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Spectres and ghosts of catastrophes

Catastrophic aesthetics in the practice of building art environments

Doctoral thesis in the field of arts in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation

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Abstract:

This research and artistic dissertation addresses the topic of catastrophic aesthetics as a form of narrative about catastrophe that reveals its spectral, hauntological character – haunting both the past and the future. Catastrophic aesthetics is not limited to the representation of catastrophic events, but is a formula for building reflections on the potential, hope, and possibilities that emerge in the face of contemporary crises. Particular focus is given to establishing a connection between issues of catastrophic aesthetics and embodied experience. In this context, environment art installations play a key role. The work analyzes selected artistic projects, each of them opening up a different thread of interpreting and taming catastrophe, pointing to various aesthetic, affective, and cognitive strategies related to this issue. The dissertation consists of four chapters. The first focuses on the ontology of catastrophe, referring to Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects and Ewa Horn's catastrophe “without an event”. The second chapter explores lost futures in the thought of Franco “Bifo” Berardi and Mark Fisher, juxtaposing them with melancholy as a form of active compassion, as exemplified by the author's installation *Paradise Rot*. The third chapter develops the themes of entanglement, potentiality, and corporeality, referring to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the Body Without Organs in the context of the installation *Behind the mouths gate something is stirring, is flickering*. The fourth chapter formulates a definition of catastrophic aesthetics, based on the recognitions of Jessica Siobhan Mulvogue, broadening the concept with the practice of environment installations and the idea of attunement. Of key importance here is thinking from the body (Neimanis, Merleau-Ponty), the concept of assemblage, and the strategy of collaboration as allied survival, illustrated by the scenographic project for the choreography *Hopecraft Ceremony* – a fictional narrative that unfolds between dystopia and utopia, catastrophe and hope. The dissertation presents catastrophic aesthetics as a sensitive creative strategy that not only records traces of decay, but also opens up space for imagination, regeneration, and collective experiencing of crises.

Time is a continuous interweaving and unraveling of material constellations, its dimensions are interconnected so that what we are is always a combination of the past and the future, debt and gift, sediment and promise¹.

¹ The above words are a paraphrase of Karen Barad's thoughts expressed in the article: K. Barad, *Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come*, cited in: O. Cielemecka, *Między ludzkim a nieludzkim. Etyka Giorgio Agambena i jej antropologiczne podstawy* [Between the Human and the Non-human. Giorgio Agamben's Ethics and Its Anthropological Foundations], University of Warsaw, Warsaw 2014, p. 88.

Introduction:

The starting point for this work is the phenomenon of dormant seeds. Dormant seeds appear on subsequent pages and in my artistic practice in various forms — each time symbolizing survival and an attempt to outline new scenarios for life in difficult times. This theme has accompanied me constantly over the last few years — in a conscious and equally intuitive form, sometimes giving rise to intricate trains of thought, other times shaping artistic realizations or the contexts built around them. In an unplanned rhythm and unexpected constellations, the dormant seeds returned to me, each time revealing themselves anew and becoming a metaphor for memory and trauma, potential and threat, and above all, a symbolic tool for reflection on time, change, and catastrophe.

According to Kent J. Bradford of the University of California, Berkeley, who studies the mechanisms that regulate seed dormancy and germination, dormancy is a physiological state characterized by metabolic activity without germination and subsequent growth². As a survival mechanism, dormancy delays germination, thereby reducing the risk of premature death due to disaster. There is evidence that the evolutionary origin of dormancy is linked to historical climate change on Earth and the spread of plants around the world. In select organisms, environmental signals are transmitted to regulatory mechanisms that control the state of dormancy. This strategy has been demonstrated to contribute significantly to the development of new species and the successful dispersal of existing ones³. At the same time, it can also pose a threat - disrupting the established balance of ecosystems⁴. In both cases, however, “dormancy should not be identified with the absence of germination, (...) seeds continuously react to their environment by adjusting their level of dormancy to the changing environment”⁵.

The phenomenon of dormant seeds is the main theme of my work *Possibility we are poisoned*, which I created several years ago in collaboration with Michał Knychaus. At the time, I did not yet know that it would be the starting point for research that would accompany me for the next few years and ultimately contribute to the writing of this dissertation. *Possibility we are poisoned* was prepared as part of an invitation to participate in the 34th Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana in 2021. It was a time when the world was in the process of overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic and when we were affected by a shock on an unprecedented scale. This paralyzing turbulence permeated our human reality on many levels that were previously unknown to us. It then became clear that the catastrophe – around which the theme of this work revolves – is not always spectacular, often extends over time, and sometimes remains almost invisible. The changes caused by the pandemic had their roots in a past full of neglect and will remain with us for many years to come. It was in this atmosphere that the curatorial concept of the Ljubljana Biennial emerged, referring to the philosophical notion of “lost

² Cf. K.J. Bradford, H. Nonogaki (eds.), *Seed Development, Dormancy and Germination*, “Annual Plant Reviews”, vol. 27, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2007, pp. xv–xvii (introduction).

³ H.W.M. Hilhorst, *Definitions and Hypotheses of Seed Dormancy*, in: K.J. Bradford, H. Nonogaki (eds.), *Seed Development, Dormancy and Germination*, *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴ Noteworthy are pyrophilous plants, whose seeds germinate after intense fires, enabling ecosystems to regenerate on the one hand, but often dominating other species on the other due to their unique resilience.

⁵ L.M. Vleeshouwers, H.J. Bouwmeester, C.M. Karssen, *Redefining seed dormancy: an attempt to integrate physiology and ecology*, “Journal of Ecology”, vol. 83, 1995, p. 1031, [online] <https://edepot.wur.nl/215579> (accessed: 23 April 2025).

futures”⁶. The example of the Yugoslav computer company Iskra Delta was to illustrate them. In the catalog accompanying the exhibition, we can read:

Iskra Delta was the name of a Slovenian company and one of the largest computer manufacturers in Yugoslavia, which had the potential to become a major player on the global market but went dark after the country’s collapse (...) In a time haunted by the spectres of “lost futures”, rather than focusing on the past, we are determined to harness the desire to inhabit a reality different from the one we inherited. Against a backdrop of social and environmental unrest, deep in a pandemic that has fixed our bodies in place and our eyes on screens, Iskra Delta arrives as an incantation of the world to come”⁷.

In the context of the Biennale's theme, together with Michał Knychaus (as is often the case in our practice), we sought inspiration in the non-human world, attempting to emphasize the nature of a crisis in which the end and the beginning confront each other, a crisis that embraces both danger and the possibility of reconfiguration. This is how we discovered the dormant seeds. We then supplemented this motif with a fictional narrative and presented it in the form of a spatial installation.



Il. 1. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Possibility we are poisoned*, ISKRA DELTA - the 34th Biennale of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana, Mala Galerija Banke Slovenije, Ljubljana, SLO, Photo: Inside Job

⁶ The concept of lost futures will appear in later chapters of this dissertation, and will be recalled after Mark Fisher. Cf. M. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, Zero Books, Winchester, Washington 2014.

⁷ T. Pogačar, N. Šivavec (eds.), *The ISKRA DELTA project catalogue*, The International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC), 2021, introduction.



Il. 2. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Possibility we are poisoned*, ISKRA DELTA - the 34th Biennale of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana, Mala Galerija Banke Slovenije, Ljubljana, SLO, Photo: Inside Job

Possibility we are poisoned is a three-channel video projection shown on three panoramic screens, complemented with a scenographic environment that enhanced the feeling of immersion and was designed to affect viewers in a multisensory way. The key was to create an experience of being absorbed in a constructed situation—a physical engagement that would emphasize the somatic dimension of perception. The screens were enclosed in specially designed aluminum panels, reminiscent of futuristic representations of plant hybrids—species with exceptional resilience to harsh climatic conditions. The main inspiration came from thistles, which we have been photographing and archiving as a duo for years during our explorations of contemporary post-industrial ruins. The screens were mounted on steel construction stamps stretched between the gallery ceiling and the floor covered with dry and cracked soil. There were also warm light lamps installed in the space, arranged at equal intervals along the walls surrounding the installation. The whole installation was complemented by a series of objects resembling machines for planting giant seeds — as if they had also come from the future. The title phrase “possibility we are...”, taken from a poem by Diane di Prima, was the starting point for a speculative story about the future, in which plants, awakened after years of sleep, begin to grow, thus influencing their surrounding environment. This story was further developed in a non-linear manner in the animation presented on the screens.

Possibility we are poisoned is a story about the potential for change understood not only as an act of human will, but also as change on a broader, planetary, and interspecies scale. We live in times of an unprecedented global polycrisis, which takes the form of intertwined and successive catastrophes: from raging fires and floods inundating continents to cataclysms directly related to our selfish, expansionist extraction policies⁸. The advancing climate catastrophe is deeply intertwined with

⁸ Timothy Morton writes: „it might be best to see history as a nested series of catastrophes that are still playing out rather than as a sequence of events based on a conception of time as a succession of atomic instants. We can

overlapping social, economic, and political crises. My role here is not to analyze them all – that is a task that significantly exceeds my research aspirations and conceptual capabilities. So I will not cite figures or reports or analyze specific events – although they are undoubtedly of great importance. However, their cumulative nature and deep interconnections mean that the networks of these interdependencies are growing on an extraordinary scale. I am more interested in what lies in between – what permeates our perception, what shapes our feelings, what eludes statistics, embeds itself in the body, and penetrates everyday life. These are the specters and ghosts of catastrophes that give this dissertation its title: the recurring and pervasive traces of previous crises that have shaped the planet and its inhabitants. These traces are found in the geological and atmospheric layers, plant and animal structures, and human behavior mechanisms and collective consciousness. They connect the scale of deep geological time with the history of each individual human being. These specters and ghosts of catastrophes are therefore experiences – emotional and physical – that affectively influence our perception of the present. They do not refer only to an intellectual awareness of history, but rather are a subcutaneous presence that defines our way of being in the world. For this reason, the concepts of embodied experience and the issue of catastrophic aesthetics are crucial to this work.

When the direction of the future is ‘out of joint’ – as Karen Barad, a feminist theorist and physicist, mentions – I feel the need to search for a new narrative that will help navigate difficult times⁹. I believe that art offers such a possibility. It is no coincidence that I refer to the project shown at the Biennale in Ljubljana. It brings together the most important aspects of my practice. I work in contemporary art, which is why my voice is primarily expressed on a visual level. As an artist, I use environment installations, treating them as a medium that enables personal and collective experience, feeling, and imagining narratives about catastrophes that have permeated our everyday lives. Unlike any other medium, art is capable of capturing complexities that elude language and rational patterns. For me, art is a space that reveals the ability to quickly recognize, tame, and respond to contemporary changes by introducing new symbols and meanings. Artistic narratives break down schemes, boldly reach into the future, and sometimes even constitute “thoughts from the future”¹⁰. This is how I understand their potential – as tools for recovering what has been lost and weaving together what has been torn apart. This perception of art is central to my doctoral project.

My practice has always combined theoretical research with intuitive artistic work. This is why contextualizing the projects I undertake is very important to me. The sculptural forms I create in my studio stem from my reflections on specific issues. However, this process is far from orderly and linear – individual threads intertwine and reveal themselves at often unexpected moments, taking the form of an internal dialogue that is constantly entwined with action. Some concepts mature over months or even years, others instantly penetrate the material as subtle traces, and at other times as their dominant feature. Olga Tokarczuk wrote that “thoughts can [...] fade away, die, go dormant, and then unexpectedly explode, collapse like an avalanche”¹¹. This is very close to the plant strategy of producing dormant seeds, but equally close to how I observe the emergence of contexts and ideas in the creative process. In the artistic projects described here, theories intersect and influence material fabrics, and vice versa – structures and forms suggest contexts that seem to have been dormant deep in

think of these nested sets as ouroboric, selfswallowing snakes (...). T. Morton, *Dark ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, p. 69.

⁹ K. Barad, *Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come*, “Derrida Today”, vol. 3, no. 2 (2010), pp. 240–268, [online] <https://feministstudies.ucsc.edu/faculty/publications/pdfs/barad-derrida-today.pdf> (accessed: 23 April 2025).

¹⁰ T. Morton, *Dark ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, ibid, p. 1.

¹¹ O. Tokarczuk, *Ostatnie historie* [Final Stories], Wydawnictwo Literackie, Krakow, pp. 30–31. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author of this paper.

the subconscious, only to reveal themselves at the very end of the creative process. However, theoretical and philosophical digressions are not meant to explain the works here – I would like to give primacy to physical presence and experience. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the theoretical reflections mentioned here outline the horizons of perspectives that have shaped me as an artist and researcher for many years. Balancing between these perspectives has been important to me since the beginning of my studies at the Doctoral School.

This dissertation therefore largely concerns the uncertainty of today's world – extended precariousness, which is defined by uncertainty affecting all species. As I will attempt to prove, and convey through my works, awareness of this precariousness is a source of sensitivity of a unique nature. Anthropologist Anne Lowenhaupt Tsing expressed the enormous potential of this precarious awareness in a captivating way when she wrote: “the problem of precarious survival helps us see what is wrong. Precarity is a state of acknowledgment of our vulnerability to others”¹².

The feeling of being suspended between anxiety and possibility structures the subsequent chapters. In the first one, I refer to the very concept of catastrophe, invoking the theories and perspectives that are most important to my practice. I refer to Timothy Morton's reflections – his position on the relationship between humans and non-humans, as well as the concept of hyperobjects – phenomena so vast and ubiquitous that they elude our perception. Later in the chapter, I focus on the hauntological dimension of catastrophe, which reveals the difficulties in understanding its causes and effects. In this context, Ewa Horn's idea of a catastrophe “without an event” – subtle, diffuse, and extended in time – is particularly relevant. This insight leads me to perceive catastrophe as something subcutaneous, as if one might write, after the title of one of Lovecraft's stories, “the thing on the doorstep”¹³. In this chapter, I also refer to Karen Barad's analysis of how catastrophe constitutes our becoming in the world, and Aleksandra Kunce, who explores the intertwining relationships between catastrophe, everyday life, and the uncanny.

In the second chapter, I move on to Franco “Bifo” Berardi and Mark Fisher's concept of lost futures, and then refer to melancholy as a form of active compassion. In this context, I describe one of my doctoral projects – the multi-element installation *Paradise Rot*, in which the loss of paradise does not mean the end, but is part of the cycle of life – dynamic, pulsating with the presence of many organisms and transformations. Important here are themes concerning the agency of dormant materials such as oil, as well as both actual and metaphorical reflections on marsh landscapes as places of contact between the possible and the liminal, unstable, and untamed.

In the third chapter, I turn my attention to the potential and complexity present in the reflections of the aforementioned Franco “Bifo” Berardi and the concept of the Body without Organs developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In this context, the analysis of another of my doctoral projects takes center stage – the installation *Behind the mouths gate something is stirring, is flickering*, whose swelling form and rhizomatic dynamics visually and materially illustrate the themes discussed. At the same time, I refer to the dangers associated with the deterritorializing potential of this concept, invoking the work of Korean artist Mire Lee, which is important to me both formally and theoretically. Directly after the section devoted to potentiality, I move on to a reflection on corporeality as a fundamental tool for experiencing reality. At this point, I also introduce the theory of

¹² A. L. Tsing, *Mushrooms at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2015, p. 2.

¹³ H.P. Lovecraft, A. Derleth, *The Thing on the Doorstep*, in: H.P. Lovecraft, *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories*, (ed.) S. T. Joshi, Penguin Books, London, 2001.

rhizomatic assemblage, which resonates with the post-humanist approaches proposed by, among others, Monika Rogowska-Stangret and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing.

In the fourth and final chapter, I introduce the concept of catastrophic aesthetics, based primarily on the findings of Canadian researcher Jessica Siobhan Mulvogue, and expand it with the approach of working in the medium of environment installations. Catastrophic aesthetics is a field that combines an awareness of loss and anxiety with sensitive perseverance and openness to the future. The immersive potential of environmental installations is combined with the category of *attunement* developed by the already mentioned Timothy Morton. A key point of reference in this chapter is also the embodied experience in the thought of Astrida Neimanis and Maurice Merleau Ponty, as well as the context of collaboration, which I perceive as a conscious strategy of allied survival. I refer here to my scenographic realization for the choreography *Hopecraft Ceremony* – a fictional story in which the audience is immersed in a world between dystopia and utopia, between catastrophe and hope, between life and slow decay. This realization weaves together all the previous threads, completing a symbolic loop. The black flowers that are the leitmotif of the installation are lilies – symbols of transformation, death, and persistence. Their presence is not accidental: they belong to species that have developed their own strategies for enduring over time. Unlike plants that hide in dormant seeds, lilies have survival bulbs – memory bodies that can persist in hiding and redevelop only at the right moment.

I would also like to emphasize a very important aspect of my artistic practice – my consistent work as part of the Inside Job duo, which I have been co-creating with Michał Knychaus for eight years now. The inauguration of this creative force was marked by joint diploma projects: bachelor's and master's degrees at the Magdalena Abakanowicz University of Arts in Poznań. Since then, all of my and Michał's creative activities have been carried out under the mark of this collaboration. We run a studio together and support each other conceptually and in terms of production. I am consciously and deliberately continuing this strategy in my doctoral work as well.

I therefore perceive each of the projects described here as both individual – rooted in my personal sensibility and creative experience – and deeply shared. The collaboration we have been developing for years is based on mutual trust and attentiveness, and the creative synergy we have developed is an important source of inspiration that will, I hope, fuel many more projects to come.

The works mentioned here and covered within my doctoral project: *Paradise Rot*, *Behind the mouths gate something is stirring, is flickering* and *Hopecraft Ceremony* were made possible thanks to my collaboration with galleries, institutions and individuals who invited me to be part of their curatorial programs. Rather than providing a framework for the projects themselves, they opened up a wide horizon of possibilities, each time inspiring and – to continue with the metaphor of dormant seeds – bringing to life another microcosm and environment, for which I am extremely grateful.

Although I do not believe that the task of balancing between catastrophe and hope can be successfully accomplished, I also think that it is not arbitrarily doomed to failure.

I. Catastrophe: Perspectives of Thinking

Catastrophe is one of the most important phenomena I refer to in my doctoral project and one that has generally shaped my artistic practice to date. As I mentioned in the introduction, I am interested in the affect associated with the pervasive nature of catastrophe and ways of describing its structure through contemporary art, specifically environment-type installations. In this chapter, I will therefore present my perspective on catastrophe and, through this, describe the background of my works – the way of thinking that shaped all my doctoral projects, so that I can examine them more closely in subsequent chapters.

