

The creative act

About content and structure
in times of transition

L I E V E K A U W E N B E R G H S

The creative act.

About content and structure in times of transition.

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2022-2023

Master's Thesis

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Master in Painting

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ABSTRACT

How do we live, think and create in our present unstable times? Crossing the fields of landscape architecture and art, this paper is a situated and non-comprehensive quest to learn how this question can influence deliberate and undeliberate choices about content and structure during the creative process in both these fields. I propose an image of how these fields might look when influenced by ecological thinking, moving away from a distanced reductive and ordered world view but instead, aided by metaphorical stories, entering the present mire through issues of extinction, power, identity, and territory, to find new structures and patterns that could reflect our epoch.

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INTRODUCTION

How do we live, think and create in these present unstable times? It feels as if we have touched upon the boundaries of our attempts of structuring and systemizing the world. For quite some time now we have been reading and hearing about the potential destructive powers of meta-narratives. This has heightened our awareness of our surroundings and the context in which we live, but it has also made us doubt the existence of stable foundations in what we have come to regard as a fragmented world. If we doubt ideologies and rationality, then how do we move? The risk is not to move at all but to stay lost in contemporaneity. Are there other ways then, to approach these transitional times? Instead of trying to distance ourselves in order to try to keep an ordered overview of things and arrive at meta-narrative stories, what if we decided to enter the flux, the marshes, the swamp of ongoingness? Would the ground be as unstable as it looks from a distance? Are there other structures to be discovered? Having helped to transform places as a landscape architect and paying close attention within such places to observe the potential positive or negative impacts these transformations can have on the multispecies life our gardens and environments harbor, I have learned that ecology as a view point through which to think can have a much wider and broader use than to be restricted to a supposedly outside nature. I have also learned that our landscapes and our gardens, and the stories built around them, tell us something about ourselves. As an artist I am interested in how this field of discipline intersects with others. What does landscaping and ecological thinking have to do with painting and art today? And how do they relate to today's sensitive topics in society, as there are, for example, identity and territory? In the following pages I want to explore how this intercrossing of land(scape), ecology and art can bring me to a tangible approach to living and creating in the present times, a non-reductive approach to being in transition, an approach other than being lost in contemporaneity and being disconnected from relations and places.

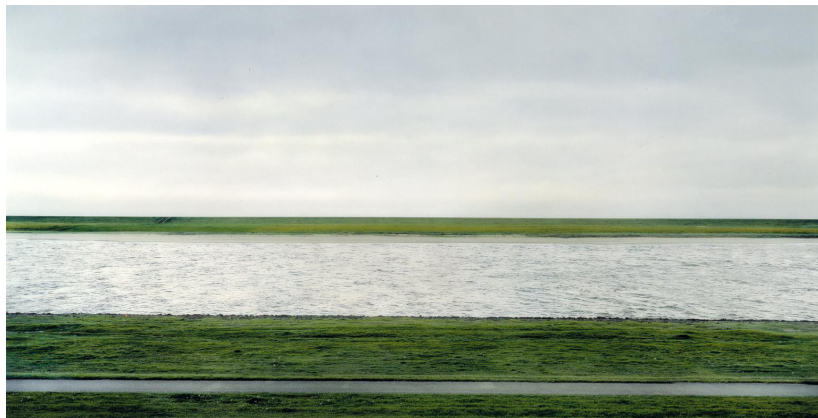
1. CHAOS AND ORDER.

“Before the earth and the sea and the all-encompassing heaven came into being, the whole of nature displayed but a single face, which men have called Chaos: a crude, unstructured mass, nothing but weight without motion, a general conglomeration of matter composed of disparate, incompatible elements” (Ovid 5).

With these lines Ovid describes the start of The Creation in his poem the *Metamorphoses*, which consists of Greek myths linked together by the theme of transformation. The creation of the Universe out of Chaos is the first change of the numerous to come in his classical text (Ovid xiii, 5). What Ovid proposes in the above words is the creation of forms and structures derived from a matter that already exists at the outset of his story in the form of chaos. The earth, sea and sky are already present in the great unstructured mass, and Ovid continues to recount how the god who is nature “disentangled the elements, so as to set them free from the heap of darkness, then gave them their separate places and tied them down in a peaceful concordat” (6).

