

# Oh, make your fingernails into spades, Your palms into shovels

Dorota Gawęda & Eglė Kulbokaitė

“Despite the fact that there are no people in them or even animals, it’s as if there is something, or someone, looking back out.”<sup>1</sup> With these words Lois—the protagonist in the story *Death by Landscape* (1990) by Margaret Atwood—describes her collection of seven landscape paintings on her walls, which touch her as much as they terrify her. What looks back from the landscapes is her summer camp friend Lucy, who simply vanished one day. So suddenly, so inexplicably, as if the landscape itself had swept her away.

The landscapes that Lois looks at, and which in turn look at Lois, represent her grief, her uncertainty about Lucy’s whereabouts, and her ghostly existence. Lucy is the ghost that surrounds Lois and the pictures: Because who even cares if her friend is alive or dead? She is simply gone.

The artists Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, who present their practice for the first time in an institutional solo exhibition in Austria with *Oh, make your fingernails into spades, Your palms into shovels*, chose the title of Atwood’s short story for one of their featured artistic works, the glass window in the centre of the room. Images of landscapes are intrinsic to both the three-channel video installation *Mouthless Part II* (2021) and *Death by Landscape (Fribourg)* (2020) in the form of GAN animations, but also the installation *Hexanol (IV)* (2019), a haystack-like object in the anteroom on the right-hand side. Elsewhere you will find rakes and votive flowers, all three-dimensional visual works that impart pictorial space and transform the Kunstrraum itself into a cultural landscape.

Landscape painting has been a distinct genre of painting in Europe from about the sixteenth century, one that reflects the human view of the cultural-natural space back to us. The rear view of a figure in Romantic landscape painting, which can be recalled most easily with the well-known example of Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), clearly conveys that seemingly untouched nature is always subject to the human gaze.

No representation of landscape is innocent anymore in the Anthropocene. But how can the landscape, like the very images in Atwood’s *Death by Landscape*, look at us in an equally haunting, appealing, or perhaps impeaching way? Like the cat of philosopher Jacques Derrida, which surprised him in the bathroom and shamed him with her gaze: “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps thinking of our present begins when the landscape, over which hangs a veil of grief, looks at us: a landscape marked by the dramatic loss of biodiversity, also summarized with the term sixth mass extinction. It is a cemetery, a place of the living as well as the dead—those species still alive emerged in co-evolution with those now extinct.

Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė conjure this ghostly quality, for instance, through the use of artificial intelligence (GAN) for their morphing landscape imagery in *Mouthless Part II* or the desolate and yet, due to varying light conditions, changing landscapes in *Death by Landscape (Fribourg)*.

What all of the works in the Kunstrraum have in common is the concurrence of different temporalities: the temporalities of the living and the dead rarely intersect in our everyday perception—but here they are often quite central to the imagery. In *Mouthless Part II* the performers celebrate the Baltic-Slavic custom of *dziady*, a commemoration of the dead with gifts for the deceased. Set randomly in the exhibition space are stainless steel displays with LED flowers, which are called votive flowers. Votive offerings, primarily since the Middle Ages, were items made as a gesture of supplication or gratitude, often modelled on the respective concerns and body parts for which spiritual assistance was requested.

Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė’s aesthetic practice is enigmatic. Literary references, allusions to Baltic-Slavic traditions, and contemporary theory underpin their artistic works and make them so multifaceted and ambiguous. At the same time, one certainly does not need to unravel all the strands in order to grasp their work. Although the duo’s work is research based, the relationship between research and the artistic work is never one about visualizing a particular text, for their works cannot be reduced to a single concept. Nevertheless: Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė like to read a lot. To end with one of their theoretical references, Timothy Morton’s book *Dark Ecology* (2016): He compares our present to *noir fiction*, a genre of crime literature in which the line between good and evil becomes blurred. Hence, we are living in a present in which we are both perpetrators and investigators in the same criminal case, in his words, we are prosecutors and defendants. Among the list of charges: the sixth mass extinction, the Anthropocene, and new viral diseases. This ambiguity oozes from the landscapes of the artists.

