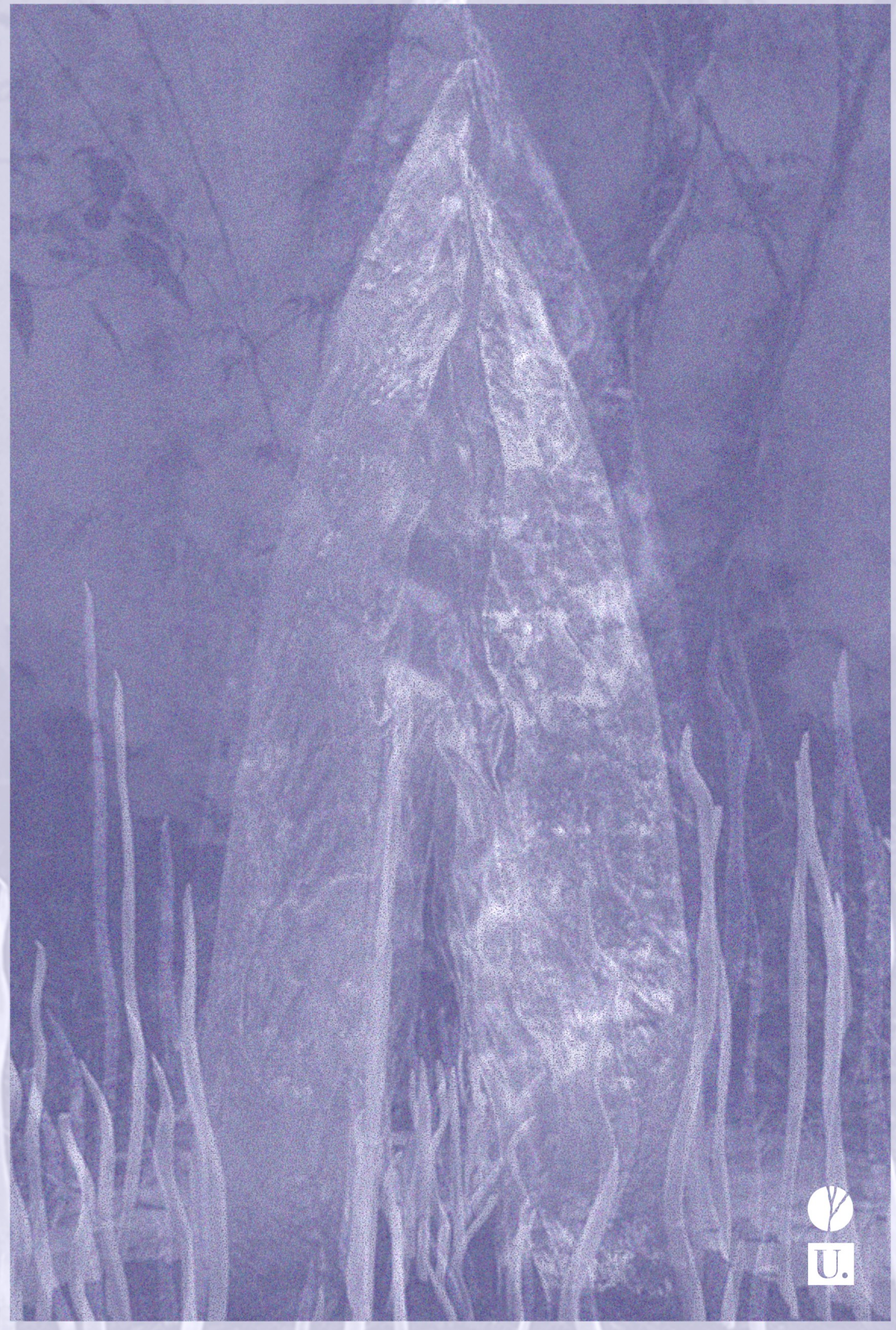
Memória além da permanência:

# *prática do luto ecológico*



**Relatório de Projeto para a obtenção do grau de Mestre em Artes Plásticas - Pintura**

Sob a orientação da Professora Doutora Teresa Maria Castro de Almeida

Marija Reikalaitė, 2026, Porto

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Memory beyond permanence:

# *practice of ecological grief*

**Project Report for the acquisition of the MFA degree**

Under the supervision of  Professor Dr. Teresa Almeida
Fine Arts Faculty of University of Porto, 2026

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# *Abstract*

The project thesis explores ways for contemporary artistic practice to articulate eco-grief and searches for alternative, collective ways of mourning ecological losses. Recognising that traditional monuments, though created to foster remembrance, fade into the background and are destined to be forgotten (Musil's concept of e*ntmerken*, or de-noticing), the work suggests a shift toward participatory interventions rooted in the intersection of the *nonument* and the methodology of s*ocially engaged art* (SEA). The text grounds this inquiry in the thanatological concept of eco-grief, deep time, mass extinctions, Gaia theory, and Donna Haraway's theory on *staying with the trouble* and *becoming-with*, drawing inspiration from subterranean, telluric beings. These theoretical foundations meet in *Substrata*, a site-specific artwork realised in August 2026 in collaboration with the local grassroots community of Terra Solta in Porto, symbolically a week before its displacement by railway construction works. Featuring an inverted glass-and-porcelain sundial and a tripartite collective performative action of transforming eco-losses, the project aims to dissolve passive spectatorship into shared authorship, providing the conditions and a place in time to transform individual eco-mourning into shared vulnerability and more-than-human kinship.



*Keywords:* Eco-grief; Socially Engaged Art; Mourning; Nonument; Kinship;

# *Resumo*

Este relatório de projeto investiga o modo em que a prática artística contemporânea pode articular o eco-luto e procura desenvolver formas alternativas e coletivas de elaboração do luto perante as perdas ecológicas. Partindo do reconhecimento de que os monumentos tradicionais, apesar de ser concebidos como dispositivos de memória, tendem a perder a sua visibilidade no quotidiano e a cair no esquecimento — fenómeno que Robert Musil conceptualiza através do termo *entmerken* (desnotabilização) —, o projeto propõe uma deslocação do paradigma monumental para intervenções participativas situadas na interseção entre o *nonument* (não-monumento) e a metodologia da *arte socialmente envolvida* (Socially Engaged Art, SEA). A investigação articula contributos da tanatologia, nomeadamente o conceito de eco-luto, com as noções de tempo profundo, extinção em massa e teoria de Gaia, bem como com as formulações de Donna Haraway sobre *staying with the trouble* e *becoming-with*. A partir destas perspetivas, e inspirando-se em seres subterrâneos e telúricos enquanto entidades que desafiam distinções convencionais entre humano e mais-do-que-humano, o projeto desenvolve *Substrata*, uma obra de arte site-specific realizada em agosto de 2026, em colaboração com a comunidade local Terra Solta, no Porto, simbolicamente uma semana antes da deslocação do espaço devido às obras de construção ferroviária. A obra integra um relógio de sol invertido em vidro e porcelana e uma ação performativa coletiva, estruturada em três momentos, dedicada à transformação simbólica de perdas ecológicas. Ao mobilizar a participação como estratégia artística e metodológica, *Substrata* procura deslocar o espectador de uma posição de receção passiva para uma condição de autoria partilhada, criando as condições espaciais e temporais para que o eco-luto individual possa ser transformado coletivamente. Deste modo, o projeto propõe a vulnerabilidade partilhada e o parentesco mais-do-que-humano como possibilidades de resposta ética e afetiva perante a perda ecológica.



*Palavras-chave:* Eco-luto; Arte Socialmente Envolvida; Luto; Nonumento; Parentesco;

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# *Introduction*

The present report, *Memory beyond permanence: practice of ecological grief*, addresses the need to articulate non-human loss through artistic practice. It departs from the premise that the environmental catastrophe is bound to excessive consumerism, collective dissociation, and an anthropocentric worldview. Faced with the escalating damage to Planet Earth, humanity is confronted with a new, yet unexplored sense of grief and a loss of innocence: the mournful realisation that the careless, hyper-abundant way of living inherited from previous generations is no longer possible and will never be. In this context, the role of monumentality in public art is debated as it plays an important part in the established mourning traditions and is directly bound to remembrance and belonging. Traditional models of public commemoration have long relied on permanent, imposing, didactic monuments. Nevertheless, as these objects blend well into the habitual urban fabric, they inevitably fail to sustain collective memory or evoke active remembrance. This report suggests a transition from silent, emotionless monumentality, towards dynamic, participatory places in space and time, capable of fostering shared vulnerability, belonging, and creating community bonds. Experiential, participatory practices, whether consensual or antagonistic, create lasting memories, due to the fact that they are not didactically learned, but unfold as spaces in time mentally and somatically lived with others. Moving beyond traditional spectator-looking-at-object artistic practices, this research questions:

1. **What is eco-grief, and how can this disenfranchised emotion achieve social legitimacy?**
2. **How can sculpture and spatial installation move beyond static representation to function as a vehicle to metabolise collective mourning for ecological loss?**
3. **How does the collective participatory performative practice challenge the didactic authority and perceptual disappearance (*Entmerken*) of the traditional public monument?**

Following this contextualisation, the report is structured into three main chapters that guide both the theoretical inquiry and the practical artistic project.

*Chapter 01:* *Understanding Eco-Grief*, establishes the psychological and ecological foundations of environmental mourning. Drawing on the seminal work in thanatology by Dr Kriss A. Kevorkian (2004) and Ken Doka's (2002) concept of disenfranchised grief, the text analyses why the emotional weight of non-human loss remains widely unseen and unrecognised. In response, the need for grief and eco-grief literacy is highlighted through the community-led frameworks of Lauren J. Breen et al. (2022) and Anna Cooke et al. (2024), demonstrating that public mourning exposes the undisputable need to explore the ties to the more-than-human world. To deconstruct human exceptionalism, the chapter turns to James Lovelock's (2000) and Lynn Margulis's (2008) Gaia theory, later reinforced by Isabelle Stengers's (2015) hypothesis that Gaia may not be a benevolent mother figure, but a fearsome, reactive hyper-entity, which gets more and more irritated by the actions of Anthropos. The abyss of deep time is seen through the lens of James Hutton (1795) and John McPhee (1998). Concurrently, Elizabeth Kolbert (2014) and Timothy Morton (2021) frame the contemporary condition within the unfolding Sixth Mass Extinction. The chapter concludes by investigating the fractured landscapes of the Anthropocene by Anna Tsing et al. (2019), ultimately turning to Donna Haraway's (2016) thoughts on Chthulucene and the imperative of 'staying with the trouble' through kinship, drawing inspiration from subterranean, telluric beings.

*Chapter 02:* *Memory Beyond Permanence,* explores the evolution of public commemoration from static stone and cast bronze towards ephemeral, socially engaged interventions. It opens with Robert Musil's (2006) concept of Entmerken (de-noticing), illustrating how traditional monuments withdraw from human perception and accelerate the process of forgetting. As an alternative, the chapter introduces Andrea Pinotti's (2023) theoretical taxonomy of the nonument—a via negativa of commemoration derived from Gordon Matta-Clark's artistic practice. The text then traces the Ethical Turn in public art through observations by Claire Bishop (2012) and Suzanne Lacy's (1995) formulation of new genre public art. The lineage of participatory practices is expanded through Joseph Beuys's (2010) conception of social sculpture. It then explores the intense polemics around Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) relational aesthetics, and Grant Kester's (2004, 2011) dialogical art. Finally, the chapter establishes its methodology upon Pablo Helguera's (2011) framework of Socially Engaged Art (SEA), affirming the necessity of actual, authentic social interaction, shared community agency, and the enquiry into authorship. The majority of practical examples to illustrate this chapter were carefully chosen from the extensive study of the archival anthology and survey catalogue "Visible" (Angelotti et al., 2024).

*Chapter 03:* *Practice of Eco-Grief*, synthesises these theoretical strands into a practical project titled *Substrata.* Building on Donna Haraway's concept of "becoming with" the practical work establishes a temporary, collective space offering an environment to transform eco-grief into something else collectively. Materially, *Substrata* employs an unusual inverted sundial form composed of semi-transparent colourless glass figures and elongated porcelain pieces evoking roots and telluric body parts. These fragile, subterranean-inspired shapes and 12 holes in the ground surrounding them, serve as a counterpoint to the imposing vertical permanence of civic monuments.

The sculpture was co-created and activated on 15 August 2026 in collaboration with the grassroots community Association Terra Solta in Campanhã neighbourhood, symbolically marking its final week before displacement by the upcoming high-speed rail construction works. The event brought community members and participants from outside together. It was constituted of three parts: performative action, conversation and community meal. The performative action drew inspiration from the work of Marija Gimbutas (1991) on prehistoric funerary practices—where death is understood as a cyclical transition rather than an endpoint—alongside the ritualistic, earth-bound performances of Ana Mendieta and the contemplative somatic exercises of the Marina Abramović Method (2004).

Through the synthesis of Nonument and Socially Engaged Art, this report demonstrates how contemporary art practice can leave behind the spectator-art-object separation and lean into the fertile, transformative compost of shared vulnerability of human and non-human kinship.

"Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing. Without sustained rememberance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think."

**Donna Haraway**



Chapter 01:

# *understanding eco-grief*

Eco-grief:

# *a disenfranchised emotion*

1.1.

Grief is a reaction to loss. It is normally associated with a death of a loved one. Grief can be a reaction to numerous different losses that inevitably happen in life. It can take the form of sadness, guilt, fury, tiredness, lethargy, anxiety, restlessness or shock. It causes physical symptoms such as dry mouth, fatigue, tightness of the chest and throat, excessive crying, and insomnia, as well as cognitive signals such as confusion, anxiety, disbelief or even 'magical thinking' (e.g. the feeling of the presence of the deceased). It often provokes daily-life-disrupting behaviour, such as lack of appetite, crying, unusual dreams, loss of interest in daily activities and social life withdrawal. It can cause issues with work, family dynamics, romantic relationships, friendships, or lead to an excessive search for spirituality. Nevertheless, grief is individual. How one reacts is very different from the reaction of another.

Eco-grief [01] is a type of grief that is caused by non-human loss in nature. As a term, it was first mentioned by Dr Kriss A. Kevorkian in her 2004 doctoral dissertation in thanatology. She describes eco-grief as a reaction to environmental loss, caused by natural or human-induced events. She developed the term to give a name to the type of grief experienced by many environmentalists and other people who are worried about the adversities that the environment is experiencing and its harsh, often irreversible consequences (Kevorkian, 2004, p. 5).

In Kevorkian's dissertation, the term derives from the concept of disenfranchised grief, named by Dr Ken Doka. It describes a reaction to the loss of a meaningful and significant attachment which a person has experienced, but that is not considered significant enough by established "traditional grieving norms" (e.g. a loss of a pet, loss of a lover, miscarriage, loss of a limb, separation of friends, divorce etc.). In some of these situations, the loss may not be recognised or validated by others; it can be belittled and considered "not important enough". The experienced grief then becomes disenfranchised: it cannot be publicly expressed, socially validated or openly mourned (Doka, 2002, p. xiii).

Within the research into grief and bereavement, Breen et al. emphasise the necessity for grief literacy in community movements, where the grieving individual has information about grief and loss and, where appropriate, compassionate and safe social support is available. To authors, grief literacy is constituted of three key dimensions—knowledge, skills, and values—meaning that their connection and integration in grief literacy is greater than the sum of its parts. They also envision that grief literacy is intrinsic in an inclusive, nurturing community that involves interdependence within social and cultural contexts (Breen et al., 2022, p. 9).

01. Dr. Kevorkian in her personal website clearly establishes the difference between Ecological grief and Environmental grief.

**Ecological grief**, not to be confused with environmental grief, is the grief reaction stemming from the disconnection, and relational loss, of our natural world. Ecological grief is experienced when we witness people willingly harming Nature and not recognizing that we, too, are Nature. We distance ourselves from Nature so much so that we talk about "going out in Nature" in order to feel better. We're able to remain in climate controlled environments so much of the time that we don't realize, or perhaps even care, that our wild Kin-dom are suffering the severe weather effects from human caused climate change.

**Environmental grief** is defined as the grief reaction stemming from the environmental loss of ecosystems caused by natural or human-made events. If we look at the definition of environmental, we find that it relates more to the impact of humans on the natural world. We're looking at this grief reaction from a larger perspective such as the loss of a forest or species due to humans. I'm reacting with environmental grief to the decline, and perhaps extinction, of the Southern Resident Orcas in the Salish Sea (Kevorkian, 2004).

In the meantime, many deaths and losses go unmourned, or that apparently do not matter in the societal understanding of mourning for human and non-human life. Even though it's unclear how to mourn them yet, people are still shaped by those numerous losses and are consciously or unconsciously affected. Mourning not only exposes our connections to others (human, animal, vegetal, mineral, hydrological, etc.), but also provides an opportunity to connect to the community through shared vulnerability. It may provide political and ethical possibilities to magnify the spaces of dialogue to include bodies not mourned in dominant discourse and inspire individual and collective action (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017, p. 5).

Sociocultural contexts and habits strongly affect the public display of emotions, and public mourning is not an exception. All cultures around the world have universally developed rituals to acknowledge the passing of a community member. Vigils, wakes, funerals, obituaries and other practices help community members to integrate human deaths. Nevertheless, cultural and societal norms in Western societies tend to limit death exposure death related material, minimising the public display of grief, which is often considered something to be dealt with privately (Varutti, 2023, p. 5).

Rituals could also ease eco-grief and guilt. They also may inspire environmental activism. The lack of established (normalised) practices to mourn ecological losses explains why communities do not engage in these rituals. Yet again, this mirrors questionable morals surrounding hierarchies of beings and hierarchies of losses, because sometimes it seems that non-human losses are simply deemed not worthy of remembrance and mourning (Butler, 2004, pp. xiv–xv).

In the times where ecological disasters and drastic climate change are becoming normality (*fig. 01, 02*), and cause inevitable loss, it is crucial to build collective habits and practices that may address eco-grief through grief literacy, environmental education and collective action. Affirming the concept of grief literacy, Anna Cooke et al. elaborate the concept to eco-grief literacy, which they define as the knowledge, skills and values that foster understanding and concrete action to supply compassionate support for those experiencing ecological grief in the community (Cooke et al., 2024, p. 3).



*Figure 01*
WA man carries a sheep on the motorcycle during a wildfire in Patras city, western Greece, Wednesday, 13 August, 2025. Photo: Thanassis Stavrakis / © Associated Press



*Figure 02*
A volunteer is engulfed in smoke while using a tree branch to try to stop a wildfire in Gouveia, in the Serra da Estrela mountain range, in Portugal on Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022. JOAO HENRIQUES / AP

Gaia theory:

# *not so motherly Earth*

1.2.

02. He suspected that when Golding suggested it, he probably hadn't reread Hesiod for a long time. Because if he had done so, he would have remembered that he was putting his friend's theory under a "curse" from which it would never be able to fully recover.

There may be many reasons to feel eco-grief, loss generating news are there to be discovered everyday. However, even though individual eco-losses are not less important, but according to the evidence gathered in this thesis, it seems that the root of the loss emotion lies way deeper. It may be the sensation that nothing ever on Earth will be the same, that the environmental changes are irreversible, and the old, careless, thoughtless way of abundant, comfortable living, will just not be possible anymore. The realisation of it, is painful and could be called a mass loss of innocence, loss of carelessness. From now on, it will not be possible to ignore the consequences or the impact of Anthropos: rising temperatures, rising oceans, fires and draughts, wars, plentitude of animal and plant species going extinct ... In addition, access to information, the possibility of self-education free of charge, takes the mystery veils down, and current, ongoing events become impossible to look away from. Slowly, humanity starts to understand, that there will not be a way back this time, and that scientists have been talking about it since the 1970s, and the horrific events are caused not by anything else, but the carelessness of previous generations.

03. Hutton sometimes is called the "father of modern geology". He in 1785 poetically compared the global cycling of water with the blood circulation of an animal.

One of first theories announcing the loss of innocence of humanity was called with a poetic, mythical name Gaia Theory. Developed by chemist James Lovelock and biologist Lynn Margulis, at first it was not taken seriously by other scientists and was considered a New Age-related pseudoscientific theory. The theory described Earth as a self-regulating super-organism—a complex entity consisting of the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans and soil. The totality constitutes a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks perfect physical and chemical circumstances for life on the planet (Lovelock, 2000, p. 10). During a period of time in the 1960s and 1970s, Lovelock was working on several NASA projects searching for life on Mars. During that time, he had a rare opportunity to look at the planet Earth from above, seeing it in its entirety (*fig. 03*), which made him question the usual reductionist methodology traditionally used by the sciences at the time. Because of its unorthodox nature, the concept was hard to understand for traditionalists, causing polemics and disagreements among the scientists.

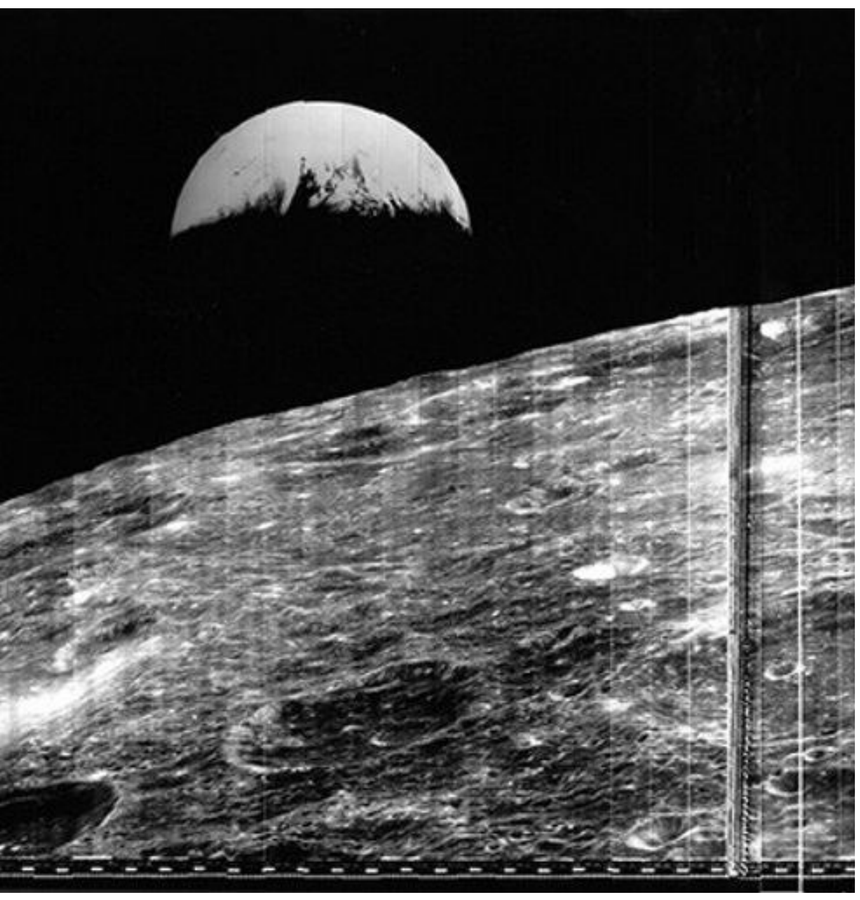


*Figure 03*
This is the first good image of the Earth taken from the vicinity of the Moon, 380,000 km away. The Earth sunset terminator runs through Odessa, Istanbul, and slightly west of Capetown.

The name Gaia was suggested by author William Golding (Lord of the Flies, 1954), who happened to be Lovelock's neighbour in the village he lived in. The planet-sized entity, though hypothetical, needed a name. Without hesitation, Golding recommended that this creature should be called Gaia, after the Greek Earth goddess also known as Ge, from whose root the sciences of geography and geology derived their names (Lovelock, 2000, p. 9).

The etymology of the name Gaia was confusing to some, as it gave an allusion to poetry and myth instead of materialistic science. Bruno Latour, in his eight lectures on Gaia, ironically addressed the conception of this name.[02] In ancient Greek mythology, Gaia, Ge, Earth, is not really a goddess, but a relentless, primordial force from the time before the gods. In the words of Latour: "Prolific, dangerous, savvy, the ancient Gaia emerges in great outpourings of blood, steam, and terror, in the company of Chaos and Eros" (Latour, 2017, p. 81).

At the time of its conception, the term was often discarded and followed by disbelief. Despite it all, it persisted and today is treated with respect and credibility in natural studies. In addition, looking deeper into the history of natural science, similar thoughts were observed among scientists working in different countries throughout different times, starting with J. Hutton.[03]

Lovelock himself describes the necessity of the Gaia theory as an alternative to the anthropocentric view which sees nature as a primitive force to be subdued or conquered (Lovelock, 2000, p. 11).

Shortly after, way less positive, even alarming perspectives started to emerge. Lynn Margulis, the renowned biologist who together with Lovelock worked on the Gaia theory, writes that the Gaia hypothesis is not at all about the Earth as a single organism. According to Margulis, the Earth, in the biological sense, has a body sustained by a variety of complex physiological processes. To Margulis, the human urge to take responsibility for the living Earth is ridiculous; she openly called it "the rhetoric of the powerless". According to her, the planet takes care of humans, not vice-versa. Humanity's self-inflated moral imperative to guide a poor Earth or heal the "lovely, but sick planet" is proof of immense self-delusion. Margulis, ironically but wisely, suggests that instead of all the laughable rhetoric about saving the Gaia entity, humanity should rather focus on protecting themselves from themselves (Margulis, 2008, p. 143).

