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Solitude Journal 2 *On the Occult and the Supernatural* 

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Detail of a naturally occurring ring of mushrooms, also commonly known as a fairy ring, fairy circle, and elf circle. They are found mainly in forested areas. Captured by Krzysztof Gutfrański in October 2019 in the forest around the Solitude castle.

### Editorial

## There Are Roots You Can Remember Krzysztof Gutfrański and Denise Helene Sumi

The first step of magic is (un)learning, and to empower yourself enough to then have the confidence to truly wish to effect change within as well as without. It's an ongoing infinite process of change through learning to be shared with your community.

Our first get-together to plan this issue took place in early summer 2020, when we met with fellows on the meadow in front of Akademie Schloss Solitude to discuss the last chapter of Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*<sup>1</sup> and the first chapter of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Heart*.<sup>2</sup> Originally, the idea was to make a journal on »Radical Pedagogy« in cooperation with Ujazdowski Castle's *Obieg* magazine, an interdisciplinary journal about art and humanities with a decolonial streak. Unfortunately *Obieg* magazine no longer exists in this form, as it has taken another direction.

Previously digesting the texts, we spent the afternoon sharing stories about our schooling and upbringing and the places or countercultural movements we could learn from – or get confused or amazed by. Between the lockdowns and close to the woods we wanted to draw on experience-based learning methods, the »living laboratory« of education, and our bodily and cognitive abilities of sensing/being/transforming with the world. In this first session, we invited fellows to think along nonmaterialistic frequencies, communion, and maybe even spiritual and ritualistic aspects of learning. We could observe that many attendees were interested in methodologies and rituals that are informed by ancestral and Indigenous practices or other *a priori* concealed languages and cultural techniques.

We are aware that the terms »the Occult« and »the Supernatural« are concepts that were framed by Western patriarchal traditions and their attributions. But we take them as a starting point for this issue, as the occult was also largely explored and displayed in valid scholarship and thus challenges both nominations/ classifications, boundaries and hegemonic structures per se. Likewise, the supernatural is widely associated with phenomena such as a cosmological world view, the world of the spirits, parapsychology, or transcendence, and can be traced to various philosophical, religious, mythological, and Indigenous domains. It thus represents an overarching approach. What is interesting is the trans-historical continuation: If we now see an increased interest in practices and knowledge deviating from institutionalized secured knowledge, this is due to centuries of sanctioned knowledge, segregation, and demarcation. We would like to share one of Gutfrański's stories here:

Back in the late 80s and early 90s, I grew up in a special place in northern Poland. The fall of communism had started the craziest period of recent Polish history. A time of mafias, UFO stories, dark New-Age cults, Americophilia and wild, rapacious karaoke-capitalism. I lived in a town which historically is one of the most important pilgrimage places in the region, founded on a supposedly equally relevant site of a former Slavic cult. It is a home of the medieval miraculous figure of Holy Mary that exposed me to the energies of vision, ardent ludic Catholic religiosity, and incredibly charismatic characters. This ancient Catholic tradition was gradually supplemented by an influx of New-Age and alternative truth-seeking ventures, at times materializing in the form of organ-snatching sects and on everyday mass hypnotism right from the screen performed by Soviet-styled TV psychics, or traveling dowsers saving you from the harms of underground waters. These »health séances,« aimed at reassuring citizens panicked over the ongoing political upheaval, were just part of a much wider repertoire. The popular culture of the time was simplistic yet suggestive, and if you were susceptible enough to these phenomena, all surrounding labor pains of capitalist transformation could have been seen as a sort of common »magic.« Fueled by ongoing disbelief in the future, the old values of collective thinking gradually disappeared under the influence of the heralds of a new order-the new role models, the new language and captivating juju of the market. Back then, I could observe how »magical thinking« can be seen primarily as an alternative form of (un)learning not allied to a state or established theologies. Which in times of crisis can be successfully activated for (mass) healing purposes or even vice versa for total crackdown.<sup>3</sup>

Now, in a completely different time, we can experience something similar, but in high definition and in the form of a collective 24/7 pandemic livestream of common global madness. And this is most likely just a harbinger of further problems with the climate crisis, austerity and cyber-life consequences of the period we are heading to; with its growing critique for existing systems and structures by representatives of all different political spectrums. Now more than ever, people are becoming loyal to simple symbols of consumerism and they're run by fear. Fear for your own and closest ones' health makes people afraid of change and what the future holds. Now with the global pandemic we can observe the effect of dividing and polarizing on a global scale more than ever before, even on the level of each echo chamber. As individuals, we are emotionally involved, mainly because of the media simplifying things and making everything very black and white. So you're either for or against something. It is a post-post truth moment when the year 2020 - which according to the Ouija board was possessed by the demonic entity »Zozo« - gave the stage to another year of backspinning and restrictions.<sup>4</sup> We need to acknowledge that the ivory tower of official, sanctioned knowledge - indoctrinated by the power structures as solely valid and classified as real or fake, science or humbug - apparently does not get us closer to understanding where and what we are now.

Coming from every corner of the planet – syncretic religions and multiple ethnical groups to individual search for self-fulfillment – contributors featured in this issue proclaimed the difficulties they had with the term »magic« in general. Knowing that from the earliest cave paintings to the beliefs and practices of modern Indigenous communities this trend occupies cybersocials, magic cannot be dismissed as irrational because it has a mind of its own. To quote the Desert Lab collective, one of the contributors of this issue: »You can call it magical, spiritual, wisdom of the ancestors if you like, but we would call this knowledge. Knowledge has many different forms.«<sup>5</sup>

These initially disenchanting words by implication mean for us that instead of reproducing a naïve or colonial notion of magic as the Other, non-rational, or an anthropological-academic reading that objectifies certain practices and methods, we instead take contemporary interest in magic to talk about past and present witchcraft and artists whistleblowing the destruction of cultural and natural environment.<sup>6</sup>

We see the occult and the supernatural as positive tools to understand what is happening around us, to con-

nect with nature, and as another way to tackle crises. »Real Magic« is against division; against the way that societies have been structured for hundreds of years and now put to a harsh test when everything becomes increasingly atomized. We can be mere observers of these happenings or try to explore alternatives, which eventually give us better understanding of where we are collectively heading.

What would happen if more attention were paid to magical and or spiritual consciousness? What effects would this have on individual, social, and cultural levels? Such questions could perhaps help us understand magic today and confront it with logic-heavy Western automatisms. Magic as a form of knowledge works through analogy and association: uniting, not separating society, individuals, and phenomena. It is not overly idealistic to suggest that participation rather than separation can have positive environmental and social effects that radically undermine ideological, political, and religious divisions run by fear. If we take magic this way, we can perhaps connect to the sense of infinite whole. Asking these questions can at the very least evoke a different understanding of the role of magic and the possibilities of magical consciousness in art and everyday life - to make subtle changes to the way we experience and interpret the world.

We are interested in artistic positions and how authors of this issue use the occult and the supernatural for their practice. Considering the times we are in, we are not looking at magic as a form of solipsism or a tool for further political segregation and charlatanry. We are interested in the knowledge of the past to update the future. What was a good ritual in 1850 might have no relevance to us now. But a ritual that destroys the power of certain atomizing elements of the internet and cleans it, might be important now.7 With this issue and through multiple histories/realities, methodologies, and practices, we can connect to hermetic, syncretic, or pagan traditions that function as a surrogate for a community that is intentionally rewriting its plot. The first step of magic is (un)learning, and to empower yourself enough to then have the confidence to truly wish to effect change within as well as without. It's an ongoing infinite process of change through learning to be shared with your community.

In spiritual terms of the *Solitude Journal*, we acknowledge an ongoing surge of interest in artists seeking the invisible. And the afterlife of the occult manifesting in both artistic practice and institutional programming around the world. A transhistorical importance in the occult has always been present in the arts. We can see it as a medium connecting us to a better understanding of the consequences of magic and pandemics seen as division from nature. The ongoing wave of spirituality in arts is rooted in explorations of feminism, anticolonialism, and alternative power systems. And with this issue we are connecting fully to it. Magic is in the mind!

**Krzysztof Gutfrański** is a curator, editor, and researcher. His contextual research practice pivots on issues of social engagement, alternative education, theory of value, and non-functional thinking in the era of systemic and technological transformations. Krzysztof was a fellow at the Akademie in 2020 and is guest editor of this issue.

**Denise Helene Sumi** is a curator and editor based in Vienna and Stuttgart. As part of Akademie Schloss Solitude's Digital Solitude she is editor-in-chief of the Solitude Journals. She is a founding member and co-director of the exhibition space Kevin Space in Vienna.

1 Silvia Federici: *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive*. New York 2004.

2 Paulo Freire: *Pedagogy of the Heart*. New York 1997. 3 Both in the summer 2020 reading group at Akademie Schloss Solitude, and in ongoing private conversations, guest editor Krzysztof Gutfrański has been an inspiring dialogue partner for creating this issue by sharing numerous examples of the substitution of magical practices by the state (capitalist or communist) and various cultural, and countercultural movements. Magic is everywhere! 4 Ouija – a spirit board or talking board, *Zozo* – see https://darrenevansparanormal.blogspot.com/2020/03/is-2020-year-of-zozo.html (accessed, March 15, 2021).

5 See in this issue the article *Kutch Desert Lab. A Speculative Script* by Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Charmy Sadhana Jayesh, and Goutam Ghosh, p. 12.

6 The analogic list is long: extractivist capitalism, desertification, water privatization, austerity measures, or political oppression; all situations that are eradicating cultural traditions and shortening inclusiveness, community building, and environmental justice and alternative education.

7 »Casting telecommunications spells, we activate our collective imaginaries, traveling through the superhighways of the digital. We trace our physical forms though screen portals and routers, to the underground and watery infrastructures, the landscapes and niches, that connect us.« In September 2020, Teresa Dillon hosted a »Cleansing Rituals for the Internet« as part of the series Nepantlas, curated by Daphne Dragona for the *Digital Solitude* program.

I Have Tried To Conjure in Braille and It Worked

### **Kuzey Topuz**

Writer Kuzey Topuz draws an image of a messy present in which »mass disinfection« activities keep accompanying mass idolatry, the necromancers' discourse rules the world, and as long as you infinitely repeat things, anything is possible. To prevent us from nostalgic devotion or longing for the past in the face of our current present, she teaches us a counternostalgia spell.

*The year 2020* was already an allegory, and anything by any means linked to it felt eons old before it even ended. When I was breaking down the unnerving symbolism, this happened to be the first image I came up with: a notorious creature has been growing aware of its mirror image too early, or too fast, or both.

Followed by this: While the industry of longing inwardly dominates the cities, metropoles seem to be proud to comply. A type of pride that you sense when facing something that is selfish, yet charming. This yearning scenery seems as invasive as it could get – to the point of necromancy *\*Sorcery\*Collabing\*Dead\**.

Another one pops out: Sleight of hand is being taught at schools before anything else. Even before the student oath and all that. Curriculum titles sound like a fictional country's second-degree humor. And cafeteria menus certainly imply some cultural references that the newcomers are too afraid to ask about.

The image slides: Individuals are now given safewords during their regular life events. The Necromancer reigns and rages. The only roleplay left for them is roleplaying, and this pastime is adorable only for a while.

The next vision is sort of misty: Mass disinfection activities keep accompanying mass idolatry. Certain cleaning products are thought to have pure psyches living inside them, regardless of their being guilt-free or not. And the supreme language that constantly aimed to be invented is even guiltier than its manufacturers. The voices seek a fabulous phrasing over and over again. It's believed these can undo particular things. Somebody says, *because repetition never faileth*. The occasional typos and logical errors found amid these human traces are the attempts of sending an S.O.S message to the reader, doubtlessly made by the homesick.

What comes after is called *counternostalgia*. A haphazard wording to begin. It's certainly lacking grammar. A new approach to speaking in tongues. It is where one is able to hear the speaking-tone tongue at last.

# A simple counternostalgia spell

These instructions will most probably be found in the archives of this transit city, the city that is now a real-life experiment.

1 Find an intersection on Google Maps. Arrange a minimal set-up of that intersection at your place or another nearby space (with small rocks, domino pieces, sugar cubes, etc.). Try to picture yourself there; standing, pacing, sitting, or lying.

2 Light three birthday candles at the center of your intersection to symbolize and summon three natural forces of life: Freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and freedom in general.

3 Pick three random words from the dictionary. Then take a moment to think and repeat them in different combinations. This is how you will begin: »Speak through me.« As soon as you hear the speaking tone tongue, you will recognize it. It sounds familiar to temporal beings.

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4 To keep your tongue away from espionage, write the combinations down in an unfamiliar writing system. Keep reciting as you transfer them to the paper in your own handwriting.

5 To reverse and correct the arrow of time, fold the paper backward three, five, or seven times. Keep it close to your ears until you hear the speaking-tone tongue once again. During the day, keep it on you; at night hide it under your pillow. Once nostalgia dissipates, you will have two options: A) Burn it at the intersection you've chosen on Google Maps. Scatter the ashes. B) If you are not allowed to go out, eat it. Let your system take care of it.



6 Read no more. Do not read anything, in order to distance yourself from the Necromancer's infamous discourse. If it still haunts you, repeat the ritual.

**Kuzey Topuz** is a writer based in Istanbul, and fellow of the »Be Mobile – Create Together!« program, in which Akademie Schloss Solitude participates. In her creative process she uses the tools of different genres and paradigms to generate a multilayered experience. She seeks the pieces – dime novels, memoirs, testimonies, found photographs, pseudoscientific texts, graffities, urban myths, etc. By experimenting on the innate nature of things and the occasional errors they show, she aims to catch momentary nuances to reveal their essence, then reconnect them within another piece of narrative that functions as the absolute constant.



Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Charmy Sadhana Jayesh, and Goutam Ghosh

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Solitude Journal 2 On the Occult and the Supernatural

Kutch, a place between India and Pakistan, is known for its »otherworldly« salt desert (the White Rann), unique rocks, fossils, the ancient Indus Valley archeological site, and Banni Grassland Reserve with its rich and diverse ecology. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Charmy Sadhana Jayesh, and Goutam Ghosh explore this site in terms of three strands in a project they call the »Desert Lab.« In the »Desert Lab« myth and mystical ideas and the site's special geological features are evaluated through speculative ideas of the Desert Planet.

> Mythological stories of Puranas and Dastangoi, describing the early land formation and the creation of the earth are reflected in the geological myths in Kutch. Here, the churning nature of the ocean, the salt desert, frequent earthquakes, and allegories of world turtles form foundational beliefs. Yet belief and myth have been shaken many times over by natural and political turmoil. Therefore, the stories have been carried and echoed in fragments of rocks, archeological ruins, and Jurassic and ammonite fossils. Geographically, the place is known for its searing sun, hot temperatures, low rainfall, and desertification, all of which affect possibilities of new life. In such climatic conditions people lead minimal lives in the isolation of the desert – pastoral, nomadic, with their uninterrupted gaze on the horizon. The desert land has been the walking grounds for reptiles, mariners, mystics, Sufis, traders, pilgrims, and conquerors. Criss-crossing paths, restless days and nights, ups and downs, and frequent seismic activities prevent stable life here. When a mystic poet utters his/her\* words: »[...] Temporary dwellers on the planet,« more than magical or supernatural realms are at play; it is a practice of living in a peaceful, well-disciplined way with minimum resources; a state we may call »Mystic Living.«

#### Prequel: Magic or Metaphor

A note from Goutam: Thank you for letting me know about your idea to include two more people from Kutch for a discussion. It is a great idea to listen to the voices of those living there and experiencing the rhythm and the knowledge of the landscape. It is precisely in telling everyday stories and not transfiguring the landscape into a fairy tale, a magical place, that I see the great potential to grasp the so-called »magical« or »spiritual« and »non-rational« as something not separate from us, but as a common understanding of ourselves as part of a whole. A note from the editor: When I invited Goutam, Bodhisattva, and Charmy to write about their »Desert Lab« project, starting the dialogue, the working title for the second Solitude Journal was still *On Magic, and Spiritual and Non-Rational Realms*.

A note from *S*: Regarding what we explored in Kutch and what we like to call »Mystic Living, « the pairing of magic with the non-rational – as used in the working title for this issue - is misleading. There are many different aspects to this, but one example is the way how magic and miracle operate on different levels of rationality. Magic is demonstrable, while miracles are not. Miracles by definition derive from a realm that can never be captured by the rational. Miracles defy reason. Magic, however, is about things that have a basis. It is interpersonal, and it is about communication. Here, one can invoke Clarke's Third Law and its restatement: »Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,« and therefore any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology. When we talk about magic, we mean it in this sense, not distinguished from the rational, just belonging to a different scale of things on the same continuum of reason. What we don't know or understand in the region may seem »magical« to us, but could just be commonplace to everyone who actually lives there. It is important to remember that these people are not our »spiritual« guides. It's not their job to lead the city-dweller (or White man/woman,\* etc.) to wisdom, nor are we here to lead them to greater science or civilization. They don't have any special wisdom, either, in a non-rational sense. One should eschew anthropological nonsense and not fetishize communities.

What we have instead are possibilities of learning from each other, which do not require cognitive jumps of miracles or new dichotomies between the natural and supernatural. People, animals, and other beings that inhabit the planet have incredible knowledge and craft, some explicit, some tacit, some understandable, some not yet so, that are testimonies to hundreds of thousands of years of different kinds of adaptation. We have many environmental challenges and stressors. Desertification is real. Much of the world is running out of fresh water. Land is becoming too saline and dry to support life. We are in the midst of a mass extinction. All of us need to learn from those who live in the desert. We need to understand what we can do better, and we need to change our ways really fast. Let us just be humble that we don't understand everything, and be open to learning from beings that know more than we do in conditions that most of us are thoroughly unprepared for. Most of humanity won't be able to find direction in a desert or a city if they are dropped in it without a map or a GPS. Most humans wouldn't know how to manage a forest safely so we don't have forest fire outbreaks. Indigenous populations are less than 10 percent of the global population, and occupy about 25 percent of the land, but manage 80 percent of planetary biodiversity. The Amazon forests are a result of indigenous agricultural practices over thousands of years. You can call it magical, spiritual, wisdom of the ancestors if you like, but I would call this knowledge. Knowledge has many different forms. To me learning is about humility. If there are those that know better, maybe I should just listen and learn – not because it's magical, but because it is vital. This applies to many knowledges: Most of us wouldn't know the first thing about fixing a broken electronic device or a machine, so we could do with training given how much waste we produce.

#### Magic #1

•: When a Bharatiya Janata Party politician offered to sponsor a new well, the villagers went to the bhopa to ask for the goddess's advice. He went into a trance

and began to shake and tremble to the chanting and percussion beat of the onlookers. This is the usual ritual with the villagers' shaman. He indicated an area in the village about two kilometers away where water could be found. A group of villagers went there and the bhopa once again went into a trance and struck his spear into the earth. When the villagers dug there, they managed to strike water at 22 feet even though water in the surrounding wells was at a level of 150 feet.

The villagers are convinced that it was through the goddess's blessing that water was struck. It was not always so clear-cut. Sometimes even after the villagers got a green signal to dig a well from the bhopa, they did not strike waters. Failure is usually attributed to bad luck or fate. In most cases, villagers rely on both technical and religious indicators to choose a site to dig a well. Usually technical aspects of knowledge for example, the location of trees and old wells, predominate. Hence, at one level, consulting the bhopa is more a ritualistic and symbolic practice. —Lyla Mehta, *The Politics and Poetics of Water*.

So these are not new knowledges but transformation of the limits of what we consider to be knowledge. The former is about technoscientific specialization, the latter is interdisciplinarity in practice. In the former, knowledge absorption is the goal. In the second, it is creating the grounds for knowledge. It because of the future, and says these aren't lost traditions or anything. They do not belong to the database of the has-been, but are in the present and are about the future.

When we render »knowledge« or »magic« into frameworks or systems we do understand, then the people holding that knowledge become dispensable. What we gain is marketability at the cost of the human. Thus if you can render the »magic« held by the »native« into science, you no longer need to keep the native alive. To discover nature's secrets you can destroy nature. This has been the genocide and ecocide of colonialism. For coevalness, we need to recognize beings – humans and non-human beings – as living, embodied repositories of knowledge, which cannot necessarily be rendered or transferred from magic to science. Hence »tantra« or its many iterations, recognizing the continually transforming and breaking boundaries of knowledge and science. Tantra is not anti-science; it is open science.

#### Magic #2

•: There was an old tree that was burning in the summer heat by a lake. A little bird used to dwell in its lap, and was sad about it. There was a moment when the bird was found flying back and forth between the lake and the tree. Each time, the bird dipped herself into the lake and held water in its tiny wings to wet the burning tree. The bird was continuously doing this until the rain came with a heavy thunderstorm. This story can be seen as a traditional moralistic fable (*Hitapadesh*). But in the summer afternoon in a clear blue sky, you have the magical appearance of sudden rain with thunderstorms. Kabir says »[...] *khuda bhi ro pada uss choti-si chiriya ka hosle dekh ke*': even God began to cry seeing the determined little bird. «

#### Navigations



C: The legend claims that Dhoramnath stood on his head for twelve years on top of Dinodhar Hill, an inactive volcano behind the monastery, in self-imposed penance for a curse he inadvertently invoked. Upon being urged by the gods to cease his penance, he agreed on condition that whatever his eyes first saw would turn barren. And thus the Great Rann of Kutch was created. A temple dedicated to him stands on the hill.

•: There is a scholar who lives in an interior district. There is no phone number. The ocean is not far from where the scholar used to live. I kept the Gulf of the Arabian Sea to my left and to my right Naliya, the last big town before reaching the scholar. We only got three more hints – Osirawandh, Jakau, and the last landmark was the person himself. Roads look like roots of trees in the map and the lines get thinner and disappear in remote, underdeveloped places.

We were four people, squeezed inside the car for a long time. We got down and asked for directions at a roadside stall. The time we left from the stall and reached the destination felt like it had low gravity, with light falling like salt crystals, less like popcorns in a glass box. There was little sense of direction beside the straight line of the road ahead of us. The empty barren land plays tricks with moving cars. The texture of the land in front of the eyes was moving in a circle like a record player. One gets confused about what is moving before and after – car, land, or the sky? You look at the far horizon where the land mass meets the sky. Here, the ground and the sky become one swaying screen. In the rough desert land, when the sun-rays are unbearable, a curtain of water forms in the corner of the desert eye. We also know this phenomena as mirage or illusion. There is a saying by the great Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam that goes: »Those smart people who do not commit the mistake of understanding the mirage as water: there is a lack of thirst in them.«

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#### **Healing Pool**



Narrations of healings do not proceed linearly and have many twists, turns, and networks. In the end they resolve themselves without any crashing moment of revelation. What makes a good recovery makes poor stories. In a long process of healing there are many ups and downs. There are times when you feel comforts (*aram*) and times you feel worse and times you feel nothing. One must respect the process of healing. Healing is a relationship with the physical and psychological substances that make one heal.