Katharina Brandl

- 1 Margaret Atwood, *Wilderness Tips* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 100.
- 2 Anna Tsing et al. (eds.), “Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene,” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. Ghosts of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 6.
- 3 Jacques Derrida and David Wills, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 369–418, here: 397.
- 4 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Co-Existence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 62.

“Riddles are funny because they exploit an irreducible gap between what a thing is and how it appears. Riddles are realist because things are riddles.”<sup>4</sup>

## Works

### Mouthless Part II, 2021

Three-channel video installation, 23:08 min  
→ Floor plan 01

The video installation is centred on a musical piece composed especially for project, which is recited silently and lip-synced by the performers. Singing voices mingle around them, claiming more and more presence as they grow louder. In the middle of the song there is a reversal of the sung text to finally arrive back at the starting point and begin anew. In the exhibition space this cyclical quality corresponds with the repetition of the video in a loop. The song text included in the exhibition booklet critically examines the Romantic poetry of John Clare and Adam Mickiewicz, especially in relation to the Romantic period's popular, pregnant depiction of nature and, in Mickiewicz's case, a nation-building concept derived from it.

The polyphony of the song is characteristic of → **Sutarinės**, traditional Lithuanian folk songs, and reminiscent of ritual incantations. This association recurs in the setting of the video: a dinner in the spirit of → **Dziady**, the Baltic-Slavic "Day of the Dead". The spirits of the dead are invoked to form a community with them. Pre-Christian rituals like these reflect a strong bond between the living and the dead, and thus a fundamental doubt about the concept of a "past" past. The dead live, be it in oral recitation, as spirits, or in bequeathing traditions.

At the same time, a landscape—created with → **GAN animation** (a technology also behind so-called *deepfakes*)—can be observed in the background, which dissolves dichotomies such as nature/culture or city/countryside and appears both dystopian and liberating. Here everything is in flux, and the boundaries between human-made categories blur. The strong references to Baltic-Slavic folklore mix with ecofeminist criticism. Inspired by Timothy Morton's notion of → **ecological awareness**, explored in his book *Dark Ecology*, a critical examination of dominant concepts—such as human, nature, body, earth, land, etc.—unfolds, mapping out a future coexistence.

In their video work Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė propagate a deconstruction of human-made categories and a radical bond between everything living and dead. Through the polyphony and multilingualism of the sung text, through cinematic means such as rising smoke, which seems to reject the confines of the frame and thus the artistic medium itself, and instead tries to envelop the viewers, through the long fingernails digging into the earth ("Oh, make your fingernails into spades, Your palms into shovels!"), the artists create an atmosphere in which all elements exist in harmony with each other. Whether human or spirit, whether living or dead, whether performer or visitor.

*Mouthless Part II* by: Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė; Editing: Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė; Composition: Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, Haraldur Thrastarson; Words: Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė; Voice: Valentin Bezençon, Anastasia Chaguidouline, Abongile Gwele; Performers: Tiran Willemse, Oskar Pawełko, Dorothea Rust; Sound Design: Haraldur Thrastarson; Costume: Tim Heyduck with Manfred Elias Knorr; Props and Scenography: Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė; Casting: Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė; Make-up: Jasmin Berger; Camera and Post-Production: Raphael Wanner; Animation: Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė.

Supported by: Pro Helvetia – The Swiss Arts Council, CH; Fachausschuss Film und Medienkunst BS/BL; On Curating, Zürich; Istituto Svizzero, IT

### Death by Landscape (Fribourg), 2020

Digital print on glass, lead, larch wood frame  
→ Floor plan 02

In Margaret Atwood's eponymous story, a young girl vanishes without a trace on a camping trip. Her friend Lois will never get over her death: Lucy is simply gone, as if she had been swallowed by the landscape. The girl did not fall victim to the forces of the "harsh wilderness" but to the landscape: that version of nature appropriated and exploited by humans, even though her death remains unexplained and Lois's grief for her friend chronic. Originally, *Death by Landscape (Fribourg)* was conceived for an exhibition at Fri Art Kunsthalle Fribourg and picked up on the longstanding glass painting tradition there. Since the early modern period, landscape as a genre of painting stands for a pictorial tradition that aestheticizes the human view of nature and charges it with different contents depending on the era.