Isabelle Stengers amplifies the not-so-positive and not-so-motherly nature of Gaia, arguing that Lovelock, perhaps, went a step too far considering a stability of the type that one attributes to a living organism in good health. According to the initial theory, Gaia seemed to be a good-willing, nurturing mother whose health had to be protected. Stengers highlights that today, our understanding of the way in which Gaia actually functions is much less reassuring. She states that Gaia is, more than ever, named precisely because in the past she was honoured as the fearsome one—as she who was fearfully and respectfully addressed by peasants aware that they depend on something much greater than them, something that tolerates, but with a tolerance that is not to be tested or abused. She was worshipped long before the cult of unconditional, maternal love, which pardons everything. According to Stengers, Gaia perhaps could be considered a mother, but a nervous, irritable, and dangerous one; the one who should neither be tested nor offended for the sake of humanities own well-being. The one who existed way before the Greeks granted their gods a moral compass and way before they gave them a particular interest in human destinies. In the case of Gaia, it was less a matter of ritualistic worshipping, but a serious matter of paying attention—of not abusing her tolerance with intrusive, disrespectful actions, that could cause irreversible, violent consequences (Stengers, 2015, p. 45).



*Figure 04*
Wildfires in Portugal
Agata Rucin / Rewilding Portugal

Just as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Stengers agrees that the hard-to-comprehend size and power of the Gaia entity constitutes a major unknown, exists at every moment of our lives, and it may be one of the root causes of environmental anxiety. This is, perhaps, what is most difficult to understand: no future can be imagined in which it will be again possible to ignore Gaia or to be oblivious to her (*fig. 04, 05, 06*), as humans were able to do in the past. Silent understanding, that it is not a "down moment that will pass" anymore, followed by a happy ending or a simplistic check mark meaning "problem solved" in a list of other problems. It will no longer be possible to forget her. Humans will have to answer for what has been continuously done for centuries in the face of an inexorable being who is indifferent to their reasoning on the matter—a being who has no spokesperson and does not even communicate verbally. Stengers comments on the matter harshly:

> *But if we listen to Lovelock, who has become the prophet of disaster, it would be necessary to reduce the human population to about 500 million people in order to pacify Gaia and live reasonably well in harmony with her. The so-called rational calculations, which result in the conclusion that the only solution is to eradicate the vast majority of humans between now and the end of the century, scarcely dissimulate the delusion of a murderous and obscene abstraction. Gaia does not demand such eradication. She doesn't demand anything (Stengers, 2015, p. 47).*



*Figure 05*
The aftermath of the devastating flood in Betrawati Bazaar in Rasuwa district, Nepal. Photograph: Angad Dhakal/Reuters

However, as harsh and even nihilistic as they sound (none of the above-cited scientists offer a solution, unfortunately), these are not fictional facts, nor so-called fake news or shady propaganda. These are proven scientific facts written by respected scientists already a decade (or decades) ago, which turns the rapidly diffusing disenfranchised grief for environmental loss into a totally legitimate human need to mourn them and the forthcoming anxiety of living on an unpredictable, complex and enormous entity (Gaia), which is acting more and more "irritated" by the actions of Anthropos. And yet, these facts, even in their most blunt or raw form (not to mention constantly emerging nuances and new discoveries, only considering the mere basics), are being actively "normalised" and distorted in the mass media, given simplistic explanations, or negated, while a deeper understanding remains reserved to the educated part of society, inaccessible to the masses.

This creates strange situations where the facts don't match the given names, and humanity slowly (maybe too slowly) start noticing it. The mismatch between global natural disaster events and their descriptions, the confusing polemics surrounding them, may be another deeper cause of eco-grief. Understanding that life on Earth will never be as careless and comfortable as it has been for the previous generations, understanding that in the face of clarity, all the illusions about the global environmental situation being "not as bad as described", will inevitably collapse, bringing an avalanche of eco-grief.

Mark Fisher named the first chapter of his work, Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?, with the famous phrase: "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 2009, p. 5). Even though daily habits and behaviour—which are all the result of capitalist-system-induced overconsumption, inaction and collective dissociation, are actively evoking an imminent global disaster, despite it all, humans continue with the old, stubborn daily habits. The fact that people are conscious or semi-conscious about it, summons the feeling of helplessness, turning it into mourning for what's been lost due to these harmful actions and what is due to be lost very soon for the same reason. Nevertheless, humans prefer to "float" in ambivalence—the inability to rebel against the harmful comfort zone, as any effort to strive for change or to stop the disaster seems far from possible at this point. And on top of it, there are few, if any, tools, and no traditions to metabolise or transform this inquietude, this unknown, disenfranchised kinds of grief.

*Figure 06*
Civilians look for survivors under the rubble of collapsed buildings in Kahramanmaras, Turkey. Close to the quake's epicentre, the day after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck the country's southeast, on February 7, 2023.
Adem Altan | AFP | Getty Images



# Deep time and ***mass extinctions***

1.3.

In the 18th century, James Hutton, often described as the "father of modern geology", observed the rock formation strata at Siccar Point, Scotland (fig. *07*), and discovered the concept of deep time. The goal of this expedition was to form some estimate of the time the Earth may have existed, but after observing the Siccar Point rock formations, Hutton couldn't give any estimate anymore. In a letter to the Royal Society, he wrote: "Here are three distinct successive periods of existence, and each of these is, in our measurement of time, a thing of indefinite duration. [...] The result, therefore, of this physical inquiry is, that we find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end" (Hutton, 1795, p. 173). Later on, in the 19th century, Mary Anning (1799–1847), a pioneering English palaeontologist and fossil collector, found an Ichthyosaurus skeleton in an English cliff. In the words of Timothy Morton, in that moment: "[...] the abyss of deep time opened up. The vast distributed processes of evolution were discovered" (Morton, 2021, p. 34).

In the 1980s, Pulitzer Prize winner John McPhee argued that numbers do not seem to work in human favour regarding the depth of time. Any number above a couple of thousand years paralyse the human imagination (McPhee, 1998, p. 16). One of Hutton's companions on the journey to Siccar Point, John Playfair, shared that the mind seemed to "grow giddy only by looking so far into the abyss of time" (McPhee, 1998, p. 65).

Indeed, not only was Playfair's mind "growing giddy", but it appears that it may be literally impossible for the ordinary mind to comprehend the actual depth of time on Earth. McPhee argues that the evolutionary process has retained humanity's animal sense of time, and that normally humans think only in five generations (two in front, two behind, with heavy attention on the current one in the middle). McPhee states that possibly, the human mind may simply not have evolved enough to be able to understand deep time due to a primordial inhibition standing in the way (McPhee, 1998, p. 77).

It seems that the inexplicable vastness of deep time, together with the sublime, primordial force of Gaia, could be one more reason making humans realise how ridiculously small their significance on the planet Earth is. To collectively understand, that one day, after a few million years, humanity will probably leave only the thinnest trace in the strata of rock formations. To the collective ego of some societies, obsessed with continuity and leaving a trace, it is not only unacceptable, it also becomes tragic, indeed. Adding to the above-mentioned examples of eco-grief, the realisation of the difference in dimensions, humanity starts to comprehend, that they are not at all the most important center of Earthy processes. That there may be a necessity to let go of the solid concepts that made them who they think they were. In front of the deep time lived by Earth and the magnitude of its elements, humans are exposed to helplessness, while until now they were convinced to be able to use everything as a resource, to tame, to senselessly extract without consequences and pretend to own it all as property. Understanding that those beliefs were an illusion leads to a collective loss of identity and a shift in the perceived power dynamics between humans and the Earth. This, too, can cause us to grief the certainty of who we are and where we stand.

Another proof of inevitable temporality of the various stages of the life on Earth could be the record of five previous mass extinctions: the End-Ordovician, the Late Devonian, the End-Permian, the Late Triassic and the End-Cretaceous (Kolbert, 2014, p. 16). According to Kolbert, an even stranger and more radical transformation is underway. After discovering subterranean reserves of fuel and energy, humans began to change the atmosphere. This altered the climate and the chemistry of the oceans. No other earthly being has ever impacted life on the planet as much before. Very occasionally in the distant past, the planet has undergone change so destructive to the diversity of life. Five of these ancient events were catastrophic enough to become their own category: the so-called Big Five. It may seem like an imaginary coincidence at first, but what if it's no coincidence at all?



*Figure 07*
Siccar Point | Geological Society of Glasgow | 2016
Photo: Dave Souza

The history of these events repeating itself is causing a collective realisation that another mass extinction may be unfolding *(fig. 08)*. While it is still too early to say whether it will reach the proportions of the Big Five, it is slowly becoming known as the Sixth Extinction (Kolbert, 2014, p. 7).

According to Morton, the "normalisation of things" could be causing this cognitive distortion—alias, a distortion of a distortion. Being in an era of inevitable mass extinction, feels intrinsically uncertain and uncanny. He states that we haven't been paying much attention for the last twelve thousand years—approximately since the start of agriculture, which required industrial processes to maintain them, hence fossil fuels, hence global warming, and this excess most likely will cause mass extinction. In the meantime, under all the surface-level, pacifying statements that "it is all normal" and it "has always been this way", the uncanny feeling is suspended in the air, indicating something is about to happen; the question is when (Morton, 2021, p. 15).

For a clearer understanding of the paradoxical invisibility of mass extinctions, Morton compares them to the points on a long timeline. They are so spread out over time that, while they are happening in the moment, with the limited ability to comprehend the deep time, it is not easy to discern them. In the words of Morton: "They are like invisible nuclear explosions that last for a thousand years" (Morton, 2021, p. 7). Humans hardly know where to start or how to react, apart from either completely dissociating from it or catastrophising about it. In addition, one of the mass extinctions, the End-Permian, also involved global warming. It happened about 252 million years ago, and at that time, plants were to blame for the excessive carbon emissions (Morton, 2021, pp. 31–32).

The theory of Gaia, deep time, and mass extinctions are all fascinating in their sublime monstrousness and unmeasurable dimensions. However, it wasn't our choice to live during them and with them. The fact that this information is not a fictional adventure story written by Jules Verne means this was happening for a great amount of time before, it is happening right now, and it will continue happening in the future. The only constant on Earth is endless change, and humans can solely observe the events from the tiny existence in the second of life on Earth they were granted by the towering giant of deep time. Humanity understands that it can only mourn the illusion of the inflated self and the expired vision of its grandiose existence. According to Richard Fortey, while we swim in our existential thoughts, in terms of geology, life doesn't stop for a second, nor does it give us a break:

> *Streams are still seeking out weaknesses in a hundred little valleys, still eroding away what deep time has constructed, essaying to lay low what geological forces once made high. Thousands of years count for nothing, for this is a process with a pace not to be measured against any human chronometer (Fortey, 2005, p. 154).*

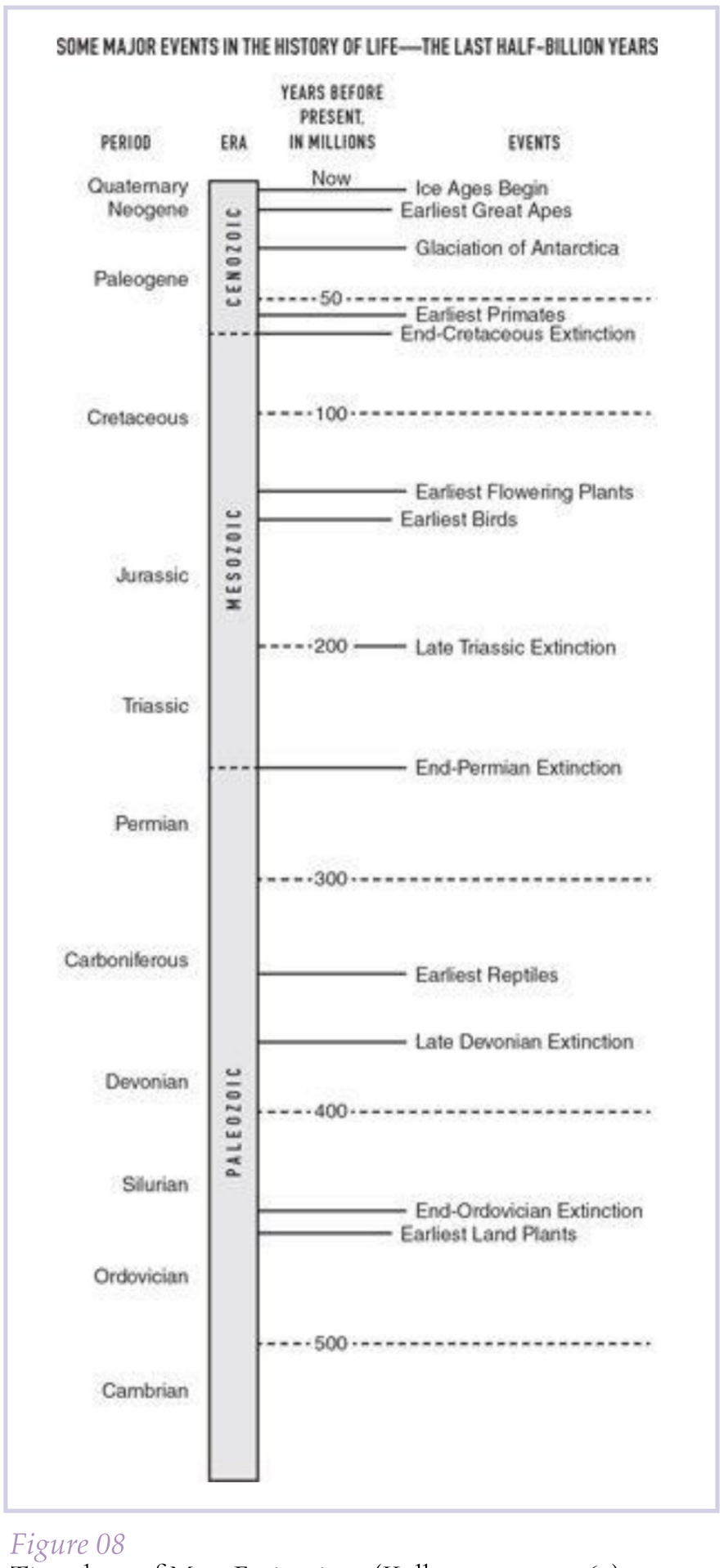



*Figure 08*
Timechart of Mass Extinctions (Kolbert, 2014, p. 165)

# Uneven landscapes
# *of Anthropocene*

1.4.

Steffen writes, that it is entirely appropriate that the first attempt to define the Anthropocene appeared in the newsletter of Global Change Research, rather than in one of the mainstream scientific journals. This article was a solidification of Paul Crutzen's first invention of the term Anthropocene during a heated discussion at a meeting of the IGBP (International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme) Scientific Committee in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in February 2000. In the words of Steffen:

> *Scientists from IGBP's paleo-environment project were reporting on their latest research, often referring to the Holocene, the most recent geological epoch of earth history, to set the context for their work. Paul, a vice-chair of IGBP, was becoming visibly agitated at this usage, and after the term Holocene was mentioned yet again, he interrupted them: "Stop using the word Holocene. We're not in the Holocene any more. We're in the… the… the… (searching for the right word)… the Anthropocene! (Steffen, 2013, p. 486).*

Indeed, the Anthropocene is an epoch, and geological time is counted in epochs (of which there are quite a few), as this time chart (created by the British Geological Survey) shows in a simplified way *(fig. 07).*

The chart shows the breakdown of the Cenozoic Era, in which we live right now. It's also very clearly visible how tiny and short the Holocene, our current, 'official' geological epoch is compared to the eons (the Phanerozoic is only one of them).[04]

Morton pungently describes the Anthropocene as a geological period in which human-made materials have literally created a layer in the Earth's crust (all kinds of plastics, concrete, nucleotides, etc.). According to Morton, it has formed an obvious stratum. He invites us to reflect on whether there is anything uncannier than realising that we are in a whole new geological period "marked by humans becoming a geophysical force on a planetary scale" (Morton, 2021, p. 6).

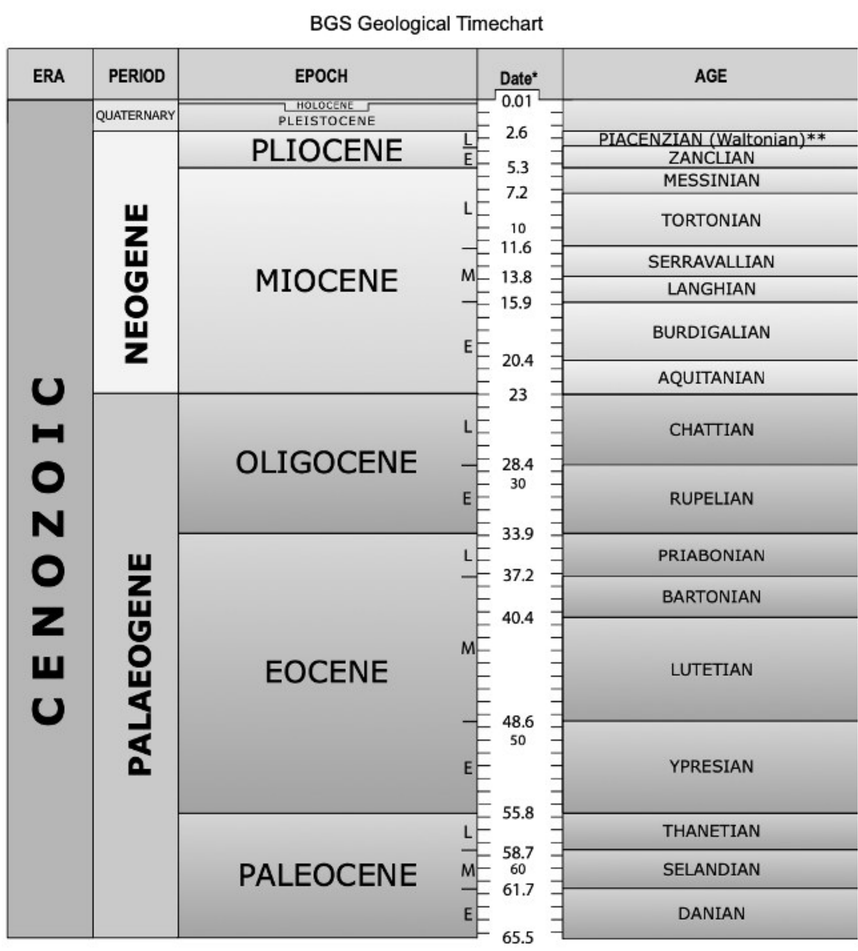
According to Anna Tsing et al., the Anthropocene is fragmented, unstable and cannot be described in one continuous narrative. It is "patchy" and shape-shifting, changing in relation to the circumstances. The patchy nature of the Anthropocene seeks to recalibrate the tools of anthropology in order to prepare to study these uneven landscapes. The article's authors suggest that by widening the notions of social relations into more-than-human space and time, anthropology may return to attending to specificity without being parochial. The multidimensional crises of current times call for an anthropology that takes landscapes as its starting point, and that calibrates itself to the structural synchronicities between ecology, capital, and the human and more-than-human histories through which uneven landscapes are created and recreated (Tsing, Mathews & Bubandt, 2019, p. 6).

Continuing on the fractured and fragmented nature of the Anthropocene, just like Gaia, through the observations of scholars, the Anthropocene has gained numerous names—it morphs into various "-cenes": *Androcene, Anglocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Ecocene, Necrocene, Negrocene, Pyrocene, Phytopocene, and Plantationocene*, among many others. Each of these names holds the analytical and epistemological quality of the original term, offering counterpoints, refutations, responses, and in-between links. Besides employing other critical accents and perspectives, they are, in themselves, parallel narratives—dissonant and complementary—in the sense of configuring other ways of narrating both the experience of the climate crisis and the socio-geo-historical processes that caused it (Petrucci, 2025, p. 34).

Donna Haraway, instead, raises the question of what happens when human self-imposed exceptionalism and individualism, so deeply rooted in Western philosophy, politics and economics, become unthinkable, terminally unthinkable, in Haraway's words: "not available to think with" (Haraway, 2016, p. 30).

04. *Eon - noun*
1: an immeasurably or indefinitely long period of time : age
I haven't seen him in eons.
2: a very large division of geologic time usually longer than an era
the Archean eon
3: a unit of geologic time equal to one billion years

*(Merriam-Webster, 2026)*



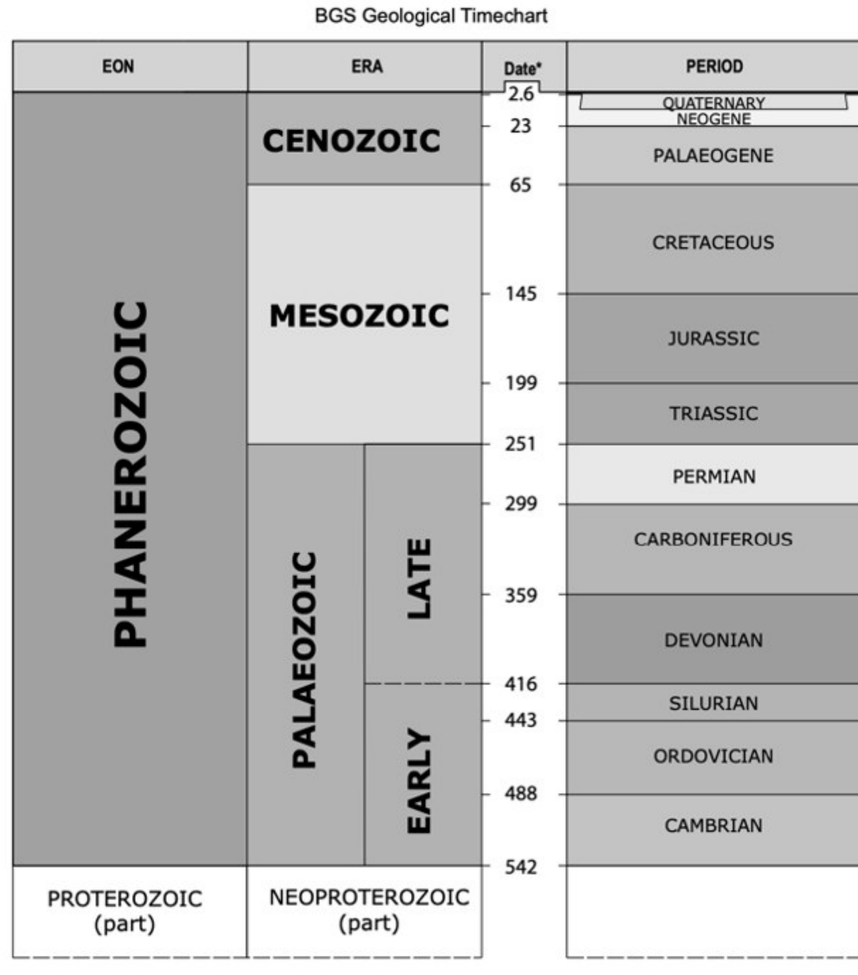




*Figure 09*
The BGS geological timechart is based on The Geologic Time Scale 2012. BGS © UKRI.

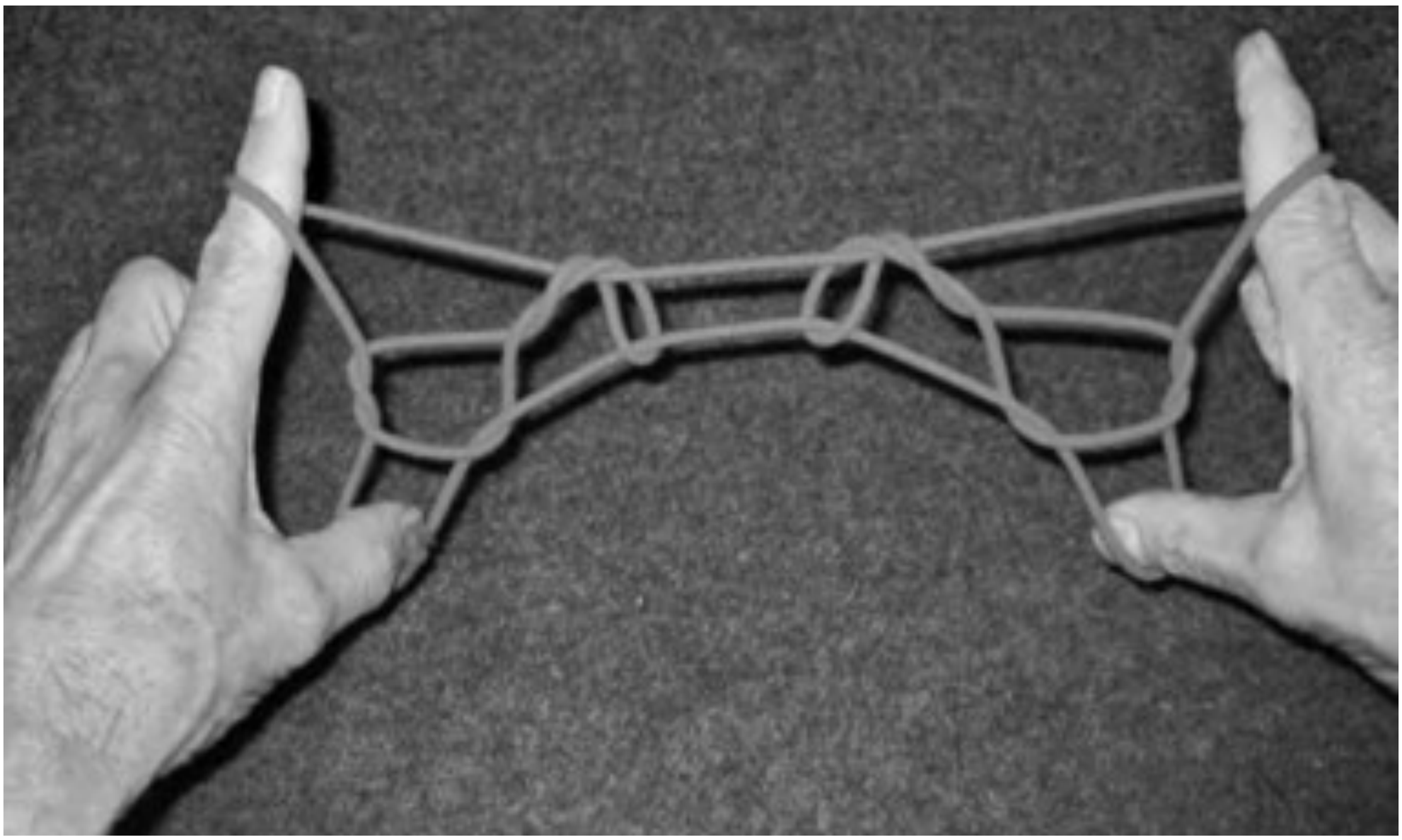
Biological sciences have been especially influential in developing ideas about the mortal life on Earth since the 18th century. Homo sapiens (the Anthropos)—as the human species, or the so-called Modern Man—was a result, and the centre, of these scientific practices. Haraway inquires: "What happens when the best biologies of the twenty-first century cannot function any more with bounded individuals plus contexts, when organisms plus environments, or genes plus whatever they need, no longer sustain the overwhelming immensity of new biological knowledge?" She asks what is to come when even Western societies can no longer imagine themselves only as individuals and societies of individuals in a human-centred world. She also suggests looking. at beings as oddkin[05], interconnected, as in the old game of String Figures (f*ig. 10, 11*) (Haraway, 2016, p. 30).