Or

Drop a bucket in the well; while the familiar reflection is momentarily shattered, what is brought from beneath the surface will be exactly what you need, though it may bear no discernible relationship to the surface image that drew you in. Try to show others what you see in the well; they won't see exactly what you see, even if you look over the edge with them. The shapes on the shifting surface of water is the experience of embodiment in layers of the virtual. —Carla Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral* 

Or

Darvesh (Angle) used to carry a mirror upon which stories used to appear. Every story is a mirror that we carry in our hands. There are points when mirrors (properties) begin to melt and vaporize our sight. A curtain of mercury (Paara) plays behind the mirror.

•••

#### **Uninterrupted Whiteness**



Do you think we are making an attempt to differentiate between Black and White when we talk about magic and the uninterrupted whiteness of Kutch?

•: We had now traveled beyond the ocean, and the water had begun to dry up and a huge salt marshland had appeared. The last melted snow dried and froze into the first salt. The horizon was white; the thin brown line that separates ground from the sky is the last hope of our senses. After walking a few kilometers in the salted barren land, the midday sky began to reflect on the ground, and ground reflected it back to the sky again. One falls unconscious, only to be rescued in the Rann by villagers who live nearby or border security forces who patrol the border area. When the BSF asked the unconscious person ...Where is he coming from, and where is he going? He says he is coming from point A, going to point B.

Back in the village there are rumors about a terrorist in the Raan.



The ocean turned into the white field of Rann or ocean of milk or ocean of curd. A musician from Nirona in Kutch, Musa Bhai once said that »Sufi is like a white page, like a white field of Raan.« Photo: Endre Tveitan, Oslo, 2017. Courtesy of the photographer

Now, let us think, what are the forces of nature? Is Rann a force of nature? Do we see the desert on its own terms? In its complete *Svatantrata* (freedom)? I am remembering the time in the desert, walking in starlight and losing the grip of time, when the stars and the salty land merged. That night I couldn't differentiate between the two. Every next step was a surprise. I didn't know what was ahead of me. The idea of time slowly fading and yet precisely and mathematically musical, a sense of separation and a point of convergence. But, as a survival experience, it is scary to think and experience.

Saleem Sinai, the protagonist in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, finds himself »anchored off the Rann of Kutch on a heat-soaked afternoon,« he says:

I stared through the heat-haze at the Rann. The Rann of Kutch ... I'd always thought it a magical name, and half-feared, half-longed to visit the place, that chameleon area which was land for half the year and sea for the other half, and on which, it was said, the receding ocean would abandon all manner of fabulous debris, such as treasure chests, white ghostly jellyfish, and even the occasional gasping, freak-legendary figure of a merman.

#### The Ocean and the Desert

 $\swarrow$ : In India and the subcontinent, there is no dearth of examples of parts of the country suffering droughts, desertification, and flooding at the same time, leading to wide-spread destruction of property and loss of life – not just human life, but all manner of flora and fauna. The desert planet and the drowned world. The desert planet and the drowned world, from one angle, seem to be absolute opposites.



: There were the asuras – quite visible and evidently lost in the dry ocean.

: The Samudra Manthan (*Great Ocean Churning*) is the foundational myth, found across world cultures and mythologies.

The cousins, *devas* (gods) and the *asuras* (demons) are at war. Following the great devastation, in which the devas lose, they agree to work together to bring balance by churning the ocean of milk, which would yield *amrit*, the nectar of immortality. Mount Mandara was to be used as a rod to churn the *amrit* out of the ocean, and *Vasuki*, the serpent king or the *nagaraja* (abides on Shiva's neck) is the churning rope was held by the cousins, as a rope, to rotate the humongous churning rod. But Mount Mandara was going to submerge in the ocean. The devas went to Vishnu, as the king of tortoises *Kurma Raja* and said to him, »O Tortoise king, thou wilt have to hold the mountain on thy back.« Vishnu in the form of Kurma (tortoise), came to the rescue of devas and supported the mountain on its shell.



A tortoise, again a slow winner to tackle in the drought and drowning. Field visit 2020

•: Ismail Bhai lives in Khadri-island in Kutch. He works for the regional forest department. We often hang around with him whenever we are in the area and see him set off with binoculars and wander around the white desert. He told us that this place came out from the ocean, like a turtle (*kachuya*). It was evening sun, the temperature in the desert (-lab) flask was cooling down with the breeze from the Raan – a drop of blue poison (Amrita) in the milk of the ocean became a precious pearl.

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# **Kepler's Witch Trial**



As a child, Kepler witnessed the Great Comet of 1577, which attracted the attention of astronomers across Europe. In addition to the comet, five zodiac symbols appear in the sky: Aries, Pisces, Aquarius, Capricorn, and Sagittarius. Below the comet's tail are the crescent moon and Saturn, depicted as a star with the astronomical symbol ħ. At the bottom center, a man draws the comet by the light of a lantern. Jiřrí Jakubuv Dačický, Untitled (Great Comet of 1577), woodcut, 1577 (public domain/wikicommons)

## Johanna Ziemer

Solitude Journal 2 On the Occult and the Supernatural

In her essay the author takes a look at the entanglements of fundamental European institutions like church, science and legal system with the notion of magic in the Early Modern Age. Through a concrete witch trial story she analyses forms of systematization and classification in the realm of scientific demonology as well as Western practices of segregation. With a brief outlook on Édouard Glissant's writing about *opacity* she proposes a more critical view on the production of European history and its narrations of freedom or rationality.

Massive transformative developments in technology and science, and the brutal suppression of non-Christian beliefs, are the two known poles of an area of conflict in which realities of the early modern era are placed from our current perspective. The births of the natural sciences and the peak of femicides in the form of »witch hunts« fall into this period.

Katharina Kepler, the mother of the well-known mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler, was one of many women prosecuted at that time for being in a pact with the devil and using witchcraft. A brief analysis of this trial's circumstances, together with a wider view on the process of segregation in European systems of thought, questions the proclaimed inambiguity of that time. This text searches for a decolonial approach to history and European self-perception – following the mention by philosopher Isabelle Stengers that the term »animism« (or »magic« – note from the author) »can hardly be disentangled from pejorative colonialist associations [or] associations with the idea of >stages<.«<sup>1</sup>

Today, it's still valid and almost undisputed to take »the« Early Modern Age as a reference period for the birth of Modern Europe. As such, it has become a projection screen, and its achievements are interpreted as pointing beyond its time and space. The Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes about the production of the Renaissance period:

The historical itinerary was political, as evidenced by the now well-known names that it evokes – Columbus, Magellan, Charles V [...] and the turning moments that set its pace [...] These political developments paralleled the emergence of a new symbolic order. The invention of the Americas [...], the simultaneous invention of Europe, the division of the Mediterranean by an imaginary line [...], the westernization of Christianity, and the invention of a Greco-novel past to Western Europe were all part of the process through which Europe became the West. What we call Renaissance, much more an invention in its own right than a rebirth, ushered in a number of philosophical questions to which politicians, theologians, artists, and soldiers provided both concrete and abstract answers. What is Beauty, What is Order? What is the State? But also and above all: What is Man?<sup>2</sup>

The hegemony of »ratio« started in the modern era in Europe and ran parallel to the idea of systematic order. It became one of the widespread ideas about this time that rational laws would ultimately replace the belief in magic and magical thinking and instead install a more relevant, universal order system. Magic has since been regarded as something foreign and other, far removed from Western culture. The very insistence on this clear separation points to a much more difficult mode of thought that has operated in Western and colonial systems of thought for centuries – that is segregation. What does this mean for the conception of our own history?

On closer examination, one can see quite quickly that the picture of the »ratio« rising in the seventeenth century that replaced the until then predominant magic, is not correct. Practices classified as magic were found in almost all areas of personal and public life. Clairvoyance or divination in jurisdiction and administration, metaphysical considerations as part of (natural) scientific discourse, and the coexistence of faith and superstition even within the churches were nothing unusual. The scientist Johannes Kepler depicts in his biography the simultaneity of many such supposed contradictions. As a mathematician, he proved the laws of the heliocentric solar system and calculated the elliptic orbits of the planets. At the same time, he wrote horoscopes with scientific claims and was convinced that the stars, like the weather, had an influence



SN 1604, Kepler's Supernova: A false-color composite (CXO/HST/Spitzer Space Telescope) image of the supernova remnant nebula from SN 1604. The »new star« was visible between 1604 and 1605 and made Kepler write his »De stella nova in pede serpentarii«. Observations from each telescope highlight distinct features of the supernova remnant, a fast-moving shell of iron-rich material from the exploded star, surrounded by an expanding shock wave that is sweeping up interstellar gas and dust. Each color in this image represents a different region of the electromagnetic spectrum, from X-rays to infrared light. The X-ray and infrared data cannot be seen with the human eye. Courtesy of NASA/ESA/JHU/R. Sankrit and W. Blair

on us humans. He was a devout Protestant and yet he suspected a force emanating from the sun, the *Anima motrix*, which unfolded throughout the solar system and had an effect on the bodies located there. Like those of many others, the transitions in his thinking were fluid.

A completely different phenomenon in which transition blurs were the witch trials, which peaked in Kepler's time. These can be seen as a particular example of intricacy. Here, the objectivity of the institutions science, church, and law interacted in the most absurd way with a diffuse belief in magic. How dangerous the elaborate system was, which outwardly pretended to be objective and inwardly was full of contradictions, and how difficult it was to encounter it, Kepler had to personally experience when a neighbor accused his mother of witchcraft in her hometown of Leonberg and pressed charges. From 1615–21, Katharina Kepler had to defend herself against the accusation of witchcraft in civil and criminal proceedings. A neighbor accused her of trying to poison her with a potion, and a child indicated that his arm had become stiff after Katharina had grazed it in passing. Katharina Kepler was threatened with torture and death by fire at the stake. In 1620 Johannes Kepler personally came to Württemberg and took on the defense on behalf of the official lawyer. The danger to his mother was very real. More than 50,000 people were burned between 1550 and 1650 in Europe after court sentences, or died as a result of torture or witch-trial tests during the trials.

In his defense, Kepler had sought advice from lawyers and theologians that he knew. They informed him on the current status of relevant disputes. Even if the large number of trials that took place gave the impression that the trials were uncontroversial or at least would have been unquestionably enforced by the authorities, this was not the case. For years, scholars from various disciplines seriously discussed questions such as whether the general rules of procedure should be applied to witch trials, whether

animal transformations could really take place and also the suitability of witch-trial tests (German: *Hexenprobe*), such as the ordeal of water. Rulers, too, whether Catholic or Protestant, had different opinions on it.

As a natural scientist and rational man, was Kepler suitable to defend in witch trials? Regardless of his personal stance on magical issues, at least from the perspective of the accused, he displayed many qualities that made him formally more suitable for defense than any local lawyer. He was networked with international scientific circles, familiar with critical text analysis, and trained in argumentation, which was reflected in his defense. He had applied for access to all statements which, according to the rules of procedure even then, had to be recorded in writing. He meticulously questioned the credibility of the individual witnesses and the conclusiveness of their statements.

But even this typical legal procedure was not enough to fully convince the court of his mother's innocence. The fact that she did not have to be burned at the stake was solely due to the fact that she was ultimately granted an additional ordeal, which she passed. The 73-year-old was led to the instruments of torture and given one last chance to confess to the charges against her before the interrogation under torture was to continue. However, since she still refused, this was eventually considered proof that she was not a witch. The trials by ordeal were not actually permitted in court, but were used repeatedly. Not infrequently, the tests themselves led to death, such as the ordeal of water. During the *Hexenbad* the woman was tied up and fastened to a rope, which was thrown into a lake or river. If she sank, her innocence was proved. The demonologists drew this conclusion from their assumption that water, as a »pure« element, would only »accept« innocent women. The women who were in a pact with the devil would not be absorbed by the pure water and would thus float. Many women drowned during these tests because they were not pulled out in time.

That of all people, the members of the secular courts had an affinity to the belief in supernatural powers was one of the prerequisites for these trials' great effectiveness. Objective court rules and personal motives for believing in magical offenses were a dangerous, disastrous mixture. The insistence on supposed objectivity corresponded to the spirit of the times and did not stop at the realm of magic. Especially the debate about the distinction between white and black or natural and demonic magic was highly topical at that time. But there were also other lively discussions about the nature, possibilities, and legitimacy of magic in all important theory-forming areas of the time, such as theology, law, or (natural) philosophy. The natural sciences only began to emerge from other disciplines. Scholars such as Giordano Bruno or Agrippa von Nettesheim wrote important contributions and classifications that systematized and bundled knowledge and traditions about magical knowledge. In this way, they quasi-founded magic discourses and supplemented them with their own treatises. In terms of content, the focus was often formerly on metaphysical and cosmological questions, which today would be partly ascribed to the fields of physics and astronomy. Another form of theorizing was the Hexenhammer - Malleus Maleficus (»Witches' Hammer») written by a Dominican monk. In the eyes of the author, this work was an implementation of the papal bull of 1484, which condemned witchcraft in the sense of the Inquisition. With the *Hexenhammer*, in the form of a scientific treatise, definitions and rules for the persecution of »witches« were written and distributed, and the book quickly became very popular. The subject struck a nerve, and even if the book was not officially recognized by the church and the courts as a theoretical basis for their work, the influence it had on its advocates at the level of opinion-forming, language use, and the encouragement of a certain basic mood was considerable. The book became the ideological basis of recognized demonologists, a subgroup of witchcraft theorists who

studied the nature of black magic and often taught at universities. In general, both natural and demonic magic did not contrast with the notion of science at that time, but were often part of it.

Nevertheless there were differences. While for some, the increasingly differentiated observations of metaphysical questions and investigations of invisible forces of nature led to ever new knowledge and the development of new disciplines and let knowledge (literally) extend to infinity, the advocates of witch hunting used systematization and order as a pretext and motive for exclusion, marginalization, and persecution.

#### The Inheritance:

Can we learn to endure and live the *Chaos-world*? How can we work against a hierarchy of knowledge that misses the multiplicity of all voices? The author Édouard Glissant, who repeatedly dealt with questions of identity, relation, and the complication of narratives, demands:

I claim for all the right to opacity that is not enclosure. It is to react in this way against so many reductions to the false clarity of universal models. It's not necessary to »understand« (or »grasp«; French: »comprendre«) who ever, individual, community, people, to »take them with me« at the price of suffocate them, of losing them so in a numbing totality that I oversee in order to accept to live with them, to build with them, to risk with them. That the opacity, ours for the others and that of the others for us when they meet, doesn't close at obscurantisme or apartheid, but be a feast and not terror. [...] All this has the sole quality of opening the trace to other saying. It is on the joint poetics that I am calling at the moment. Our actions in the world are sterile if we do not change, as much as we can, the imaginary of the humanities that we constitute.<sup>3</sup>

Glissant permanently designs models of thinking that act like networks and are dynamic, yet offer security. They are countermodels to monolithic, closed representations of history, which may sometimes seem tempting, but whose mechanisms function through exclusion and attempts at dominance. Whereas the pain that is caused is real, the disambiguity of European history in itself is only pretended. Unveiling its own fragility could be one of the many steps towards a decolonial approach to European national narratives. And by doing so putting a necessary end to what Sylvia Wynter calls the »fallacy of supraculturalism»<sup>4</sup> and re-open with Glissant to other saying.

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1 Isabelle Stengers, »Den Animismus zurückgewinnen« [Reclaiming Animism], in Animismus-Revisionen der Moderne, edited by I. Albers, A. Franke, p. 111: »The very name can hardly be disentangled from pejorative colonialist associations, also from associations with the idea of »stages«, a common (folk)lore shared by Sigmund Freud, James Frazer, and Edward Tylor. The mature (white) adult male, who has accepted the hard truth that he is alone in a mute, blind world, is then able to define the past as what leads toward him.«, see also: *eflux Journal* #36, 2012, www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61245/ reclaiming-animism (accessed February 05, 2021).

2 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*, 1995: p.74.

3 Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-monde, Poétique IV*, 1997: p. 29: »Je réclame pour tous le droit à l'opacité, qui n'est pas le renfermement. C'est pour réagir par là contre tant de réductions à la fausse clarté de modèles universels. Il ne m'est pas nécessaire de «comprendre qui que ce soit, individu, communauté, peuple, de le "prendre avec moi" au prix de l'étouffer, de le perdre ainsi dans une totalité assomante que je gérérais, pour accepter de vivre avec lui, de bâtir avec lui, de risquer avec lui. Que l'opacité, la nôtre s'il se trouve pour l'autre, et celle de l'autre pour nous quand cela se rencontre, ne ferme pas sur l'obscurantisme ni l'apartheid, nous soit une fête, non une terreur. Que le droit à l'opacité, par où se préserverait aux mieux le Divers et par où se renforcerait l'acceptation, veille, ô lampes! Sur nos poétiques.

4 Sylvia Wynter, »No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues«, in: Forum N. H. I. Knowledge for the 21st century, Knowledge on Trial, vol.1 no.1, p. 42.

Tout cela sommairement conté, a pour seul qualité d'ouvrir la trace à d'autres dits. C'est aux poétiques conjointes que je fais appel en ce moment. Nos actions dans le monde sont frappées de stérilité si nous ne changeons pas, autant que nous y pouvons, l'imaginaire des humanités que nous constituons.«

# Brazil, Brasil, Pindorama



Luiza and the celebration of Reinado in Carmópolis de Minas. © Mariana Botelho, 2019

# A conversation between Luiza da lola and Alice Zanon

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Body-crossroads in the world is me, of Pindoramic<sup>1</sup> nationality. At the crossing with Lúcia Maria de Oliveira, I am Luiza (Warrior), at the crossing with Elvira de Oliveira, I am da Iola (violet blossom). On the route of Goiás, I was born in the country of Cataguases.<sup>2</sup> I am a seed of King Ambrósio, remaining daughter of the Quilombo Campo Grande. On these Bantu Minas, I am the continuum of the dreams of my grandmothers, great-grandmothers, great-great-grandmothers and their memories. I am the outcome of blessings from many ancient Black women who knitted my feet,<sup>3</sup> who healed me from *aguamento*<sup>4</sup> and espinhela caída.<sup>5</sup> I am this meeting point, dispersing point, and crossing from Tupanuara to Curral del Rei<sup>6</sup> and vice versa. I am this questioning of who I really am or think I am, where I come from, where I am going to. To what I came. I am this unfinished version, retouched daily, on the forge of good character. On it I firm my foundation, commandment, and sacrament. I am a 41-moons spirit in this body-present-matter, dancing with everything and everyone around the Mystery. -Luiza da Iola

## Lexicon

**Reinado of Our Lady of the Rosary** – although it could be translated as Kingdom of Our Lady of the Rosary, since the words have direct equivalents in English, I have opted not to translate the term *Reinado* in the text since it is a proper name of an African-Brazilian tradition, which will be one subject of the following conversation.

**Pedir licença** – *Pedir* is the verb »to ask« in its infinitive form, *licença* is a noun that can be translated as »license.« I tried to translate this expression into English as »excuse me« or »pardon,« but none of them fits the actual meaning. Even in Portuguese the expression is delicate, because it is a translation of the Yoruba word àgò, expressing a request for passage, asking for space to pass someone or something. *Pedir licença* to one's elders and young ones denotes respect.

**Benzedeira** (n.) – »medicine woman,« »healer,« »priestess.« *Benzer*, the verb which originates the noun, cannot be simply translated into »bless.« We have a different word that is closer to »bless,« it's *abençoar. Benzer*, however, seems to be a more concrete way of blessing. It involves praying and practices that can be related to natural medicine or rituals of healing.

For those who read this text in English, it might seem that we are talking about Brazil, but we aren't. Brasil has had at least ten names since its colonization. Pindorama is said to have been the name of the land before the arrival of the Portuguese, and it was given by Tupi-Guarani peoples. After Brasil became independent (while the emperor was the son of the Portuguese king), the country received the name of Império do Brazil. Now it's República Federativa do Brasil. And that's where we are. Translation is an imperfect door. Foreigner comes from fores, door of the house, and foras, outside. We have this word in Portuguese as well, fora, meaning the same as it does in Latin, outside. To understand a tradition that exists in Brasil it's necessary to find some sort of door from Brazil to Brasil. Then, perhaps, one might find a door to Pindorama.

#### Peço licença.7

To open the door and understand what is being said behind it, there are three keys. The first one is the crowning, the second is the myth, and the third is the time: Luiza da lola was crowned the Perpetual Queen of the Reinado de Nossa Senhora do Rosário in 2018.

#### The crowning

Reinado is a tradition of the establishment of an empire. According to writer and academic Leda Maria Martins, its conception includes varied elements, liturgical and ceremonial acts and narratives that reinterpret the crossings of the Black people from Africa to the Americas.<sup>8</sup> She also writes about the role of the tradition of crowning a Black Queen and King in »gathering Black people from different nations and ethnicities that in their singing, gestures, dances and speeches inscribed Africa in Brazilian soil.« Citing Stuckey Sterling's analysis of the crowning of black Kings during the Pinksters festival in the United States in the eighteenth century, the author draws some relations between the processes in Brasil and Cuba. The procession, the music, the drums, the dances, the unity, the recreation of memory by establishing an Empire in the Americas are all points in common between these traditions of the diaspora.



Job's tears, called Lágrimas de Nossa Senhora (Tears of Our Lady) in Minas Gerais, adorn Luiza's chest making a cross © Mayara Laila, 2019

#### The foundational myth, legend, or story

She would tell a legend from the time of the slaves that really happened.<sup>9</sup> -D. Alzira Germana Martins<sup>10</sup>

Although the worship of Our Lady of the Rosary started in Europe,<sup>11</sup> there are differences between the way she is viewed by African-Brazilians and Europeans. The Virgin from the stories that founded the Reinado, unlike the European one, comes close to the men and women who rescued her from the water. She is brought to shore and sits on their drums. She chooses to make her kingdom on Earth amongst them.

#### The time

When the people who were transplanted from Africa arrived in Brasil, they received Christian names like José and Maria. The slave trade started around 1539.

There are records of crowning kings of Congo in Brazil in different regions since 1674. In the nineteenth century, the tradition was banned by the Catholic church, even though before that the crowning used to be encouraged by the »owners« of the enslaved people and the church itself as a means of maintaining the catholic order.

The tradition has never ceased to exist.

In 1888, slavery was abolished through a bill (one that contained only two articles) signed by the daughter of the emperor.

This is not a story of the past. As an oral narrative, the tradition of the Reinado is rewritten, resung, redanced, added to. The dates will flow and circle. The events are happening in all times.