I have been interested in the subject of catastrophes since my master's studies. My MA thesis focused on interpreting artistic practices that primarily represented a “dying” landscape. At the time, I was interested in works characterized by a catastrophic narrative, but in which the environment was the main “protagonist”. I analyzed the works by artists such as Pierre Huyghe, The Otolith Group, Dora Budor, Laure Prouvost, and Korakrit Arunonundchai¹⁴. Their creative practices, embedded in spatial projects, have greatly influenced my artistic thinking, which focuses on installations and is supported by the scenography experience I gained during my bachelor's studies. Undoubtedly, the presence of the theme of catastrophe in the art world has also intensified, which is why I had the opportunity to participate in exhibitions devoted to its various interpretations. Exhibitions: “Does the Rising Sun Affright” at Zachęta - National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, “The Temple of Tales” at BWA in Wrocław, “Hopecraft Ceremony” at the ARSENIC Center for Performing Arts in Lausanne, and finally “Cockaigne” at the Arsenal Gallery Power Plant in Białystok, during which I showed works that are part of my doctoral thesis, stemmed from reflections on the relationship between human and nature as a consequence of long-term crises in which the ecological is intertwined with the political and social¹⁵.

Over the past three years, when presenting the concept of my doctoral project, I have often been asked whether I think catastrophic ideation is an inherent part of the human condition and whether the anxiety around which I am developing my works and now writing, arises more from individual sensitivity than from an objective perception of reality. Indeed, catastrophic thinking has always accompanied humanity. Starting with cosmogonic narratives – the flood in the Bible, Ragnarok in Norse mythology, cyclical destruction in Hindu, through ideas about the end of the world, the apocalypse, much later romantic and decadent visions of destruction and nihilistic dystopias, to the more contemporary association of disasters with the development of civilization and its consequences for nature. Each of these approaches has been shaped by conditions specific to a particular place and era – so it can be said that each of these catastrophes is defined by a different perspective and context.

This present one is marked by a deepened reflection on interdependence and coexistence – perhaps more than ever before, we realize that we are simultaneously responsible and causative, helpless and

¹⁴ I also presented Korakrit Arunonundchai's works as part of the “States of Matter” series of events curated by myself, Michał Knychaus, and Andrzej Marzec at Pawilon, a branch of the Arsenal Municipal Gallery in Poznań (Poland). I mention this event not only because it coincided with my doctoral studies, but also because its theme overlapped with the topics discussed in this work.

¹⁵ Here are the dates of these specific exhibitions: “Does the Rising Sun Affright”, Zachęta - National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, 15.03-26.05.2024; “The Temple of Tales”, BWA Wrocław, 11.10.2024-26.01.2025; “Hopecraft Ceremony”, ARSENIC Center for Performing Arts in Lausanne, 19-21.01.2024; “Cockaigne”, Arsenal Gallery Power Plant in Białystok, 05.09-09.11.2025.

lost (alienated). We have also gained the awareness that the experience of crisis affects each of us in a completely different way and at a completely different moment¹⁶.

Reflections on catastrophes, both those emphasizing social entanglements and those directed toward the environment and posthumanist thought, are constantly being developed in contemporary philosophy. Monika Rogowska-Stangret, who conducts research at the intersection of philosophy, environmental humanities, and posthumanism, even suggests that “observing a catastrophe, accompanying it – and enduring this accompaniment – is the essence of posthumanist ethics”¹⁷. It seems to me that when practicing art engaged with the present day, it is difficult to ignore at least a few important tropes in this reflection. Therefore, in the rest of this chapter, I will refer to concepts and theories that have been useful to me in formulating my own research perspectives and have reinforced my artistic method. Today's deepened, catastrophic awareness is a fundamental change in the perception of reality – it is an intensified sense of “being of the world”¹⁸. It can be said that catastrophes are not only moments of crisis, but also lenses through which we perceive the non-linearity of time and the constantly changing relationships between individuals, states, and the environment.

1.1. The Horror of the Agrilogistics

Contemporary reflection on the nature of catastrophe largely analyzes the specificity of the development of human relations with the surrounding environment. The mechanism of the catastrophic “lens” brings to the surface a fundamental aspect – the persistent binary separation between culture and nature, which many researchers see as one of the main sources of today's ecological, social, and political crises, but also as one of the reasons why managing these crises proves to be extremely difficult. In this regard, I find Timothy Morton's reflections important. His research on ecology has greatly influenced my thinking about catastrophe, as well as about aesthetics and the role of contemporary art in reintegrating nature and culture. Morton seeks the roots of anthropogenic disasters in the beginnings of the agricultural system, which he refers to as “agrologistics”¹⁹. For him, this is the moment when the processes of land management, that are based on habits of ownership, hierarchy, and exclusion, begin. According to Morton, the agricultural system set the course for exploitation, which then expanded beyond the human species' relationship with the biosphere to include mechanisms that perpetuate inequality, economic violence, and social hierarchies. Operating on the principle of a logistical algorithm, the agrilogistics created the basis for structuring the relationship between humans and nature, which continues to this day in an increasingly accelerated and destructive form.

In this approach, the agrosystem algorithm became the basis for developing subsequent models of social and production organization. One of the areas directly linked to agrologistics is the capitalist system, the entanglement of which with catastrophic reality I will return to in subsequent chapters. When Mark Fisher and Frederic Jameson – researchers whose work focuses, among other things, on

¹⁶ In this context, it is worth noting the observations made by Isadora Neves Marques on the apocalypses of indigenous peoples whose civilizations were destroyed as a result of colonial policies. Cf. I. Neves Marques, *Parallel Futures: One or Many Dystopias?*, „e-flux journal”, no. 99 (April 2019) [online], <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/99/263702/parallel-futures-one-or-many-dystopias> (accessed: 21 May 2025).

¹⁷ M. Rogowska Stangret, *Być ze świata. Cztery eseje o etyce posthumanistycznej* [Being of the World: Four Essays on Posthumanist Ethics], słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdansk, 2021, p. 13.

¹⁸ I refer to this concept after Monika Rogowska Stangret. Cf. M. Rogowska Stangret, *Być ze świata.*, ibid.

¹⁹ T. Morton, *Dark ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, ibid., pp. 42-59.

the analysis of capitalism and its dominant cultural and ideological position – state that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” they perfectly capture the ensnaring nature that also characterizes agrilogistic thinking²⁰. As the primary means of organizing the world for millennia, the agricultural system has become a safe and domesticated space in which we function instinctively and consistently. The consequences of separating human bonds from non-humans have been marginalized for years, and attempts at change are met with resistance, resulting both from habit and fear of the unknown, as well as from motivations rooted in the paradigm of profit.

The awareness of the familiarized, established, but also destructive division between humans and non-humans can be expanded upon by reflecting on catastrophe and domestication, as present in the works of Polish anthropologist Aleksandra Kunce²¹. It refers to Freud's concept of “the uncanny” (*unheimlich*), which communicates the horror and shock associated with disruptions in the ways we experience the world we know. This is a deep cultural and emotional experience that results from encountering something that seems foreign to us. In this view, any disruption of our human perspective – any shift in the foundations on which we base our understanding of reality – can be interpreted as a catastrophic event. Since the agricultural system and the anthropocentric model of thinking constitute a “domesticated” space for us, anything that goes beyond this way of perceiving the world arouses fear and a sense of alienation. Paradoxically, however, moments when the familiar and established order is disrupted are also moments when what has hitherto remained hidden is revealed, thereby also revealing the agency, vastness, and complexity of the world around us.

1.2. The Hauntological Dimension of Catastrophe

The cracks in domestication reveal the spectral presence of that which we have tried to marginalize: the repressed, the erased, the ignored, and the insignificant. This is not only about what coexists with us now, but also about what existed before, as well as what is yet to come, which we constantly try to exclude, to hide behind the veil of an anthropocentric perspective. Referring to Derrida's recognition of the ghost – as a presence that returns and does not allow itself to be forgotten, although in an ambivalent way it was never completely present or absent – I would like to emphasize how crucial it is to recognize the hauntological nature of the catastrophe in order to understand it²².

What a catastrophe reveals in its most common sense is a temporary rupture, a violent break in the here and now, a moment of suspension, a cut, a pause. This seems to be suggested by the very etymology of the word itself: “catastrophe from the Greek κατά, ‘down’, and στρέφειν, ‘to turn’— is a sudden, destructive event that marks an ending or overturning of a pre-existing order”²³. However, this perspective obscures the significance of complex and persistent questions about the multiplicity of temporalities that play a role in understanding and giving meaning to catastrophe.

²⁰ Cf. M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, Winchester – Washington, 2009, pp. 1-11.

²¹ A. Kunce, *Katastrofa, czyli na ruinach zadowienia* [Catastrophe, or on the Ruins of Dwelling], *Kultura Współczesna* [Contemporary Culture], no. 2 (109), 2020, pp. 146–166.

²² I refer to the concept of specters and ghosts here primarily following Timothy Morton, whose concept of dark ecology draws heavily on Derridean hauntology. However, it is worth noting the original provenance of this term. Cf. J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf, Routledge Classics, New York, 2006.

²³ C. Dole, R. Hayashi, A. Poe, A. Sarat, B. Wolfson (eds.), *The Time of Catastrophe. Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Age of Catastrophe*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Burlington 2015, p. 7.

Catastrophes are not just temporary, episodic disruptions. They settle and decompose in the deep layers of geology, history, and consciousness. Refusing to end, they unfold again and again. Two complementary and interdependent temporal scales intertwine here: the scale of geological duration, measured in millions of years – slow, monumental, difficult to conceive – and the scale of human history – shorter, dynamic, full of tension. Monika Rogowska Stangret writes that “nothing ever ends and nothing ever begins, the past continues, nothing is ever outside of us, nothing comes after us, and the future is already here and is never just ahead of us. Many different voices fill every now, every smallest segment of time contains a multitude of times”²⁴. This is a poetic reflection that poignantly describes the concepts of “deep time” and “long duration” initiated by James Hutton (*deep time*) in the 18th century and Fernand Braudel (*longue durée*) in the mid-20th century, and continued today by Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others, who extends these concepts by including the contexts of the Anthropocene²⁵.

Looking at the temporality of catastrophe raises “fundamental questions about our place in the world, and especially the comparative brevity of human history in relation to the geological time of the planet”²⁶. Geological research reveals the bones of prehistoric animals, fossils, and the history of sedimentary deposits formed by volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and climate change. These traces are archives of catastrophes, ghostly presences of former ecosystems that have sunk into oblivion, yet still influence the world. A striking example of this is the history of petroleum, to which I will return later.

Although we can trace the chronology of causes and effects to a certain extent, as in the case of the petroleum, the catastrophic reality remains largely a mystery to us. The catastrophe, seen as a kind of portal through which ghosts and specters can seep, acts as a breach in our understanding of time: it makes the past no longer something that has ended, and the future is defined by what has already passed or by what could have happened but did not. Mark Fisher refers to the latter using the concept of “lost futures” – possible, imagined, and planned but unrealized scenarios²⁷. Although unfulfilled, they remain with us as specters of promises, haunting our present and reminding us of the limitations of anthropocentric imagination. Material evidence of these “tombs of the future” includes vast, degraded post-industrial areas – contemporary ruins that not only document the collapse of the modernist vision of progress, but also remain a permanent feature of our everyday landscape. Although many of these spaces did not survive economic and political transformations, their influence is still felt.

As part of my studies at the Doctoral School, I went on a research trip to Bratislava, where I had the opportunity to visit the site of the former Istrochem chemical plant. This vast area, covering over 150 hectares and located in close proximity to the city center, remains almost completely abandoned. At the same time, it is one of the most contaminated places in Europe – a space of silent but clear presence of the past that cannot be forgotten²⁸. Despite the leakage of hazardous chemicals into the surrounding soil, nature in this place seems to be intensely developed and healthy. Moving along the stream surrounding the fence, despite the pungent, metallic smell that irritates the nostrils, it was easy to see the lush vegetation growing in the ditches – tall grasses, vines, and fruit-bearing trees.

²⁴ M. Rogowska Stangret, *Być ze świata*, ibid., p. 62.

²⁵ D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2021.

²⁶ C. Dole, R. Hayashi, A. Poe, A. Sarat, B. Wolfson (eds.), *The Time of Catastrophe*, ibid., p. 11.

²⁷ Cf. M. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, ibid.

²⁸ J. Madarás, *Will Bratislava Cement Its Drinking Water Sources?*, “Urban Imagination Seminar”, [online], <https://urbanimagination.cargo.site/Jan-Madaras>, (access: 21 May 2025).

Similar experiences are becoming increasingly common in our everyday lives. They are also described by Kate Brown, a researcher of post-nuclear landscapes. Brown writes about her visit to the Tietsa River (a place affected by the Mayak disaster): “Usually when you are looking at an environmental catastrophe, you know it. Disasters have the look and feel of the natural order disassembled. In my mind, disasters should smell, smoke, or produce ugly scars. Yet nothing was out of place along this inviting little stream. The air was fresh. Swallows darted back and forth over the current. The afternoon was turning hot and, as if a siren were calling me, I had a desire to slip down and run my feet over the smooth stones on the river bottom. There were no fences or warning signs to stop me. I had to remind myself that I stood before the world’s most radiated river. I had never encountered a disaster more lovely and tempting, one less worthy of its name”²⁹.

The invisible structure — the fact that something is inscribed in the landscape that, at first glance, should not be there and cannot be seen — is one of many examples of the spectral nature catastrophe. Catastrophe evokes the ghosts of forgotten, unwanted, or erased events. The presence of what has been lost disrupts our notions of temporality. From this perspective, no process is ever “finished,” but wanders on in a long duration, unable to find solace and peace.

1.3. Hyperobjects and Catastrophe Without Event

The hauntological nature of disasters described above draws attention to the fact that it is not only the catastrophic past that constantly returns to us, but also the awareness of an inevitably threatened future that makes us unable to imagine its development. It is no longer a matter of fear of a single event – war, cataclysm, the collapse of civilization – but of the realization that we live in a world that is in a state of prolonged, constant crisis, where catastrophe is not a point on the horizon but an everyday experience. At the same time, all previous ways of organizing the world seem inadequate – the cause-and-effect relationships with which we explained the surrounding reality have begun to expand in a way that quickly escapes the horizons of logical thinking. This complexity of change is expressed in Timothy Morton's theory of hyperobjects.

Morton uses hyperobjects to describe phenomena that are widely dispersed in time and space³⁰. The way they are multi-layered, stretching into the past and future, means that we are never able to recognize them in their entirety – we can only refer to fragments, time-limited manifestations, the effects of their presence, appearances that are only small parts of them. The paradox of such phenomena is that they are ubiquitous. On the other hand, however, their specific location is impossible to determine, blurring the boundaries between locality and globality. Morton cites global warming and radioactivity, among other things, as examples of hyperobjects. Admittedly, it is difficult to find more relevant examples, and the specific nature of climate and nuclear disasters clearly illustrates these profound space-time entanglements. A nuclear explosion lasting a fraction of a second is deposited in the form of plutonium, cesium, and strontium isotopes in geological sediments for millions of years. This is described, among others, by Agnieszka Jelewska and Michał Krawczak, who note that the dominant perspective “segments the stages of a disaster according to the moment of the event, the direct and indirect effects, and the short-term and long-term consequences (...) But nuclear

²⁹ K. Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 305, cited in: M. Rogowska Stanget, *Być ze świata*, ibid., p. 55.

³⁰ Cf. T. Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2013, pp. 1-24.

disasters perceived in terms of hyperobject means that, as the situation unfolds in days and years, some aspects of the disaster are revealed in different periods, places and situations, while other aspects remain hidden (...) And the spectral spatio-temporal understanding of these phenomena shows the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman subjects, as well as the non-linearity and discontinuity that bursts asunder the framework of the classically conceived history of events”³¹. Like a nuclear disaster, global warming can also be considered in terms of a hyperobject. However, we are dealing with a different dynamic here – global warming acts in a diffuse, slow, and more difficult to grasp manner at any given moment, although its effects can manifest themselves in the form of sudden, unexpected cataclysms – hurricanes, floods, or droughts. Nevertheless, it is both a cause and a consequence of current economies, policies, industrial strategies, and armed conflicts.

It is precisely these networks of mutual entanglements that allow us to extend the concept of hyperobjects and conclude that it describes a specific condition of the present day. This is well captured by the category of “viscosity,” which Timothy Morton presents as one of the characteristics of hyperobjects, and which philosopher Anna Barcz, who analyzes his thought, describes as follows: “viscosity means that hyperobjects stick to everything that is in some way connected to them. This is important for experiencing their proximity as something that radically alienates us from the sense of security in public space, at home, and in our own bodies: ‘they are all on me. They are me’”³². I have the impression that this viscosity characterizes the contemporary catastrophic feeling – an awareness of closeness that is unwanted, from which one cannot distance oneself, penetrating, subcutaneous, and revealing fragmentarily – ultimately leading to an awareness of personal involvement and responsibility.

In her book *The Future as Catastrophe*, cultural historian Eva Horn notes that in the 20th century, the term “catastrophe” began to refer not so much to a specific event, but rather to a process – a widespread sense of “impending” danger. Horn proposes the term “catastrophe without an event” to describe this situation – that is, one that “lacks identifiable agents, a precise moment in time, and a definite location in space, and it is not confined to any particular single scenario. The catastrophe without event is characterized by disparate, diffuse, and ultimately undefinable scenarios, temporalities, localities, and processes”³³. Horn links this feeling with continuity and duration. So it is not so much anticipation as a persistent and poignant anxiety that develops over time, an awareness of the duration and continuation of the current course of events, that has become a catastrophic trap that has imprisoned our thinking about the future.

It seems that it is precisely this feeling – an affect associated with the awareness of the hyperobjective nature of the catastrophe – that reveals the interrelated and infinitely mirrored crisis of the inside and the outside, forcing us to rethink our place in the world³⁴. Hyperobjects thus lead us to recognize that we do not know and understand the world fully, forcing us to accept an active and causative world

³¹ A. Jelewska, M. Krawczak, *The Spectrality of Nuclear Catastrophe: The Case of Chernobyl*, “Politics of the Machines-Art and After” 2018, no. 5, p. 2, [online] <http://dx.doi.org/10.14236/ewic/EVAC18.30>, (access 25 May 2025).

³² A. Barcz, *Przedmioty ekozagłady. Spekulatywna teoria hiperobektów Timothy’ego Mortona i jej (możliwe) ślady w literaturze* [Objects of Eco-Destruction: Timothy Morton’s Speculative Theory of Hyperobjects and Its (Possible) Traces in Literature], “Teksty Drugie”, 2018, no 2, p. 78, [online], https://rcin.org.pl/Content/66961/WA248_86917_P-I-2524_barcz-przedmioty_o.pdf (access 25 May 2025).