Paradoxically, in the age of the Anthropos, where everything in the world is being treated as a resource to be exploited and exhausted to benefit human needs, anthropocentrism is a widely discussed matter. In various scientific fields, the question of sentience is raised increasingly often. We slowly realise that the human species is part of an intricate net of living, human and non-human sentient beings, and that the entire logic of perceiving the world in the old, dogmatic, limited, anthropocentric way is simply no longer possible. Douglas C. Youvan describes sentience as a complex and multifaceted concept that intersects philosophy, science, ethics and technology. The quality of sentience can be attributed to beings capable of subjective experiences, including feelings, emotions and consciousness. In Youvan's words: "Sentience is not just about the ability to perceive or react to stimuli, but also involves a self-awareness and the ability to experience sensations in a subjective manner" (Youvan, 2023, p. 2).

More and more beings are being considered sentient, and that throws humans into another crisis of thought: how shall we think inside this "new-old" world? How shall we move beyond our old habit of thinking that only humankind can actually feel pain and discomfort? That only human suffering is worth our kindness and compassion? Is all other pain of secondary importance? Humans unconsciously grieve the old times when morals were so simple, where there was no need to worry about a single thing touched or stepped on. Microplastic was not a concern, and nobody knew that almost every product in the supermarket is directly tied to the war industry. Humans are getting used to a very different kind of empathy, a different kind of consciousness, and a different kind of being in the world—which is probably the only way giving a possibility not to be swept away from irritated Gaia's shoulder. However, according to Morton, being in opposition to anthropocentrism doesn't mean to hate humans and "want ourselves to go extinct". To oppose anthropocentrism, he suggests seeing how we are included in the biosphere among other non-human beings (Morton, 2021, p. 30). It urges us to make a drastic change in our perception and behaviour.

05. *Oddkin*
A word coined by Haraway, describing non-natalist and off-category kin.

*Figure 10*
Ma'ii Ats'áá' Yílwoí
(Coyotes Running Opposite Ways).
Photograph by Donna Haraway.



# Chthulucene:
# ***staying with the trouble***

## 1.5.

Haraway proposes a new type of "-cene" (instead of the Holocene or Anthropocene) and a way of thinking. She proposes the Chthulucene—an interscalar time that interweaves with all other times, "that together name a timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in responsability on a damaged earth" (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). This idea stems from telluric, soil-bound beings (*fig. 12*), and from the bacterial life that has been clustering and developing "underground" since the beginning of geological time. The term represents the chthonic ones—the beings of the earth, both ancient and recent. Haraway suggests observing them and learning from their inherent ways of being: "Chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair" (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). She calls them timeless monsters who demonstrate and perform material earthiness in the form of earthy processes. In addition, they demonstrate and perform consequences too, as they owe nothing to anyone, and they don't feel the same way mammals do. Chthonic ones are not safe—they belong to no ideology and no cause, just as Gaia herself belongs to no one. They live inside the "now", exempt from conventional pasts, presents, or futures, which mean nothing to them. They advocate for a new start but do not insist on cancelling anything that was here before, or what comes after. The life of chthonic ones is full of inheritances, of memory, and full of comings—of nurturing what might still be (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). Haraway's Chthulucene represents a different way of conceptualising the fundamentality of non-human instances for the reproduction of life: not as utility, resource, or property, not like something that may be seized and exploited by "natural right", but rather as a type of immanent vitality. Precisely because it cannot be reduced to the inside-versus-outside binomial, these connective ties do not pass through the register of appropriation (Petrucci, 2025).

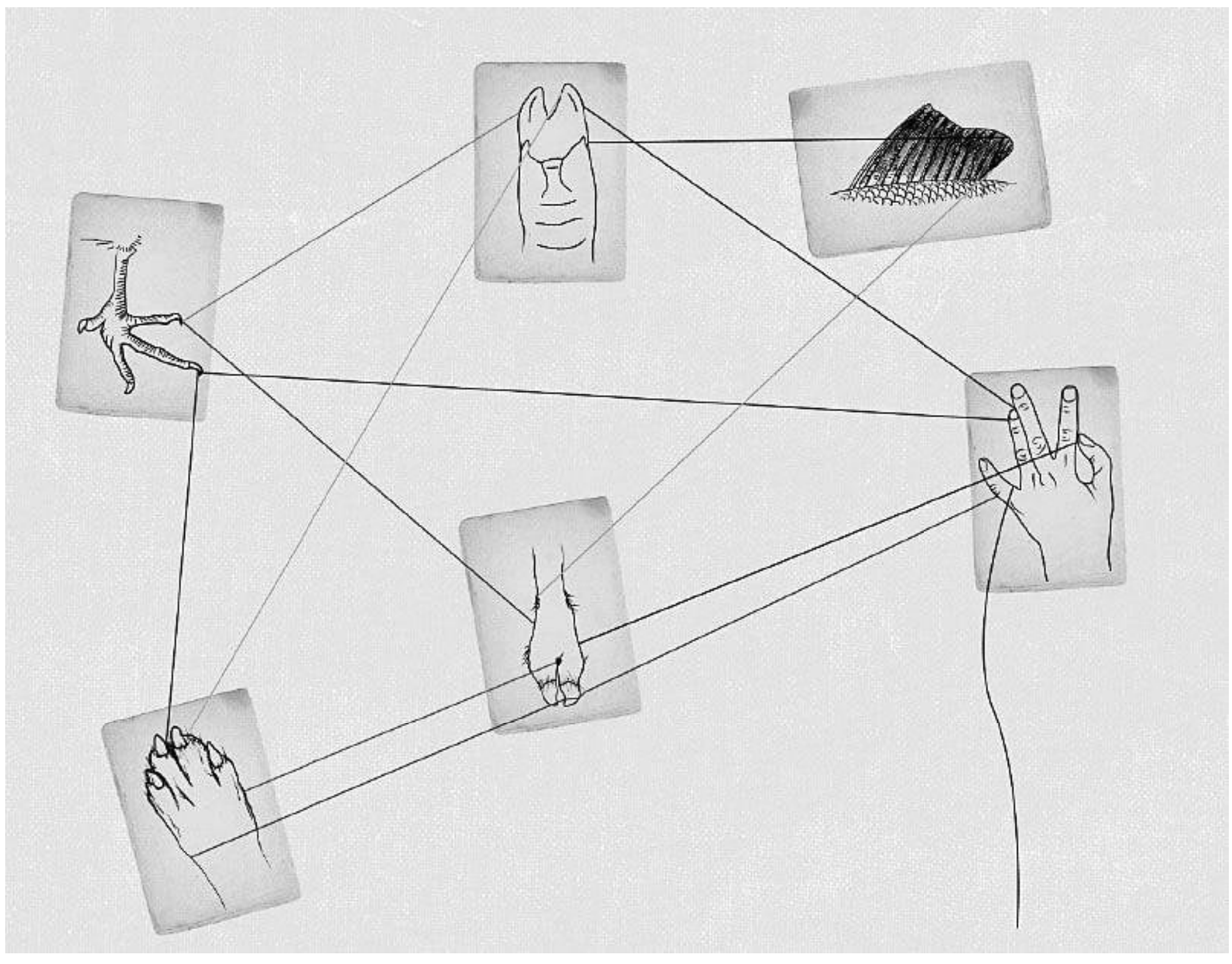


*Figure 11*
"Multispecies Cat's Cradle"
by Nassir Mufti (2011)

The Chthulucene is not only complicated to pronounce. By scrutinising the anthropocentric worldview, it represents an idea and a solution, quite hard to accept for someone accustomed to an old, comfortable way of being in the world. It decentralises and decolonises the old perception, mercilessly throwing it into the abyss of doubt and inviting humanity to draw inspiration from the creatures we were raised to despise, fear and exterminate as a sort of an automatic danger. The world as we know it is now obsolete. Anthropos may try not to accept it, but it is sensed with all the "tentacles" of the minds. The loss of the comfort of the old times carelessness causes grief. Morton argues that a new ecological awareness is "shaking our faith in the anthropocentric idea that there is one scale to rule them all—the human one" and that now, there are innumerable, equally important spatio-temporal scales that have suddenly become available and significant to humans (Morton, 2021, p. 32).

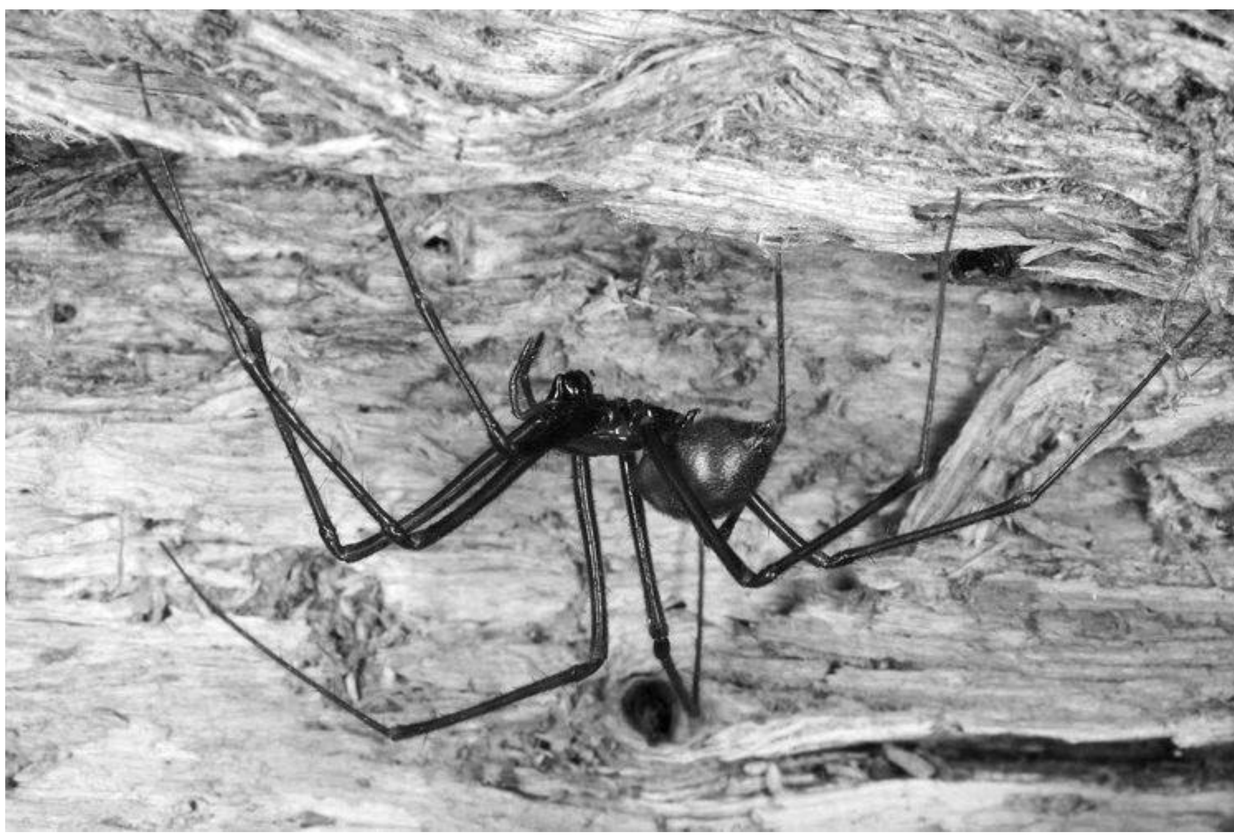


*Figure 12*
Pimoa Cthulhu,
Photograph by Gustavo Hormiga

Chapter 02:

# *memory beyond permanence*

Entmerken:

# *monument de-noticing itself*

## 2.1.



When something or someone is lost permanently, it is very human to try to ensure that they are remembered privately and publicly. For the certainty that the memory of what was lost does not accidentally slip into oblivion. It's common practice to externalise the memories and grief into monuments—architectural and sculptural objects of public art that, by articulating a space, condense time within themselves. They could be called *chronotopes*: material mnestic devices in which the memory of cultures and communities is preserved and remembered (*fig. 13*). They act as dynamos that accumulate the energy of the past—of an event, of a person—and keep it in reserve for a future that knows how to reactivate it, bring it into the present, and in turn tell the story to the future, which will interpret it, misunderstand it, manipulate it and reappropriate it (Pinotti, 2023, p. 5).

However, here comes the paradox: apparently there is nothing more invisible than a monument. According to Robert Musil, they "are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off, like water droplets off an oilcloth, without even pausing for a moment" (Musil, 2006, p. 61). In sequence, raising a traditional monument becomes counterproductive. It almost accelerates the process of forgetting. So here they stand—large (monumental), carved in precious stone or cast in bronze—drawing a long, cinematic shadow over the passers-by in the parks and squares of big and small cities, recalling certain people and events. However, instead of engaging communities in remembering, they stay silent and invisible in their didactic, rigid, patriarchal nature. Very few people stop to read what is engraved on a darkened marble plate, alongside a name and a date... We use them as landmarks or points of orientation in the urban landscape, yet hardly anyone knows what they actually represent or what they are really intended to commemorate. The purpose of most monuments is to evoke remembrance which is considered necessary, and in this primary purpose, the majority of monuments inevitably fail.

Musil attributes this failure not so much to the indifference of passers-by, as to the monument's own intention to withdraw from our perception. According to Musil: "It cannot be said that we do not see them, it would be more accurate to say that they do not allow themselves to be noticed" (Musil & Wortsman, 2006, p. 23). To express this idea, he coins the neologism Entmerken: combining the prefix ent-, which negates the verb it precedes, with -merken, meaning to notice or to become aware of. The result is something akin to de-noticing or making oneself unnoticeable. Musil elaborates, that almost anything that persists in time gives-up its ability to make a strong, lasting impression:

> *Anything that constitutes the walls of our life, the backdrop of our consciousness, so to speak, forfeits its capacity to play a role in that consciousness. A constant, bothersome sound becomes inaudible after several hours. Pictures that we hang up on the wall are in a matter of days soaked up by the wall; only very rarely do we stand before them and look at them (Musil & Wortsman, 2006, p. 23).*

*Figure 13*
King Pedro IV of Portugal monument in Porto, Portugal. by (Célestin Anatole Calmels - 1866) Photograph: Manuel de Sousa

# Nonument:
# ***uninterceptable Proteus***

## 2.2.

The second part of this thesis, responds to the 'monumental melancholy' by moving beyond the theoretical dead ends created by heritage-based or ichnological generalisations. Instead, it approaches the monument as an active, dynamic memorial: as the deliberate externalisation of memory (of an event, a person or eco-loss in this case), offered to a community. It does so by via negativa, exploring the diverse strategies developed from the 1960s onwards in response to what was widely perceived as a profound crisis in the traditional forms of public commemoration. Via negativa, because these strategies take shape in memorials that challenge, deconstruct, circumvent, or invert one or more of the defining characteristics of the traditional commemorative monument: memorials that are, in other words, nonuments (Pinotti, 2023, p. 7).

The term was invented, or rather borrowed from the celebrated artist and architect Gordon Matta-Clark, by contemporary Italian philosopher Andrea Pinotti from the celebrated artist and architect Gordon Matta-Clark. Through the neologisms non-ument or non.u.mental, Matta-Clark sought to allude to a peculiar "negative" attitude towards memory and the past. Pinotti has adopted the concept of the nonument and expanded it beyond its original intentions, turning it into a term under which to categorise other nonumental public art practices. A nonument can take innumerable shapes and appearances, allegorically described by the author as a true "uninterceptable Proteus"—always changing its shape and only responding to the questions of those who can capture it (Pinotti, 2023, pp. 8-9).

As explained by Pinotti in the introductory note of his work Nonument: A Paradox of Memory (2023), since he is referring to the via negativa, a preliminary remark about the term nonument must be mentioned. Why nonument, and not anti-monument or counter-monument, which are already established terms in the critical discourse on public art and contemporary commemorative practices? Counter-monument is a concept coined in the 1990s, primarily to define memorial responses to the Holocaust and to the difficult (for some, impossible) task of its commemoration. This thesis will include some examples of counter-monumentality drawn from that field in order to develop a more general reflection, within which Holocaust counter-monuments represent only one part (a complex and crucial one, but I will not be focusing on it) (Pinotti, 2023, pp. 8-9).

The anti-monument, instead, according to Pinotti, refers in a more restricted sense to a spatial opposition, whereby a new memorial is erected in direct confrontation with an existing memorial in order to contest it dialectically. Usually it is a strong gesture, reminding that the question of commemorative monumentality should not be treated as an isolated object, but rather by considering each individual memorial within its broader network of relationships—other monuments, public space, cultural context, and historical tensions... Sometimes in solidarity, sometimes in conflict. However, although important, anti-monumentality is a specific branch of monumentality, which cannot be elevated to a generic category (Pinotti, 2023, pp. 8-9).

While describing nonument as a term, Pinotti starts way back in the Middle Ages with Pseudo-Longinus and his treatise Peri Hypsous, on the aesthetics of the sublime. According to Pinotti, nonument connects to the sublime, particularly in its features associated with a vast scale and enormous, frightening proportions. The Greek term that modern European languages have translated as "sublime" is hypsous, meaning peak or apex. The Latin sublīmis derives from līmus, meaning oblique or hanging, with the addition of the prefix sŭb-, here indicating a hovering or suspended state in the air. The treatise by Pseudo-Longinus which develops the aesthetic reflection on this concept, is an investigation into elevation, which shifts from a physical realm to a figurative, stylistic realm through metaphor (Pinotti, 2023, p. 121).

Here, Pinotti moves our sight to 1727 Britain, where Alexander Pope (under pseudonym Martinus Scriblerus), wrote a satirical take on the classic Longinian Peri Hypsous, ironically titled Peri Bathous, or The Art of Sinking in Poetry. It is no longer hypsous (elevation), it becomes bathous instead (the profound). It promises to offer a series of guidelines for orienting oneself within the dimension of the Latin altitudo, this time pointing not upwards, but towards the "lowlands of Parnassus". Scriblerus affirms:

> *We come now to prove that there is an art of sinking in poetry. Is there not an architecture of vaults and cellars as well as of lofty domes and pyramids? Is there not as much skill and labour in making of dykes as in raising of mounts? Is there not an art of diving as well as of flying? And will any sober practitioner affirm that a diving engine is not of singular use in making him long-winded, assisting his sight and furnishing him with other ingenious means of keeping underwater? (Pope, 1728/2009, p. 11).*

Beyond the parodic intentions of Pope, who was committed to ridiculing the bad taste and pseudo-sublimity of the literati of his time (an effort that must be framed within that specific historical-cultural context), it is an invitation to invert the gaze, representing the first step in the path to nonumentality. It flips the climax sought by the monument's magnitude into the anti-climax of the strategies adopted by the protagonists of the contemporary nonumental scene (Pinotti, 2023, p. 121). Nonument brings the pathos of a traditional monument down to Earth—to the community and to current reality—at times descending even beneath the earth, beneath the community. It emphasises these concepts no longer in 'divine' or 'celestial' terms, but rather through the 'anti-sublime', 'anti-marvellous' or 'anti-heroic'. Through its grounded 'realness' and via negativa, it undergoes a process of self-negation, paradoxically reaffirming itself as 'sublime' once again. It does so in contemporary, relevant terms, effectively repeating the monumentality paradox, but this time the other way around.

# Pinotti divides the *nonument* concept into nine typologies:



Figure 14

## *The In-mergents*
**inverting the vertical rise**

**Example:**
disappearing underground steel column by Jochen and Esther Shalev-Gerz in the city of Harburg, Germany (1986).

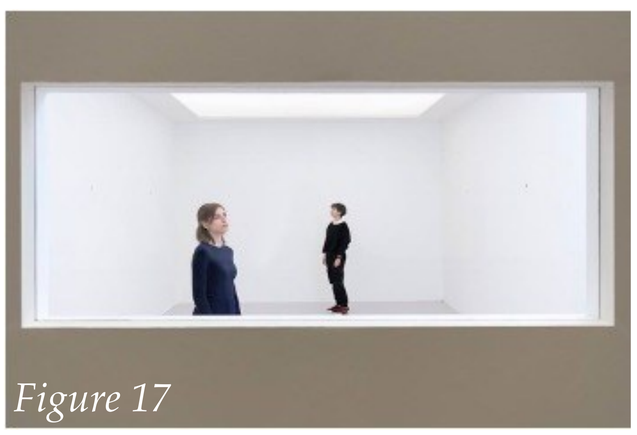


Figure 17

## *The Atmospherics*
**adopting almost immaterial media**

**Example:**
22,853 (Crying Room) by Tania Bruguera (active between 2018 and 2021).

## *The Reappropriated*
**appropriating pre-existing memorials to resignify them**

**Example:**
Maurizio Cattelan "L.O.V.E." (it. Libertà, Odio, Vendetta, Eternità – eng. Liberty, Hate, Revenge, Eternity), event of reappropriation occurs on 8 March 2021, when the street artist and poet Ivan Tresoldi paints the nail of The Finger with pink "nail polish" in homage to feminist movements (Milan, Italy).



Figure 20

## *The Invisibles*
**evading perception**

**Example:**
Wrapped Reischstag by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, 1995, Germany



Figure 15

## *The Augmented*
**exploring new digital technologies**

**Example:**
Monuments Project by Kinfolk collective (2021, USA).



Figure 18

## *The Interactives*
**involving a reciprocal action between the memorial and the visitor**

**Example:**
Transmission by Harun Farocki (2007).



Figure 21

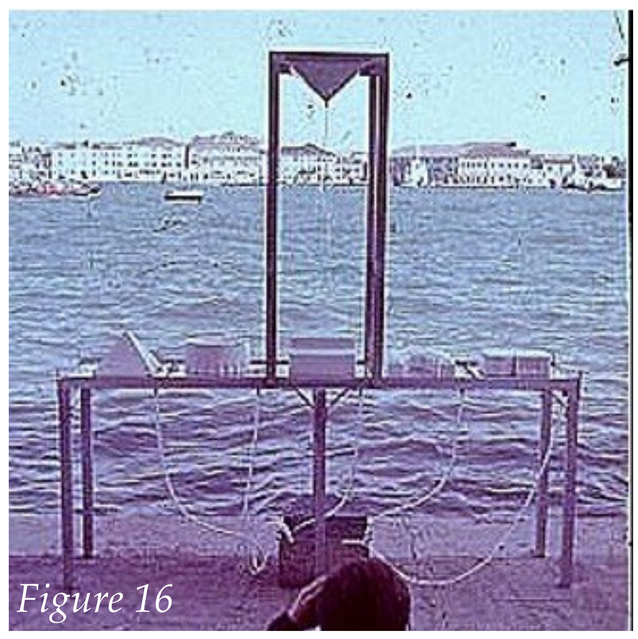


Figure 16

## *The Ephemerals*
**challenging permanence**

**Example:**
La moglie di Lot e la coscienza di Zeno by Superstudio (La Biennale di Venezia, 1978).

## *The Performatives*
**existing through gesture and movement**

**Example:**
¿Quién puede borrar las huellas? by Regina José Galindo (Guatemala, 2003).



Figure 19



Figure 22

## *The Intransitives*
**adopting traditional commemorative forms yet emptying them of all memorial content**

**Example:**
Cretto di Gibellina by Alberto Burri (1984). Built on the ruins of the town of Gibellina, in 1968 completely destroyed by earthquake (Italy).

# The ethical ***turn***

## 2.3.

However, some historical avant-garde artistic practices already aspired to exist within the social sphere, beyond the logic of the traditional art system—confronting or accentuating various social topics and actively searching for new, unexpected ways of co-existence. They believed that art was an integral and irreplaceable part of the public sphere, and that it should contribute to and actively participate in it (*fig. 23*).

The previous chapter shows, that the nonument is shape-shifting and contains collective memory and time in various forms, not necessarily physical or static. A nonument can become anything—a gesture, a performance, a projection, etc. Parallel to the nonument, from an experimental space to connecting art with life in the post-war avant-garde, participatory art practices emerged, acting as a strong reaction to the rapid expansion of the art market and its influence over artists' relationships with the public. At some point the art world was becoming restricted to smaller, niche and increasingly elitist audiences and some artists could not accept conforming to that (Angelotti et al., 2024, p. 20).

According to the art historian and critic Claire Bishop, the roots of reasoning behind a compassionate way of empathising with the other are typical of the discussion on participatory art, in which, in Bishop's words: "ethics of interpersonal interaction comes to prevail over a politics of social justice". She connects it to the intellectual trends introduced by the identity politics theory of the 1990s: "respect for the other, recognition of difference, protection of fundamental liberties, and a concern for human rights." Bishop states that the philosopher Peter Dews has coined this process as an "Ethical Turn", in which queries on conscience and duty, on recognition and respect, on justice and law have strongly returned to be visible and important, while not so long ago they were considered "outdated humanism" (Bishop, 2012, p. 25).