# A conversation between Luiza da Iola and Alice Zanon

Alice Zanon: Luiza, you were recently crowned the Perpetual Queen of Our Lady of the Rosary. Beatriz Nascimento says that the structure of King and Queen in the Reinado is a recreation of African societies within the possible conditions found in this adverse environment, Brasil.<sup>12</sup> What is the role of the tradition of the Reinado and its symbolic systems in establishing transatlantic and beyond-time connections?

Luiza da Iola: The legacy I assumed from my mom after fourteen years of her passage from this plane made me understand that this Ancestral crown, before being above my head, had been on the head of all the others who preceded me, and I hope by the graces of N'zambi that will be on the heads of those who succeed me. We know that the people transplanted from Africa were not only blacksmiths, masters of agriculture, and spiritual leaders, but also they belonged to nations and empires. Through their strategies of resistance, they recreated by manifestations their civilizations and their kingdoms on Brazilian territory, proving that who they were hadn't been forgotten, even with the circles around the tree of forgetfulness. I believe that the biggest role of the *Reinado* has been to preserve our real identity and place of belonging even in the condition of exile. The *Reinado* is therefore a recreation of the Bantu civilization in Carmópolis de Minas.

# For Gomes e Pereira, »to go through paths trailed by ancestors is to relive the strength of communication with the invisible world, it is to participate in the mysteries of those who have already gone.«<sup>13</sup> Could you tell me more about your ancestors' paths in Carmópolis de Minas?

I grew up listening to my mother Iôla revere her elders anytime she spoke about herself. She would say, »I am Maria Francisca's daughter, Norberta's granddaughter, and Maria Cirilo's great-granddaughter.« I didn't get to meet any of them, but in time, especially this time where I am at, I started listening to people from Candomblé who, before saying something, *pedem licença*<sup>14</sup> »with the blessings of my elders, with the blessings of my younger ones.« And I immediately associated that to what my mother was naturally doing when she said the names of our ancestors. It was through this feeling that I understood that these women represented great strength and power in the Carmopolitan society. My great-grandmother Maria Cirilo was a *benzedeira*,<sup>15</sup> a healer, and exerted a strong influence in the community. She was a midwife, and many heads have been received in this world from her hands and her daughter's hands, her granddaughter's and great-granddaughter's, until this day. From this clan of ladies of the heads comes the immaterial patrimony and spiritual heritage that I have the responsibility to safeguard.

#### The reinadeiros honor Our Lady of the Rosary, which is said to have been found, usually by a Black child, in the water. What is the relation between the story of Our Lady of the Rosary and the sea?

There are many versions for this mythical foundation of the image of Our Lady being removed from the sea, with the sacred African drums being played by the ancient Black men who, after numerous attempts that other groups had made to take her out of the water, succeeded in bringing her to shore. On *Afrografias da Memória*,<sup>16</sup> Leda Maria Martins points to three common elements in these narratives: »the description



Job's tears, called Lágrimas de Nossa Senhora (Tears of Our Lady) in Minas Gerais © Mayara Laila, 2019

of a situation of repression lived by the enslaved Black people; the symbolic reversion of this situation with the removal of the saint from the water or the rock, captained by the drums, and the institution of a hierarchy and another power, both founded by the mythical framework.« The origin of Our Lady that came from the sea reinforces the maternal archetype and ethnic unconscious related to the Earth-Mother-Africa, first soil of mankind. The chants of *banzo*,<sup>17</sup> a reminder of the Mother Land, always go through the sea, just like the route of the ships that carried the enslaved, but in the opposite direction.

#### Do you see a connection between Catholicism and the practices of the Reinado?

Although the devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary holds similarity, to the point where many define the Reinado as an African-Catholic manifestation, the manner in which white people and black people have celebrated it since the beginning is very different. This is explicit in the way the reinadeiro people manifest their worship through their corporeality and ritualistic by means of chanting, dancing, prayer and their daily routine which is always a worship to the Great Mother.

You are a singer and released an EP with Nívea Sabino called Interioranas last November. Thinking about what Beatriz Nascimento<sup>18</sup> said about body and dance being documents, do you see artistic manifestations as a manner of »presentifying« history?

This quote reminds me of her saying that the dance for the Black person is like an act of liberation. Music, dance, and rhythm have always been a way of communicating with Ancestrality, with the extraphysical. I experience this whenever I sing, because in my tradition we pray by singing. And that is also a form of emancipation for me.

In the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, a practice known as the »technique of catechism« was very common in the schools of Brasil. It consisted of the uncritical memorization of dates and names in history classes. What does the choice of May 13, 1888, to sign the Golden Law have to do with the erasure of Ventura Mina<sup>19</sup> from official historiography?

I've been learning more and more to see time as something cyclical and spiral instead of a linear continuum. The false abolition still celebrated annually on the thirteenth is strategically taught and evaluated in school curriculum. But the same attention is not given to the Black protagonism and resistance in Minas Gerais, for example. Ventura Mina led the Revolt of the Carrancas on the May 13, 1833, the largest revolt led by the enslaved in Minas Gerais, even before the Revolt of the Malês. But these insurgencies didn't have notoriety, I believe, due to the fallacy of the submission of the enslaved people to slavery. The truth is that the protagonists of the abolitionist movement had the color Black, as people still try to omit.

As Antônio Bispo wrote, »even if they burn the writing, they won't burn orality. Even if they burn the symbols, they won't burn the meanings. Even burning our people, they won't burn ancestrality.«<sup>20</sup> To you, what is the importance of the words in Bantu when it comes to preserving history?

For many traditions, words are a lot more than symbols. They carry strength, energy, a vibration. I started feeling them a while back. In my town there is a place called Cacimba. This word caught my attention and I started to think about the presence and influence of the Indigenous and African peoples in Carmópolis. Researching its etymology, I found that the word *Kixima* comes from Kimbundu, from the Bantu language family, and one of its meanings is »the well.« There, in the olden days, people washed their clothes and filled up buckets of water for the houses' reservoirs. The *cacimba/kiximba* is a sign that these people from Congo or Angola were here. They are also arrows of these passages in the villages through the names Congo, Catucá, Mumbaça.

»Let the erê grow up to be a doctor and sign a new law / Let the erê know that his great-grandfather wasn't a slave, but a true king.«<sup>21</sup> These are the verses of the song-manifesto Let the erê live.<sup>22</sup> Gathering 22 artists from Minas Gerais, the song was recorded in 2016 by the movement #NOSTEMOSUMSONHO.<sup>23</sup> What was the context of this action?

I proposed this action from the repercussions of the Costa Barros<sup>24</sup> slaughter in 2015: 111 shots were fired at five Black teenagers; 83 of them hit the bodies of these boys who had gone out to celebrate one of them getting his first job. That week I found out that two other teenagers had been executed here, near Belo Horizonte. It was with this feeling of powerlessness and outrage that I thought I would use the weapon that I had, my voice, my chant, and I summoned as many voices as I could to amplify this message in sensibilization, conscientization, and confrontation against this sad reality: every 23 minutes a young Black man is murdered due to racism. Racism that operates in the same way here and beyond here. I imagine that being Black in Germany must be as hard as being Black in Brasil, since historical violence continues to be normalized. And because it is normalized, it doesn't cause any social commotion. Maybe through feeling and commotion we shall move forward in the combat against racism in its deepest root: structural and institutional racism. Art is our way to fight and educate.

Alice Zanon writes, teaches, creates lesson plans, and draws. It is said that predicates of action (»person does«) existed in oral languages before predicates of essence (»person is«), which were created by literate culture. She graduated in visual arts from UFMG in Brazil, she has been researching writing through its visuality and the word in space (its morphemes, lookalikes, translanguaging). She is currently studying education under an ecological perspective, oral and literate cultures, and sentence structures in Latin and Japanese.

Luiza da lola, Afromineira, countrysider, natural from Carmópolis de Minas, Perpetual Queen of Our Lady of the Rosary, guardian of ancestral memory, normalist, singer and songwriter, artivist, art educator, researcher, history teller, producer, and cultural mobilizer. Idealizer of the artistic and sociocultural movement #NOSTEMOSUMSONHO that in 2016 released the song-manifesto #deixaoereviver, in sensibilization and conscientization of the extermination of Black youth. Through her art, she wishes to promote the culture of affection and the rescue of individual and collective ancestral memories.

1 Pindorama is believed to have been a mythical place for the Tupi-Guarani peoples, a land free of evil on the shore of Brasil. *Pindo* means palm trees, while *rama* could mean spectacle or place.

2 The Cataguases were an indigenous tribe known to be extremely brave and who prevailed in the territory of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. »Country of Cataguás« is how Minas Gerais was once called, which could be translated into General Mines. The name relates to the gold and ore mines that were found and have been explored since the colonizers' arrival.

3 The expression *coser* os *pés* is a prayer that is used to heal a part of someone's body. A ball of wool is put on top of the wound and, with a needle, the wool is knitted on the ball while the prayer is spoken.

4 The word aguamento comes from water, probably mouth-watering. There are many different ways to cure a child (under seven years old) from aguamento, which is when someone craves something to eat, but the person eating will not share food with the one who desires it (it can happen with any food). This generates a feeling of depression and lack of appetite.

5 The expression could be translated into »fallen spine.« When a child was held badly or someone threw the baby while playing with them, the baby could dislocate the middle bone in the thorax, which caused them to have uneven limbs. It was common for Mineiros to take their babies to see healers when they started crying for no reason, to check if they had espinhela caida. Going to a doctor was expensive, so *benzedeiras* also worked to cure the physical body.

6 Curral del Rei is the original name of Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais. *Curral* is the place where you trap

cattle, and *del Rei* is translated as »of the King.« 7 Here the verb *pedir* is conjugated in the first person

singular of the present indicative. See Lexicon. 8 Afrografias da Memória – o Reinado do Rosário no Jatobá was written in 1995 by Leda Maria Martins. The title could be roughly translated into »Afrographies of Memory – the Reinado of Rosary in Jatobá.«

9 Idem.

10 D. Alzira was the Queen of Our Lady of Mercy from the Sisterhood of Our Lady of the Rosary of Jatobá. This sentence was collected by Leda Maria Martins (1995:53) during two interviews with the Queen in 1992 and 1996.

11 According to Leda Maria Martins (1997), the cult of Our Lady of the Rosary was diffused throughout Europe and Africa by the Dominican order, and the Christian use of the rosary of Mary dates to 1090. The devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary has always been connected to the victory in the battles the Christians fought against heretics, such as their victory over the Turks near Lepanto in 1571 (now Nafpaktos, Greece).

12 Orí is a documentary released in 1989, written by Beatriz Nascimento and directed by Raquel Gerber.

13 Gomes e Pereira: *Negras Raízes Mineiras: Os Arturos.* Belo Horizonte 2000. This title could be roughly translated to »Black Roots of Minas: The Arturos.«

14 See Lexicon. 15 See Lexicon.

16 Leda Maria Martins: Afrografias da Memória – o Reinado do Rosário no Jatobá. Belo Horizonte 1995.

17 According to Nei Lopes, in the Novo Dicionário Banto no Brasil (New Dictionary of Bantu in Brasil), the word mbanzo has its origin in Kimbundu and it means longing, passion, hurt. In Kikongo, mbanzu means thought, remembrance. The author says that *banzo* is a mortal nostalgia that attacked enslaved African Black people in Brasil.

18 See note 12.

19 Ventura Mina was the leader of an uprising known as Revolta das Carranças (Revolt of Carranças: Carrança is the name of a wooden sculpture of a frowned face that protects boats and houses from evil spirits), an uprising that took place in Minas Gerais, in the farms of Campo Alegre (Joyful field) and Boa Cruz (Good Cross). The farm of Campo Alegre belonged to the general congressman of the province of Minas, Gabriel Junqueira. Together with Julião and Domingos, Ventura Mina killed the son of Gabriel Junqueira. A small group of enslaved men or women, we only have the official records of the state gathered with the three of them, and they set off to Boa Cruz, killing two other families who held enslaved people. This happened on the 13th of May of 1833, 55 years before the signing of the Golden Law. At the end of that day, Ventura Mina and four fellow insurgents were killed. The other 16 men who rebelled were convicted to death penalty, with the exception of one, who was made into their executioner. This was one of the most severe convictions of collective death penalties in the history of Brazil Empire.

20 In Colonização, quilombos: modos e significados (2015). The title could be roughly translated into »Colonization, quilombos: manners and meanings.«

21 *Erê* is a word that comes from Yoruba, and it means »to play.« The *erê* are child divinities.

22 The song was written by Sérgio Pererê, featuring Tamara Franklin and Douglas Din.

23 We have a dream.

24 Costa Barros is a neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro



## Johanna Hedva

36

Solitude Journal 2 On the Occult and the Supernatural
»All forms of language – from Ancient Greek and Hangeul, to mathematics and quantum mechanics – are attempts at divination.« In the following text, writer, artist, and astrologer Johanna Hedva shares the story of how they became an astrologer and what they mean by saying »I come from a family of witches.« Hedva invites us to think through the entanglements of divination as a tool for articulation: of narrative as prophecy, writing as a curse tablet, cause and effect as interchangeably noun and verb. »Any language we use to describe the world also creates the world,» they say. »It makes, it unmakes. It articulates, it obfuscates.«

How to tell when you're gonna die: Astrology for Writers. »Tell« is the most important word in this title. You tell the future as you tell a story as you tell time as you tell me your name. For divination is nothing but an articulation of the future; and the future, as we know, does not exist as such, but is the shimmering cast off by the past and the present. Divination is simply the devotion to this shimmering, a devotion that expresses itself through craft.

Language creates the world as much as it breaks it; this often happens at the same time. Begetting and informing each other, both cause and effect, creation happens because of destruction, through it, by it, in it, and vice versa. In this way – the way that goes more than one way – there are many selves in one person, many meanings in one sentence, many fates in one future.

The raw material of astrology is fate. Astrology is like any other craft – this particular craft applies itself to crafting fate. Yes, astrology can tell you when you're going to die, as it can tell you how to live. But what can it teach you to *tell*? How can astrology be used as a storytelling device? When fate and time are approached as malleable and multiplicitous, rather than monolithic and fixed and singular, if they are internal as much as external forces, agencies as much as conditions, they become material like any other: a medium of communication, transmission, content, and form.

There is the question of whether or not astrology is »real,« if it's a »fact«. I'd propose that the more interesting question to ask is how we understand facts to be facts at all. How do we decide collectively that a system of meaning is real or not? And when we do, whom does it benefit? To what end? When the poet Morgan Parker was asked by *The Believer* magazine to discuss the state of the fact, Parker responded: »Facts are white.«<sup>1</sup> In a talk with Arthur Jafa at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, Saidiya Hartman stated that history is fiction with state power.<sup>2</sup> I think of these statements often; they ring in my mind like a kind of bell.

As a writer, I primarily understand the world through language. Articulation, description, observation, critique, elegy, bathos, pathos. I am a writer who works in many genres – essays, poetry, fiction, plays – and I am an artist who works in many forms and media – video, performance, print and book design, installation, music, sound – but all of these are forms of writing to me, because I work with the definition of writing that it is language embodied. Writing is the craft of creating a body for a language, to structure it with spine and skin, to animate it with a persona, a face, to let it speak with a voice on a page or housed in a throat. Whenever I talk about bodies, I'm also talking about devotion: My practice is devoted to the many different kinds of bodies that are possible.

I am also a practicing astrologer, and have been reading for clients since 2014. Thus, I want to suggest that astrology is a language like any other language – ancient Greek to the written form of Korean, Hangeul, mathematics to quantum mechanics, art and philosophy and poetry – in that it is a system that humans have invented to try to make meaning out of our experience on this planet.

Since the Enlightenment, astrology has been systemically removed from the canon as a valid system of meaning. It has been denigrated and maligned and disqualified as a worthwhile field of knowledge. For thousands of years before that, however, it was a system of meaning that was used alongside medicine, physics, science, and literature. Indeed, it was developed concurrently with those systems, which is to say, that those systems were developed because of and through astrology too. They informed each other, they made and unmade each other. As any astrologer knows, there is no one, true, real astrology, just as there is no one, true, real science or literature. There are many, and they have been constructed within their specific contexts, traditions, cultures, places - and as they are practiced, they become, they are becoming.

I was once asked how I would link astrology with politics. I would say that any system of meaning is political because meaning is power, especially when it is used to police, when it is instrumentalized as a weapon. But, as we all know, meaning is capricious and promiscuous and shape-shifting. You can say that something means this, and you can say that something means that. What is important here is the system that corroborates which meaning has been designated as the normative one, the one consolidated by power. Studying astrology and its history has brought me to a constant questioning of the systems we've decided to use to understand and articulate our world. How did we decide to use these, and not those? What were the conditions that led to such decisions? Crucially, what are the consequences of those decisions?

When mathematicians reach a limit with mathematics, in terms of what it can cover as a language, they must invent new mathematics: the numbers pi, e, the square root of -1. The number zero is an invention – and it caused a scandal when it first emerged.<sup>3</sup> The paradox of Zeno in Ancient Greece broke the world.

»How can nothing be something?« Many of the tenets of math, physics, and astronomy, when they were first conceived by humans, were condemned as outrageously incorrect, blasphemously evil, laughably stupid. I think about this every time someone tells me they don't believe in astrology. I ask them what they think astrology is, exactly, and they respond that it's the horoscope you can read in the newspaper. And what did your horoscope tell you? I ask. Mine says I enjoy attention, but that's so wrong, they say. Right, I say. And if you read a book you don't like, does that mean literature is not real? What about the books you've never heard of? Are they not real? What about books written by people who don't look like you, whose language you've never heard of? What have you been told about those people? Are those qualities real, true, facts? Says who?

It's always amusing to me to hear that people don't believe in astrology but they believe in money. Or time. These are all equally arbitrary inventions. It's just that some of them are backed by institutional power, and some are not. Even this, I'd like to suggest, is not permanent. Generally I'm a pessimist, and I'm pretty against the reliance we place on hope, but I sometimes allow myself to hope that, as astrology's institutional power was disqualified at one point in time, perhaps the institutional power behind money, capitalism, ableism, racism, all these demons, will be removed. Perhaps there will come a time when people ask, »But is money actually *real*?« The one true real fact that I feel I can rely on is that things – and the languages we use to describe them – change.

#### 2.

How did I come to be an astrologer and a witch? For me, being a witch means being in a respectful relationship with the energies and forces of the natural and supernatural worlds, particularly the ones we can't see or measure or explain with normative systems of meaning. A witch is always someone without institutional power, a condition elucidated most brilliantly by Silvia Federici. In Caliban and the Witch, she traces the historical scope of how witches came to mean what they do, as cultural, mythological, and political figures. The figure of the witch that we in America and Europe know today was born in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, and she was constructed at the same time as capitalism was taking root. This is no coincidence. She is unmarried: she answers to no man. She is a childless woman who lives at the edge

of civilization: she does not participate in the reproductive labor that capitalism needs to survive. She has a reverent relationship with the plants and animals around her: she does not exploit the land for capitalist production. She does not defer to the Church for her spiritual practice, and she can make things happen without working for them. For all these reasons, she is dangerous, deviant, ungovernable, lawless. We can see how such a figure would come to be meaningful for oppressed people living in contemporary capitalism. The witch shows a path of resistance, a practice that pushes back.

I was raised in a family of witches, by which I mean that my mother and her sister, my aunt, were witches in Los Angeles, and on my father's side is the tradition of Korean fortune-telling. Because my father's mother emigrated from Korea to America during the war, and spent her entire American life trying to assimilate and blend in to her adopted country, the practice of fortune-telling carried on in secret, and was ultimately lost – something that is true for so many whose people have been shaped by imperial and colonial migration.

Until very, very, very recently, practices of witchcraft and folk magic have had to persist fugitively, passed down as furtive oral traditions, shape-shifting so as not to get caught. The threat of persecution has been dangerous and real. This is why there is no one true form of witchcraft; no authentic practice of it upon which a canon of the kind built around, say, mathematics, can be raised. This is knowledge passed between women in a kitchen, slaves in the cotton field, foreigners in alleyways, refugees in a camp. It comes alive in fugitive spaces; to survive, it must slip outside the mainstream, persist away from places of acceptable, normative visibility. The value of practices like this is always determined by a market beneath and behind the one that those in charge wish to see. It is underground, in shadow. The question is: why? Who - what - put it there?

My aunt and mother were not initiated into any proper order; they practiced at home, in the kitchen or the backyard, blending their witchcraft with the Catholicism they were raised in as a kind of folk magic. Because they were white working-class women raised in the 1960s and 70s in Los Angeles, which meant that the witchcraft they learned came from whatever books were for sale at the local hippie store, I sometimes joke that they were »sloppy Wiccans.« Wicca, invented in England in the 1950s as an amalgamation of various Pagan and Celtic magics, was the most recent trend in Anglo-European witchcraft at that time, and with its obvious middle-class whiteness, was the most acceptable to the market.

But if you had asked my mother and aunt what kind of witchcraft they practiced, or what lineage they studied, they wouldn't have known how to answer your question. We're witches, they would have said. What else is there to say. No one, of course, would have asked them such a question. Back then, I didn't go around telling people that my mom and aunt were witches; I would have been ridiculed and laughed at, or dismissed as nuts. They didn't announce themselves either.

For my mother and my aunt, being witches didn't mean glamorous rituals with long robes, or dozens of glass jars full of bizarre materials for spells, or posting photos of their crystal grids to social media, or anything devised, designed, displayable, or expensive. Rather, it meant being in tune, agnostically and humbly, with something not human but very much alive in the earth and nature and of the stars, and taking care to notice and listen to the invisible energies in each room.

### The one true real fact that I feel I can rely on is that things – and the languages we use to describe them – change.

It gave them a sense of agency in lives where they often felt they had none. Alone, they practiced rituals and beliefs that, from what I can tell, they invented on their own and which rarely overlapped with each other's. They didn't share their devotions with each other, and I never heard them talk about doing magic together, or even discussing it, but they were both animated by their practices and formed by them. I can't imagine either woman without her magic.