### Hexanol (IV), 2019

Aluminium, steel, hay  
→ Floor plan 03

The first thing that confronts visitors to this installation is the smell. Responsible for it is the chemical compound cis-3-Hexen-1-ol. It is the smell of mown lawn and old books, the smell of decomposing cellulose. For many people, it immediately provokes childhood memories and thus has a positive connotation. However, the menacing pointed shape of the human-size haystack counters this impression as a motif of agrarian culture that turns against humans and becomes a danger. Furthermore, the form of the pile of hay resembles a pyre, thus bringing to mind execution methods like those used in witch hunts.

## Glossary

**For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am a little short of dying. (I–II), 2019**  
Spruce wood, polished steel, deformed lab glass  
→ Floor plan 04

The omnipresent deconstruction of dichotomies such as nature/culture or wilderness/civilization in the exhibition is particularly present in this work. The rake with glass ampoules attached to it can be interpreted as humankind's violent appropriation of the earth, turning it into soil. At first glance, the glass ampoules look like hay hanging from the rake, referring on the one hand to nature, which has lost the battle with the rake (a human tool), and on the other hand, through the association with medicine and chemistry, to the sciences and ultimately to the modern rationality humans have created. The rake as a tool to dominate the earth becomes the symbol of a violent takeover, which ends in capitalist appropriation and exploitation.

The title is cited from a poem by Sappho, the most famous ancient Greek female poet. She describes the ritual *Adonia*, performed exclusively by women to mourn the death of Adonis. In this ritual plants were placed in clay shards and left to wither in order to "bury" them thereafter.

**Votive Flowers (I–III),  
Freestanding Votive Flowers (I–VII), all 2022**  
Stainless steel, LED flowers  
→ distributed over the exhibition space

Situated in different places throughout the exhibition space, sometimes blocking the way like a stumbling block, *Votive Flowers* accentuate the exhibition's reflection upon the theme of individual and collective grief. But what or whom is being mourned? Possibly the world as we know it will be laid to rest—the destroyed planet may and must be mourned. But the title also suggests that the flowers are → **votive offerings**. As such, they bear a pledge that rejects nostalgic wallowing in bygone times and points to a new future worth living. Unlike living flowers, they do not wither and thus are at once a reminder, a memorial, and a new beginning.

**Rusalka:** a ghostly female figure that appears in various Slavic folk tales. Frequently associated with water spirits, rusalkas can bring good or evil to humans. Their pop cultural representation resembles the concept of the mermaid.

**Marzanna:** The Marzanna cult came into being in 965, following the order of the newly baptized Polish prince Mieszko I to destroy all pagan images of God. From this mass spectacle emerged the powerful demon of death Marzanna, who is an amalgamation of all the annihilated spirits.

**Strzyga:** A vampire-like demon from Slavic folklore. Born as a human being with two hearts and two souls, only one of the two souls passes to the afterlife, while the other soul wanders the earth doing nefarious deeds.

**Sutartinės:** Polyphonic folk songs sung since centuries in Lithuania. A special characteristic is the independence of the different voices in melody, rhythm, and lyrics. Sometimes accompanied with dance and instruments, sutartinės were performed on the occasion of important events such as weddings or harvest celebrations, but also while doing everyday chores.

**Dziady:** A Baltic-Slavic tradition from pre-Christian times to commemorate the deceased, which was practiced twice a year. An important part is the ritual invocation of the spirits of the dead, who "come back to life" on this day.

**GAN (Generative Adversarial Network):** A class of algorithms for machine learning frameworks. A GAN learns from a training set to generate new data with the same statistics as the original training set. For example, a GAN trained on photos can generate new photos that look at least superficially authentic to the human eye and have many realistic features.

