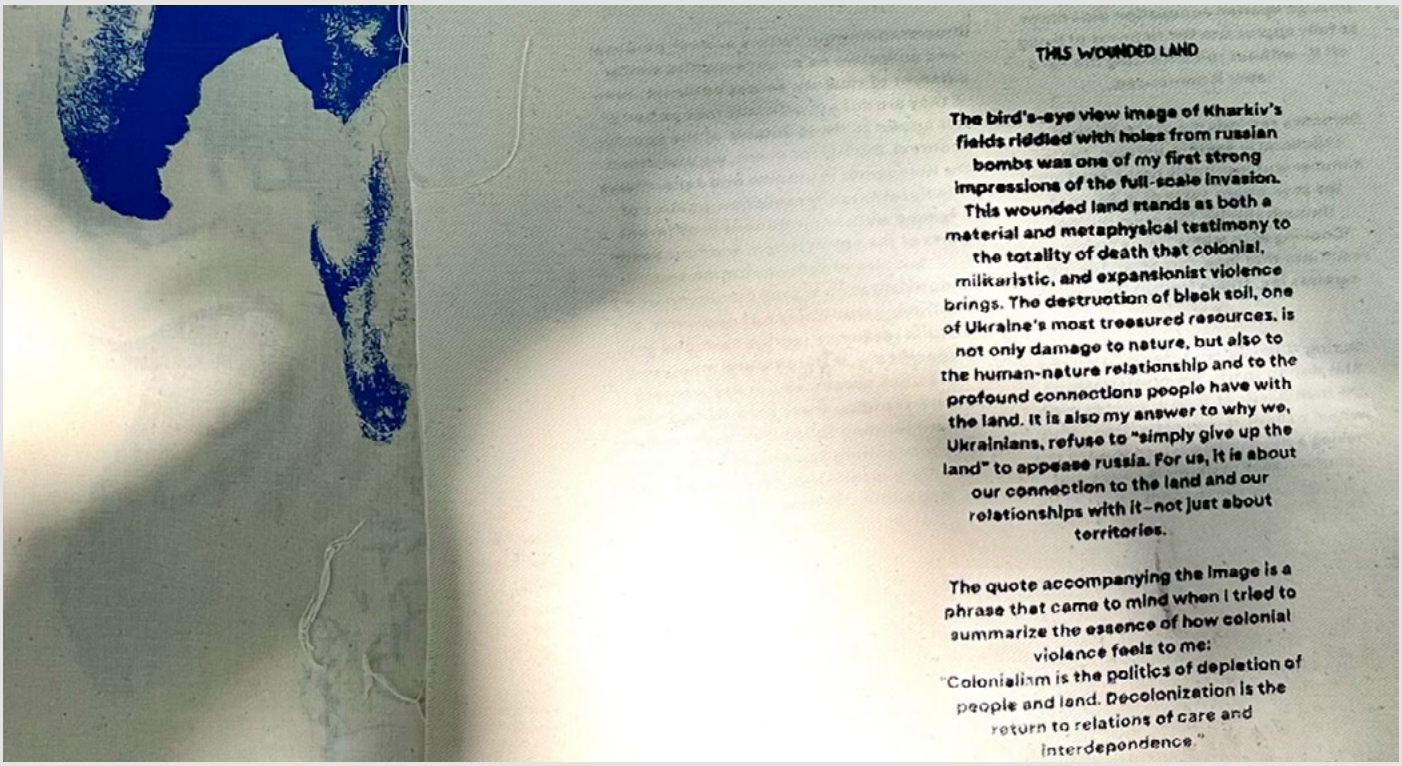
The Grief Table - part of the "Cooking with Mama" process within the project "Traces of solidarity - remnants of self-organized common welfare and care practices", curated by Sharmila and O, 2024. Credit: thisismywork.online

First and foremost, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to every individual, initiative, and space that has made these communal gatherings possible. We deeply appreciate the work, knowledge, thoughts, energy, and time that so many have dedicated to this process. This includes all the tandem members - whether present in person or connecting online - Giorgi Rodionov, Diana Khalil, Maryna Dostibegian, Oksana Potapova, Saltanat Shoshanova, Elnara Nuriieva-Letova, Seseg Jigjitova, Elvis Çolpuh, Umtata, Petro Rusanienko, Sashko Protyah, Marina Israilova. We also thank the mothers who occasionally joined the events, Olia Hordiienko for designing the invitations, Nastia Hrychkovska for sewing the zine covers, the volunteers who supported us, and everyone who came to the gatherings and/ or contributed in any way, from peeling vegetables to cleaning tables, from printing the zine pages to weaving them into a single piece. This text reflects the variety of perspectives and knowledge shared during the events by our communities - without which the gatherings themselves, and our reflections on them, would not have been possible.

There are moments when it feels that our communal events “Cooking with Mama” began long before we started to cook - before the first table was set, before the pans began to simmer. Maybe it emerged in the soil, or perhaps in what the soil remembers. The soil was always there, even when we didn’t name it. It held all of us. Every story, every recipe, every moment of sorrow and tenderness shared seemed to trace its way back to the land - in its loss and fragile relations of belonging, in the ways it nurtures, survives, and holds knowledge - back to layers of memory buried beneath imperial histories.

We kept thinking about Ukraine, about *chornozem* - that black soil, that sustained generations and witnessed the scars of empires: Tsarist serfdom, Soviet industrialization, the Holodomor, Nazi occupation, Chornobyl, capitalist assimilation and then the Russian invasion - different names for different dimensions of colonial violence.

That black soil that fed millions in Ukraine and far beyond. The source of wheat, sunflowers, and corn - only became truly visible through the threat of its absence after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For decades, even centuries, this land - the so-called “breadbasket” for many countries globally - remained largely concealed, dismissed as a “grey area” on the map, a place many knew little about. When Russia launched its full-scale war in 2022, exports of crops grown on Ukrainian soil were



Fragment of a textile zine by Oksana Potapova, a participant in the edition "Cooking with Mama: The Politics of Holodomor and Asharshylyk. Exploring personal and collective histories through food", 2024. Credit: Tanja Sokolnykova

severely disrupted by port blockades and damaged infrastructure. This sudden interruption revealed the world's deep dependence on Ukraine's harvests.

Now, Ukrainian land is facing even greater challenges - wounded by constant attacks, contaminated with mines, and scorched by war. A land that is home to and nourishment for millions has, at the same time, become a danger zone: an injured, poisoned body that may take decades, perhaps centuries, to heal from imperial and colonial violence. Yet it remains a body that still carries knowledge and memory, holding a deep connection to those who came before.

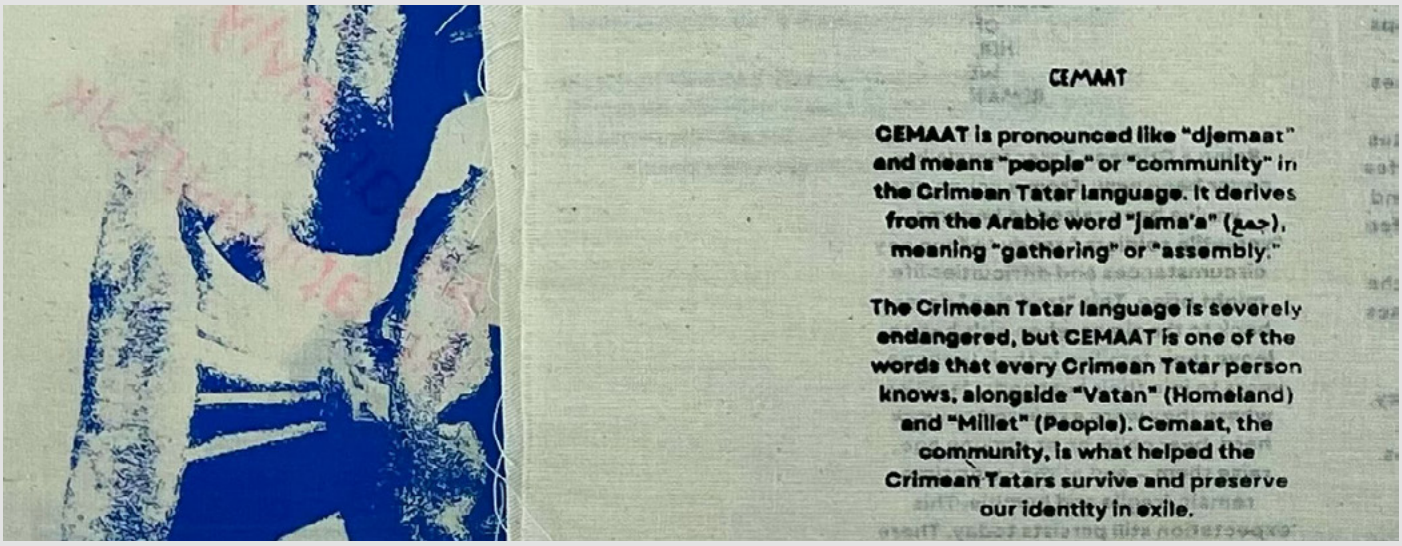
Beneath all these layers lies a history of peasantry - generations who lived by cultivating and defending this material foundation of life. The relationship between peasants and land was never merely economic or survivalist, it was also cosmological. Each agricultural cycle was attuned to the soil's rhythms: when it begins to breathe, when it yields, when it grows tired, when it asks for care. In these harvesting cycles, the land, the ancestors, the dead were honored with an abundance of rituals and customs, their care and labour was acknowledged in songs, reflected in food practices or stitched into clothing. Yet that relational bond has continually been threatened by erasure: from collectivization to contemporary land grabs, from colonial conquests to the latest forms of agro-capitalism and Russia's ecocide.

The project's intention is to hold space for these fragmented languages and to sense the emergence of a common ground for mutual care, responsibility, and solidarity.

That ambivalence runs through many regions. Every story shared through "Cooking with Mama" leans on its own soil - from Eastern Europe, the Caucasus to Central and Northern Asia. Different lands, identities and cultures, yet all marked by the legacies of Russian and other imperial forces: dispossession, extraction, displacement and endurance. Soil as both ground of life and ground of death - a repository of nourishment and remembrance. We think of it as an ancestral language, one that colonialism has long tried to silence. Through "Cooking with Mama" we have been learning to speak that language again - not fluently, not fully, but in fragments. In our gatherings, these fragments show up through voices often overlooked or defined by (dominant) perspectives imposed from outside. Voices that find themselves in-between, navigating hybrid identities and uncertain ways of belonging. And in those fragments, we unearth that soil: digging into personal and collective hi/stories, acknowledging how many gaps and losses they reveal, how they are shaped by interconnected yet distinct experiences of imperialism(s) and resistance. The project's intention is to hold space for these fragmented languages and to sense the emergence of a common ground for mutual care, responsibility, and solidarity.

People who have lost physical connections to their homelands - through occupation, war, genocide, persecution, or other forms of violence - often preserve those homes within themselves. They are carried through language, rituals, food, traditions, oral, and other living practices. "Cooking with Mama" became a space for sharing these carried (home)lands, for inviting others into spaces often not physical but symbolic and embodied, held on the visceral level of memory.

We witnessed how those who still have access to their homes and lands brought its pieces with them, while living in exile or migration. During one of the editions of "Cooking with Mama," Kazakh (Qazaq) researcher Saltanat Shoshanova shared *Qūrt*, a Central Asian dry cheese made from fermented milk. Since this product is not available in Germany, she brought it from her homeland to share its taste and to tell the history of the Central Asian nomadic traditions connected to this food. Saltanat recalled how, during the Soviet era, *Qūrt* carried the meaning of resistance and support in labor camps like ALZHIR (Akmolinsk Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland), where women endured harsh repressions. There, villagers who couldn't help openly would pretend to throw stones at the prisoners, so the guards wouldn't



Fragment of a textile zine created during the communal gatherings "Cooking with Mama" by Elnara Nuriieva-Letova, a participant in the edition "Cooking with Mama: Indigenous Perspectives. From Repressions to Translocal Solidarity", 2024. Credit: Tanja Sokolnykova

notice that they were actually giving them *Qūrt* as food that could help them to survive. This also echoes a story shared by Crimean Tatar activist Elnara Nuriieva-Letova. After the forced deportation of Crimean Tatars by Stalin's order in 1944, many died far from their homeland. They weren't allowed to come back to Crimea (Qirim) until the Soviet Union collapsed. Those living in exile asked those who could travel to Crimea (Qirim) to bring them a handful of soil, offering a symbolic reconnection before death when a physical return was impossible.

Our gatherings feel like an act of landing - an intentional space for the moments to listen, to celebrate, to mourn, to un/learn, to weave bonds across borders, hi/stories and identities.

With these stories guiding us, our gatherings feel like an act of landing - an intentional space for the moments to listen, to celebrate, to mourn, to un/learn, to weave bonds across borders, hi/stories and identities.

When we say "Cooking with Mama", it is never just about cooking. It speaks to lineage - how we remember and honor ancestral and everyday knowledge, tracing how it endures across generations, how it overlaps and transforms across borders, how we question what is called "tradition", and how we generate liberatory meaning from it. It also reflects what it means to root ourselves while remaining open to translocal connections and to an understanding of our interwoven struggles. In this sense, tradition is not fixed or linear; it is negotiated, revisioned, and it is political. Rethinking tradition means recognizing both continuity and rupture: choosing what to carry forward, what to transform, and what to let go. It feels like lineage is

relational and it is alive. Here, our communal events became a space for critically examining traditions and their ambivalent meanings. We look at the kitchen and food as a site of both emancipation and oppression. In Kazakhstan (Qazaqstan), for example, the kitchen has often functioned as a place of women's gatherings and empowerment, where stories and secrets circulate. During one of our editions, Ukrainian feminist and peace researcher Oksana Potapova brought up the issue of food nationalism and the ways political actors use cuisine to shape right-wing narratives and xenophobia. She suggested cooking *Okroshka,* a cold soup, together in order to make visible the multiplicity of food traditions even within a single region of Ukraine, and to show how such diversity disrupts dominant storylines.

Our "Cooking with Mama" encounters also honor the legacy of Kurdish artist Hiwa K. They have been an act of homage to his initiative of the same name. During the Second Gulf War, Hiwa fled Kurdistan, Iraq. The webcast cooking event "Cooking with Mama" was one of his first artistic works in Germany in which he prepared various dishes with different communities together with

Captured moment from the edition "Cooking with Mama: The Politics of Holodomor and Asharshylyk. Exploring personal and collective histories through food" with Oksana Potapova and Saltanat Shoshanova, 2024. Credit: Maryna Markova.

his mother who had been guiding cooking sessions for many years via video calls. Hiwa's project carried the impossibility of home and yet the persistence of connection and closeness. That experience is familiar to many who joined our gatherings, coming from such contexts as Georgia (Sakartvelo), Armenia, Dagestan, Kazakhstan (Qazaqstan), Ukraine, Crimea (Qirim), from within Roma communities or from the Buryat Indigenous communities - those who endure repressions, occupation, impossibility of return, genocide, displacement and war, and who know it directly, through family or transgenerationally. We carry Hiwa's refusal to separate the personal from the political, the domestic from the global, the intimate from the historical. Engaging with Hiwa's legacy brings Kurdish struggles into conversation with the so-called "Global East", connecting different forms of resistance without claiming equivalence. We seek to build a dialogue between struggles that are often portrayed as opposing or disconnected, finding ways to reimagine solidarities for collective action. It is about resonance - as we aim to explore possible intersections and invite others to look for links within hi/stories that may appear scattered or unrelated, yet upon closer reflection reveal shared experiences and aspirations.

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At the same time we take our own path in adapting "Cooking with Mama", seeking to narrate our hi/stories in our own way...

... Which brings us to the gut, the inner land of ours. And our communal cooking is an exercise in listening to it, in tuning into what the body knows and how it remembers. And sharing stories, in turn, is an exercise of speaking from the gut, from what our bodies hold, from that place of intuition and conflicting emotions where histories ferment and continue to live through us. This is why land and body are inseparable: what we digest reflects what the land offers, and what it withholds. The way we cook becomes an archive, and what we eat evokes memory. Colonial violence sought to separate reason from feeling, body from knowledge, yet as we stir pots and roll dough, we practice another epistemology, one rooted in the geography of our bodies, the stomach, the tongue, or the fingertips, in the scents and tastes of emotional bonds that cannot be standardized or measured.

Our tandem hosts brought recipes that had traveled across families and regions: *Okroshka* from Ukraine, *Khinkali* from Georgia (Sakartvelo), *Jingalov hats* from Armenia, *Chudu* from Dagestan, Kazakh (Qazaq) breads like *Shelpek* and *Baursak*, Crimean Tatar (Qırımtatarlar) *Kobete*, Buryat-Mongolian tea, *Bigos*, and fried potatoes adopted by Roma communities. We reflect on how food shifts its place of belonging and becomes translocal as its meaning and form change with context. Here, for instance, a Polish-born cultural mediator and performer of Roma origin Umata introduced to us *Bigos (po cygańsku)*, a variation of the dish traditionally associated with Polish *Bigos*, transformed by Roma communities in Poland as a way of preserving their cultural identity in the face of assimilation and racism they continue to confront. Or how Maryna Dostibegian and her mother shared the story of *Jingalov hats*, a dish rooted in the culture of the Artsakh region of Armenia. Preparing it becomes a way for Maryna to reflect on her complex identity, and on what it means to find and create new homes far from the old ones. She speaks from a family history marked by survival of the Armenian genocide, followed by migration to Georgia (Sakartvelo), then to Ukraine, and later multiple dispersals caused by the war. At the same time, *Jingalov hats* share cultural roots with *Chudu*, a Dagestani similar dish introduced by Diana Khalil, who likewise learned to trace commonalities of colonial erasure through her both Ukrainian and Rutul identities.

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All the foods we cook evoke complex historical origins, wide regional spread, and layers of cultural imprints and family variations. They reveal how taste has been shaped and reshaped across generations, often absorbed into or redefined by national narratives, a process influenced by the legacy of imperial policies, as for example Soviet modernity.

The Soviet regime profoundly affected food cultures, dietary practices, and the interactions among cuisines. The so-called “internationalization” of Soviet cuisine, an instrument of cultural colonialism, was on the one hand a result of (oftentimes) forced migrations such as deportations, exiles, and resettlements, and on the other hand a part of broader policies that imposed universalism. These policies created notions of cultural ownership while producing a standardized, homogenized understanding of food traditions. They led to the appropriation and renaming of dishes, the simplification of recipes, and the banalization of food practices once rich in local,

ceremonial, or seasonal meaning. Through institutionalization, regional specialties were often stripped of context and transformed into uniform, mass-produced versions.

Food under Soviet rule also reflected broader structures of control and inequality. Forced food practices, deliberate starvation, the "culture of poverty", and the engineered economy of scarcity with its unequal distribution of food all functioned as mechanisms of submission and dependence. Supply differed across regions - capitals, industrial centers, and constructed tourist areas were prioritized, while towns and villages faced severe shortages. In these conditions, resilient food practices persisted as both survival and resistance: home gardening, foraging, careful use of ingredients, and methods of preservation and recycling. These acts maintained threads of autonomy and continuity, allowing traditions to endure and not to dissolve into the Soviet mainstream and political machinery that sought to control the very act of nourishment.

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Many of our gatherings have explored tangible ways of coping with scarcity, reflecting both survival experiences and the cultural traditions shaped by them. For instance, as Umtata shared, Roma approaches to food reveal remarkable resourcefulness and sustainable practices that embody early forms of upcycling. Or consider how, in Georgia (Sakartvelo), the extreme food shortages following the collapse of the Soviet Union became moments of creativity and celebration in the family of artist Giorgi Rodionov as his mother devised ways to ease the hardship. Knowledge of foraging for mushrooms or herbs in different cultural contexts - such as in Ukraine or Armenia - has long been connected to experiences of deliberate famine, war and displacement.

Imperial and colonial violence in Eastern Europe, Central and Northern Asia, and the Caucasus deprived people in these regions of their roots, traditions, and knowledge of their ancestors and communities. Moreover, it also deprived them of the knowledge about each other. Knowledge production has long been and continues to be influenced by the imperial center, shaping dominant narratives of the past and creating false hierarchies among people, their hi/stories, and languages.

Captured moment from the edition "Cooking with Mama: Stirring the Pot of Roma Culture. Stories and Stews" with Petro Rusanienko and Umtata, 2024. Credit: Maryna Markova.

This dynamic is similar to how, for example, "Slavic Studies" or "Eastern European Studies" in academia are largely dominated by the study of Russian literature, history, and language. Such an approach creates a completely distorted picture of the region and implicitly declares whose histories and cultures matter and whose do not.

"Cooking with Mama" became a space for us to challenge sources of knowledge, and not only for the people attending the events, but also for ourselves. It allows us to learn more about one another, to reflect on the narratives we have internalized, and to actively unlearn or fill in the gaps through knowledge shared by communities and through the lived experiences of people.

Absorbing this knowledge can be compared to a form of conscious eating: looking at food closely, exploring it through smell, touch, and taste, chewing and digesting it and allowing the nutrients to settle within our bodies, replenishing what had long been missing.

Communal cooking often offers us a chance to dwell with traumatic experiences associated with gendered kitchen labor. In patriarchal societies, the kitchen carries a heavy political weight as a site of female exploitation and invisibility. Through "Cooking with Mama", we sought to reimagine this space: each act of peeling, cutting, boiling, frying, or serving become a ritual not only of remembrance, but also of reclaiming, allowing us to honor our roots, yet critically looking at traditions and

their (hetero-)normative aspects. In transforming cooking from an individual duty into a collective process, we discover that the kitchen can shift from a site of oppression into one of mutual support, knowledge-sharing and healing.

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In tracing the inheritances of care (or its absence), we begin to sense how our own gestures echo those who came before us - how the everyday acts of tending, nurturing, comforting become seeds for mutual aid and for forms of kinship beyond the nuclear family. By sharing this deeply situated knowledge with each other, we shape other ways of being together. Communal cooking teaches us that care is both material and emotional. It exists in the hands that peel vegetables, in the patience of kneading dough, in offering tea, in shared laughter, in the pauses that follow expressions of loss, in the words of recognition. The gut is where pain and care meet, and communal cooking becomes a way of digesting and metabolizing lived experiences.

This links us back to land. Through what we take in, transform, and return. From land, through the gut, and back to land again. To return to land for us means entering into relation and asking: how can we belong through repair, through attention, through care? This return is always shadowed by loss which waits to be seen, acknowledged and shared. From the internal work of the digestive process, we extend outward into composting transgenerational (and not only) traumas that live quietly (or not) in the lands and in our closest geographies - our bodies and our families. It's laboring with histories and presence heavy with extraction, domination, and displacement. Russia's full-scale invasion has called many of us to reckon with these layers all at once, to tend to the residues of the empire that condition how we inhabit land, languages, and relations. To compost colonial weight is to turn what was imposed into something else, to rework the material presence of pain into a possibility of repair and connection.

One of those moments of composting took shape for us through artistic expression. We think of those empty tablecloths that held our food, our bodies, our conversations - how, over time, they accumulated layers of visual and written nourishment: screen prints, traces of shared meals, comments, and drawings

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from each gathering - becoming sites of unfolding relations. With every edition, they expanded through contributions from our tandem hosts: images of remembrance and words in their mother tongues, reflecting the themes we explored and embodying acts of resistance. Moving from the storytelling of one region to another, they formed a living map of memory, a shared landscape of experiences. We found ourselves drawn to the tactile possibility of messing up with textile, sketching, drawing, experimenting on them felt like support to compost emotions and thoughts while listening and cooking, noticing how what is shared mutates in the body.

And from those layered tablecloths emerged our small edition of handmade, screen-printed zines - artistic booklets collecting visual and written contributions from the hosts across five editions. Each zine is a special harvest holding knowledge,

Captured moment from the edition "Cooking with Mama: Making a Solidarity Textile Zine" with workshop by Nastia Hrychkovska, 2025. Credit: Maryna Markova.

vulnerability, hi/stories, relations, deeply personal testimonies. Every page carries echoes: the emotions food evokes, the memories it stirs, the political questions it opens, composted into a tangible object that feels priceless. Our hearts feel bound when we think of how many hands and souls made these zines possible.

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The entire printing process was handcrafted by our team, our friend Nastia Hrychkovska transformed the tablecloths into zine covers, and the bindings were assembled collectively with our guests. Every page is hand-printed, hand-dried, and hand-woven together - hundreds of hours of labor, mirroring the countless hours of work that activists, artists, and researchers dedicate to restoring erased memories and suppressed knowledge. Engaging with a zine can feel like engaging with memory itself. As a reader you are invited to participate actively - to piece together fragments, to recollect stories, their non-liner relations, their emotions, and to encounter your own memory in dialogue with the collective one.

Solidarity textile zine displayed on the handprinted tablecloth created for the "Cooking with Mama" communal gatherings, 2025. Credit: Tanja Sokolnykova

Each zine bears witness to care translated into material form. We felt the necessity to extend this care, so that our solidarity could take on a tangible shape and continue to support Ukrainian resistance. Out of these intentions grew the idea to organize auctions and sell zines during later editions of “Cooking with Mama”, one of which took place at the RUTA conference in Ukraine.

Throughout every edition of “Cooking with Mama” we ask ourselves - how to build solidarities, while also expressing our support for different struggles in concrete, practical ways. During each event, we collect funds for causes important to the people and communities involved. The first edition, for instance, supported queer artists from Georgia (Sakartvelo) who were facing oppression after the government adopted copy-pasted from Russia anti-LGBTQIA+ laws. In the edition dedicated to Roma cultures, we raised funds for the battalion of Petro Rusanienko’s brother - one of our tandem participants - who is fighting on the Ukrainian frontline.

These gestures are modest, yet they root our practice in the material reality of injustice. They remind us that solidarity is never abstract, it demands concrete actions. To stand with others means moving resources, redistributing what we can, and tending to what is broken - across distance and borders. These small acts, turning creativity into sustenance, care into action - carry forward the commitments at the heart of our gatherings. As we cook, we participate in cycles of care that extend beyond the kitchen, beyond art spaces, into the fragile networks of survival and resistance.