My aunt's magic was the kind that had a warm, cozy house around it, with a huge herb garden out back. Her library had books on astrology, witchcraft, Wicca, and different spiritual and occult practices. I remember how she read from a book that collected Native American songs and prayers, many of them dedicated to plants, animals, and the earth. She had altars in every room, collections of objects that were meaningful, beautiful, and arranged with care. On the full moon my aunt would drag me outside to stand in her backyard barefoot. We'd look up at the moon while pulling energy up from the earth through our feet and thank the Goddess for her wisdom and guidance. My aunt urged me never to sleep with my hands open and upward because it would leave me vulnerable to the intrusion of unwanted energies. »The palms are very sensitive, they're like doorways,« she'd say. »When you meet someone, you touch palms, and when you pray, you touch your own. A lot of power is in your palms.« She told me to put my hair across my palms while I slept, to ward off nightmares. »Your hair is your protection, your power,« she'd say. She threw salt over her shoulder while cooking, and spoke of the corner in the living room where my grandmother's ghost still sat (it had been her favorite part of the house when she was alive). We made recipes from The Wiccan Cookbook, and always had a feast on Samhain. When her cats' whiskers fell off she collected them. There was a little ritual to it. You made a circle around your nose with the whisker, counterclockwise, three times, while thanking the cat for its magic, and then saved the whiskers on your altar. My aunt is 72 years old, and has had numerous cats in her life, and so the bundle of whiskers that has accumulated on her altar is by now as thick as a new pack of toothpicks.

My mother's magic was more sensitive, unstable, psychic. Hers was the kind that drifted in, rippled through the air into her skin. She had big, watery, unguarded blue-green eyes, and they swelled with tears whenever she spoke about her feelings, and when she stared silently out a window, which she did often. She never fit into normative life, was always stuck outside of it, peering in. In her library she had books on dream interpretation and tarot, the Wizard of Earthsea series, and the Dragonsinger books by Anne McCafferty, about the young woman who can sing to dragons. I have the sense that, because she could hear them and didn't know how to shut them out, ghosts and other energies tormented her, crowding in, making noise at her, crashing on her like waves. She'd tell me to leave anywhere if I got a bad feeling. As a teenager, if I went to a party, she told me that, if my intuition told me it wasn't safe there, I should leave immediately, just run out the door and into the street and not look back. She told she could hear me if, across town or in another city entirely, I screamed in fear. »Call for me,« she'd say, »I will come get you. Even without my body.« She strung dozens of sun-catchers in each window, so that rainbows danced on the walls of our house. She collected piles of seashells and kept them in jars and baskets and bowls in every room, and the walls of our house were coated with images of the ocean that she'd cut from magazines, the paper yellowing and curling at the corners, a kind of old magical skin. She talked to animals more than humans, speaking to the birds who passed through our patio, translating what our cats were thinking. She said the Hail Mary during crises, like when her car broke down on the freeway. She cursed my father when she was hurt or angry. She took omens from the color of the sky. Once she got a job in a bank, handling money behind a plate of glass. But holding all that money in her hands, feeling where it had come from and what it had taken from its owners, was too much. She quit after a week. My father mocked her for being incompetent. All of the men that I saw her come into contact with said she was crazy, spoiled, weak.

#### 3.

When I was a teenager, I rebelled against all of this. I wanted to be an intellectual, respected and admired by people who were smart and important. Witchcraft was bullshit. Magic was crazy. Astrology wasn't real. Look what it had done to my mother. I went to college and studied physics for two years, with the aim to get a PhD in astrophysics and work at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory down the street from my aunt's house. I studied mathematics and computer science and, even though I loved it, I was terrible at it, far behind all the other students who had brains wired for numbers and logic. I remember going to the computer-science lab for help on a problem, and when I showed my notes to male tutor, of how I thought I could solve a coding problem, he looked at me skeptically and said, »Did you come up with this? You didn't come up with this.« I had, in fact, come up with this; his bland sexism made me even more determined to succeed in his world, on his terms. I spent days, eight hours, ten, in the mathematics lab; I took extra classes in geology and astronomy; and when not in school, I read every book I could find on the difficult, fascinating scientists who had discovered »beauty« and »truth« in the world and communicated it in numbers, like catching lightning in a bottle. I was hard and critical about anything that couldn't be proven scientifically. I praised empiricism. I used a vocabulary that had been codified by the academy, and I never thought twice about why it was codified, and for whom.

This lasted more than ten years. And then in my late 20s, my health collapsed. I've written elsewhere



Francisco Goya, Untitled, known as *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1819–1823), the painting is part of the »Black Paintings« series and depicts the Greek Myth of Cronus. Collection: Museo del Prado, Madrid.

about that experiece, so I won't rehash it here.<sup>4</sup> But suffice to say, I was totally annihilated, physically and psychically. I moved back home to my aunt's house. I couldn't get out of bed for two months. I couldn't speak or read or see anyone. And every visit to the doctor was a battleground. They heaped diagnoses on me. Medication after medication. I felt broken open, that a version of myself had been smashed to pieces. It wasn't just that none of what the doctors told me about myself made sense, but very little of it actually helped me feel better. And none of the knowledge I'd worked so hard to learn helped me at all either. Rational empiricism failed me. Logic disappointed me. The language of the medical-industrial complex didn't articulate my experience at all. What I'd come to understand as knowledge brought me little in the way of understanding.

One day I found myself going through my aunt's bookshelves. I found a book I'd read as a kid, a popular astrology book from the 1970s. I read through it again. I learned that I was currently going through my Saturn return, a time in life that is harrowing and full of challenges, if not full-blown crisis. It begins at age 29.5 and lasts nearly three years. Many different cultures recognize this period as a rite of passage; ancient peoples celebrated it with rituals that offered guidance and instruction. I read more. Turns out my natal Saturn is in the 12th house, which is the house of secrets, sorrows, self-undoing, illness, isolation, suffering, mysticism, sleep, and sanctuary. It is the worst place for Saturn, because it's where the Ancient astrologers said Saturn has his joy. They call Saturn the greater malefic: he's the force of evil and bad fortune in astrology. Based on the ancient Greek god of time, Cronus, in astrology he is the principle of time as a linear grind in one direction: decay, age, responsibility, struggle. So when a guy like that is having his joy - well, it's a different kind of joy than one would imagine. Think of Goya's painting of Saturn devouring his son - this is the asshole who currently was having his joy in my life.

The more I read, the more I found that astrology explained things in a way that made sense to me; it was a language different from what I'd had at my disposal so far, but which spoke to the complications in my life in a way that, rather than flatten them into incomprehensible failures, made them sing with meaning, context, possibility. Astrology spoke of cause and effect without narrowing it to one's individual capacity of choice and mistake; it spoke of life not as a thing that happens in a straight line. Instead, astrology cast life against a vivid backdrop of many different forces in convergence and divergence with each other. It proposed that an individual's own internal forces are always in communion with external forces that are interpersonal, social, political, cosmic. For example, astrology's conception of illness was the opposite of how capitalism explained it: rather than being a product of my own moral failing, measured by my incapacity to work according to capitalist terms, astrology simply said that illness was a part of life. I wasn't sick because of something I'd done, or not done. It wasn't my fault. It simply was.

Since then I've come to learn that astrology is one of the most robust languages that humans have invented to articulate what is difficult in life, and this propensity to account for suffering brings a sense of expansion, a feeling of support. Rather than denying or evading it with prevarication, astrology has made an eloquent and powerful language for pain and struggle. It speaks of malefics, lesser and greater; debilitated planets; cadent houses; the Via Combusta. There is a house »hostile to future activity,« and a house of »bane and toil.« There are ways to account for enemies, misery, prison, debt, disease, adversity, sorrow, and death. There is a gate to Hell - two in fact. Astrology accounts for these forces as being parts of the universe like any other - and it is just as vibrant and nuanced a language when it comes to describing good fortune. There are greater and lesser benefics, dignified and exalted planets, planets and signs that are helpful to each other; there's a Part of Fortune, and a House of Joy and Pleasure.

What catches and holds me is that the articulation that astrology affords is one of complexity, rather than simplification. I love how complicated it is. It teems with possibility, with the poetic, and there is never just one answer, or reason, or cause. Empiricism here is many-layered, a body with different shapes that changes depending on your perspective, on how you approach it, on what you need and expect that body to do. It is a language that is alive, and this is one of the reasons it's so supple in describing life: because it is *liv*ing. True, it has been shaped by different points in history, bent to the needs of that Zeitgeist, and sometimes those needs have been nefarious, but isn't that true of any language? Like any language, it can be pulled and pushed and formed and deformed, and this shape is dictated by the intent behind it, which is to say the infrastructure that holds it up matters, which is to say the meaning it produces is always enmeshed with power.

Another way of saying this is that the answer changes depending on the question you ask. And the question you ask depends on what you are willing to know. This text is based on a lecture given at the Studium Generale Wxtch Craft lecture series 2020–2021, Royal Academy of Art, The Hague. See: https://www.kabk.nl/agenda/online-studium-generale-lecture-johanna-hedva (accessed January 27, 2021)

Johanna Hedva is a Korean-American writer, artist, musician, and astrologer who was raised in Los Angeles by a family of witches, and now lives in Los Angeles and Berlin. Hedva's practice cooks magic, necromancy, and divination together with mystical states of fury and ecstasy. There is always the body – its radical permeability, dependency, and consociation – but the task is how to eclipse it, how to nebulize it, and how to cope when this inevitably fails. Ultimately, Hedva's work, no matter the genre, is different kinds of writing, whether it's words on a page, screaming in a room, or dragging a hand through water.

1 Joshua Wolf Scheck: "The State of the Fact" in: *The Believer*, May 1, 2018. Available online at: https://believer-mag.com/the-state-of-the-fact/ (accessed February 17, 2021).

2 Hammer Museum: Saidiya Hartmann and Arthur Jafa,

YouTube video, 1:38:02, uploaded by »Hammer Museum« on June 10, 2019. Available online at https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=YGxZQ3Py4-A (accessed February 17, 2021).

3 »Zero: Biography of a Dangerous Idea,« *Wikipedia*, last modified January 21, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/

Zero:\_The\_Biography\_of\_a\_Dangerous\_Idea (accessed February 17, 2021).

4 Johanna Hedva: *Sick Woman Theory*, http://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory\_Hedva\_2020.pdf (accessed January 27, 2021).

# **Prints/Collages**

## **Elisabeth Rafstedt**

44

Solitude Journal 2 On the Occult and the Supernatural

Textile pages in European medieval manuscripts were designed to work as ornamented initial letters or drop caps do – to portal the reader into texts.

The prints/collages are part of an ongoing series made while reading and working.

- 1. –
- 2. D. Bellamy (When the Sick Rule the World, 2015), Escalator from C. Akerman (Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, 1975)
- 3. S. Lewis (Full Surrogacy Now, 2019)
- 4. –
- 5. S. Federici (Caliban and the Witch, 2004)
- 6. Sappho (Fragment 134, transl. G. Davenport, 1995)

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# The Blue Pit



Blue Dyke, Cyanotype/digital print on photo rag paper, A1 size, 2018

## Breda Lynch in conversation with Krzysztof Gutfrański

Fragments of Breda's personal memories bifurcate into tales of other Irish women whose stories were portrayed on TV, written in books or passed along generations through oral history. From the occult to the occulted, Breda and Krzysztof talk about feminism, LGBTQI+ and women's rights in Ireland and Poland, magic, catholicism, power shifts, an overthrown Amendment, Magdalene laundries, cyanotypes, masks and silencing. Lynch's written voice brings with itself a choir. Krzysztof Gutfrański: There is a surge of interest in spirituality and mysticism at the moment, currently manifesting in both art practice and gallery programming. In truth, the interest in the occult has always been present in the arts. The ongoing wave of spirituality is rooted in explorations of feminism, anti-colonialism, and alternative power systems. Do you think pandemic anxieties connect stronger the occult with politics lately?

Breda Lynch: There has always been an interest in art and society with the occult, esoteric, spiritual, and mystical, and the many different ways in which that is described. To me, the interest in the occult, the spiritual, and the mystical is a part of art practice. It's part of the engagement with the imagination. Channeling, possessing, and directing what could be construed as the indefinable, the metaphysical. This personal understanding is from an engagement with alchemy, esoteric personalities, theosophy, histories around paganism, modern occultism, witchcraft, mediumship, and satanic feminism. Knowledge gained from these engagements has been directed through art practice in different ways over the years.

As both an artist and educator based in Ireland, I have encountered over time a kind of prejudice toward such content, knowledge, or alternative practices of making art and developing artistic content. Themes created through these types of channels were sometimes considered at best unfashionable within creative communities, institutions, or art colleges. The engagement with such subject matter was sometimes demeaned, dismissed, or greeted with a degree of incredulity. For some, this was not the zeitgeist in contemporary art.

This is an area of practice that's vital and vibrant. It can be difficult to understand, it may be contentious, challenging, all of these things. It is interesting how these areas of knowledge, once on the fringe, have recently had various attributes or methodologies absorbed into the social and political fabric of everyday life.

#### When physical shows were still possible, you took part in Elliptical Affinities: Irish Women Artists and the Politics of the Body, 1984 to the Present. Can you tell us how your feminist position began in Ireland?

I've always described myself as a feminist. Growing up I had to purposefully seek out my own history, a feminist history. Lesbian and queer stories were not available to me and I realized that at a young age. I did not fit into established narratives and expectations; I did not want to engage with predetermined roles and behaviors that were expected of me by a paternalistic state.

I would have had that very typical Irish country upbringing, Catholic of course. I would not describe myself as a Catholic now; more a pagan. Thinking of the past, there were a number of memories in my childhood or coming into my early adulthood, which had a profound influence on me. And certainly would have influenced me from the point of view of having to position myself as a feminist. Part protection and part protest against the cultures of misogyny and patriarchy within my own family.

#### How would you describe these memories?

My father seemed to recognise my difference at an early age. Around the age of eleven or twelve, probably twelve, I was summoned into the kitchen one evening. Both my mother and my step-grandmother were sitting while my father was standing by the fire. I was the topic of this conversation, but I didn't feel included in the conversation.

My father was advocating that I should be sent to »New Ross.« I had no idea what was at New Ross or what New Ross was about. He was making reference to the Magdalene laundry in New Ross. My mother had said very little, it was my step-grandmother who said to my father, no, I would not be going there. In hindsight I had a lucky escape, not being sent to a Magdalene laundry.

At that time, in the 1970s, Magdalene laundries were places where bold girls were sent. »Fallen« women were sent there, pregnant girls, »troublesome« girls, and old women. They were slave houses where many women languished and never left. Families preferred to abandon them, as they had apparently brought shame on the family. For a lot of these women, all they needed to leave those institutions was two signatures, the signature of a local parish priest, and the signature of a male member of a family, a father, an uncle, a grandfather, a brother. But for so many of the Magdalene women they had no possibility of getting those two signatures. These church state institutions only closed their doors in Ireland in the 1990s.

Where I work, Limerick School of Art and Design, is a former Magdalene laundry that was repurposed as an art school at the end of the 1990s. The past is still present there. The women who were contained there are either dead or still seeking redress from the state or church bodies. The long-promised memorial to the women who were incarcerated there is still not onsite after more than 20 years of occupancy by LSAD. More evidence of the persistent culture of silencing still prevalent in Irish society.

## What was happening in Ireland in the years before the Magdalene laundries shut down?

In 1983, I was 13 going on 14, there was the story of the death of Ann Lovett. News broke on a cold January, in a little town called Granard. She was a 15-year-old school girl who died while giving birth to a baby boy at a grotto dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. A national debate ensued about women and plenty of misogyny was aired during those conversations. Another event from 1984 was the Kerry Babies case, the public denouncing and demonisation of Joanne Hynes. At 24 years of age, she attempted to conceal the birth and the subsequent death of her baby in remote County Kerry. Parallel to these events was the grim discovery of a dead baby on a remote beach in County Kerry. The Garda decided that Joanne had killed her own baby and the dead baby found on the beach.<sup>1</sup> T hey attempted to maintain that she had also given birth to both. »Superfecundation« was the term being used by Garda superintendents and media reporters. The Kerry Babies case became long-running and was given main headlines, detailing grotesque speculation around her anatomy and misogynistic shaming of her as a woman. Only in 2020 did the state apologise and compensate her and the family for the damage and trauma inflicted.

#### It is hard to imagine such a level of hatred toward women. How has it improved?

These tragic events that happened in 1980s Ireland deeply impacted me at the time as a young woman growing up in Ireland. Memories of those cases still haunt me to this day. But Ireland was not a safe place for women in the twentieth century. Even now, this country still has much explaining and redress to do. The recent botched apology for the legacy of the Mother and Baby homes in Ireland by our current Taoiseach being an example.<sup>2</sup> »Everyone was to blame,« he said, which of course had everyone echoing the phrase »if everyone is to blame no one is to blame.« Of course we know who is responsible: the church and the Fianna Fail and/or Fine Gael state.<sup>3</sup>

A legacy of misery, exploitation, abuse, human trafficking, and death. All giving the silent treatment, which our state has demonstrated in its continued silencing and controlling of the past. The Catholic church has done its best to control and silence victims, still shaming after years of abuse perpetrated against citizens of Ireland. I once heard said that »modern Ireland was forged on the anvil of women's suffering.«



The Pit, Detail of the installation view of the video, 2:00 Min., 2013

#### How do you combine research within your artistic practice?

My work is very informed by research, and research is an open term to me. Multiple sources are considered and explored for material, images, and meaning. Hidden histories, folklore, obscure archives, popular culture, mainstream media platforms, social media platforms, collective memories, underground information structures, and so forth. Appropriating, finding, or foraging images that »resonate« being a key feature of my process. The cut-up becomes a transformed thing capable of new meaning. Detournement and culture jamming are strategies that also find their way into the practice. For me, it is an intuitive process. Ultimately it allows for the pursuit of spiritual and existential meaning through knowledge and craft.

An example to explain a little more is a short experimental moving image work/ installation I did a number of years ago called *The Pit* (2013). It uses approximately 20 seconds of original film footage from the black-and-white movie *The Snake Pit* (1948). The footage itself is picked, as it is a remembered dream sequence having watched the movie in my childhood. Later in adult life I wondered if I had dreamt this memory or if it were a film at all. This was an itch I had to scratch so I went about trying to find the movie, which I did. On rediscovering the dream sequence, I was compelled to work with it.

The sequence is one of the most visually compelling in the movie. It uses a long POV take. A God's-eye view showing us what looks like a pit, reveals distant contorting figures, but gradually the camera zooms in to the face of the main character, Virginia, who, we then realise, is in a chaotic asylum ward surrounded by other distressed inmates. This POV shot is important as it moves from the omniscient God's eye view to an intimate closeup.

Splitting the screen in two, I presented two iterations of the sequence. The left is the camera moving from the distant shot to the intimate closeup, as seen in the original clip, while the right-hand-side shows it in reverse, the camera moving from Virginia's distressed closeup to eventually the omniscient view looking down upon the distressed inmates. The next manipulation is the timing of the footage and the muting of the sound. Whereas the appropriated film segment originally was 20 seconds, it was slowed so that the 20 seconds played out over two minutes. Finally, the two splitscreen channels are looped into one final projection.

The cinematic sequence is selected for its psychological impact. Once doubled and manipulated in the manner it is, the left side plays forward while the right side plays simultaneously in reverse, creating a dizzying effect and the looping never brings it to closure. The simple and direct manipulations in editing the original footage creates an uneasy relationship between the self and the other. Or as my friend Dr. Jenny Keane suggested in earlier discourse on The Pit, that it »generates liminality between presence and dispossession.«

#### Do images can »dis-enchant« reality or personal perspective?

Now more than ever. With the undercurrent of disenchantment in the world there is a necessity to engage with the world of the imagination, paranormal ideas, the esoteric; and to visualise new inclusive realities, as in the western world, the old ways are inhabiting, declining, and corrupting. The last hundred years or so in the west have seen the development of new ways of thinking, expressions of spirituality, alternative philosophies, communities and modes of being, not allied to a state or established theologies. This activity has only accelerated in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

# In your recent works you have a series of female »masked« Blue Dyke portraits. In cyanotype minimalistic form, you apply semi-anthropomorphic abstraction, which is reminiscent of Indigenous imagery in relation to magic. Who are these women, and what kind of change do they offer?

There is an ambivalence about these works and who these folk are. On one level, the masked appearances may remind us of old pagan or folk customs of mask-making and wearing that were pervasive across Ireland, Europe, and elsewhere. Masking has plenty of references in the Celtic or pagan past of Ireland, used as part of custom and celebration tied to the pagan calendar. Despite both British colonialism and Roman Catholicism, these folk customs have proved resilient over time. Some of these traditions have persisted into twenty-first century Ireland, through the activities of the Mummers, the Straw Boys, and other folk groups that engage in reenactments of these old folk traditions.

On another level these images are about the present. These are images that have been appropriated and accumulated from fashion images distributed and circulated online. Sourced from documentation detailing clothing collections from catwalk shows by Martin Margiela, amongst others, who have a reputation for deconstructing and queering fashion. These appropriations for me are presentations of selves that explore the non-binary, genderqueer and androgyny in an emancipatory manner. Identities are simultaneously sartorial and fabulously glamorous. These Blue Dyke characters are ambivalent and ambiguous identities.

Lastly, these images visualise a utopian future. Imaginings of female and queer personalities and collectives. Cyan sci-fi phantoms of the imminent future.

Cyan absorbs red light and as such is the complement of red. We can trick our mind into seeing cyan where it doesn't exist by forcing the mind first to see everything as red.

I've heard it described as a borderline colour. It is the mixing of green and blue light. Sometimes the colour has a spectral, shadowy quality that allows one to move

beyond the image. To me, I see these cyan images as ghosts. They're ghosts of ghosts, sometimes three or four times removed through the copying and reproductive processes. I am interested in what finds its way into an artwork that was not intended and what does not find its way into an artwork that was intended.

When I think about my country, Poland, I see recent pro-choice struggles in borderline color. As Silvia Federici and others have suggested, we can also look at reproductive rights from the occult perspective. What do the witchy and wayward women of the past teach us in these truly substantive struggles for reproductive freedom?

Poland's current government imposing bodily autonomy strictures on women and persons identifying as LGBTQI+ is state violence against women and queers. Looking back on our proclaimed independence from British rule, the Catholic church moved into the center of power, enabled by the new free state government at that time. Substantial power and even government portfolios, such as education and health, were given over to the church administration. This church and state entity imposed such strictures on Irish bodies for decades, all to maintain a church and state authority.

Remembering the »Repeal the Eighth« movement for the legalising of safe abortions in Ireland from 1983, the acceleration of organisations and representative groups in support of repealing the Eighth Amendment is notable. More than 15 years ago there would have been a handful of pro-abortion/Repeal the Eighth think tanks advocating and campaigning for change. More than 30 years of campaigning, activism, and protests by the feminist grassroots movements in Ireland eventually paid off. At the time of the referendum, there were approximately 66 such groups campaigning for the legalisation of abortion in Ireland. These groups were representative of communities, occupations such as Artists for Choice, Lawyers for Choice, Teachers for Choice, Doctors for Choice, Farmers for Choice, etc., or geographies such as Tipperary for Choice, Limerick for Choice, and so on. The two referendums, on marriage equality in 2015 and repealing the Eighth Amendment in 2018, were watershed moments in the recent history of this country.