*Figure 23*
Mierle Laderman Ukeles, with two unidentified workers, in *Touch Sanitation Performance*, which took eleven months, beginning in July 1979.

# New genre ***public art***

## 2.3.1.

During the 1990s, Suzanne Lacy noticed that, for the previous three decades, a variety of visual artists with different perspectives had been working in a way that was similar to political and social activity, but with an aesthetic sensibility. Engaging with the most profound issues of the time—toxic waste, race relations, homelessness, ageing, drug use, colonialism, gang warfare or cultural identity—these artists "have developed distinct models for an art whose public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language" (Lacy, 1995, p. 19).

Lacy observed that the source of these artworks was not specifically visual or political statements, but rather "an internal necessity perceived by the artist in collaboration with his or her audience" (Lacy, 1995, p. 19). She described and coined this form of practice as new genre public art to separate it in form and intention from traditional public art —a term used for decades to describe sculptural objects sited in public places (monuments). Unlike traditional public art, Lacy described new genre public art as being based on engagement: "visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives" (Lacy, 1995, p. 19).

In the context of new genre public art, stretching from the 1970s through to the 1990s, Lacy highlights globally renowned names such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Allan Kaprow (*fig. 24)*, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, the Guerrilla Girls, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Judy Chicago and many more. However, while the genre continues to evolve today, the name "new genre public art" has in the meantime become obsolete.



*Figure 24*
Allan Kaprow, Household (1964)

## Social
# *sculpture*

2.3.2.

German artist Joseph Beuys expanded this approach to the extreme, controversially annihilating the dividing line between the artist and the spectator. He stated that society's division between "artists" and "non-artists" is an unnatural barrier that alienates people from one another. Instead, he asserted that every person is inherently creative and continually engages in artistic processes through daily interactions, behaviours and relationships. He compared everyday actions, such as people walking on a crowded street, to the movements of dancers—noting that, in both instances, the focus is fundamentally on the movement of feet. In addition, Beuys highlighted that human existence is fundamentally an ongoing act of creation and form. To remedy this alienation, Beuys called for a shift away from traditional definitions of art and urged individuals to recognise their active role in shaping reality. This participation formed the basis of social sculpture—a concept where human actions and relationships served as the medium to "mould" society. When people realise they are constantly participating in these material and social processes, art transforms from an elite practice into an universal, accessible tool. Finally, he expanded this creative responsibility into a deeper view of ecology. Beuys stated that ecology should look beyond environmental conservation to focus on the health and vitality of the human social organism. By practising sculptural logic on everyday interactions, the invisible forces that shape our communities could become tangible (Beuys & Harlan, 2010) (*fig. 25*).



*Figure 25*
**7000 Oaks, Joseph Beuys**
One oak tree was planted for each basalt block in Kassel (1982)

## Relational aesthetics and
# *dialogical art*

2.3.3.

Later on, French art critic, curator and former co-director of the Palais de Tokyo Nicholas Bourriaud introduced the concept of relational aesthetics. He defined socially engaged art as a theory and practice focused primarily on human interactions and its social contexts, rather than on creating an isolated, private space for personal symbolism and self-expression. It turned out to become an upheaval of the aesthetic and goals created by modern art. He argued that it is no longer possible to perceive contemporary artwork as a space to be simply walked through. Instead, it may be presented as a period of time to be lived through, a collective experience introducing an opening to unlimited discussion. Art can be especially instrumental when it comes to expressing connection, as it "tightens the space of relations". This is distinct from TV and literature consumption, which confine each individual to a private space, and also unlike theatre and cinema, which unite groups together in rooms in front of specific, moving images. Bourriaud states: "I see and perceive. I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time. Art is the place that produces a specific sociability" (Bourriaud, 2002, pp. 14–16).

A few years later, Grant Kester introduced another form of socially engaged art, slightly different from Bourriaud's, calling it dialogical art. To explain it, he employed a known phrase from the educational theorist Paulo Freire, stating that socially engaged artists replace the habitual "banking" style of art[06] with a process of dialogue and collaboration (Freire, 1968/1993, p. 72). The importance is in the character of this interaction, not the integrity of the object or the artist's experience in producing it. The object-based artwork is produced solely by the artist themselves and only afterwards offered to the spectator. As an outcome, the spectator's response has no immediate exchange effect on the constitution of the artwork. In addition, the object is always static. In the words of Kester: "Dialogical projects, in contrast, unfold through a process of performative interaction" (Kester, 2004, p. 10).

06. Where an artist places an expressive content into an object, to be taken later by the spectator.

# Insignificant ***others***

2.3.4.

Further on, Kester criticised Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics on the grounds that nowadays we live in a "society of spectacle" (a reference to Guy Debord), where even social relations are being turned into things and objects. Kester mentions a cohort of artists who, in the 1990s, employed a new approach to art in the form of staging "micro-utopias" of human interaction as their artwork, "convivial, user-friendly artistic projects" (Kester, 2011, p. 31), which offered a beautiful promise to overcome the reification of social relationships. Nevertheless, Kester argues that, after all, Bourriaud gives a clear rearticulation of the conventional discourse, in which the reification attitude has now colonised the most intimate modes of genuine human relations and interactions. Why is it complicated? Bourriaud is clearly separating the "new ways of being together" that he has privileged in his own curatorial work[05] (*fig. 26*) and insignificant others[06]. The tradition of activism or political art is not present in Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics and it is openly disregarded as naive and reactionary. Kester criticises Bourriaud's statement where he calls futile every stance that is 'directly' critical or addresses the issues of society (Kester, 2011, p. 31) (*fig. 27, fig. 28*).

Bishop criticised participatory art's limitations and shortcomings too. She argued that the dedication that mobilises this work suggests that this form of art questionably forms what the avant-garde is today: artists revisiting social situations as an anti-materialistic, anti-market, politically and socially engaged call to make art a more vital, more intrinsic part of life. But the urgency of this endeavour has led to a moment in which practices of socially collaborative art are all perceived to be meaningful artistic gestures of resistance. In Bishop's words, this approach operates by "assuming there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art, because all are equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond" (Bishop, 2012, p. 13). Bishop argues that it is also fundamentally important to discuss, scrutinise and compare this kind of work as critically as any other form of art.

However, Bishop strongly deviated from this one-sided approach. She based her reasoning on the non-binary philosophical thought on the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who states: "An artist can be committed, but what does it mean to say that his art is committed? Commitment is not a category of art. This does not mean that art is apolitical. It means that aesthetics has its own politics, or its own meta-politics" (Rancière & Rockhill, 2018, p. 60). Bishop continues her reasoning on Rancière's idea that the centre of the problem is that a clear criterion for establishing an appropriate connection between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics simply does not exist. In the meantime, these two constantly intertwine—politics has its aesthetics, and aesthetics has its politics (Rancière & Rockhill, 2018).



*Figure 26*
Rirkrit Tiravanija. untitled 1992-1995 (free/still)
Installation view, 303 Gallery, New York, 1995
Image courtesy 303 Gallery



*Figure 27*
CLIMAVORE: On Tidal Zones. Cooking Sections, 2017-ongoing. Isle of Skye. Photo: Nick Middleton. Courtesy of Cooking Sections.

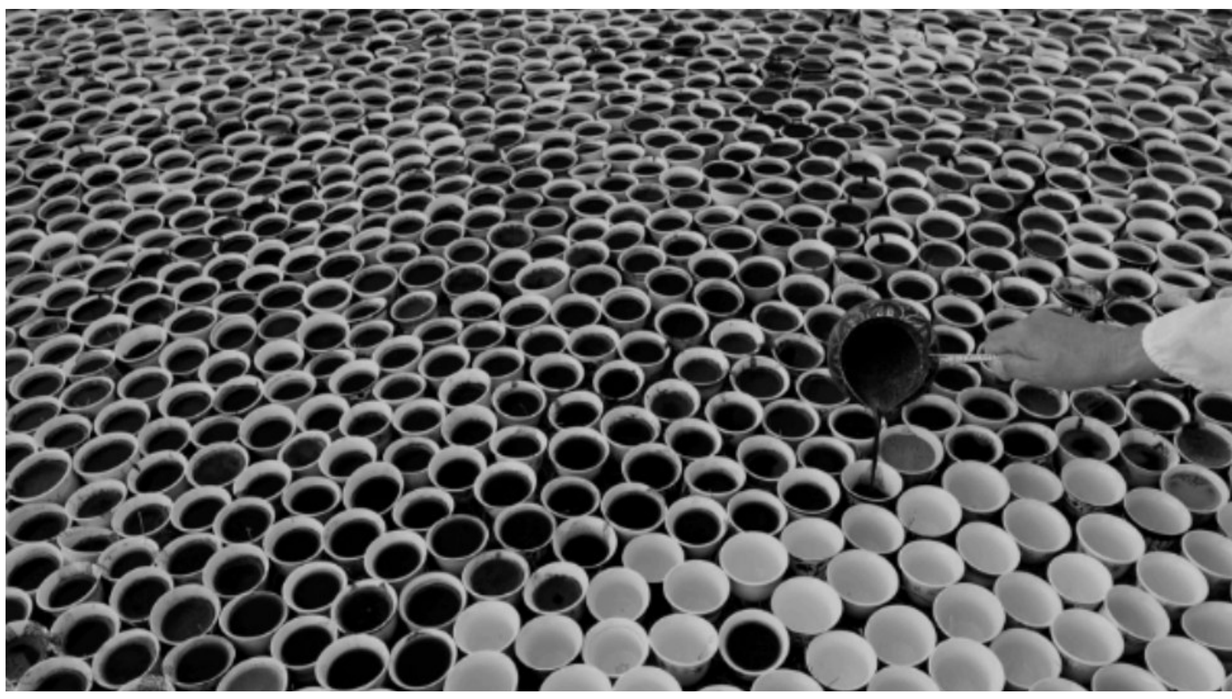


*Figure 28*
Aida Šehović, *Što te nema [Why are you not here?].*
A nomadic memorial to the victims of 1995 Srebrenica Genocide.
Photo: Paul Lowe

07. For example, work created by artists such as Pierre Huyghe, Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Christine Hill.

08. Work created in the traditions of performance art and socially engaged collaborative practices—a diverse range of artists and collectives working globally in collaboration with environmentalists, AIDS activists, trade unions, anti-globalisation protestors, etc.

SEA or

# *socially engaged art*

2.4.

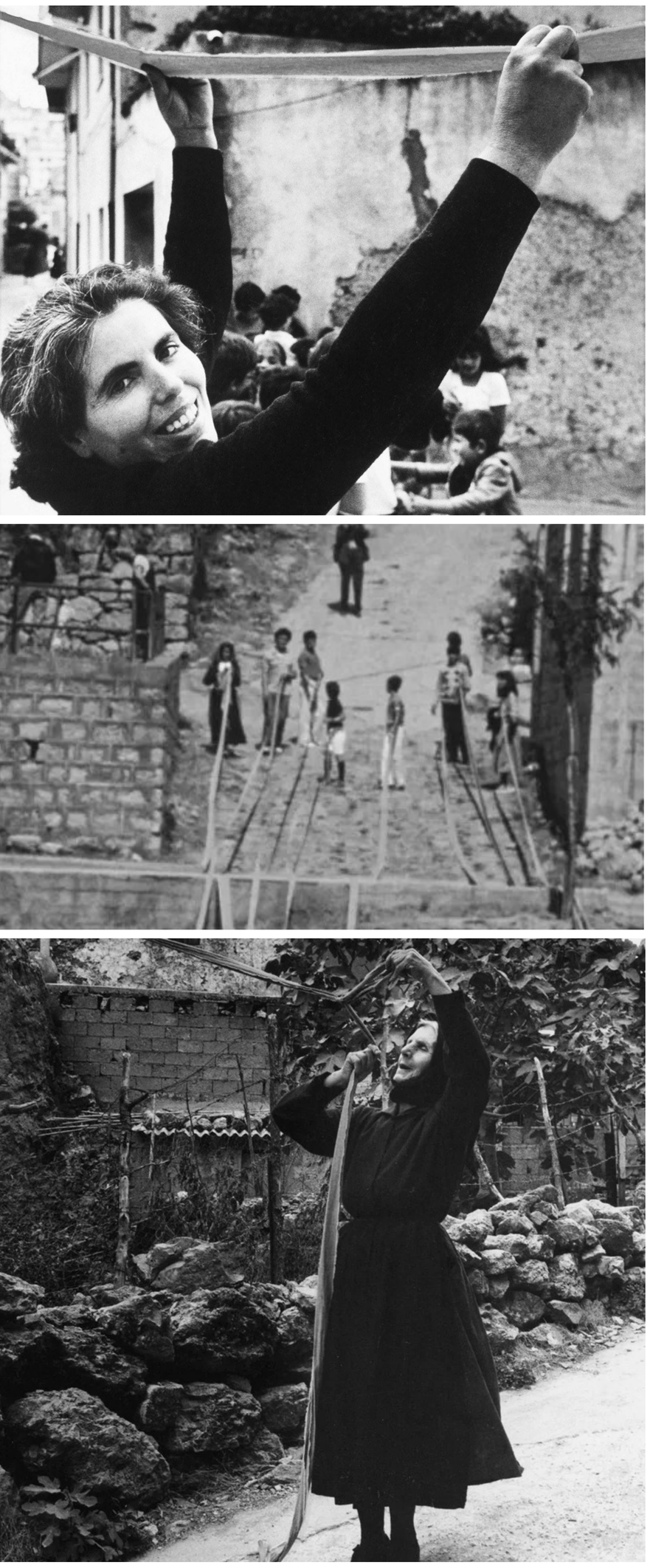


*Figure 29*
Maria Lai, Legarsi alla montagna, Ulassai, 1981, Italy, courtesy of Archivio Maria Lai, photos by Piero Berengo Gardin

The practical outcomes of this thesis rely on collective activation rather than static object-making, in sequence it is necessary to thoroughly examine the mechanics of community-based practice. As vast and variable as participatory art forms can be, and with all the polemics around them, the visual and performance artist Pablo Helguera[09] defined the practice clearly and named it Socially Engaged Art (hereinafter referred to as SEA). Helguera starts by stating that all art is fundamentally social, but it is important to understand the difference between a static work of art (like a painting or a sculpture) and a dynamic social interaction that defines itself as art—thus SEA. While there is no established criterion to define what should be considered a meaningful social interaction, what typically characterises SEA, is its dependence on social intercourse as the means of its existence. However, according to Helguera, SEA as a category of artistic practice is still a construct in progress (Helguera, 2011, p. 1).

Many SEA artists seek not only to distance themselves from object-making practices, but from authorship in general. According to Helguera: "Yet the uncomfortable position of socially engaged art, identified as art yet located between more conventional art forms and the related disciplines of sociology, politics, and the like, is exactly the position it should inhabit" (Helguera, 2011, p. 4). The uncomfortable position often links to conflicts within both art and sociology. According to Helguera, this tension should be openly addressed and not resolved. Indeed, SEA does not and cannot offer a solution to any problems from any discipline it engages with. Instead, by temporarily transporting these problems into the realm of ambiguity of art-making, it generates new insights, raises new questions and consequentially makes the particular problem visible to other disciplines. However, the artist as a social practitioner must also make peace with the fact that they will eventually be accused of being an "amateur" anthropologist, sociologist or the like (Helguera, 2011).

To distinguish these methodologies further, Helguera separates two types of practice: symbolic and actual. They sometimes intertwine, but SEA is clearly tethered towards the actual practice, not the symbolic. Symbolic can be considered artworks that are made to address social or political issues, but only by means of representation, illustration or metaphor[10] In the case of actual practice, the work usually runs a risk of being unsuccessful and does not control a social situation in a strategic way to achieve a specific, pre-defined outcome. To summarise, lively social interaction occupies an unexchangeable, central part of any SEA artwork. It is a hybrid, interdisciplinary activity sitting somewhere between art and non-art, and its state and questions can often remain permanently unresolved. In the words of Helguera: "SEA depends on actual—not imagined or hypothetical—social action" (Helguera, 2011).

Naturally, community is a crucial element within this equation. Not only could SEA projects not exist without community, but the practice also aspires to be a community-building mechanism (***fig. 29***). SEA is characterised by the inclusion and activation of the public, naturally assuming roles beyond that of the passive spectator. SEA often has a political agenda behind it, but usually its emphasis is less on the protest and more on becoming a platform for the participation of others, so that the outcome and results of the project can live beyond the ephemeral presentation. However, SEA projects can be very different in character and means, and at first sight can seem to have nothing in common (Helguera, 2011). Within this framework, community acts as a direct collaborator. According to Bishop, it is crucial to give agency to participants, and it is equally unfair to assume the capabilities of the people participating. They should be given freedom and authority to create in order to avoid artistic projects turning into an orchestrated and choreographed performance instead of participatory art (Bishop, 2012, p. 26).

To initialise these projects, artists commonly insert themselves into social situations where communities usually have not called for their presence. The key factor for a successful project is in understanding the social situation in which it will happen and how it will be negotiated and approached.

09. Former director of adult and academic programs at MoMa, New York.

10. For example, a painting about social issues or a staged gallery performance about a social issue with an invite-only audience.



*Figure 30*
Sandi Hilal, Al Madafeh/The Living Room, 2018–2021, Prästholmen, Boden, Sweden



*Figure 31*
Santiago Sierra, 160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People, 2000, El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo, Salamanca, Spain



*Figure 32*
Pussy Riot, Punk Prayer, Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Moscow, 2012

When an artist enters one of these situations, they are suddenly face to face with complex, unique social dynamics coded in a particular culture, habits, traditions and ways of being—sometimes very different from those the artist is familiar with and accustomed to. If any of these social codes are misinterpreted, diminished, ignored, underestimated or, in the worst-case scenario, disrespected, things can unfold in a very chaotic, even hostile way, where the artist soon feels lost and uncertain how to proceed. While it is impossible to predict the behaviour of every individual in the community, it is essential to be aware of how interpersonal situations emerge and how some of them can be negotiated in order to achieve a better understanding of the needs, requirements and interests of the parties involved (Helguera, 2011, p. 30).

Once situated, the generation of dialogue relies on moving away from formal structures (*fig. 30*). It is quite straightforward that formal ways of speech (e. g. political speech or an educational lecture) are not the most sociable approaches to conversation. That is why SEA artists often prefer less formal conversation structures. The objective in many cases is to remove formality and protocol, inspire participants to share freely and, hopefully, arrive at an exciting exchange (achieving boredom can also be a valid objective). Open structures are based on spontaneity, which is unpredictable and not easy to achieve. In a social situation, there is always a possibility of having a great conversation, or not—we can never predict what we will find. Informal exchanges can lead to interesting results, or they can equally lead nowhere. The objective of the SEA artwork, is to create a space where any conversation can take place. Any natural and organic conversation or interaction in the case of SEA is more valuable than a rehearsed, guided or directed one—which, as mentioned before, would result as illustrative and symbolic instead of real and actual. In most dialogical art, the artist should not be satisfied with having just any conversation. Nevertheless, it is fundamental for the artist to have a genuine openness and interest towards the universe of the community, with all its interests and concerns. Otherwise, the detachment of the artist[11] may make participants feel as if they are being used and prevent any natural occurrence of genuine dialogue or collaboration (Helguera, 2011).

This immersion dictates the terms of the actual collaboration, where the two main factors are sharing responsibilities between parties and the creation of something new. In most cases, it is the artist who is expected to set the tone of the collaboration and to be the conceptual director of the project (Helguera, 2011, p. 53). However, some artists prefer to be mere facilitators and deny any individual initiative. According to Helguera, the artist should not disappear. Even though authorship in SEA is different from other art forms, it cannot be altogether eliminated. Many times, the inclination of the artist to become only a facilitator lies in a confusion about the artist's role in the collaborative relationship: the artist cannot fully understand where their expertise really lies. In SEA, the artist's expertise often lies "in being a non-expert, a provider of frameworks on which experiences can form and sometimes be directed and channelled to generate new insights around a particular issue." (Helguera, 2011) The ability to enter a collaboration process with a community requires a definition and some thinking on the terms on which the artist and the group will interact. This is indeed no easy task, and it tends to create anxiety for many SEA artists, who are obliged to provide a strong, well-defined framework for a work which is unique, original and maybe even provocative (Helguera, 2011).

While congenial experiences based on dialogue and collaboration are those most common in SEA, antisocial or antagonistic action is a fundamental area too (*fig. 31*). Confrontational SEA takes a critical position on an issue in question without necessarily offering a solution, but rather raising questions around it or inducing the necessity for action. Artists who create in a realm of antagonistic SEA often adopt ironic, humorous, provocative or even openly violent stances (*fig. 32*). Nevertheless, because a negative approach often faces many external judgements and polemics, it is often dismissed as hostile and harmful. Antagonistic SEA rarely aspires to alienation, but rather seeks to initiate a discussion around a social issue, provoking reflection and debate, and by doing so justifying its extreme measures. A very violent and antagonistic approach is more likely to be accepted by critics and the public when its point is equally grave; otherwise, it may be considered arbitrary (Helguera, 2011).

Bishop identifies the problematic side of consensual practices (which contrast with antagonistic SEA), where "idiosyncratic or controversial ideas are subdued and normalised in favour of a consensual behaviour upon whose irreproachable sensitivity we can all rationally agree." (Bishop, 2012, p. 26).

11. Seeing the community in question only in its utilitarian capacity, without a willingness to immerse themselves fully and connect.

To provide an example, she argues that unease, discomfort, frustration, fear, contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity can all be essential to any artwork's conceptual weight (*fig. 33*).

Because of these complex experiential layers, SEA practices are usually already performative in nature. Many SEA projects are politically activist or seek to make political statements with a clear, unambiguous agenda. Others do not have declared morals and aspirations other than to engage the audience in a unique, unexpected experience. Many museums and galleries use the work of SEA artists in order to enliven blank spaces and engage visitors. These events many times blur the lines between the SEA artwork and carnivalesque entertainment. It raises a question: how can the point at which a SEA work stops being performative and becomes pure entertainment be defined? Helguera asks: "Is it enough to create ephemeral, entertaining, or confrontational gestures, regardless of whether or to what degree they reach the consciousness of individuals or communities?" (Helguera, 2011) Yet, he underlines that it is very important to retain the aspect of play in SEA and be aware of its performativity in social engagements. It may sound contradictory, but only when play upsets existing social values can the room for real reflection be created; only in that way can the merely hedonistic experience of a spectacle be escaped. In addition, the process of this performative action in collaboration with a community creates an unusual value which may be difficult to consider an "outcome" in the traditional art market sense; therefore, the boundaries between the SEA artwork and experience are blurred in the same way that authorship and collectivity are melted together. In the words of Helguera, in many SEA artworks, "All components of a traditional structure of production and interpretation are turned around and resignified." (Helguera, 2011).The most valuable feature SEA art making can offer is not accurate representation, but the complication of interpretation, so new questions can be discovered

This emphasis on the live event introduces a major challenge regarding documentation, as artistic authorship is directly attached to the end product. It is no easy task to claim authorship of an intangible event. Yet, this contradictory fact is the very essence of SEA: an intangible social interaction within a group of people can become an artwork. That is why, many times, the documentation of a SEA event becomes the end product. However, it becomes complicated when the artist themselves is the sole author of the documentation of a collective action. It is very important to have documentation from the community's perspective; otherwise, we run the risk of seeing only the vision of the author, who may blend what actually happened with what they wished would happen. In the case of SEA, participating individuals are the primary recipients of the experience, and it should also be up to them to describe it. The artist and the critic should participate in the documentation, but should never be the primary documenters of a SEA artwork-experience. A work documented solely by the artist themselves lacks verifiable proof and can be considered a work shifting towards fiction —thus becoming a symbolic piece. Because of that, documentation should become a daily part of the process. It should not be a part of post-production, but a coproduction of viewers, interpreters and narrators—a collection of multiple witness accounts. However, SEA documentation must be perceived and used in full understanding of its inadequacy as a substitute for the actual experience, servi only as a complement (Helguera, 2011).

Ultimately, this experimental synthesis allows these projects to blend education and art-making in experiences highly distant from conventional academic art practices. The experience of transpedagogy can be described as an illustration or simulation of education that aims to democratise the process, turning viewers into partners, participants and collaborators in the construction of the work, while simultaneously maintaining the opacity of the vocabulary commonly used in contemporary art practices. Traditional education often fails to recognise three common phenomena: first, the creative performativity of the act of education; second, that the collective construction of an artwork or of an idea is simultaneously a collective construction of knowledge; and finally, the third and most important, that the knowledge of art is not limited to merely knowing about the artwork, but is a wonderful tool for understanding the world. Helguera suggests using art formats and processes as pedagogical vehicles instead. The blurring of boundaries between disciplines points to a kind of art-making where art no longer points at itself, but instead focuses on social processes and genuine exchange. The author calls this a powerful and positive re-envisioning of education that can only happen in art due to its performativity, experience and exploration of ambiguity (Helguera, 2011).

To realise this interdisciplinary approach, SEA practices have effectively "absorbed" the traditional set of academic art skills (e. g. figure drawing, colour theory, casting, etc.), and what is replacing them (in words of Helguera) is tenuous at best. The new set of requirements for SEA is ambiguous and creates a vacuum of endless possibilities, which can be almost paralysing for a beginner practitioner. This is one of the main reasons why students often wonder if a SEA practitioner can be any kind of expert at all. Disappointed with poor guidance and the ambiguity of the subject, they often pursue a social work discipline instead, leaving the uncertainty of SEA behind. Some even believe that the future of SEA lies in dissolving completely into other kinds of disciplines. Helguera opposes such dissolution, arguing that it would be a product of poor education about what the dialogue between art and the world can be. However, he addresses another problem, which is the disconnect between art programs and art practice. It manifests in the primary context (in the school environment) where students produce and analyse their art. This artificial, safe environment can be necessary and positive in some aspects (e. g. the social environment it creates), but mainly it is too safe, not challenging enough and very distant from the world where art will be created after school. This is especially true for the creation of a SEA artwork, which, in order to be considered SEA, must be multidisciplinary in its reach and creative in its individual development (Helguera, 2011).