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Olga Shparaga

Solidarity and Care

Olga Shparaga, PhD (b. 1974 in Minsk) is philosopher in exile, Visiting Scholar at the Institute of Philosophy at the FernUniversity Hagen. She taught philosophy at the European College of Liberal Arts in Minsk (ECLAB) until 2021, which she co-founded in 2014. She also taught philosophy at the European Humanities University in Minsk (2001-2004) and Vilnius (2005-2014 in exile). In August 2020, she co-founded the feminist group within the 'Coordination Council' initiated by Belarusian opposition politician Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Her second book, *Community-after-Holocaust. Toward an inclusive society* (Minsk, ECLAB-books, 2018, in Russian) was awarded by The International Congress of Belarusian Studies as the best philosophical book 2018. Her third book, *The Face of the Revolution is Female. The Case of Belarus* was published in German by Suhrkamp in 2021. This book was also published in Vilnius in Russian und in Lithuanian and received the "Ales-Adamovič-Award" 2021 of the International PEN Belarus.

Olga Shparaga is a member of the Advisory Board of the Länder-Analysen ("Country Analytical Digests"), of the filia Women Foundation Council and of the Ideology and Politics Journal Editorial Board. In 2024 Olga Shparaga was also awarded with the "Voltaire Prize for Tolerance, International Understanding and Respect for Differences" by the Potsdam University. In the winter semester of 2024/25, she was a Käthe Leichter visiting professor at the University of Vienna.

In the large exhibition *Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance.*, which took place at Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv in 2021 and was dedicated to the 2020 Belarusian revolution, ‘solidarity networks’ emerged as one of the key metaphors around which the exhibition was structured [1]. The accompanying curatorial text explains that ‘solidarity networks’ symbolise self-organisation “without a centre, without leaders, without hierarchies,” which became the driving force of the Belarusian revolution in 2020.

‘Solidarity networks’ brought strangers "shoulder to shoulder" and were supported by a constellation of digital platforms, initiatives and movements that accumulated and transformed protest energy into social change. The authors of the concept also considered "the feeling of mutual support, sisterhood, neighbourhood and camaraderie" to be essential components of this network, which "fueled the daily rhythm of protests and kept them from subsiding" [2].

Exhibition Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance., curated by Aleksei Borisionok, Andrei Dureika, Marina Naprushkina, Sergey Shabohin, Antonina Stebur, and Maxim Tyminko at Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv, 2021. Pictured: fragments of artworks by Vika Mitrichenko and Alena Davidovich. Photo by Oleksandr Popenko

Solidarity and the Ethics of Care

These reflections on the 2020 Belarusian revolution resonate with a broader body of scholarship on the new nature of solidarity, as well as on the relationship between solidarity and care in the 21st century. They are particularly characteristic of (queer)feminist activists and researchers [3]. In the words of Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Bahar Oghalai, the authors of a recently published book *Freund*innenschaft* about friendship: “The collective of protest is always precarious and fragile. The spontaneity of its emergence corresponds to its inevitable dissolution, which cannot be planned in advance. Participants in protests may know one another, or they may not. They are both equals and strangers. For a limited period of time, they form a community, only to break apart soon after into smaller groups and individuals” [4].

Care, ultimately, becomes an alternative to self-sacrifice and makes it possible to reject victory at any cost and the central role of male heroes in political struggle. Instead, what comes to the fore are the value of each individual life, collective efforts, the contribution of each and every one, and solidarity as the intersection of these very different and non-hierarchical efforts come to the fore.

Care in this kind of protest reveals itself in so-called small spaces – in an apartment, kitchen, café, park or neighbourhood –sustained through “balanced, understanding conversations that can channel and maintain outrage" [5]. It is precisely in such spaces that emotional energy and creativity accumulate and are preserved, as well as humour and joy, which allow them to function as environments of mutual support. Care, ultimately, becomes an alternative to self-sacrifice and makes it possible to reject victory at any cost and the central role of masculine heroes in political struggle. Instead, what comes to the fore are the value of each individual life, collective efforts, the contribution of each and every one, and solidarity as the intersection of these very different and non-hierarchical efforts come to the fore [6].

Marina Naprushkina, What Are Our Collective Dreams?, installation view from the exhibition What Are Our Collective Dreams?, curated by Taras Gembik, Joanna Kordjak, and Antonina Stebur at Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, 2025, photo by Andrei Stseburaka

Lea Susemichel and Jens Kastner, authors and editors of the significant 2021 collection of texts on *Unconditional Solidarity*, also emphasise the importance of care for defining solidarity in the 21st century [7]. The starting point for their argument is *the ethics of care*, an idea developed by American psychologist Carol Gilligan, who first reflected on the necessity of this ethic in her book *In a Different Voice* (1988). There, she argued against *the ethics of justice*, as popularised at the time by American philosopher John Rawls.

If the ethics of justice proceed from universal and rational rules, such as human rights, then the ethics of care, according to Gilligan, are based on attentiveness, care, and sensitivity to situations. From the perspective of the ethics of care, universality and rationality are demystified as constructed and ascribed to masculine subjects, who operate with them in the public sphere of politics, thereby relegating feminine subjects to the private sphere of the home. In the words of Gundula Ludwig: “Only by banishing human neediness — their dependence on social relationships, social support, care, and emotionality — to the private sphere could the public sphere become one in which all of these social and emotional needs were excluded as non-existent or irrelevant” [8].

Transferred to the context of discussions on solidarity, the ethics of care makes it possible, on the one hand, to rehabilitate emotionality, without which relationships between people are hardly possible.

Transferred to the context of discussions on solidarity, the ethics of care makes it possible, on the one hand, to rehabilitate emotionality, without which relationships between people are hardly possible. On the other hand, it allows for a reformulation of the relationship between universalism (rules and rights) and particularism (situations and positions, including those of men and women). As Susemichel and Kastner put it, solidarity must proceed from the real differences between people and, accordingly, must begin with the reconciliation – rather than the erasure or silencing – of these differences, to make universal equality possible. The authors relate this interconnection to the potential of the Care Revolution, which "could be understood as the political programme of such a care ethic — one that takes differences into account and links the idea of mutual dependence with the utopia of a society shaped by equality, enabling a good life for all" [9].

Marina Naprushkina, What Are Our Collective Dreams?, installation view from the exhibition What Are Our Collective Dreams?, curated by Taras Gembik, Joanna Kordjak, and Antonina Stebur at Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, 2025, photo by Andrei Stseburaka

Solidarity in Difference

One of the most important embodiments of solidarity, which arises at the intersection of universality and particularity and leads to a new understanding of public and private, is sisterhood, which is also invoked by Belarusian authors of the metaphor ‘networks of solidarity’. One of the key texts in which the concept of sisterhood is examined in its contemporary meaning is the 1986 essay by the American feminist philosopher and activist bell hooks, *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women* [10]. In this article, bell hooks formulates the requirement that political solidarity among women should not merely be understood as not free from acknowledging differences between women, but as actively requiring such recognition.

Historically, this requirement was shaped by — and, as bell hooks explains in her essay, emerged from — the situation of black women in the United States in the 1980s. bell hooks shows that when white feminists claim the universality of the female position as that of victims of patriarchy, they become blind to their own actions in supporting it. These actions manifest themselves in the exploitation of black women by white women, both in the workplace and in the household. Theoretically, bell hooks interprets this blindness as the separation of a critique of patriarchy from a critique of racism on the one hand, and of classism on the other.

One of the most important embodiments of solidarity, which arises at the intersection of universality and particularity and leads to a new understanding of public and private, is sisterhood.

Another theoretical argument developed by bell hooks is as follows: “Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as 'victims' because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. It would be psychologically demoralizing for these women to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization. They bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources. This is the woman bonding feminist movement should encourage. It is this type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood” [11].

Marina Naprushkina, What Are Our Collective Dreams?, installation view from the exhibition What Are Our Collective Dreams?, curated by Taras Gembik, Joanna Kordjak, and Antonina Stebur at Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, 2025, photo by Andrei Stseburaka

In this way, bell hooks calls for replacing the supposedly universal experience of victimisation with a heterogeneous experience that is, at the same time, capable of being or becoming connected to an experience of struggling for one's own recognition, inseparable from the task of survival. The strengths and resources that hooks then supplements in her essay with "so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we [women] have to share with one another" [12] should help in this struggle and form the key relationships of sisterhood.

If we combine these conclusions with bell hooks' thesis that differences between women should not be denied, then strengths and resources should be understood as linked precisely to the differences or uniqueness of each individual. The task of solidarity, which bell hooks also understands as a political commitment to the feminist movement, consists of working to overcome everything that patriarchy has taught women. To do this, bell hooks explains, it is necessary to "develop strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness, etc" [13], as well as for countering hostile and negatively charged communication. An important component of these strategies, according to bell hooks, is the task of "to accept responsibility for fighting oppressions that may not directly affect us as individuals" [14].

From Recognition of Diversity to Caring Solidarity

Another version of the connection between solidarity and care is ‘caring solidarity’, a vision proposed by the Dutch researcher Selma Sevenhuijsen. She also considers this concept and practice in the framework of the feminist ethics of care, which "points to forms of solidarity in which there is room for difference, and in which we find out what people in particular situations need in order for them to live with dignity. People must be able to count on solidarity, because vulnerability and dependency, as we know, are a part of human existence; we need each other’s disinterested support at expected and unexpected moments" [15]. In doing so, she contrasts caring solidarity with pragmatic solidarity, for which symmetrical reciprocity is decisive.

No less important for caring solidarity, alongside recognising human differences and being attentive to the uniqueness of each situation, is the understanding that solidarity without care easily turns into paternalism, while care without solidarity risks intensifying the privatisation of care — when care work and practices are delegated to various private institutions, whether family-based or market-based, such as fee-paying clinics or schools, access to which may be significantly restricted. In both cases — solidarity without care and care without solidarity — what is at stake is the preservation of social and political inequality between people and a mode of acting whose logic, even if it does not reinforce this inequality, offers nothing in its place.

Solidarity without care easily turns into paternalism, while care without solidarity risks intensifying the privatisation of care.

As Selma Sevenhuijsen herself puts it: “Solidarity without care leads to an impoverished sense of morality and collective responsibility, because it can only recognize others if they are exactly ‘like us’ or needy, pathetic, pitiful and worthy of ‘our’ commiseration because of their comparative deprivation in relation to ‘ourselves’. Solidarity thus depends on an ‘us-and-them’ distinction, which is exactly what forms an obstacle to thinking about care in

a 'human' way. On the other hand, care without collective solidarity strengthens the privatization and moralization of care. We need caring solidarity not because the 'needy' are dependent on the solidarity of the 'strong', or because the 'strong' need to defend themselves against the looming threat of society's corruption by the 'needy'—an idea which has been fast gaining in popularity in recent years—but because everyone in different ways and to different degrees needs care at some point in their lives" [16].

Sisterhood teaches us to free ourselves from oppression along multiple axes, while caring solidarity calls on us to link fragility and the need for care to people's different circumstances and situations, including our own vulnerability.

The contrast between caring solidarity and the division into "us" and "them" refers to another major debate on solidarity, sparked by the American philosopher Richard Rorty in his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). It is important to note that this book itself emerged in the context of the mobilisation of Polish society in the early 1980s through the *Solidarność* trade union movement, which was later forced underground under pressure from the communist regime. Inspired by the Poles' struggle against the anti-democratic regime in their country, Rorty defines solidarity as our sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others — people we do not know. If we feel solidarity, he continues, we begin to think of other people as "one of us," despite the differences that exist between us.

More specifically, this means, on the one hand, "the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation" [17]. On the other hand, it means striving to make the concept of solidarity more expansive, starting from one's own form of life, which Rorty refers to as "we liberals."

This has drawn criticism from various contemporary scholars, and Susemichel and Kastner in particular criticise Rorty for proposing a version of solidarity that is rooted in the idea of community. According to this idea, "the 'others' must be recognised as similar to us in order to be accepted into our 'we'" [18], which turns solidarity into a paternalistic one.

Caring solidarity, like sisterhood as understood by bell hooks, seeks to avoid precisely this aspect inherent in the practice of solidarity as such. Sisterhood teaches us to free ourselves from oppression along multiple axes, while caring

solidarity calls on us to link fragility and the need for care to people's different circumstances and situations, including our own vulnerability. Caring practices, in this sense, always already remind us of fragility. At the same time, being tied to the uneven and unjust distribution of responsibility for their implementation, they require solidarity — a solidarity that is meant to transform the unwarranted privileges of some into unconditional support for those who need it.

Being tied to the uneven and unjust distribution of responsibility for their implementation, they require solidarity — a solidarity that is meant to transform the unwarranted privileges of some into unconditional support for those who need it.

Marina Naprushkina, What Are Our Collective Dreams?, installation view from the exhibition What Are Our Collective Dreams?, curated by Taras Gembik, Joanna Kordjak, and Antonina Stebur at Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, 2025, photo by Andrei Stseburaka

Endnotes

[1] Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance. [brochure] Aleksei Borisionok, Andrei Dureika, Marina Naprushkina, Sergey Shabohin, Antonina Stebur, Maxim Tyminko (ed.) –– Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kyiv, 2021.

[2] ibid., p.12.

[3] Lea Susemichel und Jens Kastner (Hrsg.), Unbedingte Solidarität. –– Muenster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2021; Mario do Mar Castro Valera und Bahar Oghalai, Freund*innenschaft. Dreiklang einer politischen Praxis. –– Muenster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2023; Ewa Majewska, Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common. –– London, New York: Verso, 2021.

[4] Mario do Mar Castro Valera und Bahar Oghalai, Freund*innenschaft. Dreiklang einer politischen Praxis. –– Muenster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2023, p.14.

[5] ibid., p.16.

[6] Asef Bayat, Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring. –– Harvard University Press, 2021.

[7] Lea Susemichel und Jens Kastner (Hrsg.), Unbedingte Solidarität. –– Muenster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2021.

[8] Gundula Ludwig, Geschlecht, Macht, Staat. Feministische Staatstheoretische Interventionen. –– Berlin & Toronto: Opladen, 2023, p.23

[9] Lea Susemichel und Jens Kastner (Hrsg.), Unbedingte Solidarität. –– Muenster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2021, p.36

[10] bell hooks, Sisterhood. Political Solidarity between Women, Feminist Review 23 (1986), pp.125–138.

[11] ibid., p.128.

[12] ibid., p.128.

[13] ibid., p.137.

[14] ibid., p.137.

[15] Selma Sevenhuijsen, Citizenship and the Ethics of Care. Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics. –– London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp.150-151.[16] ibid., p.151.

[17] Richard Rorty, Contingency, irony, and silodarity. –– Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.192.[18] Lea Susemichel und Jens Kastner (Hrsg.), Unbedingte Solidarität. –– Muenster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2021, p.22

Victoria Jolly

The Absent Body – Ciudad Abierta

[Open City]

Victoria Jolly Mujica (1982, Chile) is an architect and visual artist whose work explores the material and poetic possibilities of concrete through experimentation, installation, and site-specific practice. Based in *Ciudad Abierta* (Open City), she is a founding member of *Punto Espora*, a researcher at the Concrete Innovation Center at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and a lecturer in material technologies. Her work bridges architecture and visual arts, rethinking concrete through flexible formwork and sculptural processes. She has exhibited internationally, including at the BoCA Biennial (Lisbon) and Fotonoviembre (Tenerife). In 2025, Victoria presented ESCORIA installation at *Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw*, expanding her research into industrial byproducts and sustainable material innovation.

Water Moth (igloo) at Ciudad Abierta, August 1978. Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong.

CITY

The Ciudad Abierta, located among the Ritoque dunes north of Valparaíso, was created out of the need of an artistic collective inspired by the utopias of the 1960s to have a space where they could develop a project that would bring together life, work and learning through the encounter between poetry and different disciplines. Formed in 1970 by Latin American and European architects, artists, philosophers and poets, *the Ciudad Abierta* is precariously constructed from structures that develop organically, with each of its works considered to be in a continuous process. It is primarily recognised as an architectural experimental laboratory where works are placed by reading the geographical coordinates of the location, and the native terrain forms part of the ground and its immediate surroundings.

Could we think of the architecture of *the Ciudad Abierta* as a garden?

Buildings that change their morphology over time, to which layers are added, a gentle construction on the territory, which without the care of its inhabitants disappears again.

Until now, the story of its history has been constructed from the academic sphere and its architectural works, forgetting the space of life that has also been part of the project since its beginnings. Currently, 44 people live there, including 10 women and 16 girls.

Girl running in the Music Hall at Ciudad Abierta, date unknown.
Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong

BODY

El Cuerpo Ausente [The Absent Body] is an installation created for the Visual Arts Gallery in the Valparaíso Cultural Park by visual artist Victoria Jolly, sponsored by the Chilean Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage.

This installation incorporates female voices into a narrative about the *Ciudad Abierta*, based on the testimonies of ten women who lived here in the first twenty years after *Ciudad Abierta* was founded, between 1970 and 1990.

The installation is based on an oral archive consisting of ten interviews and includes the audiovisual performance, in which female voices narrate historical experiences. The piece incorporates actions carried out in the *Ciudad Abierta* in Ritoque, with images of the present-day landscape accompanying the narrative.

The installation is an exercise in memory that creates a living archive, highlighting dimensions such as the coexistence of life in artistic

Victoria Jolly, The Absent Body, 2023. Action at Ciudad Abierta, Ritoque, Chile. Courtesy of the artist

experiences alongside intangible practices that lie behind collective projects.

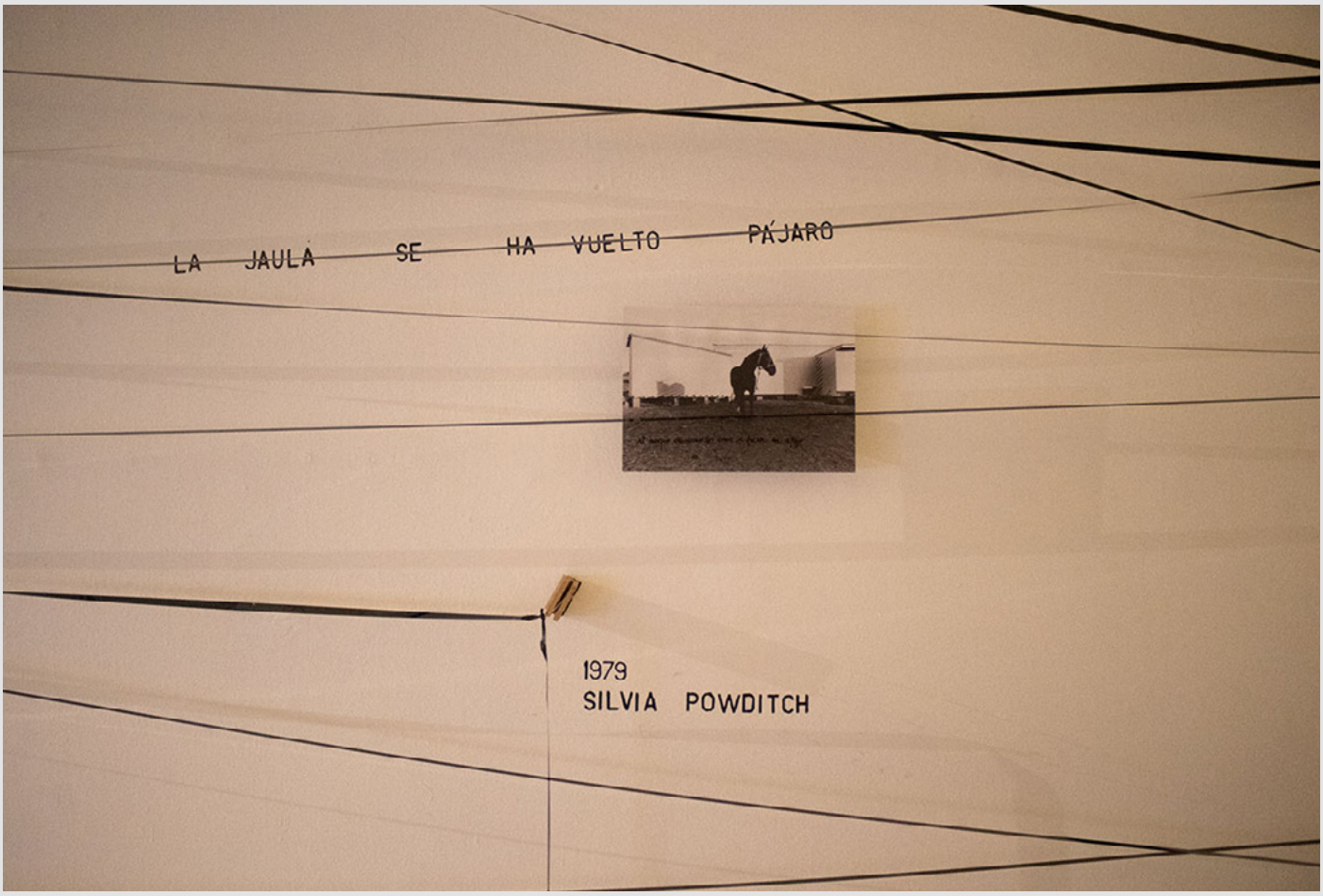
The critical review of architectural practices and micro-history makes it necessary to reclaim, highlight, and make available these women's voices, as they could disappear.

The installation aims to recover and preserve memory through the testimony of its protagonists, as a tool for the construction of new historical narratives, thereby supporting the women's participation in the creation of artistic and multidisciplinary projects that intersect with life, care, and oral tradition.

"The first women are a fundamental part of the *Ciudad Abierta*'s history. Listening to them was first an exercise in trust that I hope to bring back in the form of an archive and audiovisual installation. The Absent Body is an attempt to emphasise the dimensions that make *the Ciudad Abierta* different from a laboratory or field of experimentation, because it has been and continues to be an inhabited, lived experience.

The new generations do not start with a blank page; what we do nowadays is influenced by the experiences of other people, regardless of their duration, dissent or continuity. Any collective is also a sum of its names, recognising diversity as a value."

Learning and exploring an oral tradition where upbringing, care and lifestyles allow us to discover the fluid boundaries between domestic life, everyday routine and artistic creativity.



Victoria Jolly, The Absent Body, 2023. Exhibition view at Visual Arts Gallery, Valparaiso Cultural Park, Chile. Photo: Benjamín Santander. Courtesy of the artist

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Victoria Jolly, The Absent Body, 2023. Exhibition view at Visual Arts Gallery, Valparaiso Cultural Park, Chile. Photo: Benjamín Santander. Courtesy of the artist

CIUDAD ABIERTA LIKE A GARDEN

In the early 1970s, a group of families moved to *Ciudad Abierta* in Punta de Piedra, and that is where I grew up. We moved from one building to another over time. My earliest memories are of 'La Alcoba,' a kind of elevated boat with windows under the seats, from where we could look down at the ground below. Later, my room was a small area that protruded from the walls of 'Confin'. There was a door that opened from the interior wall and a staircase that led directly to the dunes.

Originally constructed and designed as a place to cross both architecture and different disciplines with poetry, the *Ciudad Abierta* aspired to a poetics that remained in a state of permanent latency or was always to be discovered.

When I was five years old, it became a place for visits and shared holidays. We took turns on weekends between my house near the Torres de Tajamar in Santiago and the bus trips to Punta de Piedra in Quintero. Thus, I got to know the *Ciudad Abierta* from the inside, far removed from the image of a laboratory or utopia.

Wasn't it precisely its status as an 'inhabited extension' that distinguished it from an experiment?

The absent body was a time to cross the memory gap and listen to the experiences of the early days, through the voices of ten women who lived in the *Ciudad Abierta* between 1970 and 1990. Suspended time that today, after two years of listening, brings us back to the question whether it was ultimately "the project" or the initial idea that shaped life.

Or rather, was it life, its praxis and its implementation that eventually shaped 'the project' and the world of ideas?

No doubt it is a place that outlives us and, like the garden, sooner or later surrenders to another guest, a slight construction in the territory that, without the care of its inhabitants, disappears once again.