³³ E. Horn, *The future as catastrophe: imagining disaster in the modern age*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2018, p. 9.

³⁴ J. Zalesak, *Apocalypse Me*, The Faculty of Fine Arts of the Brno University of Technology in Brno, Brno, 2016, pp. 8, 12, 137.

beyond humanity. These reflections therefore also have an existential dimension, which is important for shaping our identity.

The essence of my projects is entanglement and interaction, which I will emphasize in the following sections of this work. Catastrophes, as extended hyperobjects, reveal what Karen Barad would call entangled causality. Barad writes that “the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter’s iterative becoming”³⁵. Beyond philosophical reflection on the nature of time and the intertwined temporality of catastrophe, this prompts us to consider their material, deeply rooted entanglement. Catastrophes are embedded in the world and thus in its and our becoming. These processes have no rigid boundaries – they are dynamic, constantly reconfigured, and relational. From reflections on the persistent duration of a catastrophe, on its spectral presence extending beyond the here and now, materiality itself emerges – what Barad further calls “intra-action” – becoming through relations, becoming through time.

In the above paragraphs, I wanted to show that even though catastrophic experiences have become part of our everyday lives, we ourselves only have access to fragments of these enormous processes—they are particles, pieces, a recurring specter. Reflection on a scale that is impossible to comprehend cognitively, but at the same time inevitable, sharpens our own finitude, fragility, awareness of interdependence and entanglement. Catastrophes, like Morton’s hyperobjects, “are receptacles like Plato’s chora: they are weird places that don’t have thin rigid boundaries. Another one pops open inside an existing one when some property of an existing system begins to go into a strange loop, giving rise to another receptacle”³⁶. These are therefore “uroboric loops” and, like the symbolism of the ouroboros, they indicate that destruction and rebirth, anxiety and hope are inextricably linked.

The primary aim of this chapter was to provide a conceptual framework for the subject of catastrophe, which serves as the overarching theme of my doctoral project. This framework leaves room for detailed descriptions and comparisons of individual works in subsequent parts of the dissertation. My artistic practice does not represent catastrophes per se – I have no ambition to present specific, determined events, but rather, remaining within the formula of intra-action and causality, to communicate their dispersed, multidimensional nature. The projects described below, interspersed with reflections on catastrophe, embodied experience, and aesthetics, constitute spatial installations – “environments” in which individual objects, as well as their combinations and arrangements, are significant.

Another characteristic of my artistic practice is that existing works often reappear in new contexts. They are incorporated into subsequent installations, transformed and reassembled. Individual objects eventually become the building blocks of new, designed “worlds”. This approach means that my creative process is never fully complete. Constantly reconfiguring and upcycling materials and ideas is therefore key to understanding the method I adopted for my doctoral project.

All of the projects described in this work share a common core. They stem from similar assumptions, are made from similar materials, and use related techniques. While they can function independently,

³⁵ K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, London, 2007, p. 234.

³⁶ T. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, *ibid.*, p. 76.

they reveal their full potential through interconnection – the relationships that allow them to complement each other, creating a broader, coherent visual and aesthetic message. They are based on materials associated with industrial origins, such as steel and aluminum. These materials are byproducts of larger industrial production, though this is not immediately apparent. The precise cuts made using CNC milling machines are usually carefully sanded, but an almost organic-looking laser burn mark is sometimes left on them. The metal elements are accompanied by hand-dyed, stitched, and shaped linen and cotton fabrics. Organic plant forms intertwine with elements of technological infrastructure to create hybrid compositions. These materials and working methods generally refer to the relationship between humans and non-humans. In my projects, I do not strive for essentialist solutions. Futuristic imagination is closely related to the past; it encounters the visceral and the corporeal, pointing to the inseparable relationship between the past and the future. The projects described below intertwine the past and the future with physical experience, creating spaces – environments in which anxiety and potentiality co-create a complex whole.

Curator Michal Stolarik poetically described the key aspects of my creative method in the text accompanying my exhibition, "Whispers from the Cracked Horizon," at the Šopa Gallery in Košice, Slovakia. Although these words refer to projects that preceded my doctoral project, they remain relevant today:

*Indistinct whispering gradually merges into background noise. Only familiar references, shapes, colours and materials remain, activating memories, ambiguous emotions and flashbacks of nostalgia for situations yet to be experienced. An inexplicable feeling of fragmentary déjà vu culminates in tantalizing frustration from the inability to decode the seen. Reflections of metallic objects, razor-sharp delineations, machine-cut curves, technologization of artistic procedures and identifiable de-humanizing of processes graciously contrast with visual traces of bodily remains, organic shapes or fragments of fragile materials. It's on the tip of our tongue, but still lost in oblivion. There's no endorphin rush on the horizon (...) The result is a contrasting encounter of various time layers anchored in a visually captivating time capsule, which materializes past catastrophes and outlines an idea of future (...)*³⁷.

In this short passage, Michal Stolarik has managed to articulate the intuition that has shaped the forms of my work over the last few years. Its dystopian character and post-catastrophic aesthetics are revealed. Whispers of the past and future emerge, along with the expansiveness of industrial forms and the precise order of mechanical systems. Areas of sensory experience – organic and corporeal – create spaces where time and active matter unravel and intertwine.

³⁷ M. Stolarik, *Whispers from the Cracked Horizon*, Šopa Gallery, Košice, Slovakia, 11.11.2022 – 28.01.2023. [online] <https://stolarik.info/insidejob>, (access: 25 May 2025).

II. The Imagination Crisis and Melancholy

2.1. Lost Horizon: The Cancellation of the Future

Both in the introduction, referring to the curatorial vision of the Biennale in Ljubljana, and in the chapter on the spectral nature of catastrophes, the concept of lost futures has already been mentioned. These unfulfilled projects, which nevertheless influence the present, are often a source of anxiety, associated with feelings of failure, nostalgia, and longing. More than 10 years ago, in his book *After the Future*, philosopher Franco “Bifo” Berardi used the expression “slow cancellation of the future” in the context of the cultural and economic transformations that have been taking place since the 20th century³⁸. This statement contains a particular diagnosis of the present day, permeated by the gradual disintegration of the belief in the possibility of continuous progress. “There is a crisis of belief in the future, leaving us with the prospect of an endless, deteriorating present”, writes Berardi³⁹. In his publications and speeches, he comments extensively on the role of the future in contemporary ideologies, which largely build this narrative around progress, the path “to a better tomorrow,” and thus various types of utopias more or less rooted in actual reality. Berardi notes that recently, this imagination based on a belief in continuous growth has been replaced by a dystopian one⁴⁰. Techno-enthusiastic models of economic and social development, myths of growing universal access to broadly understood “goods,” and equality in the face of current polycrises have begun to be redefined. The earlier enthusiasm has been replaced by fears of the uncontrolled expansion of artificial intelligence and the unimaginable demand for fossil fuels and water needed to cool this red-hot machinery. The illusion of universal prosperity began to be associated with excessive and unjustified consumerism, and the ideas of social equality drifted far away in the context of numerous humanitarian disasters, which, although they should seem unthinkable in today's world, are strikingly close and real. Berardi sees the catastrophic reality in the accelerating rhythm of production, technology, and the pace of everyday life, which, following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, he calls deterritorialization – the process of displacement and destabilization of existing systems⁴¹. It can be said that the reality affected by many crises deterritorializes not only ecosystems and bodies, but also the imagination, for which the future is no longer a matter of choice and conscious action⁴². When Berardi writes that the project of the future has been canceled, he does not mean, of course, that the future has ceased to develop. Rather, he draws attention to a kind of “psychological perception” which, unable to break away from the myth of progress and development, determines the condition of crisis in thinking about what is possible⁴³. So we are dealing with a loss of horizon and, as the philosopher writes, “although the horizon is shifting further and further and we never can reach it, looking at the horizon gives a sense to our walking”⁴⁴.

Similar reflections accompanied Mark Fisher, who was mentioned in the previous chapter. In his collection of essays, titled *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Fisher refers, among other issues, to the crisis of imagination and our inability to construct alternative narratives that would be

³⁸ F. „Bifo” Berardi, *After the Future*, AK Press, Oakland 2011, p. 13.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴² Berardi writes about this crisis of imagination throughout the whole book – a summary can be found in the chapter “Precarious Future,” pp. 96 – 104 (“I’m trying to investigate the present collapse of the imagination of the future, from the point of view of the (apparently) impossible re-composition of social subjectivity” – p. 97).

⁴³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

capable of reversing a fatalistic future⁴⁵. He describes the current situation as “capitalist realism” – a time when the paradigm of total consumption naturalizes the devastation of the planet, while paralyzing our imagination and ability to act. In his characteristic manner, drawing on works of popular culture, Fisher examines the slogan “no future” from the 1970s. In his essay “It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,” he uses the example of Alfonso Cuarón's movie *Children of Men* to present a world steeped in stagnation and melancholy⁴⁶. In Cuarón's movie, the symbol of a canceled future is humanity's inability to reproduce. One of the first scenes reveals that shortly after his 18th birthday, the world's youngest citizen dies in a fatal accident. Thus, with the death of the “last child”, the last hopes also disappear. Faced with the inability to bring forth new generations who will carry on history and culture, the meaning of existence itself is called into question. Fisher, of course, takes up this theme metaphorically, as a transfer of a different kind of fear: “I want to argue this anxiety cries out to be read in cultural terms, and the question the film poses is: how long can a culture persist without the new? What happens if the young are no longer capable of producing surprises? *Children of Men* connects with the suspicion that the end has already come, the thought that it could well be the case that the future harbors only reiteration and re-permutation. (...) Such anxieties tend to result in a bi-polar oscillation: the ‘weak messianic’ hope that there must be something new on the way lapses into the morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen”⁴⁷.

Berardi writes that “at the beginning of the 21st century, does dystopia take centre stage and conquer the whole field of the artistic imagination, thus drawing the narrative horizon of the century with no future”⁴⁸. This atmosphere of impotence and alienation, characteristic of the current moment in history, is sensually captured in the trilogy *Angst* – an installation and choreographic work created in 2016 by German artist Anne Imhof. The first installment of the series took place in the minimalist space of the Kunsthalle Basel in Switzerland and was based on a series of performances and an exhibition, which was partly constructed through choreographic activities⁴⁹. The artist created an atmosphere that referred to the sense of contemporary anxiety, isolation of the individual, and loss of the ability to communicate. Alternately lethargic and agitated, the characters, staring at their smartphone screens and surrounded by easily recognizable products and brands, seemed to wander like zombies through the cluttered spaces of the gallery. The second and third installments of the trilogy took place at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin and at La Biennale de Montréal in Canada at the Musée d'art contemporain, respectively. In subsequent presentations, Imhof addressed even more bluntly the experience of confinement, oppression, and powerlessness in the face of expanding systems, and introduced additional elements related to the themes of ritual, domination, and control. During the Berlin performance, *Angst II*, viewers entered a space filled with white smoke, where performers moved sluggishly. This several-hour-long action was described by the artist as an “exhibition-opera”, but it was difficult to discern a linear sequence of acts or narrative⁵⁰. The action was scattered, and viewers of the choreography could enter and leave at any time, observing actions that were distant from each other. The performers, dressed in fashionable, subcultural costumes, wandered around the space of the former railway station in a way that evoked even greater confusion and aimlessness than in *Angst I*. The dominant impression was an overwhelming feeling of emptiness,

⁴⁵ M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ F. „Bifo” Berardi, *After the Future*, *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Information about the event and a description of the exhibition can be found in the Kunsthalle Basel event archive: <https://www.kunsthallebasel.ch/en/exhibition/angst/> and on the “Mousse Magazine” website: <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/anne-imhof-kunsthalle-basel-2016/> (accessed on: 21 May 2025).

⁵⁰ L. Rojas, *Anne Imhof: Angst II*, „Caesura Magazine”, 2016, [online], <https://caesuramag.org/posts/anne-imhof-angst-ii>, (access: 21 May 2025).

which, despite the growing tension and the sense of anticipation of something about to happen, found no resolution or finale. Curator and art critic Jan Zalesak aptly referred to what Anne Imhof managed to create in the dreamlike setting of the Hamburger Bahnhof: “For all its visual appeal, the one thing *Angst II* conspicuously failed to offer was any vision of the future. On the contrary, in terms of its individual images and its overall message *Angst II* fits perfectly into an endless timelessness in which any hint of a ‘direction’ is quickly transformed into something we might call a wander (...) *Angst II* not only represented this aimless wandering, but allowed the viewer to become part of it, to immerse herself in this strangely incoherent collective body that does not create a ‘common ground of understanding and act together for a common goal’ but is held together by shared affects and subliminal signals. Anne Imhof offers us the opportunity to try out for just a moment what it is like to be part of a living, breathing, moving, photo-snapping community of perfectly alienated subjects (each from themselves and from the rest) that more and more resemble the things they produce”⁵¹. The titular anxiety that Anne Imhof manages to convey in her trilogy *Angst* is the strength of her creation, because it is this anxiety that has enslaved us in the present, making us unable to see any meaningful alternative beyond the here and now⁵².



Il. 3. Anne Imhof, *Angst II*, 2016, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin. Photo: Stefano Pirovano / Conceptual Fine Arts

⁵¹ J. Zalesak, *Apocalypse Me*, ibid., pp. 40-41.

⁵² Ibid., p. 42.



Il. 4. Anne Imhof, *Angst II*, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2016. Photo: Nadine Fraczkowski / Sleek Magazine

The perspective of a lost horizon was also one of the main inspirations for the work *Paradise Rot*, which is part of my doctoral project and which I have had the opportunity to present at two exhibitions so far – during “The Temple of Tales” at BWA Wrocław Główny (2024) and “Cockaigne” at the Arsenal Gallery Power Station in Białystok (2025). In this project, I linked the formula of lost futures with the issue of lost paradise – an imagined, unattainable ideal that shapes many futuristic, modernist utopias. In my opinion, the concept of paradise as a (lost) order and lost futures have many points in common.

The title *Paradise Rot* is a reference to Jenny Hval's book and at the same time a paraphrase of John Milton's 17th-century poem *Paradise Lost*⁵³. Growing out of Renaissance theology, Milton's text presents the concept of paradise as a place strongly defined by the Protestant God and by human beings situated anthropocentrically in the world. It is a powerful myth about a supposedly ideal order, a myth about guilt and redemption. The archetype of paradise lost, important in biblical symbolism and reinterpreted in the poem, thus became fundamental to essentialist ideologies that recognize universal, immutable laws governing reality⁵⁴. When choosing the title of my work, which I will describe in detail in the following paragraphs, I wanted to take into account several dependencies that

⁵³ J. Hval, *Paradise Rot. A Novel*, Verso, London, 2018; J. Milton, *Raj utracony* [Paradise Lost], trans. M. Słomczyński, Wydawnictwo Zielona Sowa, Krakow 2002.

⁵⁴ Some contemporary analyses point out that Milton's text can be considered important in showing the connections between human and non-human life and in constructing environmental ethics. However, I am interested here in the common associations with the phrase of “paradise lost.” Cf., for example, S. Smith, *The Ecology of Chaos in Paradise Lost*, “Milton Studies”, Penn State University Press, vol. 59, 2017, pp. 31-55.

undermine these assumptions – the tension between loss, associated with the premonition of the receding horizon of an imagined future, longing, and the “unfulfillment” inscribed in it and the process of decay, associated with dystopia, but potentially also signifying transformation and change. While working on the objects, I came across the aforementioned novel by Jenny Hval, which tells the story of an old house whose space is gradually being taken over by lushly growing plants. In her fictional narrative of decay and disintegration, Hval has woven a dynamic and vital space, because although the building where the action takes place is in a state of obvious erosion, it is teeming with the presence of many organisms and transformations. While reading, I also returned to my reflection on catastrophe, domesticity, and the uncanny, which I referred to in the previous chapter, following Aleksandra Kunce. What I found interesting here was the appearance of non-human life forms, which, at the moment of the “home's” decomposition, begin to establish their own laws, penetrating not only the fabric of the building, but also human bodies.

2.2. *Paradise Rot* – Melancholy and the Sources of Vulnerability

Themes of a “lost paradise”, catastrophe, and the uncanny inspired my installation composed of plant-like objects. The work features elements that refer to abandoned industrial structures, decomposing matter, ecological violence, and organizing infrastructure. It also refers to untamed, “dark” nature and more-than-human agency. My goal was to capture a sense of melancholy, which I believe is essential to grasping the “slow cancellation of the future” described by Berardi and the “lost futures” discussed by Mark Fisher. In the simplest terms, melancholy is characterized by constant fear and uncertainty. It is a feeling associated with mourning, longing, and loss that transforms into an existential, penetrating sadness over time. These are undoubtedly emotions associated with an awareness of contemporary crises. However, apathy, resignation, disappointment, and a sense of individual and collective powerlessness do not fully reveal the complex nature of melancholy and the premonition of “the end.” Similarly, Berardi and Fisher do not stop at these emotions alone. After all, Berardi ultimately asks: “should we accept the idea that in despair there is a painful awareness that we need to process something rather than remove it or bury it under an obligatory optimism”⁵⁵? For years, melancholy, apathy, and depression have been viewed as ways to engage with the surrounding reality. Cioran, for example, writes that melancholy “leads to an indefinite sense of the world” and is a form of “intense perception of reality”⁵⁶. It is “melancholia generosa” – no longer viewed as an illness of the soul, but rather as a source of contemplation, reflection, and creative inspiration.

According to Fisher and Berardi, the feeling of powerlessness is linked to the failure of a specific model of social organization based on agrilogistics and the growth paradigm, as Morton would say. In this sense, it is a deep awareness that existing structures are inadequate and contribute to physical and mental exploitation. Therefore, recognizing one's own powerlessness and the associated anxiety can be understood as the result of an in-depth analysis of the surrounding world – an engagement far from acceptance that becomes an expression of internal conflict and discord.

⁵⁵ F. „Bifo” Berardi, *Quit Everything. Interpreting Depression*, Repeater Book, London, 2024, ed. Kindle, loc. 1,265.

⁵⁶ E. Cioran, *Na szczytach rozpaczy* [On the Heights of Despair], trans. I. Kania, Aletheia, Kraków, 1992, p. 61.