*Figure 33*
Teresa Margolles, Vaporisation, 2002. MoMA PS1 Archives

Chapter 03:

# *practice of eco-grief*

Common
# *planetary problem*

3.1.



*Figure 34*
Prehistoric funerary figurine, Death, she has a long mouth and the round eyes of a snake. Karanovo VI (Lovets, at Stara Zagora; 4500-4300 B.C.)
Marija Gimbutas

According to Kevorkian, in the case of eco-grief, it is very important to name it. When emotion is labelled or named, this action makes a feeling become real and validated. It is in human nature to desire to know that one's feelings are real, valid and acknowledged by others. The term eco-grief has brought acceptance to people who have felt as though their feeling of deep environmental loss was obscured by society as an abnormal or unnecessary reaction, most of all because, as a subject, it is so vast and variable, and not easy to define in relational terms (Kevorkian, 2004).

Nonetheless, despite the increasing speed and amount of ecological destruction, society continues to respond mostly with indifference. On a daily basis, faced with the undeniable evidence of irretrievable ecological loss, people are dissociating and carrying on with their lives almost as if nothing had changed. Yet, this kind of performative normalcy should be considered an illusion, as emotional turmoil can no longer be easily hidden: eco-anxiety, anger and feelings of helplessness are very common, especially among younger generations. It becomes problematic if the emotional despair caused by ecological entropy remains private, unnoticed or treated individually, rather than as a community or societal issue. Instead, if this grief is expressed in a public setting and shared with other community members, it becomes a legitimate societal response to a common, planetary problem (Varutti, 2023).

Varutti argues that grieving for environmental loss is not optional, it is necessary. It leads to the acknowledgement of loss and reflection upon it, opposing denial and dissociation (key aspects of avoiding environmental grief). To mourn ecological loss publicly, one needs to be prepared to perceive and embrace the loss, pause to reflect on it, understand its meaning and consequences, allow oneself to fully feel it, and share those feelings with others as a part of a ritualised mourning practice in order to "metabolise" and transform the heavy sensation (Varutti, 2023).

Grieving practices are essential because they allow us to productively transform negative and paralysing emotions, such as sorrow, anxiety, guilt, anger and despair. By expressing and sharing these feelings, community members divide their heavy weight and do not have to carry them individually. This can lead to collective healing, create meaningful bonds and inspire environmentally positive decision-making. Just like in the ancient traditions of grieving for a deceased person *(fig.34)*, through ritualised, collective practices, mourning transcends the negative emotion of loss and can become a force for change (Varutti, 2023).

Traditional grief rituals are collaborative, entangling performative practices. As a performative practice with a mnemonic nature, this ritualistic framework is already very close to the concepts of the nonument.

Project

# ***Substrata***

3.2.

Grief is a layered emotion. It sits within the human mind just like strata in ancient rock formations, marking the depth of the deep time in Siccar Point. Grief is felt personally and takes different shapes. Like *Substrata*, for some it feels dry and frail like limestone. For others, it is viscous and dense like dirt in a swamp. For many, it is soft like clay that can be shaped. For most, it is hard and rigid like a rock formation. For a few, it reflects light in gemstone colours like a mineral. For some, it is fluid, like water... Nevertheless, for everyone, it is a transient material that changes, that transcends its current state through time, and that becomes something else. Like hot, active, ever-changing compost. It is a dermis layer under the skin of Gaia.

*Substrata* is the underground. Not the distant one, not the mythical Hades, from where Persephone comes once a year with the rebirth of life, fertility and the promise of Spring. Not that one. The earthy one, just below the grass, just below the pavement of the street which we walk every day on the way to the grocery store. The layer two centimetres below the strata of the Anthropocene. The one where telluric beings reside. Where the chthonic ones live. Where the white, ghostly roots hold on to the soil and onto the time they have been gifted here on Earth, caressed by the soft, moist, shimmering bodies of decomposers. It is a host for all kinds of life.

Inspired by Haraway ideas, *Substrata* builds on the concept of a compost—messy entanglements, multiple perspectives, not only human. A place to assimilate, to transcend, and to transform something strongly felt but unidentified, employing all possible kinds of being and all kinds of feeling. A society imagined as a hot, shimmering compost—we require each other in unexpected collaborations and entanglements, and *Substrata* is a place to explore the possibilities. A soil layer made of uncategorised, unrecognised emotions like eco-grief. Amalgamated, decomposing, decaying matter, transcendent, transforming, mutating into something new, nurturing what already exists, what already lives. As Haraway suggests, not individual, not alone, making oddkin, in the hot compost sub-level in action, in a million actions at the same time. Taking example from telluric beings, bound to the soil, mortal, interconnected inhabitants of the dirt (including plants, fungi, worms, burrowing animals and... humans). No, we have never been floating, superior rulers "above" nature (anthropocentrism). Just like any rodent, plant, spider, earthworm or centipede, we are biological creatures physically bound to the soil, entirely dependent on the Earth's natural systems in order to stay alive. We become with each other, our individual griefs become something else together, something collective, a new bond (*fig. 35*). Only by doing, only after doing, can we see what it will become, as we cannot know in advance or control the outcome. *Substrata*, just like the subconscious of the mind, talks in code if it talks at all. *Substrata* is smelled (the moist and cold odour of a deep well on a hot summer day), *Substrata* is felt on the skin (the cooling, humid sensation while entering a cave), *Substrata* is the layer just under Gaia's "skin". The second layer from the top of the deep time.

*Substrata* practically combines two previously explored concepts—nonument and SEA—together approaching the practice of eco-grief.



*Figure 35*
Substrata, activation event, 15 August 2026, Association Terra Solta, Porto

# The ***beginning***

3.2.1.

During my first and second MFA years, before arriving at Substrata, I produced several projects, in various mediums, which paved the way to discovering Socially Engaged Art. Nature, time and memory were topics that moved me for a long time, and I think it is important to share them, in order to understand *Substrata* better.

These projects were conceived in three different countries: Portugal, Lithuania and Italy. Portugal as the country where I study and am based in at the moment; Lithuania, because it's my home country; and Italy, because during the second MFA year, I have studied in Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan for a semester as an Erasmus+ exchange student.

10. Full documentation and descriptions of the projects mentioned available in the annexes.



*Figure 36*
*Funeral of a Cedar tree, Collective performance, 2025*

*The first step* towards my interest in eco grief has been a collective performance for Specificities of the Artistic Practice class at FBAUP. It was called *Funeral of a Cedar Tree (fig. 36)* and was dedicated to an old Cedar tree trunk lying in the Faculty's garden. I produced it in collaboration with my colleagues Ana Leandro, Teresa Bastos and Catarina Kneipp. It involved collective intuitive performative gestures and participation of the entire class of students.

It consisted of three honorary actions, which we created thinking about a non-human funeral. The class were instructed only to bring wireless headphones and follow the collective action, as there were no other given guidance.

First, everybody had to connect to the same transmission of a sound—field recordings from a forest (recorded and mixed by Ana Leandro in the mountains). The second step was the movement from the classroom into the garden and to the Cedar tree trunk. The third action involved pouring water, playing with light-beams on the tree trunk using tiny mirrors and caressing the tree trunk with hands.

*The second project* was a series of triple exposure 35 mm film photography and a written piece titled *36 Images of Grief*. It described the eeriness and uncertainty of non-human loss. Number 36 stands as the number of frames in a 35mm film roll (*fig. 37*).

**

*36 Images of Grief*

*The world as I know it is now obsolete. The new one is yet unknown and shapeless. The spirit aches with every man-made wildfire. The body shivers with thoughts of the proximity of nuclear destruction. The eyes water with exploited oceans and colonised lands, built on suffering of others and covered in the ugly debris of a century of useless habits. I find solace in games of light, moving shadows, reflections on the water — the only constant in the turbulent whirlpool of reality... and while the new world takes its shape, slowly and painfully, I photograph my grief.*

*A fleeting Rorschach test — we turn our gaze inward, through the crooked mirrors of the outside world. My heart today is not exactly where it was supposed to be anatomically, it's scattered between the eyes and fingertips. The cold glass of the camera lens protects it while I fearfully observe the unconscious wilderness. The long sticky tongue of film tastes the objects; the textures of non-edible surfaces stick to a light-sensitive cellulose acetate. Devouring the sensations, leaving no trace, committing no damage. A weightless touch of focus leaving an invisible mark on existence in time. Transparent is the most delightful taste, iridescent — the most beautiful colour.*

*I photograph my grief while the old obsolete world slowly turns into a new one. I take 36 pictures.*

*How do you mourn the unmournable?*

**

It was an introspective experiment, featuring my own hands exploring the ghostly surroundings, created with triple film exposure

*The final work was presented in video format, it can be accessed here: https://youtu.be/HgB415hl40E*

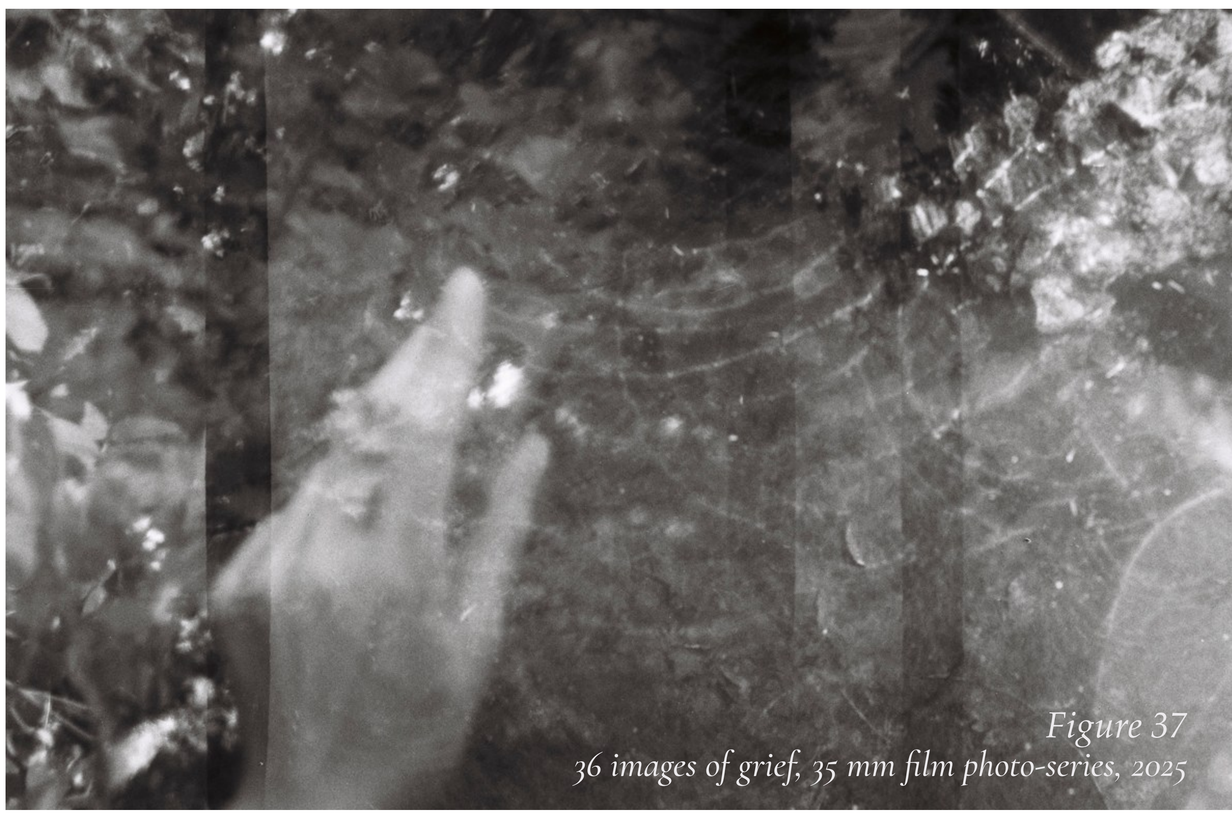


*Figure 37*
*36 images of grief, 35 mm film photo-series, 2025*

# Gardens of Oblivion:
# ***cartography of a distant memory***

3.2.2.

*Gardens of Oblivion: Cartography of a distant memory* was the initial title of the current project thesis. In the process of study, research and practice, it naturally changed, but it concluded the first year of this MFA course.

It spoke about a hypothetical place in time—Oblivion, where very distant memories belong. It touched on a very specific type of memory—gardens. The entire project was based on the interviews recorded in Lithuania with my grandfather, telling the stories about the garden of his childhood, in the Lithuanian countryside between the First and Second World Wars and the Russian occupation (*fig. 38*). The garden stories intertwined with family history and political history. The garden became a container of time, an unusual map of times that are gone, but still accessible through the hypothetical place of Oblivion.

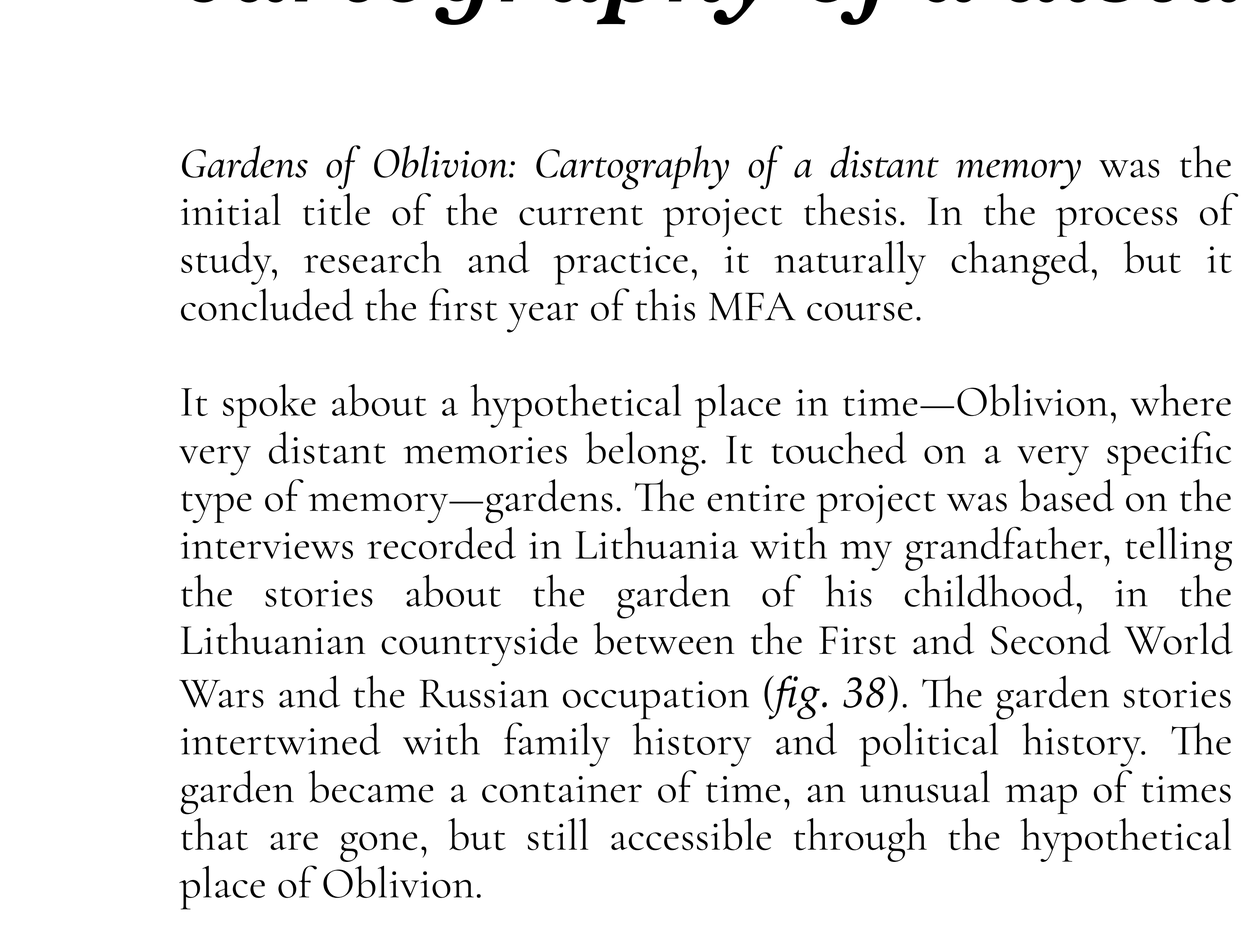


*Figure 38*
*My grandfather's hand, showing the pictures of the remains of the garden and his childhood home during the interview, 2025, Klaipeda, Lithuania*

*Gardens of Oblivion: Cartography of a distant memory* depicted three realms—terrestrial, celestial and ethereal. It consisted of three installations. It took place at the 16th-century palace Casa do Corim, in Águas Santas, a suburb of Porto, as a part of the collective end-of-the-first-year exhibition of my MFA course.

*The first installation* was centred on the round granite table, surrounded by the centenary exotic garden. The installation represented a deconstructed sundial. It consisted of the table covered with soil, into which grass seeds had been planted. The grass did not grow because of direct sun exposure, but they mixed with the soil and were still visible. They became food for little birds and insects, attracting life to the sculpture. At its centre stood the gnomon, a ceramic semi-pyramid that casted a shadow, shifting throughout the day with the Earth's rotation and serving as a timekeeping device during the daylight hours. Surrounding the table were twelve ceramic, cylindrical structures resembling little tree trunks or totems, each with root-like extensions at the base and shallow, bowl-shaped indentations at the top, designed to collect rainwater, dew, or any other environmental residue.

These elements were specifically thought of to "contain time" and symbolically archive events associated with the memory explored in the interview with my grandfather.

The forms were unified by dark glaze, reminiscent of a night sky, with a slight shine, like a mushroom membrane or insect skin. The graphic elements were etched in the black surface with exact interview transcriptions, perpetual lines and plant motives, using sgraffito technique. The installation remained outdoors for the duration of the exhibition and were intended to interact with the environment and to become gradually embedded in the surroundings they were part of. It represented the terrestrial realm and the soil (*fig. 39, 40, 41*).







*Figures 39, 40, 41*
*Gardens of Oblivion: cartography of a distant memory*
*First installation, Casa do Corim, 2025, Porto*

*The second installation,* composed of glass and moss, employed a hybrid technique that combined linocut printmaking with glass (image transported using kaolin powder). The method itself served as a metaphor for the metamorphosis of memories, involving shifts between distinct materials, densities, and temperatures. The result was eighteen transparent glass panels featuring the motifs of the plants described in the interview, collectively reminiscent of stained glass. It was quite an unorthodox stained glass: semi-transparent, no colour, capturing and refracting the light and colours of its surroundings instead. The installation represented the celestial realm (*fig. 42*).

It was held by transparent acrylic structures, constituted by elements of the installation like green moss, white light boxes illuminating a few glass pieces, and glass tiles themselves. Resembling the nature of Oblivion, it kept some moments illuminated, some enclosed, some in the natural shape (moss), some artificial (illumination inside the light boxes). It was about the contrast between two distant materials—an actual plant: fuzzy, green, alive, soft to the touch, fragile; and the glass—hard, solid, cold, fragile (in a different way), colourless, reflective.

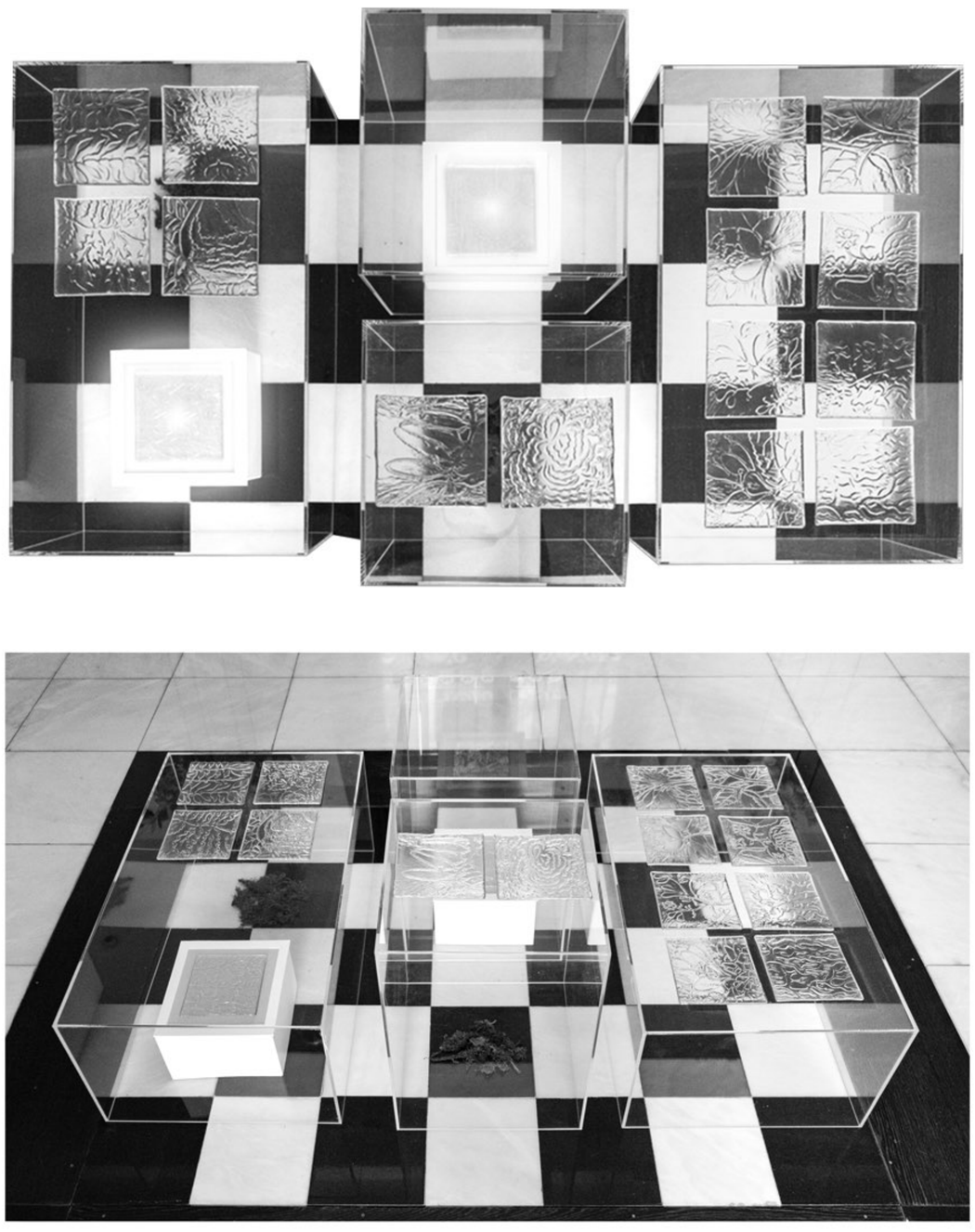
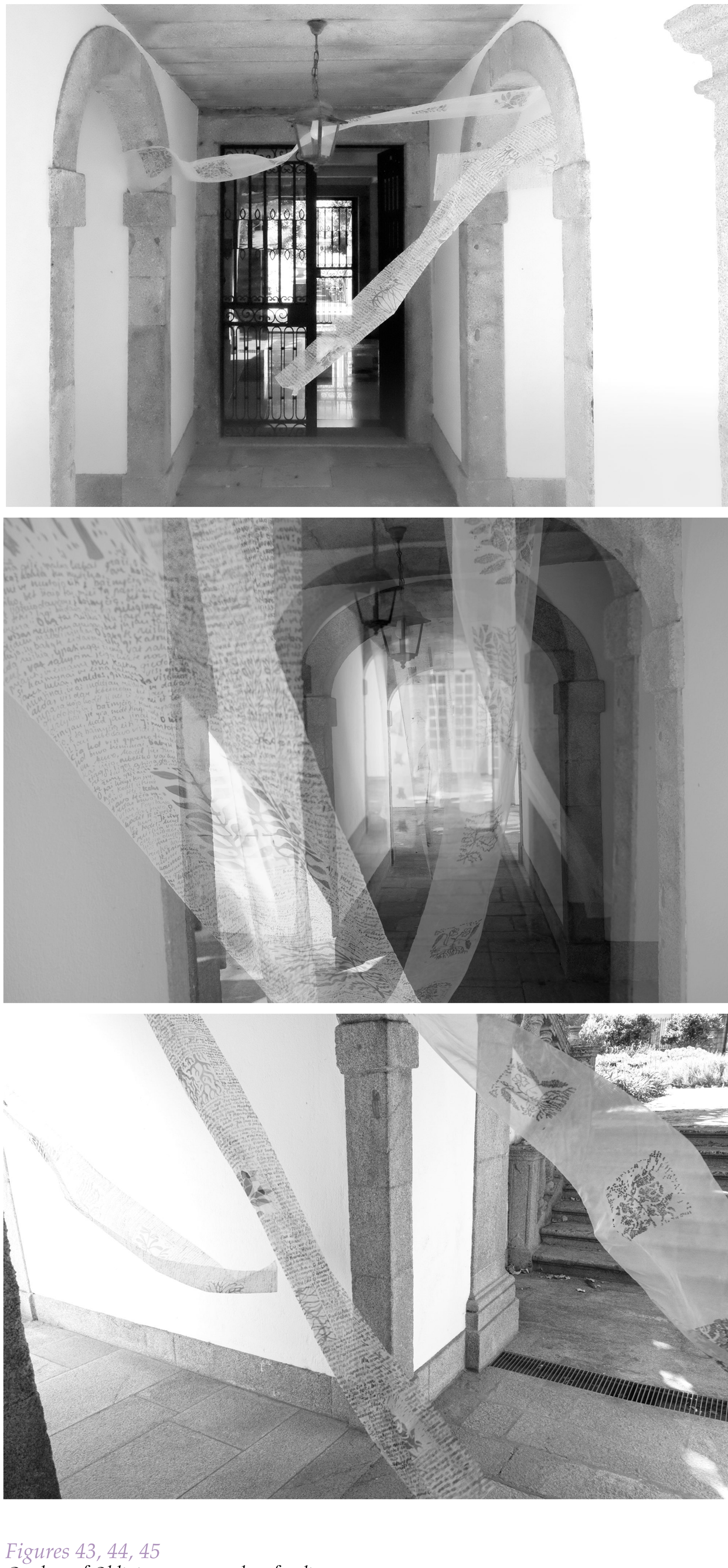


*Figure 42*
*Gardens of Oblivion: cartography of a distant memory*
*Second installation*

*The third installation* was created thinking about the element of aether, the immaterial. Unquestionably real, but impossible to grasp in any way. How much does human nature desire to archive and document even the most shape-shifting aspects of existence? The memory, instead, moves smoothly with the wind and other elements, ungraspable to the bodily senses. Impressions of images and voice, shadows of trees and plants, ripples in the water, melodies, distant wind —a shapeless amalgamation drenched in the bright sunshine (or shadows, depending on the day).