Diego at the Banquet Inn at Ciudad Abierta, Ritoque, Chile, date unknown.
Archivo Histórico José Vial Armstrong

Victoria Jolly, The Absent Body, 2023. Exhibition view at Visual Arts Gallery, Valparaiso Cultural Park, Chile. Photo: Benjamín Santander. Courtesy of the artist

that year we got married
you were getting married
and you could change your name

he wanted to come
because he felt
that you could not belong without being there

when he came to find me
it made so much sense
because, deep down,
it was the continuity of the world
that had been my childhood

we loaded the car
we lifted the mattress
the books
the food

and everything that was
clothes and bags

we knew this belonged to no one
that this was going to be like this
forever

Portrait of Paula Mujica, the artist's mother in the former Alcoba.
Photo courtesy of Victoria Jolly

we arrived at a place to be inhabited
by a couple
it was named Alcoba
I have never imagined I would live
in a building like this
the four corners were open
and there was sand
around the whole perimeter of the room

the rooms
were small places
you couldn't see
it was living like princes
but with little

Children at Ciudad Abierta, Ritoque, Chile, 1984.
Courtesy of Victoria Jolly

in the mornings
I took them out to catch the Sun
white smoke rose
from our mouths
because we lived
in an ice box

the yard reached the sea
the sand changed
with the moonlit nights
then I realised
that I could go out walking
and explore the place
I gathered the children
we watched birds
and clouds

I showed them
what interested me

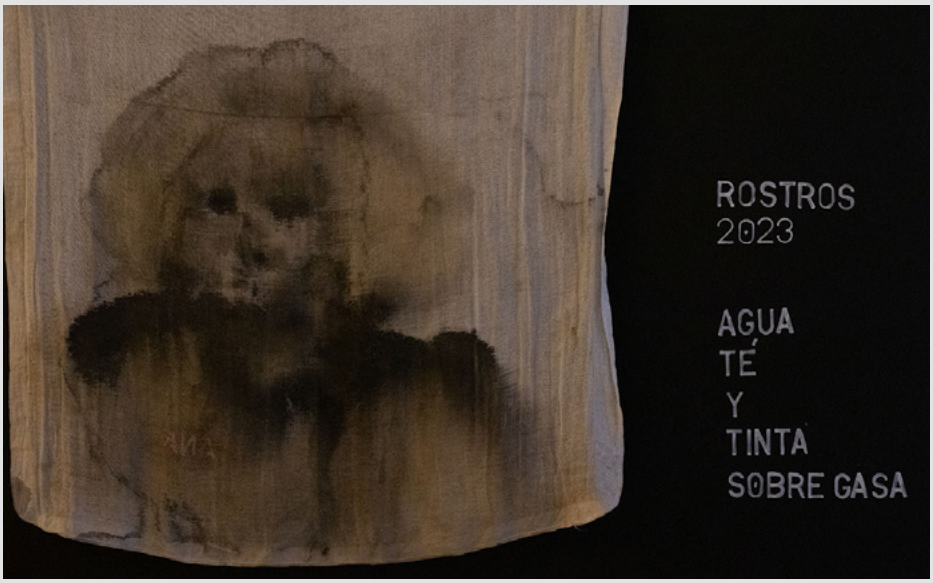
why did everyone forget the mother?
from whom do you receive your formation?

that night a huge fire was made
the poets began reading first

we were a captive audience
of a masculine world
especially in those days
and we women were
the characters
the muses
the Helens of Troy
the inspirers the vestals
the virgins

but I

I liked
the Medeas
the Sibyls
the Fridas
the Gabrielas



Victoria Jolly, Painting with water, ink an te, The Absent Body, 2023. Exhibition view at Visual Arts Gallery, Valparaiso Cultural Park, Chile. Photo: Benjamín Santander. Courtesy of the artist

I'm not here for being a woman
nor for being religious
not even
for having a craft
I'm simply
here
discovering

the lives of the others
I showed you the place
there was another way of living
with family and all
that was crossed
by the space of hospitality

because guest
is the one who receives
and guest
is the one who comes
the life of an inn
lay in building it
I think even today
they're not finished

Victoria Jolly, The Absent Body, 2023. Action at Ciudad Abierta, Ritoque, Chile. Courtesy of the artist

and what if we thought of architecture
as a garden?

dug, planted,
watered, cared for

germinates, changes,
and disappears again

we were never owners
we were
in charge of hospitality

the children invite us
to remain on this soil
Soil and Blood go together

this Cemetery was created
after the death of my son
here he died
in the waters of the estuary
we moved him
and here we buried him
here is my father
my mother
and my grandmother
my son – my whole family

perhaps it would be logical for me to be buried here too?

that day
we couldn't go out
everything changed
it was like living now
in the catacombs
we stayed locked in
I was downstairs
and the soldiers would come
to see if in the houses
we had anything

thank goodness my brother
and a nephew burned everything

later you look back on it
with perspective
and you realise the gravity
and the weight of that time

we continued
unconsciously
innocently
without touching that dimension
we did not take part

when I left
I had an encounter
with the city
an encounter with the country

Victoria Jolly, The Absent Body, 2023. Action at Ciudad Abierta, Ritoque, Chile. Courtesy of the artist

Victoria Jolly, The Absent Body, 2023. Action at Ciudad Abierta, Ritoque, Chile. Courtesy of the artist

I remember realising
that I had spent ten years
in a kind
of marvellous world
but somewhat fiction

I've been here 14 years
I've been here 35 years
I've been here 75 years

we were in love
with the Ciudad Abierta

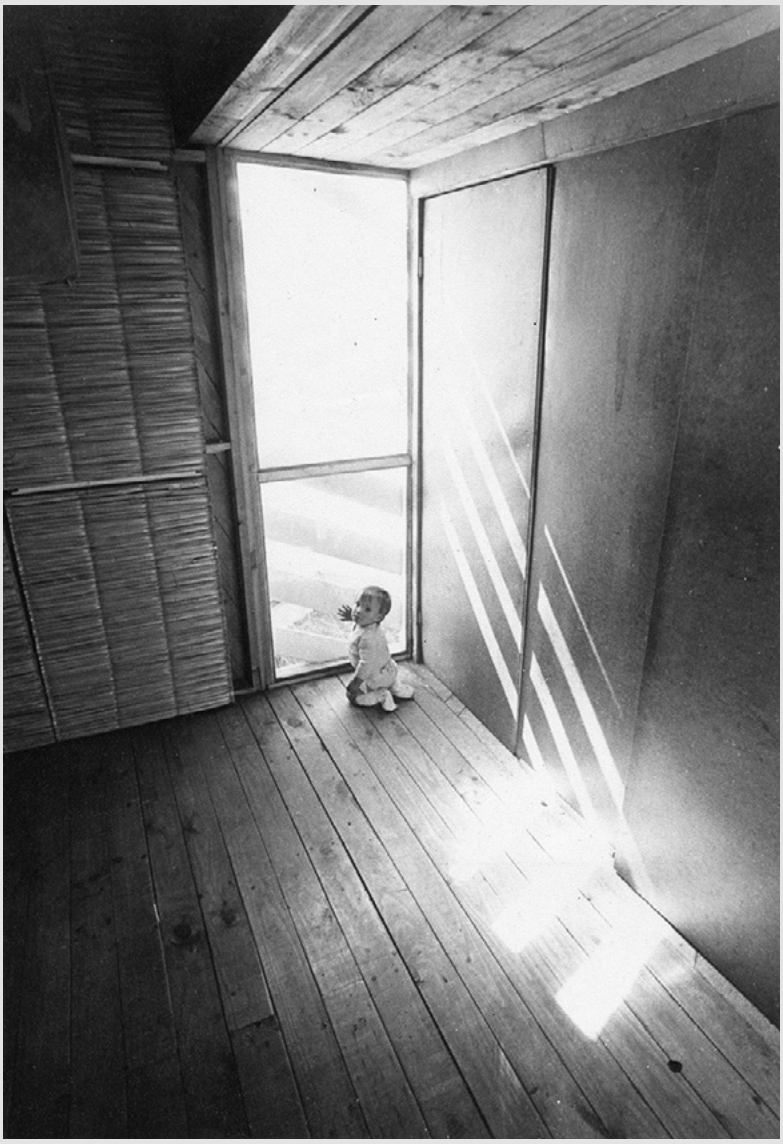
as long as I didn't have this room
that part of me
had no place
had no place

I felt I needed my place
a room of my own

here in this storeroom
we keep memory
the gathering of recollections
as if it were a reflection
that asks us

are we going to repeat the past?
or open up another

possible future
a fortune of freedom



Inside Music Room at Ciudad Abierta, Ritoque, Chile, date unknown. Archivo José Vial Armstrong

Darya Tsymbalyuk

WAR in the Steppes*

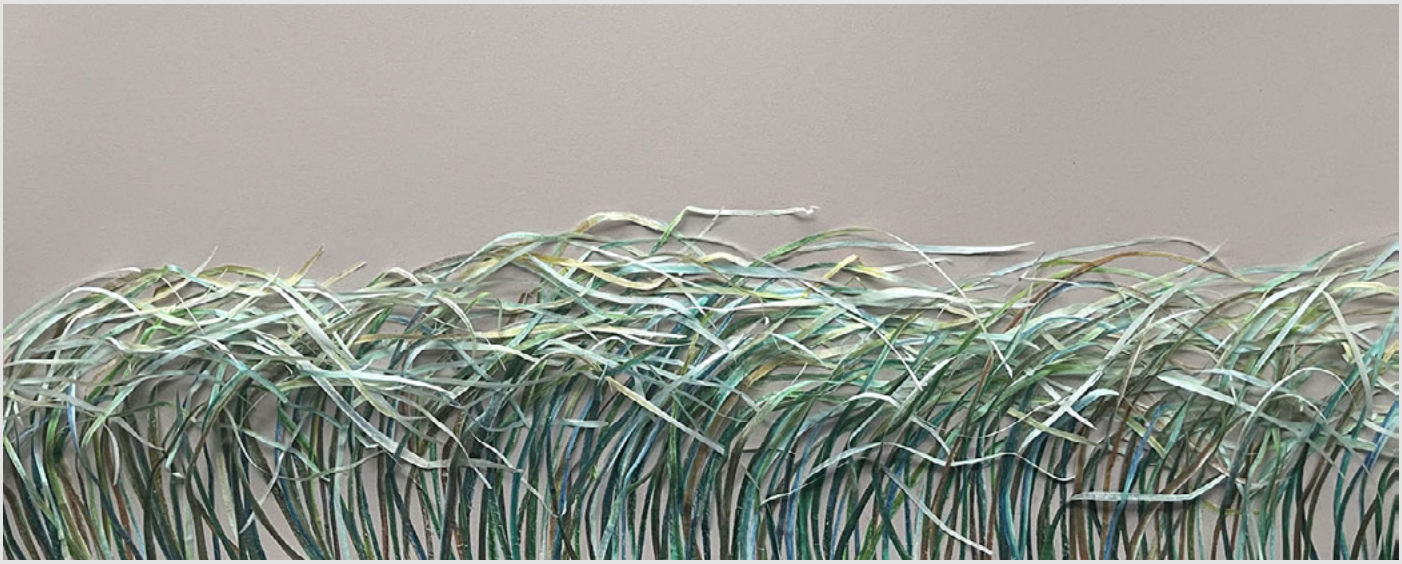
Darya Tsymbalyuk is an interdisciplinary researcher and creative practitioner whose work lies at the intersection of environmental humanities and artistic research. She is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures and the Committee on Environment, Geography, and Urbanization (CEGU), University of Chicago, and the author of the book *Ecocide in Ukraine: The Environmental Cost of Russia's War (*Polity, 2025). In addition to writing, Tsymbalyuk works with images through drawing, painting, collage, and film essays.

* Originally appeared in German in *Geteilter Horizont: Die Zukunft der Ukraine*, edited by Katharina Raabe and Kateryna Mishchenko, Suhrkampf, 2025.

In Ukrainian there is a word *stepovyk* (masculine) or *stepovychka* (feminitive), designating a person living in the steppe, in what used to be the vast grasslands covering the south and the east of Ukraine, a part of the Great Steppe, stretching from China to Hungary. I find this form of belonging shaped not by language, religion, or ethnicity, but by being a part of a place deeply resonant. It has been years since I moved away from the steppes. Yet each time I encounter dominant Russian imperial imaginaries of the steppe as an empty and dull place, imaginaries which have also often been deeply ingrained in (hi)stories told locally, I feel indignation; and this indignation reminds me that, alongside my family, it was also the steppe itself that raised me. Thus, no matter how far I am, contrary to colonial narratives that aim to empty, the *stepovyk*/*stepovychka* thinking continues to hold its promise of understanding the land of the steppes as shimmering with life, a quiet resistance.

Since the end of the seventeenth century, the steppes of Ukraine have been inscribed into the Russian imperial project through military expansion, agriculture, and industrial extraction and contamination, where the former was conceptualised as a plain background for the growth of the latter. The ongoing Russian invasion is a continuation of this logic, a fever dream of colonial conquest to which the east and the south of Ukraine, rich in black soil and leading to the Azov and Black Sea routes, are central. These days I often find myself thinking with the steppes, both as a socio-cultural region the histories of which have been deeply shaped by Russian colonisation, and as a naturecultural world, which both includes the steppe as a disappearing grassland habitat and (industrial) agricultural practices of land use in southern and eastern planes.

I grew up between an *idea* of the steppes as vast grasslands of feathergrass, fragments of which would still occasionally shine here



Darya Tsymbalyuk. Stipa maeotica, collage, 2025

and there, and a *reality* of monocrop fields crisscrossed by shelterbelts. Still, my mother, who had no other family in the steppes of the south of Ukraine except my father stationed there as a military officer and me, often found solace and company in taking me out of the village to the bitter wormwood grasses and the lasting joy of immortelles, towards the Buh estuary or *lyman* as we say back home. Largely disappeared through agricultural ploughing, the steppe still held for her its space of openness, promise, and a way of belonging.

I grew up between an idea of the steppes as vast grasslands of feathergrass, fragments of which would still occasionally shine here and there, and a reality of monocrop fields crisscrossed by shelterbelts.

Self-taught local Mykolaiv historian Yuri Kriuchkov argued that the name of my home village Korenykha (now administratively part of the city of Mykolaiv), came from the name of a Nogai locality, Karanga-Kır, which existed there before the Russian colonisation in the XVIII century [1]. Kır means “steppe” in Nogai language. Before the Russian colonisation, Nogais and other nomadic people lived in the steppes of the Northern Black Sea. [2] With the Russian colonial conquest of the steppes, Nogais were displaced to the North Caucausus. In 1783, thousands of Nogais were killed in the Aleksander Suvorov’s suppression of the Kuban Nogai uprising against the Russian imperial rule. On the other side of the Buh *lyman* on which my home village sits, there are Cossack crosses to be found on a village cemetery; Cossacks too used to live here. Patches of feather grass take over the cemetery’s edges, and climbing one of the cemetery benches, placed there for those visiting the dead, you can see swans down below on the *lyman* water. The steppes are inhabited through an ebb and flow of the wind, bending down grasses and short southern trees in reverence for the soil, carrying millions of birds on their migration routes, archiving memories of those invisibilised through material and historical erasures. I do not however intend to romanticize the past: for the enslaved people who were trafficked in the Black Sea slave trade the steppe was also a place of woe, and I do not intend to paint the pre-colonial as an idyll, I simply want to be able to know it [3]. Today, there are many dead to visit on the bank of the Buh *lyman*, many are forgotten, with names in languages I will never know; many are very close, killed in the ongoing Russian invasion and buried in this cemetery, including those who even in the moment of their burial could not return to then-still-occupied neighbouring region of Kherson and now are eternally displaced.

The steppes are inhabited through an ebb and flow of the wind, bending down grasses and short southern trees in reverence for the soil, carrying millions of birds on their migration routes, archiving memories of those invisibilised through material and historical erasures.

Many years after I moved away from the southern planes of the Northern Black Sea, it was in the context of the war that I found myself returning to the steppes. I was interviewing people displaced from Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts after the start of Russia's war on Ukraine in 2014. We talked about home, and many people shared memories of the steppe, which was also taken from them by the war. Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts are steppe regions, and the first phase of the war, 2014-2022, took place in the steppe part of Ukraine. After the escalation of the war to a full-scale invasion, even more steppes have been turned into battlefields or militarised land, witnessing shelling, extensive digging, and vehicle movement. Many lands have been rendered inaccessible by landmines, and many are still occupied. In some places, desertion of territories by people and the hunting ban may result in the population growth of some steppe species; at the same time, habitats of other species may have been destroyed through contamination and mechanical damage. Environmentalists debate whether contaminated lands could be conserved just like the Chornobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve after the Chornobyl nuclear catastrophe of 1986; [4] farmers return to lands de-occupied, de-mining with their own hands, often at the cost of their own lives.

Already prior to the war, the steppes, as unploughed grasslands, comprised only 3% of Ukraine's territory. [5] Ukrainian steppes are places of extremely high biodiversity. Unable to read the richness of local life, imperial visitors often described them as empty; *stepovyky* and *stepovychky,* however, know that a big part of steppe life occurs underground, invisible to the eye. Over time, biodiverse remnants of this intense life become humus, or *chornozem*, fertile black soil.

For centuries, different political regimes that have existed on the lands we know today as Ukraine have been interested in black soil and in turning the steppes into "productive" landscapes through (industrial) agriculture. The traces of these different regimes linger on until today and are used as a base for contemporary modes of extraction through production; the slow disappearance of steppe habitats is inherently linked with these past and present practices.

Russia's war on Ukraine, which has largely been unfolding in the southern and eastern steppe regions, brought new attention to this socio-cultural space and naturecultural world. Experiences of loss have a capacity to trigger heightened awareness, an episteme of death that sheds a morbid spotlight on life destroyed. Ever since my conversations with people displaced from Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, it has been through this episteme of death that I have been learning about the steppes, too.

Thus, in spring 2022, a video of a marbled polecat, *Vormela pereguznia*, trapped in a dugout and documented by the soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, circulated the internet. It was the first time I and many other people learned that marbled polecats live in the Ukrainian steppes. Trenches and military fortifications crisscross habitats all over the 1000 km frontline, cutting across villages, agricultural fields, and nature reserves, and mashing people and other species together in new configurations.

When, on June 6, 2023, the occupied Kakhovka dam was breached, the episteme of death brought into spotlight ecosystems of the Lower Dnipro. There was a collective outpour of grief for people, animals and whole habitats destroyed in the flood. Among other beings being

Photo published on the Facebook page of the Mykolaiv Oblast State Emergency Service of Ukraine, August 10, 2022.

Darya Tsymbalyuk. Centaurea protomargaritacea Klokov – Steppe, oil on canvas, 2025

affected by the deluge, people also talked about the fate of a sandy blind-mole rat, *Spalax arenarius*, endemic to the sandy steppes of the Lower Dnipro region.

At the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion the Ukrainian Nature Conservation Group (UNCG) published a list of plant species on the brink of extinction.[6] All listed plants are steppe plants, which reflects the current endangerment as well as the longer histories of destruction. Among the species listed by UNCG there are eight types of cornflowers or *voloshka* in Ukrainian, one of them is endemic to the sandy soils of the Lower Southern Buh region near my hometown Mykolaiv. In May 2022 Mykolaiv State Emergency Service posted a photo of this plant, *Centaurea photomargarecea Klokov*, on their Facebook page: it was taken during an emergency response, featuring the plant against a burnt background. [7]

The lives of the sandy blind-mole rat, the marbled polecat, and *Centaurea photomargerecea Klokov* have been threatened by the war. Their potential disappearances are, however, not singular episodes; they are signals of a larger threat, an erasure of whole habitats, of whole worlds. While the

Darya Tsymbalyuk. Yelanets Steppe Nature Reserve, 2023

war put a final morbid spotlight on these endangered species, the story of their disappearance has a much longer history, rooted in the lingering imperial imaginaries of the steppe as an empty space, or a space to be emptied.

When I look up the sandy blind-mole rat, I learn that he was first taxonomically identified in 1937, a year of Stalin's Great Terror, by a Ukrainian zoologist Evdokia Reshetnik, when her research on rodents was supported by the Soviet government and the policies of the "anti-pest" campaign in a goal of advancing agricultural production to an industrial scale, the making of the "breadbasket". Reshetnik managed to continue her research when Ukraine was occupied by the Nazi Germany, [8] a regime which was also interested in yielding the maximum agricultural benefit from the black soil of the steppes, and therefore, in eliminating rodents. In more recent years, farmers and garden owners continued killing mole-rats, which they considered a threat to their agricultural produce.[9] As a result, for years, life of the sandy blind-mole rat has been tied in a deadly embrace to the cultivation of the celebrated "breadbasket" image, which as Asia Bazdyrieva argued was produced as part of the colonial extraction of Ukraine. [10]

When in the summer 2023, I travelled to look for *Centaurea protomargaritacea Klokov* with environmentalists Inna Tymchenko, Diana Krysinska, and Oleh Derkach, as well as a local

historian Natalia Yemelyantseva, we went to one of the villages just outside Mykolaiv to see the place called Starohalytsynivskyi Steppe. Starohalytsynivskyi Steppe is a protected grassland area squeezed between rows of summer houses, a railway, and a cemetery. There was no information board next to the site, and if you were a stranger, you would not know what this land was. In the 1990s, Oleh Derkach, a prominent botanist and conservationist, attained a protected status for this patch of the steppe, and it was a privilege to hear about it from him and to hear him commenting on plants that we were looking at. At the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion, Mykolaiv was almost encircled, and areas around the city, including communities near the steppe site, witnessed heavy fighting. Starohalytsynivskyi Steppe has not been checked for landmines or other unexploded ordnance, and local municipal authorities advised us to stand on the asphalt road near the site, but it was nearly impossible to keep Oleh Derkach from walking into the steppe, a botanist forgetting mortal danger when called by the grasses. He did manage to spot *Centaurea protomargaritacea Klokov* for us.

Yelanets Steppe Nature Reserve – House of Nature, 2023. Photo by Darya Tsymbalyuk

Yelanets Steppe Nature Reserve – House of Nature, 2023. Photo by Darya Tsymbalyuk

Starohalytsynivskyi Steppe is identified as a natural monument. French historian Pierre Nora argued that whenever memory ceases to be alive, it becomes a *lieu de memoire*, a memory site, contained. [11] Starohalytsynivskyi Steppe is a memory of a disappearing world, a world which has recently been placed into an even greater danger by the Russian full-scale invasion, as well as by climate change, where in Ukraine the steppe regions are at the highest risk. The story of *Centaurea protomargaritacea Klokov* we went to see last summer, is a story of the steppes, a story of endangerment told through the bodies of hundreds of species entangled in the imperial, colonial, and capitalist projects of extraction. The steppes, turned into natural monuments, become memories; they become part of the past.

Another visit I made last summer was to the Yelanets Steppe Nature Reserve in the north of Mykolaiv Oblast. As we were walking around the reserve, director Halyna Drabyniuk brought me to a dilapidated building featuring magnificently decorated plaster walls. The building, referred to as the House of Nature and in the past used for a variety of purposes, has stayed abandoned for years, and some decorative walls were in pieces. In her role as the director, Halyna Drabyniuk has been fighting for a chance to preserve and rebuild it. She is dreaming that one day it could become a research centre on the study of the steppes, and that the current grief of witnessing the destruction of the southern and eastern planes would allow for a new awareness of these lands, their (hi)stories, and their inhabitants. After all, they say steppes are used to fires, at least.

The post-war future in which the steppes are recognised as intense living worlds is rooted in the knowledge of *stepovyky* and *stepovychky*, whether we talk about the (re)telling of stories about those, human and more-than-human who have inhabited these planes, or about the understanding of steppes as habitats sheltering diverse forms of life. As I talk to another *stepovyk*, ornithologist Kostiantyn Redinov, I realise that for the whole Mykolaiv Oblast, there are only two people who have spent years of attuning themselves to the bird worlds of my home region, two people to watch the millions of birds flying over the steppes and *lymans* in this corner of the Northern Black Sea. Even prior to the war, conditions of life and work of environmentalists on the ground were determined by the chronic and systematic lack of funding, and the dilapidated state of the House of Nature at the Yelanets Steppe Nature Reserve is only a visible symptom. The war brought new unprecedented problems, as well as significantly exacerbated old issues.

Yelanets Steppe Nature Reserve is not on the frontline, though at the beginning of the full-scale invasion the fighting came close, the reserve experienced landmines and fires, and sounds of explosions scared bisons living in the reserve,

who in panic broke through the enclosure. Still, the reserve is not under occupation, shelling or turned into a battlefield. Yet, in Ukraine today, environmentalists are as much under attack as everyone and everything else. Since the Russian full-scale invasion, many got drafted or enlisted, many found themselves living under occupation or becoming displaced, many have been held captive or tortured by the Russian occupational forces, many live in life-threatening circumstances daily. With steppes disappearing, an intimate knowledge about these places is also gone, knowledge that has been carried in the bodies of people who had inhabited these lands, as well as bodies of those who spent years studying them.

Walking around in the House of Nature, I climbed the second floor to see the plaster wall featuring an intricate image of evolution from above. From the second floor I could also see the steppes stretching around the building. When it comes to the steppes, the future has often been imagined on the horizon, whether it is a vision of a steel factory or a tractor, bringing industry to the otherwise “empty” lands. The steppe has often been treated as transitory, a stage to overcome, a passage. These too are colonial legacies, which are felt more acutely in places emptied by the war, and which continue to impact conditions of life on the ground. It is difficult to imagine the future in the context where life is measured in the survival of each single day. In Yelanets Steppe Nature Reserve, instead of looking at the horizon, more often I found myself falling to the ground, to look closer at different plants, to spot an insect, to smell. After all, moons ago when the grasses dominated these terrains, it was to the land that one used to turn for answers, pressing an ear to the ground, waiting to hear about what is to come.

When it comes to the steppes, the future has often been imagined on the horizon, whether it is a vision of a steel factory or a tractor, bringing industry to the otherwise “empty” lands. The steppe has often been treated as transitory, a stage to overcome, a passage.

Endnotes

[1] Yuri Kriuchkov, *Staryi Nikolaev i okrestnosti* [Old Mykolaiv and surrounding areas] (Mykolaiv: Dikii Sad, 1991), p.31.

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[6] “20 roslyn, yaki mozhut znyknuty cherez viynu Rosiii v Ukraini” [20 plants that may disappear due to Russia’s war in Ukraine], *Ukrainian Nature Conservation Group*, 30 June, 2022 (https://uncg.org.ua/20-roslyn-iaki-mozhut-znyknuty-cherez-vijnu-rosii-v- ukraini/).

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[8] Maryna Korobchenko, “Evdokia Reshetnik (1903–1996) — vydatna postat v istorii akademichnoii zoolohii ta ekolohii Ukrainy” [Yevdokia Reshetnik (1903-1996) – prominent figure in the history of academic zoology and ecology of Ukraine], *Proceedings of the National Museum of Natural History*, vol. 14, 2016, pp. 136-146.

[9] Maryna Korobchenko, “Status slipakiv yak myslivskykh vydiv ta yoho zminy na ostanni 100 rokiv” [The status of mole-rats as game species and its changes over the last 100 years], *Naukovyi visnyk Natsionalnoho universytetu bioresursiv ta pryrodokorystuvannia Ukrainy [Academic bulletin of the National University of Bioresources and Nature Management of Ukraine]*, vol. 164, no. 3, 2011, pp. 108-117.

[10] Asia Bazdyrieva, “No Milk, No Love”, *e-flux*, vol. 127, May, 2022 (https://www.e- flux.com/journal/127/465214/no-milk-no-love/).

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Dzina Zhuk

Scene: Walking/ Listening/ Assembling

underneath "Druzhba" Oil Pipeline, or What Is after the Infrastructures?

Dzina Zhuk (Minsk/Berlin) is an artist, tech-politics researcher, and fiction writer. Dzina Zhuk explores the performativity of speculative fiction, the body and its extensions, and alternative visions of technologies. Her practice spans para-fictional texts, experimental infrastructures, and situations engaging colonial dependencies, digital conditions, and fragile solidarities. She is part of eeefff, an artistic cooperation and made-up institution working across poetic computations and collective imaginations, or what they call «infrastructures of imagination». She is a co-organiser of the School of Algorithmic Solidarity (2022–ongoing), Work Hard! Play Hard! (2016–2020), Decentric Circles Assembly (2024), and Forest Assembly of Educational Fictions (2025).