Interestingly, after these referendums, the life of one of Ireland's important saints, St. Brigid, seems to be reclaimed by the beneficiaries of both of these movements. Little-known aspects of her life, such as being a pagan Goddess, a healer, a mystic, an abortionist, and a lesbian have been spotlighted, much to the disgruntlement of pious Catholic church leaders and others. St Brigid's legacy is at times obscure. Meave Brigid Callan, who is a professor of religion and medieval studies in Iowa in the United States, maintained in her scholarship that Brigid performed the first recorded abortion in Ireland in 650 AD. Here Callan maintains that Brigid was noted to have helped a »woman in a difficult situation.«

#### You grew up in Kilkenny, were there witches?

There was a curious case of Dame Alice Kytler, the Kilkenny witch who escaped being burned at the stake as she shape-shifted and escaped to England and was never heard from again. I grew up with this story, but the reality of her case was transformative to Irish history at that time.

This was medieval Ireland of 1324, and Alice was a woman of property and had been married four times and widowed. Children of one of the deceased husbands were disgruntled with their lack of inheritance and pressed for an investigation into Alice and her business dealings.

Eventually, accused of being witches and practicing witchcraft and sorcery, Alice and her maid Petronella De Meath were arrested and tried for heresy in front of an ecclesiastical court. They were also accused of worshipping the devil and fornicating with a demon, arguably the first record of devil worship being associated with witchcraft. Later, Alice escaped for a second time to England but her maid Petronella was arrested and burned at the stake outside what is the Tholsel in Kilkenny's city center.

The aforementioned historian Maeve Brigid Callan discusses the story of Alice and Petronella in her book *The Templars, the Witch and the Wild Irish*. According to her this was not »real« heresy but »artificial« heresy, as these were fabricated charges against adversaries. She also presents an argument that this case also represented a type of transformation in the perception of Ireland having up to that point been seen as the island of »saints and scholars« to now being promoted by the Normans, the Roman Catholic church and the English, all settlers, as a land of »heathens and heretics.« Up to this point the Irish did not practice Christianity in the form of the Roman Catholic church. According to Callan, this story of Alice and Petronella reflected the »conflicting interests and shifting identities« on the island. Eventually this conflict was performed on the burning body of Petronella. This incident of burning a woman at the stake as a heretic and witch occurred well before the mass burning of witches across Europe in the fifteenth century. The context for these early trials were conflicts created around ethnic identity between the Irish, the Anglo-Irish, and the English.

## Connecting to W.B. Yeats's poem »The Second Coming,« do you think that pandemics gave Brexit an occult dimension?

Conflicts around ethnic identity are not uncommon in the histories of this island and our neighbors. In ways, art and magic have played their own roles in that history. An important writer/poet/magician who wrote about some of these conflicts was W.B. Yeats. I was always fascinated with Yeats's life story, in particularly his engagement with practical magic, Celtic mysticism, the great wheel, and historical time. He was a high-ranking initiate of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. I loved reading about his psychic collaborations with George Hyde-Lees, whom he married in 1917. These activities included his translations of her automatic writing and automatic speech. Much of this activity led to the writing of a seminal text titled *A Vision*, written incorporating George's automatic utterances and »scattered sentences« and contributions from etheric and higher spirits.

In 1919 during the Spanish flu pandemic, while a pregnant George was recovering from the flu, Yeats wrote what would become his most often quoted poem, »The Second Coming« (originally titled »The Second Birth«). Because of its vivid apocalyptic imagery, it has been quoted and referenced in twentieth and twenty-first century popular culture: television, film, music, and so on. In the poem he refers to history moving in 2,000-year cycles; »twenty centuries of stony sleep« coming to an end. A few years ago, the contemporary Irish journalist and writer Fintan O'Toole proposed a notion called the »Yeats test.« Here he maintained that the more Yeats was quoted in media and politics, »the worse things are.«<sup>4</sup> Indeed it is obvious the political shenanigans of the past five years between Ireland, the UK, and the EU that change is afoot, Brexit being part of that change. For anyone observing domestic politics in Ireland during this Covid pandemic, change will come. Our current government is a Frankenstein monster, which presents quite the spectacle of the establishment clinging to power. And in doing so demonstrates in the words of Yeats that »the center cannot hold.«



Church and State, Cyanotype/digital print on photo rag paper, A1 size, 2019

Breda Lynch is a contemporary Irish artist born in Kilkenny and based in Limerick city, located in the west of Ireland, working in a variety of media, including drawing, photography, print, and digital media, video, and installation. She is a full-time lecturer in Fine Art at Limerick School of Art and Design. She engages with dialogues and discourses on queer feminisms, the western mystery tradition and occulture, appropriation, and the economy of the image.

Krzysztof Gutfrański is a curator, editor, and researcher. His contextual research practice pivots on issues of social engagement, alternative education, theory of value, and non-functional thinking in the era of systemic and technological transformations. Krzysztof was a fellow at the Akademie in 2020 and is guest editor of this issue.

1 The Garda is national police service.

the Republic of Ireland. 4 Fintan O'Toole: »>Yeats Test< criteria reveal we are doo-

3 Fianna Fail and Fine Gael are major political parties in med,« in The Irish Times, July 18, 2018 https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-yeats-test-criteria-revealwe-are-doomed-1.3576078 (accessed March 7, 2021).

# The Deep Cut

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The Deep cut, page 2 of the prison notebook, photo Sarvenaz Mostofey

# Sarvenaz Mostofey in conversation with Krzysztof Gutfrański

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Have you thought about freeing your mind, locking-down your body, or maybe doing something about the space around you? A composer and researcher, Sarvenaz Mostofey shares notes on Iranian syncretism, long-distance communication, and sounds of healing.

> Krzysztof Gutfrański: This issue of Solitude Journal is about magical consciousness. You once told me about a Persian myth involving a sort of energetic vampirism. It was about rulers of the past snatching and eating brains of the young generations to remain in power. Do you think power can be perceived as a form of magic?

> Sarvenaz Mostofey: The root of the word »magic« is supposed to come from *magi* in ancient Zoroastrianism. In the past, magi or *Mogh* (in Farsi) meant the »spiritual leader« or »priest,« although in the ancient Greek texts they were seen as sorcerers and nothing more, in most cases. Different historical sources show different interpretations of what these people actually did. In some, they were considered the servants of the fire temple; in others, dream interpreters who issued prophecies on the future and through which they infiltrated the king's decisions and manipulated them. For ancient Iranians, magic and sorcery were the religion of the devil, but it is interesting that the actions ordered to neutralize spells were also a kind of magic. Magic was also mixed with healing and power, and if you open ancient books of *Avesta*<sup>1</sup> or *Shahnameh*,<sup>2</sup> you can find that magic existed both for good and for evil, as Zoroastrianism is something between polytheism and monotheism.

Zoroastrian rites were the state religion of three great Iranian empires, which flourished almost continually from the sixth century BC to the seventh century CE and dominated much of the Near and Middle East. First taught among nomads on the Asian steppes, Zoroastrianism became the state religion of the three great Iranian empires and had a remarkable influence on other world faiths: to the east on northern Buddhism; and to the west on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. With the conquest of Iran by the Muslim Arabs, Zoroastrianism lost its secular power but continued to survive as a minority faith. Despite its antiquity, it remains a living religion, giving extra cues to the tradition of magic. What interests me in all this is not the legacy of a long-term history or multiple dynasties, which left the population alone with post-invasion destruction, but rather the magical effect of time preserved within language, music, and poetry. Verses are present in literature from the hard science of Avicenna to the historical epic poems of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. I find it quite playful. Symbolic terminology became a corresponding motif throughout the time, which is repetitively present and imprinted on Persian poetic tradition. Persian poetry is in constant dialogue with people, and present in everyday life. You can read and understand literary works from centuries ago; it's strange but true. Many contemporary musicians are still singing the poetries of the medieval era and they are well-received. I do not think it is a form of archaism; on the contrary, it means that these poets are actually very contemporary.

#### So, what about the story of the brains?

Well, I can give you a beautiful take from the story of Zahhāk (another name for Ajidahak), one of my favorite parts from Shahnameh. The evil king Zahhāk was fooled by his cook, who was actually Ahriman (the evil spirit in Zoroastrianism) himself. Ahriman kissed Zahhāk's shoulders, and snakes came out of each of the kissed places. After this incident, Ahriman orders Zahhāk to feed the brains of two young men to snakes every day so that he is not bitten by them. Each day, Zahhāk's agents kidnap two men and kill them, so that their brains can feed Zahhāk's snakes. Two men called Armayel and Garmavel decided to rescue the young men from the deadly snakes. They learn to cook and become Zahhāk's royal chefs. Each day, Armayel and Garmayel saved one of the two men by sending him off to faraway mountains. Then they swapped one human brain with that of a sheep. Why didn't they do this trickery to save both men is something I always thought about as a kid. Eventually, the people led by Kaveh Ahangar, who was a blacksmith, revolted against Zahhāk and elected Fereydoun as a king. Fereydoun captured Zahhāk and imprisoned him in Mount Damavand. The myth may have a natural origin, as Mount Damavand was once an active volcano that erupted at least once - rivers of lava flowed from it like horrible fiery snakes. The story of Zahhāk being trapped in Damavand may have originated at the same time the eruption of Damavand lavas stopped. The constant fear of Zahhāk breaking his chains can be seen as concern about the volcano's reactivation.

#### How can you outline the dimensions of esotericism in Iran?

You can feel it in the landscape, geography, and language. For example there are multiple stories and folklore about the winds. And different meanings and multiple stories with mythological winds. One of the most renowned comes again from the *Shahnameh*. It covers a mythological story of Arash the Archer, who is a heroic figure of Iranian mythology. There are two brilliant contemporary adaptations, in a play by Bahram Beyzayi called *Arash* and an epic poem by Siavash Kasrai.

In the myth of Arash you can find a major battle in Mazandaran when Turanians surrounded the Iranian forces and the commander of Iran proposed a truce. Afrasiab, the king of Turanians, accepted, but to humiliate the opponent, he offered a game. It was a sort of archery competition. Whatever land falls within the range of an arrow shot should be returned to Manuchehr, the king, and the Iranians. Everything outside its range will go to Afrasiab. An angel (*spendarmad*) instructs Manouchehr to build a special arrow and bow. Standing on top of Alborz mountain range summit, Arash fires a specially-prepared arrow but also sacrifices his own life while launching it. The arrow travels very far, from dawn to sunset, before finally landing by Jay-hoon River at the border. Then you can feel more air in this story: Vayu is a god of wind in both Indian



Sultan Mohammed, *The imprisonment of Zahhāk in Damavand*, »Tahmasebi Shahnameh«, 1525-35, Metropolitan Museum, NYC (wikicommons) and Iranian mythology. It protected the arrow's flight and also gave extra energy to it. It is interesting that Vayu – the symbol of neutrality in Iranian myths as he makes sacrifices for both Ahura Mazda (the highest deity of Zoroastrianism) and Ahriman (evil spirit) – decides to take sides this time and help Arash.

The fact that many Iranians name their children after someone who saved the country from humiliation and misery by throwing a life-sacrificing arrow says something about a wish that a single arrow can save everyone. It also implies something about sacrifice that I wish were different: I wish parents would give less heroic names to their children, so people can be more liberated from the weight of history.

## Regarding bows and arrows, do you see the wind as a moving force of sound? How does listening to the landscape influence folk music in the region?

Sets of beliefs called Zār exist among the coastal people of southern Iran, common to coastal African countries like Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. It is a precious ethno-musical cult intertwined with magic, performance, and nature - the sea and wind, which are also the source of supernatural phenomena in the south. The wind is the main player and like the dual character of wind in old myths, they believe that winds are also good or evil. They have different names and they are powers that rule all the unseen mystical creatures. Zār are the most dangerous, most common winds and there are more than seventy types of them, depending on where they are coming from. They believe that humans can be possessed by these winds and fall into insanity or get seriously sick. The community developed the practice of exorcising possessed bodies, which usually lasts for a couple of days. Māmā zār (female) or Bābā zār (male) lead these ceremonies. To me it is an early example of (drum) music therapy and a gesture of public care to the individuals in the community, because Ahl-e-Hava (literally: »community belonging to the winds«) are the people who were successfully exorcised and have to attend every Zār ritual. Other people from the cult, who may or may not be possessed, also participate in the ritual and can eventually go into trance to speak in tongues. In videos, you can see ghostlike trembling bodies under ceremonial veils. It is simply beautiful.

But it is very difficult for nonlocal people to access these rituals and that's why this practice fortunately survived. These are some general things that I know from various sources. And since the language and culture of beach dwellers differ from one village to another, these rituals can be very different. The beauty of these ceremonies is the alternative way in which people in that region cope with their difficulties; the people who receive the least share of the economy in a region that provides for the whole country. The industrialization of the coastal region, with its ecological impact on the people who were living in peace with their environment and were freely trading with other coasts, had long-term consequences on their everyday lives. To take away the freedom of specific people in the name of modernization, which they could not even benefit from, could lead to all those distressed, possessed bodies. Therefore, the Zār ceremony can be interpreted as the hopeless request of the Southern human for nature to return to balance.

It seems your interest in esoterics focuses on birds connected to magic, like those of woodpeckers and crows. Here I would like to talk about your site-specific sound installation, on which we could work together during Akademie Schloss Solitude Summer Festival. Can you introduce us to the project?

I have a special relationship with birds and love them so much. In Tehran I am a member of a gang of crows and we exchange gifts on my balcony. I remember one of them once leaving a beautiful stone on my windowsill. But while in Solitude, I was fascinated by the sounds of the forest, especially woodpeckers drumming. These birds are considered patrons of magic, forestry, and rhythm. They drum not only because of juicy worms hidden under the bark, »healing« the trees at the same time (which in its own right also creates homes for other birds). They are unique because they cannot »sing« in the conventional bird sense. So they developed a long distance communication for mating and claiming territories by drumming on various surfaces. You can find stunning examples of woodpeckers drumming on non-natural objects like a NASA space shuttle or electric poles. Sometimes it is like trance music. As an American naturalist Fannie Hardy Eckstorm poetically explained, »Other birds woo their mates with songs, but the woodpecker has no voice for singing. He cannot pour out his soul in melody and tell his love his devotion in music ... He is the only instrumental performer among the birds; for the ruffed grouse, though he drums, has no drum.«<sup>3</sup>

The work *Neither Aleph*, Nor Lam was also a dialogue with one of the old buildings of Schloss Solitude, a former barn located on the edge of the woods around the castle. The project was inspired by the surrounding forest, acoustic aspects of wood, and long-distance communication. One of my ideas was to bring the environment around this building inside and make the walls transparent, to create a space which is also connected to its surroundings; a fluid in-between zone that imitates nature and dialoguing with the forest. I installed the sound of woodpeckers drumming inside a timber-framed building made of trees growing around the castle. Hearing woodpeckers drumming from my studio was an inspiring moment. I would frequently go to the woods and field-record. The way they connected in my head - an old notebook and drumming woodpeckers – was not something so clear to me. Maybe it was the code that I imagined was existing in that notebook or maybe it was a magical organic correspondence, but the auditory experience while listening and recording woodpeckers was the closest auditory association that I experienced through language. I can just grasp it as an effect that an non-human language triggers in you. So in this sense I become an outsider who does not understand a language.

Nature and subsequently its sounds are considered noise in multiple urban spaces. Audio architecture and ubiquitous music are predominantly present in urban life. Even if these sounds are recorded sounds of nature and played for people to hear, they transform nature and its huge rich sounds into manipulated replayed mellow background noise. One of the sound technologies that has actually been migrated from military research are flat-panel speakers that can vibrate any surface and turn them into sound transmitters. In this piece I used panels in the form of the timber frames of the walls of the barn to vibrate the loud drumming of woodpeckers and prison tap codes.

## The prison »knock code« plays an important role in your project. How does it relate to your background?

Writing and deciphering messages in secret code and other forms of secret writing have long played an important role for both long-distance communication and the occult. Today when anonymity gains different dimensions, both in problematic countries and in the global village, where most people are busy bees producing content for Big Tech, you can see the relevance of the unknown. Just imagine how we have become accustomed to communicating with others using devices such as mobile phones, computers, intercoms, and so on. Slowly forgetting that in emergency situations these things may be inoperable or unavailable, like what we actually experienced in the November 2019 protests with 10 days of internet blackout in Iran. Imagine if you were trapped in a structure after an earthquake or perhaps imprisoned or taken hostage.

	1	2	3	4	5
1	А	В	C/K	D	E
2	F	G	Н	I	J
3	L	М	Ν	0	Р
4	Q	R	S	т	U
5	V	W	x	Y	Z

The Polybius square

How could you communicate if your voice could not be heard, or if you want to convey the message only to those who should hear it?

So, here I was interested in exploring sonic qualities of the so-called Polybius square. It is a device invented by the ancient Greeks and made famous by the historian and scholar Polybius. The device is used for fractionating plain-text characters so that they can be represented by a smaller set of symbols, which is useful in all types of simplified distance communication: for telegraphy, steganography, and to certain extent cryptography. The device was originally used for fire signaling and drumming, allowing for the coded transmission of any message. In modern and contemporary times this system has been widely used among the prisoners around the world and known as the knock/tap code. For example:

HELLO 23 15 31 31 34 Tapping: .. ... . ..... .... .....

One of the references in Neither Aleph, Nor Lam was your father's diary from the time of imprisonment in the 1950s in Iran. There are references to prison codes, something the Persian poet Hafez called the rend or Aesopian language, as well as references to very contemporary notes on medical training in warfare. What was it like to sonify such a specific artifact?

Imagine being able to talk to someone who is not able to speak anymore. That puts me in a phase of creating a dialogue with the past through an object, and also digging it out from a completely different context. I was imagining that this is a notebook more than information on first aid or medical training. So that prisoners were trying to teach each other. The strength of the symptoms discussed were a way to discuss contagious topics strong enough to travel through concrete walls. To code to other inmates and also to share this knowledge when you are released from prison. I think this notebook was addressed to me as a distant but familiar tap-coded message.

And you mentioned the rend. It was a mythical construct for Hafez, devised for a person he wished to be and admired – a character created with so much deliberate ambiguity, one who is against hypocrisy and is spiritual, beyond demands of legalistic religion and false piety. An early Bohemian poet and artist? An antinomian? Maybe, but as soon it turns into a pretentious image, Hafez immediately rejects it. To define rend is very difficult, but it is more difficult to become one.

Sarvenaz Mostofey is an Iranian sound artist and composer currently based in Berlin. Her projects incorporate space as an active attribute in the process of creating art, exploring interconnections between modes of sonic attention and concepts of space. She was a fellow at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in 2020.

Krzysztof Gutfrański is a curator, editor, and researcher. His contextual research practice pivots on issues of social engagement, alternative education, theory of value, and non-functional thinking in the era of systemic and technological transformations. Krzysztof was a fellow at the Akademie in 2020 and is guest editor of this issue.

1 The Avesta (/eˈvɛstə/) is the primary collection of religious pronounced [ʃp:hnp:'me]; lit. »The Book of Kings,« is a long texts of Zoroastrianism, composed in the Avestan language. 2 The Shahnameh (Persian:شاهنامه,Romanized: Šāhnāme

epic poem written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi between c.977 and 1010 CE and is the national epic of Greater Iran.

3 Fannie Hardy Eckstorm: The Woodpeckers. New York 1901. p.15

# Encounters in Sacred Places

Visual artist Michael Kleine and dramaturg and musician Roman Lemberg embarked on a field trip to Italy in 2018. It was the beginning of a long-term study on the connection between the sacred and performative practices in the context of places of worship, from prehistoric times to the present.




















Solitude Journal 2 On the Occult and the Supernatural



















In 2018, we visited a number of places in Italy that have been set up for ritual acts, sacrifice and worship, representation and performances: temples, squares, theaters, parks, villas. These were forgotten places as well as very famous and touristy places, dating to different times: from prehistoric ruins to architectures of the classical modern period, some of which have already become ruins themselves.

A multifaceted transfer of cultural signs became visible: from an archaic prehistory to Roman antiquity with its mystery cults, to Catholic Christianity, the Renaissance, to a classicist or shamanist-inspired modernity, often linked with hints back and forth, superimpositions, moments of exchange, and quotations wrapped up in a morbid atmosphere of neglect and decay or in today's musealization and commercialization. In the places we visited, we repeatedly encountered a particular quality of »experience« that we only could describe as somehow »sacred.« Sacred because something that points to the extraordinary was staged there, something that stands out from the everyday.

In these places, techniques are effective that – still today – we also include in the usual tools of performance, of theatrical staging, and dramaturgical strategies. The scenery, positioning of objects, appearances, the placement and integration of light; everything is geared toward an effect that then actually occurs or accidentally fails: the effect of experiencing the »sacred.« In the following, we would like to reflect on these basic strategies for staging the sacred in brief.

#### Corporeality

A place is sacralized by (at least) two intentions that meet in a fragile encounter: the place has been intentionally set up for an effect and we, the visitors, are searching for an experience there. In the preoccupation with the sacred, the material and the spiritual become blurred. One has become almost accustomed to looking at the sacred as something spiritual, i.e., unreal or supernatural, linked only to the field of imagination or the metaphysical. But in the places we visited, the sacred experience is always transported through concrete tangible material things. These places were set up in the past, sometimes an extremely long time ago. If they still have their physical effect on today's visitors, they only function across the temporal distance, because of their corporeality/materiality: there was an intention in the distant past that has left its mark for a possible future encounter.

In the end, two (or more) human intentions rooted in different times meet in the physicality of the sacred space and create an experience of common corporeality. This specific experience of physical community is a crucial element of sacrality.

#### **Staging Techniques**

Sacred places are specially designed through spatial modifications such as demarcations, elevations, hollows, or vistas. Objects are either placed in a particularly exposed position, or in hiding places such as niches. Nevertheless, these architectural elements do not remain frozen forever.

These seemingly permanent installations communicate their fragility; they obtain their own temporal dimensions: Growing vegetations indicate their aging. Moving shadows of the daylight highlight their rigidity, yet fall apart. The fleeting element of water in natural or artificially created ponts, fountains, and moats contrasts the architecture and points out (material) changeability.

In a broader sense, sacred places can be shaped by ephemeral actions. Through choreographies, processions, rituals, gestures, rhythms, and directions, time was inscribed in these places. Often these ephemeral actions are still legible in the remaining architecture: paths, stages, and niches indicate the possibilities for rituals, plays, or ceremonies. The intensity of these traces can vary from great prominence to barely visible.

Often the fixed and the ephemeral refer to each other and play together: The »ephemeral« performances sacralize the place in which they are held, and the »permanent« installations sacralize the time spent in: as mo(nu)ments. Sometimes this can be even experienced in the sonority of those places, yet another staged dimension. In a grotto, for example, where sounds – voices and footsteps, and drops of water – are multiplied and echoed, you can imagine that thousands of years ago they sounded exactly as they do now.