Dissolved in motion blur, reflecting light-beams from the little bits and pieces of gold leaf, moments of clarity. Fleeting realisations of preciousness, that we are able to remember, at this micro-instant, so clearly.

All the writing on the pieces of fabric consists of excerpts from the actual dialogues recorded in the interview. Drawings and images interpret the graphic forms and physical elements from the other two installations. The installation was produced in semi-transparent fabric, acrylic paint and gold leaf (*fig. 43, 44, 45*).



*Figures 43, 44, 45*
*Gardens of Oblivion: cartography of a distant memory*
*Third installation*

# Accademia di Belle Arti
# *di Brera*

3.2.3.

During the period of five months, from October 2025 to March 2026, I studied at Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, Italy as an Erasmus+ exchange student. I consider this experience important for my final project, as there I discovered the concepts of *nonument* and s*ocially engaged art* and had a chance to study sculpture and perfomance art.

Fluency in the Italian language was one of the reasons for choosing Italy as my Erasmus+ destination, that's why enrolled in several theoretical and practical lectures. The most relevant for *Substrata* were New Tendencies in Contemporary Art with professor, art historian and curator Cecilia Guida, History of Western Aesthetics with professor and philosopher Federico Ferrari, Performance for the Visual Arts with professor, theatre director, actor and scenographer Loredana Putignani, and Sculpture with acclaimed writer and sculptor Gianpiero Moioli.

New Tendencies in Contemporary Art was based on the theme of collective memory and monumentality. It consisted of theoretical lectures, seminars with recognised artists and researchers in the field, workshops and portfolio reviews with the presence of prominent contemporary Italian and international artists.

During this lecture I discovered the concepts of the *nonument* and *socially engaged art*. Indeed, in preparation for the final exam, I extensively studied several books of the bibliography of this thesis.

The class of History of Western Aesthetics gave me a wide view on the theory of seeing and perceiving art in general. It started with Ancient Greece and ended in the beginning of the 21st century. The lecture consisted of a theoretical part, the seminar and the final exam. I had a chance to extend my knowledge in the studies of concepts of the sublime, memory, and the shifting perception of beauty. The discipline gave me perspective and a certain depth in the elaboration of my own artistic concepts.

The Performance for the Visual Arts opened the door to a completely different realm. Alongside studying the work of great masters like Jerzy Grotowski, Marina Abramović, Tadeusz Kantor, Romeo Castellucci, and Carmelo Bene, just to name a few, in collaboration with other students from the group, we practiced improvisation and somatic movement three times a week and created our own individual and collective performance pieces (*fig. 46*).

This practice gave me a push to experiment and to expand, to search for unexpected results through personal work, to move between dimensions not only on the theoretical, but also on the physical level. The charismatic presence and years of extraordinary experience with the professor Loredana Putignani were equally inspiring.

During the classes of sculpture, I had a chance to bring my physical creations into the digital world by using technology like 3D scanning and 3D modelling. I gained valuable skills in the practice of my work with bioplastics, but also in Blender and other useful technological tools, which resulted in a video sculpture. Alongside new technologies, professor Moioli introduced us to the most exciting names and works in Italian and international sculpture through the 20th and 21st centuries, like Marino Marini, Arturo Martini, Carlo Scarpa, Lucio Fontana, Neri Oxman, Tomás Saraceno, Anicka Yi, Andy Goldsworthy, Olafur Eliasson and many more.

These studies and experiences resulted in two projects – *Lux Index* (a video sculpture) and *Iperuranio* (video performance).

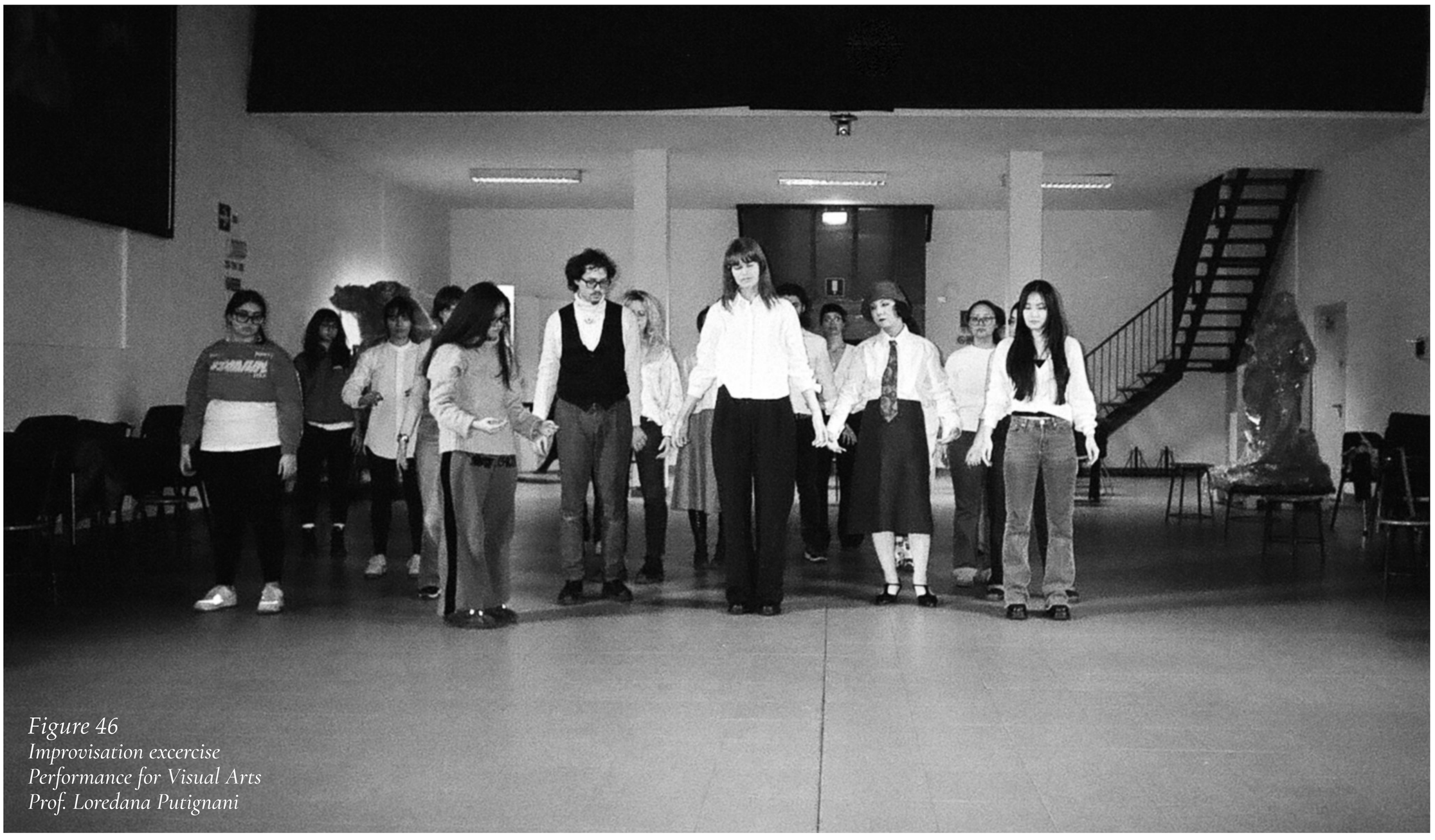
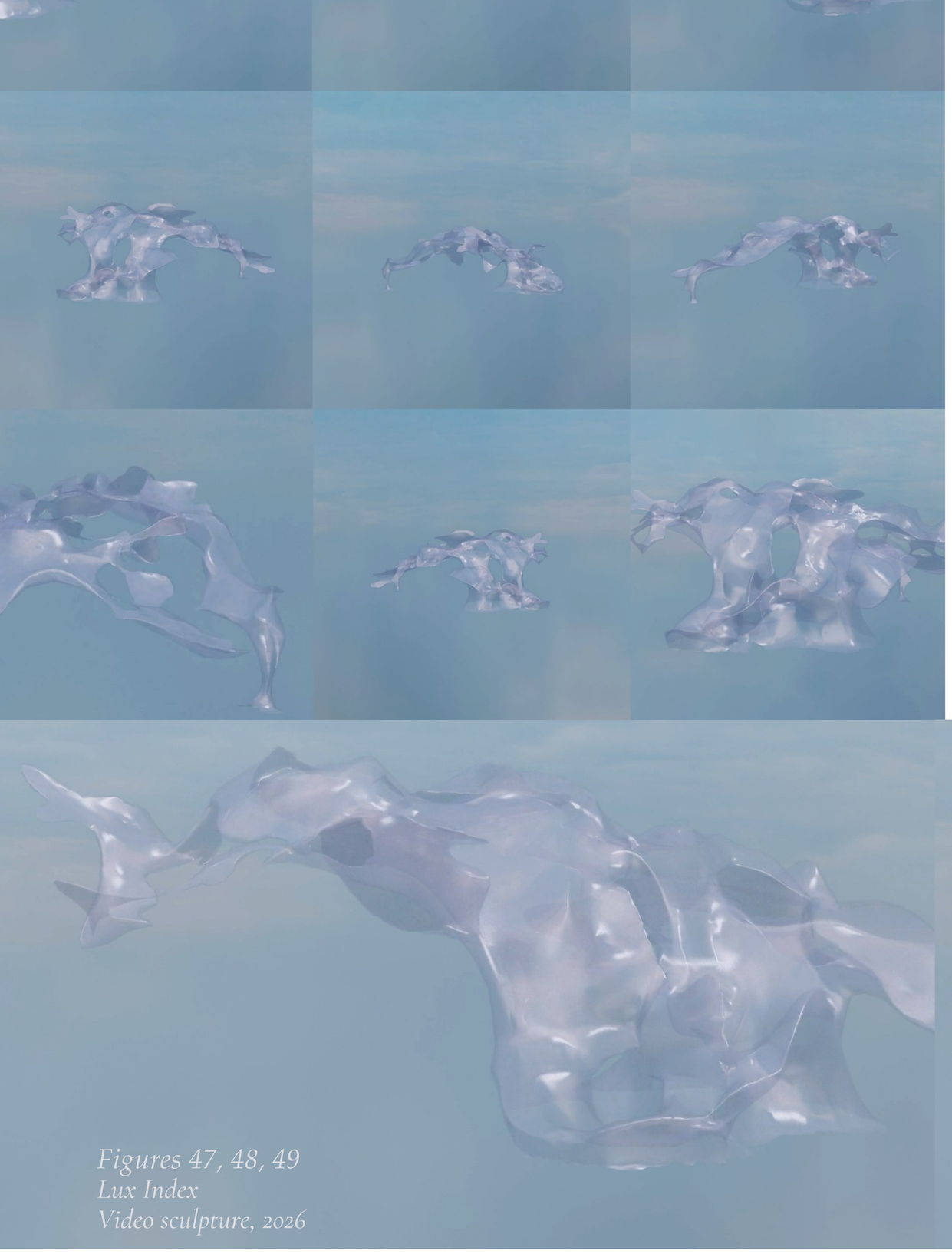


*Figure 46*
*Improvisation excercise*
*Performance for Visual Arts*
*Prof. Loredana Putignani*



*Lux Index* was a final project for the sculpture discipline. It started as a continuation of my experiments with bioplastic material and evolved into the digital realm. Lux Index is about the measurement of light, thinking about the reflective surfaces of rock formations of celestial bodies. The concept builds on the light of celestial bodies, reaching our eyes after millions of years of travelling through space, which is an unusual comparison to the process of memory (***fig. 47, 48, 49***).

The object's appearance and surroundings is reminiscent of a science fiction ambiance, an ancient cosmic body reflecting light in its perpetual rotation.

Video footage can be seen here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSRCx9Odatw



*Figures 47, 48, 49*
*Lux Index*
*Video sculpture, 2026*

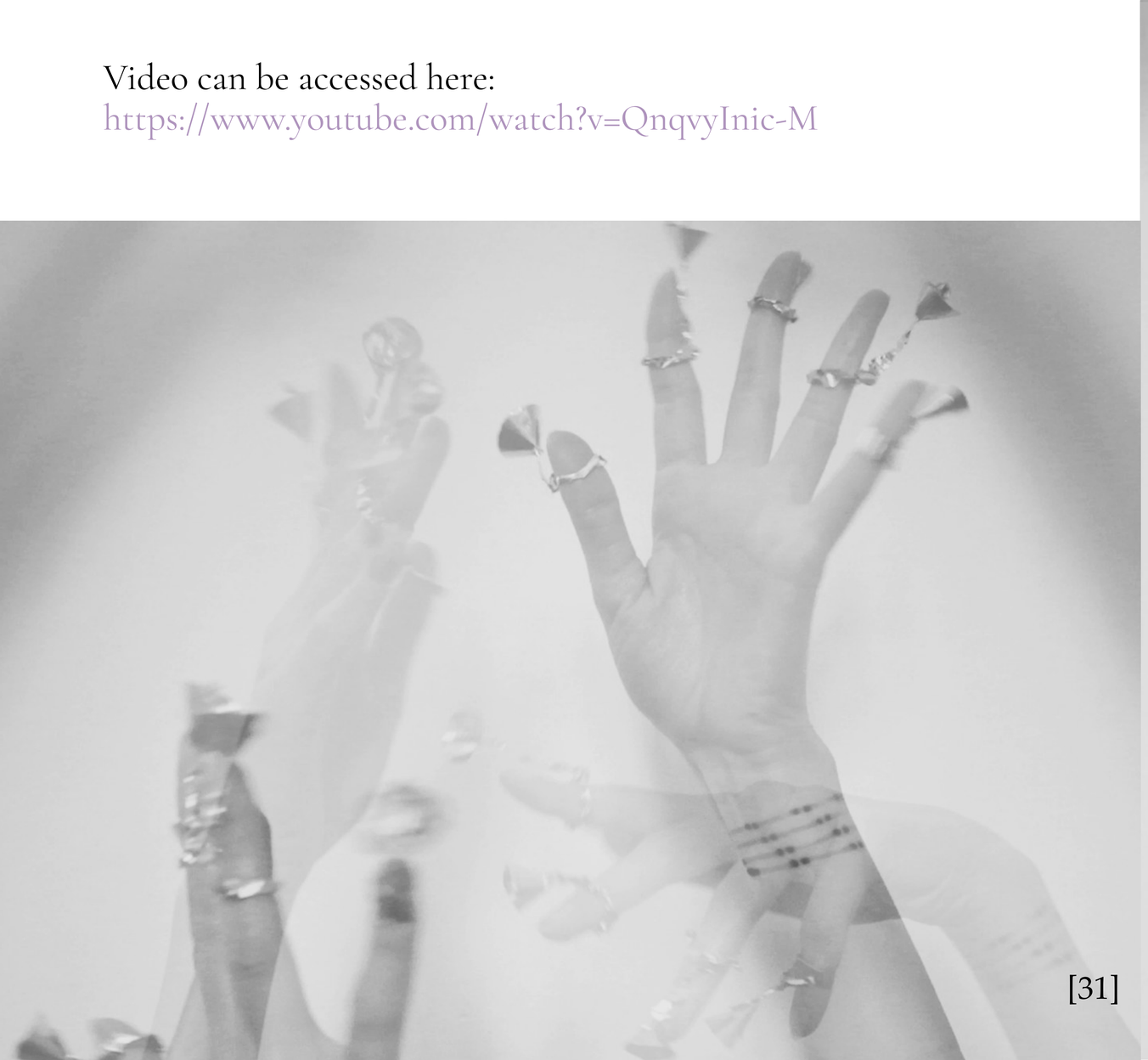
*Iperuranio* was an individual project developed as a final work for the discipline of Performance for the Visual Arts. It was based on Plato's Hyperuranion and the supra-celestial realm. It's one more interpretation of Oblivion – a hypothetical place where the distant memories reside alongside forgotten gods and obsolete worlds. It plays with the sound of 10 finger chimes, shadows and double exposure.
It was presented as a video projection and a photo series featuring stills from the video (***fig. 50, 51, 52***).

After returning to Portugal, the video performance was shown in Café Candelabro in Porto during the month of April 2026, as a selection for a long-running video art program #Playlist.

Video can be accessed here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnqvyInic-M



*Figures 50, 51, 52*
*Iperuranio*
*Video performance, 2026*



Pluvial

# *episode*

3.2.4.

Pluvial episode was a planetary event that happened during the Carnian period, causing a major change in the global climate. It influenced significant changes. A continuous rainfall that lasted for millions of years, caused by massive volcanism and which led to global warming and endless deluge, was regenerating and terribly destructive at the same time.

A performance piece was conceived thinking about the depths of geological time, about water and about grief. It reflected on the solid things becoming a liquid matter, about mountains and heavens merging into one continuous stratum, about involuntary moments of vanishing and about waiting many lifetimes for the tempest to end.

The plot was a fracture of a dream, or a myth, or maybe a distant memory emerging from the depth of time. An old, forgotten, mythical entity, remembering the Pluvial episode, engaging in a ritualistic practice, telling the story in continuous, repetitive song and whispering in tongues.

The act featured a glass container with water, natural pebbles, sea shells and a glass sculpture, produced in slumping technique in the laboratory of glass at FBAUP. The costume consisted of a custom-made, painted and embroidered blouse and a headpiece, with floating, tentacle-like ribbons and strings, glowing in a black light illumination. The moving water reflections on the walls, created an allusion to being underwater. The performance happened in an old swimming pool's dressing room, paved with tiles which added natural reverb and echo to the voice. It took part of the *Circuitos* event organised by Galeria Municipal of Porto.

Video footage: https://youtu.be/Lhc_KAk7n7E



*Figures 53, 54, 55, 56*
*Pluvial episode*
*Performance*
*Circuitos, 2026*

# Materials, processes,
# ***production***



The *Substrata* sculptural shape comes from the form of a sundial (which was used in one of the *Gardens of Oblivion: Cartography of a Distant Memory installations*). The central part is a deconstructed Gnomon and is constituted of four semi-transparent glass objects and smaller porcelain sculptural objects.

The materials were chosen in contrast to the first version. Before they were robust, dark and made of clay, with actual interview text inscribed into the surface in sgraffito technique (*fig. 59*). Reminding of tree trunks or pyramids (in the case of the Gnomon). Twelve holes dug around the central composition represent the 12 hours of the day.

In *Substrata* the shapes focus on telluric beings, their lightness and agility of all kinds of antennas, pointy legs, claws, tentacles, teeth, particular geometry of the bodies, also it draws shape from various plant roots and their systems underground. Glass, because of it's undergroundly translucency, porcelain, because of its paleness, fragility and smooth texture .

The glass pieces were produced in the glass and mosaic laboratory employing slumping technique, using pieces of 3mm colourless float glass *(fig. 57, 60-68)*. The porcelain pieces were made using imperial porcelain *(fig. 58)*.

However, this time the sundial, instead of being exposed to sunlight, metaphorically focuses on the underground. The shapes of the sculptural objects in the middle interpret roots or the "tentacles" of plants (another oddkin[11] of telluric beings). The composition allegorically takes an inverted position—as if the roots, instead of being under the soil, were seen on the surface upside down in a vertigo-like state.

The center piece is only a first part of the artwork. The remaining parts are dedicated to the collective practice of eco-grief, and are executed in collaboration with the community. Each participant in the practice shaped a little burial figurine out of brown clay to finalize the sculpture. It was not a pedagogical practice, every person participating was co-creating the final sculpture, which resulted into shared authorship of the artwork.

11. Haraway's term for unconventional forms of kinship that extend beyond biological or familial relations, emphasizing interdependence, collaboration, and responsibility among humans and other-than-human beings.

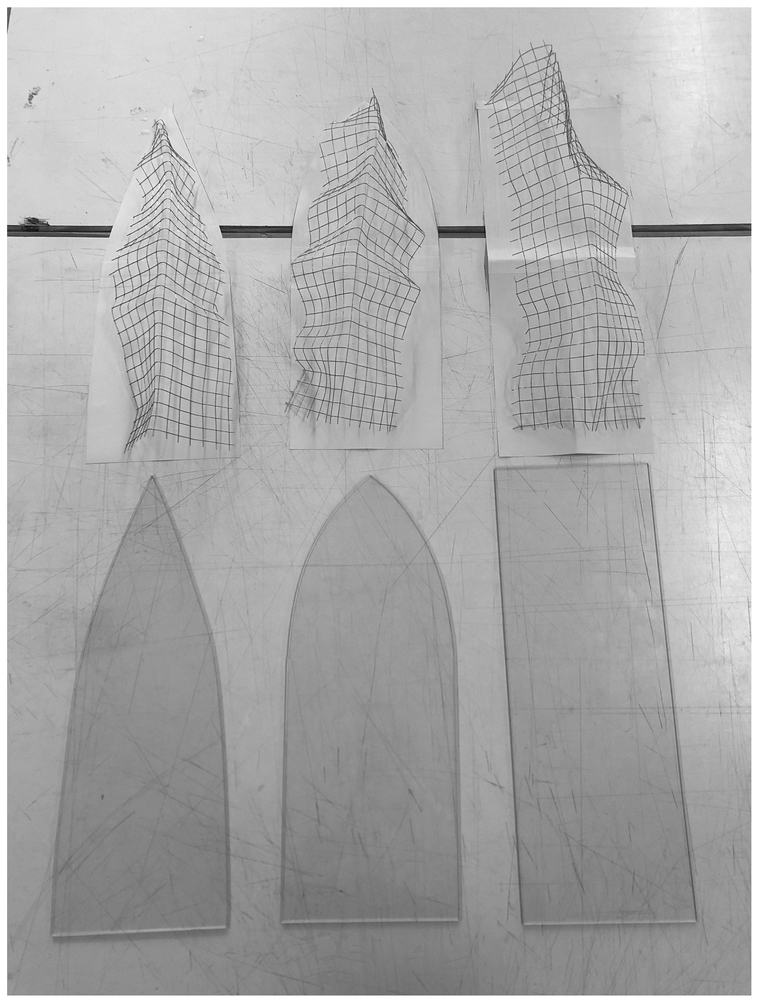


*Figure 57*
Substrata, preparation of glass pieces, May 2026, FBAUP



*Figure 58*
Substrata, preparation of porcelain pieces, July 2026, Porto



*Figure 59*
Gardens of oblivion: cartography of a distant memory, 2025, Casa do Corim, Aguas Santas, Porto