There is a reassuring tone to these lines: the matter is there at the disposal of some higher power, it is chaotic at the outset but all it really needs is a systemic puzzling to create an orderly harmoniously balanced result. There is a security in this proposed process, a promise of firmness, of stability, solidity even, that makes me think of Andreas Gursky’s famous photograph *Rhein II* (1999) (Image 1.1.), that seems to echo Ovid’s words “He severed the sky and parted the sea from the land.” (6). Like the tying down of the elements in a peaceful concordat portrayed by Ovid, *Rhein II* is a careful organization of divided components sectioned in different categories which form a coherent arrangement. It is as if the photograph wants to show off its capacity to reveal the system used by Ovid’s god of nature. It is telling that it is amongst the most expensive photographs ever auctioned. The art historians Hugh Honour and John Fleming wrote that it seems as if Gursky were trying fully to comprehend his

scenes' overwhelming complexity, to make it manageable both for him and for us (Honour and Fleming 900). As the artist himself says "My preference for clear structures is my desire, perhaps illusory, to keep track of things and maintain my grip on the world" (900).



1.1. Andreas Gursky. *Der Rhein II*. 1999. Color photograph, chromogenic print on paper. 156.4 x 308.3 cm. Tate Collection.

I suppose that this was also amongst my own reasons to become a landscape architect in the past and which I can now further link to why the works of minimalist artists like that of Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt have been able to draw me in for a long time: they were strategies and images that were capable to alleviate the part of me that is so in want of structuring. Repetitive patterns and structures in nature and landscape and endless variations of regular grids in artworks seem to work like anodyne: they sooth, they comfort, they allay pain. It is precisely because this regular grid disallows the pathos of dynamic tension to lie in the work that minimalists adhered to it (Foster et al. 162). Like Gursky the minimalists sought to experience the higher structure. The painter Frank Stella said: "All I want anyone to get out of my paintings [...] is the fact that you can see the whole *idea* without any confusion" (Honour and Fleming 851). Donald Judd made an allusion to



1.2. Donald Judd. *Untitled*. 1970. Stainless steel and blue plexiglass 10 units, each 22.9 x 101.6 x 78.8 cm. Judd Foundation.



1.3. Sol LeWitt. *Incomplete open cubes*. 106.7 x 106.7 x 106.7 cm. Herbert Foundation.

making sets of bricks, which could be described as ‘one thing next to the other’ (Foster et al. 145), which once again seems applicable to Ovid’s lines in which the air, earth and water received their designated place.

The sense of clarity of order and soothing of the senses described above seems further and further away from us today, as we are living in these present unstable times. Large wildfires travel from earth far into the sky to reach the upper atmosphere, skies produce major floods on earth, and the seas are eating away at earth’s borders. Wars show how we are connected with ties we can’t sever, and humanitarian, political and environmental crises traverse boundaries. Everything seems entangled in a great mass of chaos and it is quite hard to imagine how we could disentangle it, let alone put one thing next to the other in a clear structure. And what’s more: everything is constantly *moving*! I turn again to Ovid’s words, right before the intervention of the god who is nature: “Although the land and the sea and the sky were involved in the great mass, no one could stand on the land or swim in the waves of the sea, and the sky had no light. None of the elements kept its shape, and all were in conflict inside one body” (5). How to disentangle and structure things without breaking processes and connections that are in a constant state of flux? Clear divisions and categorizations, straightforward stories; they would always need factors of reduction. To help me out of the doubtful mode as to how to proceed in this moving mass, lost in contemporaneity, I hold fast on the realization that I do actually find myself somewhere, *here*, in a specific – real, concrete – place and time. From this place, this landscape, I will start by observing the ongoing processes and connections.