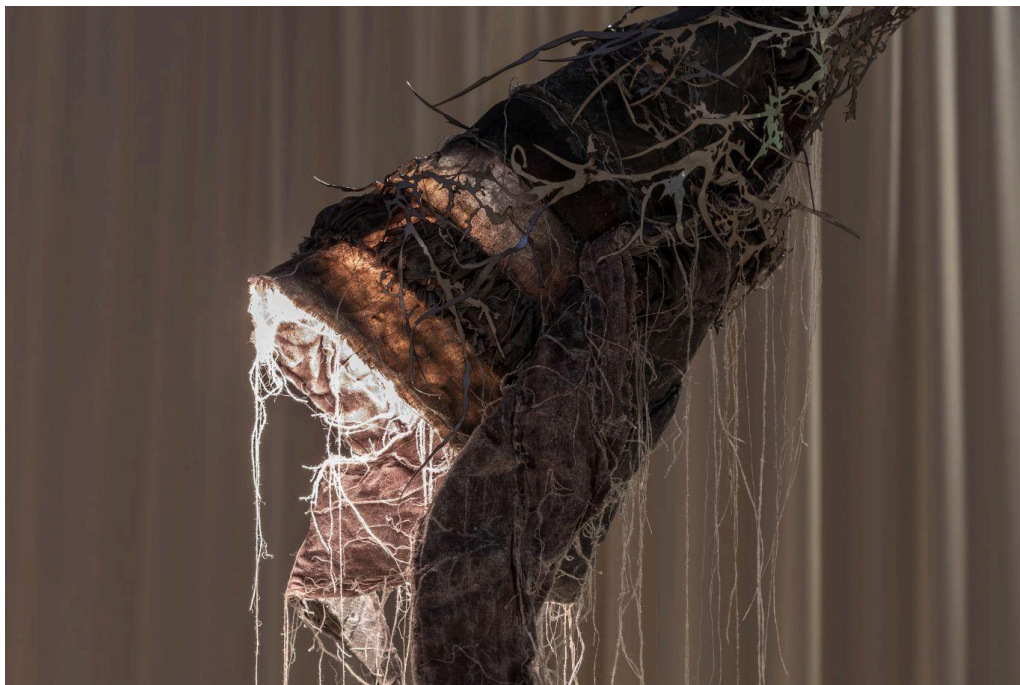
Il. 5. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, BWA Wrocław Główny, Wrocław, 2024.
Photo: Alicja Kielan



Il. 6. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, BWA Wrocław Główny, Wrocław, 2024.
Photo: Inside Job



Il. 7. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, BWA Wrocław Główny, Wrocław, 2024.
Photo: Inside Job



Il. 8. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, BWA Wrocław Główny, Wrocław, 2024.
Photo: Alicja Kielan

Jessica Siobhan Mulvogue, a Canadian researcher who studies the relationship between catastrophe and aesthetics, writes that melancholy is an act of militant lamentation, a tool for sustaining resistance, a refusal to accept loss and “move on”⁵⁷. On the contrary, the end of mourning or acceptance of loss often allows the course of events to be restored, though perhaps it should not always be. These are, after all, recurring ghosts and specters whose melancholic feeling cannot be exorcised, reminding us of the “long duration” not only of catastrophic events, but also of a future that has been halted and postponed. By preventing “a catastrophe from becoming assimilated into the order of things”, melancholy creates an opportunity to envision what has thus far been beyond the realm of imagination⁵⁸. Jan Zalesak puts it similarly, writing that the end of “our” world (in the form of ecological, economic, and political crises) is an opportunity to become aware of other worlds and cosmogonies⁵⁹. Timothy Morton also addresses melancholy, seeing it as a state that connects humans with non-human beings and the history of the planet⁶⁰. Thus, awareness of a “lost paradise” becomes the indigestible physical and psychic memory trace of other beings within oneself”, a premonition of being an immanent part of the world, playing an important though not dominant role⁶¹. Ultimately, the awareness of precariousness mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation can be a source of exceptional sensitivity⁶².

I tried to reflect this perspective through the work *Paradise Rot*, which is described below. The gloomy atmosphere of twilight, the rickety organic structures leaning against the building's original architecture, and the muted colors – the dull greens and grays, and the emerging rust – all stemmed from a melancholic feeling. There is a tension between the impression of toxicity and the smoldering vitality, which stems from a reflection on fragile hope and the feeling of weakness. As with most of my work, *Paradise Rot* was conceived as an environment: a separate, somewhat dystopian space that evokes a sense of alienation. Composed of many tropes and references that raise questions rather than provide answers, I believe *Paradise Rot* accurately reflects the complexity of melancholic sensitivity. Unlike Imhof's project, humans are not at the center of events here. My work primarily focuses on the landscape and its post-catastrophic nature. The viewers are invited to observe a world in which they do not play the leading role. This gradual shift in narrative focus, from stories centered on humans to stories about a world beyond human existence, is a recurring theme in my work. Sometimes compared to stage sets for performances, these landscapes are places where I would like to shift the focus away from human agency, at least symbolically. In Imhof's work, the characters are immersed in paranoia, helplessness, and communication difficulties. In my work, this fear exists in the background without a specific beginning or end. It does not refer to a single event but rather conveys a mood, a premonition, or an intuition.

The project's centerpiece consists of sculptural objects that exist at the intersection of technology and nature. Rather than presenting a simple, romantic, and dualistic opposition, it was important for me to

⁵⁷ J.S. Mulvogue, *Catastrophe Aesthetics: Affective Epistemologies of Climate Change in Experimental Media Art*, York University, Toronto, 2018, p. 146.

⁵⁸ P. Rae, “Modernist Mourning,” p. 18, cited in: J.S. Mulvogue, *Catastrophe Aesthetics: Affective Epistemologies of Climate Change in Experimental Media Art*, *ibid.*

⁵⁹ J. Zalesak, *Apocalypse Me*, *ibid.*, p. 6, Zalesak refers here in particular to Isadora Neves Marques, who describes the stories of people who have already faced apocalypses in the past. Cf. I.N. Marques, *Look Above, the Sky Is Falling. Humanity Before and After the End of the World*, „e-flux journal”, no. 65 (August 2015), [online] <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/65/336645/look-above-the-sky-is-falling-humanity-before-and-after-the-end-of-the-world/> (access: 21 May 2025).

⁶⁰ Cf. T. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, *ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁶² A. L. Tsing, *Mushrooms at the End of the World*, *ibid.*, p. 2.

emphasize the coexistence of these orders – their mutual entanglement. In *Paradise Rot*, as in my other works, I reflect on the fact that today's technology is never created in isolation from nature; rather, it constitutes a kind of transformation and reconfiguration. The steel and aluminum that I have worked with for years have become the building blocks for undulating stems tipped with fabric calyxes from which a delicate light emanates. The exaggerated plant structures seem to dominate visitors strolling through the exhibition. The curved steel branches create a kind of secondary architecture, forming soft arches that stretch above visitors' heads. During the exhibition "The Temple of Tales", where the work was presented for the first time, the branches rested on columns that were an integral part of the space. Joanna Kobyłt, the exhibition's curator, described them as follows:

In these abandoned neo-Gothic interiors built in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a time of flourishing industry, some odd plant-like objects appeared. They are propped up on cast-iron columns, with which they appear to bear a strange resemblance. The wavy lines of the stems shine metallically, and the leaves, sharp as thorns, glisten with steel, occasionally betraying their industrial origins with traces of rust. Most peculiar, however, are what seem to be neither flower cups, nor wispy cocoons crowning their apparently delicate steel stems—inside they glow with an electric light⁶³.

Similarly, during the second presentation of *Paradise Rot*, at the Power Plant in Białystok, they built infrastructure that was partly organic and partly industrial. This infrastructure was related to the building's original function dating back to the early 20th century.

Soft calyxes crowning steel stems (*The Observers*) lean over ponds filled with black, oily sludge (*The Ponds*). This arrangement suggests weight, and the deep inclined position may indicate emotional reflection. The form gives the impression of being "stooped" – if one were to compare it to the human body. Though they hang down, their inclination is not comparable to dying or withering processes. It is, on the one hand, a state of suspension and, on the other, a gently smoldering activity indicated by the warm light emanating from within. The winding cables powering the objects' interiors and connecting to the ponds suggest the drawing of energy. The source of this energy seems to be a sticky substance in a metal container – or, conversely, it is black sludge sucked out of a toxic, overgrown plant. In *Paradise Rot*, the black liquid may evoke associations with petroleum, a fundamental global economic commodity and the main energy source. Formed from organic matter and accumulated in sedimentary rocks, petroleum has had a significant impact on history, climate, and international relations since the mid-19th century. This context is important to me and also appears in my other works⁶⁴

Petroleum, also known as "black gold," was largely formed between 280 and 345 million years ago, although its origins date back even further. Humans have used it since ancient times, when it was widely utilized in construction and everyday infrastructure. The excessive extraction of fossil fuels and the inadequate management of abandoned wells are now subjects of widespread debate. These discussions primarily highlight the environmental damage caused by declining surface and groundwater levels, the release of harmful methane, and the infiltration of toxic substances into the soil. These threats are well-documented in scientific literature, the focus of many social campaigns, and the subject of heated political debates. In these contexts, awareness of the risks often takes a backseat to economic profits. A perfect example of this is the disaster of Deepwater Horizon in 2010,

⁶³ J. Kobyłt, *The Temple of the Tales*, BWA Wrocław Główny, 2024, text from the booklet accompanying the exhibition.

⁶⁴ I am referring, among other things, to the work *Hopecraft Ceremony*, which I describe in the fourth chapter.

the world's largest oil rig incident. The ecological losses from this event are incalculable, despite the fact that the tragedy could have been prevented.

The fossil fuels extraction and transportation industry creates extensive networks. Some are buried deep underground while others run across the bottoms of oceans, rivers, and lakes. These networks resemble a technological bloodstream through which the raw material that fuels global consumption flows. The presence of petrol is tangible; the past is near, and its decline is imminent. The history of its extraction is therefore a story of loss – the burning of fragments of the past whose end is inevitable around 2050, when “black gold” reserves will be depleted. Stephanie LeMenager, an American professor of environmental humanities, coined the term “petromelancholy” to describe “mourning for oil resources and the pleasures they sustained”⁶⁵. Petromelancholia describes how “loving oil to the extent that we have done in the twentieth century sets up the conditions of grief as conventional oil resources dwindle”⁶⁶. It also refers to a sense of guilt associated with using these energy sources and an awareness of how difficult it is to resist and stop petro-culture⁶⁷. Like melancholy itself, however, its petro-derived counterpart is a sensitive, insightful, and critical perspective.

In a speculative fiction piece, Reza Negarestani offered an intriguing perspective on oil's agency⁶⁸. He points to the entanglement of people with the materials that accompany them - primarily oil. The narrative of *Cyclonopedia* subversively suggests that what lies dormant underground is returning. This return is the reemergence of repressed matter from the Earth. This matter is accelerating global warming in order to end the current chapter of history, the Anthropocene, in the long term. In Negarestani's work, petroleum becomes a repressed consciousness that emerges from the depths. From an economic point of view, humanity seems to be at its mercy⁶⁹.

I wanted the plants leaning over the oily ponds to highlight these connections and suggest that organisms saturated with poisonous substances had evolved into monstrous, overgrown forms that reveal their toxic nature. In other words, this sticky liquid matter (similar to Morton's viscosity) turned out to be essential to sustaining their lives. The exaggerated forms, as mentioned in the title, are observers, though their original working title was different. Initially named *The Narcissist* and *The Narcissist Liar*, they refer to the figure of the narcissist in a philosophical context, especially in ecological concepts, as a metaphor for deep reflection on the relationship between being and the world⁷⁰. Originally, the figure of the narcissist, rooted in Greek mythology and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, symbolized pride, vanity, and self-admiration. More broadly, it has become an analogy for the downfall associated with believing in one's own superiority. However, Timothy Morton notes that narcissism can be seen as a kind of expanded consciousness, somewhat similar to melancholy. Melancholy is not just deep sadness and apathy; it is the result of reflection and the experience of coexistence. The narcissist staring intently at the surface of the water becomes part of the surrounding world, sees his reflection, and, although he remains in love with it, experiences his presence in relation to nature. Morton's interpretation of narcissism is a “looped self-reflection”

⁶⁵ S. LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, p. 18.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 102.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ R. Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia. Complicity with anonymous materials*, re.press Melbourne, 2008.

⁶⁹ *Cyclonopedia: Petro-Politics and Tellurian Lube*, „The Spouter Magazine”, 2021, [online] <https://medium.com/the-spouter-magazine/cyclonopedia-petro-politics-and-tellurian-lube-2a3787f83f4b>, (access: 21 May 2025).

⁷⁰ Cf. T. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, ibid., pp. 98-99.

involving a confrontation with otherness, the “non-self” and the “non-human”⁷¹. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, narcissism is associated with the mirror stage, when the individual recognizes himself as separate yet dependent on the image. Morton develops this theme, pointing out that narcissism is a way of perceiving oneself as part of a larger network of relationships. The final version of the work was titled *The Observers*, retaining the context of observing one's surroundings.

In *Paradise Rot*, the landscape of melancholic reflection is an important element. It is somewhat dystopian, immersed in ecological mourning and the awareness of throbbing techno-capitalist economies and politics. However, it is also thoughtful, observant, and active, as suggested by objects looking at themselves.



Il. 9. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, BWA Wrocław Główny, Wrocław, 2024.
Photo: Inside Job

⁷¹ Ibid.

2.3. Will-o-the-wisp

As part of the “Cockaigne” exhibition at the Power Plant gallery in Białystok's Arsenal, the *Paradise Rot* project was supplemented with a further context. The dominant subject here were swamps – places that are unknown and dangerous, but also, in an inhuman and difficult to comprehend way, exceptionally vital. This topic was not unfamiliar to me – a few years ago, I took up the subject of swamps, and the result of this exploration was the creation of the work *Anitya - There are flowers that are born of mud* (2021). Later, I used the same title for my exhibition at 66P - Subjective Cultural Institution in Wrocław (2023). The title refers to the lotus's ability to grow in murky, muddy matter, expressing strength and the possibility of resilience and adaptation in the face of environmental degradation and the consequences of civilizational changes.

While working on “Cockaigne”, curator Katarzyna Różniak suggested reading Michał Pospiszył's texts, which addressed the issue of wetlands and the processes of their deliberate drainage from an ecological, but also political perspective⁷². According to his analysis, since very early historical times, swamps have been a battleground for control and dominance. They were a motherland for the wildest nature, but also a refuge for all kinds of fugitives fleeing from the dominant systems of power and order. The project of draining swamps became a programmatic element of Enlightenment civilization, to finally accelerate in modern times. Michał Pospiszył commented on this as follows: “But why did wetlands, which had been part of the regional landscape for years on end, become such a serious problem in the eighteenth century? (...) In the writings of Voltaire, Frederick the Great, and August Sulkowski, social and ecological barbarism was described unequivocally negatively. (...) In this vision, there was no place for hybrids: for a muddy road, an unregulated river, an undrained field. Reality, social and natural, was supposed to be divided into simple categories, allowing it to be organized according to Linnaeus's tables. Mixtures of all kinds made the ruled territory less legible and rendered exploitation difficult”⁷³. As a result of this paranoid crusade against ecological and social “barbarism”, most of the world's wetlands were eliminated over the course of hundreds of years. This has led to catastrophic droughts that now affect not only the warmest regions of the globe⁷⁴. Today, most of the arguments used to justify drainage have been refuted⁷⁵. Although swamps are traditionally viewed as frightening and sinister – the natural setting for horror in popular culture – they are an essential part of a living, self-regulating environment. So they are a symbol – on the one hand, of all the difficult conditions, the feeling of hopelessness and finality. On the other hand, they can also be seen as a beginning. They are a building material – the primordial substance from which life crawled onto land.

⁷² M. Pospiszył, *The Fifth Element: The Enlightenment and the Draining of Eastern Europe*, “Environmental History” 28 (2), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2023, pp. 361-388; K. Czeżot, M. Pospiszył, *Osuszanie historii. Błoto i nowoczesność* [Drying out history. Mud and modernity], “Teksty Drugie”, no 5, 2021, pp. 62–78, M. Pospiszył, *Zacieraj ślady!* [Blur the traces!], “Mały Format”, 3 July 2021, [online], <https://malyformat.com/2021/07/zacieraj-slady/>, *Mały Format+7Mały Format+7Mały Format+7*, (access: 21 May 2025).

⁷³ M. Pospiszył, *The Fifth Element*, *ibid.*, p. 375.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁵ Cf. “Throughout modern history, projects involving river regulation, swamp drainage, and wetland reclamation have been accompanied by the same set of promises: reduced flooding, increased fertile land, and ultimately improved health and sanitary conditions. However, we know from the experience of the last two hundred years that what has been achieved is not so much an increase in arable land, because the land taken from the river (or swamps) very quickly becomes barren (...) The view that regulating rivers reduces the risk of flooding is also untenable. (...) The health issue is also controversial. There are too many variables to determine what impact the drainage of wetlands may have on improving health conditions”. K. Czeżot, M. Pospiszył, *Osuszanie historii*, *ibid.*, p. 72.

The connection between *Paradise Rot* and the themes of swamps and petroleum seems interesting to me because of the similarity of fluid materials embedded in geological and ecological processes. In *Bodies of Water*, Astrida Neimanis asks: “From where do we gather our own waters, and to what or whom do we bequeath them?”⁷⁶. The dark, oily liquid flowing through the exaggerated *Observers* is part of their bodies. This cycle is full of chaos, uncontrollability, and uncertainty – much like a future-oriented sensitivity that is aware of its inevitable defeat. In my opinion, the process of drainage is also synonymous with the politics of fossil fuels extraction and its disastrous long-term consequences.

However, the main theme that influenced the presentation of *Paradise Rot* in the context of the swamp exhibition was the recurring motif of the so-called “will-o’-the-wisps” (latin: *ignis fatuus*), a legend repeated in many cultures. This ancient and widespread folktale tells of mysterious, flickering lights appearing over swamps and peat bogs. The presence of these lights was usually associated with danger, signifying bad luck, getting lost, and inevitable death for travelers. These legends have their roots in natural phenomena, such as the emission and ignition of methane, hydrogen sulfide, and phosphine under favorable conditions in wetlands. Legends and parables about fires that lure unsuspecting travelers into deadly swamps can be found all over the world. Their symbolic and cultural function mainly communicates liminality, or the points of contact between the real world and the afterlife. Will-o’-the-wisps can also symbolize false promises and cognitive traps. In this context, swamps are associated with mystical and spiritual insights. They point to disorientation, death, and decay but also to potential rebirth and transformation. Thus, will-o’-the-wisps are the embodiment of the nature of swamps – their instability, fluidity, treachery, and mystery.