**Ecological awareness:** Morton sees *ecological awareness* in the Anthropocene as an aimless loop in which the perpetrators pursue themselves in their own perpetration. Humans, who subjugate the earth, remain stuck in this role, whether while plundering mineral resources or trying to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

**Sixth mass extinction:** A term used to describe the extensive extinction of species in our present age, which began with the current geological epoch, the Holocene.

**Votive offering:** object designed as a gesture of supplication or gratitude (for an answered prayer); from Latin *votum*: vow.

SONG (FORWARD)

*Mouthless Part II script, 2020*

Performer II as MARZANNA

The Earth is wretched  
our ground,  
Idzie bobo, złapie kogo?  
All leveled,  
all vanished, all settled.  
Contaminated, eroded,  
drained, exploded.

The negation of the rock,  
our ground,  
Idzie bobo z da-le-ka,  
All leveled,  
all vanished, all settled.  
Contaminated, eroded,  
drained, exploded.

To give rise to the soil,  
our ground,  
Idzie bobo po żelazie  
All leveled,  
all vanished, all settled.  
Contaminated, eroded,  
drained, exploded.

Performer I as RUSAŁKA

The negation of the soil,  
our ground,  
Idzie bobo i dotknie tu kogo... tu, tu, tu...  
All leveled,  
all vanished, all settled.  
Contaminated, eroded,  
drained, exploded.

To give rise to life  
our ground,  
Idzie bobo – pogłaszczę tu kogo... mizi, mizi, mizi...  
All leveled,  
all vanished, all settled.  
Contaminated, eroded,  
drained, exploded.

The negation of life  
our ground,  
Idzie bobo – całuje tu kogo... cmoku, cmoku, cmok...  
All leveled,  
all vanished, all settled.  
Contaminated, eroded,  
drained, exploded.

Performer III as STRZYGA

To give rise to riches  
our ground,  
Idzie bobo – uszczypnie tu kogo... szczypu, szczypu, szczyp...  
All leveled,  
all vanished, all settled.  
Contaminated, eroded,  
drained, exploded.

The negation of riches  
our ground,  
Idzie bobo – podrapie tu kogo... drapu, drapu, drap...  
All leveled,  
all vanished, all settled.  
Contaminated, eroded,  
drained, exploded.

INTERMISSION

Performer II as MARZANNA

Oh, rise, from the earth,  
From the dark soil;  
What legs, poor me, can I use to lift myself, ah,  
Oh, what arms to lean upon;  
Ah, my soul, my little heart.  
Oh, make your fingernails into spades,  
Your palms into shovels;  
Oh, throw the soil onto one side,  
And the slab to the other.

Turn your hands into shovels. Dig yourself out. Return to me.

CHORUS / PREFACE (POLYPHONIC)

Performer I as RUSAŁKA  
Performer II as MARZANNA

*Pas-de-tête*

reached out your dripping fingers  
my soul, my little heart  
Croakers,  
crakers,  
crocs crouched beside a conduit,  
a crabbling creekbed.

Walking on the head  
reached out your dripping fingers  
Oh, rise, from the soil  
Croakers,  
crakers,  
crocs crouched beside a conduit,  
a crabbling creekbed.

Feet up  
reached out your dripping fingers  
what arms to lean upon  
Croakers,  
crakers,  
crocs crouched beside a conduit,  
a crabbling creekbed.