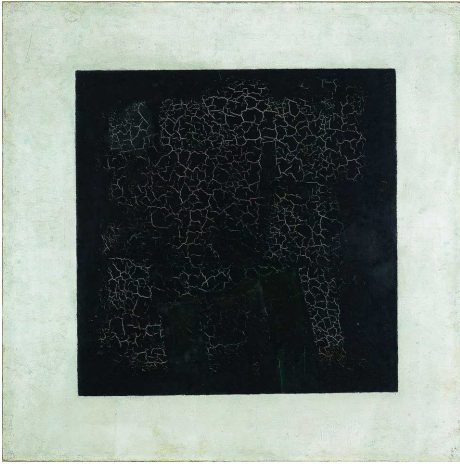
2. A SLAB OF CONCRETE AND A SQUARE

One of these places laid bare for me to view are the multifold front gardens along our roads, often covering a mere sloping distance of a few meters between someone's intimate world and myself. They show me to what degree we have tried to bring order in our environment. Private property but publicly scrutable, they become familiar to the one who looks, and they have stories to tell. They speak at once in an individual voice of personal character as in common voices of certain time spans shared in history. They betray an individual world vision while at the same time revealing epochal adherence. But I must admit that my observation often leaves me downhearted. The distances between gardens that stimulate my imagination are too long. It is not the aesthetical choices that bother me, on the contrary, I very much welcome their diversity as they stand for a multiplicity of stories. What bothers me are the many attempts to what I can only call an *erasure* of these in-between spaces from existence, as if we are left puzzled with the question as to what to do with these few square meters that were put in the package together with the homes we are occupying. I would even prefer Ovid's *crude, unstructured mass; a conglomeration of matter composed of disparate, incompatible elements* to a space concreted from street to front door, or to an all-covering patch of gravel or artificial grass, which now seem to be new strategies for inserting barriers between our feet and all living things underneath them.

It makes me think of what the French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre calls "dominated space" in *La production de l'espace* (1974): "The dominant and the dominated: a natural space that is transformed (mediated) by a technique or a practice. In modern times, their number and examples are evident and readable as such: a slab of concrete, a highway. The domination becomes completely dominant by technicity" (Lefebvre 191). Lefebvre goes on to explain that dominated spaces are the results of projects of masters, and that technicity introduces a form within the older space, most often a rectilinear or rectangular form. The dominated space is generally closed off, sterilized, emptied. This

emptied space cuts me off from the potential stories linked to certain time spans in history, stories I was looking for in observing the front gardens. They don't refer to a certain time in the past, and they are void of any specific vision or ambition for the future. There is just the emptied space. Nothing grows, nothing moves, nothing lives. I think of the many dormant seeds under these slabs of concrete or patches of gravel, waiting patiently to be able to tell the stories of their ancestors. This emptying of space feels like a way to approach space as if nothing was there in the first place, not even Ovid's entangled mass of chaos. A little bit like the white cube within the art space. Likewise, this clearing out of our front garden speaks of a want of starting with a clean slate, as if to say "before we came to occupy this place, there was nothing, and now we can start to create". Only the story seems to stop after cleaning the slate, and we don't move towards a new creation. Or we think that the cleaning of the place, the dominating slab of concrete, *was* the creation. This in-between status where the garden is cleaned of all living material becomes an accepted image of order, an image of how we think the world really is and it defines our role in it; cleaning, systemizing, dividing and ordering in distinct categories, fixing things in stable concordats. And of course, it is hard to do this when elements like plants are constantly moving, growing, dying, and mutating the space.

These reflections and Henri Lefebvre's image of the dominant rectangular form also throws me back to Malevich's squares. In 1915, the *Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10* in Petrograd marked the founding moment of Suprematism. The Russian artist Kazimir Malevich chose the square to determine the zero degree of painting, the essential minimum. The squares already appeared in his previous works. It was part of Malevich's search to detach the image from its referents, towards showing that a picture has an existence of its own (Foster et al. 143). In *Reservist of the First Division, Moscow* (1914), Malevich uses a blue square to block part of the image where we might have seen the face of the reservist, the term *reservist* referring to men like himself under the age of 43 liable to be called up in the event of war. This blue square seems like the concrete slab put in the front garden, superposed on organic living soil. It is



2.1. Kazimir Malevich. *Black Square*. 1915.
Black Square. 1915. Oil on canvas.
79.5 x 79.5 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



2.2. Kazimir Malevich. *Reservist of the First Division*. Moscow. 1914. Oil on canvas with collage of printed paper, postage stamp, and thermometer. 53.7 x 44.8 cm. MoMA.

an attempt, as put forward by Hugh Honour and John Fleming, to “convey the supremacy of idea over matter, over the chaos of nature” (Honour 794).