In this context, the light gently seeping from the chalices in the work *Paradise Rot* is a subtle foreshadowing of the opportunity to regain the future, breaking the impasse and seeing new prospects on the horizon. It is a spark of hope, a deceptive invitation into a tangled ecosystem of possibilities, to which the next chapter is entirely devoted.

⁷⁶ A. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, New York, 2017, p. 67.



II. 10. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot, Wind Sailors*, Power Station of Arsenal Gallery, 2025. Photo: Tytus Szabelski-Różniak



II. 11. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, Power Station of Arsenal Gallery, 2025. Photo: Tytus Szabelski-Różniak



II. 12. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, Power Station of Arsenal Gallery, 2025.
Photo: Tytus Szabelski-Różniak

III. Potentiality – body, plant-thinking, assemblage

When Berardi writes about dystopia and impotence, he mentions that, even in the darkness of our current crisis, a horizon of possibilities exists⁷⁷. For me, too, such fragile hope holds exceptional significance in the context of catastrophe⁷⁸. When thinking about the direction of the upcoming artistic project, I am always accompanied by a tension between anxiety and an attempt to chart a potential path which, although it does not guarantee a solution, triggers thinking towards the still present possibility of survival. This was the case with the project *And the Door Was Kicked Open Again*, which I realized at the FUTURA Center for Contemporary Art in Prague in 2021. There, I began translating plant inspirations into forms that overgrew metallic, seemingly mechanical structures. At that time, during numerous trips around contemporary, post-industrial ruins, slowly being reclaimed by nature, I started to study and photograph thistles. Their perseverance and resilience in difficult environmental conditions inspired me to create an exhibition that, despite its dystopian nature, told a story of survival. Thistle-inspired forms remain part of my projects to this day. The story of decisions, transformations, and the arduous search for meaning among what is falling apart and what is rising from the ashes was also part of one of my earlier installations, *Not a Gift Given but a Choice Made*, dedicated to the Pavilion in Poznań in 2019⁷⁹. The environment of twisting, upward-growing, rhizomatic structures built in this space suggested the relentless possibility of continuous reconfiguration. This vector of change suggests that even in the most fatalistic scenarios, a delicate, flickering light of hope smolders. I do wish my works would function in this way: as tools of imagination – setting directions for possible action in complex and difficult circumstances.

While the already mentioned Anne Lowenhaupt Tsing points out that uncertainty is a permanent condition, a characteristic feature of the present times, she also reminds us that: “one value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival”⁸⁰. Tsing uses the term “precarity”. The etymology of this word points to its Latin roots, which refer to dependence – most often negative – on someone else. I think that in the context of both Tsing and this work, it is reasonable to turn toward the dynamics of coexistence rather than control and the tensions of mutual connections. That aspect, I feel, is what Tsing draws out most from the precariousness she mentions. “To survive, we need help,” writes the researcher, continuing that survival is a mutual relationship that is a source of cooperation, which also includes interspecies cooperation: “The important stuff for life on earth happens in those transformations, not in the decision trees of self-contained individuals. Rather than seeing only the expansion-and-conquest strategies of relentless individuals, we must look for histories that develop through contamination. (...) The evolution of our “selves” is already polluted by histories of encounter; we are mixed up with others before we even begin any new collaboration. (...) Contamination makes diversity”⁸¹. The contamination addressed here refers to both the specters and ghosts of past and future catastrophes, which I wrote about earlier—traces of exploitation, destabilization, but also hints of coexistence and transformation, which can only occur through relationships, through entanglements, through alliances.

⁷⁷ Cf. F. „Bifo” Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, Verso, London 2017.

⁷⁸ I refer to fragile hope here with reference to Rebecca Solnit and her book *Hope in the Dark*, in which the concept of “fragile hope” appears in the context of crises and catastrophic reality. / Cf. R. Solnit, *Hope in the Dark. Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2016.

⁷⁹ The Pavilion is part of the Arsenał Municipal Gallery in Poznań (currently GAMA), dedicated to performative, discursive, immersive, and music-related events.

⁸⁰ A. L. Tsing, *Mushrooms at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, *ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

So, what is potentiality? What about the “Possibility we are poisoned” that I mentioned in the introduction? After many years, this idea returned to me as a formula of uncertainty, a starting point, a challenge, and a question about agency. So, both “possibility” and “contamination” will appear in this chapter – but contamination that no longer has negative connotations. It will be presented as an antidote, a countermeasure to another poison. In a slightly different context, the motifs of dormant seeds and the body will also reappear as a foreground for reflecting on empathy within posthumanist ecological coexistence conditions⁸².

3.1. Body Without Organs

In his 2017 book *Futurability*, Berardi states: “I’m not going to write about the future, again. I’m not going to write about no-future, either. I’ll write about the process of becoming other: vibration, selection, recombination, recomposition. (...) I call possibility a content inscribed in the present constitution of the world (that is, the immanence of possibilities). Possibility is not one, it is always plural: the possibilities inscribed in the present composition of the world are not infinite, but many”⁸³. When compared with the observations in *After the Future*, which served as a reference in many parts of the previous chapter, these words seem to be a quite strong optimistic declaration. In my opinion, Berardi does not invalidate his earlier insights about the “slow cancellation of the future” here but rather subtly changes their direction. It is a proposal that turns away from the concept of a predetermined future, which we constantly strive for and surrender to. For him, the future becomes a space of possibilities: open and free from the necessity of fulfilling pre-programmed expectations. In this sense, our role is not to reclaim it but to recognize its porosity and unseal its image.

Turning towards “possibilities and recombination”, Berardi references Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who dedicate a significant portion of their renowned work *A Thousand Plateaus* to these processes⁸⁴. In the included manifesto, they pose the question: how do you make yourself a body without organs? (BwO)⁸⁵. Inspired by the work of Antonin Artaud, who was interested in freeing the body from its automatisms and limitations, this daring idea is the starting point for reflections on potentiality. For Artaud, the BwO was a symbol of rebellion, free from imposed structures and representing regained energy. Deleuze and Guattari used the concept as an abstract idea referring primarily to potential and possibility emerging from established frameworks and orders. Over time, the BwO theory has also become fertile ground for many new materialist and posthumanist considerations that inspire my research. For Astrid Neimanis, Deleuze and Guattari's reflection on the body constitutes post-human phenomenology – one in which “bodies are congeries of all kinds of physical, material, cultural, and semiotic forces, and how they become is more interesting than what they are”⁸⁶.

To me, BwO is primarily an opportunity to think about the future beyond established norms and structures. It is useful for constructing a world between sadness and hope, reflecting on what the

⁸² D. Golańska, *O praktykach i procesie. Nowomaterialistyczne spojrzenie na sploty sztuki, nauki i wiedzy* [On Practices and Process. A New Materialist Perspective on the Entanglements of Art, Science and Knowledge], in: O. Cielemecka, M. Rogowska-Stangret (eds.), *Feministyczne nowe materializmy: usytuowane kartografie* [Feminist New Materialisms: Situated Cartographies], e-naukowiec, Lublin, 2018, p. 215.

⁸³ F. „Bifo” Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, *ibid.*, p.1.

⁸⁴ Cf. G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Tysiąc plateau. Kapitalizm i schizofrenia* [A thousand plateaus. Capitalism and schizophrenia], trans. B. Banasiak, K. Kuziak, M. Kwaterko, Wydawnictwo Bęc Zmiana, Warsaw, 2015.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-199.

⁸⁶ A. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, *ibid.*, p. 44. .

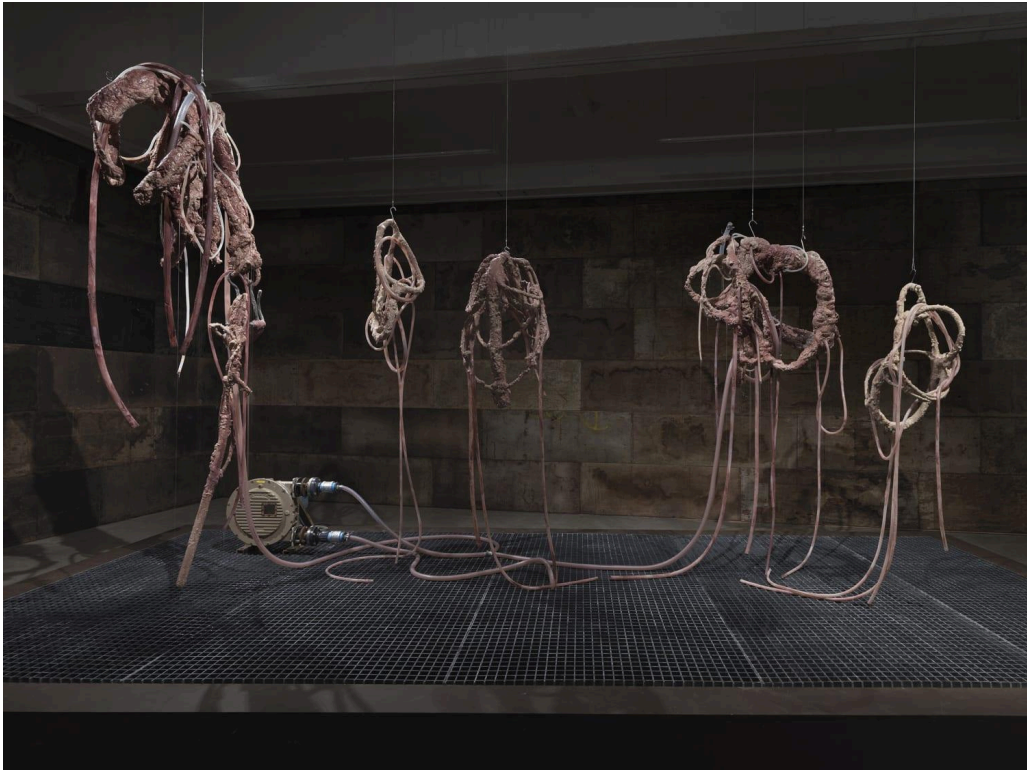
future might become. When I wrote about the canceled future, the lost paradise and further – the lost paradise that contains elements of life – I had precisely this intensity and urge, which characterize BwO, in mind. A future defined by growth projects and strictly individualistic perspectives leads to slow burnout – a sense of living in an ongoing catastrophic environment fueled by the grim echoes of local and global crises. The concept of "becoming," as postulated by Deleuze and Guattari, Neimanis, and others, offers an alternative to such linear ways of imagining the path ahead.

I will refer again to Berardi, who describes these processes. He writes that “the present reality contains the future as a wide range of possibilities, and the selection of one possibility among many is not prescribed in a deterministic way in the process of morphogenesis. The future is inscribed in the present as a tendency that we can imagine: a sort of premonition, a vibrational movement of particles that are taken in an uncertain process of continuous recombination. Immanence does not imply a logical, necessary consequentiality: the present does not contain the future as a necessary linear deployment or consequential elaboration of implications that we can read in the current reality. Immanence means all the uncountable divergent and conflicting possibilities are inscribed in the present. The present state of the world can be described as the vibrational concurrence of many possibilities”⁸⁷. Therefore, movement, recombination, and transformation associated with possibility and potentiality do not necessarily mean revolutionary changes. These can occur on many scales, each with its own undeniable significance.

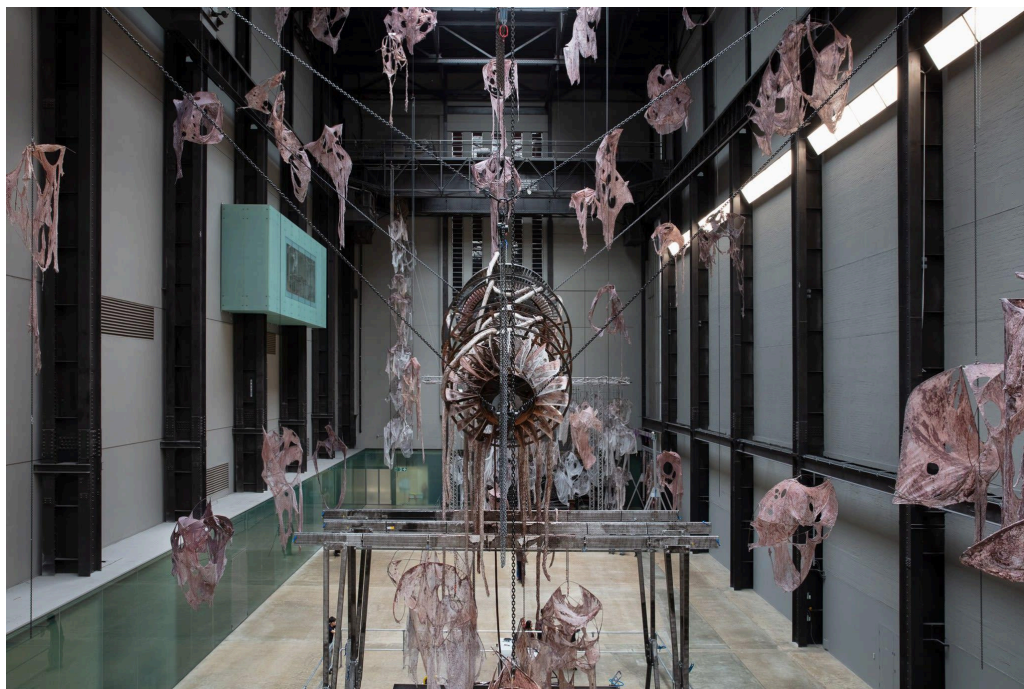
The concept of a canceled future can paradoxically be a new beginning—a space rooted in the possibility of observing the very processes of thinking about the future and the very moments of “becoming” that extend beyond strict frameworks and chronologies. To me, the Body Without Organs is a metaphor for contemplating what lies ahead. It does not have to be associated with catastrophe, success, or development. A decentralized, stitched-together, fragmentary structure is a more appropriate way to describe it, as it is attentive and sensitive to geopolitical differences, possibilities, and limitations. The concept of the Body Without Organs is closely linked to processes of deterritorialization, which – it should be remembered – are often exploited by the capitalist machine, which is highly efficient in handling the notions of fluidity and disorganization. The works of Korean artist Mire Lee illustrate this mechanism. In my opinion, she uses the reverse logic of BwO - Organs without Body. Although the artist's installations have plenty of potential (as suggested, for example, by the titles of the works from the *Carriers* series, which refers to containers and organisms that can physically transport or hold various elements), the leitmotif here is the deterritorialized, fragmented body⁸⁸. In Lee's installations, it appears permanently intertwined with industrial waste, digesting and metabolizing each other while accumulating sticky fluids and undergoing deconstruction. Rotating motors compress the matter of objects, giving them shapes and forms that mimic the processes of organs. In Mire Lee's work, Organs Without Body are scattered organs that are constantly deterritorialized.

⁸⁷ F. „Bifo” Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, ibid., p. 13-14.

⁸⁸ Cf. M. Lee, *Carriers*, 2020-2022, [online] Tina Kim Gallery, <https://tinakimgallery.com/exhibitions/33-mire-lee-carriers/> and the artist's website: <http://www.mirelee.com/en/works/carriers> (access: 21 May 2025).



Il. 13. Mire Lee, *Carriers*, Tina Kim Gallery, 2022. Photo: Hyunjung Rhee



Il. 14. Mire Lee, *Open Wound*, Tate Modern Londyn – Hyundai Commission, 2025. Photo: Ben Fisher / Tate

For the *Open Wound* exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, Lee created an environment consisting of turbines entwined with pseudo-bodily entrails⁸⁹. The installation repurposed an old crane that had previously served the power plant located in this part of the building. Skeletal structures formed from the rotors suspended from it, and silicone tubes were strung between them – a peristaltic system spurting a viscous, pinkish-brown substance. It seems as if Lee's turbine, no longer satisfied with generating electricity from coal and oil, was grinding skinned bodies. The body is thus harnessed in production processes that recombine and transform it. Here, too, there seems to be room for re-becoming, fluctuation, and experimentation. However, I think Lee's work reveals a subtle yet important difference: recombination and transformation can be tools of oppression too. Distorted bodies, which become hosts to the production process, are in fact part of a continuous becoming—but this becoming seems to be outside of time, outside of the body itself. The titles of some of Lee's works, such as *Saboteurs* (2019), *The Complicits* (2019), and *The Liars* (2018–2020), reveal how her work navigates this scattered influences. They refer to the complex feelings associated with the constant crises, tensions, and accelerations of late capitalism. Lee listens to “the darkest depths of contemporary life, demonstrating how quickly the seemingly banal innocence of its machinery can reveal a hidden inverse of depravity and dystopia”, writes curator Billy Tang⁹⁰.

How, then, can we grasp the critical potential of the concept of the Body Without Organs while avoiding the dangers depicted by Lee's works? Deleuze and Guattari describe the BwO using the metaphor of an egg (embryo), which may be crucial here if we consider its similarity to the “seeds” mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. Both eggs and seeds store life in a dormant state. They are capsules of potentiality and forms of promise – spaces of constant formation. Thus, the egg takes on an almost political dimension, which is certainly how Berardi interprets it. The egg metaphor allows us to easily imagine the hidden potential of the BwO. “the egg holds all the potential only a fraction of which will ever be actualized in the subject” writes Astrida Neimanis, following Deleuze and adding that ‘the embryo holds all the potentiality that would rip an adult apart. In order to grow from larva to adult, the adult must select what it can withstand. In other words, the emergence of specific bodies is not a given, but rather an active result of the forces of selection and differentiation’⁹¹.

Therefore, activity and awareness are important here as well. The BwO concept has the potential to enable change and transformation, but this potential can only be unleashed when the possibility is embodied in a subject endowed with potential⁹². This awareness is precisely the knowledge I postulated earlier: observation of unrest, awareness of crises, interspecies entanglement, inequality, threats, and the readiness for change despite the often overwhelming nature of it all.

I believe that art is an excellent medium for creating alternative perspectives and realities. “Within the context of catastrophe, it is tempting to grasp onto this transformative potential of art, especially since the etymological roots of catastrophe tells us that there is a generative potential, a potential for change.”, concludes Jessica Siobhan Mulvogue, who has been mentioned previously⁹³.

⁸⁹ M. Lee, *Open Wound*, Tate Modern – Hyundai Commission, Turbine Hall, London, 9 October 2024 – 16 March 2025, Cf. [online] <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/mire-lee> (access: 21 May 2025).

⁹⁰ B. Tang, *Post-Industrial Grotesque*, “Tina Kim Gallery” and “ArtAsiaPacific”, 9 September 2022, [online], <https://tinakingallery.com/news/26-post-industrial-grotesque-artasiapacific/> (access: 21 May 2025).