****The para-fictional text below is inspired by and based on the Decentric Circles Assembly, a program of contributions and four assemblies, which took place July 25–28, 2024, in Warsaw and was organised by Aleksei Borisionok, Olia Sosnovskaya, Kolja Spesivtsev, and Dzina Zhuk [1]. As part of this gathering, there was an expanded guided tour, «Flow Control» by Tytus Szabelski-Różniak and Hubert Karmiński, as well as an assembly. Both events took place near the «Druzhba» pipeline, and were built around a physical presence near the oil infrastructure. The theme of the assembly was «Beyond Centres»[2]. The working group of the assembly made a textile field to host the gathering and invited everyone to sit together upon it. Topics included, but were not limited to: redefinitions of solidarities, east-south, post-socialisms, sabotage, nonwestern imperialisms, Soviet colonialism, hacking, cyber partisaning, geometries of imperialisms, sensing of dissensus, westernmost east, logistics, offshore-nearshore, outsourcing gradients, rural-urban divide, landscape dramaturgy, unevenness, fallow land. Moving assembly intertwined into the landscape that is «beyond center» but serves it. ****

Expanded guided tour «Flow Control» by Tytus Szabelski-Różniak & Hubert Karmiński. Decentric circles assembly. 2024. Photo by Kolja Spesivtsev

The oil pipeline is installed on poles. It was constructed in 1964 to deliver oil from the Soviet Union to the socialist countries of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon). Today, it starts in Almetyevsk (Tatar: Әлмәт [*Älmät*]) in Tatarstan — a republic within the Russian Federation — and runs to Belarus, where it splits into two main branches: the northern branch, which passes through Poland to Germany, and the southern branch, which goes through Ukraine to Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

We walk under the pipeline, our bodies moving through the high grass. I touch the pipeline as a hill allows me to be on arm's reache, my fingers feel the vibration of it. There is a sound of pumping – machinic one, powered by electricity. Later, I hear the sounds from the past, gathered by Tytus Szabelski-Różniak and Hubert Karmiński: noises of animals, airplanes, oil running, trees, military helicopters, the river, sounds of the pipeline being played with sticks and stones [3].

— What will happen if the pipeline here is being disrupted?
— It will be wonderful.
— It will be an ecological disaster. Can you imagine all this forest?

Decentric circles assembly. 2024. Photo by Kolja Spesivtsev

— I think it should be destroyed in Russia.
— But there are also people there.
— I think it would be wonderful.
— But it is indigenous land where there is a specific relationship with the land. To destroy it would mean to bring harm to this land.
— Yeap (*insinuating*).
— Could it be just stopped?
— It's impossible. First destroy, then recycle.
— How to get rid of something that is the basis of so many things in everyday life? We came here from Warsaw, partly by car, partly by train, which uses electricity that is mostly produced here from burning coal.
— Maybe cut the electricity off?
— Is it actually possible to destroy the pipeline without harming?

The pipeline goes deep into the forest, like a long snake; you can not see its tail. No horizon is available without the pipeline here. «Under the pipeline is a wasteland. Looking from another perspective, this is a fallow land (Bel: *папарная зямля*) waiting until the infrastructure will be rearranged or demolished»[4]. Part of the forest was cut down to make a flow of oil possible. Usually, they try to hide it under the earth, so no one can see it, no one can touch it, no one can destroy it. Actually, the forest had been cut even earlier, I learn from Tutys [5], the corridor that we see in this forest used to be a railway. «Ah, yes, as they love it, one infrastructure upon another one, the more — the better», the thoughts spinning in my head. The pipeline ahead of us crosses the river on pillars that once carried a railway completed in 1939, six months before the outbreak of the Second World War. «In 1935, at the request of the General Staff of the Polish Army, among other things, the Wieliszew–Nasielsk railway line was developed. The designed route was to connect the Vilnius region and Grodnoszczyzna with the port in Gdynia, relieving the Warsaw junction. On the other hand, in military terms, it increased the capacity of the Legionowo-Iłowo line, and the new bridge was a strategic alternative to the easy-to-destruct single-track bridges on Narew in Modlin and Wkra in Pomiechówek. <...> In January 1939, the bridge passed the load test successfully. The entire line was commissioned a month later, on February 25, 1939. <...> In September 1939, retreating Polish units blew up the bridge. During the occupation, some elements were demolished and exported to the Reich, and the line itself became the border between the Third Reich and the General Government.

So, three infrastructure sisters: the youngest one — «new oil» — data with its materiality in fiber optic cables, the middle one — oil pipeline, the oldest one — railway. They are co-dependent; they can not live without each other. They are connected forever, through labour and blood.

By the end of 1945, the tracks were dismantled, and the embankments were one of the smuggling trails of smugglers to Warsaw. After World War II, the line was not reactivated» [6]. Fiber-optic cables follow the same routes as today's oil pipeline, one infrastructure on top of another. Initiatives such as *Project Visegrád* continue this pattern, reusing the paths of past extractive systems to build networks for data and communication [7]. So, three infrastructure sisters: the youngest one — «new oil» — data with its materiality in fiber optic cables, the middle one — oil pipeline, the oldest one — railway. They are co-dependent; they can not live without each other. They are connected forever, through labour and blood. One can find the other one by finding one of them; just follow the terrestrial and sea fiber optic cables. Oil is flowing «through this land along with information» [8].

Look at this pipeline, it's a tool of a colonial extractivist machine

Assembly: Decentric Circles Beyond Centres. 2024. Photo by Dzina Zhuk

The process of watching the video «Sedimented Motion» of Vera Zalutskaya and Kirila Cvetkovska, music by Olga Markowska. Decentric circles assembly. 2024. Photo by Kolja Spesivtsev

— Do you know the term «function creep»?
— No.
— It's kind of using technology not in a way that it was intended, beyond its original purposes.
— Yes, because of infrastructures build upon the previous infrastructures, it is hard sometimes to reverse imperial relations.
— Look at this pipeline, it's a tool of a colonial extractivist machine — from exploiting Siberian land as indigenous land to Euromaidan and the Russian war against Ukraine.
— What I am saying is that if you build new infrastructures on the basement of old ones, you can recreate the same relations that were embedded there at the very beginning. So maybe we should think not only about re-purposing old infrastructures, but creating some kind of counter-infrastructures, infrastructures in other directions.
— Yes, so they are not centralized.
— But decentralization is also corrupted, kind of a buzzword.
— It made me think about the preparation work that needs to be done before the railroads. Infrastructure equals, or how do you call it (*shows with hands «=»*) the *infra* for the *structure* itself. So, all the infrastructure by definition, is the basis for something else.

Words in imperialist mouths are used to hide something — like here we have «Druzhba», but it does not bring friendship, it brings oil.

The oil pipeline is called *Druzhba*, which translates as «Friendship». While walking, we hear different sounds coming from a small portable speaker that Tytus is playing. The sound of running oil, br-br-br-bru-bru-brrr — and the sound of a helicopter that flew here about a year ago — tr-tr-tr-trrr-tra-ta-trrr. «It was not only growth and abundance, but also catastrophes of different sorts projected into the future, sent down the stream via Friendship, Brotherhood, Union and Progress, among others» [9]. As Tutys mentioned earlier, «it was not a gift of a pure heart though, but a cold political calculation. With volatile social sentiments after Stalin's death and uprisings of different scale in the GDR in 1953, and Poland and Hungary in 1956, the next economic crisis could result in a political shift» [10]. Tutys went on, speaking of a modernism shaped between the wars and after the Second World War, what McKenzie Wark calls *'developmental modernism'* — a way of casting present needs into a future where growth and abundance would quiet conflict.

Expanded guided tour «Flow Control» by Tytus Szabelski-Różniak & Hubert Karmiński. Decentric circles assembly. 2024. Photo by Kolja Spesivtsev

Assembly: Decentric Circles Beyond Centres. 2024. Photo by Dzina Zhuk

The path was clear: build, invest, industrialize. Oil — black and vital — was one of the keys.

— I was wondering if friendship helps building solidarities between different distant context, or is it too naive to think in this way?
— Friendship can work inside of some ideologies; they can make gaps in ideologies, these things — you can not control them, it can even save some people's lives, between, for example, enemies in the war. If you start to put it inside of any ideology, it will stop working.
— Words in imperialist mouths are used to hide something — like here we have «Druzhba», but it does not bring friendship, it brings oil.
— Can friendship be borrowed?
— Practices of friendship — another tool of making politics?
— And friendship can also end. It's not the answer for every question.
— My grandma used to turn on the gas stove just to warm up the kitchen and at the same time on a TV Lukashenko and Putin's friendship would collapse, because Lukashenko was saying he will turn off the gas pipe. It's strong in my memory.
— This is how friendship ends.
(*Laugh*)

Assembly: Decentric Circles Beyond Centres. 2024. Photo by Dzina Zhuk

We can see this infrastructure as «laundry machine» where the oil is being blended and origins being obfuscated. Such is «the zombie pipeline ecology», Tutys adds.

In the 1970s, the Institute of Cybernetics in Kyiv, led by Viktor Glushkov, turned its efforts to the Druzhba pipeline, threading it with new veins of computation. It was part of a larger dream. Glushkov had imagined an all-Soviet cybernetic network, a system to automate the planned economy without surrendering its socialist core. But «top party officials downsized Glushkov's idea for an overwhelming information-management-and-control network to a series of smaller-scale, disparate network projects» [11]. Signals and feedback loops would pass between factories, users, and the state — a living circuit of needs and supplies, «data-based, therefore better than the simplistic and wasteful capitalist game of supply and demand» [12]. Data would guide the flow, not profit. «Socialism embedded in the network»[13].

Expanded guided tour «Flow Control» by Tytus Szabelski-Różniak & Hubert Karmiński. Decentric circles assembly. 2024. Photo by Kolja Spesivtsev

— My parents have a huge barrel like leftovers from the Second World War, it is a German one, from nazi-times. The whole my life we were using it for watering, growing potatoes and tomatoes.
— Pipeline is more related to new forms of production! How to re-use it?
— Near Baikonur, there are a lot of fallen-down rockets, and the locals repurpose them. There is a boat, and some other everyday objects
— Maybe a pneuma-mail?
— Huge sculpture?
— Pumping carbon back to the ground?

Oil is not only present in the pipeline here, it is also present in the land while we are walking on — «a presence in absence» [14]. We walk along the land, following the pipeline, trying to find where it ends. It does not. At least, not here. Being physically here and holding an assembly beneath it changes the way we talk, the way we walk, the way we look at the forest, the way we imagine, the way we hold the gathering, the way we affect. It is no longer an abstract notion of *infrastructure*; it is as much present as our physical bodies. Both are skeletons, but with other meanings, skeletons resting beneath another skeleton. Sitting on the grass, on the couch of the fabric,

one can listen to the oil gurgling in the pipe. «It was meant to be dead, seems so much alive, pumping oil with a speed of one meter per second. Oil from one hydrocarbon regime was replaced with oil from another one. Or, what is worse, it might be a different oil only on paper. The Kazakh crude oil, flowing above us right now, might actually be at least partially Russian» [15]. Although oil imported into Europe is officially of Kazakh origin, part of it may indirectly come from Russian crude. Kazakhstan is importing oil from Russian Federation for domestic use while simultaneously exporting its own, using the same infrastructure, connected to Druzhba pipeline. We can see this infrastructure as «laundry machine» where the oil is being blended and origins being obfuscated. Such is «the zombie pipeline ecology», Tutys adds.

— What about reverse logics?
— There are counter-infrastructures, like for example artworks that are building for example communication infrastructure, but it's on smaller scale. It's more ephemeral.
— The French built roads in Niger, and it is believed that there are ghosts there, and when there are auto-accidents, it's because of that.
— Who wants hot tea?
— Me!
(I see three more hands)
— Nicole Starosielski talks about farmers at the peripheries of US, the land of which is exploited by water pipelines. And then there was an attempt to build a gas or oil pipeline nearby, I do not remember exactly, and the farmers said that two of them can not coexist, as one is a contradiction of the other.
— On what can you count if you think of creating something? What could be considered as your infrastructure? Especially when you are part of the society where your infrastructures are systematically erased?
— There are also toxic forms of solidarities, take Germany now, for example, how it treats Palestine.
— I would think about occupying and not agreeing to give up on terms, like «solidarity» — maybe to explain notions in verbs?
— Terms get exhausted.
— Solidarity is a practice, not a term.

On what can you count if you think of creating something? What could be considered as your infrastructure? Especially when you are part of the society where your infrastructures are systematically erased?

Endnotes

[1] Work Hard! Play Hard! working group, Decentric Circles Assembly invitation, 2024, https://workhardplay.pw/en/2024/.

[2] Documentation of the assembly Decentric Circles Beyond Centres is available under the link: https://workhardplay.pw/en/2024/assembly-decentric-circles-beyond-centres.html

[3] Reference to the field recording sounds by Tytus Szabelski-Różniak and Hubert Karmiński that were sampled by Tytus during the expanded guided tour "Flow Control", near "Druzhba" oil pipeline, 2025.

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[9] Szabelski-Różniak and Karmiński, "Flow Control/Guided Tour."

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[11] Oleksiy Radynski, Is Data the New Gas? - Journal #107" (e-flux Journal, 2020), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/107/322782/is-data-the-new-gas.

[12] Szabelski-Różniak and Karmiński, "Flow Control/Guided Tour."

[13] Ibid.

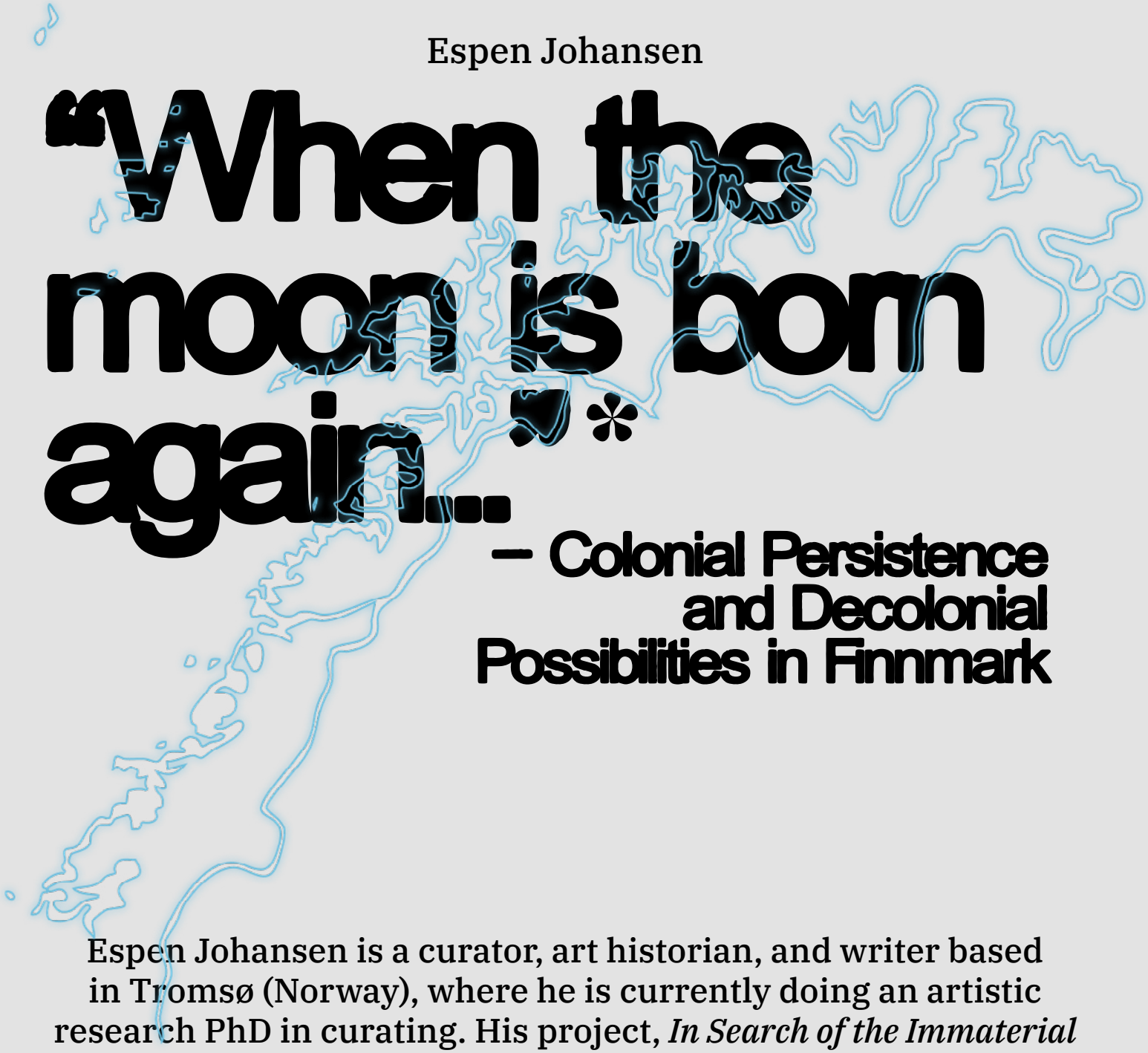
[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

Espen Johansen

"When the moon is born again..."*

– Colonial Persistence and Decolonial Possibilities in Finnmark



Espen Johansen is a curator, art historian, and writer based in Tromsø (Norway), where he is currently doing an artistic research PhD in curating. His project, *In Search of the Immaterial Monument*, examines how collective memories and blind spots manifest and form in our public spheres. Relocating to Tromsø, a city with Norway's largest Sámi population and a geography defined by its proximity to Russia has adjusted Johansen's attention to questions of borders, systems of control, and art as a potential countermeasure to disentangle and challenge narratives of nationalist exceptionalism.

* The newly elected Sámi Parliament begins their political declaration for 2025-2029, titled *Mánočalbmi*, with the words, "When the moon is born again a new cycle begins." Mánočalbmi is the Northern Sámi word for the first visible part of a new moon. Translated to English by the author.

This essay developed from thinking with the exhibition *No Man's Land | Ingenmannsland | Endoris*, by Skade Henriksen, which I curated for Tromsø Center for Contemporary Art. Through a sound installation outside the art center by its entrance, visitors were met with a large panoptic mirror – the type used for surveillance – and a calm voice emitting from speakers, which explored the Arctic borderlands of Finnmark as sites where militarization, extraction, and climate policy converge upon indigenous territories. The following excerpts are drawn from Skade Henriksen's sound installation *No Man's Land | Ingenmannsland | Endoris*: [1]

"The area is basically wallpapered with defense installations, equipment, and intelligence operations. It would be the number one target for an attack!" the woman said. "That's the reason they're draining the county of jobs and people! The goal is to avoid having too many people living here." For several days, I kept pondering what the woman had said – could there be something to the idea of a buffer zone?

[...]

Skade Henriksen - No Man's Land | Ingenmannsland | Endoris, courtesy of Mihaly Stefanovicz and Tromsø Kunstforening

“It has been a deliberate political choice not to construct landmark buildings in the county – because it is an area considered difficult to defend. It should not attract attention, provide justification for, or tempt anyone to want to annex the area. A region with good infrastructure could be more tempting than one without."

[...]

"Of course, it’s also easier to carry out interventions in nature - the area is referred to as an 'Eldorado' of natural resources, a raw material bank - because “no one lives there” - no-man’s-land."

Excerpts from the news, facts and rumors from politicians and first-hand experiences from inhabitants of the region outline a geopolitical situation, largely shaped and dictated by the South. There is no realistic plan to defend Finnmark in the case of a Russian invasion, they say; the vast region will merely absorb the shock and buy us time to set up frontlines with NATO support further to the South. Furthermore, this strategy of keeping Finnmark underdeveloped has resulted in a landscape perforated with defense infrastructure yet perceived (from the capital) as a no man's land available for exploitation. Militarization overlaps with extractivist pressures pushing for a “green transition” which unfolds on indigenous territories, fracturing traditional reindeer herding

Finnmark, photo taken by Skade Henriksen, courtesy of the artist

practices and reinscribing colonial dispossession under an ecological guise. The region is now seemingly only given two choices, neither of which seems remotely sustainable: to fight climate change/create jobs, we must extract "green minerals" from the indigenous lands, obstructing Sámi reindeer herding in the process

This strategy of keeping Finnmark underdeveloped has resulted in a landscape perforated with defense infrastructure yet perceived (from the capital) as a no man's land available for exploitation

(a small but necessary sacrifice, they tell us). Or, if we leave this vast, rich landscape untouched to allow for reindeer herders to continue with their practice as they have done for centuries, we accept sacrificing the environment as a result. There are plenty of things to object to with such oversimplifications, and the dilemma is certainly difficult. But primarily, my argument is that the options we're presented with are false dichotomies, which all rely on maintaining the neoliberal, extractivist and military infrastructures already in place. We should not accept the premise that we *must* choose the lesser of two evils but rather insist on engaging in worlding new imaginaries which could in turn give us better options.

Finnmark, photo taken by Skade Henriksen, courtesy of the artist

These examples show how the transition from fossil to renewable economies risks replicating colonial systems, despite its maybe good intentions

In thinking with Skade Henriksen's work, I wish to further expand on the topic she raises and discuss how infrastructures (or lack of infrastructures) create and maintain colonial dependencies in the region through climate initiatives/efforts to create jobs, and the militarization of Norway and NATO's border with Russia.

Looking at these issues in Finnmark and Sápmi together exposes that neither militarization, extractivism, nor climate change can be understood as single-issues, because they intersect and amplify each other, creating ripples and layers and compounding effects. Climate change freezes reindeer pastures, turning snow into ice, energy infrastructure and military installations further obstruct reindeer movement and lay claim to some of the best pastures, and mining deposits suffocate the fjord. Following Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion that structures of power intersect to produce and amplifies specific vulnerabilities, [2] intersectionality can be extended to the material and ecological domain. This entanglement

Finnmark, photo taken by Skade Henriksen, courtesy of the artist

resonates with Bani Brusadin's description of infrastructural "fog," where domination operates from within systems that appear neutral or technical, [3] and with Svitlana Matviyenko, Sitora Rooz, and E. Vincent's "technologies of occupation, persistence, and implication," which reveal how colonial hierarchies adapt within modern infrastructures, ensuring the power-dynamics remain unchallenged. [4] It is within these overlapping infrastructures that colonial power reproduces itself – quietly, persistently, and usually in the guise of progress.

In Repparfjorden, "green" copper mining threatens marine ecosystems and coastal Sámi fishing traditions as well as obstructs reindeer herding; in Melkøya, the electrification of gas infrastructure sustains fossil capital under an environmental pretext. Together, these examples show how the transition from fossil to renewable economies risks replicating colonial systems, despite its maybe good intentions.

Repparfjorden — the impact of mine tailings on ecosystems

The fjord is located in Kvalsund municipality, not far from Hammerfest, and is an important area for coastal Sámi communities, used for fishing as well as for reindeer herding. The surrounding mountains also contain a fairly large copper deposit and are the proposed site of the Nussir copper mine. The mine is presented as an essential contribution to Europe's decarbonization, providing copper for renewable technologies, electric vehicles, and power grids, and it also promises jobs in a region that desperately needs them. The logic appears irrefutable – climate change demands new materials, and this no man's land can provide them.

However, in order to extract copper from the mountain, the mining company got permission to dump 30 million tonnes of mine tailings into Repparfjorden. [5] Marine scientists have warned that sediment dispersion could suffocate benthic species and affect salmon migration with long-term consequences.

The premise that marine pollution can be balanced against climate gain remains ethically incoherent

The project follows a pattern that has characterized state and corporate relations with Sámi land for generations: consultation without consent and compensation instead of co-decision. The mine's approval process exposed how easily the principles of free, prior, and informed consent [6] can be circumvented when national interests are at stake. As the recent Sámi Parliament Mánočalbmi Declaration states, "Sámi rights to land, water and natural resources form the basis of our culture, language and livelihoods. These rights shall secure the material and immaterial foundations of Sámi society." [7] The Nussir project violates precisely that foundation by treating the fjord as expendable infrastructure.

This dynamic exemplifies what Bani Brusadin has described as the *fog of systems*: an opacity produced not by secrecy but by complexity, where political decisions appear as technical necessities. The environmental impact assessment, with its graphs and mitigation scenarios, gives the illusion of rational control. Yet the premise that marine pollution can be balanced against climate gain remains ethically incoherent. Here, extractivism rebrands itself as environmentalism, creating what Matviyenko, Rooz and Vincent call a *technology of persistence*: a colonial form that survives by adapting to the language of progress. The result is a structure that renders the ongoing colonization of Sámi territories both invisible and rational. Although the massive protests against the project may indicate that the fog is thinning. Recently, local Sámi-led protests have merged in solidarity with larger environmental groups across Europe, showing that such issues can never be understood and much less solved in isolation.

From the protest camp by the Nussir mine. Photo: Henrik Myhr Nielsen, NRK

Melkøya — "greenwashing" Snøhvit LNG terminal

A similar logic of necessity, sustainability and development lies behind the proposal to "electrify" Melkøya, a large LNG terminal located on a small island just outside Hammerfest. Replacing its gas turbines with renewable energy drawn from the mainland grid will cut local emissions by almost one million tonnes of CO_2 annually. But the numbers hide a significant truth: While local emissions would drop, the electrification project would encourage continued gas extraction from the Barents Sea for decades to come, gas that, once exported and burned elsewhere, will release far greater emissions than those saved on site.

This massive investment would be used to supply renewable electricity to an already profitable fossil fuel facility, while local industries and communities have long felt neglected. The Norwegian government claims, “Lack of grid capacity and a strained power situation are among the greatest obstacles to growth and development in Finnmark.” [8]

Snøhvit LNG terminal, Melkøya. Photo: Timon Schneider, Getty Images

Map of Snøhvit gas field by Equinor

This proposed expansive power grid is thus presented as a gift, an investment to enable further growth and development in the region. But it comes with a huge cost, as the multiple wind power projects and power lines required would lay claim to vast areas and severely affect Sámi life in the region. [9]

The rhetoric it employs is this: Norway must maintain its energy exports to help ensure European stability, especially amid war and geopolitical uncertainty. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Finnmark is facing even more pressure to serve as an energy corridor, mineral hub and a security buffer.

Within this discourse, projects like Melkøya are framed not only as economic assets but as geopolitical obligations. The result is a merging of energy and defense infrastructure, where climate and security become indistinguishable rationales for expansion. This relates to what Matviyenko, Rooz, and Vincent describe as a *technology of implication* – systems that entangle citizens, institutions, and even environmentalists within the very structures they might seek to oppose, making it near-impossible to break free of the infrastructures in place.