#### **Time Leaps**

What is fascinating about all these places is the overlapping of the present and the past: These places often refer to older pasts. Often Christian medieval chapels are built upon cult sites from Roman times; beneath the Roman cult site lies an even older place of worship. New buildings were erected on top of ruins, ruins were rebuilt, the remains of older buildings were integrated, fragments were used as spolia. The distinction between »authenticity« and »forgery« becomes blurred.

Already in ancient times, remains of older cultures were often preserved and integrated into a cult. During the classical Greek period, for example, older archaic weathered wooden images of the gods had a status of their own alongside the idealized »modern« marble statues, and had a special spot in the temples. The ancient tombs of their mythical founders were worshipped in the center of the cities, such as the tomb of Romulus in Rome. There were shrines for relics, and remains of the bodies of ancient heroes, like the hair of Medusa, and the skin of Marsyas, or their instruments and weapons.

The old stories about the apparitions of gods, spirits or even monsters in sacred places translate these experiences of encounter with an intention from the past, the physical communication.

This creative communication with the past reappears throughout cultural history. During our travels through Italy we faced it in various forms: the Catholic cult of relics, the reinvention of antiquity in the Renaissance, rural tales and festivities, to contemporary cultural tourism; the cult of art objects. Our own sensitivity is shaped by all these influences and inspirations.

#### All images: Michael Kleine, 2018. Courtesy the artist

**Michael Kleine** is a performance and visual artist, stage designer, and theater director. His interdisciplinary artistic practice comprises stage and costume design, artworks and objects, performances, productions, and exhibition architecture in the fields of theater, opera, contemporary and classical music and visual art. In his solo exhibitions and performances, he creates intense collective experiential spaces by focusing equally on the art work/object, sound, architecture, social situation and visual conditions.

**Roman Lemberg** is a performer, musician and music dramaturg, arranger and composer. His artistic practice is characterized by his involvement with the medium of opera/musical theater. Together with the Berlin collective HAUEN & STECHEN, he is dedicated to redesigning the great myths of opera history in formats that transcend genre boundaries. In his joint practice with visual artist and director Michael Kleine, he expands in the field of artistic research, with a focus on the sacred and its links with artistic and performative strategies.

## Honoring the Moon's Otherworldly Presence

Virtual Moon Altar for Global Ritual and Connection



# Lark Alder (VCR) in conversation with Denise Helene Sumi

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Lark Alder a.k.a. VCR's project..*oOo.*. *Virtual Moon Altar for Global Ritual and Connection* replied to the 13th Web Residencies call »Muntu Maxims« by Solitude. It aims to unite people in a worldwide observance of the lunar cycle. In the following text, Lark Alder discusses the connection that the moon cycle creates between people worldwide, other species, and objects, as well as their individual practices of relating to the moon.

#### Denise Helene Sumi: How does the lunar cycle connect, well, everything on earth?

Lark Alder: I've been keeping a journal about my observation of the moon since the start of the Web Residency, which happened to coincide with the new moon on November 14. One thing I wrote that sticks with me is:

The truth is that I often feel lost in time, space, and tradition. The moon is the one thing that grounds me – a landmark that is both stable and constantly in motion. [...] The moon's presence is multidimensional – both tangible and otherworldly

So I would like to start with that statement, as I feel it sums up the way the lunar cycle unites us all through constant cyclical change that marks the passing of time. By definition it is a global experience as the moon phases are experienced simultaneously in all parts of the world. It is an experience shared by all planetary beings now, as well as ancestors of the past. Regarding human perspectives, there are countless cultural beliefs and practices related to the moon: both new and old, and those that are lost to time. Many of these cultural practices, faiths, and mythologies have common themes that highlight cycles of fertility, death, (re)birth, and time passing. Though my intention for the project ...oOo.. is to highlight these connections and how they intersect with the natural world, I quickly became overwhelmed by the vastness and complexity of cultural traditions.

The research and sharing of cultural perspectives merits a slow and thoughtful approach, as so many cultural practices are appropriated and exploited through this very process. Plus, the moon's presence is multidimensional – both tangible and otherworldly. There is too much to consider at once, and I see the process of connecting with the moon's cycles to be in itself a process of slowing down.

As an entry point, rather than looking at the vast mythologies and cultural practices related to the moon, you turned to the natural world. The book Moonstruck: How Lunar Cycles Affect Life by Ernest Naylor was one source you were looking at. In connection with the question just asked – could you give more examples of how the moon affects the living beings, the natural world and its objects, by means of physical/genetic forces?

Yes, rather than starting with human cultural practices and beliefs, I have begun by studying how the moon's astronomical presence affects our planet's physical matter and biology. This is no doubt laying the foundation for this project with the more »sciencey« side, but I don't mean to equate science with »truth« or foundation. Many science-based studies I have come across purport to debunk myth and folklore, or grumble about how people's cultural beliefs taint the accuracy of their studies – as if it were possible to untangle our networked existence.

I don't see science as having more value than intuitive, indigenous, folk, or faithbased knowledge, nor the wisdom of the plant and animal world. I was recently introduced to the term »deep mapping,« which feels true to how I am approaching this project as a holographic, multidimensional exploration of the moon.

I am starting with the physical/astronomical presence of the moon simply because it is a planetary experience and a nice point of departure. From this perspective, these are the three ways I believe the moon most impacts the life and matter on our planet:

- 1 Illumination of the night sky
- 2 Marker of time passing
- 3 Gravitational pull and effect on tides

The long and short of it is that life's evolution is informed by the lunar cycle. There is growing evidence that organisms (including humans) possess internal circalunar clocks – we are all lunar creatures.

#### 1 Illumination of the night sky

Just as there is a 24-hour cycle of light and dark, there is a 29.5-day lunar cycle of nocturnal illumination. Certain species of flowers bloom in the full moon, as they are pollinated by nocturnal moths and other insects who use the moon to navigate. Nocturnal activity of birds who eat those insects also increases on the full moons.

When you are in areas without light pollution, the light of the full moon is bright. For most of human existence (before electricity), the light of the full moon made nocturnal activity much easier. The full moon was a time to travel, to gather, to stay awake through the night. It was the original disco.

Conversely, the new moon, when the night sky is dark, is a time we associate with rest, reflection; it is the more introspective part of the cycle. Much like the winter months. In these ways, our evolution is informed by the lunar cycle.

#### 2 Marker of time passing

The moon is one of the most prominent and exact markers of time passing. Many animals (especially sea creatures) time their mating events to surprisingly exact phases of the moon. Just a few weeks ago, the coral of the Great Barrier Reef erupted in a massive spawning event, which occurs annually a few days after the full moon in November/ December. Sea urchins, Palolo worms, flatworms, sand crabs, and sea lice are other examples, and many studies show how animals who live in intertidal zones maintain these rhythms even when removed from all environmental stimuli. They possess internal clocks that keep track of the lunar cycles. These are known as circalunar rhythms in the



Work in progress, ...oOo... »Virtual Moon Reverence«, 2020

field of chronobiology, similar to the more familiar daily circadian rhythms, and there is growing speculation that humans might also possess genes that are attuned with lunar cycles.

Regardless of whether you can sense it internally, we can certainly keep track of the lunar cycle by looking at the sky – it is the original calendar.

#### 3 Gravitational pull and effect on tides

I like to surf – the changing tides are the way I am most intimately aware of the changing moon phases. Some beaches are only surfable at certain tides, the shapes of the waves shift based on how the water meets the ocean floor. The tides are much more extreme during new and full moons when the earth, sun, and moon are all aligned. For animals in the intertidal zone, awareness of the tides can be a matter of life or death. I could go on about flatworms and sandcrabs, but will save that for a future conversation.

#### The observation of the lunar cycle and associated social practices are ancient cultural, mostly analogue practices. To what extent do you reproduce or alter particular ancient practices and rituals and its narratives through your online moon altar?

Well, this remains to be seen as the project is just beginning and will evolve over a year of lunar cycles. Did I mention that the dates of this residency start and end on/ around the new moon? It is an auspicious beginning. I originally proposed it as an »Online Moon Altar,« thinking it would be a site of collective ritual practice, though I started to conceive of it more as a site of »Virtual Moon Reverence« to be more inclusive of all the shapes it takes as it is starting to feel more like a temple/shrine, as well as simply a source of information. Because it is entirely nonverbal, with no text, the information conveyed is more implied than stated. I am hoping to give the viewer the



Work in progress, ...oOo.. »Virtual Moon Reverence«, 2020

opportunity to intuit their own meaning and draw from their own sociogeographical and cultural experiences. So in that way it is very different then most traditions, which tell you a story or provide a set of instructions.

As I mentioned, I am slowly moving to be thoughtful in my approach for referencing cultural practices. There is a fine line and a lot of gray area between honoring traditions and carving them up for consumption. It is not my intention to partake in appropriative practices that are so common in the realm of modern spirituality – which I have certainly seen my share of as a third-generation white Californian. At the same time, these cultural systems offer wisdom of great value and deserve acknowledgement, as they have certainly informed my own practices and approach to this project as a temple/shrine/altar. My goal is to be intentional and well-informed in how I bring them in, especially as I am not using language which makes it much more difficult to create a context/container for sharing.

One modern cultural perspective I look to reframe is how, as a child, I was often told that »the sun is the source of life.« The history of the moon offers a much more subtle take on what facilitates life on Earth – reminding us of how the less forceful presence is often overlooked in patriarchal, western, war-based, and settler-colonial societies – true to how many cultural perspectives of the moon are aligned with the feminine.

It is common knowledge that the human menstrual cycle synchronizes with the lunar cycle. With your background in queer-feminist theory, I'd like to talk about identity politics, genetic research, and categories such as »the masculine« and »the feminine.«

Yes, I am cautious to equate the moon with »women,« as much of what people are referring to is menstruation. Referring to »women« in this regard equates gender with

biology. Taking into account people who are trans/nonbinary/gender noncomforming, many women/feminine people do not menstruate, while many men/masculine people do. And it is important to remember that the persecution of women as »witches« also includes these other targeted genders and people who practiced indigenous and earth-based healing practices.

That said, I consider the moon to be aligned with the feminine, which is distinct from the term »women.« Much of this association stems from the menstrual cycle's close correspondence to the lunar cycle (though the time of one lunation is actually a little longer than the average menstrual cycle, 29.5 versus 28 days). However, there are other converging factors, like the moon's more subtle presence compared to the sun, or the fact that notions of witchcraft became associated with observance of the natural world such as the cycles of the moon.

You were introduced to new and full moon rituals through New Age »woo,« right? There is a lot of criticism of the New Age movement, especially in the light of its marketing and the stereotypes it produces. Can you share this criticism?

Yes, I absolutely share this criticism. But it is a »both-and« situation. »Woo« is a funny term, as it engenders a type of criticism about New Age-y culture itself – I use it to make fun of myself as much as I take it seriously as a term. To have just the woo with no politics is appropriative and irresponsible. But to look at everything through a primarily critical lens is no way to live. I think about this in terms of the queer theorist Eve

### To have just the woo with no politics is appropriative and irresponsible. But to look at everything through a primarily critical lens is no way to live.

Sedgewick's concept of a reparative read. In contrast to the critical read, which is based in negative affect and the desire to expose blind spots and oppressive ideologies. The reparative read is rooted in positive affect: pleasure, curiosity, hope. The reparative read asks: What are the parts we can appreciate/learn from, even though the work is problematic? Sedgwick argues, and I agree, that we need both reparative and critical reads.

I have spent most of the past month reflecting on my own relationship to the moon and to intuitive practices in general. Specifically, I have been reflecting on the ways that modern Neo-Paganism, Wicca, and Witchcraft are appropriative or disrespectful to people who were persecuted for being witches. Something Sylvia Federici said in a talk I attended this month was useful to hear at this moment. She expressed her distaste for the way »witch« has been reclaimed/fetishized by contemporary movements, as it was not something people identified as, but a label they died protesting. In an article shared in our reading group, Isabelle Stengers quotes a statement by neo-pagan Starhawk, who said »The smoke of the burned witches still hangs in our nostrils.« As we reference tradition, we must not forget those who came before us, nor the fact that women and other targeted genders are still persecuted to this day, albeit in different forms.

Because I have been thinking so much about all the women and other targeted genders who were prosecuted, tortured, and killed based on their relationship to the natural world, I also started to conceive of the temple as a mausoleum of sorts, a place to honor those whose lives were taken, though it is all very abstract as of now. Because both the internet and the world of the unseen are so dense, I intend to approach this with great reverence, respect, and care. Do you recognize tensions between ancient practices and your use of technology for worshipping the lunar cycles? What potential do you see in the use of relatively young and independent technologies for a self-determined engagement with the moon cycles?

I am laughing at the word »tension« after the *attempt* at the new moon Zoom ritual we had today. I was so flustered by navigating the technical aspects (which included routing my cell phone camera to Zoom so I could display a bathtub with rocks slowly filling with water) that I was completely unable to tune in and hold space. I could blame it on the fact that it was also an eclipse, or my last-minute decision to rescue a puppy the day before, but it left me feeling that I was trying to do the impossible in merging a very embodied practice with a virtual one. But I think that »impossible« spaces are the most exciting ones to explore.

Still, it would be strange to only observe the moon primarily through a digital device, just as it would be bizarre to use your cell phone to breathe. I feel it is important to move the project off-screen into physical space – one that you walk by rather than link to. An object that facilitates grounded connection rather than distraction. To this end I am making a printable lunar calendar which will be available in early January and am very excited about.

You started your work conceptually with an altar – a place of worship. What is it for? Do we need an altar as a medium? Isn't the moon the ultimate shrine itself? EXACTLY!!! The natural world is the magic. It is the spell.

### As we reference tradition, we must not forget those who came before us, nor the fact that women and other targeted genders are still persecuted to this day, albeit in different forms.

We do not need a place of worship. The moon offers us that through her presence in the sky. But I do think it is easier for people to enter a mode of reverence through spatial orientation. The altar/shrine/temple offers a designated space to enter that mindset. In pondering what the ritual should look like, it struck me that it wasn't so much *what* people did to observe the moon cycle, but that they were paying attention at all.

One of the key aspects of the online altar ..000.. is that it's nonverbal. As a visitor, I enter an immersive virtual environment with specially composed synth sounds, inhabited by 3D-scanned objects, and the central altar, without written explanation. Why is this contemplative and sensory focus central to the work? Where exactly in the virtual ..000.. environment do you convey natural phenomena and where do you create a mystical environment?

First, the moon predates language – I like that the project could present the content nonverbally, especially as language is so specific to humans and the moon reaches far beyond our sphere. I also wanted to make a web-based resource that was accessible to speakers of all languages. Though the internet is a global network, much of it is limited to people who speak more prominent languages and dialects.

The landing page is where the natural phenomena are communicated. It currently includes a visualization of the moon cycle and is also where I will archive the biweekly posts from the email list (roughly aligned with new and full moons), starting with images and sounds more closely related to the astronomy and biology I have begun researching. Being that posts are all nonverbal, they are quite abstract and don't offer



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much factual information for people to latch onto beyond the experience of the sound/ audio and associative connections.

The homepage links to an immersive 3D space with a watery expanse under what appears to be the moon's surface. This is definitely the website's mystical realm, transporting you to an extraterrestrial dimension that evokes the power of the subliminal and unseen.



Visit the Project

Lark Alder aka Lark VCR explores the personal, political, and social implications of an increasingly digitized and bioengineered world. VCR stands for Virtually Conflicted Reality – the state of perpetual disconnect we navigate as cognizant individuals who have no choice but to participate in systems defined by injustice. Leveraging hybrid forms of video and web-based media, their projects offer queer feminist visions for future technology's role in mediating magic and intimacy.

**Denise Helene Sumi** is a curator and editor based in Vienna and Stuttgart. As part of Akademie Schloss Solitude's Digital Solitude team she is responsible for the editing of the Solitude Journal, and the Solitude Blog as well as partly for the Web Residency program. She is a founding member and co-director of the exhibition space Kevin Space in Vienna.

# How Does an Artist Work With the Educational System?

## Tequio, Dialogue, and Situated Indigenous Knowledge in the Practice of Daniel Godínez Nivón

### Krisztián Gábor Török

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How do we challenge hegemonic knowledge systems? Which systems, techniques, languages, and methods allow us to describe what surrounds us, and to learn from? These are central questions in this issue of the journal. And this essay, by Krisztián Gábor Török, examines how Daniel Godínez Nivón localizes knowledge as a collective thinking and experience process through *tequio* – a nonformal, noninstitutional, participatory, communal collective working method from Indigenous communities in Mexico.



Kazá project by Amauta García and Daniel Godínez Nivón, Detail of *La Casa del Agua*, Video Full HD, 6:42 Min, 2019–2020.



Daniel Godínez Nivón, Animal Assembly, Watercolor on paper, 2010

Tequio is communal collective work in Indigenous communities in Mexico, especially the Mixtecan-Zapotecan groups from Oaxaca. The word comes from the Nahuatl term *tequitl* (work or tax), which was labor forced on Mexico's Indigenous groups during colonial rule. The Indigenous communities redefined this unpaid labor to specific social services in which men over sixteen were involved. Today, in Oaxaca, this practice has become a political statement as well. In the original ethnic zones, it is used to transform family work to a wider social and infrastructural network. The migrant population in cities also use it to affirm community identities through different media outlets.<sup>1</sup> Those who migrated to the US still participate in *tequio*, connecting with their community, organizing social events, and sharing their experiences as migrants. In practice, tequio refers to a working method in which community members provide skills that are useful to the community in exchange for others. It is an assembly model that enables them to stand up as a collective body through democratic decision-making. It allows experimental education through daily practice, that members of the social assemble learn from experience.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold thinks the first place to find education is not in pedagogy, but in

participatory practices that happen through experience.<sup>2</sup> Ingold, in his book Anthropology as/and Education, discusses how we should not understand education as the transmission of knowledge but rather communication between practitioners. Communication should be understood as a practice of commons, that is to establish commonalities between both sides in the educational process. Commoning can't happen without variation, as without differences between individuals; it would only return to a baseline identity. According to Ingold, variation allows the establishment of a shared social environment »[...] in which everyone has something to give precisely because they have nothing in common.«<sup>3</sup> We can find variations and a common language through correspondence and storytelling to reconsider our thinking's epistemological boundaries and bring together the practitioners' existential stakes. What Ingold defines as variation's role in the shared social environment of education is could be understood as a form of *tequio*.

The socially engaged educational practice of Daniel Godínez Nivón uses many participatory practices, mixing them with different Indigenous knowledge production and organizational methods, especially *tequio*. Godínez Nivón's more than decade-long project



Daniel Godínez Nivón, Assembly, Watercolor on paper, 2010

Tequiografías was made in collaboration with the Assembly of Indigenous Migrants (AMI) in Mexico City, which consists of four ethnic groups: Zapoteco, Mixteco, Triqui, and Mixe. Although the artist's grandparents were part of the Zapoteco tribe and migrated to Mexico City, he was not aware of *tequio* as collaborative thinking and collaboration, similar to many Indigenous migrant families. They never thought of their language, or their costumes. The artist first started working with the group in 2008 without a clear conviction of what he wanted to work on. He tried to understand the role the artist can take in the Assembly's life. His goal was to find a way to make *tequio* visible to others through art. While being with the group, Godínez Nivón took on his role in *tequio*, teaching drawing to the community, while he took part in their Assemblies. After working with the AMI for almost two years, the artist found a suitable way to contribute to social life.

Using *Monografías escolares* (school monographs), which are traditional didactic school materials in Mexico, he created *Tequiografías* with the group. *Monografías* and *Tequiografías* initially seem the same: they are on an A4 sheet that addresses specific topics through everyday life, cultural traditions, and historical events and show images on one side and a short

explanatory text on the other. Teachers tell their students to buy them when learning about a specific topic, and they are widely accessible in stationery shops. Tequiografías differ in that they challenge singular narratives of monocultural production of knowledge presented by Monografías and highlights tequio as participatory, correspondence-based learning. They are published in Spanish and the four different Indigenous languages of the AMI Assembly. The images represent various aspects of the Indigenous community's life and how they perceive the world. Each Tequiografía was made during the Assembly. Godínez Nivón made them, and the whole group created the images in dialogue with him, even their colors. It's important to state that the knowledge presented on each Tequiografía was not knowledge created by the artist; he only gave form to what was already present through his process.

Working with the group and attending the Assembly, the artist took part in *tequio* as an educational process similar to the inference between commoning and variation that Ingold understand as education. Through this method using *Tequiografías*, Godínez Nivón gave a platform to *tequio* as localized knowledge of the AMI, both as collective thinking and as a



Daniel Godínez Nivón, *Essay on Oneiric Flora*, 2020. Scientific illustration by Marco Antonio Pineda. Mixed media.

working process. Later on, Godínez Nivón spoke with the nearby stationery store to sell *Tequiografias* and convinced elementary school directors and teachers to use them in their teaching. The artist made the Ministry of Public Education adopt Tequiografías in Indigenous teachers' work in some states in Mexico. Godínez Nivón gave agency to Indigenous knowledge through Tequiografías, turning them into what Donna Haraway calls situated knowledge by directly confronting the official education system through these objects.<sup>4</sup> After this project, Godínez Nivón made tequio part of his work. Although he does not claim to practice tequio, it became an ethical way for him to move in and through life, to collaborate and create with others. For Godínez Nivón, there is continuous learning from and with others through the mode of Assembly, which he learned from *tequio*. His process is not necessarily a trajectory of bettering a craft or success; instead, it is about becoming more aware of the multicultural tools one can access in their context.