⁹¹ A. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, *ibid.*, pp. 92, 120.

⁹² F. „Bifo” Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹³ J.S. Mulvogue, *Catastrophe Aesthetics: Affective Epistemologies of Climate Change in Experimental Media Art*, *ibid.*, p.37.

3.2. *Behind the mouths gate something is stirring, is flickering*

*The horizon of possibility is perceived as an infinite sprawl of connecting, flashing points*⁹⁴.

Behind the mouth's gate something is stirring, is flickering consists of six objects of similar size that hang from the ceiling on a long, rhizomatic structure that also winds across the floor. The calyx-like forms were made from fragments of hand-dyed linen, silk and organza sewn together. The exterior of each form has a darkened color palette of moss, grays and browns. In some places, one can see glyphs that are difficult to decipher or fragments of impossible-to-read text. The interior, on the other hand, is organic, darker and red – one might say fleshy or carnal. Each of the six objects resembles an empty cocoon or a moult from which something has hatched. They could also be open vessels or open bodies. The forms have been additionally waxed so that they appear wet, cracked, covered with a transparent layer. From the interiors emerge metallic, floral elements.

The work draws inspiration from the plant world, particularly the carnivorous pitcher plant family (*Nepenthaceae*), which lures insects with its scent. In this context, pitcher plants can be interpreted as empty bodies – bodies without organs whose spaces pose both a threat and an opportunity. The bulging trap forms of pitcher plants are simultaneously leaves, containers, and digestive systems, combining functions characteristic of different parts in other plant organisms. Therefore, the pitcher plant is not a leaf, flower, or fruit; it is a hybrid form “in between”, containing the potential of each of these structures.

The calyxes in this piece are open and permeable. Black lines, resembling cables or roots, wind through them and spread across the floor as if searching for an exit. These lines serve as a supporting mechanism, like a vine, and are also a material from a different order – technological and mechanistic – pretending to be merely part of the organism. Similarly, the metal quasi-plants placed in the calyxes – tangled, organic shapes laser-cut from stainless steel. They are entities that belong elsewhere, like parasites entwining and hooking their sharp edges onto the delicate membranes of the chalices. *Behind the mouth's gate something is stirring, is flickering* is an organism that is not separate and independent, does not exist in isolation, is infected with another life force. It forms compact clusters, and its presence is always associated with other calyxes in an almost twin manner.

I wanted this work to feature an element close to the body. It is actually one of the first projects in which I addressed this aspect. Previously, rather its intentional absence was important to me⁹⁵. However, the porous bodies of the cocoons in this piece are not the human ones - what was important here was the context of the bodily shell as a field in which various orders intersect⁹⁶. Following the American poet and writer Adrienne Rich, Astrida Neimanis writes that “the thing called ‘the body’, (...) is a congeries of other bodies, and always on the move”⁹⁷.

⁹⁴ F. „Bifo” Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, ibid., p. 27.

⁹⁵ The second of such works was *Skinwalker*, resembling an open, split body, with only ribs and thin skin remaining. The work was presented during the exhibition “There are flowers that are born of mud” at the 66P - Subjective Institution of Culture in Wrocław (21. September - 4. November 2023).

⁹⁶ A. Barcz, *Wstęp. Hydrofemenologia według Astridy Neimanis* [Introduction. Hydrophenomenology according to Astrid Neimanis], in: A. Neimanis, *Ciała wodne. Posthumanistyczna fenomenologia feministyczna* [Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology], trans. S. Królak, Pamoja Press, Warsaw 2024, p. 20.

⁹⁷ A. Neimanis., *Bodies of Water*, ibid., 34.



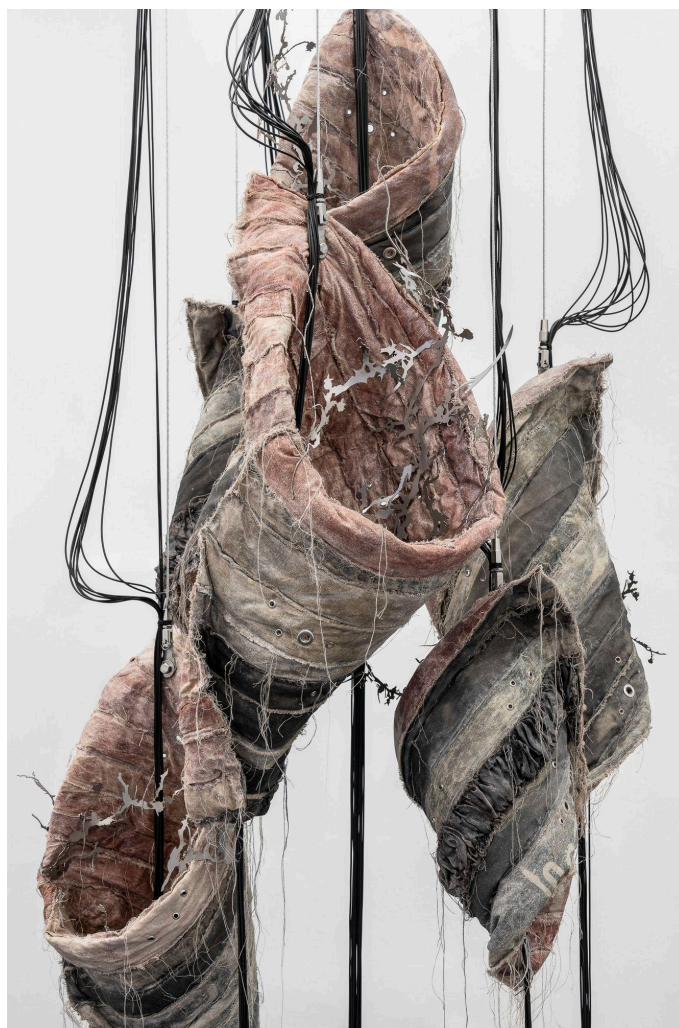
Il. 15. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Behind the mouth's gate something is stirring, is flickering*, eastcontemporary, Milan, photo: Tiziano Ercoli

The body becomes – as in the title – a gateway, “it is a congeries of the personal and the political; of the material and the semiotic. It is biological and cultural, and it is never only one thing, in only one place, or only ‘itself’”⁹⁸. Feminist environmental humanities researcher Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality captures these tensions well. Trans-corporeality shifts the understanding of the body as a separate, hermetic existence⁹⁹. This awareness of the community – with processes, substances, including chemicals, and ethical commitment, which introduces new ways of humanistic thinking and acting.

What is important to me here is understanding the complex nature of the body as a non-individual experience. I see living through the entangled body as a way for seeing possibilities where previously only rigidly defined structures were visible. I believe the body is a vehicle for the experience itself. Turning toward trans-corporeality opens up possibilities, potentialities, and virtualities that co-shape the body. It opens up thinking about affective flows and “becoming” in relationships, care, sensitivity, and engagement.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

⁹⁹ Cf. S. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington – Indianapolis, 2010.



Il. 16. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Behind the mouth's gate something is stirring, is flickering*, eastcontemporary, Milan. Photo: Inside Job

3.3. Being of the World: The Complexity of Assemblage

The trans-corporeal nature of the body and, further, the turn toward “becoming” and co-creation, is also described by Monika Rogowska-Stangret, who postulates “being of the world”. Borrowed from Karen Barad, this phrase is a critical shift from the popular statement of “being embedded in the world” or Heidegger’s “in-der-welt-sein”. It reveals a different positioning of the human subject in relation to the surrounding reality. For Barad and Rogowska-Stangret, “being of world” realizes the ontology of interdependence and material intra-action – a condition that is beyond anthropocentric relationality. “Being of world” means that there is no quality difference between us and the world – we emerge from and become one with it. ““We” are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity”¹⁰⁰. “We are of the world, not in the world. (...) Being of the world also means

¹⁰⁰ K. Barad, cited in: M. Rogowska-Stangret, *Być ze świata*, ibid., p. 26.

experiencing an implosion. (...) Finally, being of the world means emerging from it and becoming one with it. All aspirations, whether for union, fusion, connection, separation, isolation, or narcissism, are immanent to the world and characterize it”¹⁰¹.

In this context, Rogowska-Stangret devotes particular attention to plant world. To her, plants are a particular embodiment of the trans-corporeal approach of “becoming”, which departs from views that isolate the individual from the environment. She discusses plant time noting that the temporality of plants is based on synchronization with the time of “the other”. This synchronization is related to access to water, the seasons, access to light, and mineral elements. Following philosopher Michael Marder, Rogowska-Stangret proposes “plant-thinking” and compares it to the concept of “rhizomatic assemblages”¹⁰². Combined with the broader theory of rhizomes and assemblages, plant-thinking opens up many paths for creative imagination and can serve as an interesting conceptual tool. According to Marder, “plant-thinking happens when the presumed self-identity of “subjects” and “objects” that populate a given milieu recedes, allowing the rhizomatic assemblage to surge up to the foreground, to be activated by sharing difference among its various nodes, and where the spacings and connections, communication lines and gaps between the participants in this assemblage prevail over what is delimited within them”¹⁰³.

The concept of assemblage is also developed by Anna Loewenhaupt Tsing, who writes that assemblages “allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them. They show us potential histories in the making. (...) Assemblages don’t just gather lifeways; they make them. Thinking through assemblage urges us to ask: How do gatherings sometimes become “happenings,” that is, greater than the sum of their parts? If history without progress is indeterminate and multidirectional, might assemblages show us its possibilities”¹⁰⁴?

Assemblages and plants both play important roles in my projects. In all of the works described here, I set stories of dystopia, anxiety, catastrophe, and the search for hope within non-human organisms. Overgrown and often exaggerated plant bodies serve as vessels for reflections on loss, time, and survival. This concept stems from the assumption that Marder’s “plant thinking” can offer valuable imaginative models. The objects I propose are composed of deconstructed fragments of other systems and structures sewn together. Various orders appear in them, some of which can be attributed to technological or industrial origins and others that bring to mind organic structures. This approach is connected to the idea that “the human body itself is host to a vast ecosystem of trillions of other creatures – the membranes of the body are porous, and it’s not possible to affirm the boundary between inside and out”¹⁰⁵. The transience and form of coexistence expressed by working with materials from different orders is crucial to me because it helps shift rigid ontological boundaries and proposes a process of constant exchange instead. In this sense, my perspective aligns with the ideas of French philosopher Bruno Latour, who sees nature as a connected network of interacting entities. Latour’s concept of Gaia, a planetary organism endowed with collective intelligence, builds on earlier findings by James Lovelock¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰¹ M. Rogowska Stangret, *Być ze świata.*, ibid., p. 26.

¹⁰² Cf. M. Marder, cited in: M. Rogowska Stangret, *Być ze świata.*, ibid., p. 109.

¹⁰³ M. Marder, *Plant-Thinking. A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, p. 169.

¹⁰⁴ A. L. Tsing, *Mushrooms at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰⁵ E. Wilk, *Death by Landscape*, Soft Skull, New York, 2022, p. 19.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. B. Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2017.

Similarly, Timothy Morton, in his concept of dark ecology, instead of tales of heroic progress and elevated goals, encourages us to look down at our feet – towards what is below – plant life. Instead of the classic categories of transcendence, he proposes the concept of "subscendence", suggesting that we should descend the hierarchical ladder and immerse ourselves in the "swamp" of matter – world of the non-human¹⁰⁷. Subscendence, as described by Morton, is a whole that emerges from its parts—neither superior nor subordinate to them, and impossible to fully grasp or describe. It is dispersed and elusive, yet real—like climate, ecosystem, or body. This perspective allows us to think of the world not as an orderly structure, but as a dynamic, uncertain, and interdependent network of beings.

Using a botanical metaphor, I incorporate aspects of multidimensional complexity into my projects, such as the aforementioned "rhizomatic assemblage". The English word "assemblage" is a translation of the French *agencement* used by Deleuze and Guattari. These concepts evoke the ideas of combining, gathering, and acting, which characterize the methodology present in all my projects described here. Assemblage, understood in this way, is an important concept for me, both theoretically and because of its ties to the formal solutions I employ. Assemblage in my practice appears on many levels: individual objects are composed of various materials, processes, elements, and orders that constitute larger, complex structures in the form of environmental installations.

In art history, assemblage is primarily known as a technique for creating works that often combine incongruous fragments and incorporate found, discarded, unwanted, and fabricated objects. The essence of assemblage lies in its scattered nature and heterogeneous structure. Nicolas Bourriaud interpreted assemblage as the practice of remixing existing works, as for example it is done often in music¹⁰⁸. Although, assemblage can also be a useful conceptual framework encompassing practices that do not fit into this category in its original sense. Here, I am referring to the process of creating individual works using various media, techniques, and materials – in my case, metal, fabric, and synthetic and organic elements – as well as the presentation of these works and the interaction with the viewer's experience. When perceiving the installation, the viewer finds themselves in the middle of it and thus becomes part of it. Manuel DeLanda, a Mexican-American writer, artist, and philosopher, argues that "an assemblage is an entity whose identity is determined by its relations with the world", thus problematizing issues of hierarchy and other binary oppositions, such as the distinction between nature and culture¹⁰⁹.

The rhizomatic structure is therefore rendered in almost every one of my projects, not only through black synthetic lines - cables, wires, tentacles – that wind their way through the gallery space, seeming to both take root and climb upward or stretch downward toward other works in a scattered gesture of growth. The rhizome in my work is also defined by its multiplied arrangements, such as the open calyxes in *Behind the mouth's gate something is stirring, is flickering* and the bent plant lanterns in *Paradise Rot*. These compositions are capable of spreading and forming open networks with no evident center.

¹⁰⁷ T. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, ibid., pp. 114-116.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. N. Bourriaud, *Postproduction – Culture as screenplay: How art reprograms the world*, Sternberg Press, Londyn, 2005.

¹⁰⁹ M. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society. Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, Bloomsbury 2006, p. 10, cited in: M. Chaberski, *Doświadczenie jako asamblaż w sztuce zamglonego antropocenu* [Experience as assemblage in the art of the hazy Anthropocene], Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Krakow, 2019, p. 14.

IV. Catastrophic Aesthetic and Embodied Experience

The theories of assemblage and rhizome mentioned in the previous chapter lead me directly to the story of multi-element installations – environments that do not communicate a single, homogenous perspective, but rather focus on a dispersed sensibility. I would describe my practice of working in the medium of environment-type installations as a model for composing a patchwork landscape. It involves stitching together assumptions, emotions, premonitions, fears, and hopes. The structure of this paper has been deliberately conceived in such a way that individual works and installations are intertwined in subsequent chapters, and only at the end their interconnections and “environmental” character emerge. As in the exploration of any space, here too, the uncovering of individual threads, tropes, references, and contexts woven into details, materials, and arrangements leads to the creation of a realm that presents a tangled, multi-layered map of meanings and relationships between the material and the imagined. Moving through such a landscape is a form of recovering and mediating “feeling” in a reality whose complex, hyperobjective nature seems to exceed our perceptual capabilities.

One relevant perspective for this approach can be found in the observations of Jessica Siobhan Mulvogue, who uses the term “catastrophic aesthetics” to describe “the ways in which art works, as “affective atmospheres,” are expressing the present catastrophic nature of climate change”¹¹⁰. However, in my opinion, the concept of catastrophic aesthetics, she puts forward, can be significantly broadened beyond the communication of climate change itself. Furthermore, I feel that combining catastrophic aesthetics with the formula of an environment-type installation allows for a more complete grasp of the tensions associated with the feelings of anxiety and hope related to catastrophic reality. And finally, catastrophic aesthetics, supplemented by the category of embodied experience, is a practice rather than a closed category. The engagement resulting from the embodied reception of a work, which in its nature resembles moving through a landscape, is here a perspective that complements the model of affective empathy. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to examine the concept of catastrophic aesthetics, then describe my own methods of working with environment-type installations, and finally emphasize the essential aspect of embodied experience as a method of cognition that goes beyond the rational understanding of reality.

4.1. Catastrophic Aesthetics

The subject of catastrophic aesthetics serves as a kind of summary – a final point of reference not only for analyzing the theoretical phenomena discussed in this paper, but also for understanding my artistic practice. Mulvogue aptly addresses the roles of aesthetics and affectivity in a reality saturated with social and environmental crises. She writes, “as our present is defined by a catastrophe, (...) we need to find avenues of bringing affectivity to the foreground. One way to do so is through aesthetics”¹¹¹. Timothy Morton, in turn, defines aesthetics as a formula of causality, arguing that causality – the message – always takes the form of an aesthetic experience¹¹². The important point here is recognizing the “agency” of the aesthetic experience. For Morton, creating art transcends the symbolic dimension;

¹¹⁰ J.S. Mulvogue, *Catastrophe Aesthetics: Affective Epistemologies of Climate Change in Experimental Media Art*, *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹¹² T. Morton, *What If Art Were a Kind of Magic?*, „ArtReview”, November 2015, [online], <https://artreview.com/november-2015-feature-timothy-morton-charisma-causality/> (access: 23 July 2025).

it can be an authentic transformation, as he writes: “to make an artwork is to interfere directly with the realm of causes and effects”¹¹³.

The Greek word *aisthesis* refers to sensory knowledge – that is, embodied knowledge based on perception. In the context of catastrophes, they are certainly of great importance – and to them are devoted countless scientific and artistic studies – ones that not only address the scale of the problems, but even attempt to counteract them. Thus, the strategies of mediating the catastrophe through an aesthetic message are varied, and I do not think it is relevant to justify them. What is important to me is drawing attention to the deepened sensory engagement that can be recognized as a legitimate form of knowledge. In this sense, aesthetics can have an almost emancipatory character. Philosopher Jacques Rancière points this out when he examines how aesthetic fields constitute the distribution of what is visible, present, and recognized¹¹⁴.

In the context of my research, I find the reception of aesthetics, as proposed by American pragmatist philosopher and educator John Dewey, and developed by literary and cultural scholar Renée C. Hoogland, interesting¹¹⁵. Hoogland views aesthetics as an active, collaborative process carried out simultaneously by the artists and the audience¹¹⁶. This perspective aligns with the concept of “being of the world” that I described above due to its proximity to new materialist ideas of “co-worlding”. According to Hoogland, artistic creation is “not only embodied, but also embodying” – aesthetics is therefore the very process of becoming together¹¹⁷. However, I believe this approach does not invalidate the autonomy of the work. The experience being described here concerns not only the author and the recipient but also the artistic work itself, which is causative and generates emotions and produces meanings. Yet this causality is not based on the metaphysical depth of the work, as described by Walter Benjamin's concept of the aura. What I mean here is rather the complicity of artistic expression in relational configurations that enable significant, albeit sometimes subtle, perceptual reformulations. Jessica Siobhan Mulvogue writes that “affect emerges in the encounter between bodies”, which she emphasizes are not limited to human bodies but extend to all kinds of bodies – nonhuman and inanimate. Furthermore, referring to Deleuze, she points out that he “sees in the power to be affected an arena for an exploration of an ethical and political project”¹¹⁸.