*Figure 60*
Testing stability of the glass pieces

*Figure 61*
Filling the electro-welded metal net forms with ceramic fill shapes

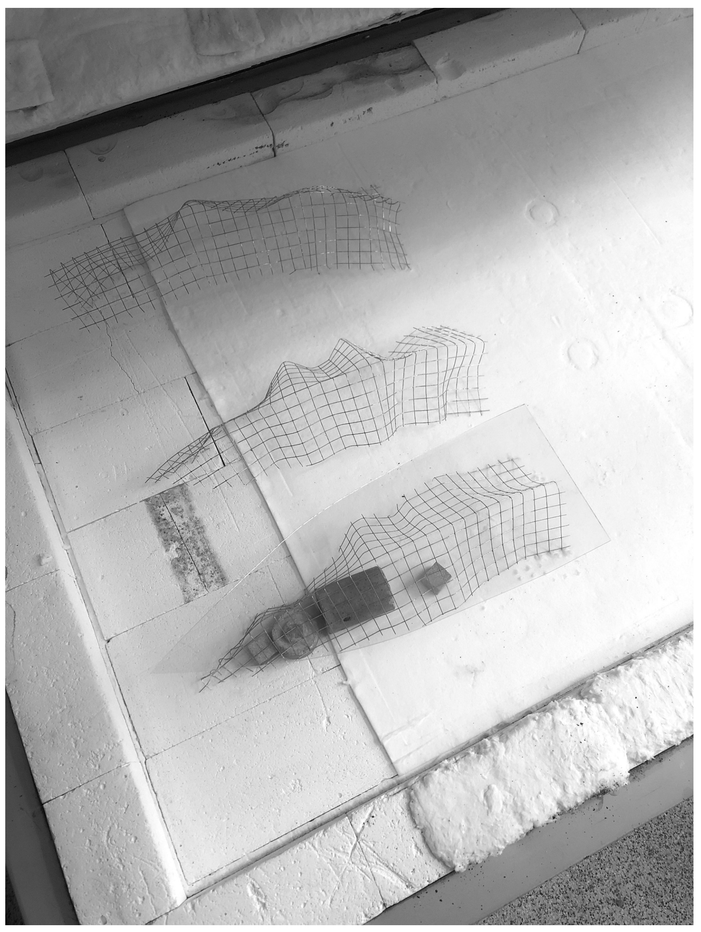




*Figure 62*
Preparation of firing the kiln

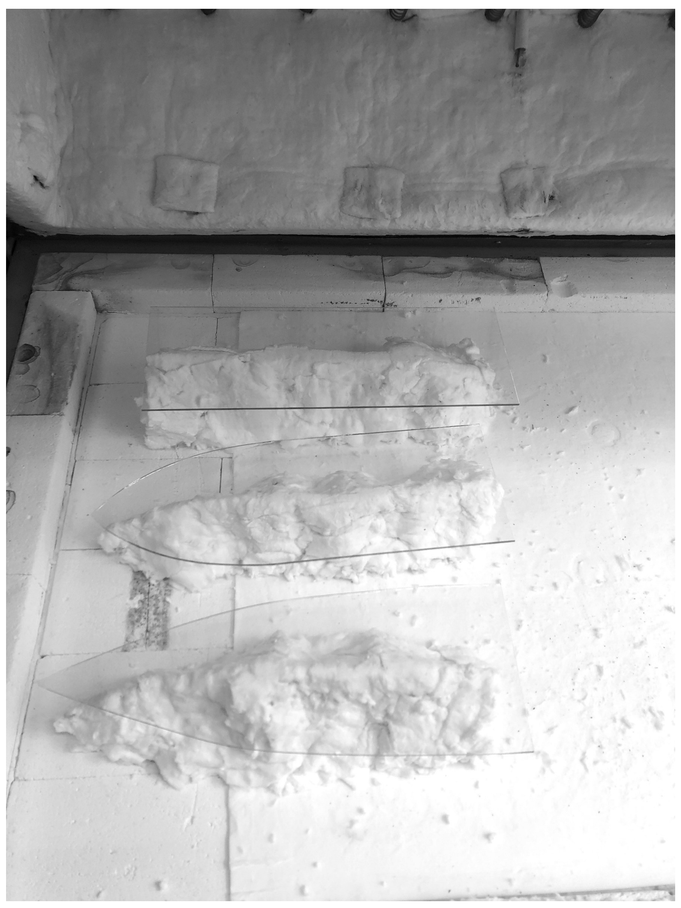
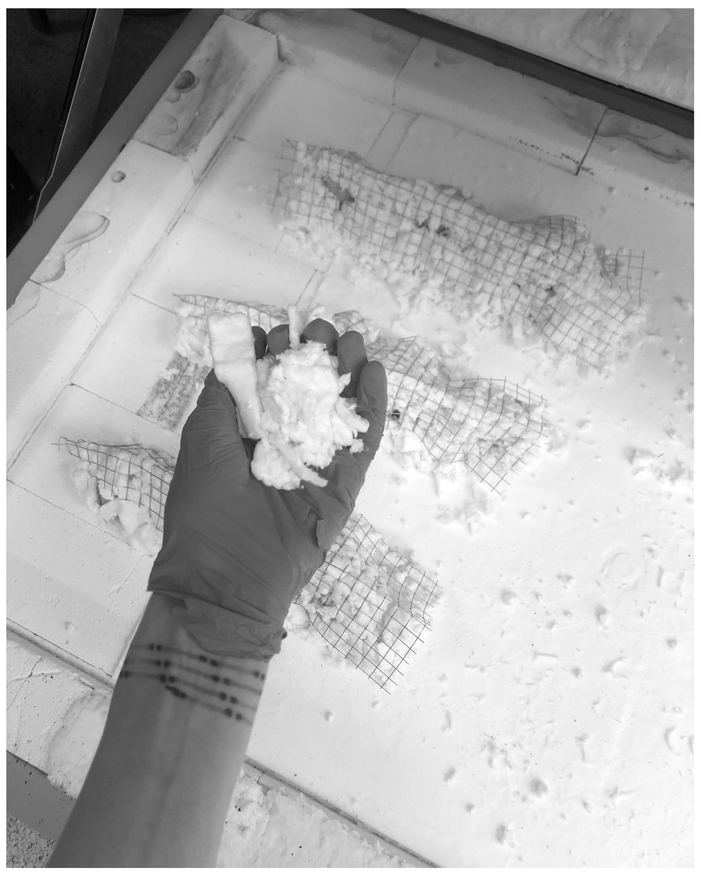


*Figure 64*
Placing the glass to be fired

*Figure 63*
Filling the electro-welded metal net forms with ceramic wool



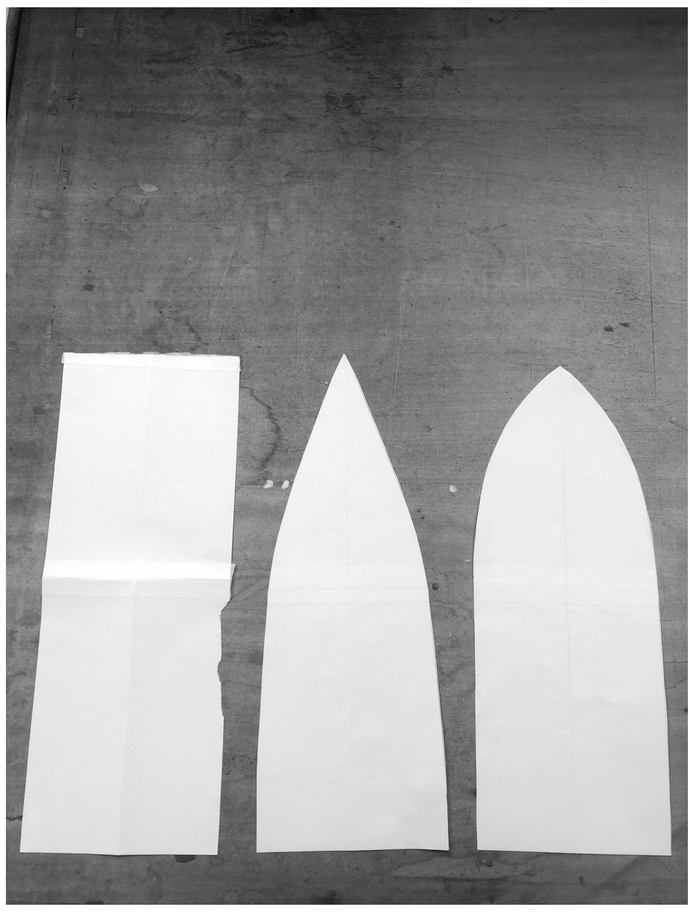


*Figure 66*
Designing paper shapes to cut the glass

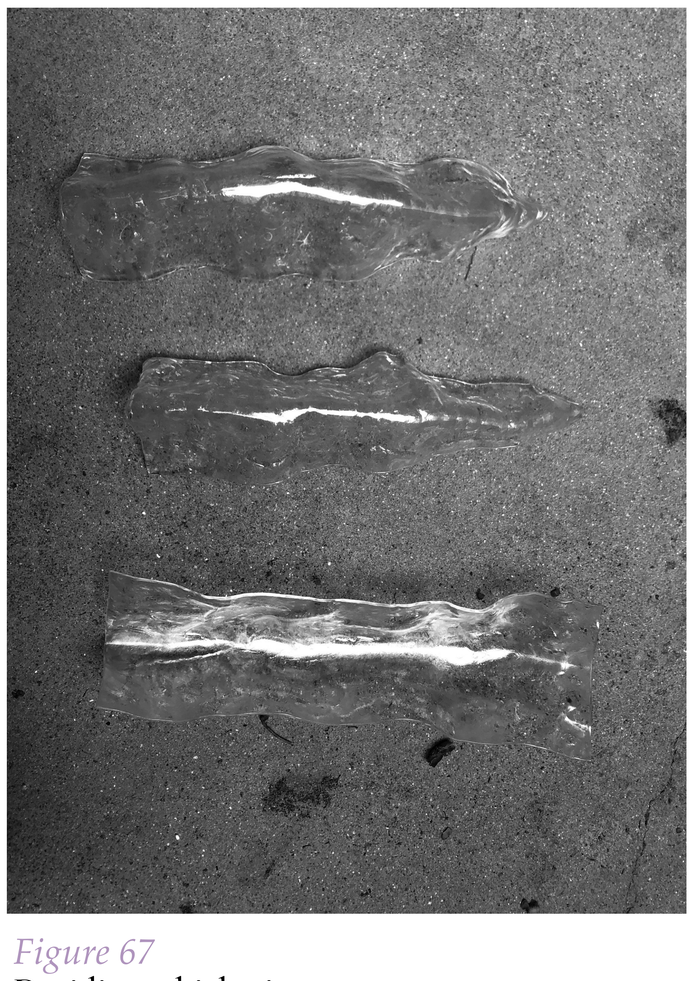


*Figure 67*
Deciding which pieces to use

*Figure 65*
Filling the electro-welded metal net forms with ceramic wool



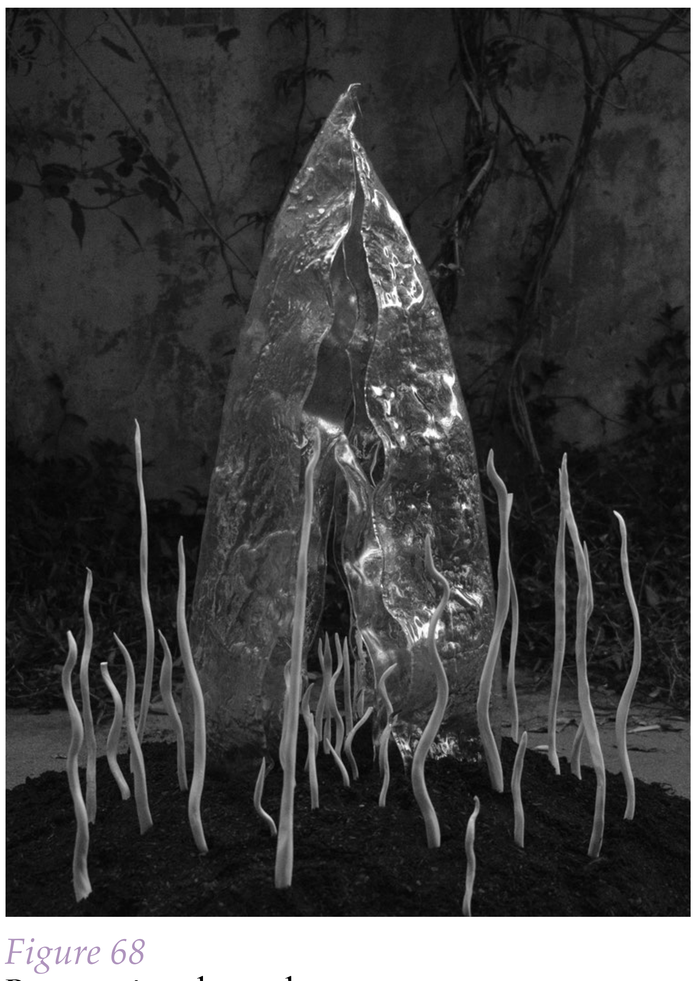


*Figure 68*
Prototyping the sculpture

Substrata

# *activation*

3.2.6.

The *Substrata* activation event took place on the 15 of August, 2026, on the top of a hill, just behind Capela de S. José / Centro Juvenil de Campanhã, at the community garden of association-movement Terra Solta.

Terra Solta is a grassroots community association, focusing on environmental education, volunteering, and community gathering. It operates as a little, hidden island of nature in the middle of the city and is an unique, inclusive microcosm, which kindly agreed to collaborate and host the event exploring the practice of eco-grief.

This gathering symbolically marked the last public event of Terra Solta, during which we said farewell to this unique and wonderful place. Due to the construction works for the high-speed rail line, Terra Solta had to move to a new location, and August 2026 was it's last month in the Campanhã neighbourhood.

A public event was announced through posters in the city, through social media and through word of mouth. It was hosted by Terra Solta community, but not limited to it. The event happened outdoors, was free of charge and open to anyone willing to participate *(fig. 69, 70)*.

Initial information offered an overview of the *Substrata* idea and explained the reasoning behind it—to gather together for a co-created moment of practice of eco-grief in a collective performative action and have an informal conversation about the experience (or anything else) and a shared meal afterwards (everybody was invited to bring a plate to share). It was explicitly highlighted that the practice will not require any artistic skill or physical preparation, will not be designated to a specific age group, and is open to everybody who has an interest in joining.

It was a hazy mid-August Saturday afternoon, the event unfolded around the sculptural piece *(fig. 71, 72, 73)* and the long table in the pleasant shade of old, tall trees of Terra Solta. Firstly, I introduced myself, the idea of the project and the concepts of eco-grief and co-creation of the sculpture. I proposed three performative steps to conclude the sculpture:

1. *Materialization and transformation* of our personal non-human losses, in a form of symbolic sepulture of writings and drawings.
2. *Slow drinking of water,* sip by sip, experiencing each and every drop hydrating the human body and connecting to all the other waters on Planet Earth and all the human and non-human beings drinking the water in order to live and die.
3. *Shaping of a burial figurine* out of red clay to finalize the glass-porcelain sculpture.

The steps were presented as mere suggestions and were subject to change, skip or extension at any given time. The participants were invited to forget the line between the artist, artwork and the spectator and engage fully, without second guessing their role. I presented myself not as an author, but as an intersection between the participant and facilitator, without directing or influencing its artistic outcome in any way. Event was held in Portuguese and English languages.

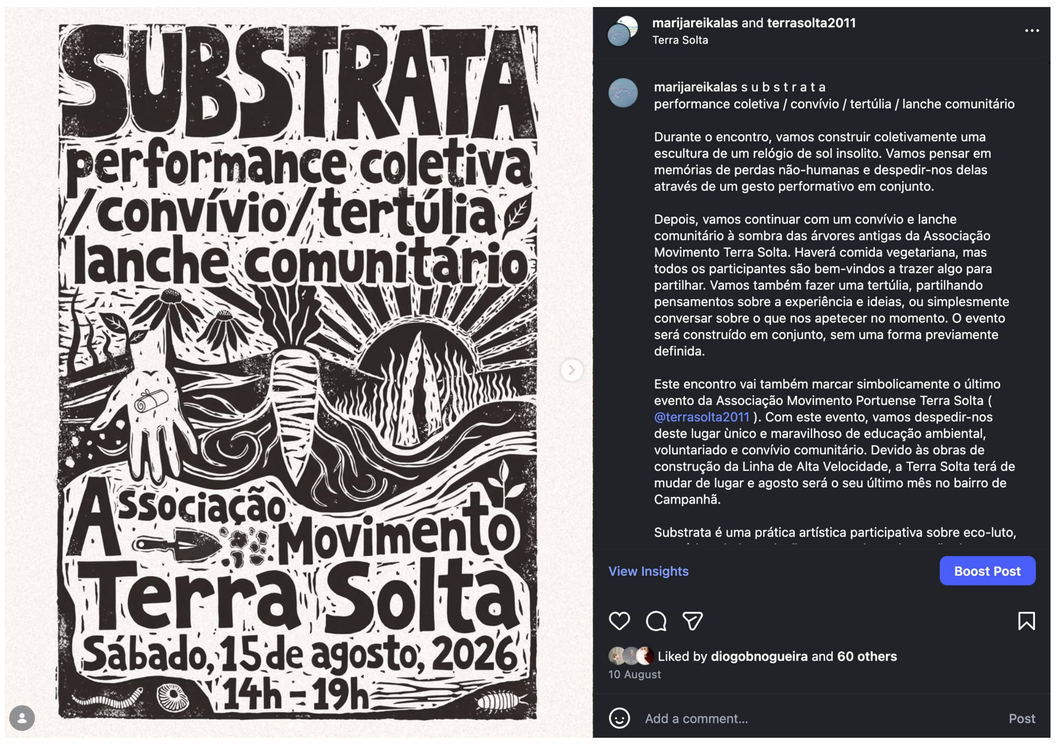



*Figure 69*




*Figure 70*



*Figure 71*



*Figure 72*



*Figure 73*



*Figure 74*

While we were talking, on the table there were sheets of paper with images of the prehistoric funerary sculptures, from the lifelong extraordinary researh of anthropologist Marija Gimbutas. *(fig. 74)* She described how prehistoric European societies viewed death not as a linear full stop, but as a cyclical pause—a necessary transition before rebirth. The "death figurines" I chose for the inspiration papersheets in this event, were found in Neolithic, Copper Age, and early Bronze Age graves and carried specific visual clues that outlined this philosophy (Gimbutas, 1991). The collaboratively produced figurines in the practice of eco-grief in *Substrata* in a way ended up reflecting the prehistoric burial rite, but from the contemporary point of view. After all, in the beginning of human history, a group of humans very long time ago gathered together and did a funerary rite for the first time. With no guidance, no instructions, they co-performed the funerary action, which during the layers of time became rooted traditions. Alongside the images of prehistoric funerary figurines, I also added a few examples of Ana Mendietta's work, which is directly connected to prehistoric funerary art tradition and moved the event into the contemporary performative realm.

The initial presentation, nor any given examples were approached in academic way. In order to avoid disengagement, they were kept as short as possible and served as a kind of a vague, non-obligatory inspiration. From the previous experience of organising linocut workshops for adults, I have learned that majority of "grown-ups", not coming from artistic background, at the beginning of any creativity based activity may feel a strong anxiety of incompetence (due to the rooted societal bias of meritocracy). In order to bypass this part completely, I had to find a way to give participants a ground, a possible, fluid starting point without obligation, a door to enter the realm of play without stopping at the threshold of self-doubt. That's how the imagery of prehistoric funerary figurines and Ana Mendieta's work were chosen. From there the performative activation part started to unfold *(fig. 75, 76)*.

We started by taking little paper pieces placed around the central part of the sculpture. The participants were invited to describe something that they felt they had irreversibly lost in nature—something they grieved. The range of subjects was not monitored in any way. It could be anything, and the only criterion was that it had to be real and that something could not be brought back. The writing could take any shape or genre. It could be a single letter, an acronym, one word, a name of a place, one or a few sentences, a poem, a text or a stream of consciousness, anything. The papers were then placed in 12 holes surrounding the central gnomon sculpture and covered with soil - performatively given to *Substrata* to assimilate and to transform.

Next to 12 holes, glasses with drinking water were placed. Each participant was invited to sip the water as slow as possible, while focusing on the bodily sensations, appearing thoughts and their surroundings. This excercise draw inspiration from Marina Abramovic's Method Water Drinking Excercise "With your hand, hold a glass of pure water. Wait and look at the water. Drinking in slow motion, bring the glass to your lips. Drink in small sips as long as you can" (Abramovic, 2004). It served as a method of awareness of connectivity with all living beings, held alive and being decomposed by humidity/water from inside and outside the bodies.

The third part of the performative action was to shape the clay figurines in clay and complete the collective sculptural composition *(fig. 54, 55)*. The figurine could reflect what was spoken, thought or written on the paper, it could be abstract, or it could take any possible shape, no questions asked. As no initial indications were given about where to place the after they are complete, participants started placing them on the soil surrounding the initial central sculpture part.

A few hours had passed, and it was clear that the performative part, requiring concentration and attention was coming to the end. As the last thing, I thanked everybody who came (people kept coming and joining in during the porocess) and asked them for the moment of silence to “close” the performative part.

After that, everybody moved back to the table, where we placed all the food that had been brought to share. We spoke about the experience for a while, but mostly chatted about small, pleasant things and the food on the table. The mood was not heavy and did not feel funerary at all: children of different ages were running around, birds were chirping in the tall trees. We said farewell to Terra Solta as we knew it and collectively enacted a moment of mourning and transition. The project, however, could not establish what participants experienced internally. It could only document the actions, interactions and responses that were observable, while recognising that the meaning of the experience remained partly inaccessible to me *(fig. 77-90)*.

Event video footage can be accessed here:
https://youtu.be/dXHhdFDWvGM?si=aM-XP8EP8p-ipgvB



*Figure 75*



*Figure 76*



*Figure 78*



*Figure 77*



Figure 79



Figure 80




Figure 81



Figure 82



Figure 83



Figure 84



Figure 85



Figure 86



Figure 87



Figure 88



Figure 89



Figure 90

# *Final remarks*

This project began with a question about how ecological loss can be mourned when the losses themselves are often difficult to name, share, or publicly acknowledge. The research established eco-grief as a legitimate response to environmental loss and connected it to wider questions of anthropocentrism, deep time, mass extinction, and the changing relationship between human and more-than-human life. It also examined the limitations of traditional monuments, particularly their permanence and tendency towards de-noticing, and investigated the nonument and socially engaged art as alternative approaches to public commemoration.

These theoretical investigations were brought together through Substrata. The project moved from an individual, object-based approach towards a temporary and participatory practice in which the artwork could be changed through collective action. The inverted sundial, made from glass and porcelain and inspired by roots, telluric beings, and subterranean forms, became the material structure for this process. Its completion depended on the participants, who contributed symbolic acts of burial and handmade funerary clay figures, actively engaging instead of only observing the work.

The activation at Terra Solta showed how eco-grief can be approached through shared, embodied actions rather than through representation alone. The three stages of symbolic burial, drinking water, and making funerary figures created a situation in which individual experiences of loss could enter a shared space and be addressed collectively. However, the project could not establish the participants' internal experiences or determine whether these actions resulted in a personal transformation of grief.

The project therefore does not propose a solution to ecological grief. Instead, it demonstrates one possible artistic framework for making eco-grief visible, shareable, and collectively addressed. Substrata ultimately shifts the emphasis from producing a permanent mnemonic object about loss towards creating a temporary situation in time that can be lived and experienced, and subsequently remembered. Mourning itself becomes the artistic material.

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# *Annexes*



*Figure 14*
*Monument against Fascism*
Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz
1986, Harburg, Germany

The counter-monument created by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz in the city of Harburg, Germany in 1986. A 12-metre-high, square shaped steel column, covered on all four sides with lead soft enough to be a writing surface. A stylus was available at the side of the column, allowing anyone to engrave their name and expression of opposition to fascism. A sign next to the column addressed passers-by in seven languages: "We invite the citizens of Harburg and visitors to the city to add their names here to ours. By doing so, we commit ourselves to remaining vigilant. As the names cover this 12-metre-high lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day, it will have completely disappeared, and the site of the Harburg Monument against fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we who can stand up against injustice". The progressive sinking of the column's segments took from 1986 to 1993, with the definitive disappearance transforming the column's top into a plaque at ground level (Herz & Shalev-Herz, 1986).



*Figure 15*
*Wrapped Reichstag*
Christo and Jeanne-Claude
1971, Berlin, Germany

The Reichstag stands up in an open, strangely metaphysical area. The building has experienced its own continuous changes and perturbations: built in 1894, burned in 1933, almost destroyed in 1945, it was restored in the sixties, but the Reichstag always remained the symbol of Democracy.

Throughout the history of art, the use of fabric has been a fascination for artists. From the most ancient times to the present, fabric forming folds, pleats and draperies is a significant part of paintings, frescoes, reliefs and sculptures made of wood, stone and bronze. The use of fabric on the Reichstag followed the classical tradition. Fabric, like clothing or skin, is fragile, it translates the unique quality of impermanence.

For a period of two weeks, the richness of the silvery fabric, shaped by the blue ropes, created a sumptuous flow of vertical folds highlighting the features and proportions of the imposing structure, revealing the essence of the Reichstag (Christo & Jean-Claude, 1971).

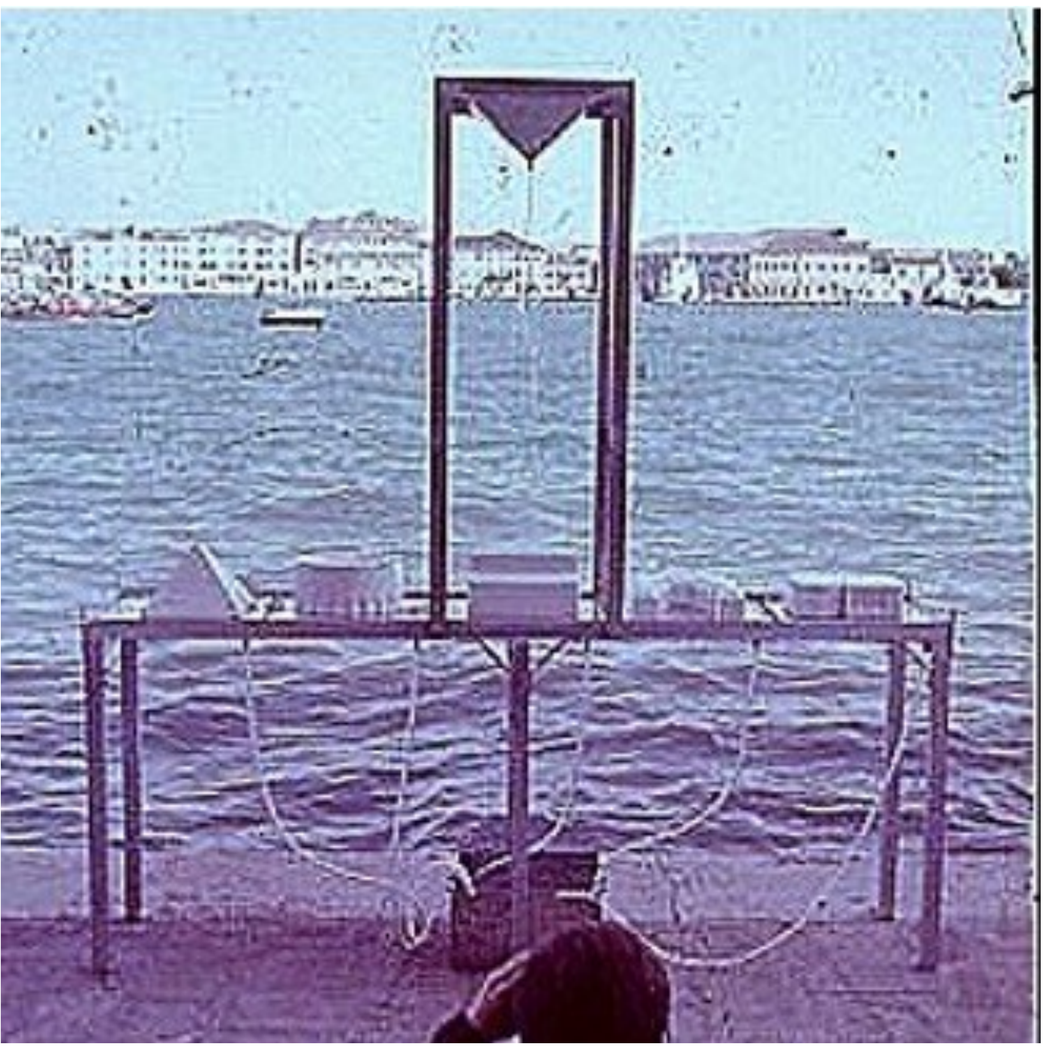


*Figure 16*
*La Moglie di Lot e la coscienza di Zeno*
Superstudio
1978, Venice Biennale, Italy

*Superstudio* presented *La Moglie di Lot e la coscienza di Zeno* in Venice Biennale 1978, consisting of a welded iron table and moving tower designed to hold a fluid pouch filled with water. A tube dripped water over five salt moulds representing the historical stages of architecture: the pyramid, the coliseum, the basilica, Versailles and the Villa Savoye. With time, as in fact was the case, each of the salt moulds disappeared, a demonstration on architecture's inevitable dissolution. This project more than anything else physically embodied the dilemma of architecture's ephemeral existence, with the additional tension that such a delicately framed iron and salt structure produces by sitting at the edge of Venice's Grand Canal. The artifact has since been lost, but its idea lives on as the anti-monument dedicated to the mother of all monuments (Superstudio: La Moglie Di Lot E La Conscienza Di Zeno, 1978 – Bentpriorities, 2026).