*Tequiografías* meet with the hegemonic system of education through modes of dissemination. How does Godínez Nivón use the situated knowledge of Indigenous communities in Mexico's official school system? For him, the school serves three functions: a place of tension, the discovery of experiences, and legitimization. According to him »it is not the system of education that is the major flaw, but we should change people's ethics and intensions within them.«<sup>5</sup>

In his project Oneirical Propaedeutic (2017) the confrontation that created situated knowledge happened through bringing Indigenous epistemologies directly into the educational circuit. During the twoand-a-half-year period of participatory work, Godínez Nivón worked with twelve teenage girls at the Yolia orphanage in Mexico City. He was invited to do an art piece through an art foundation that had previously done workshops in the building. Tequio was the initial inspiration for the work. The question was how to bring a group of individuals together by understanding tension through communication. Through a series of participatory process and workshops, Godínez Nivón established a commoning and variations between the students. After trying out many different practices, later in the process, the artist introducted the idea of dream propaedeutic. Learning through dreams emerged when he created the *Teqiuografia* on health. He met with a group of midwives from the triqiu tribe in Oaxaca, the only matriarchal society within Mexico. These women learned about their healing practice through dream propaedeutic. Using the midwives' Indigenous teaching and learning method, primarily based on meditative exercise, he organized dream workshops with the girls; consisting of regular meetings at Yolia on Sunday, and a weekly collective dream encounter on Wednesday night. Godínez Nivón found it essential to introduce the girls to the midwives' role as »women of knowledge, women of power, their sensitivity with their strategies.«<sup>6</sup>

After six months, the dream process proved fruitful, as each participant started to dream of flowers, which became their common language. They began to work on the relationship between plants and dreams, and the plants soon lost their resemblance to reality. The students shared their experiences and Godínez Nivón got different experts on board from various

In school, real indignity is never connected to the contemporary population but to the glorified, pyramid-building Maya and Aztec past.

fields as biology, agronomy, and botany. Eventually, the dream workshop turned into something that was not just about dreams, but situated knowledge of midwifery; the healing process was confronted with scientific and academic narratives of expertise. Through his instigation, the artist managed to bring scientists from the university into the process. The scientific establishment engaging with the plants found in girls' dreams is a subversive act against productivity that is so often valued in hegemonic education.

The eventual outcome of the work was *I remember the day I was born. Will be tomorrow*, a poem documentary about a sculpture garden that will last for 5,000 years, made after the girls' dream flowers on the mountain Iztaccíhuatl (a Nahuatl word that means »sleeping woman«). The girls can see the mountain from Yolia's roof, where they looked at it while »moon



Daniel Godínez Nivón, Details of the video, *I remember the day I was born. Will be tomorrow*. Video Full HD, 07:40 min, Photo: Arjan Guerrero.

bathing.« Godínez Nivón held some of the last dream workshops on the roof (he'd commissioned a staircase so the girls could access it safely). The garden was created to close the project; the art faculty's students made the sculpture together as per the girls' instructions. The documentary functions as a dream sequence about how the girls' dream flowers transformed into sculptures. In the beginning, the students fall asleep on the roof only to wake up in the mountains and find the clay flowers to organize them into a garden. In the background, a collectively created poem with the same title as the film is read out by a participant. The film does not show every element of the process, but communicates through poetry.<sup>7</sup>

*Kazá*, formerly known as *Bede*, is a collaborative project between Daniel Godínez Nivón and fellow artist Amauta García. The two have been working with schools around the state of Guanajuato through experimental educational processes since 2015.<sup>8</sup> In the region, for many students and parents, Indigeneity is part of oppression, and many families would not teach their own culture, nor would students want to learn about it. Misión de Arnedo was seen by outside locals as a »witches' town« due to the women's healing qualities and botanical knowledge in the area. Many of the

students felt distanced from Indigenous culture due to this negative subjugation. As he did at Yolia in his educational process, Godínez Nivón often invites local experts to hold classes during his workshops. To subvert the negative image, García and Godínez Nivón invited healer women to the school so the students can see that their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers have »hands that could heal.«<sup>9</sup> By directly addressing the community's tension, the artist dismantled the idea of the witches as »other« and legitimized the Indigenous situated knowledge through the school system.

The flaws of Mexican education, mostly present in rural Indigenous schools and how they communicate, are represented in the school system. Within the idea of a progressive country that the Mexican state has long tried to implement, these groups are often portrayed as backward. In school, real indignity is never connected to the contemporary population but to the glorified, pyramid-building Maya and Aztec past. Children working in the fields are always understood as negative. The education system fails to recognize other learning methods that can happen through these processes and what children can learn about their environment.<sup>10</sup> The daily reality of many Indigenous communities has been severely affected by the escalating climate crisis. This



Kazá project by Amauta García and Daniel Godínez Nivón, Detail of *La Casa del Agua*, Video Full HD, 6:42 Min, 2019–2020.

requires promoting Indigenous situated knowledge within schools to fight against these environmental threats.

*Kazá* finished each year with a documentary made by the artists focusing on a specific aspect of life in the schools, with a gradual shift in focus toward rituals and practices around the cultivation of nature. As the region of the Sierra Gorda mountain range in Guanajuato has been hit by continuous years of drought due to the long-lasting effect of the now-closed mining industry, the documentaries recently took a poetic turn. La Casa del Agua (2019) tells the story about water's birth; how it searches for a home as a comet flying in space. Eventually, it lands on Earth where it brings life and prosperity after which animals honor the »house of water« by offering something to it each year. The poem, documentary, and story were made through a participatory process by the children from the workshop at Miguel Hidalgo Elementary school in Misión de Arnedo. They created the costumes, choreography, and storyline, and wrote the short poem narrated in the film. As a preparation during the Assemblies that followed the tequio format, García and Godínez Nivón asked the children to write haikus inspired by Japanese ecopoetry, thinking about the local animals and plants and how these would give offerings to their environment. After writing the poems, the children each chose an animal and impersonated it, turning the Assembly into animals, not students. Connecting Haraway's situated knowledge to posthumanist thinking is crucial in developing different ways of knowing by understanding how to connect with flora and fauna surrounding our local area, and bringing out more complex situated knowledge. The promotion of practices from another society, such as Japanese ecopoetry, does not ignore the idea of local-based experience. By introducing strategies from the outside that can be relatable in another context, the artist stimulated the students to relate to their surroundings and environment while developing new ways of thinking.

Where so far I have described the educational process that happens within shared social environments, I should discuss the role of sharing these experiences with a wider public and how it affects further Godínez Nivón's artistic process. As José Miguel González Casanova writes, artists should not only be concerned with the production of artworks, but they should also be aware of other elements of their process, such as distribution and perception. However, these aspects are not necessarily in the central scope of most artistic processes. By considering these stages together, an artist can expand the field of visibility for the heterotopia art creates, through different communication forms.<sup>11</sup>

Godínez Nivón views the creation of an artwork as an honoring of the correspondence method; however, sharing an outcome does not occupy a highlighted spot in his process. He equally weights the three aspects highlighted by Casanova, and he has a deep understanding of the economic system that supports art and network where the dissemination of works occurs. Godínez Nivón's working method has two key elements: first, he confronts the hegemonic structure of knowledge by bringing nonrational knowledge into the education system. He invited the triqui midwives to the teenage girls' class to show different modes of female empowerment to the students. During the workshop he held at a high school in Guanajuato, students could learn from the experiences of healer women from the local community, to fight against the Indigenous students' negative perception of their indignity. By bringing the knowledge already present in the community to the official school, the artist legitimized the situated knowledge in the students' eyes.

Through the second element in Godínez Nivón's working method, he expands the visibility for the Indigenous situated knowledge production through communication that happens as an outcome of the educational process. He creates a context-specific response in medium and format to each of his projects. The artist balances the use of translation and poetic device in his work, depending on where it will be disseminated. By doing so, he empowers but does not fully expose the identity of the participants in his projects. The use of these two outcomes in his work depends on the artist's primary audience for the work and how they will be utilizing it.

Tequiografías are traditional school materials that are not controlled by the Ministry of Public Education and are directly used by Indigenous schools as a didactic device for students to understand their heritage. The use of translation here was not for the hegemony to better appreciate its subject, but instead as an educational tool to fight against forgetting languages and presenting cultural diversity. The primary mode of distribution of these works was not through the art world, but through stationery shops. Although it would be false to state that these images are not aesthetic objects in themselves, their low price and wider availability escape the art market's commodifying frame.

When the work is to be used in art institutional context, Godínez Nivón usually works with myth or mythmaking as a poetic device in different mediums.

Iñigo Clavo talks about confessional ontology, the Western colonial desire for transparency, where to know also involves a certain ownership of things, nature, and other humans - the Western fantasy for control, in this ontology, extracting secrets is an important part of maintaining power.«12 In response to this, Iñigo Clavo refers to Édouard Glissant's idea of the right to opacity, that by maintaining a level of abstraction and not knowing, we can defend the incomprehensible.<sup>13</sup> To communicate, Iñigo Clavo reaches for De Sousa Santos: we should use poetry as its the few places in Western modernity where opacity is validated.<sup>14</sup> According to Tim Ingold referring to Foster, anthropological artwork should not be complicit in marking things and placing them into a context. This process will lead to further marginalization of the subject.<sup>15</sup> By practicing the right to opacity, Godínez Nivón's work steps forward from the artist ethnographer of the 1990s as he avoids identifying things through his use of poetry and symbolic meaning. Both in the case of I remember the day I was born. Will be tomorrow (2017) and La Casa del Agua (2019/2020), Godínez Nivón utilized this right to opacity through the poem-documentary format. However, he does not fail to communicate and share something about and with the group he was working with. First, by creating a collective memory site through the film and the sculpture garden made out of dream flowers, he mythologizes the educational process. La Casa del Agua indirectly shows the way Kazá made the students engage and create new forms of situated knowledge by giving agency to flora and fauna as well as the environment of their region, through a self-made myth with the use of practices from outside the local knowledge, instigating new ways of thinking.

To answer my initial question about how artists can engage with the educational system, Godínez Nivón does this through communication and variation in participatory methods. Ingold understands education's role in the same way. The artist understanding of *tequio* underlines the process as an ethical position, meaning that the common benefit gives a sense of belonging to one's work and effort. His approach is based on the eagerness to wonder about something that one does not know. He arrives in each situation with a specific type of naivete and willingness to adapt to the group he works with. Godínez Nivón's practice uses a poetic approach to instigate new modes of thinking and find tensions between different group members through dialogue, to imagine, through art, something
that was not visible before. By creating assemblies, he realizes the tensions and common elements within a group. He aims for people to be invested in some-thing already present or make a still-nonexistent or imaginary goal for them to invest in. Godínez Nivón's work uses the official system of knowledge production and dissemination as schools, stationery shops providing teaching supplies, or art institutions to contrast objective situated knowledge with the monocultural hegemonic system using translation or poetry, depending on the situation. He pushes toward a multicultural education system where Indigenous knowledge is legitimized, as part of the official structure to legitimize their situated knowledge.

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**Daniel Godínez Nivón** is an artist from México City, for the past 12 years he has developed his work in context-specific scenarios. One of the fundamental tools of his practice is tequio, a communal, collaborative, compulsory and unpaid working system. In 2019 is nominated for the Visible Award and in 2021 is selected for the Jan Van Eyck Academie Residency Program.

1 Néstor García Canclini: »Tequiografías: Reimaginating Interculturality,« in: *Visibleproject* (blog), https://www.visibleproject.org/blog/text/tequiografias-reimaginating-interculturality/, (accessed February 11, 2021).

2 Tim Ingold: *Anthropology and/as Education*. Abingdon, Oxon, New York 2017.

3 Idem., p. 5.

4 Donna Haraway, »Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,« in: *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988), pp. 575–99.

5 Daniel Godínez Nivón interviewed by Krisztián Gábor Török, February 2021.

6 Daniel Godínez Nivón: »Propedéutico Onírico / A Dream Propaedeutic – PSU Art & Social Practice, « Interview by Spencer Bryne-Seres, http://psusocialpractice.org/spencer-byrneseres-with-daniel-godinez-nivon/ (accessed February 9, 2021). 7 The project recently finished Essay on Oneiric Flora, 2019. The artist further collaborated with biological and computer energies to give life to the girls' imagined plants through the digital. See »Ensayo de Flora Onirica – Daniel Godínez Nivón, « https://www.danielgodineznivon.com/ Ensayo-de-Flora-Onirica, (accessed February 12, 2021).

8 The project that started at Miguel Hidalgo elementary school in San Ildefonso Cieneguilla with the Hñähñü Indiginous group later continued at the Miguel Hidalgo elementary school in Misión de Arnedo with the Uzá group.

9 See note 5.

10 María de Ibarrola Nicolín: »Los grandes problemas del sistema educativo mexicano,« in: Perfiles educativos 34, no. SPE (2012), pp. 16–28; Yolanda Jiménez Naranjo and Rosa Guadalupe Mendoza Zuany, »La educación indígena en México: una evaluación de política pública integral, cualitativa y participativa,« in: Liminar: estudios sociales y humanísticos 14, no. 1 (2016), pp. 60-72.

11 José Miguel González Casanova: »Forum Arte Vida.« Mexico City 2003.

12 María Iñigo Clavo: »Traces, Signs, and Symptoms of the Untranslatable,« https://www.e-flux.com/journal/108/325859/traces-signs-and-symptoms-of-theuntranslatable/ (accessed February 12, 2021).

13 Édouard Glissant: *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor 1997, p. 120.

14 Bonaventura de Sousa Santos: Renovar la teoría crítica y reinventar la emancipación social. CLACSO, 2006, p. 39.

15 See note 2, p. 65; Hal Foster: "The Artist as Ethnographer?" in: *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology.* Eds. G.E. Marcus and F.R. Myers, Berkeley 1995, pp. 302–09.

# Borne of the Flowing Water



Work in progress, *Brewing symbiotic care: feeding and nurturing a fungi cyborg feminist future*, 2020

### A conversation between Marie-Eve Levasseur and Mara-Johanna Kölmel

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Solitude Journal 2 On the Occult and the Supernatural

For the Web Residencies by Solitude on the topic »Muntu Maxims« artist Marie-Eve Levasseur made visible the unrecognized work of the brewsters, alewives, and other women who brew for their kin to survive. Her project *Brewing Symbiotic Care: Feeding and Nurturing a Fungi Cyborg Feminist Future* consists in a 3D world, a futurist brewery where plants, microorganisms (yeast), machines, and human beings are working in symbiosis. Read an interview with the artist.

> Borne of the flowing water, Tenderly cared for by the Ninhursag, Borne of the flowing water, Tenderly cared for by the Ninhursag<sup>1</sup>

These are the first lines of one of the oldest beer recipes of the world – the hymn to Ninkasi. First written on a stone tablet around 1800 B.C., it emerges from an oral tradition of brewing beer across Mesopotamia. Its origins lay in the hands of women and dates to 3,500–3,100 B.C. As Marie-Eve and I meet to discuss her contribution to the Muntu Maxims Web Residency call, we sip on her home-brewed beer, which miraculously found its way from Leipzig to my studio at Akademie Schloss Solitude. The artist has been brewing since around 2018. The Sour Brewster ale that we drink during this interview is based on the Gose beer style from the medieval German town of Goslar. It is the first beer Marie-Eve brewed with a new kind of knowledge, namely that her passion for brewing is actually deeply rooted in a long-forgotten and erased history of female brewers.



Sour Brewster ale brewed by Marie-Eve Levasseur in front of Mara's studio at Akademie Schloss Solitude, label by James Turek (https://shuttlebase.org)

Mara-Johanna Kölmel: Brewing Symbiotic Care, the project you have developed for this Web Residency, takes the hymn to Ninkasi as its starting point. Ninkasi is the ancient Sumerian goddess of beer and her hymn the very first recipe for brewing beer. Women brewed beer nearly exclusively across Mesopotamia until the rise of the Roman Empire. The Egyptians worshipped a beer goddess named Tenenet. In Baltic and Slavic mythology, one finds goddess Raugutiene, who provided protection over beer. The Finnish tell the legend of a woman by the name of Kalevatar, who invented beer by mixing honey with bear saliva. From the Viking era in Scandinavia until the Middle Ages, women continued to be the primary producers of beer in northern Europe. Could you tell us about this important framework for your work and how it links but also expands on this forgotten history?

Marie-Eve Levasseur: Well, I am a brewster<sup>2</sup> myself and, before last summer, I was completely unaware of the essential and crucial role women once played in beer production. I was shocked to learn how easy manipulating history seems to be. To me



Portrait of the artist as a brewster. A homebrewing setting in the kitchen.

it also made total sense that women presided over the birth of beer, supervising the fermentation process and providing friends and relatives with their healthy and nu-tritious beverage.

In early civilizations, as water was often dangerous to drink, beer remained a trusted necessity, and brewing a daily ritual for the survival of the species. Goddesses associated with beer were often also associated with birth and healing. So beer history has also a lot to do with health care and a knowledge of medicinal herbs, plants, and spices. Sumerian beer would often contain herbs that were found in ancient medical remedies. The hymn to Ninkasi is a recipe that is poetry as well as instructions, one that was most probably sung by the brewers while working, honoring the oral tradition of knowledge transmission. Ninkasi is the beer goddess but also the beer itself. For this Web Residency project, I am rewriting this hymn, updating it to a modern language and modernizing its ingredients, images, and processes while trying to keep the poetic and repetitive flow. I want this hymn to pay homage to all the brewsters, priestesses, and witches from the past.



Ninkasi, the Sumerian goddess of beer: http://www. mesopotamiangods.com/a-hymn-to-ninkasi-translation/

Your Web Residency work mirrors these entangled histories using visual means. The visitor finds herself in a sci-fi laboratory, a futuristic brewery with a brewer's kettle, floating yeast, vases that resemble stone tablets, and a broomstick as alestake over the entrance. One might also think of a witch's workshop. Some sources suggest that the history of brewing and witchcraft may intersect. I'm curious to find out more about this history, and how it perhaps also marks the brewing's shift from a predominantly female to a male practice.

A later history of beer, especially in medieval England, mentions the figure of the alewife, one that is not easy to separate from the figure of the witch: she brewed with a cauldron, often needed the company of a cat to keep the stored sacks of grains safe from mice, used a broom as an alestake over her door to indicate beer surplus to sell, and wore a conical black, sometimes pointed hat on market days to be recognized from afar as a beer seller.<sup>3</sup>

According to some historians, the witch hunts of the Middle Ages represent the moment where women were gradually pushed away from the beer business.<sup>4</sup>

»Guilds formed and as a result, women were increasingly pushed out of their traditional roles as brewing became a higher status, more desirable, and better paid position. While this process occurred gradually and differed in temporal and geographical contexts, by 1700, women were by and large pushed out of brewing. [...] In response to this, or perhaps parallel to this process, female brewers, braciatrices, became vilified. Not only were they depicted as purveyors of the mortal sins of gluttony and lust, they were also believed to be wholly incapable of brewing. They were, as a group, cheaters, liars, and completely untrustworthy – selling beer in illegal measures and doctoring their ale with various nefarious ingredients. They were portrayed in art and literature as prostitutes, procuresses, and sexual deviants. And somewhere, somewhere at the crossroads of greed and misogyny, these charges became even more sinister, and perhaps even deadly. Alewives could be associated with witches.«<sup>5</sup>

With the Inquisition from the Catholic Church, general oppression and marginalization of women were highly common. Especially women with knowledge of plants and herbs, a potential financial autonomy due to selling their own beer, and the fact that the brewsters would supervise a bubbling brew that, after fermentation, could cause someone to lose control after drinking it, it was easy to see some devil's magic in there.



Work in progress, *Brewing symbiotic care: feeding and nurturing a fungi cyborg feminist future*, 2020

So the history of beer making speaks at the same time of a history of erasure of female influence. This in turn reminds me of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's book Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History. Here he writes that presences and absences of history »are neither neutral or natural. They are created. As such they are not mere presences or absences, but mentions and silences of various kinds of degrees.«<sup>6</sup> Why do you feel the digital medium is a suitable medium to tackle such silences of history?

A very recent erasure, yes. Those presences and absences in history definitely are the product of a situated production of knowledge. Mostly situated in patriarchy. That's very problematic, and it is something we cannot »erase« from the past way of telling history, but we can certainly transform and expand it in the future. To those old ways of mentioning only that what once was considered relevant (values that fortunately tend to shift over time), we can add a knowledge that is situated elsewhere in the now with the voices we have, mentioning stories we consider important today and people who are missing in history and storytelling. I'm not an historian, and I can't pretend to know how that should be done, but as an artist, I am able to make things visible. I wasn't aware of that almost untold history until I made my own research. It is also through the Internet that I found scientific as well as mainstream articles that informed my project, along with my own experience in brewing. A combination of digital and material translations are necessary here. I see the digital medium as perfect for spreading knowledge and make alternate narratives accessible. There are advantages in using our networks to fill gaps from the past, but there are materials that are more sustainable in time, that can be found again in the future and that we or others might be able to decode better than old rusty hard drives (like the 4,000 year-old cuneiform clay tablets that allowed us to translate the Hymn to Ninkasi, for example). In my opinion, we need to prevent erasure again and move toward inclusively writing events as well as dismantling phallogocentrism in all spheres of life.



Mother Louse, well-known alewife from the region of Oxford, mid-seventeenth century

My research explores how artists are using digital technologies to enact structures for memories. My argument is that a recent generation of artists is reclaiming the convoluted concept of monument (as a structure that is proof to memory, that preserves memory, remembers, reminds but also bridges past, present, and future) to highlight the trajectories of those forgotten, erased, and left behind. Do you see your work as a monument of a different kind?

For this one, definitely. I felt the need to tell this story directly after discovering that I had better role models to look at. I directly felt more in the right place, knowing that this passion of beer and brewing had some solid roots in a story that I find more appealing than anything I heard or saw before. This is partly why this work could function as a digital monument, an homage to all the brewsters, alewives, braceresses, mothers, sisters, and friends who cared for their kin by brewing the vital beverage. That's the kind of remembering that I, personally, find relevant and empowering. The digital does not yet offer insurance of its archiving potential. That is maybe the reason why, in my practice, I still hang on to materiality. I plan this work in a long-term way, as a multimedia installation including ceramics and other mediums that would be exhibited along with the digital.

#### So how will this project venture from the screen into the real world, and evolve further?

Well, I was approached by Ute Hartwig-Schulz<sup>7</sup> who curates projects and exhibitions at a former brewery that is being rebuilt as a cultural center and art space in Halle, Germany.<sup>8</sup> As they were renovating the ruins, they asked me if I would be interested in participating in their project. That's when I began my research on women in brewing. Having the opportunity to do this web residency right now means an important turn in my practice, and the beginning of a series of works along those new lines. In the next year at the Schwemme in Halle, I will present an extension of this digital work I am working on for the Schloss Solitude's Web Residency, along with ceramic pieces, video, audio, and a special collaborative brew in the form of a full-room installation. I have already started a conversation with the composer Johannes Grosz about the potential transformation of the new hymn into a multivoice sung piece, that I hope to record with my own voice, and maybe chant it while brewing my next beers. I wish to reinforce the ritualistic aspects of beer brewing and drinking through the singing of the hymn, reconnecting with former and present rituals. Beer is known to have been used for initiation



Work in progress, *Brewing symbiotic care: feeding and nurturing a fungi cyborg feminist future*, 2020

ceremonies, rites of passage (cycles of life or seasons), feasting, rituals of death and mourning, and as an offering to ghosts.<sup>9</sup> The potential intoxication of the beverage made people come closer to the mystical. In ancient Egypt, small-scale breweries in paintings or clay models were sometimes put in the sarcophagus of Pharaohs to accompany the deceased in their final journey, providing them with beer for the eternity of their afterlife.