The notion of “being affected” in the context of phenomena that are beyond our comprehension is often associated with the concept of sublimity. Sublimity, initially defined as “delightful horror,” according to Nicolas Bourriaud, provides a useful explanation for the sensation of anxiety and for the loss of control that we are currently experiencing as a result of climate change¹¹⁹. However, this experience of fear caused by something powerful and greater than ourselves differs from the sublimity characterized years ago by Edmund Burke. In this new sublimity, the central subject and our own uniqueness in the face of a disturbing world collapse – after all, we are “inside” the catastrophe.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Cf. J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, London – New York, 2004.

¹¹⁵ R.C. Hoogland, *A Violent Embrace*, p. 21, cited in: M. A. Glosowicz, *Estetyka afektywna : zarys metodologii badań literackich* [Affective aesthetics: an outline of literary research methodology], in: E. Wichrowska, A. Szczepan-Wojnarska, R. Sendyka, R. Nycz, (eds.), *Historie afektywne i polityki pamięci* [Affective histories and politics of memory], Instytut Badań Literackich PAN - Wydawnictwo, Warsaw, 2015, pp. 47–62, [online] <https://books.openedition.org/iblp/5226>, (access: 21 July 2025).

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ J.S. Mulvogue, *Catastrophe Aesthetics: Affective Epistemologies of Climate Change in Experimental Media Art*, *ibid.*, p. 33.

¹¹⁹ N. Bourriaud, *Planet B. Climate Change and the New Sublime*, Les presses du réel, Dijon 2022, p. 10.

Going a step further, we are the catastrophe ourselves, experiencing and contributing to its effects. Therefore, it is impossible to maintain distance, just as it is impossible to maintain the privileged perspective of the human subject. The contemporary experience of sublimity is thus more akin to drifting on stormy seas of anxiety than observing them from a safe distance.

The concept of disrupted distance, as defined in the contemporary understanding of sublimity, is essential to my interpretation of catastrophic aesthetics and informs my approach to environment installations. When working with complex installations, the goal is not to recreate a catastrophic event or to use the aforementioned “aura”. Instead, I prefer to replace this contemplation, which is based on distance, with what Morton describes as *Zerstreuung* – distraction¹²⁰. However, this distraction should not be understood as a lack of focus or a superficial perception. Rather, reception in a state of distraction resembles an active process involving movement, changes in perspective, and multifocal engagement.

Thus, the combination of aesthetics and catastrophe, along with this understanding of sublimity, becomes a formula for narrating catastrophe. This formula combines the aforementioned themes — the spectral nature of catastrophic events, which haunt our thoughts about the past and future, and the poetics of regaining our ability to think about “possibilities” and hope. Aesthetics is the place where we re-habituate our sensorium, according to Mulvogue¹²¹. On the other hand, catastrophic aesthetics can be a field for drawing affective horizons. In my installation work, these horizons point to the dual nature of experiencing catastrophe, taking into account both its potential and its threat. Therefore, I am interested in an artistic method that introduces disruptions into dominant models of perceiving the relationship between humans and the world through specific visual strategies. This approach is far from illustrative or simplistic visualization. Instead, it creates a space for speculative imagination that draws on contemporary tensions and turbulence – climatic, social, political, and economic. In this sense, my creative work is also work with fiction that has the potential to become reality. It is not an escape from a “trembling” reality but an attempt to transform it from the level of affect.

4.2. Environmental Installations

To better understand the nature of my current creative perspective, it seems important to refer to my earlier artistic experiences and the path I have taken in their development. I began my practical interests in art by studying at the Faculty of Interior and Stage Design¹²². I thought long about the right place for my interests, which at the time were dominated by vague ideas about presence and interaction, and working with materials. So I chose the Set and Fashion Design program, where I deepened my approach on how to work with both space and the body. Set design in an academic context was primarily associated with theater and the traditionally understood stage space – with the audience facing a performance that takes place in front of or, less often, around the viewer. Clothing, on the other hand, focused mainly on the human body and appeared in the context of an actor, performer, or model. The areas I am currently involved in go beyond this framework – for me, scenographic experience is a tool for working with exhibition and installation, and I have replaced clothing with working with fabric, which goes beyond the utilitarian and costume aspects.

¹²⁰ T. Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge – London, 2007, pp.162-163.

¹²¹ J.S. Mulvogue, *Catastrophe Aesthetics: Affective Epistemologies of Climate Change in Experimental Media Art*, *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹²² Faculty of Interior and Stage Design at Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznan.

Over time, my interests shifted further and further toward the performativity of matter itself, a key concept in Karen Barad's work. Barad extends the notion of performativity to encompass the processes of material becoming, including those of the non-human. New materialist performativity deconstructs the oppositions between nature and culture, human and non-human, object and subject. It proposes a modified framework for constructing the world. This agency-based realism departs from individualistic metaphysics and the division between mind and body. According to this theory, bodies gain meaning through “intra-actions”, or the performativity of becoming¹²³. Jane Bennett's reflections on “vibrant matter” were also important to me in this context, captivating me with their poetic descriptions of ordinary fragments of reality. Bennett sees a kind of “enchantment” embedded within the bare matter¹²⁴. Though Barad and Bennett's concepts differ in many ways, both deconstruct human agency.

Following these leads, I began to formulate my own approach, in which I slowly began experimenting with specific materials, their semantic intertwining, visual and haptic features, as well as creative work methods based on the use of various machines and experimental manual work, including fabric forming and dyeing. Starting with individual objects, I built larger installations in the form of scenographic environments, where light and spatial arrangement play key roles. Creating a multi-element, quasi-scenographic narrative space does not unify the experience or create a homogenous perspective. Rather, I am interested in Morton's distraction, focusing on fragments and diversity. Here, immersion replaces contemplation, and feeling is more important than synthesizing individual threads. In this sense, I believe the potential of environments as measures that convey “being of the world” is revealed. One of Morton's most important concepts is attunement. Working with environments – installations – seems to me to take the form of such attunement. “Attunement is an unclear and undefined model of coexistence based on adapting to others, harmonizing like instruments in an orchestra playing a common melody and participating in a single endeavor without cognitive distance – similar to what happens in dance”¹²⁵. This passage, which appears in Andrzej Marzec's introduction to the Polish translation of *Dark Ecology*, can be read in connection with the spatial installations to which this chapter is devoted. Attunement suggests relational resonance, similar to a sound experience in which individual elements, each possessing their own autonomy, play together a score that only in this combination, in this specific arrangement, reveals meanings and specific experiences. Attunement therefore refers to a designed, conceived, though often intuitive relationship of references between elements and objects – light, arrangement, rhythm, structures, material tensions, presence, absence, and relationship with architecture.

When constructing environments, each presentation – even of the same installation – is unique. It looks very different and has a different context. It is a kind of listening and attuning to the place, the curatorial idea, the space, and the other works. While it's obvious that a work presented twice will never be the same, I believe spatial installations differ from works conceived as single pieces presented multiple times. An example of this concept is the work *Paradise Rot*, which I have discussed previously. Its two presentations are part of my doctoral thesis: the first at the “The Temple of Tales” at BWA in Wrocław, and the second at “Cockaigne” at the Arsenał Power Plant Gallery in

¹²³ K. Barad [za:] *Performativity*, „New Materialism Almanac”, [online], <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/p/performativity.html> (access: 27 July 2025).

¹²⁴ Cf. J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham–London, 2010.

¹²⁵ A. Marzec, *Wspólnota spod ciemnej gwiazdy - wplątani w gęsty, ekologiczny półświatek* [A community of a shady character - entangled in a dense, ecological underworld], in: T. Morton, *Mroczna ekologia. Ku logice przyszłego współistnienia*, [Dark Ecology: Toward a Logic of Future Coexistence], trans. A. Kowalczyk, Oficyna Związków Otwarty, Warsaw, 2018, p. 11.

Białystok. Though these two spaces differ, I don't believe the architectural aspect alone shaped the difference in perception of these two exhibitions.

For the first iteration, during “The Temple of Tales”, I wanted to create an intimate, separate space – a space that is dark, yet paradoxically seems close and inviting. The objects, *The Observers*, were intertwined with the architecture, adhering to the columns as if merging with them. In a way, they repeated the arches of the chapels referenced in the title, “The Temple of Tales”. They could be interpreted as the space's prosthetic limbs, its exaggerated, vegetal prosthetic architecture. Between them were *The Ponds* and around them were black cables supplying light. The installation was also accompanied by specially designed curtains. They were sewn from raw linen and hand-dyed, as if previously immersed in black water from mechanical containers. The arched structure supporting the curtains separated the installation from the surrounding, as the entire installation was placed in the central part of the room. The windows were covered with dark foil, limiting access to natural light and creating an atmosphere of isolation, concentration, and suspension. This set-up allowed the viewer to find themselves both within and on the border of the installation, which provided a space for physical presence and exchange.

In this project, I wanted to explore the concept of a sensitive presence, a kind of ritual of presence, which was also important for the curatorial concept of the exhibition. However, I am not referring here to religious mystery, but rather to the formula of corporeal “being,” in which observation becomes “bodily sight,” playing the role of a cognitive, nonlinear tool for orientation in the world¹²⁶. In her essay *The Word Made Fresh: Mystical Encounter and the New Weird Divine*, Elvia Wilk reinterprets the concept of the sacred and mysticism within the context of the Anthropocene and the literary genre of the new weird¹²⁷. I find the mystical experience that primarily takes place in the context of the senses interesting. This experience involves dissonance and disruption of cognitive comfort, which Wilk points to and which is similar to Morton's distraction. For Wilk, the mystical experience is a confrontation with weirdness – an encounter with it akin to the sublimity I wrote about above. The ritual of presence is thus realized as an experience of entanglement full of tension and ambiguity. Wilk appreciates the concept of bodily sight, writing: “faced with the possible annihilation of the planet as we know it, certain modes of knowing fall short. Especially insufficient is knowledge that purports humans to be distinct from ecosystems, much less in control of them”¹²⁸.

In art, it seems possible to disrupt the everyday order through aesthetics and the affects associated with it. This disruption prompts reflection in a new way, offering the potential to generate different kinds of knowledge. Spatial installations, due to their immersive nature, can activate this mode of cognition uniquely. The important aspect here is the form that alters perception, offering the possibility of symbolically relocating experience and directing attention to ways of how to respond to catastrophic feelings, reflecting on the possibility of imagining the future and the necessary redefinition of relationships with non-human actors.

¹²⁶ Cf. E. Wilk, *Death by Landscape*, *ibid.*, pp. 80, 90-91.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-92.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.



Il. 17. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, BWA Wrocław Główny, Wrocław, 2024.
Photo: Inside Job

Paradise Rot was presented differently at the “Cockaigne” exhibition at the Arsenal Power Plant Gallery in Białystok. The exhibition's curator, Katarzyna Różniak, asked me to create an ambient spatial environment based on an installation of objects. I was given autonomy and the entire first room of the venue, which measures almost 300 square meters, to complete this task. I decided to combine the works *Paradise Rot*, *Behind the mouths gate something is stirring, is flickering* and *Wind Sailors*, a series not yet described here, into a single arrangement that organizes the space rhythmically. In addition to these works, the room also featured paintings by Sana Shahmuradova Tanska, who uses soft shapes and organic forms to address the theme of trauma as a means of communicating with the past, a small object by Dominika Olszowa, and a drawing by Noor Hasan, a teenager who, together with her family, experienced the hardships of wandering through the marshes of the Białowieża Forest while fleeing her country across the Polish-Belarusian border¹²⁹. For the new version of *Paradise Rot*, I designed special steel systems that looked like mechanical arms. Their form brought to mind industrial devices capable of sliding movement. The forms were attached to an almost mirror-like oval surface that suggested its presence with delicate light refractions – as if echoes of

¹²⁹ Cf. K. Różniak-Szabelska, *Cockaigne*, Power Station of Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, Białystok, 05.09 – 09.11.2025, exhibition info and curatorial text [online] <https://galeriaarsenal.pl/wystawy/kukania/> (access: 21 May 2025).

forms unable to fully reveal themselves. The whole piece was additionally positioned on a rusting metal platform composed of segments resembling a stopped caterpillar track. Deconstructed and dismantled—much like the sliding crane systems of the former power plant located above the ceiling—it resembled non-functional but still physically present post-industrial relics, which, although they had lost their original utility, retained their material presence. This environment is no longer intimate or separate; rather, it is open and vital, playing out between the past and the present, activity and suspension. Symmetrically arranged, additional intense warm lights in the form of long metal lamps that I created are close to the surveillance infrastructure, which is of great importance in the context of “Cockaigne”. Floating above the heads are *Wind Sailors*, which are like sails spread out on triangular, curved metal structures. A translucent green-gray fabric resembling a membranous structure is stretched between the steel skeleton with thin threads flowing down from it. These works were initially inspired by organisms called “velella” (also known as “by-the-wind-sailors”), whose sail-like form allows them to catch the wind and travel with ocean currents. “Velella” are at the mercy of the winds and can often be found washed ashore many kilometers away. This served as a distant metaphor for the very essence of “Cockaigne”, but what was important here were the themes of fragile, difficult-to-navigate movement, as well as a form of suspension.

The structure of the second presentation of *Paradise Rot*, was therefore more diffuse. The goal was to trigger non-linear perception, disperse attention, and achieve chiasmatic interpenetration of things. The presentation aimed for open-entanglement (“open-ended-gathering”), where all elements played an equal role and functioned like rhizomes, intertwining with each other and leading to common threads¹³⁰. This allowed the imagination to switch between the tensions of matter, the structures of forms, conceptual differences, and commonalities. Unlike in “The Temple of Tales”, the lack of a center and the equal value of all elements of the installation were essential in this version. The potential of one object is activated by its interaction with another. In this symbolic dimension, the nature of environmental activities resonates with the nature of the coexistence of things in the world. Using scattered elements, these practices outline tangled landscapes – dynamic systems of relationships – where different temporalities, materials, and affects intersect.

Cognitive engagement is also important here. It involves searching for meaning, finding oneself in the designed environment, and moving around it as if it were a landscape. It also activates one's body and position in relation to the space and, ultimately, to the works. The two installations described above were characterized by two different approaches, both of which are equally important to me. They demonstrate how I attempt to initiate and activate cognitive, sensory, and emotional processes that intertwine during the reception experience. In spatial installations, it is difficult to maintain distance. Once inside, one cannot be only “in front” but rather “in the middle” or “surrounded”. One is part of it, almost in line with the overgrown vegetation of *Paradise Rot*, among the climbing rhizomes of *Behind the mouths gate something is stirring, is flickering*, and as if beneath the surface of the drifting *Wind Sailors*. “To learn about an assemblage, one unravels its knots”, Tsing suggests, and I would like my works to have a similar dynamic, encouraging unraveling, searching for meanings, and composing potentials – perhaps feeling them more often than capturing them in the logical structure of language¹³¹.

¹³⁰ A. L. Tsing, *Mushrooms at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, ibid., pp. 22-23.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 83.



II. 18. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, *Behind the mouths gate something is stirring, is flickering*, *Wind Sailors*, Power Station of Arsenal Gallery, 2025. Photo: Tytus Szabelski-Różniak



II. 19. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Paradise Rot*, *Wind Sailors*, Power Station of Arsenal Gallery, 2025. Photo: Tytus Szabelski-Różniak

In conditions of uncertainty and catastrophic anxiety, it seems that turning toward environmental installations allows us to observe temporary and unstable configurations and dispersed ways of being. This may constitute a field for the emergence of new possibilities.



Il. 20. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), *Wind Sailors*, Power Station of Arsenal Gallery, 2025.
Photo: Tytus Szabelski-Różniak

4.3. Hopecraft Ceremony and Embodied Experience

The projects that comprise my doctoral research, as well as the order in which they are presented in this dissertation, reveal additional dynamics and suggest a transition that corresponds to the gradual formation of my theoretical reflection. The work described in this subsection is a significant element of the summary. As in the case of *Possibility we are poisoned* from the Ljubljana Biennial, which opened the paper by setting the direction of the artistic and research method, *Hopecraft Ceremony* from the following paragraphs outlines a new perspective and possibilities that will certainly influence my further steps and subsequent projects.



Il. 21. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), scenographic installation for the choreography *Hopecraft Ceremony*, dir. Natasza Gerlach, Arsenic – Centre d’art scénique contemporain, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2024.
Photo: Arsenic – Centre d’art scénique contemporain



Il. 22. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), scenographic installation for the choreography *Hopecraft Ceremony*, dir. Natasza Gerlach, Arsenic – Centre d’art scénique contemporain, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2024.
Photo: Arsenic – Centre d’art scénique contemporain

The *Hopecraft Ceremony* is important for understanding the role of embodied experience in my environment-type installations. I develop these installations as experiential and affective spaces to explore our situation in the face of catastrophic reality. It is also the most “scenographic” project among the works described here. In fact, it was created as an installation for a choreographic performance at the Arsenic Center for the Performing Arts in Lausanne, Switzerland. At the intersection of choreographic arrangements and atmospheric ambience, the narrative intertwines the contexts I described earlier concerning catastrophe and its pervasive, hauntological, hyperobjective dimension. The audience is immersed in a fictional story that plays out between dystopia and survival, catastrophe, hope, life and slow decay. The concept of my installation expanded on themes proposed by director Natasza Gerlach. It considered the element of nature (in the spirit of Morton's dark ecology), catastrophic themes, and the concept of “fragile hope”. The main metaphor for these relationships is the process of breathing, understood as an act of sharing and interdependence. In the presented world, oxygen is scarce. This is reflected by the performers using inhalers, which they pass between themselves as precious gifts, as well as by objects placed throughout the space. These objects

were conceived as upward-rising, vertically stretched structures – lianas composed of synthetic black strings, electrical cables, and silicone tubes overgrown with large black flowers. They evoke burnt, charred plants incapable of photosynthesis. Resembling rhizomes, these elements grew high above the ground, hung down the entire height of the room, and spread across the floor, timidly taking over the space. The installation also included post-industrial steel barrels, smoke, and the smell of synthetic gasoline. Through sharing, breath was passed not only to people but also to the plants as an expression of the need to save their lives. In this process, the human and non-human worlds seem to work together in the face of danger, although the proposed formula is far from utopian survival scenarios.