*Figure 17*
*Crying Room*
Tania Bruguera
2019, Tate Modern, London

In a small room, an organic compound in the air induces tears and provokes what the artist describes as 'forced empathy'.

Tania Bruguera engages with 'the role of emotions in politics'. Her main concerns are institutional power, borders and migration. Her work spans performance, events, action, film, installation, sculpture, writing and teaching alongside site-specific works. Often, she sets out to cause change through her work. She calls this approach Arte Útil (useful art), in which people engage as users rather than spectators (Tate, 2018).



*Figure 18*
*Monuments Project*
Kinfolk
2021,US

*"We recognize that our country's monuments, public spaces, school curricula and cultural institutions have systematically and intentionally excluded BIPOC history. We started The Monuments Project as a way to create and insert hundreds of digital monuments into public spaces with or without permission. We soon realized that we can shift the mindset of a generation by targeting the youth and placing our content in schools throughout the country. We are merging culturally responsive pedagogy and primary source documents with our augmented reality monuments" (Kinfolk, 2025).*



*Figure 19*
*¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*
Regina José Galindo
2003, Guatemala City, Guatemala

Walk from the Constitutional Court to the National Palace of Guatemala, leaving behind a trail of footprints made with human blood, in memory of the victims of the armed conflict in Guatemala, and in rejection of the presidential candidacy of former military officer, genocidaire, and coup leader Efraín Ríos Montt.

Excerpts from video by Damilo Montenegro.
Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDTLipg9vMc

(José Galindo, R., 2003)



*Figure 20*
*L. O. V. E.*
Maurizio Cattelan
Reappropriation by Ivan Tresoldi
2021, Milan, Italy

Ivan Tresoldi, a poet and street artist, painted the fingernail of Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture L.O.V.E. (also known as “Il Dito") in Piazza Affari, Milan, in fuchsia. The act, which occurred before March 8, 2021, was intended as a poetic and political statement challenging the art world and raising awareness about women's conditions. On March 8, hundreds of women participated in a performance by painting their middle fingernails. The intervention sparked debate: some called it vandalism, and the Lega party filed a complaint, citing Tresoldi's prior conviction for writing on walls and his announced plan to modify the statue of Indro Montanelli (ARTFEED — Contemporary Art Intelligence, 2026).



*Figure 21*
*Transmission*
Harun Farocki
2007, Germany

*“Places of memory set in stone are the subject addressed by Harun Farocki. Transmission examines the pull and adoration of monuments scattered all over the world that have become goals for pilgrims and tourists and now serve to meet a whole range of different needs, from personal memory to spiritual enlightenment and religious sentiment. Farocki’s journey starts from the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, a wall of black granite engraved with the names of all the 58,249 Americans killed in the Vietnam War. Thousands of people visit it every day, touch the letters and trace the names of family and friends in an attempt to establish a link between their own lives and the past. Other objects of pilgrimage – including the foot of the statue of the Apostle in St Peter’s and the Bocca della Verità in Rome as well as the devil’s footprint in the Frauenkirche in Munich and the monument in the Buchenwald concentration camp – meet the same need for understanding and purification. Stone is the material in which the collective memory of a life or an event in the past is immortalized and becomes an object of worship. At the same time, the memory of thousands of visitors is preserved in the traces of wear it displays” (Beckers, 2026).*



*Figure 22*
*Cretto di Gibellina*
Alberto Burri
2015, Gibellina, Italy

On the site of the old town, now called Gibellina Vecchio, Burri created the Cretto di Burri as a memoriam to the community and as a remembrance of the devastation of the earthquake. He followed the lines of the existing street layout by containing the debris, including rubble, stones, furniture and domestic remnants in gabions. Employing the military, and the construction companies working on the new town, cement was then poured into the mould of the urban footprint creating an abstract pattern of white concrete blocks echoing the shapes of buildings, with cracks following the old roads and paths. The concrete, which has turned grey with time, suggests a Columbarium, in the style of an Italian cemetery where ashes and remains are placed in miniature houses or wall compartments (retrieved from: https://hicarquitectura.com/2023/11/alberto-burri-cretto-di-burri-sicily/).



*Figure 23*
*Touch Sanitation Performance*
Mierle Laderman Ukeles
1979, New York, US

Ukeles' first performance with the New York City department of sanitation (DSNY) was Touch Sanitation Performance, 1979-1980, in which she faced and shook the hand of all 8,500 Sanitation employees as they did their work, saying to each, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." Engaging in public space, Touch Sanitation humanizes this alienating work and conveys the importance of a traditionally devalued sector of labor. As the project progressed, she also documented the stories of these workers in the video Sanman Speaks (1979-84), providing a space for the workers to articulate their own positions and experiences. The video also records the complex and durational process of collecting and disposing of waste, giving a sense of the physical immensity of society's refuse (Mierle Laderman Ukeles - Monoskop, n.d.).



*Figure 24*
*Household*
Allan Kaprow
1964, US

*Household* was a foundational 1964 performance piece by American artist Allan Kaprow, commissioned by Cornell University and staged at the Ithaca City Dump. As one of Kaprow's most famous *Happenings*—a term he coined to describe interactive, non-narrative events that blurred the line between art and everyday life—the piece subverted traditional theater by eliminating the stage, scripts, and passive spectators. Unlike a play, Household had no dialogue. Instead, it relied on a strict "score" of structured instructions divided along starkly stereotypical gender lines, reflecting themes of the mid-1960s American feminist movement. Participants (whom Kaprow preferred to call "livers" rather than actors) carried out a series of ritualistic, raw, and highly physical actions like licking jam from a car e. g. (retrieved from: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/h/happening/happening).



*Figure 25*
*7000 Oaks*
Joseph Beuys
1982, Kassel, Germany

Joseph Beuys's project *7000 Eichen* (7000 Oaks) began in 1982 at Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany. His plan called for the planting of 7,000 trees—each paired with a columnar basalt stone approximately four feet high and positioned above ground—throughout the greater city of Kassel. With major support from Dia Art Foundation, the project was carried forward under the auspices of the Free International University and took five years to complete; the last tree was planted at the opening of Documenta 8 in 1987. Beuys intended for the Kassel project to be the first stage in an ongoing scheme of tree planting that would extend throughout the world as part of a global mission to spark environmental and social change. Locally, the action was a gesture toward urban renewal (Joseph Beuys, 7000 Oaks | Visit Our Locations & Sites | Visit | Dia, n.d.)



*Figure 26*
*untitled 1992-1995 (free/still)*
Rirkrit Tiravanija
1995, New York, US

Untitled (Free) was the title of Tiravanija's first solo exhibition, held in 1992 at the 303 Gallery in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan. For the occasion, the artist moved the contents of the gallery's back rooms into the exhibition space, placing the business of art on display, and transformed the emptied office into a temporary kitchen, where he prepared Thai vegetable curry and served it free to anyone who wanted it (MoMA, n.d.).



*Figure 27*
*CLIMAVORE: on tidal zones*
Cooking Sections
2017-ongoing, Isle of Skye

CLIMAVORE is a long-term project envisioning new "seasons" of food production and consumption that react to human-induced climatic events and landscape alterations. Different from cycles of spring, summer, autumn and winter, dry and rainy season, CLIMAVORE reimagines how diets and infrastructures can adapt to climate-driven phenomena like subsidence, flash floods, or drought. CLIMAVORE is then proposed as a form of devouring following their effects on anthropogenic landscapes. Unlike carnivore, omnivore, locavore, vegetarian or vegan, CLIMAVORE is not only about the origin of ingredients, but also about the agency that those ingredients have in providing spatial and infrastructural responses to human-induced climatic events. At the core is to embrace a flexible form of eating, shifting for instance to drought resistant crops in a period of water scarcity or filter feeders during times of polluted or acidified waters. By framing foodways within a financialised landscape, CLIMAVORE critiques the geopolitical forces behind the climate crisis and the extractive pressures they impose on human and nonhuman lives (Cooking Sections, n.d.).

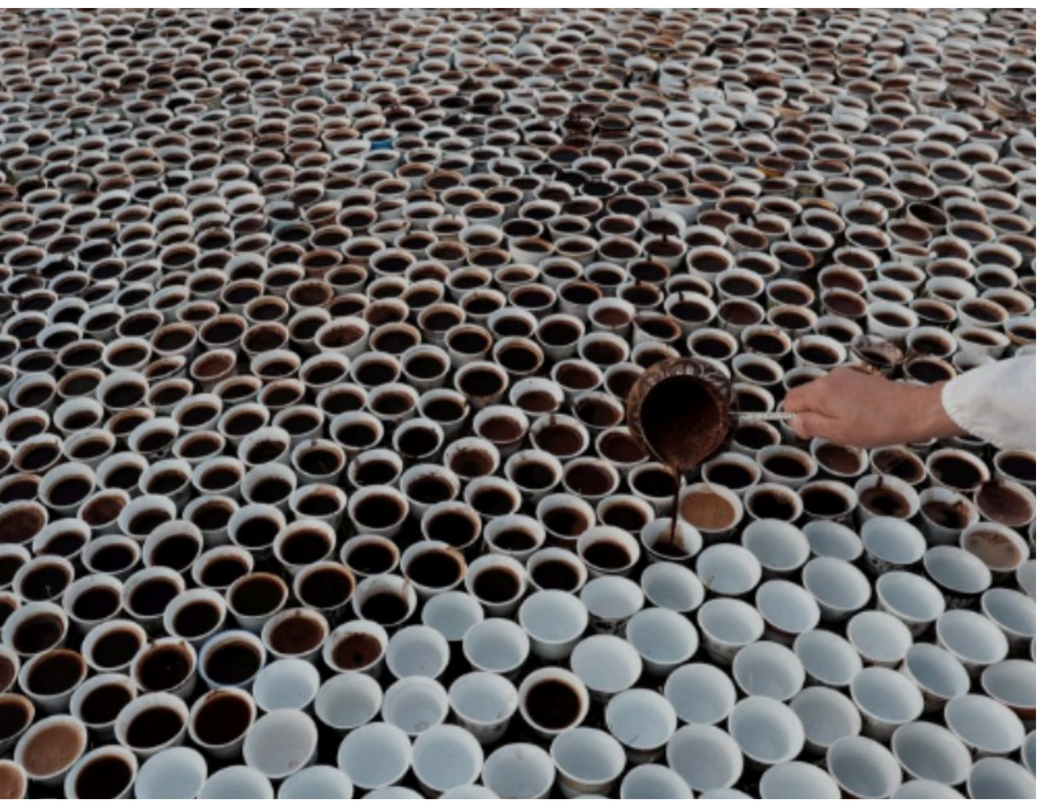


*Figure 28*
*ŠTO TE NEMA (Why are you not here?)*
Aida Šehović
2007 - ongoing, nomadic

ŠTO TE NEMA is a nomadic memorial to the victims of 1995 Srebrenica Genocide. In 2008 ŠTO TE NEMA became participatory for the first time in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, through collaboration with the Women of Srebrenica in the square where they gather monthly to call attention to their missing loved ones. As they filled the collected cups with Bosnian coffee prepared on site, the work shifted from a solitary artistic gesture into a collective commemorative practice shaped by shared experience. By this first participatory shift, the collection had grown to more than 2,000 cups, and memory, resistance, solidarity, and demands for justice became central to the monument's evolving form (Šehović, 2025).

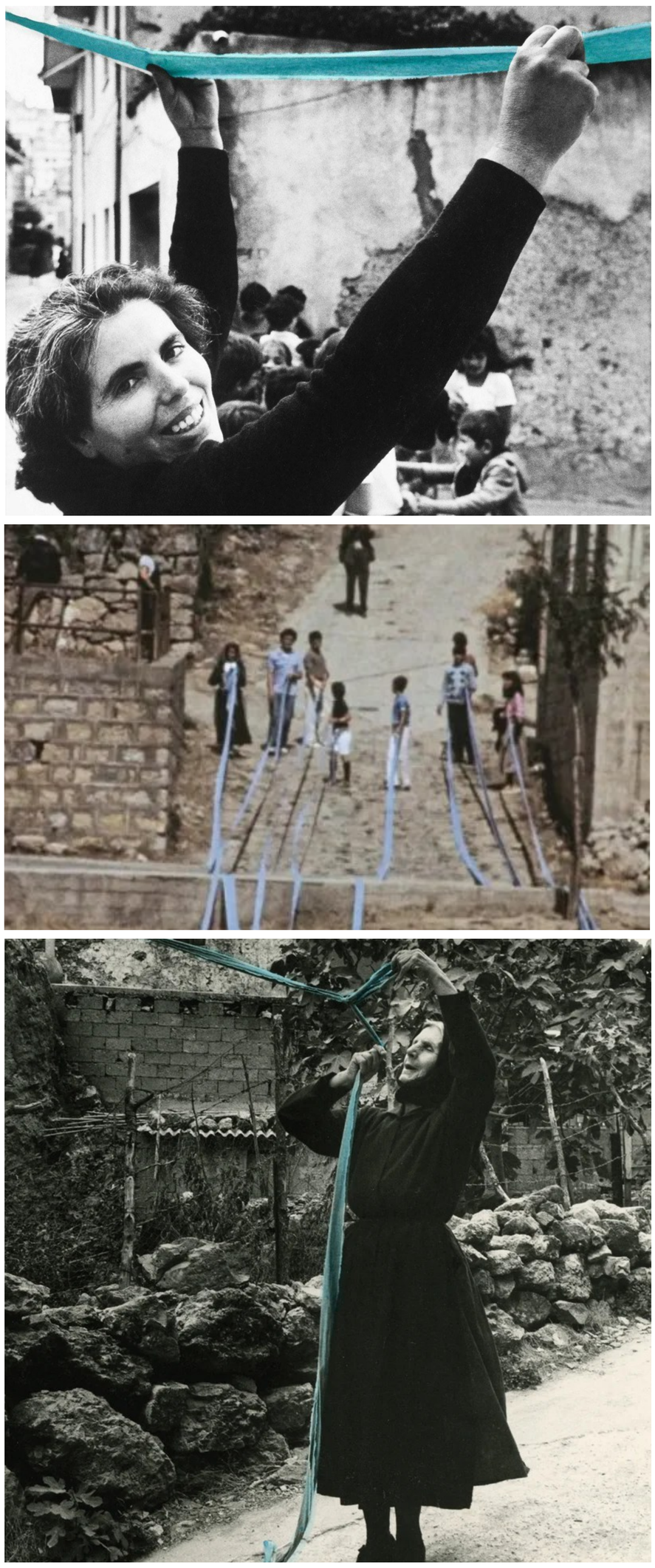


*Figure 29*
*Legarsi alla montagna*
*(Binding oneself to the mountain)*
Maria Lai
1981, Ulassai, Italy

On September 8, 1981, the Sardinian village of Ulassai became the scene of a participatory action initiated by the artist Maria Lai. The work was inspired by a local legend of a landslide in which two girls died while a third managed to save herself by clutching onto a celestial ribbon. For Legarsi alla montagna (Binding oneself to the mountain), the entire community tied twenty-seven kilometers of light-blue cloth ribbons to the doors, streets, and houses of the town, thus forging relationships, both old and new, among the inhabitants. This was the first significant participatory and relational artwork documented in Italy. Appearing on the RAI television channel a few days after the action, Maria Lai explained: "It was like putting a match to firewood that was ready to burn," stating that nowhere else this work could have assert itself with the same power and symbolic effectiveness as Ulassai (Angelotti et al., 2024, p. 310).

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsroVFXpOUY



*Figure 30*
*Al Madhafah / The Living Room*
Sandy Hilal
2018–2021, Prästholmen, Boden, Sweden

The project is inspired by a story about a Syrian refugee couple Yasmeen Mahmoud and Ibrahim Muhammad Haj Abdullah, who had moved to Boden from Syria and drew on the tradition of hospitality. The architect Sandi Hilal, together with Yasmeen and Ibrahim, supported by Public Art Agency Sweden, Bodenbo, Havremagasinet and the Defense Museum Boden, have collaborated in the Al Madhafah / The Living Room art project. Al Madhafah / The Living Room in the Yellow House at Prästholmen is a work of art, but also a living room open to those who want to host new encounters. After this, a network of various living rooms activated simultaneously in different locations: the house of Yasmine and Ibrahim in Boden, ArkDes Museum in Stockholm, Fawwar refugee camp in the south of the West Bank, and the living room of Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti's house in Stockholm supported by the Arab Fund for Art and Culture (Angelotti et al., 2024, p. 160).



*Figure 31*
*160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*
Santiago Sierra
Salamanca, Spain, 2000

Four sex workers addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to give their consent to be publicly tattooed (Sierra, 2000).

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7P9YMwIfxc&t=3s



*Figure 32*
*Punk Prayer*
Pussy Riot
Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Moscow, 2012

*"Women, according to the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church, should give birth and love. The Russian Orthodox Church does not like feminists: thus, according to Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov, "feminism is such a powerful blade against the family!" Pussy Riot is in fact against the traditional patriarchal family, where women are given a secondary, subordinate role. And we, feminists, will serve the Punk Prayer at the altar, because women are not allowed to be there. The Virgin Mary, for example, would not be able to enter the altar if she were in the Temple" (Pussy Riot, 2012).*

*Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smG6LYc-g4w&t=9s*



*Figure 33*
*Vaporisation*
Teresa Margolles
2002, US

Teresa Margolles's installation Vaporización uses water collected from washing the dead to transfuse gallery space with palpable absence. Fogging the room with inhalable condensation makes the living and dead permeable to each other while reinscribing the role of performer onto the body of the viewer. In this exchange, the nameless dead of Mexico City are given a communal theatricality that operates at the edge of visibility, in the theological realm known as via negativa. Through refusal, via negativa has the potential to encourage transformation of self-concept and commitment to others' well-being. This article explores these elements as ethical and aesthetic imperatives in Teresa Margolles's neo-minimalist installations, comparing methods of encountering the illegible through literal diffusion of bodily contact with theology that concerns divinity as unknowable. Tactics of performative negation emerging in Queer theology and contemporary art have the ability to resuscitate the sacred within the relational aspects of exhibition space, to confront dehumanization, and to retain intimacy while contributing nondidactically to human rights discourse (Santos, 2024).

Funeral of a

# *Cedar tree*

A.2.



*Figure 91*

36 images of
***grief***

A.3.



*Figure 92*

Gardens of Oblivion:

# *cartography of a distant memory I*

A.4.



*Figure 93*

Gardens of Oblivion:

# *cartography of a distant memory II*

A.5.

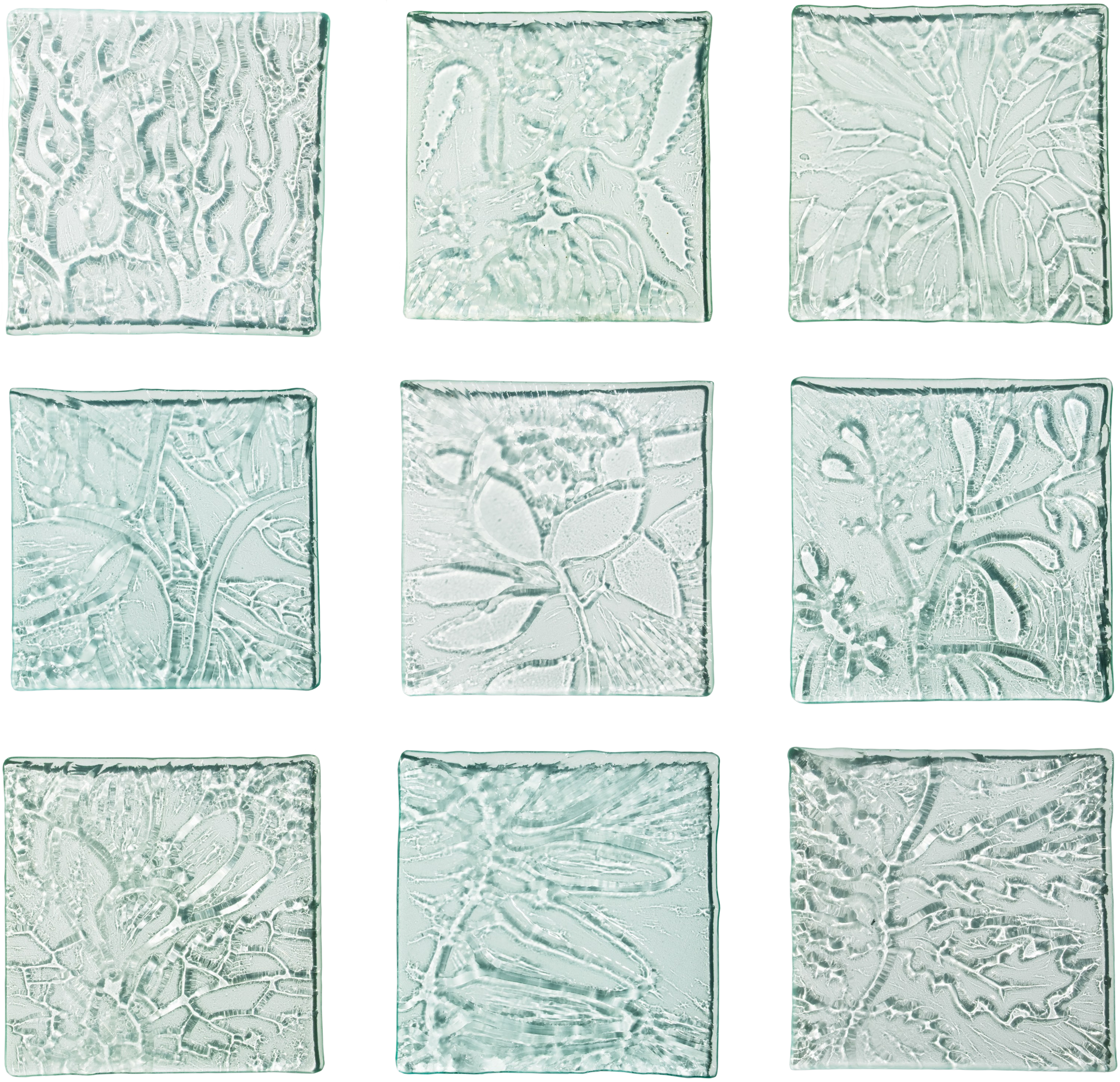


*Figure 94*

Gardens of Oblivion:

# *cartography of a distant memory III* A.6.



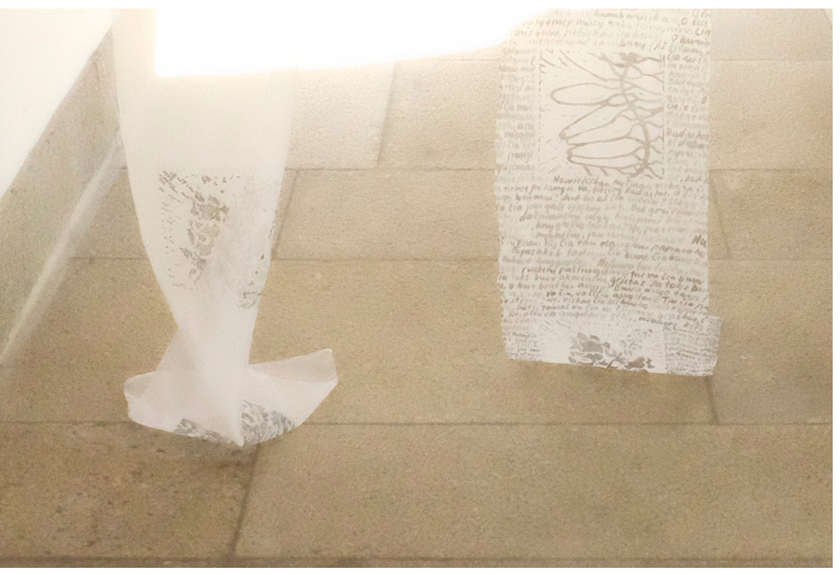











*Figure 95*