In a way, then, one could say that you imitate the very idea of brewing in the digital medium and in the sense of bringing different heterogeneous materials together to create one powerful potion. I think there is something magical in brewing itself but also in the concept of brewing as a cultural praxis to access our contemporary. How would you describe your artistic notion of brewing?

As for brewing or cooking, art could be understood as a »container« that is filled with materials, images, associations, colors, textures, fictions, and experiences, then being submitted to different transformations with various tools and techniques, accepting the sometimes mysterious accidents and glitches on the way and maybe learning from them. While brewing, there are also many containers, one for each step of the transformation, and each time it contains the liquid in the process of becoming a beer. Although the result is planned, the taste and the nuances that you can then perceive are never the same (if we're not talking industrial production, of course). They have been influenced by the moment, the brewer/brewster's mood, what was available within the spice shelf, which malts were in storage ... and maybe even the moon phase can change something, since it has an effect on so many bodies of water and living beings. There is also the actions of a very invisible wild yeast in the air, or from the skin of the brewster, so there is a part of homebrewing you can't completely control, and I like that. I think the magic often comes from what you can't control or reproduce. It's often through some sort of unconscious collaboration with glitches, errors, or in the case of brewing, wild yeast, that we come to a result that has an unusual potential.

What is important to emphasize is that your work actually celebrates co-authorship with the nonhuman. Its protagonist is the yeast that activates, transforms, and gives life. To close our conversation, what does symbiotic care in the twenty-first century mean to you? How does it manifest, and how can we attune our surroundings to take on the responsibility of caring?

I see symbiosis here as mutualistic, where each organism contributes something that benefits the survival of the other. And being mutually beneficial, the symbiosis becomes caring in itself. The brewing person is feeding the yeast with sugars and takes care of the optimal conditions in temperature and humidity, and in return, the yeast cells will ferment the beverage. Without this collaboration, beer cannot exist. I think it is part of a post-anthropocentric strategy to acknowledge the doings and importance of other beings, which reminds us of a deep mutual dependence on this planet. Thinking only through and with the *anthropos* is an error that has shaped our species for too long. I understand Muntu Maxims as exactly this: a symbiotic caring future with awareness of the connections and mutual dependencies of everything that lives.

May Ninkasi live with you – let her pour your beer everlasting.



Visit the Projec

Marie-Eve Levasseur's work deals with intimacy, interactions, and non-human ecosystems. She works with video, installation, sculpture, and 3D animation, among other techniques. The method she uses feeds from feminist science fiction and its emancipatory potential. Her projects produce speculative fabulations; imagined situations with fictive devices, extensions for human and non-human beings that open a cross-species dialogue.

Mara-Johanna Kölmel is a London-based curator and art historian with a special interest in (post-)digital art and culture. She has performed international curatorial roles for the Biennale of Sydney, Kunsthalle Hamburg & Akademie Schloss Solitude, also realizing exhibitions with the curatorial collectives Approved by Pablo in London and peer to space in Berlin. She is a co-editor of the forthcoming book Dada Data. Contemporary Art and Post-Truth Politics and co-founder of SALOON London, a network for women in the London art world.

1 For a translation of the full hymn see https://www. Nugent: »For Centuries, Alewives Dominated the Brewing beeradvocate.com/archived-articles/304/ (accessed Decem- Industry, « in: Gastro Obscura, August 17, 2018, https://www. the Production of History, Boston 1995, p. 48. ber 9, 2020).

2 Brewster is the forgotten name for female brewer. See December 9, 2020). also braciatrices, pandoxatrices, and braceresses in: Judith M. in a Changing World, 1300-1600, New York 1996.

Alewives Became the Stereotypical Witch,« in: Ancient Ori- December 9, 2020). gins, August 1, 2017, https://www.ancient-origins.net/history-ancient-traditions/bubbling-brews-and-broomsticks- braciatrix.com/2017/05/24/featured-content-3/ (accessed how-alewives-became-stereotypical-witch-021539; Addison December 9, 2020).

atlasobscura.com/articles/women-making-beer (accessed

4 Theresa A. Vaughan: »The Alewife: Changing images (2012), pp.34-41 https://www.academia.edu/3428837/ 3 Riley Winters: »Bubbling Brews and Broomsticks: How The\_Alewife\_Changing\_Images\_and\_Bad\_Brews (accessed

5 See Dr. Christina Wade's blog braciatrix.com: https://

6 Michel-Rolph Trouillot: Silencing the Past: Power and

7 Hartwig-Schulz is the founder of an uncommon artist residency for female artists with child(ren) in Prösitz https:// kuenstlergut-proesitz.de (accessed December 9, 2020), a verv Bennett: Ale. Beer, and Brewsters in England, Women's Work and bad brews, « in: AVISTA Forum Journal Vol. 21 Number ½ necessary project I was part of in 2018 and where I had the opportunity to deepen my knowledge of ceramics, especially porcelain.

8 See Schwemme e.V.: https://schwemme.org, (accessed December 9, 2020).

9 See https://www.alimentarium.org/en/knowledge/alcohol-and-religion, (accessed December 9, 2020).

## On Alchemy, Migration, and Pilgrimage



Solælune, I, in Empathy, 2020

### Solælune Alieldin Ayman and Nardeen Galuaa

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Solitude Journal 2 On the Occult and the Supernatural

The following essay points out how game developers from Egypt use their alchemical knowledge and how they have come to understand the image of migration and refuge as a quality that mirrors a key principle of alchemy: the dualistic nature of existence. Migration and refuge are subjects the duo Solælune, consisting of visual artist Nardeen Nabil and game developer Alieldin Ayman, often delve into. In their games, such as *I*, *in Empathy* (2020) and *Elysium: The Refuge* (2019) they propose a new image of the refugee as the alchemical acolyte. »The act of migration is a transitional state,« they say, »and it transforms individuals, and there it can be tied closely to the alchemical initiation.«

> How good it is to migrate every day! How beautiful it is to stop somewhere every day! How nice it is to flow without freezing and getting muddy! What word that belongs to yesterday, is gone, my loved one, with yesterday. Now is the time to say new things. —*Now Is The Time To Say New Things*, Jalal ad-Din Rumi

It is no coincidence that the subject of spirituality and divination has recently gained tremendous recognition in art and contemporary society. One can observe an increased interest in studying topics such as magic, occult, shamanism, and alchemy. The global pandemic and prolonged forced lockdowns might have awakened even more feelings of unsettlement and a changed perception of time, and with it inner thought and meditative conversation with oneself in hope of ultimately changing, or merely escaping, the secular nature of modern life.

For the ones who truthfully seek within, the difficulty of these periods is a major characteristic of what we call the »spiritual pilgrimage,« a term we use to describe a journey ventured by the soul to destinations where enlightenment is possible; a liminal home and a resting place built upon harmonizing inner conflict and embracing the divine within. It is important to understand that a spiritual pilgrimage is neither bound to particular spatial constellations or crossing borders – except for those of the mind. Should circumstances allow for it, a physical transformation, or a metamorphosis, reflects and accompanies that of the spiritual. The following text wants to emphasize the understanding that migration (with all its devastating moments) can be understood as such a spiritual pilgrimage.



Emblem XIII from the *Book of Lambspring*. Source: Musaeum Hermeticum (1678)

An excellent representation of the concept of the spiritual pilgrimage as we understand it can be found by studying the last five emblematic plates in the *Book of Lambspring* (1556). These are concerned with fulfilling the great work of alchemy: the philosopher's stone,<sup>1</sup> or as Lambspring mentions it, the »philosophical stone.«<sup>2</sup> The plates show a narrative whose three main characters are: a king, his son, and a winged spiritual guide; of which could be seen as the earthly body (the king), the soul (the son), and the spirit in man (winged figure).

The king entrusts his son, the prince, to the spiritual guide to show him the world below from a high mountain above, and the heavens above from below, which fills the prince with great joy. Likewise in a spiritual pilgrimage, this event reflects a process through which the soul separates from the earthly body and its physical senses mature, and simultaneously is made conscious of its own nature and the inner world through the spirit. This event can be traced down to »the nigredo,«<sup>3</sup> or the blackening, in alchemy. However, during these transformative procedures the soul could easily be deceived by the initial inner brightness, which is often mistaken for true illumination: »the albedo« or the whitening, which precedes »the rubedo,« the reddening.<sup>4</sup>



Solælune, I, in Empathy, 2020

The next plates from the *Book of Lambspring* reveal the choice of the prince, who mourns the lonely king and returns to his pale and dying father, as the soul must return from its pilgrimage for the alchemical initiate to continue beyond the albedo. As the story progresses, the father – who deeply rejoices his son's return, so much so that he devours him – goes into a metamorphosis of the body that changes his form to resemble that of a glorious man; albeit still wishing for his son's return. The change – and the hybrid state – represented resonates with the way we use the term migration/spiritual pilgrimage. This is a physical, observable change that follows and reflects that of the soul and the spiritual.

Finally, upon the king's wish, his body is softened by rain, which allows for the rebirth of the prince from the king to achieve the balance of body, soul, and spirit in the alchemical initiate; the rubedo, the final stage of the Magnum Opus of alchemy.

It is to be noted that the allegory of the suffering father devouring the returned son dictates the yearning for a physical manifestation of the soul's transformation after its return, and the difficulty of the inner conflict the initiate must overcome to achieve the great work. The process in its entirety could also be grasped through reading these words from the infamous emerald tablet: »Separate that spirituous earth from the dense or crude by means of a gentle heat, with much attention. In great measure it ascends from the earth up to heaven, and descends again, newborn, on the earth, and the superior and the inferior are increased in power.«<sup>5</sup>

Refuge and migration are subjects we often delve into in our art practice; our deep interest lies in understanding how these notions transform individuals and how closely one can tie them to the alchemical initiation. The act of refuge is a transitional state. A verse of the gnostic gospel of Philip indicates that refuge can be interpreted as an alchemical process – one that does also start in the *nigredo*: »Those who have gone



Zosimos of Panopolis facing his inner self, separated by a tree of life from the Facsimile Edition of the Mushaf as-suwar (p.157a). Source: Corpus Alchemicum Arabicum Vol. 2

astray are those born of the spirit. And they are usually lost because of the spirit. So from one single breath of spirit the fire blazes and is blackened.«<sup>6</sup>

It is also noteworthy to consider how a refugee holds two entities or personas, a rescuer and a rescued (he rescues him\*herself, and becomes the rescued). A selfless consciousness is consumed to create the path for a dormant yearning self, a potential future, which is an act done in perfect awareness, almost reminiscent of that of the alchemical Ouroboros<sup>7</sup> constantly consuming its self to grow and survive.

In our games, such as *I*, *in Empathy* (2020); *Elysium: The Refuge* (2019); and *Nomad: The Pilgrimage* (2018), we often use the concept of »shattering interchangeably« as a symbol for refuge, which we believe is one that incorporates the fickle nature of the state of consciousness of a refugee. The concept was first developed from a text written by Zosimos of Panopolis, in which he describes a long and strange sequence of dreams he experiences that Jung later considers a very difficult alchemical allegory.<sup>8</sup> In his dream sequence, Zosimos is dismembered into four parts, and he describes it as being cut »in accordance with the rule of harmony.« Those parts are then burnt upon an altar until he realizes that he has become spirit through transformation of his body, a transcendence of flesh in a way. The visions extend much longer but end with Zosimos waking up and describing how much beauty he has witnessed and thus understood throughout his rather bizarre visions.<sup>9</sup>

The separation before conjunction is an important and recurring theme in alchemy that can take many forms such as its mention in *Splendor Solis*, an illustrated alchemical manuscript from the fifteenth century, written in old German. It says: »Mendalus the Philosopher says: I command all my descendants to spiritualize their bodies by dissolution, and again to materialize the spiritual things by means of a gentle decoction.«<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, this concept played a major role in ancient Egyptian mythology: the

fight of Osiris with his brother Set results in the dismemberment of Osiris's body into fourteen parts that were scattered by Set in different places over the land of Egypt. The same number, fourteen, was of utmost importance in the continuation of the story, where Osiris's son Horus avenges his death by fighting Set, resulting in his left eye being shattered. That eye is then healed by Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom and science, and alleged author of the emerald tablet under the name Hermes Trismegistus and made into the »Eye of Horus,« which Osiris uses to revive his father.

The eye got its common usage as the symbol that is now well known; one of healing, sacrifice, and resurrection. Rituals of counting and completing the Eye of Horus were performed in temples every month, linking it to the lunar cycle, again taking place over fourteen days.<sup>11</sup>

And perhaps it is through this very separation of consciousness, and coexisting in multiple realms, tied together by bonds of empathy and solidarity, that the refugee might once again be made whole in a new home through rebirth (or replacement), that we understand it to be a modern image of the esoteric alchemist. We'd like to conclude with the words of Thoth:

No one can be saved until he is born again. If you want to be reborn, purify yourself of the irrational torments of matter ... This is the only road to reality. It is the way our ancestors tried to discover Primal Goodness. It is sacred and divine, but a hard highway for the soul to travel in a body. For the soul's first step is to struggle against itself; stirring up a civil war. It is a feud of unity against duality. The one seeking to unite and the other seeking to divide.<sup>12</sup>

Solælune was founded in 2018 by Alieldin Ayman, a game developer and software engineer, with the visual artist Nardeen Galuaa. The duo seeks to experiment with philosophical video game projects with the goal of creating awareness of humanitarian issues such as the refugee crisis and proposing alchemy as a medium to comprehend the human soul and its potential. Games developed by them include I, in Empathy (2020), Elysium: The Refuge (2019), and Nomad: The Pilgrimage (2018).

mystical terminology of alchemy, symbolizing perfection at 6, 2021). its finest, enlightenment, and heavenly bliss. Efforts to discover the philosophers' stone were known as the Magnum Opus (»Great Work«).

2 Johannes Lambspring, Book of Lambspring as seen in The original book could date back to 1556 with one of its earliest versions written in German. https://www.e-manuscripta.ch/doi/10.7891/e-manuscripta-6275 (accessed on February 6, 2021).

3 In alchemy, black (nigredo) is the first stage in the magnum opus. The nigredo state is accomplished by work; org/alchemylibrary/emeraldtablet.html (accessed on Febit is not the original state of the soul, the prima materia. It is ruary 6, something that one has come to, and is a signal that one is ready to begin the journey. See https://soulspelunker.com/ 2014/01/alchemy-nigredo.html (accessed on Feb. 6, 2021).

4 Adam McLean: »The Birds in Alchemy,« in: The Hermetic Journal No. 5 (1979). Available online at: https://www. February 6, 2021).

1 The philosopher's stone was the central symbol of the alchemywebsite.com/alcbirds.html (accessed on February

5 The Emerald Tablet is an alchemical text that holds significant importance in the founding of western alchemy. It was allegedly written by Hermes Trismegistus, a name associated with the combination of Greek god Hermes and Musaeum Hermeticum by Lucas Jennis, 1625 (reprint 1678). the Egyptian god Thoth in Hellenistic Egypt, and the most significant figure in alchemy. It first appears in Arabic in the book of Balinas the Wise on Causes (Kitab Balaniyus al-Hakim fi'l llal) around 650 AD. Many translations have since been made, of which we included the one by Sigismund Bacstrom. Available online at: https://innergarden.

6 The gnostic Gospel of Philip is one of several ancient books discovered in upper Egypt in 1945, initially completed and translated in 1975. Available online at: http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/GPhilip-Barnstone.html (accessed on

7 The Ouroboros is an alchemical creature (snake eating its tail), and perhaps the most famous one, first illustrated by Cleopatra the Alchemist, an ancient Greek alchemist who was born and lived in the city of Alexandria in Egypt somewhere between the first and fourth centuries of the Common Era, in the Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra. Available online at: https://cannotbcontained.com/2017/ 07/17/cleopatra-the-alchemist-sketch-of-a-philanthropist/ (accessed on February 6, 2021).

8 Carl Jung: Alchemical Studies: The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 13. Princeton 1967, pp. 59-60. Available online at: https://www.academia.edu/9234735/Carl\_G\_Jung\_Vol\_ 13 Alchemical Studies (accessed on February 6, 2021). 9 Idem, pp. 64-65.

10 Solomon Trismosin: Splendor Solis, 1582, p.30

11 Geraldine Pinch: Handbook of Egyptian Mythology, 2002: pp.131-32.

12 Peter Gandy and Timothy Freke: The Hermetica: The Lost Wisdom of the Pharaohs, 1997, pp.121-22.

## What You Have Heard of Brussels

### Sofie Verraest

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There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. —1 Corinthians 15: 39-4

the [...] initiands are often considered to be dark, invisible, like a planet in eclipse or the moon between phases; they are stripped of names and clothing, smeared with the common earth, rendered indistinguishable from animals. They are [...] associated with life and death, male and female, food and excrement, simultaneously, since they are at once dying [...] and being born.

-Victor Turner

What you have heard of Brussels is true. Of all the cities in the world it is the city closest to Heaven. This is not a lie, but a true thing, a fact. One can gather proof by walking the streets & then stopping movement & directly looking up. What one finds, looking up, is a whole second landscape, complete with sloping, swelling, tectonic shifting. One finds clouds that will part & clouds that will gather & a dirty pigeon will fly across & the light, o the light, it will, fiercely, be light, because this is where Angels live. It is where they live & breathe & dream up the city below & make house in its Bastard Children, who are the real reason Tim & me moved here almost ten years ago: these Brussels Angelbastards, who are, in fact, lit like candles. Who are, in fact, bright & genderless Goddessgods, raging & radiant, solid & see-through. »Let us go,« Tim had said, annoved, discouraged, having looked at those around us. »Let us go.« At those around us with whom we shared dialect & childhood & little else. Who had stabbed us, Tim had said, in our innocent backs. »So let us go,« & we had done so: placed our dark things in boxes that, close to midnight, when the moon was full & the year 2009, we unpacked in the soft glow of a hundred thousand Angelbastards, who are the real reason we moved here almost ten years ago. Who are the reason I am still here now, despite difficulties, turmoil, crisis. Despite these happening presently. There are days, these days, when I cannot look. The light falls in, the sun is gold, the city alive, but I can only close the eyes. I close the eyes. I bend the knees. I lie down flat. Not one thing more can I do. But when I do this, I see clouds. & when I do this, I see purple skies. & all around me I see the purple wings of the brilliant Angelbastards of Brussels, who surround me with their beautiful, deficient love. Who call me on my phone. Who ask how I am doing. How I am doing now, with everything. They who are this city. It is of them I want to sing.

Closest to Heaven does not mean Heaven. However, it means close. So close, it means, no other city is closer & feeling just like it, looking just like it. So, Brussels is a place of, yes, tarmac & brick & other such hard materials. A place, also, yes, of flesh

& flow & invisible toxins carried on the wind. A place of dark & many corners where uncontrolled bodies do uncontrolled things. A place where reasoning is, yes, routinely flawed, attention span short, the sense of time warped, but, o, but, o, the Goddessgods of whom I want to sing. Who crack the knuckles & bite the nails. Who look for shade on sunless days. Who attempt to remember until they forget. Protocol & etiquette they forget. Food for the road they forget. To charge their phones they forget & what you have heard is true: they growl when they reach orgasm, they howl when the moon is large & low, they scratch the shins unthinking. But, o, these Angelbastards pure, who bathe me in such warmth. O, Simon, Alina, & Mousa, too. Who drink with me the rum & beer & walk with me the many streets & cry for me some tears, it is of them I want to sing. Mousa, yes. Vitoria, too. Miriam & Alina. Who came to Brussels like Tim & me, packing inconsistencies & in the belly a fire they hoped would not yet die. Who left a town & many clothes & languages they once spoke. Who inhabit, wear, speak Brussels now. »Good evening,« they say, a million different ways, »we came here to be free.« In a broken-down English, »good evening,« with an accent of Persian, of second-hand German, a left-over from Akan. With a sound like Arabic, like radio static, a sentence from Russian, from Basque. »Good evening,« it spills & leaks on the square because these are the good Brussels ways. All flows & froths & streams in this town. Alcohol, tears run down the streets & tonight, on the square, while the church bells ring, while the clouds turn pink & the carousel spins, tonight once again, while the soulful sing, all flows & froths, goes right around, the blood & thought, the sperm & spit, a throb of nerves & quickened lymph. The ovum leaps, the air congeals, another Bastard Child is born. Look, there is its halo.

This, then, is my city. These here are its people. Into their eyes I look & in my heart find prayer & praise. & if all could be a dream & my words one flow unending, & if never came a moment for breathless catching of the breath, then for the whole rest of my life a flow of prayer I would say & for this Brussels city, & its Bastards who are Angels, sacred gratitude it would convey. I would use its whole duration, yes, to demonstrate & prove how all around me men of Brussels, who are Goddesses & Saints, how all around me Brussels women, who are men & also Gods, how all around me spirited beings, precious Angelsouls, how all around me, almost daily, they carry me & soar. Those with wings – this is true – almost never do not spread them, & even though quite frequently they act like keys that have no lock, & even though, more than as road, they act as something like roadblock – despite these little miseries, happy would my earth time be relating how these Goddessgods impressively persist. In their breathing & their eating & digesting they persist. In the getting up in the morning & the spreading of their wings. In the giving of their blessings. They get tired & ill & all the time lost, but in their trying & helping they persist & persevere, & very quickly, at the age I have now reached, which is the age of 33, when I was struck by disaster & became unmoored & free, very quickly at this age, in this city that is here, this unending prayer of praise would also take the shape of a love song, lone & sweet. A song of love so musical, so memorable in structure, a song that wraps the heartfelt into melodies so plain that you will not want to cry to it, even though you would – such a song of love, the most smitten, I would sing, & never would I stop to breathe, & only sugar would I spin, & never you would cease to learn, through the clouds of your own tears, about the Brussels Bastard Children - aureoles & flapping wings & mud caked to their undersides - & with me you would sing the praises, for example, of Alina. Who, on this difficult Friday evening, in the time of my high need, is so good & kind as to unfold for me her sofa-bed – & put me down to sleep. & in the morning bring me coffee. & an orange. & soft cheese.

*»What You Have Heard of Brussels« is the opening chapter of a novel-in-progress Sofie Verraest worked on during her fellowship at Akademie Schloss Solitude. Mousa, Simon, Alina, Vitoria, and Miriam are all characters in the book, which is conceived as a manic song of praise that – well, it can hardly last, can it?* 

**Sofie Verraest** is a writer. She curates multilingual literary events and teaches literature, creative writing, and urban and architectural theory at Ghent University and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (KASK) in Ghent/Belgium. Her interests include very short prose, the problematic concept of a mother tongue, exophony and multi-/translingual writing, narratives in architecture and urban planning, and the city in fiction. She lives in Brussels, a city in reality.

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