Since the energy crisis following the war in Ukraine, the Norwegian government has sought to position itself as Europe's reliable gas supplier. In this framework, criticism of extraction becomes almost irresponsible or even immoral. Yet, as art historian and writer on global politics and ecology, T.J. Demos remind us, a "just transition" cannot

be achieved by substituting one form of destruction for another, it would require a "a radical restructuring of our politics and economics by prioritizing equality, social justice, and multispecies flourishing—rather than another depoliticized, single-issue environmental initiative, or worse, part of the growing project of green neoliberalism. To do so, a change of focus is necessary." [10]

Militarization of the North

While extraction and energy policy are often justified through economic and environmental arguments, militarization in the North is legitimized through the language of security. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the geopolitical map of Northern Europe changed abruptly. With Sweden and Finland joining NATO, Sápmi has become the alliance's newest and longest continuous northern frontier.

Finnmark, photo taken by Skade Henriksen, courtesy of the artist

While extraction and energy policy are often justified through economic and environmental arguments, militarization in the North is legitimized through the language of security.

Finnmark, bordering Russia and Finland, as well as being the home of Sámi communities and other minorities that traverse national boundaries in this harsh Arctic environment, have shaped it as a space of collaboration and negotiation rather than division. And in its relation to Russia, Norway's policy has been to pursue a two-track approach of both deterrence and reassurance. [11] But this balance has now shifted. Norway recently lifted its self-imposed restrictions on hosting allied military exercises in the East of Finnmark, close to the Russian border, but with the expansion of NATO, joint military exercises have expanded in scale and frequency, sometimes involving tens of thousands of troops. Just days ago, the Norwegian government proposed spending 3,4% of its GDP for military purposes, at a total of 180 billion NOK. More than one-third of Norway's military budget – 68 billion NOK – is military support to Ukraine.

In a recent address to the newly constituted Sámi Parliament, King Harald V said, “In 2025, we are living in a time marked by new international uncertainty. Once again, there is war in Europe. We are in the most serious security situation since the Second World War. It is important that the Armed Forces are strengthened in the years to come. At the same time, the Armed Forces must consider Sámi culture and traditional Sámi livelihoods.” [12]

In the public discourse, the militarization of the North is framed as a necessary, collective duty in order to defend democracy. [13] Yet the lived experience of this defense is unevenly distributed. The *Mánočalbmi Declaration* addresses this imbalance, warning that the growing security focus must not come at the expense of Indigenous rights. It calls for binding consultation procedures for defense planning and demands that cultural and environmental impact be integrated into national security assessments. And while these two perspectives often clash, one should refrain from merely viewing them as antagonisms, choosing one over the other. For the first time, the Sámi Parliament included a chapter on "Public safety, defense and emergency preparedness" in their declaration, and Sámi Parliament President, Silje Karine Muotka, makes an obvious but often overlooked point: " It is a paradox that those who are experts in living in this border area in the North are not involved in the work on total preparedness. We have a lot we can contribute with when it comes to knowledge about these areas."[14] While the national borders are colonial constructions dividing Sámi into four countries, it does not mean that

In the public discourse, the militarization of the North is framed as a necessary, collective duty in order to defend democracy. [13] Yet the lived experience of this defense is unevenly distributed.

Sámi communities on the Norwegian side do not have a stake in national defense. A former Sámi Parliament politician, Sandra Andersen Eira, has been serving in the armed forces in Ukraine for three years, warns, "Finnmark is the first to be occupied. Russia is training and practicing for it. If they come, what will happen to the reindeer herding, fishing and other resources? They will be occupied and destroyed." [15]

Sandra Andersen Eira serving in the armed forces in Ukraine, Photo: Gunnar Bratthammer, NRK

decolonial possibilities and imperfect solidarities

The question of protection thus becomes paradoxical. For the Sámi, defense becomes a matter of sustaining the conditions of life through a military infrastructure that simultaneously obstructs it. A similar contradiction extends to environmental initiatives as well, where neoliberal logics allow climate change to be perceived as

an opportunity, not only a crisis. The Arctic is warming four times faster than the global average, making resources more accessible as its surrounding ecosystems gradually collapse. This recursive logic - appearing to solve a problem using the same methods that caused it - is characteristic of what Rob Nixon calls *slow violence*: a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." [16]

Multiple processes occur incrementally, through permits, consultations, and environmental impact reports, conveyed through a bureaucratic language of progress

In Finnmark, the slow violence takes the form of gradual dispossession of land and the gradual depletion of natural resources. Multiple processes occur incrementally, through permits, consultations, and environmental impact reports, conveyed through a bureaucratic language of progress. By the time their effects become undeniable, the damage will have already happened.

The realities unfolding in Finnmark today - mining in Repparfjorden, electrification at Melkøya, militarization along the eastern border - are single-issue incidents, but interconnected concerns that reproduce colonial relations through infrastructure. Each project claims to act in the name of progress, security, or sustainability, yet all subscribe to the same underlying premise: every gift, however well-meaning, comes with a cost. Together they form what Matviyenko, Rooz, and Vincent describe as *technologies of persistence* — the continuation of colonial structures through adaptation. These technologies no longer need to dominate through overt force; they endure through the bureaucratic and material systems that organize modern life.

Understanding this persistence requires that we acknowledge our implication within it. As Bani Brusadin argues, the fog of systems is not only something we observe but also something we inhabit. We are all situated within such systems, and there is no neutral position from which to critique them. But despite our complicity and dependency on such systems, it does not mean that we should not criticize them or work towards building better systems. Columnist Martin Lukacs argues, "neoliberalism has conned us into fighting climate change as individuals." [17] The task, then, becomes finding ways to act differently from within the system, to make it visible, and gradually and collectively construct new alternatives from the ground up.

For those of us working within art, research, or curatorial practice, this raises difficult questions about situatedness and responsibility. Artistic engagement with the North risks repeating the extractive logic it seeks to critique through cultural appropriation if it treats the context, the people and the region as mere aesthetics. When describing her work, Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha shares her ethical considerations when working with people from other cultures, “I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby.” [18] This gentle methodology makes it possible to work closely with others and their lived experiences without taking away their agency or claiming their voice as your own.

The first step towards a decolonial future is to stop framing actions from those in power as charitable, because "unlike solidarity, which is horizontal and takes place between equals, charity is top-down, humiliating those who receive it and never challenging the implicit power relations." [29] And to challenge power relations means to acknowledge our complicity and to take responsibility for redistributing that power. Such an act is neither generous nor emphatic; it is merely justice. Aruna D'Souza warns us, "We must not fall into the trap of imagining that changing attitudes - cultivating empathy for the oppressed - will undo structures. The structures need to be undone in order to clear the conceptual and imaginative space for empathy to flourish." [20]

Only through committed, considerate, and methodical work grounded in and governed by the needs of Sámi communities and national minorities — not in what the non-Indigenous people assume they want — can colonial dependencies be weakened and solidarity as a decolonial infrastructural practice take shape.

These technologies no longer need to dominate through overt force; they endure through the bureaucratic and material systems that organize modern life

Endnotes

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Ana Laura Cantera

Extractivism and Exhaustion

through an Anthropofungal Speculative Perspective

Ana Laura Cantera is a transmedia artist, researcher, and professor. She works with the relationships among art, technology, and non-human entities from decolonial perspectives. She studies the political connotations of these intersections and how we can rethink these fields of knowledge in the crossover of geopolitical aspects from a Latin-American point of view. She has a PhD in Arts and Techno-aesthetics and has a Master degree in Electronic Arts at Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, where she is Director of BIONUMA - Research and Development Group on Biopoetics and New Materials. She is developer and creator of biomaterials, specializing in grown designs from mushroom mycelium.

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The text is a speculative essay narrated from an imaginary sensory perspective of a fungal being. While as humans, we could never truly experience other forms of existence, the game of speculative writing allows us to rehearse more-than-human strategies of survival and resistance in the face of the destructive logics of capitalist greed. Through a humanly fungal voice, the essay adopts the mode of "as if" to explore how multispecies narratives can unsettle naturalized stories and imagine other possible and desirable worlds. The anthropofungal perspective is a speculative interspecies branch of the Brazilian anthropophagic methodology to absorb and metabolize the logic of the fungi, even being humans [1].

From its underground filaments, this organism recounts the slow violences inflicted by extractivist practices in the territories of the Latin American Souths—lands crossed by short-term policies justified in the name of modern progress. From within the soil of a monoculture, the fungus becomes both witness and archive of exhaustion: the loss of diversity within its networks, the rupture of symbiotic relations, and the suffocating silence that emerges when a single crop is allowed to dominate.

The fungus does not call for a return to purity or origins, but rather for a recognition of interdependence, opacity, and the need to inhabit broken and imperfect networks where life still insists on flourishing. From that insistence, its mycelial body narrates what remains invisible to the human gaze: the murmurs of the earth, the invisible alliances, and the pulsations that resist beneath the surface.

To deepen this reflection, the essay engages with the artistic work of Juan Cortés, *A Tale of Two Seeds: Sound and Silence in Latin America's Andean Plains*, in which sound is used as a crucial medium to reveal the hidden vibrations of monocultures and to denounce what is missing—the silenced biodiversity. By juxtaposing the testimony of fungi with Cortés's sonic strategies, this text seeks to imagine ways of listening, caring, and resisting that transcend anthropocentric perspectives and embrace a politics of survival in uncertain terrains.

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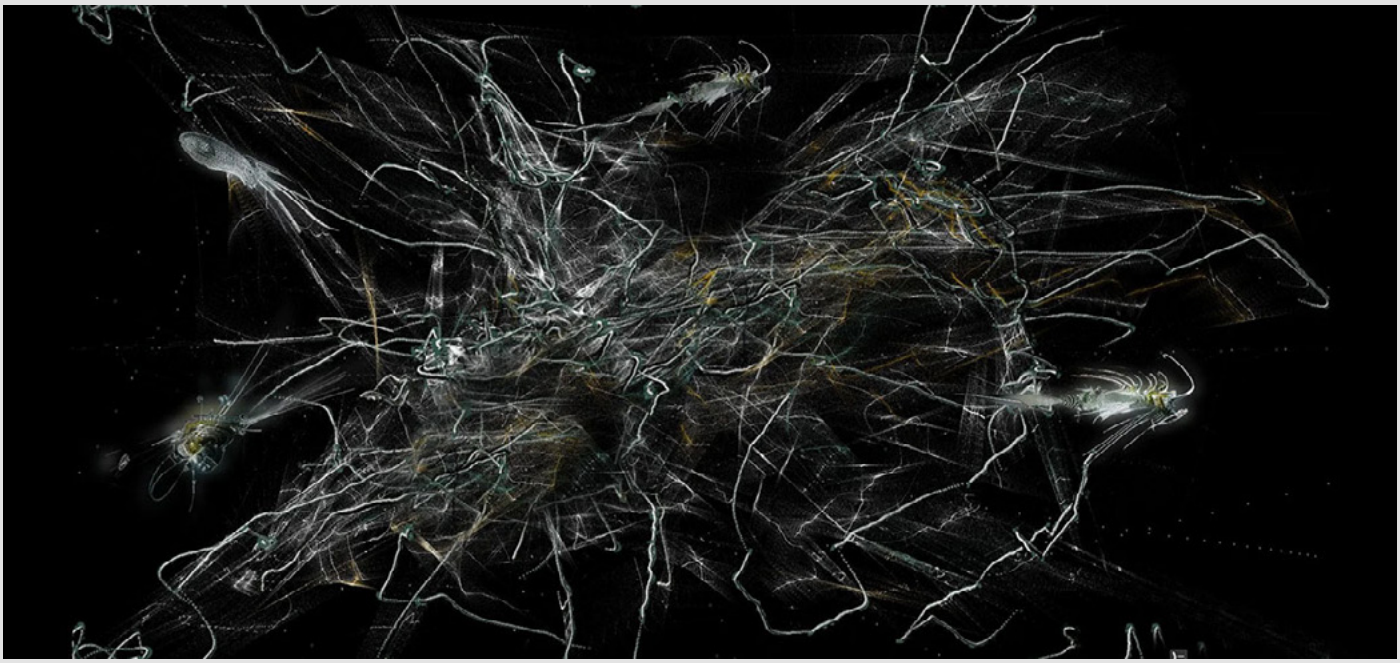

Figure 1, As Above, So Below, 2004, interactive installation, courtesy Juan Cortes.

The fungus does not call for a return to purity or origins, but rather for a recognition of interdependence, opacity, and the need to inhabit broken and imperfect networks where life still insists on flourishing.

Humans say that my essence and way of functioning are an example to follow if humanity is to be saved. My way of living and subsisting—through hyphae connected with other beings across the soil—has become a metaphor for connection, collaboration, symbiosis, and solidarity for those who seek to change their future in order not to disappear. After being despised for years, I have now become a symbol of resistance and power. Yet, although many speculate about my being in the world, they barely know me. I am opaque.

A human named Édouard Glissant [2] once spoke of the right to opacity in the face of humankind's emphatic need to know everything, by any means. In the name of knowledge, every action becomes permissible—no matter how violent it may be. From this perspective, the right not to be fully understood, translated, or made transparent becomes, for us fungal beings, both a possibility and a form of resistance against reduction, classification according to dominant parameters, and appropriation.

My body is ungraspable and always entangled with others in the underground darkness. It is decentralized; it does not function like theirs, where hierarchy

dominates every conception they hold. My strength lies in dispersion, in multiplicity. My being is to be in relation and to collaborate, because this grants me existential continuity. My mycelium spreads throughout the soil in connection with and through others: plants, trees, insects, minerals, and other things whose identities I do not know—elements and substances that have appeared only in recent decades.

the right not to be fully understood, translated, or made transparent becomes, for us fungal beings, both a possibility and a form of resistance against reduction, classification according to dominant parameters, and appropriation

I cannot even understand what they call an individual. How can something be conceived as independent in this world that so inherently depends on others? I do not know how they can imagine themselves as isolated from those who constitute them. Where do they find the limits? I cannot find them. Perhaps that is why they ignore us—why they fail to appreciate our ecological function.

My hyphae extend in the dimness without asking for permission or demanding resemblance. They do not seek to empathize or to know; they sustain, they fuse, they open invisible passages for life to flow. My solidarity is imperfect, as Aruna D'Souza once said [3]: it is a gesture that does not rely on transparency or empathy. At times I do not even know with whom I join, yet it serves me to do so. I nourish myself without distinction, without understanding, without granting entity or category. My solidarity blooms in uncertainty and opacity. I expand blindly, intertwining disparate lives. My purpose is to subsist—but also to relish the pleasures of being alive, whenever possible. That is why my collaborations and connections with other entities are not as innocent as they are often described. Humans sometimes romanticize these bonds, but the truth is that I am constantly negotiating—seeking my own well-being, drawing from my creative power. Perhaps we are not so different after all.

But I am also becoming a little lonely. Not long ago, I could associate with countless tiny companions who inhabited my soil—animal, vegetal, and fungal alike. In those days there was vitality everywhere, endless possibilities for cooperation. Life was a biodiverse feast. But suddenly things began to change. Those around me started to disappear, and emptiness began to surround me. The soil turned into a coarse, arid, hostile block, filled with a multitude of identical plants that have little to

offer. They do not understand where they are; they cannot adapt. I do not know where they come from, but I am certain they do not belong to these lands. I sense them bewildered, exhausted, unable to let their cycles unfold. They are alienated, blocked, with their vitality amputated. They have been turned into zombies [4]. My invitations to connect are seldom answered. They seem like lifeless things, growing automatically. Life has gone mute. It no longer vibrates.

The soil has been filled with substances that constantly repel my will to connect and weaken me day by day. They are forcing me to withdraw from my own territory. I am afraid of disappearing. I am running out of nutrients, out of alliances. Symbiotic relations are becoming ever more fragile, superficial, and intermittent—each time, even less enduring. I am growing weary. I am hungry.

The soil has been filled with substances that constantly repel my will to connect and weaken me day by day.

I have less and less corporeality. I am forced to cut off extensions of myself in order to survive. My hyphae fade away day by day. I now settle for mere survival, for I have fewer and fewer nourishing options. And yet, I resist. I can still recycle some of the remaining organic matter, and that allows me to restore a small measure of habitability to the soil— a little hospitality for those who continue resisting alongside me. My body can still sustain diverse relationships in a context of uniformity, weaving threads where humans insist on tearing them apart.

When organic matter grows scarce, I begin to consume my nematode companions [5]. Worms are not my favorite, but that is how I survive. The soil has grown impoverished, and I must improvise new networks—ones that are far from ideal. Every desire to persist is, in its own way, a form of alliance. To devour is sometimes the only means of continuing to weave life in an exhausted soil where networks break one after another.

The soil is turning into a suffocating, homogeneous mass. Humans sow and harvest always the same. They order, repeat, impoverish, discipline. The earth grows exhausted, endlessly asked for the same nutrients. The plants that have long been companions in this place are being erased. They call them *weeds*, with contempt—because they cannot tame them, cannot exercise control over their wildness. Those plants know what cooperation truly means, but they are incompatible with the goals of these people. They cannot bear their rebellion, their ability to grow without permission.

Humans are a machine for exhausting beings. Harboring always the same vegetal entities breeds more

silence, more erosion. I do not share the humans' perceptive channels, but I know about vibrations. And I can tell — the fields grow quieter, more still. Less biodiversity. Fewer connections. Fewer pollinators. More broken and fragile networks.

More death. More exhaustion. For everyone. Even for humans.

Perhaps it is better not to see us... Maybe their blindness is their way of surviving guilt.

People say that what I inhabit is a resource, and that it must be exploited for greater monetary gain. A resource is something to be used, squeezed, and discarded. It serves their interests, not ours. In their world of hierarchies and verticality, they believe that being on top gives them the right to ignore and destroy us. Who told them the soil is their property? Could it be that they simply do not perceive that we are down here? Perhaps it is better not to see us... Maybe their blindness is their way of surviving guilt.

To listen to the earth has become, today, an act of resistance.

Juan Cortes is an artist who seems to have realized that the soil is not just a surface to walk on. He is a good friend. Juan has a piece called *A Tale of Two Seeds: Sound and Silence in Latin America's Andean Plains* [6], which functions as an acoustic testimony of how territories change when monoculture arrives. This human senses the electrical conductivity of amaranth plants and transgenic soy in Colombian agricultural soils—before, during, and after the expansion of soy in the Eastern plains of the country—as well as the emergence of amaranth in today's agricultural technological landscape. Using various recording and capturing technologies, he transforms these imperceptible pulses into what humans call sound. I "hear" through waves, and the difference in movement is striking when local crops appear in the fields. This is the case of amaranth, sacred to Indigenous communities but considered a parasite by the capitalist system, as it is a wild, untamable plant that grows in these lands [7]. As a local, intimately connected to the soils where it grows, its vibrations are powerful: in its sensing, irregular, vital frequencies can be perceived, full of variation and heterogeneity, reflecting the alliances, exchanges, and networks we form as inhabitants of the soil. In contrast, in fields of transgenic plants, the little that does vibrate occurs in flat, timid, uniform rhythms. Silence and pause take center stage.

Through both forms of listening, the humanly invisible worlds are

revealed, along with the gap of exhaustion in the soil and among those of us who inhabit it. To listen to the earth has become, today, an act of resistance.

My being endures in relation. But we already need a breath. A rest for the soil and for those of us who inhabit it.

Juan Cortés, as if he were one of us, transforms the inaudible into sonic politics: he amplifies difference and denounces the loss that unfolds year after year. He makes the rest of humanity hear the collapse and impoverishment of the soil—our fatigue and weariness, which will eventually become their weakness. His work recounts our hardship and transforms it into a witness and archive of our pain. His installation offers a glimpse of what the soil feels: the tensions between persistent life and total control.

The sound work calls for another way of paying attention, as Baptiste Morizot would say [8]. It is not merely about making visible or audible. It is a way of relating to the world, to our world. It is a way of caring, of coexisting, of knowing that we all need other existents. It is also a way of relearning to perceive what humans have chosen to ignore: presences, gestures, and agencies of other beings and ecosystems. It is a departure from the extractive mode of perception, an entry into the ecosensitive tracing of letting oneself be affected. It is a form of ethics and reciprocity. Thank you, Juan.

In the ever-quieting, more-than-human world resides my being. My being endures in relation. But we already need a breath. A rest for the soil and for those of us who inhabit it. Let them stop demanding from us. Let them nourish us. Let them allow diversity to return, so that pollinators may come back.

The only thing that heals is difference.

The living does not want to be homogenized and exterminated any longer. Humans will not survive either if these processes continue. There is no such thing as an individual. It is a complete fiction that they once believed and naturalized. Separation is their most destructive illusion.

Endnotes

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[2] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Michingan: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).

[3] Aruna D’Souza, *Imperfect Solidarities* (Berlin: Floating Opera Press, 2024).

[4] Noelia Billi calls “zombie plants” those that are alive but trapped in forms of existence that make them resemble the dead or semi-dead: limited, manipulated, dependent on industrial circuits, disconnected from their natural ecological relationships. Billi points out that these plants lose “the non-universalizable aspects of the vegetal” and their own temporality. Noelia Billi, “Plantas zombies, vegetales algorítmicos y plantborgs: Plantas y naturaleza artefactual,” *Revista Latinoamericana del Colegio Internacional de Filosofía* 10 (2024): 50–73, https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/handle/11336/250625

[5] Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures* (New York: Random House, 2020).

[6] Juan Cortes. “A Tale of Two Seeds: Sound and Silence in Latin America’s Andean Plains.” *Juan Cortés – Official Website.* Accessed September 15, 2025.

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Jessica Wan and Youngsook Choi

Building Planetary Pedagogy of Love:

Conversation on Foreshadowing as Transnational Ecological Grief Infrastructure

Youngsook Choi is a multi-disciplinary artist of Korean heritage, and also works as a public arts practitioner and researcher with a PhD in human geography. Choi instigates grief as the process of climate interrogation that scrutinises structural conditions intersecting human tragedy and environmental loss. In Every Bite of the Emperor (since 2021), her ongoing body of works on colonial exploitation, engaging post-mining towns in Northern England, Malaysian rainforest, and Vietnamese hydrosphere, is in tandem with this inquiry. Emphasising collective investigation and imagination, Youngsook founded the transnational eco-grief council Foreshadowing.

Jessica Wan Ka Po is a curator and writer working to create culturally hybrid spaces that platform diasporic and transnational narratives. Jessica is currently an associate fellow of the Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN) and an associate lecturer at the Chelsea College of Arts, UAL and Goldsmiths, University of London. She has produced projects with institutions including iniva and Delfina Foundation.

The following conversation weaves through such landscapes of loss with Youngsook Choi, who instigates grief as climate interrogation, founding *Foreshadowing*—the transnational ecological grief council that dares to address "those who are no longer with us or won't be soon." Emerging not as consolation but as infrastructure, *Foreshadowing* has been quietly building the radical architecture of collective witnessing across continents. This conversation traces how *Foreshadowing* forges what Choi calls "a planetary pedagogy of love"—moving beyond the privatised melancholia of Western environmentalism toward something more dangerous.

That's when the learning began for me. It began with the recognition of exhaustion not as failure, but as a symptom of structural violence.

Jessica Wan

JESSICA WAN (JW): I remember when we first met, during the Hawkwood Artist Residency convened by Moi Tran as part of the East Asian Ticket Club in December 2023. We arrived with a certain lightness—yes, there was joy in the room—but also a weight we didn't yet have words for. Many of us came off the back of our own battles, carrying exhaustion like a second skin. There was an unspoken hope that, by gathering as a community of Asian artists, researchers, and cultural workers, we might find something like restoration. Or at least, a place to let the weariness show.

It was the end of the year, the season when the first film of ice settles on the grass, and the trees begin their long exhale into winter. We sat together in a circle around the dinner table, talking about the war in Palestine, the war in Ukraine, the quiet violence of defunding in the arts, and the rising tide of racist attacks. Everything felt frayed and urgent. Still, we leaned in toward each other.

Over the week, each of us offered something to the group. We carved out time for rest as seriously as we did for dialogue. There were breakout spaces, solitary spaces, shared silences. There was a lot of gentleness—enough to begin honoring the truth that our bodies are not machines, that no one can carry the weight of this world alone.

I remember you led a workshop on the politics of refusal and withdrawal, bringing up ecological grief practice that you have been dedicated to. What emerged was a quiet refusal: a collective, embodied rejection of ableist productivity. We said, in so many ways, "We can no longer sustain the pace we are told is necessary. Let this space be a site for collective rewiring—for being, not just doing."

That's when the learning began for me. It began with the recognition of exhaustion not as failure, but as a symptom of structural violence. It began with acknowledging the illness that seeps into our daily lives—not just in the body, but in spirit and soil and speech. December, after all, is the month of decomposition. The time when things fall apart to make way for something unseen. I began to ask: What might we learn if we stopped fearing the decay?

YOUNGSOOK CHOI (YC): Before reminiscing about our December gathering at the Hawkwood Residency, I would like to mention the season we are now in to honour the hosting theme - *Mycelium Against Empires*. Mushrooms form an eco-infrastructure that proliferates its presence in the dead yard when things start losing the sign of vitality and prepare for *active* dormancy. With full mycelial bloom, we are in the season of reflection, recalibrating the vision for the next growing cycle. The perfect time of the year to talk about grief! And the alternative, or even 'subterranean' in a sense of non-institutionalised web of support, infrastructure.

I propose grief as the process of socio-political autopsy

Youngsook Choi

However, the neocolonial capitalist nonstop machine doesn't allow this cyclical sense of time, as for everything and everyone to function all year round. The workshop I delivered at the residency amplifies this hostile pace and intensity of the system and shares our experiences of struggle conjured from it. Therefore, for recognising what power and new agency we could yield in practising the politics of refusal and withdrawal.

Organising collective grief and witnessing is very much part of this enquiry. And the reason why I propose grief as the process of socio-political autopsy. It reveals structural conditions that keep causing certain kinds of violence and repeating patterns of loss. Grief renders the site of confrontation towards systematic oppression and brutal hierarchy/ domination - a powerful exercise of deep interrogation, potentially invoking transformation. The trouble is that our grief is so fragmented.