Hopecraft Ceremony marked a significant point in my artistic practice, as it was the first time I approached my installations as spaces in which the participation of performers was integral. The context of the body is important here not only in the way I described earlier – through the physical presence of the viewer, who, by moving around the exhibition spaces, experiences the work in a non-rational, embodied way. In *Hopecraft Ceremony*, the body is a structural and essential part of the project.

Following the thoughts of new materialist feminist researchers, I believe that rethinking the body is one of the most important conditions for redefining our relationship with the environment and the world in general. Thus, rethinking the body in conditions of catastrophic anxiety is not only a challenge, but also a starting point for situating one's own, beyond-individual perspective. Important here are the observations of Stacy Alaimo, whom I already mentioned in the previous chapter when writing about trans-corporeality, but also the ideas of Lucy Irigaray and Astrid Neimanis. It is also worth mentioning Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who is crucial to the concept of embodied experience. He rejects the prevailing dualisms that classical humanistic concepts of embodiment often fall into, proposing instead a concept of the body emerging from dynamic and fluid systems of dependencies and debts to other beings. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body never exists as something autonomous, it is always chiasmically entwined with the world¹³². By chiasm, he means mutual overlap, exchange, constant “co-worlding”. According to these assumptions, knowledge about the world does not belong to the sphere of ideas or the subjective, isolated “I”, but manifests itself at the intersection of bodies – in living and embodied experience¹³³. Embodiment is therefore not an abstract state, but a situation: a sensory-material relationship that is subject to constant transformation and is always co-created by a multitude of actors.

“Situating ourselves and describing our implication within a posthuman bodyscape is also a question of ethical accountability”, writes Neimanis¹³⁴. Feminist philosopher, Elisabeth Grosz, in turn notes that: “we need to understand the body, not as an organism or entity in itself, but as a system, or series of open-ended systems, functioning within other huge systems”¹³⁵. This issue of entanglement was important precisely in the relationship between the performers' bodies and the objects in *Hopecraft Ceremony*. Irigaray reminds us that the gift of breath comes not only from human bodies, but also from plants. Breath is therefore a fundamental element of existence, a strategic element in building relationships and, at the same time, organisms¹³⁶. In *Hopecraft Ceremony*, the relationship of passing on breath was symbolically reversed – oxygen drawn from breathing aids was also passed on to plants at selected moments of the performance using silicone tubes. “By emphasizing the movement across

¹³² A. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, ibid., p. 43.

¹³³ Cf. Ibid., p. 48-49.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

¹³⁵ E. Grosz [cited in:] S. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, ibid., p. 10.

¹³⁶ A. Grzemska, *Antygona XX-wiecznej filozofii* [Antigone of 20th-century philosophy], “Miesięcznik Znak”, no 2/2025, [online] <https://www miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/antygona-xx->, (access 27 July 2025).

bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that trans indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors.”, writes Stacy Alaimo¹³⁷. Similarly, in *Hopecraft Ceremony*, these relationships play out beyond just the human and the plant organisms.



Il. 23. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), scenographic installation for the choreography *Hopecraft Ceremony*, dir. Natasza Gerlach, Arsenic – Centre d’art scénique contemporain, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2024.
Photo: Arsenic – Centre d’art scénique contemporain

Although charred flowers were the main element of the proposed scenographic objects, they were supplemented with details representing remnants of technological reality. Black rhizomes spread, taking over elements of the sound and lighting systems in a manner characteristic of how nature develops in post-industrial spaces left behind by humans, which I have researched and described in earlier chapters. The specific approach to the new life emerging from the ruins or from what we left behind is one of the key themes of my doctoral research. The oxygen transmitted in *Hopecraft Ceremony* is no longer a natural chemical compound resulting from biological or geochemical

¹³⁷ S. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, *ibid.*, p. 2.

processes. Its origin is synthetic. Drawn from inhalers, it brings to mind a kind of toxic or narcotic substance, especially when we also think of the suffocating smell of gasoline floating in the air and the heavy smoke systematically filling the space. The gestures of drawing and passing on breath by the performers were suspended between moments of their symbolic cathexis, almost sleep, and moments of elation that interrupted these moments – flowing, plant-like movements rising upward. One might think that this is more about poisoning than life. However, the scenographic objects materialize the mutual relationship between the biological and the technological: they are simultaneously traces of poison and forms of regeneration – contamination and antidote intertwined in one habitat.

There was only one verbal moment in the structure of the performance – a poetic utterance that drew on the Slavic etymological kinship between breath (in polish “oddech”) and spirit (in polish “duch”), articulating a relation to hauntological presence. This aspect is particularly interesting to me because in this doctoral project, the hauntological, pervasive presence of catastrophe is of exceptional importance. The context of oxygen and its absence – and thus, by implication, the excess of carbon dioxide – reminds us of the environmental entanglement of breathing processes. Both carbon dioxide and oxygen are carriers of anthropocentric relations – the history of industrial exploitation. CO₂, being the result of burning fossil fuels, is the main “waste” of the industrialized world, the spectral presence of exploitation – the burning of what comes directly to us from the past.

The structure of the installation that served as the scenography for the *Hopecraft Ceremony* gave it an autonomous role, although it should be noted that the final form of the whole spectacle was the result of collective collaboration, understood not only as mutual attention to individual elements of the performance, but rather as actions aimed at ensuring that space, movement, object, and light would closely influence each other. There was no top-down strategy, no carefully thought-out script, and no rigid schedule – the actions aimed at giving the entire production its final shape were based on months of discussions, exchanges of inspiration, suggesting new ideas, and rejecting those that seemed unnecessary. I had the impression that this process was synchronous, taking the form of the aforementioned attunement. The creation of the *Hopecraft Ceremony* in this form was possible thanks to a shared process. Such collectivity in the making of art is, of course, not a novel strategy. For me, however, collaboration takes on a special meaning in the context of reflecting on catastrophe – the emotions that accompany it and the need to chart our own alternative paths of action and thought. Astrida Neimanis notes that “co-worlding is always a collaborative process, and always emergent”¹³⁸. She thus points to the causal potential of collective action, which almost literally “creates new worlds” – micro-communities that go beyond mere human alliances and will be able to navigate catastrophic turbulence.

¹³⁸A. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, ibid., p. 34.



Il. 24. Inside Job (Ula Lucińska, Michał Knychaus), scenographic installation for the choreography *Hopecraft Ceremony*, dir. Natasza Gerlach, Arsenic – Centre d'art scénique contemporain, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2024.
Photo: Arsenic – Centre d'art scénique contemporain

Conclusion:

My doctoral project was created in response to the intuitions outlined here – as an attempt to materialize catastrophic aesthetics in the medium of installation. The story of dormant seeds, resonating with Franco “Bifo” Berardi's concept of potentiality and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's figure of the “egg,” opened up my artistic and research explorations a few years ago, which are now focused on catastrophic phenomena and the role that art can play in times of turbulent, planetary change. So my practice has recently been not only a mediation with my own experience, but also a recognition of the usefulness of creative language in taming uncertainty and searching for paths that could offer an alternative to scenarios of a canceled future. In this paper, catastrophe does not refer to a definitive “end” and is not synonymous with apocalypse. I have used the figure of specters and ghosts in the title to convey its diffuse and processual nature. Specters and ghosts thus reveal the ways in which catastrophe deconstructs a seemingly stable reality.

The works described within this thesis are a response to the themes that emerge in the following chapters — they are an attempt to make the “specters and ghosts of catastrophe” tangible within the installation experience. With each of my works, I have tried to open up a different thread of interpreting and taming catastrophe.

Referring to the myth of paradise lost, the installation *Paradise Rot* tells the story of the re-intertwining of the natural and the technological – of the lush vitality that emerges from the ashes of catastrophe. Exaggerated, plant-like bodies, capable of surviving among toxic, post-industrial ruins, become a testimony to fragile hope, smoldering subtly but stubbornly, like the light inside the textile chalices crowning the objects. The series reminds us of the power of active melancholy—a source of commitment and awareness necessary for survival and adaptation.

Floating freely, suspended on thin steel cables, the works from the *Wind Sailor* series draw inspiration from the marine organisms Velella – drifting nomads carried by water currents. They are a metaphor for the constant openness to change and acceptance of not-knowing that are necessary for understanding the inevitability of the Anthropocene itself and for anti-essentialist reflections on the past and future. *Paradise Rot* and the accompanying Wind Sailors during the “Cockaigne” exhibition, like my other projects, do not strive for a romantic return to nature. Rather, they reveal a dark character of it, entangled with human and technological infrastructure.

Behind the mouths gate something is stirring, is flickering introduces the theme of corporeality. In times marked by uncertainty and growing anxiety, recognizing the complex nature of the body and its place in cognitive processes becomes particularly important. It is the body – our closest, most intimate environment – that remains in constant relation to what happens between us and the world. It can warn us, suggest answers, and at the same time shape our ways of feeling. The open, multiplied forms of chalice-cocoons reveal the porosity and hybridity of bodies – both human and non-human. These structures are not closed and homogeneous – they reveal the flows, movements, relationships, and dependencies that constitute corporeality. In a darkly ecological intertwining, what is contaminated and poisoned coexists with what carries the potential for renewal and antidote. In this ambivalence, we can see a hint of a post-catastrophic condition: a situation in which life does not so much triumph over destruction as emerge despite it. In this view, the impossible figure of an oversized, carnivorous plant organism inspired by the pitcher plant family materializes an intermediate state – the condition of the body and the environment, which, although weakened and polluted, constantly adapts and creates new ways of coexisting.

Hopecraft Ceremony, on the other hand, is a story about cooperation and coexistence in a situation of emergency. The lack of oxygen, which was the main theme of the performance, can be seen as a reversal of the potential of dormant seeds. Carbon dioxide, produced in the combustion of fossil fuels and dormant for thousands of years in the deep layers of the earth, materializes in our world as a factor accelerating catastrophic changes, raising the planet's temperature and symbolically “taking the breath away” from living organisms. In *Hopecraft Ceremony*, this was a metaphor for deep interdependence. The performers, moving among plant objects, passed oxygen to each other. Black, charred-looking flowers climbing up electric cables and interwoven with silicone tubes, as if for resuscitation, reversed the roles – humans transferred oxygen to plants that had previously been photosynthesizing. This situation was a metaphor for an environment in which it is necessary to build cross-species alliances.

All of the projects described above reveal their full potential when presented as larger presentations, which I refer to as environment installations. Their immersive nature, close to the “rhizomatic assemblages” described in previous sections of this work, is an invitation to explore the sensibility that emerges from the interweaving of matter, formal experiments, the arrangement of works in space, and the use of light. Each time, I am interested in shaping a space that provokes reflections, intuitions, and emotions. I believe that such experiences can initiate new models of empathy, leading us to rethink our relationship with the world. Cultivating this mode of imagination is again close to the metaphor of dormant seeds, which carry within them the potential for future life and can awaken as soon as they find the right conditions.

The materiality of each of my doctoral projects is porous and fragile – it creates space for the viewer, but also places them in a specific emotional situation. It is important for me to use fiction – imagined configurations of reality that may or may not come true. Their purpose is not to predict or illustrate the future, but to create a space of possibilities. Fiction understood in this way is not escapism, but an extension of our imagination to include what may emerge from catastrophic fissures – to paraphrase the title of my exhibition, for which the text was written by Michal Stolarik, already mentioned in the introduction – this works are “whispers from the cracked horizon”.

Simon O’Sullivan, a researcher specialized in fiction, while describing affect in the context of installation based practices, noted that: “this is art’s function: to switch our intensive register, to reconnect us with the world. Art opens us up to the non-human universe that we are part of. Indeed, art might well have a representational function (after all, art objects, like everything else, can be read) but art also operates as a fissure in representation. And we, as spectators, as representational creatures, are involved in a dance with art, a dance in which – through careful manoeuvres – the molecular is opened up, the aesthetic is activated, and art does what is its chief *modus operandi*: it transforms, if only for a moment, our sense of our “selves” and our notion of our world”¹³⁹.

The aesthetics of catastrophe, within which I situate my activities, is a formula for creating material imagery that can provide a helpful framework for capturing anxieties and hopes—both for me, the creator, and for the recipients of my visual messages. In my opinion, spatial installations show particular potential in this area. Based on forms of active perception, they are embodying spaces—engaging the senses and the body, creating conditions for immersion in an experience that transcends the purely visual, rational, and linguistic sphere. Catastrophic aesthetics can thus help to

¹³⁹ S. O’Sullivan, *The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art beyond Representation*, „Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities”, vol. 6, no. 3, 2001, p. 126, [online], <https://simonosullivan.net/articles/aesthetics-of-affect.pdf>, (access: 27 July 2025).

chart paths of knowledge that do not document reality or offer a complete understanding of it, but broaden its experience. I would like my current and future activities in the field of art to help, at least to a small extent, to tame what is difficult to explain and encapsulate within unambiguous narratives. Appreciating entangled, corporeal, non-linear forms of perception allows us to co-create sensitivity and “staying with the trouble”¹⁴⁰. It is this staying, which Donna Haraway writes about – persisting with what is uncomfortable and ambiguous – that I consider one of the fundamental aspects of catastrophic aesthetics.

My artistic practice and this doctoral project constitute a kind of speculative experiment, which, I hope, may contribute, at least to a small extent, to overcoming the current crisis of imagination, the sense of powerlessness, and alienation. The specters and ghosts of catastrophe, inscribed in every tiny fragment of reality, are not suppressed here, but on the contrary, become an integral and necessary component of existence intertwined with the world.

*Ghosts, too, are weeds that whisper tales of the many pasts and yet-to-comes that surround us. Considered through ghosts and weeds, worlds have ended many times before. Endings come with the death of a leaf, the death of a city, the death of a friendship, the death of small promises and small stories. The landscapes grown from such endings are our disaster as well as our weedy hope*¹⁴¹.

As in the introduction, I would also like to refer to the aspect of cooperation, which plays an exceptionally important role in my creative activities. Working in a duo is for me an attempt to create a space outside the systemic conditions – a departure from the usual rules and the individualistic domain that predominantly shapes the contemporary art world. I have repeatedly mentioned the anxiety associated with perceiving reality as “catastrophic.” I think that the privileging of extreme individualism is one of the factors that deepens this feeling, or at least significantly hinders the creation of effective strategies for sustaining “hope” and alliances in difficult times. Anthropologist and cultural studies scholar Michał Krawczak, who himself works in a collective, notes in his text on the dynamics of group work: “concepts such as collective or community turn out to be marginalized and ineffective in an economic system based on the global flow of capital”¹⁴². Although such creative activities are not rare, institutional or economic conditions often impose a number of restrictions on them, which mean that collectivity is negotiated and questioned.

Describing a collective creative process is a difficult task, especially when it concerns a duo rather than a group of people, and when the activities of this duo are the subject of daily, consistent, developed, and processual practice, rather than occasional projects. I have decided not to describe the specific distribution of tasks within each work on the following pages of this thesis. I believe that, given the meaning of the works themselves, this would be distracting and fragmenting – contrary to

¹⁴⁰ Cf. D. J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham–London, 2016.

¹⁴¹ A. L. Tsing, H.A. Swanson, E. Gan, N. Bubandt (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2017, p. G6-G7.

¹⁴² M. Krawczak, *Ludzkie-nieludzkie: kolektyw jako metoda badawcza i praktyka artystyczna* [Human-inhuman: the collective as a research method and artistic practice], in: A. Jelewska (ed.), *Sztuka i technologia w Polsce. Od cyberkomunizmu do kultury makerów* [Art and technology in Poland. From cybercommunism to maker culture], Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań, 2014, s. 144, [online], <https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/6aee100f-6f65-486d-a0b8-9d4c183971d9/content> (access: 27 July 2025).

their assumptions and contrary to the creative processes themselves. Instead, I have decided to outline my personal research and artistic path, starting with my bachelor's studies and the experiences I gained there, through my master's studies, to my doctoral project. All these experiences have had a profound impact on the shape of my personal creative perspective. The works presented and described here were created in collaboration with Michał Knychaus, but they are also deeply personal projects, accompanied by my individual reflections presented on the above pages.

Collectives are a certain form of laboratories—although I must admit that this term brings their activities closer to formalized research units. The duo within which I create is not a planned strategy, but rather a process, a form of experience, a practice of everyday life and creativity. “Give me a laboratory and I will raise the world”, writes Bruno Latour, pointing out that science is created within complex collective projects, through relationships of dependence and translation of knowledge¹⁴³. In a similar way, Berardi, referred here multiple times, sees the potential for transformation in these shared spaces of intellectual work and empathy:

My basic assumption is this: notwithstanding the darkness of the present, notwithstanding looming war and widespread resentment, notwithstanding the impotence of political will, a possibility lies in the structural constitution of the present world. It is a possibility of emancipation, enrichment and peace. This possibility is stored in the cooperation among the knowledge workers of the world. (...) The possibility lies in the social brain, in the social organization of knowledge and culture. As long as we are able to imagine and to invent, as long we are capable of thought independent from power, we will not be defeated. The problem is that the forces of darkness are trying to subdue thought, imagination and knowledge under the rule of greed and the rule of war. If they do succeed in submitting knowledge to the logic of profit and violence, they will destroy everything. If they do not succeed in their intent, no matter how much destruction the forces of darkness can bring about, the cognitive workers of the world will find the energy and the creativity to resurrect the old dream of egalitarianism, social autonomy and happiness¹⁴⁴.

This quote encapsulates the motivation behind my approach to both artistic activities and theoretical research. It is an approach based on consistency, mindfulness, and on presence, which manifests itself not only in the creative process and self-reflection, but also in attempts to actively shape the surrounding environment. The possibility of change in a closely intertwined world will therefore not be the result of an individual act – it will be the effort of a community of which artists are a part. What is more, this community can, or rather should, extend to other actors in the planetary network: human, non-human, living and inanimate. So as long as – in this catastrophic reality – we retain the ability to “imagine and invent” the future, to which I have referred many times in this work, remains open. Even if we are losing more and more landscapes, and certain species are abandoning the world one by one, even if political and cultural tensions are growing, there is still – amid the ruins – a “fragile hope” smoldering, as mentioned in the introduction.

¹⁴³ B. Latour, *Give me a laboratory and I will raise the world*, [online], <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/12-GIVE-ME-A-LAB-GB.pdf> (access: 27 July 2025).

¹⁴⁴ F. „Bifo” Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, *ibid.*, pp. 161-162.

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