Malevich will move on to pure geometric forms, writing “All reference to ordinary objective life has been left behind and nothing is real except feeling” (Honour 794). His famous *Black Square* (1915) shows how nothing is left visible of what lied or lies under the square, the rectangular form is now the pure form which will transmit the pure mystical feeling. In his *Suprematist Manifesto* (1916) Malevich explains that in order to rid art of the conditioning images of the past like “nature’s little nooks, Madonnas and Venuses”, the artist needs to get out of the “rubbishy slough of academic art” and has to “advance toward creation as an end in itself and towards domination over the forms of nature” (Danchev 106-107). In an age of political turmoil, a transitional period in which the Russians are starting to revolt and the fall of the Russian Empire under tsar Nicolas II is pending, Malevich’s squares are also an accurate way to distance oneself from the system that came before. Like the concrete slab in our front garden, the square is a non-discriminative all-consuming rupture of ongoingness (note 1).

So now our empty front garden has become stuck in a transitional phase, time, place, with no referent in the past or future, no longer moving but at a standstill. Now it has become a place of passage, a transit zone, a place of temporary occupation like the acts of transferring groceries from our car to the house, collecting packages from the delivery service, emptying the mailbox. We don’t linger in the front garden, we move away from the vulnerable place it has become, where we are in plain view of hundreds of eyes potentially inspecting us. We prefer the house and the back garden which have places to hide, where we can take cover behind walls, hedges and wooden fences. The description of the front garden as transit zone fits with what the anthropologist Marc Augé calls a non-place: a transit zone or a place of temporary occupation, places that have been torn from relational, historical and identarian contexts (Augé 100). With the slab of concrete we have brought Augé’s concept to our homes as we cleared out our front gardens of

its historical context (note 2). The emptiness that is left testifies of a rupture – or at least a severe questioning and searching– of identarian and social context. The relational activity that is left are fleeting, fugitive acts that prevent us from properly connecting with this space.

3. GRADIENTS AND IN-BETWEENNESS

I am looking for other ways to approach this transitional space and period, other than being lost in contemporaneity and being disconnected from relations and places. A tangible, positive, non-reductive view on being in transition. A view that leads me away from this language of elimination and domination. I am thinking of the American novelist Ursula Le Guin, who showed me that the human tale is better told, fuller, when we tell stories in the language of the carrier bag, instead of the language of weapons (Le Guin 35-37). Before weapons there must have been the carrier bag, she states, because when we evolved into human beings our principal food was *gathered*. We didn't spend all that much time hunting but the story of the hunter, the hero, with his sticks, spears and swords has dominated the storytelling in history. So now it is the old story, the one of the carrier bag, that should constitute the new story (Le Guin 29-30). I am projecting Le Guin's thinking to the domination of my concrete slab and square and realize that I too can replace them with another language, another tale; one that is more fitting, more desirable for today's world. One that tells of entanglement rather than putting things in a strict orderly fashion next to one another. One that tells of addition rather than subtraction, multiplication instead of reduction. I can do this when I move my attention away from an anthropocentric attitude towards the garden and steer it towards the study of ecology. What do ecological studies tell us about transition zones? They point to the importance of graduality as opposed to hard linear boundaries: gradual transition zones are areas of immense interest as they provide the right conditions for the development of varied and species-rich communities (Londo 41-42). These *gradients*, as they are also called, refer to the gradual change of environmental factors in a certain space, for example gradients between dry and wet, dark versus light, nutrient-poor and nutrient-rich soil. In his book *Towards more nature in garden, parc and landscape*, the Dutch botanist and researcher Ger Londo explains that these gradients can harbor a larger variety of species because species bound to one or the other side can abide here, as well as other species altogether,

who prefer a situation in-between. Londo visualizes this concept by way of a simplified figure of two bars: one bar has a hard division line in the middle separating two colors in a binary way. In the other bar the same two opposing colors gradually blend within each other (Image 3.1.). This concept allows for a different approach to think about transition, one that calls for an observation of what is happening *between* structures, to explore the continuously remodeling and temperamental entanglement of living there. So I decide to leave my position reflecting on front gardens on the sideline, and opt to venture into the gradients, and I am taking the ecological thinking with me.