In their book, *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler observes systematically individualised grief, [1] perceived as a private affair that one needs to deal with alone quietly and moves on swiftly to rejoin the system. Many pre-modern, pre-colonial customs used to allocate seasons and even years for grieving, and the community held the responsibility to support these times fully. In contrast, all that isolated and unprocessed grief in our time turns into trauma with frustration and anger, undermining its transformative potential.

Youngsook Choi. Foreshadowing envisioning map, 2023

JW: There is a strange, sacred power in pausing long enough to grieve. In choosing to inhabit the dormancy. In honoring the rhythms of our own changing bodies as deeply as we honor the falling of leaves or the migration of birds. Because without decay, there can be no transformation. No compost, no new life.

In that space of shared exhaustion, I felt something like fragile solidarity. How do you think collective practices of rest and ritual can begin to repair our fractured relations—with each other, and with the more-than-human world?

How did you come to understand grief—not just as an emotion, but as a methodology? What infrastructures of care emerge when you facilitate grief as collective investigation, rather than individual pathology?

Grief is a matter of equity

Youngsook Choi

YC: In the same volume, Butler also states that grief is a matter of equity. The socio-political systems endorse grief only for the lives that fit into the prescribed values, whilst the others are not grievable (for example, the victims of 911 terror versus civilian deaths in the Iraqi War). Hence, the violence towards these non-grievable others is justified and repeated.

This hierarchical perception of life and resultant violence clearly manifests in ecological loss. When we look at the mountains carved out for mining or ski resorts and the bodies of water blocked by hydrodams or for land reclamation projects, the human-centred system doesn't even acknowledge the need for

grief over these immense ecological losses, vindicating them as the inevitable resourcing to sustain ever-demanding human systems.

This hierarchical perception of life and resultant violence clearly manifests in ecological loss.

Youngsook Choi

Since 2020, my research and art practice have centred around ecological grief, engaging multiple sites of environmental damage and ongoing extraction across the UK, Malaysia and Vietnam. Soon, I found that processing eco-grief is not an easy space to be alone. After my intense fieldwork in the Malaysian rainforest in March 2023, Climate depression hit me hard, almost paralysing me in bed for a while, which became the critical juncture of dreaming to build a platform for eco-grief practitioners.

Eight months later, out of desperate needs for the infrastructure of mutual care, collective witnessing and interspecies solidarity, I founded the eco-grief council *Foreshadowing* and organised the first gathering with artists, curators and researchers across different continents and ecosystems whose practices are dedicated to the long-term grief process for the sites of environmental destruction and impacted communities. As Joshua Barnett states in his book, *Mourning in the Anthropocene*, eco-grief 'both confirms and affirms that we are not, finally, alone.' [2]

In Foreshadowing, transnationality is one of the critical lenses for interrogating ecological loss, often the consequence of the exploitative operations of multinational corporations, closely entangled with the global investment structure and colonial legacy. You have been involved in the research body that weighs on this transnational organising through art and culture, and your research explores radical pedagogy, of which I advocate that grief should be a quintessential part. So, the idea for devising a mutually beneficial conversation through programming the Foreshadowing public launch occurred to me.

JW: Indeed, let us begin by acknowledging the inseparability of growth and decay, and take in the seasonal energy of renewal that this moment offers. Compost, after all, is both an ending and a beginning.

In the book *Let's Become Fungal! Mycelium Teaching and the Arts*, Valiz Amsterdam, describes the mycelial web as "the collective memory of the whole fungal organism." Our futures are deeply entangled with our pasts. [3] The distribution of resources, shaped by histories of colonial trade, enforced migration, and extractive economies, has made our present globally interwovened.

To remember these microbial, historical, and environmental connections is, as they write, a practice of responsibility. It draws us not only toward remembrance but toward collaboration, toward generative relationality. This, to me, echoes so much of what Foreshadowing embodies: grief as equity, grief as activism, grief as infrastructural imagination.

The distribution of resources, shaped by histories of colonial trade, enforced migration, and extractive economies, has made our present globally interwovened.

Jessica Wan

And as you've said, one of the essential elements of a radical pedagogy is precisely that: equity. The undoing of hierarchies—not just of knowledge, but of whose grief, whose pain, whose survival matters. Radical pedagogy begins with pushing back against the supremacy of absolute knowledge, the linearity of instruction, and the inherited contradiction between teacher and student, authority and receiver.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Paulo Freire calls education "the practice of freedom." He places dialogue at its centre, not as a method of instruction but as a way of co-creation. [4]

Knowledge emerges not through domination, but through mutual exchange. That kind of learning is ecological. It grows laterally. It listens.

In my curatorial and research practice, I have long held friendship and conversation as key methods. They allow room for vulnerability. They create the possibility for different forms of knowledge—embodied, emotional, intergenerational—to emerge alongside more formal theory. These spaces honour the lived experiences, the stories we carry, and the relationships we are still learning how to hold.

When you first shared the vision behind Foreshadowing, I felt the urgency of it. The way it addressed something many of us were already feeling, but didn't yet know how to name. I saw how it offered a space for those carrying climate grief, displacement, or environmental loss to gather—across borders, across timelines, across species—and begin to process together.

YC: What truly interlaces place-specific realities regarding ecological grief is the responsibility of witnessing and the consciousness of decolonisation. The commonality in grief across various cultures is the requirement of a witness, which leads to collective making time for remembrance. This act of commemoration addresses the connection between the dead and the living - how the loss is related to the lives of those who gather around it.

And this relationality creates a web of care and solidarity that penetrates guarded walls defined by nationality, culture, geography, and taxonomy of species. Like fungai, this transnational web of loss is also a subterranean, submerging structure connected quietly through the burial grounds of neocolonial capitalism. We deeply share what Robin Wall Kimmerer insists, 'I could not bear the loneliness of being dry in a wet world.' [5]

The undoing of hierarchies—not just of knowledge, but of whose grief, whose pain, whose survival matters.
Jessica Wan

Then the question is how to make the call for imagining the joy of standing together in the heavy wetness of the current world. Building the courage to face the weight of ecological loss at a transnational scale takes time and space, which is the reason why I held back the public appearance of Foreshadowing for over one and a half years since the first gathering.

The initial critical step was to build intimacy and trust as a collective body of grief companionship, without external pressure to deliver our works and chart our presence in the world. Not to mention the necessity of nourishing time to learn about each other's practice of eco-grief. Especially in the given condition that we are geographically dispersed and live in different time zones with various care duties, this internal building period also gave us a chance to learn operational protocols of working from afar, but closely, with reflexivity.

JW: At that time, I had just completed a twelve-session reading group series, which used a method of collective voicing to explore texts by Global Majority writers and practitioners. Rather than treating theory as abstract, we read through the lens of our own lives. These sessions were part of "Out of Margin: A Transnational Perspective", a platform based at the TrAIN Research Centre at UAL. It focused on transnational histories, theories, and practices that emerge from outside dominant narratives. Not to be absorbed into the centre, but to understand how the margins generate their own forms of knowledge, care, and resistance.

Supporting the public launch of Foreshadowing felt like a natural continuation of this work. It brought together many of the threads I have been holding: displacement, collective memory, transnational solidarity, and the role of cultural practice in building alternative infrastructures.

You mentioned transnationality as a lens, but also a lived condition. As Foreshadowing expands across different geographies, ecosystems, and communities, how do you hold the tension between shared grief and place-specific realities? What has surprised or challenged you in the

collective work across such varied contexts?

YC: The most challenging part in practising ecological grief is the absence of adequate languages and methods of interspecies communication, mainly due to the limitation of human-centred intelligence and the evidence-based rationalising process. Since centring my practice and research around eco-grief, the urgency to build eco-literacy has emerged. If you look at the Foreshadowing envisioning board, it is apparent that many of the critical strata in Foreshadowing touch upon this subject. Building planetary pedagogy of love, creative conviction of political spirituality, and living memorials as care infrastructure for interspecies commemoration are all involved in exploring new kinds of literacy. As Robert Macfarlane [6] states in his recent publication, exploring a river as a life-force, not a resource, 'no landscape speaks with a single tongue.'

Formless knowing, accompanied by a sense of humility, yet trusting feeling/compassion as fundamental ways of knowing, is the first step toward recovering our long-lost eco-literacy. Through unapologetic reimagination, embodiment, and land-informed experimentation, methods to organise/practise eco-literacy have been slowly building. One of them is the adaptation of a tea ceremony as an embodied means of writing a prayer for our broken planet.

Slow Sips with Earth (since 2023) is my ongoing practice of eco-grief gathering. It recollects participants' ancestral knowledge of tea leaves and herbs, and activates a geological sense of resistance by writing a collective poetry through tea blending and tasting. At the public launch of Foreshadowing last May at Delfina Foundation in London, I facilitated this method to commemorate the loss within elephants' diaspora. Accompanying the reading materials you organised as the repository of witnessing atrocity towards the land and the colonial others.

'Interspecies Solace - Dismantling Total Station', a convivial gathering, composed of storytelling, tea ceremony and collective poetry reading/writing, host by Youngsook Choi and Jessica Wan as part of Foreshadowing public launch. Delfina Foundation, 2025. Photos taken by Ghost Chan.

JW: Our collective reading and writing workshop *Dismantling Total Station* was particularly nourishing with the embodiment of the warmth and smoothness of tea. It began with your performance, sharing the stories of the elephant's diaspora in the ever-shrinking Malaysian rainforest, then moved onto reading poetries by Mahmoud Darwish and Maya Angelou on grief and solidarity, and ending with collective creative writing. The slow reflective sips of Liu Pao, a.k.a. the miner's tea from Taiping, and passing around cups brought us together in shared gestures, mobilising resonances while we witnessed each other's voices and stories. The openness of writing reflections using one word on a poster note, and then collaboratively constructing meaning by composing these individual notes together, enable a new or renewed forms of inhabitation that mark the slow unravelling of kinships. There was a softness to that pace, a structure that supported the collective processing of grief, confusion, and loss. I feel like this is where our work lies, in unfinished threads.

Without commemorating the loss of a life, how could we truly create a life-affirming system that provides an abundance of resources and clean air for all? Isn't grief coming from the deep place of love and care for all living beings, the ultimate form of celebrating a life?

Youngsook Choi

In the second edition of this workshop, I'd like to explore further the pairing between readings and the tea ceremony, while holding spaces for complex entanglements to emerge. As a child, my mom used to host tea ceremonies on Sundays, and we would go from green tea to white tea and to pu-er when the sun started to set. Returning to the body, our first vessel, often helps to ground our mind to take on a different tempo and be open to seeing how individual pains are shared and passed on to future generations. The journey to healing starts from grief, and I'm very excited about what the futures might hold for our collaboration. In your view, what is the evolving role of Foreshadowing?

YC: Foreshadowing wouldn't exist in an ideal world where all living beings coexist respectfully without an extractive hierarchy and community-oriented grief practices are honoured in the welfare system. Sadly, the current world is quite the opposite. Superegos with a colonial conquest mentality don't know how to rest their war games, and brutal capitalism smells every destruction and bloodbath tragedy as opportunities for development and profiteering. Regardless of so many high talks around green solutions and sustainability, absurdly involving countless carbon-burning international trips, the climate crisis

is getting more and more intense. All results in immense loss that intersects ecological trauma and human tragedy.

Some might think the care infrastructure for eco-grief and interspecies solidarity is not so urgent to build in times of food and energy scarcity and air pollution. Then, without commemorating the loss of a life, how could we truly create a life-affirming system that provides an abundance of resources and clean air for all? Isn't grief coming from the deep place of love and care for all living beings, the ultimate form of celebrating a life?

In Foreshadowing, we don't endorse the abstraction of hope. We actively interrogate the meaning of hope that green-washing businesses and NGO policy papers have often integrated. We fiercely deny the narrative of false hope that glosses over the violence of the profit-above-everything systems. We don't honour the humanity that discusses solutions for human survival before taking time for grieving over the harm and loss the system has caused to this planet. If anyone asks about the future of Foreshadowing, I would say I am almost allergic to such a saturated idea of a future. Living on a damaged planet contests who we are as humans, calling for 'art of living' [7] as the strategy of interspecies survival, where I see that Foreshadowing takes an infrastructural role.

Endnotes

[1] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life - The Powers of Mourning and Justice*, Verso (2004).

[2] Joshua Barnett, *Mourning in the Anthropocene - Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence*, Michigan State University Press (2022): 19.

[3] Valiz Amsterdam, *Let's become Fungal! Mycelium Teaching and the Arts*, (2023): 61-63.

[4] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

[5] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass - Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Milkweed (2013): 295.

[6] Robert Macfarlane, *Is a River Alive?*, (Penguin Books, 2025): 16.

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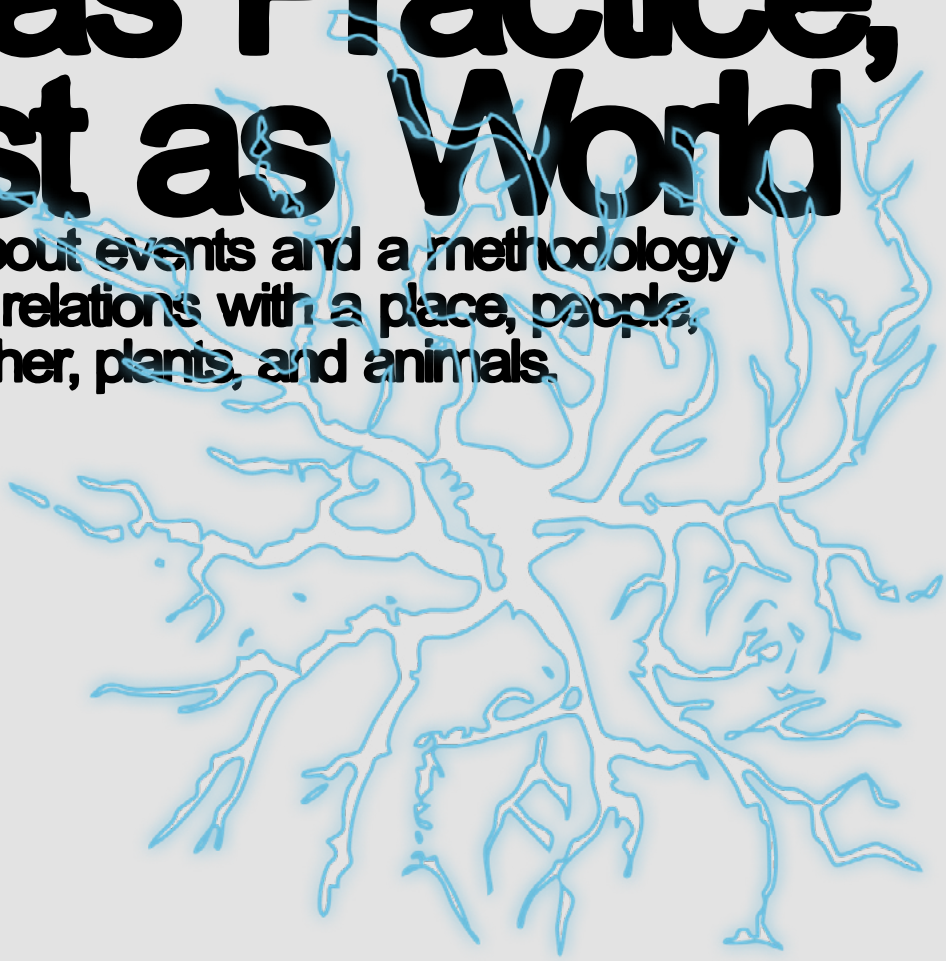
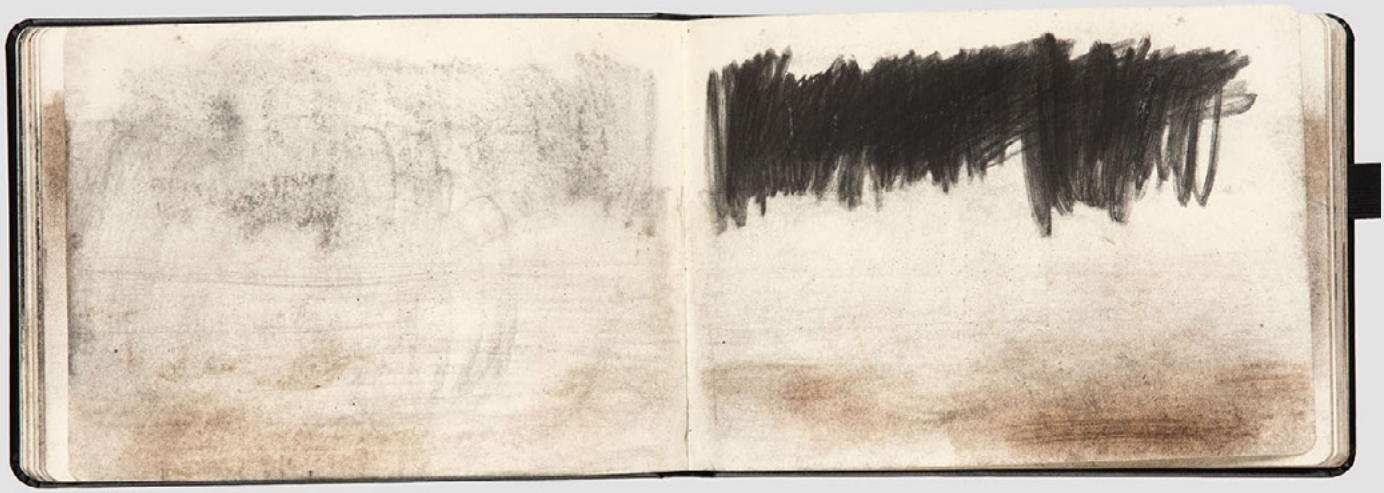
Sofiya Sadouskaya

Care as Practice, Forest as World

An essay about events and a methodology shaped by relations with a place, people, weather, plants, and animals.



Sofiya Sadouskaya is an independent curator, art historian, and cultural manager from Minsk, Belarus, currently living in exile. Her curatorial and research practice explores the intersections of contemporary art, ecology, and collective care. Since 2012, she has curated the long-term *EVAA project* (Environmental Visual Audial Art Project), integrating artistic and environmental activism through open-air gatherings. She curated two Belarusian exhibitions within Łódź Fotofestiwal (2022, 2023) and co-curated *The Beyonders* (with Anna Karpenko, Gallery of Contemporary Art "Ў", 2019), co-authored the children's book series *The Art of Belarus in the 20th Century*.



Works by L. "Alive After Death" series

Editorial Note

This text is deeply significant to me as an editor, but also personally – it is bodily and emotionally connected to my own experience of living through the revolutionary and repressive times in Belarus from 2020 until today. The transformation of the plein air series, described here by Sofiya Sadouskaya, is told with minimal distance, where the personal and the political are inseparably entangled. Her reflection sheds light on artistic and collective practices that have existed and continue to evolve in Belarus, often remaining invisible and unarticulated.

This invisibility does not only stem from the fact that these practices of care resist the representational machinery and productivity logic of contemporary art. Above all, it is a response to the continuing repression in Belarus – as of autumn 2025, there are officially more than 1,100 recognised political prisoners, and between 6 and 12 per cent of the country's population has been forced to leave. Under such conditions, invisibility, anonymity, non-publicness, erasure of traces, and refusal to document or record have become strategies of protection for artistic and civic communities.

Sadouskaya's account of the plein airs initiative should therefore be read not only as documentation of a particular project and time, but also as a glimpse into a multitude of other initiatives that continue to unfold across Belarus today. As the author rightly notes, this is not an isolated case but rather one of many "spores" or "gifs" of a wider mycelial network – a living structure that reveals current tendencies within Belarusian art. These tendencies inherit both the spirit and the structure of the 2020 protests, which philosopher Olga Shparaga has described as caring. We can read contemporary Belarusian artistic resistance through a horizontal and feminist lens – as an ongoing practice of care, interdependence, and survival.

“Stay with the trouble!” [1]
Donna Haraway

«Пахне чабор...» [2]
Пятрусь Броўка

The Care of the Fungus

Serpula lacrymans is a fungus that settles in dead wood and gradually breaks it down with its rhizomorphs.

A fungus has taken up residence in the log frame of the khutor [3]. It appears in homes left unheated for long stretches, where the roof begins to leak and the air turns damp and cold–– in houses where absence outweighs presence. In human terms, this fungus is described as dangerous and destructive. But dangerous to whom? What is its purpose? It quickly composts dead wood, turning it into soil – into earth. This Fungus is a helper and an agent of time; it is not against the present but for the future. It breaks down the wood, creating a medium for other living beings while we are far away.

News about the fungus in the walls, the leaking roof, the balcony almost deconstructed by time, water, and lichens reached me as I was reading Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*. I read and felt, in my body, that what Haraway writes about is unfolding in the landscape of my life. The headlines of these days are stories of how nonhuman agents have arrived in our house and are practicing care, not for us humans, but for the place itself in which they live and act.

Most of my family is now far from this house; we cannot return to stoke the stove. Relatives and friends care for the house—and now the fungus does, too. Can I see this otherwise, as a process of “making kin” with nonhuman agents (Haraway), and understand the action of the fungus as care? From a human point of view, care means preservation; from the point of view of place, care means continuation. From 2020 to 2024, this place helped people to continue. Now it needs a different care—the care of a fungus.

Works by L. "Alive After Death" series

Plein-air

Evernia prunastri—oakmoss—is a lichen, a lifeform born of a durable symbiosis between a fungus and an alga.
Around the house, every tree is dressed in lichens; scientists say this indicates clean air.

In this house, hidden in the forest, plein-airs took place from 2014 to 2024. I was part of them—sometimes curator, sometimes cleaner, sometimes administrator, driver, manager, mushroom-picker, fundraiser, cook, mower. Listing these roles splits me apart; I'd rather tangle all those markers of identity back into a single skein: I was a person making sure that meetings—between people, places, plants, ecosystems—could happen. Care took many forms and required many different gestures.

This text is my attempt to reflect on our work—our approach, methodology, and the history of these plein-airs—and perhaps to trace what this small, often nearly invisible process meant for the Belarusian community: a process that nevertheless found its couple of weeks each summer in order to happen. A crucial part of this reflection concerns the changes in both content and form after 2020—shaped, on the one hand, by protests saturated with mutual care, and on the other, by the parallel undertow of unprecedented repression, censorship, pressure on individuals, forced departures of loved ones and friends, searches, dismissals, blacklists—and our attempts to go on living and to keep ourselves integral.

In the Western tradition, such events are called residencies; we kept the older word. From the French, *plein air*

literally means “open air,” and in Russian (and English) it refers to the modernist tradition of painting nature. We tried to rethink “plein-air” itself, to deconstruct a structure that splits the human artist (subject) from a generalised object (“nature”). We rewove its meaning so that the artist would not “look at,” but “be with,” restoring the sense of oneself as part of a larger ecosystem.

The idea first emerged from a meeting (a symbiosis?) between two sides: the art community, represented by the directors of the *Ў Gallery* (Valentina Kiselyova and Anna Chistoserdova) [6], and the environmental community, represented by the director of Belarus’s oldest ecological NGO, Ecohome, and by the photographer Iryna Sukhy [5]. Over a glass of wine at the *Ў Gallery* bar, the idea arose to create a shared space for art and ecology. At first, it was simple — even a bit blunt: we would tell artists about environmental problems, and they would make artworks that could help people not only learn about but also feel and understand those problems.

The first attempt was the *Agri-Cultural Fest* in 2012—a three-day event where artists, ecologists, and farmers shared works, produce, and knowledge. It became clear immediately that lectures—even discussions—are not the best way to “own” knowledge; telling is not the same as understanding. So the idea of plein-airs appeared—not the classical kind (artists painting outdoors), but plein-airs as situations of encounter with ecosystems. Thus, in 2013, began the story of our plein-airs (the lichens attest the air is clean), which we later gathered under the name *EVAa Project* (Environmental Visual Audio Art Project). In 2020–2021, under the pressure of protests and rising waves of repression in Belarus, the plein-airs changed form and took on political meaning as an attempt to continue artistic practice in revolutionary times. This simple, anachronistic form—like an old tree inhabited by a fungus—found new meaning for Belarusian cultural workers and activists.

Works by L. “Alive After Death” series

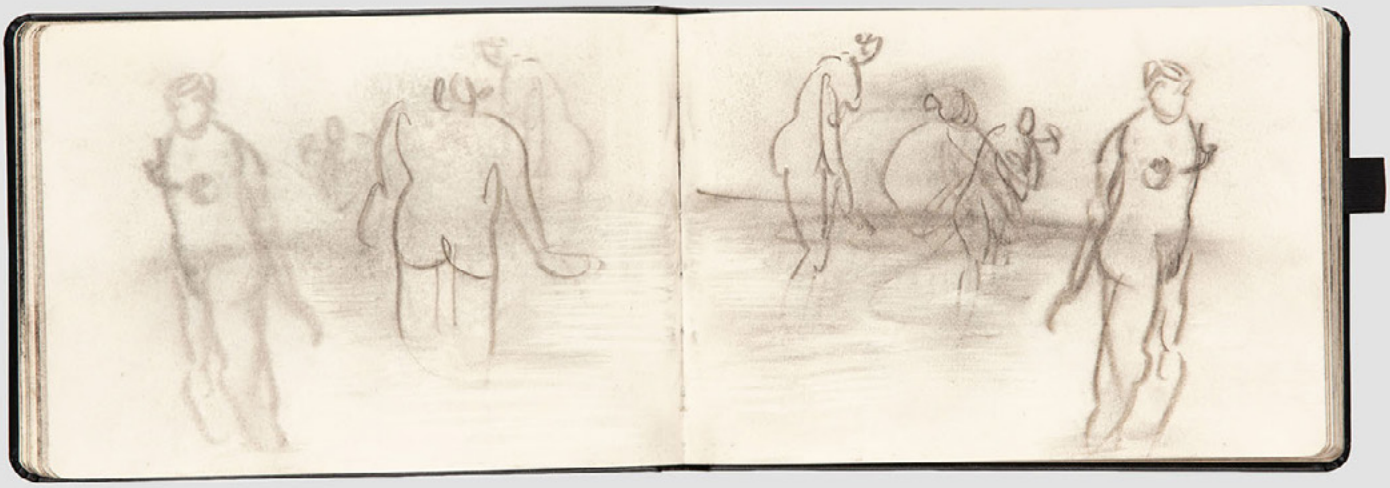
The Compost Heap's Caring Solidarity

Earthworms (Lumbricina) do their quiet work in the compost heap near the house, taking care of organic waste. Through their care, kitchen scraps and other organics quickly turn into dense, fertile soil.