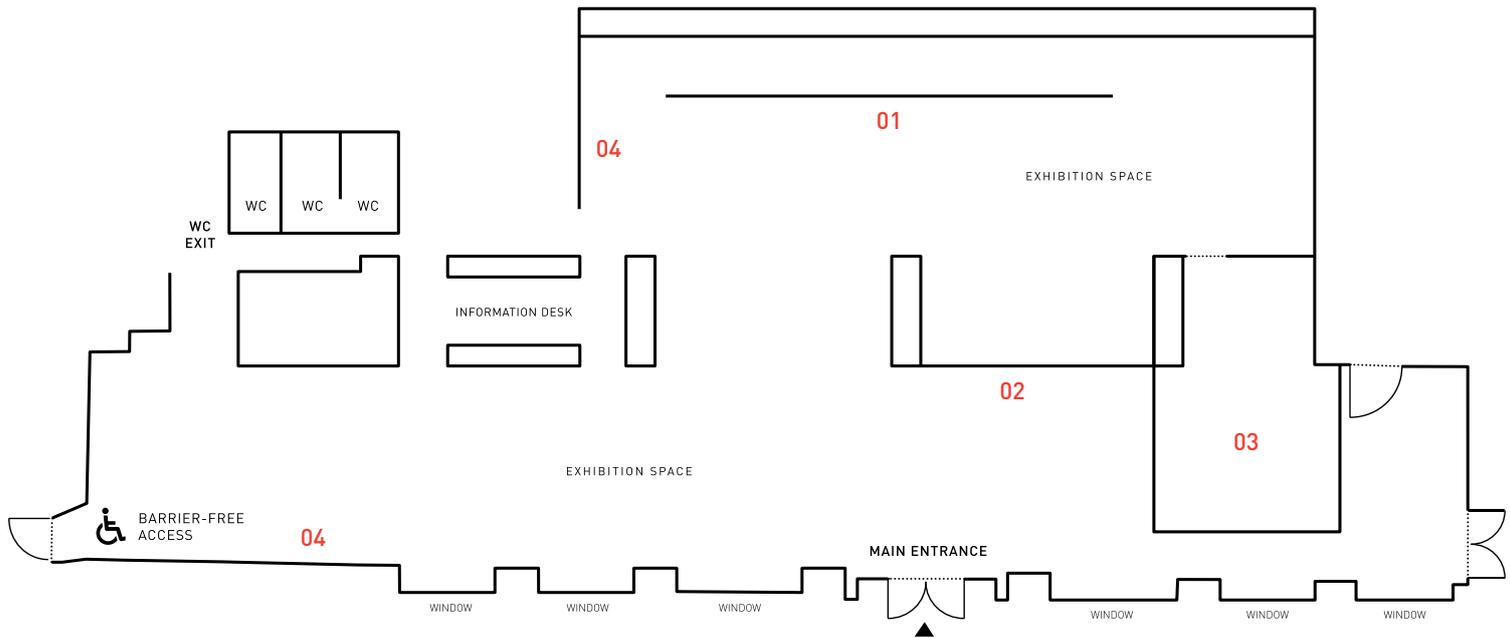
Both light and darkness  
reached out your dripping fingers  
throw the soil onto one side  
Croakers,  
crakers,  
crocs crouched beside a conduit,  
a crabbling creekbed.

—  
DEEP BREATH  
—

To give rise to uprisings.  
our ground,  
Idzie bobo – utuli tu kogo... luli, luli, lu...  
All leveled,  
all vanished, all settled.  
Contaminated, eroded,  
drained, exploded.



# Floor plan



- 01 Mouthless Part II, 2021**  
Three-channel video installation, 23:08 min
- 02 Death by Landscape (Fribourg), 2020**  
Digital print on glass, lead, larch wood frame
- 03 Hexanol (IV), 2019**  
Aluminium, steel, hay
- 04 For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am a little short of dying. (I-II), 2019**  
Spruce wood, polished steel, deformed lab glass
- ~ Votive Flowers (I-III), Freestanding Votive Flowers (I-VIII), all 2022**  
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With the support of:



Bundesministerium  
Kunst, Kultur,  
öffentlicher Dienst und Sport



Project funding:



Kanton Basel-Stadt  
Kultur

**Colophon** - Texts: Katharina Brandt, Marina Ninić - Copyediting: Else Rieger - Translation: Peter Blakeney & Christine Schöffler  
Graphic Design: Wolfgang Gosch - Printer: Druckerei Walla GmbH, A-1050 Vienna - Media Owner: NO Festival und Kino GmbH, Minoritenplatz 4,  
A-3500 Krems - Publisher: Kunstraum Niederösterreich, Vienna - © 2022 NO Festival und Kino GmbH, Kunstraum Niederösterreich  
Kunstraum Niederösterreich, Herrngasse 13, A-1010 Vienna, [www.kunstraum.net](http://www.kunstraum.net) - ISBN 978-3-9505011-3-1