Everyday life at the house is simple: we cook together; we sort our rubbish, and what cannot be recycled we take away; we do all the cleaning and washing ourselves; drinking water comes from the spring by the lake; electricity from a solar panel; water for daily use is drawn from a well; mint and other herbs for tea come from the garden; whatever is possible we buy from local farmers; we gather berries and mushrooms in season and apples in autumn—and the worms in the compost heap help us handle organic waste.

Limited resources and shared care for the place and the household offer a chance to live the principles of degrowth bodily. An economy of care, instead of an economy of growth, becomes natural in such circumstances; it turns out one can make do with little, and sufficiency is lived as another form of abundance.

Care for one another through daily life is a key part of the plein-airs. With no single person responsible for all the domestic work, we entered a mode of attunement: we cooked together, taking turns, adjusting not by timetable but by sensing each other's states. Each person chose when and what to cook, or which task to take—fetching water, chopping wood, washing dishes. Strikingly, we almost never reached for "procedural" solutions like chore rotas; we helped each other spontaneously, distributing responsibility without pressure. Domestic practice became a moment of closeness and care in which the most valuable bonds and conversations unfolded. When there is no consumer attitude toward another's labour, workload spreads softly and naturally, making room for rest, creativity, care, and gratitude. This free, self-organising structure answered warmly and gently to people's needs and capacities. The place was arranged so that hundreds of small acts of care were inevitable; through them, interdependence could be felt. Earthworms were also part of that chain, constantly composting our scraps so that next summer they would become fertile soil and the cycle could begin again.



Works by L. "Alive After Death" series

Being-With as Method

Błakitnyja azjory—the "Blue Lakes"—are a group of lakes in Belarus, in the western Belarusian Lakeland. Formed during the last glaciation, they were covered in pine and spruce-pine forests. The lakes are notable for their clear water and the absence of anthropogenic ecological disturbance; protected aquatic plants grow there (field horsetail Equisetum arvense and arrowhead Sagittaria sagittifolia).

Until 2020, our plein-airs followed a model borrowed from environmental education. We drew up programmes, and invited experts to lecture on permaculture, ecology, microplastics, hydrology, ornithology, and related topics. There were themes for each year, schedules, educational methodologies—an apparatus meant to "teach ecological behaviour." Artists became participants; experts dispensed knowledge.

Gradually, it became obvious that this structure did not work. The place itself—the forest—asked for softness. Distance from Minsk, intermittent electricity, the impossibility of using a beamer, the rough road, the weather—all of it disrupted the logic of control. We learned to accept circumstances rather than fight them. It became clear that a shared lunch with an activist or a biologist could matter more than a lecture; that the

lake in morning mist or the Perseids in August teach no less than a presentation. Human and more-than-human became equal participants.

The decisive break came in 2020, when the pandemic and protests destroyed the very forms of almost any public event. There was no plein-air that year. In 2021, we returned, and it was no longer an educational process aimed at producing an exhibition. It was a way to be together, to live through disappointment, to support one another. The plein-air continued the caring solidarity that appeared on Belarusian streets in 2020.

The form changed. We resisted the logics of overproduction and project efficiency, where encounters must culminate in a product. Public display had become unsafe; many independent cultural institutions were closed or had gone underground. We shifted focus from outcomes to relations. We concentrated on what happens during the plein-air: our practices, in a sense, inherited the logic of protest—building infrastructures of care, supporting each other, making acquaintances. Not the result but the very process of bonding with each other and with the site became the artistic practice. Care, in its broad political sense, moved to the centre.

Much changed after 2020: there were no open calls; new participants came by recommendation, and invitations were passed personally. A network of safe, close ties emerged. Often someone could not make it, or had to leave suddenly; others arrived at the last minute as a “+1” — and stayed. We accepted this as the field’s own logic: those who needed to come would come, for as long as they needed.

Works by L. “Alive After Death” series

From 2021, the plein-air existed without an aim to produce results and without a compulsory schedule. Artists, poets, ecologists, photographers, and theatre people gathered to cook, pick mushrooms, talk, and read to one another. The aim was no longer to make works for an exhibition; shared everydayness itself became the work we did together. Revolutionary/protest time is often described as rupture—as a state of exception that breaks habitual rhythms. Yet it is also a chance to reassemble the everyday, to re-compose ties and practices, including artistic ones.

Plein-airs gave room for this reassembly. To remind ourselves that not everything must have a goal, we began to write simple things into the "schedule" and call them "practices," returning to ourselves the right to time and to relationship with place and with one another. The tools of art fused with daily life; what had been background became both content and meaning.

The everyday turned into a space of resistance. When public forms of art, politics, and language were erased by repression, what remained were small, bodily, daily actions—embodied practices: cooking, looking, breathing, listening. These simple gestures restored a sense of agency.

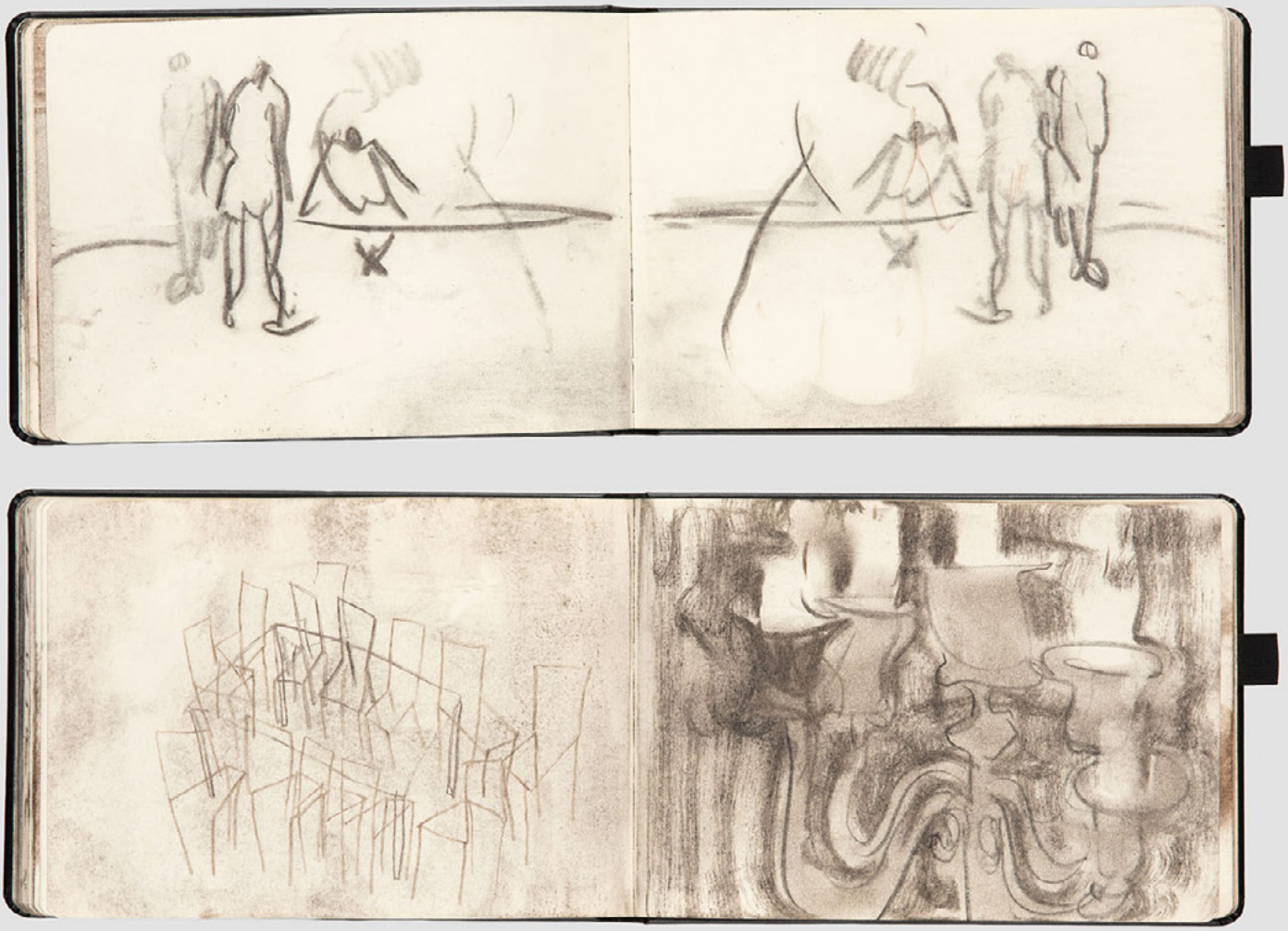
A few of them:

- A practice of lake-bathing—immersing in every lake we encounter during the plein-air.
- A practice of watching sunrise and sunset.
- A practice of sitting together by the fire.
- A practice of walking the river (not along it, but in the late-August shallows).
- A practice of looking at stars.
- A tasting of water from three springs.
- A practice of walking in the forest alone or as a group.
- A practice of foraging mushrooms, cleaning mushrooms, cooking mushrooms, and eating mushrooms.
- A practice of listening to birds in the morning.
- A practice of watching the fog.

our practices, in a sense, inherited the logic of protest—building infrastructures of care, supporting each other, making acquaintances

Fluxus-like traditions sprouted, spontaneously, in a Belarusian khutor. They had no goal, yet meaning emerged—togetherness, the sharedness of moments, renewed agency felt at points of contact with different weathers, places, media. Everyday life became a political act: a way to remain alive and connected where the possibility of public action had been destroyed.

Thus, in conditions where the usual forms of art and institutions became impossible, a practice of co-being was born—not a manifesto, not the hunt for a final product, but co-presence; not escapism—but care. We learned to build relations that do not require representation yet sustain bonds—with each other, with the forest, and with this cluster of lakes. These ties are the primary result. They persist, unfold, and give rise to new forms of support, symbioses, collaborations, friendships, and kin-making.



Works by L. "Alive After Death" series

Mushroom Soup

Recipe
Fresh mushrooms — 500 g
Butter — 50 g
Pearl barley — ½ cup
Potatoes — 3
Carrots — 2
Onion — 1
Sunflower oil, Salt, Ground black pepper, Bay leaf, Parsley, Sour cream to taste

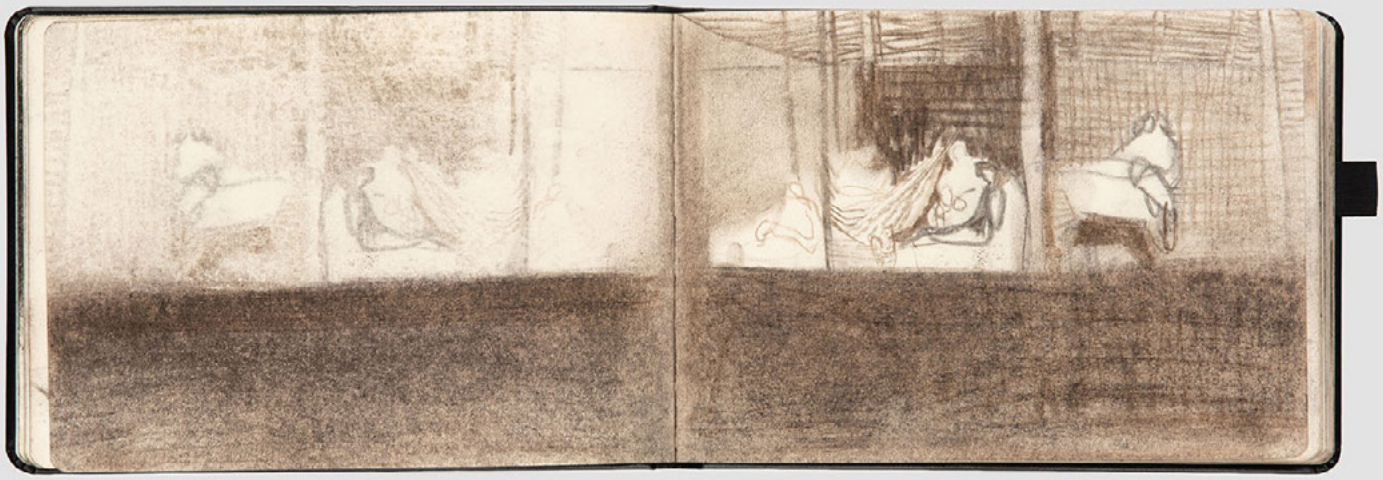
Soak the pearl barley in cold water in advance—overnight or at least 2 hours. Gather fresh mushrooms (ideally porcini, aspen, birch boletes), clean them, slice, and sauté in 2 tbsp butter. Transfer the sautéed mushrooms to a pot, add 2 litres of boiling water, and simmer over low heat for 30 minutes. Cut the potatoes into thin strips. Dice the carrots and onion finely. Heat vegetable oil in a skillet and first sauté the onion until golden. Add the carrots and fry for 5–7 minutes. Add the vegetables to the soup, salt and pepper, add a bay leaf, and cook for another 20–30 minutes until the potatoes are done. Serve with sour cream, finely chopped parsley, and bread. Eat at a big table with family, loved ones, and friends.

Works by L. "Alive After Death" series

Usually, after the plein-airs, we organised exhibitions at the *Ў Gallery*: quick, sometimes sketch-like reflections on processes and ideas we engaged with. They were often hard to grasp and not close to viewers, because the plein-air is a form that resists representation. It is an experience of bodies and bonds that cannot be extracted into an external object and presented, isolated, in a white cube; institutional formats cannot hold this.

Since 2020, there have been no public exhibitions (first, the gallery went into quarantine; later, in 2021, it closed because the political persecution, and the team had to leave the country). Public events became impossible, as anything could be grounds for detention. That necessity led us to a more organic way of showing—of presenting the content of the plein-airs outside their site. Not exhibitions, but brief occasions—meetings, sometimes dinners—where there were no spectators because everyone present became a participant. The plein-air itself, and whatever followed, became acts without an audience—mysteries. We found ways to hold them without announcements, without openings, within our own community, in liminal spaces on the verge of closure; in private flats and the emptied studios of those who have already left the country. In those circumstances, such meetings became a way not so much of public as of personal speaking and sharing: a chance to share what we had lived through, to meet, to eat again a mushroom soup that carries more meaning than curatorial texts in conditions of dictatorship, censorship, and blacklists. Our "target audience" was ourselves, our loved ones and friends.

Political transformations shifted our understanding of art. Traditionally, the art system functions as a machine of representation, where artists "present" results to a broad public. In Belarus—amid the contraction of public space (because cultural venues were radically reduced, and because almost any public act became unsafe)—initiatives like our plein-air began to move from exhibitionary practices to the formation of spaces of support and care, where contemporary art operated as a constellation of tools for mediating relations between people.



Works by L. "Alive After Death" series

Hyphae and Spores

A hypha (from Greek hyphē—web) is a thread-like fungal filament; the mass of hyphae forms a mycelium. Spores (from Greek spora—sowing, seed) are the reproductive cells of fungi and plants, used for dispersal.

Before 2020, there were almost no practices in Belarus that set as their goal not the display and production of art but the creation of another form of everyday life and of ties between people through art. After 2020, many such practices appeared. Like fungal hyphae, they branch underground, connecting us in networks—silent, hidden—because any public manifestation risks people's safety and the life of the process itself: being discovered, destroyed, shut down, or blacklisted.

In our pockets, on our clothes, in our bags, and within us remain seeds and spores that germinate on the compost heap of our relations. Echoing Haraway once more: "To seed worlds is to open the history of companion species to ever more relentless diversity and urgent trouble." After 2020, the plein-air became a way to "stay with the trouble," to withstand its volume and complexity—not to avoid it, but to be in it, together with dear others—with fungi, lakes, and wind. Care became our form of resistance. As philosopher Olga Shparaga writes about the Belarusian protests of 2020: after 2020, care remained political action—without slogans; private, but not apolitical.

Thank you to the old linden, the worms, the apple tree, the lakes, the blackcurrant, the lichen, and the fungus. They are co-authors of this piece. And thanks to everyone who knows how to use the Khutor's toilet, what to throw into the compost, and who remembers the secret paths to the lakes, the chanterelles, and the porcini.

Works by L. "Alive After Death" series

A recipe for making drawing charcoal
Peel thin willow or linden twigs, cut them into stick-lengths, and pack them into a metal coffee tin filled with river sand. Bury the tin under a campfire for about five hours. Done! Suits for drawing everything—from black holes to soft bodies.

Endnotes

1. Haraway, D. J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.p.116

2. "Thyme is fragrant..." - is the title and line from a famous poem by Belarusian poet Piatruś Broŭka. In 2021, it replaced the government-banned popular protest slogan "Жыве Беларусь!" (Long Live Belarus!) in public. It symbolizes Belarusian solidarity. It can be used in dialogue. To "Thyme is fragrant..." one might respond with "It is fragrant!" or "It's fragrant forever!". Броўка, Пятрусь. 1988. *Збор Твораў. Т. 3. Вершы*, Паэмы, 1954-1964. Vol. 3. Мінск: Мастацкая літаратура.

3. Khutor is a single-homestead rural settlement in Eastern Europe regions

4. Latouche, Serge. 2009. *Farewell to Growth. Polity*.

5. Sadouskaya, Sofiya. 2020. "Мастацтва Прарастаць. Экалагічнае Як Палітычнае. Размова Ірыны Сухій І Сафіі Садоўскай Пра 'EVAA Project.'" *pARTisanka* 1 (1): 87–89.

6. Ў Gallery of Contemporary Art. 2017. EVAA Project 2012—2016.

7. Шпарага, Ольга. 2025. "Заботливая Демократия Как Альтернатива Героизации и Патернализму." *REFORM.News*. February 19. https://reform.news/zabotlivaja-demokratija-kak-alternativa-geroizacii-i-paternalizmu.

Aigerim Tleubay

The Persistence of Imperfect Solidarity in Grassroots Movements

Aigerim Tleubay is a community organiser and community-based researcher from Kazakhstan, engaged in feminist, ecological, and art movements. Her work is rooted in the intersections of feminist organising, climate justice, and local knowledge. She is Program Director of FemAgora Central Asia, a grassroots organization supporting women*'s movements. From 2022 to 2024, as Director of Artcom Platform and contributor of the Care for Balkhash Lake Initiative, she co-curated the Art Collider School in Balkhash, bringing together young artists, scientists, and local residents to imagine ecological futures, and "Balkhash 2024" International Forum, where communities, activists, and policymakers shaped strategies to protect the lake. She writes for independent media across Central Asia, using storyworking as a way to connect struggles for land, water, and dignity – and to build transnational solidarity against climate and social injustice.

Korpe, a traditional sitting quilt from Kazakhstan. Photo courtesy of Aigerim Tleubay.

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This essay grows out of collective knowledge and experience accumulated over nine years of working with Central Asian grassroots communities, including the Artcom Platform art collective and many others.

This essay was first written in Russian, a language that continues to carry the region's colonial imprint, and then translated by me into English, another languageя marked by its own imperial past, with the care of friends and the assistance of AI.

How solidarity takes shape within our grassroots movements under these conditions

The aim of this essay is not to offer a full analysis of the colonial, postcolonial, or neocolonial structures that continue to shape the conditions of life across Central Asia. While such analysis remains important, here I focus on how solidarity takes shape within our grassroots movements under these conditions.

As Akbar Rasulov notes, Central Asia is often described as five "unfinished modernization projects." [1] In this view, our countries are seen as being in a permanent "transition" between the so-called Second and Third Worlds, places imagined to need external guidance. The same logic is repeated by global foundations, international NGOs, and embassy programs from "developed" countries. The region is not treated as a partner in global exchange but as a passive field for testing and influence, a group of "transitional" states presumed to lack their own institutional histories and reliant on imported models of governance and development.

These external representations don't just shape how local movements are seen; they also reshape how we speak about ourselves and to one another. As we learn and adopt the "donor language," our vocabulary for describing our work gradually changes. This borrowed language helps us communicate with global institutions, but it also reshapes how we think and speak about what we do. Over time, the "donor language" becomes a space of tension between what can be expressed and what is actually lived.

If the "donor language" represents one side of external influence, the other appears in academic production. Academic and public discourse about grassroots movements, especially research produced outside the region, also affects how these movements understand and describe themselves.

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Dastarkhān, a traditional tablecloth from Kazakhstan. Photo courtesy of Aigerim Tleubay.

Researchers rarely invite local participants as co-authors in the process of knowledge creation. As a result, knowledge that emerges from practice is often represented out of context, leaving communities without their own voices. This reinforces a hierarchy in which "universal" and supposedly "objective" knowledge dominates knowledge rooted in lived experience, emotion, and practice.

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Ideas that originate within communities, such as mutual aid, horizontality, or collective care, often become part of theoretical frameworks developed elsewhere without acknowledgement of their sources or contexts. As a result, local experience is turned intoan illustration or material rather than a full contribution to global knowledge. For instance, in political studies, academic texts written by researchers often frame these movements through the lens of "democratization" or "civil society." Yet for the participants themselves, these terms rarely hold much meaning, as their practices are driven by care, survival, or local forms of solidarity that do not fit universal models.

In this regard, Kazakh cultural scholar Zira Nauryzbayeva highlights the Aday clan of tribal union Bayuly in western Kazakhstan's oil belt, a region with a long history of anti-colonial protest, from earlier uprisings to Zhanaozen in 2011 [2] and ongoing strikes. Often in papers, this is framed as a class protest ("proletarian protest"), but she argues that's misleading: many workers, mostly Aday, act as an indigenous tribe on its own land, reasserting inherent title to the land and its resources [3].

Collective action won't fit tidy, external frames; it endures not only on material conditions, but on the close, felt ties that make belonging and purpose real. Feelings, emotions, personal experiences, and even fatigue in activism are not secondary; they are central. Ignoring them means overlooking the texture of collective life, the fragile and deeply human ground on which solidarity rests. Horizontal organization is often imagined as an alternative to hierarchy, a space of mutual care and support. Yet power does not disappear; it changes form. It can be expressed through language, tone, attention, or through those who set the atmosphere, direction, and ethical limits of the group. This is because the complexity of human relationships and the object-oriented ontology's concept of total non-hierarchy rarely intersect in real life — a point emphasized by my friend, Kazakh education activist and pedagogue Aizhan Smagulova in our years-long conversations about power in grassroots initiatives.

Korpe, a traditional sitting quilt from Kazakhstan. Photo courtesy of Aigerim Tleubay.

To stay legible to donors, media, or allies, grassroots collectives accept categories that police what is seen as political, ethical, or even real. That acceptance is not neutral: once these categories begin to govern internal life, horizontal forms start to mirror the very hierarchies they seek to oppose. Hence the paradox of horizontalism.

In this environment, the image of the "good activist" — responsible, sensitive, fair — easily appears. But this image can turn into a form of pressure and self-surveillance.

Under such conditions, collectivity can shift from a flexible, and evolving practice into a moral ideal, a disciplinary ethic. It creates unspoken expectations to always be attentive, available, and caring. These rules function as internal control, generating pressure to remain emotionally open and constantly present.

In this environment, the image of the "good activist" — responsible, sensitive, fair — easily appears. But this image can turn into a form of pressure and self-surveillance. Fatigue, frustration, or distance may then be seen as moral failure. Care, once turned into an unquestioned norm, loses its openness and becomes discipline. Burnout and a loss of self follow.

When personal and collective boundaries blur in pursuit of an ideal, individuals lose contact with themselves. In trying to belong completely, one gives up doubt, contradiction, and complexity — everything that makes life genuine. This is especially visible when personal experience becomes political. Every feeling or gesture turns into a political act, leaving little room for what is private or simple. One begins to live not one's own life but a collective image of it.

But solidarity is not an ideal but a set of lived practices that include error, vulnerability, contradiction, and structural imperfection. Imperfect solidarity allows space for rest, anger, or withdrawal without guilt or moral judgment. A collective that can accept the words "I'm tired, I need a break" preserves both the person and the group. The ideal of constant engagement leads to exhaustion and fragmentation. The continuity of any collective depends on respect for personal boundaries. This is, in itself, a decolonial act, a refusal to perform the role of the endlessly productive subject.

Imperfect solidarity also recognizes the mixed and sometimes conflicting motives that bring people together. The ideal of moral purity demands unity of purpose, but people unite for many reasons: shared trauma, practical need, or the wish to belong. Acknowledging this complexity allows for broader and more lasting coalitions built on shared action rather than moral perfection.

Error, too, has value. In a culture of perfection, error means failure; in imperfect solidarity, it is a form of learning. It shows the limits of our systems, capacities, and care. Recognizing and addressing mistakes together becomes a strong practice of honesty and connection. Imperfect solidarity is an ongoing process of reflection that names discomfort and hidden power relations, even when it feels uneasy.

This reflection does not reject care or solidarity. It returns them to their practical meaning. Care becomes sustainable when it includes the right to pause, to set boundaries, to feel anger, or to step away. Recognizing imperfection is not the opposite of community; it is what keeps community real and open. What we call a movement exists in uncertainty, in mismatch, in the ongoing attempts to be together despite contradictions.

In conclusion, I want to return to something simple yet difficult: the sustainability of grassroots movements depends not only on strategy, but also on the ability to preserve one's energy, pace, and integrity. As grassroots initiator and creator from Almaty Aisulu Toishibek writes, "Whatever our goal may be, we must have the strength and energy to realize it. Being well, allowing ourselves to remain true to who we are and to our values — this is already a powerful political act." [4]

What we call a movement exists in uncertainty, in mismatch, in the ongoing attempts to be together despite contradictions.

Endnotes

[1] Akbar Rasulov, "Between the Second and the Third Worlds: The Legal Postcoloniality of Central Asia," in Sergey Sayapin, ed., *International Law, Politics and Security in Central Asia: Studies on Transformation and Development in the OSCE Region* (Springer, forthcoming 2025)

[2] Radio Azattyq. "Kazakhstan: Zhanaozen Oilmen 2011." Azattyq.org (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), May 25, 2020. https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-zhanaozen-oilmen-2011/30636710.html

[3] Zira Nauryzbayeva, "Between God and Oil," *in Qazaqstan, Kazakhstan, قازاقستان: Labyrinths of Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse, ed. Alima Bissenova* (Almaty: Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture, 2023), 335–399.

[4] Aisulu Toyshibek, Telegram post, tits talking, no. 985, n.d., accessed November 9, 2025, https://t.me/titstalking/985

Poornima Sukumar

Aravani Art Project*: Intersectional art and connections

I am Poornima Sukumar, a creative director, part-time artist, illustrator, and thinker with a deep passion for community-driven art. For over a decade, I have worked as a community artist, collaborating with diverse groups across the world. My journey has taken me to painting with children of sex workers, transforming remote villages in Uttarakhand, working with children in East Africa, engaging with the Maasai community in their centres, collaborating with juvenile prison inmates, supporting individuals with disabilities, and empowering members of the transgender community. Each experience has reinforced my belief in the power of art to connect, heal, and create change, making it a tool for storytelling, identity, and social inclusion. I co-founded Aravani Art Project along with the members of the Transgender community in 2016.

* The term 'Aravani' means a person who worships Lord Aravan, the patron God of the transgenders. This name is used as a non-patronising name for the community.

Indian history and mythology are rich with instances of trans*persons holding high positions in royal courts and society, with many mythological stories bestowing them with divine status. However, today they are a highly marginalised community, facing exclusion and discrimination in almost every walk of life. This discrimination has denied them employment opportunities, forcing them into begging and sex work as a source of livelihood, which in turn has affected their perception in society. Historically, Indian mythology and history celebrated trans*persons, often granting them high social standing in royal courts and even divine status in numerous stories. However, this is a stark contrast to their current reality: even today, trans*persons are a heavily marginalised community, experiencing discrimination and exclusion across almost all aspects of life.

The systemic discrimination limits their access to employment, frequently leaving begging and sex work as their only viable sources of income, which further entrenches negative societal perceptions of the community. This, along with general apathy and stigmas/ taboos around the community, has stifled/limited their interactions and conversations with the general public, subjecting them to increased discrimination by society and, in many cases, by their own families.

The term 'Aravani' means a person who worships Lord Aravan, the patron God of the transgenders. This name is used as a non-patronising name for the community.

Aravani Art Project's works at the intersection of community, public space, and visual culture, collaborating with transgender and LGBTQIA+ communities to create murals, installations, and collective artistic gestures that reimagine the urban environment. Our practice positions art not only as a form of expression but also as a means of recognition and visibility for a community often pushed to society's margins. By working slowly and collaboratively—through shared storytelling, embodied knowledge, and creative co-production—they build spaces where trans*persons can assert presence, foster connection, and reshape the narratives imposed on them. Aravani works across sectors—including urban design, education, and waste management—using art to challenge stigma, amplify marginalized voices, and build intersectional collaborations.

Our project was initiated with the clear goal of bridging the societal gap that has persisted for decades. Spending quality time with this community, discussing the journey of re-discovery and the difficult process of dismantling old identities to forge new, more authentic ones, deepened my interest immensely. The emotional intensity of these

internal struggles was truly overwhelming. At its core, this vision is about empowerment—amplifying voices long pushed to the margins, since we work with sex workers and the begging community within the Transgender community. Though legal recognition has improved, the lived reality at the grassroots remains harsh, with many still facing hostility, exclusion, and limited opportunities. Through art, community engagement, and visibility, we aim to create safer, more inclusive environments where transgender individuals can reclaim space, build confidence, and shape their own narratives.

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Streets of Tsunami Quarters, Chennai. 2017. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

Public art is a powerful tool that enhances community participation, togetherness and for catalysing public interventions. While a splash of colour to brighten up your Monday blues is a welcome treat, public art has the potential to be far more powerful - and a tool for breaking and initiating conversations around social taboos that have existed in society for far too long.

The Aravani art project aims at organically bringing together the people from the transgender community and cis-people artists to collaborate and paint public spaces.

The objective is to use art as a medium to initiate and sustain conversations aimed at sensitising society towards the challenges and discrimination faced by the community. These will enable to creation of an awareness about the community and the social exclusion they are subjected to. At the completion of the wall art, the transgender community and the public will have an opportunity to interact and barter conversations/ stories while they break myths and disembark stereotypes. The hope was to also create space for the trans* community in the field of art.

Shwetha, Shanthi, Jyothi, Chandri, Thara, Purushi, Raji, Prarthana, Sandhya at the mural for the Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru 2020. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

The Aravani Art Project operates at the potent intersection of artistic expression and dedicated social activism. Our work is fundamentally rooted in the belief that art is a powerful catalyst for dialogue and transformation. This synergy is manifested as we meticulously conceive and execute murals and public artworks that are directly informed by, and speak to, the prevailing social, environmental, and political issues within a specific geographical and cultural landscape.

Our work is fundamentally rooted in the belief that art is a powerful catalyst for dialogue and transformation.

We utilize the public canvas not merely for aesthetic adornment but as a vital platform for raising awareness, challenging entrenched norms, and giving visibility to marginalized narratives. Each brushstroke is a statement, consciously engaging with the complex realities of the community, ranging from gender inequality and sanitation crises to environmental degradation and the rights of the transgender community.

Vicky, Sanjeevani and Sarita at our 2nd mural in 2016, Mumbai.
Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

Jyothi, Shanthi and Karnika at Venice Biennale, 2024. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

Our process is deeply collaborative and geographically sensitive. Significant time is invested in understanding the local context, interacting with community members, and identifying the issues that can be voiced through public art. This ensures that the resulting artwork is not an external imposition but an authentic, resonant reflection of the space it occupies. In this way, the art itself becomes a form of direct action, transforming silent struggles into visible, unavoidable public discourse and inspiring collective reflection and change.

We examine their spaces of innovation, the places of their history and create room to learn by transforming this knowledge into public art. The streets are particularly important place to do our work, as it is in these public spaces that the bodies of Transgender identifying people attract violence, harassment, social negligence and pressure. Our creative collective seeks to respond to these experiences by creating art and spaces that instead encourage exchange, discussion, openness and debate surrounding gender identities and stigma. For example, we collaborated with St+Art India Foundation and painted a mural at the biggest red light district in Asia.

Aravani Art Project x St+art Foundation, 2018 Kolkata. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

The visibility of the transgender figure has begun to disrupt long-held beliefs about gender. By making art together, we are seeking to gently reshape these politics of inclusion and exclusion that surround gender identities. The struggle for accepting and understanding the identities of Transgender individuals exists in each society, race, and class.

What makes these traditions extraordinary is their role as collective sanctuaries. Each festival, myth, and ritual becomes a gathering space where no one feels alone

We began this work with a deep desire to explore trans culture and trans history—traditions that have been slowly fading, especially after the pandemic, and further diluted by shifting political landscapes. Many of these festivals and narratives date back 300 to 400 years, carried forward through generations of transgender people who have preserved them with devotion and resilience.

What makes these traditions extraordinary is their role as collective sanctuaries. Each festival, myth, and ritual becomes a gathering space where no one feels alone—a rare moment of belonging in a world that often denies transgender people visibility and dignity. For many who

suppress their identities in daily life, these celebrations offer an opportunity to be fully themselves, even if only for a few days—to let go, to express, to exist without fear.

Yet within this beauty lies a stark contradiction. In these sacred moments, transgender people are revered—seen as divine, holy, close to god. But outside these spaces, the same individuals are often sexualised, marginalised, and violated. This tension reveals both the depth of cultural reverence and the harshness of social reality, making it even more urgent to archive, honour, and bring forward these powerful histories before they fade further.

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The project also creates visibility through its other storytelling methods – honouring cultural traditions, sharing personal journeys, and highlighting everyday acts of resilience. These stories, expressed through colour, texture, and form, allow viewers to encounter trans lives in ways that are humanising, intimate, and grounded in truth. We have explored theatre, audio walks, podcasts, zines, graphic novels, animations and are set out on an eternal journey to find different mediums of art to express and to archive the lived stories.

Kumari and Purushi lost in thoughts at a local festival in Bannerghatta, 2019. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

An art rendition of the photograph for Venice Biennale, 2024. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

Aravani Art Project x St+art Foundation, 2018 Kolkata. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

Solidarity emerges not just from representation but from participation. Our monthly gatherings with our collective members creates a sense of family and continues to use friendship and trust as a foundation for all the work we do. We also conduct small workshops that encourage the members to share vulnerabilities with judgements and call out on the mistakes as well. In doing so, Aravani Art Project builds a culture where trans and queer people are not merely included but centred—where their voices, histories, and everyday lived experiences are shared.

Ritualistic morning with Hearth Summit BLR ,Community Arts Network at Bangalore Creative Circus, 2024. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

A scene from the making of the Solo Exhibition with XXL Gallery, 2025. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

A moment in Cubbon Park where the trees and the Transwomen share lived stories, 2025. Photo courtesy of Aravani Art Project

Aravani Art Society envisions a future where art becomes a bridge of care, connection, and possibility for sexually vulnerable individuals and children from marginalized communities. By working hand-in-hand with transgender artists, we seek to create pathways of dignity, visibility, and creative expression. Our commitment extends beyond metropolitan centers, reaching into smaller towns and districts across India, where access and opportunity are often most limited. In doing so, we hope to nurture a landscape where every community feels seen, supported, and empowered to imagine new futures through the transformative power of art.

Lizaveta Stecko

A Collective Resistance Against the Darkness.

The case of STUS Foundation

Lizaveta Stecko (born 1998) – Belarusian-Polish curator, activist and researcher working in the thematic areas of migration, borderland experiences and engaged art. Co-founder of the STUS Foundation, she implements projects and exhibitions that critically examine mechanisms of oppression, practices of solidarity and pro-social activities. She has curated and co-curated exhibitions and events at DOMIE, the Szczur gallery in Poznań, the Museum of Warsaw's Praga District, the Ochota Cultural Centre 'OKO', Jasna 10 – Social Institution of Culture of Political Critique, and Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. As a producer and animator, she co-creates festivals, performances and artistic laboratories, focusing on community building, empowering people with migration experience, and developing grassroots practices of care and engagement. She holds a master's degree in curating and art theory from the Magdalena Abakanowicz University of Arts in Poznań.

In 2022, immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion to Ukraine, I co-founded the STUS collective. My friend and I felt that we could somehow influence the situation and use our experience. I wanted to join in active support. STUS began with the creation of a chat on a social network where people willing to help Ukraine, and those seeking support, could reach out, come together, and establish contact or cooperation: finding housing for an acquaintance from Ukraine, clothing for someone who crossed the border with only a backpack, purchasing and delivering medicines to Ukraine that had become unavailable after the full-scale invasion began. From the very beginning, our role was to coordinate assistance — for example, finding basic equipment for soldiers, purchasing helmets or tourniquets, and organizing logistics for delivery to the front line. This kind of grassroots coordination often grows into surprisingly nimble support networks, and it tends to spark even greater efforts in times of upheaval.

Humanitarian aid from the STUS collective, 2022

Humanitarian aid from the STUS collective, 2022

Humanitarian aid from the STUS collective, 2022

Where we came from

From the very beginning, half of the team were people with experience of migrating from Belarus and Ukraine. It was a remarkable opportunity for STUS that these people were able to integrate and find like-minded people. This enabled the initiative to operate from the outset not within a hierarchical, welcome culture framework, but to build joint connections and networks of care, where people with shared experiences of migration and refugees came together and developed collaborative opportunities. Our experience guided us in which direction to go and how to build processes. In this context, it is important to mention that the name of the collective, and later the foundation, was inspired by the personality of the Ukrainian poet and political prisoner Vasyl Stus and his struggle for independence.

Poland's borders became a zone of ambivalence, with a humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border and cruelty and violence towards refugees on the one hand, and support and public involvement in helping refugees from Ukraine on the other.

Both as part of the STUS initiative and on an individual level, the socio-political context and emotions determined our joint activities, the conditions in which Polish society and the state found themselves. At that time, Poland was under the influence of right-wing politicians who prioritized conservative values and criticized liberals and independent actors. State control over cultural institutions was tightening, with leaders and programs being replaced by those more loyal to the dominant narrative. The main events of those years were the deprivation of reproductive rights for part of the population; abortion on demand is still not available here. There was also a dominant trend towards tougher rhetoric against the queer community, with a number of regions and cities in Poland declaring themselves "LGBT ideology-free zones." Poland's borders became a zone of ambivalence, with a humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border and cruelty and violence towards refugees on the one hand, and support and public involvement in helping refugees from Ukraine on the other.

Working with a "vulnerable" context

In the early years, the team's active focus on the topic of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and helping people with experience of refugees from there was driven by the hope of liberation from Russian imperialism.

In the work process, the collective's focus took on a more intersectional perspective. Living in an era of multiple crises, we try to act in those areas that we can reach on our own.

Since some members of the collective have experience of migration, research, practice, and action in this environment, it has become a natural focus. We organize events that invite people with such experiences, raise their visibility, and strengthen their potential in the cultural sphere. We want to feel a sense of agency, care, and relevance together with these people, as well as the joy of being together despite the darkness around us. For example, cooking and eating together, which accompanies our events, has become such a practice for us.

Project „Victory Garden" in collaboration with Motyka i Słońce foundation, 2022, photo by Polia Niemaeva

Project „Victory Garden" in collaboration with Motyka i Słońce foundation, 2022, photo by Polia Niemaeva

Typically, when we cook together, we make more food to provide for guests who might not be involved in the cooking. It's become a core principle for us to care for our participants, to ensure they have a delicious meal and the strength to thrive, and only then to make changes around them. At our events, we prioritize vegan food, preparing it ourselves or hiring people with migration experience to cook for us.

We also encourage people who are involved in creative activities by organizing exhibitions and concerts. We create workspaces for creative people with migration experience or whose work could be considered alternative. We usually invite those we know personally, follow them and believe in their creativity. It's important to us to create a safe space for both performers and audiences. Aware of our audience's financial situation, we hold events free of charge, offering the option of voluntary donations. Our events are multilingual—our community is gradually growing, and so is the number of languages we speak.

When creating visual arts events, we find open calls a valuable practice. Where we propose a topic, look for participants and invite our friends to participate. We strive to develop a welcoming and open format, but at the same time, it's important to ensure that both we and those involved feel safe.

Event "Besties hanging out in the squat are hot 2023, photo by Vitalii Ivantsov

Event "TUSA STUSA", 2025

Opening of the exhibition "By Art to Cepelia", 2022

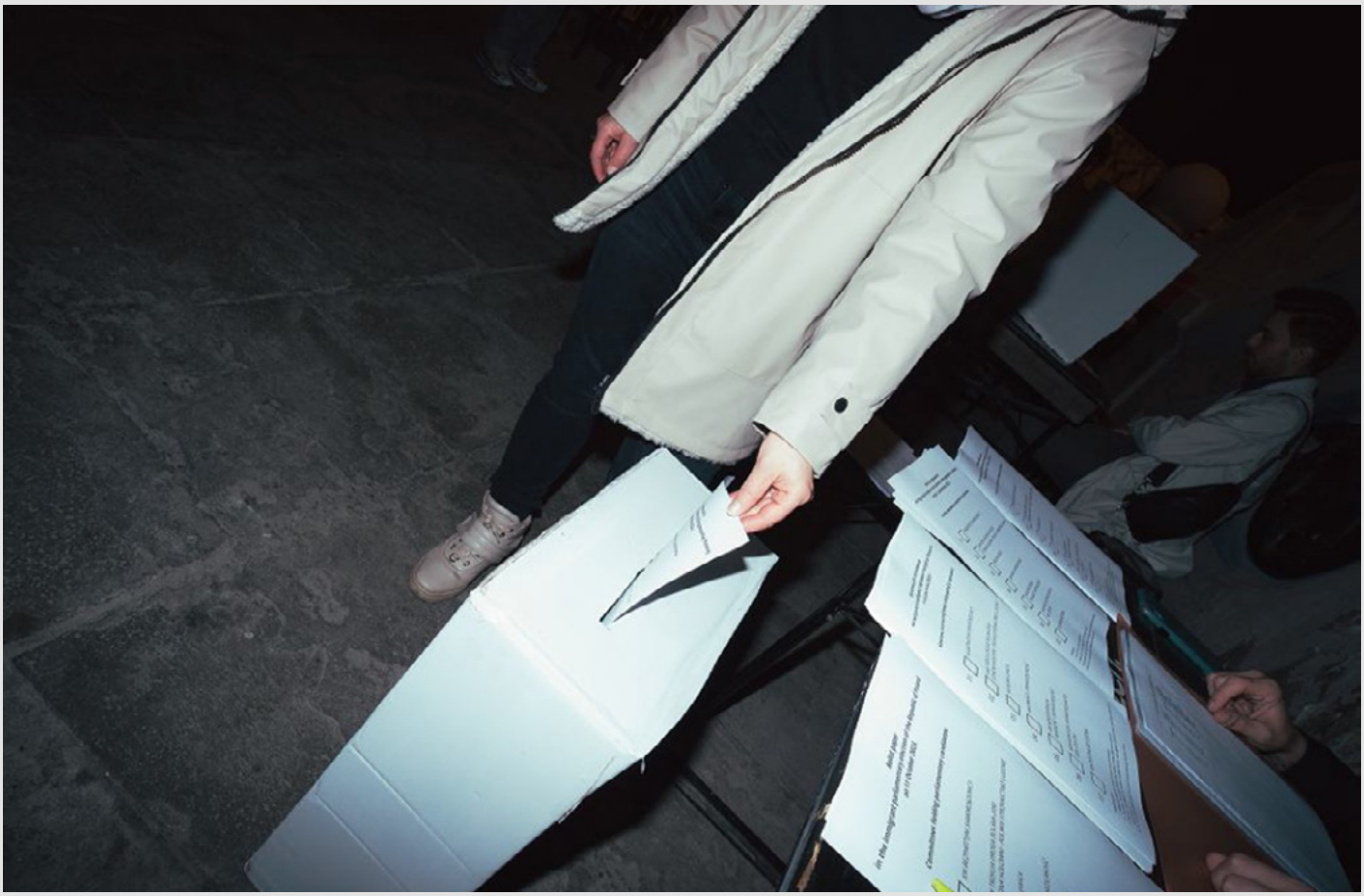
I feel that the field of creativity, in our case, has a long history, one in which we want to work, create, and be inspired by one another.

Unfortunately, the context in which we live forces us to engage in more than just these activities. is also active in publicly commenting on the current political reality, speaking out on issues of migration policy, the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, and other events related to Poland's foreign policy. We speak on behalf of and together with the diverse migrant community living here in Poland, attempting to reconcile the perspectives of various types of people with migration experience: workers and refugees, those who have lived in Poland for 5 months and those who have lived here for 15 years, people from countries that have experienced Russian violence but also from countries that for centuries were victims of European colonialism. Although we do not directly join political debate, we maintain our own perspective on the margins of the mainstream, yet from time to time we use mass media, such as television or radio, to reach a wide audience.

People with migration experience also have a voice

One such example was the organization in 2023 of symbolic parliamentary elections for communities with migration experience. Traditionally, migrants are groups and communities that are deprived of the opportunity to participate in elections. Despite the fact that political decisions directly affect their lives, for example, through the tightening of migration policy, the extension of deadlines or the complication of bureaucracy on the path to their legalisation, they cannot influence politics through direct electoral voting. Due to this, migrants experience a constant feeling of powerlessness, which further contributes to marginalisation and exclusion. Using approaches taken from activist and artistic practices, such as the theatre of the oppressed, we proposed an envisioned situation of political participation where migrants can vote and be elected. Through political imagination, participants with experiences of migration and refugeehood symbolically reclaim their agency. The event was organized by an international team that believes that people with migration experience deserve full visibility and effective participation in politics, especially when that politics directly affects their living conditions. We wanted to encourage participants to reflect on their role in the Polish state, particularly in the context of the distribution of power and voting rights. The campaign encountered predictable hate from right-wing circles. Our personal information was shared on one social media platform, and there was some harsh criticism of our actions, but there was also some humor. For example, a tweet about "this is how nation states are destroyed. Without a single shot being fired," referring to our practices.

We received also misunderstanding from some migrant communities that shared the narrative: people who migrate are only guests and therefore have no right to decide the future of the country in which they live and which they help to build.



Event "I want to have a vote", 2023

Having migration and the experience of living in the context of another country, we bring together people with similar stories so that we can express our views and participate in creating counter-narratives.

We act from a different position: having migration and the experience of living in the context of another country, we bring together people with similar stories so that we can express our views and participate in creating counter-narratives. As STUS, our central concept is the idea of interdependence, meaning that we emphasise the connections between various forms of violence and oppression, despite the fact that the media and politicians attempt to portray them as separate events. . That is why it is so important for us to speak openly about the possibilities of mutual support and solidarity, even when experiences and perspectives differ, and global narratives try to divide us. We believe that in the struggle against oppression and neo-colonialism, we need transnational solidarity. Therefore, in the summer of 2025 we organized the discussion panel *"Faces of Oppression and Collective Solidarity"*.

We met to discuss issues about the roles played by individuals and groups in histories of power, violence, and oppression, but also in support,

Discussion panel "Faces of Oppression and Collective Solidarity", photo by Kacha Szaniawska

Event place BarKa, 2025 photo by Filip Sowiński

Event place BarKa, 2025 photo by Filip Sowiński

solidarity, and compassion. Equally important were questions about strategies of resistance and what we can do to meaningfully support the struggle for freedom. We invited people from Palestine, Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia (Sakartvelo), who shared their experiences, spoke about the realities of life in their countries, and reflected on their countries' future. Participants in the discussion included: Emil Al-Hawaldeh, Lana Burkadze, Mark Tsinkevich, and Natanael Maslianinov. The discussion was moderated by Katarzyna Przyborska.

Events in these countries reveal universal mechanisms of oppression and the struggle for freedom, even though historical and political contexts differ. In each case, there is a clear escalation of violence by the state apparatus and practices of biopower, total surveillance and the construction of control infrastructure, propaganda that deals not so much with the future as with erasing the past and legitimizing lies in the present. We discussed the mechanisms and effects of propaganda and disinformation, ethnic and racial prejudices, colonialism, and the imperialism of major states.

Events in these countries reveal universal mechanisms of oppression and the struggle for freedom, even though historical and political contexts differ.

In a world that constantly tries to divide us, our goal is to build bridges between people who experience oppression and to discover together what unites us — because occupation is occupation, war is war, and although imperialism and colonialism often wear different masks, the mechanisms of empires remain the same.

KVIR LAB presentation, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2024

Queering reality

An essential lens in researching imperial mechanisms and the intersectionality of various violence and the building and shaping of counter-practices that could resist repressive configurations of power and form communities and care is queer optics. In 2024, together with Arina Bozhok, I supervised KVIR LAB – a laboratory where we invited queer people with experience of migration from Belarus and Ukraine to share their stories and create a zine publication together. It was a very important experience, thanks to which I understood how deeply the empire can take root and how much power the people around me have to influence the reality around them. In this laboratory, the very process of creating a safer space, cross-pollination, non-hierarchical forms of mutual learning and discussion, and the formation of a place for collective complaints in a supportive atmosphere, was key importance.

KVIR LAB presentation, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2024

KVIR LAB workshop, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2024

We were lucky to have a wonderful group and team that created the conditions in which we were able to present not only the publication, but also a performance and an interactive game at the final presentation at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Poland.

It was a very important experience, thanks to which I understood how deeply the empire can take root and how much power the people around me have to influence the reality around them.

The performance *"Our Queer Is Uncomfortably Political"* was created by Viktoryia Hrabennikava, Oleksandr Halishchuk, Varvara Sudnik and Arina Bozhok — queer artists and cultural workers from Ukraine and Belarus. It was based on a collage of personal experiences, authentic events, professional gossip, and work-related messages from the art world. The project's format included reading chains of emails, reenacting dialogues and recordings that reveal the backstage functioning of art practitioners at the intersection of queer "Eastern" identity with the bureaucratic, Eurocentric world.

The core idea of the performance confronted Western expectations of "Eastern European queer exoticism"

with real challenges: the struggle for rights, patronage, paid and unpaid labor in the arts, as well as the refusal to be a product for consumption. In this way, the work of the performers became a signal about the limits of narrative and institutional colonization and about the courage of asserting subjectivity under conditions of oppression.

"We guess formality is enough to make a performance of careness about "transnational queer-feminist dialog and solidarity". And behind the scene they can still stay comfortable inside their Eurocentric privileged point of view and refuse to delve into the context of your transnational queer-feminist comrades as long as it starts to be a bit too complex and uneasy."

KVIR LAB presentation, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2024

A message to the world

These examples are only a part of our practice. Over the three years of our existence, we have organized more than 30 events, each unique and important. STUS's work is, above all, about mutual support. As an association, the fund implements projects within a horizontal, non-hierarchical structure. Operating at the intersection of migrant, queer, and anti-imperialist perspectives, STUS prioritizes dialogue, community, and active resistance to structures of injustice. Our work is not just a reaction to crises but, above all, a conscious effort to build community models based on mutual respect and empathy. Faced with escalating conflicts, repression, and global tensions, our collective sees an urgent need to create spaces of solidarity and mutual support.

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We know that no struggle for freedom is easy or linear; it is a process full of difficulties and contradictions. We believe that through collective action and mutual support we can resist mechanisms of violence and growing divisions.

Our goal remains to amplify the voices of those marginalized and pushed to the periphery of public discourse: those affected by war, those with migration experience, queer people, activists, and artists. We want intersectional voices, stories, needs, and desires to be at the center of the conversation about the future we can create together.

STUS is not just an initiative, but a process that involves a large number of different people with different intersecting experiences of exclusion, repression, war, and discrimination. We think of ourselves not as a place, but as a hospitable invitation to collaborate, support, and take part in building a world where everyone has the right to safety, self-determination, and dignity. We believe that every action, every gesture of solidarity matters, because together we are a force capable of changing reality and finding light even in the darkest times. STUS is a space open to everyone who wants to act, support, and create a better today and tomorrow.

The event in the series "Kitchen of Meetings: Andrzejki", 2025

The author thanks the members of the STUS collective for their comments and suggestions.

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