3.1. Image reproduced from Ger Londo. *Gradual transition zones or gradients.*

To aid me do this I will bring in another story, an old story that I can bring back in the present, like Le Guin did. What better story to use for our gardens and ourselves being in transition than one of Ovid’s metamorphoses? When I use the word metamorphoses, I am no longer thinking about the structuring or arranging of clearly outlined elements in an ordered way to get to an all-covering view of life. Instead I am entering the in-betweenness of structures: I start thinking of the actual changing of forms. Even with the broadness of the term ‘metamorphoses’, I envision something more tangible, more concrete. I see specific, *living* forms that are in constant movement. Metamorphoses brings me to a specificity, a situatedness in time and

place. The influence of Ovid's tales in the history of the humanities can hardly be overrated, whether it be in the field of literature, art, garden landscape, theatre, religion or other studies. It is exactly in the potential of possible connections within this entanglement of fields and times in history that many stories lay yet to be told, from different and sometimes crossing or overlapping viewpoints. The entanglement between human and non-human in Ovid's stories is very relevant to our world today, and what triggers me furthermore is that Ovid's stories bring me in the mire; this swampy and boggy ground our world seems today. I am thinking now especially of the stories in which the women's roles are, to say the least, dubious. One of their stories, written 2015 years ago, can reconnect me with today's agitating transforming world.

4. PAN AND SYRINX

Not long after Ovid's account of creation he offers us the tale of Pan and Syrinx (Ovid 39-41). The story itself is an interlude; it is told in-between the story of Io, it weaves the first and second part of Io's story together (note 3) and so it is a story that gets involved, connects, and is told to tell other stories. Syrinx is a beautiful naiad who regularly has to elude the pursuits of satyrs and various gods of the forests. One day after rejecting the advances of the god Pan she is obliged to flee from his pursuit through the fields until the river Ladon bars her way. Seeing no other way to escape she calls on the nymphs of the rivers to transform her, and just when Pan thinks he has caught her, he is left clutching marsh reeds (Ovid 39-40). This, in a nutshell, is the first part of Syrinx's story. Applying Londo's image of the binary versus the gradient to this story, we could say that Syrinx has found herself on the separating hard line in the landscape, where land and water are abruptly separated from each other. In this situation Syrinx is unable to find a hiding place. It would be like looking for a hiding place in Andrea Gursky's famous photograph *Der Rhein II*, in which the different elements are nicely laid bare in the open, clearly separated by line and color.

This idea of hard boundaries and the consequences they bring to Syrinx's situation, her inability to find a hiding place or escape route, is something we can relate to the times we are living in. The ecofeminist science philosopher Donna Haraway finds the Anthropocene (the name that is now frequently being used to refer to the transformative effects of human activity on earth) to be more a boundary event than an epoch, because it marks severe discontinuities (Haraway 2016:100, 44). It is filled with the destruction of places and times of multispecies refuge, filled with human and non-human refugees without refuge (100). Haraway refers to anthropologist Anna Tsing's view that in the long period of the Holocene places of refuge abounded, while now they are being wiped out, and this might well be called the inflection point between the Holocene and the Anthropocene (100). Syrinx can be seen faced with this discontinuity, this abrupt boundary in the

landscape without gradient zone between land and river. (And our cleared off front gardens, void of any possible refugia, has in itself become a place to flee from.) Syrinx's strategy, or her only option, is to metamorphose into her own hiding place, her own gradient zone, by turning into freshwater reed marshes. By doing this, she has willingly or unwillingly also assured a place of refuge for a plurality of multispecies that can thrive in this gradient. I might call this new situation an *invironment*. If an environment is a graphical area with its many conditions that surrounds us, than an *invironment* could be this same space and conditions but not just surrounding us but putting us as an active part within it. Or, in other words, the *invironment* is not just there as a background or an abstract space around us, but we are *co-creating* this space with other beings. Neither are we just *providing* a static environment for us and other beings as a one-time act, but we are part of a *continuous* world-making process that can never be finished or done. We constantly interinfluence our *invironment*. This could be another way of formulating what science philosopher Bruno Latour is saying when he explains that our experience in the world is a composition, because we “reinforce – or complicate – niches, bubbles and shielded spaces that other living things maintain, envelop, overlap, and put together with other living things around them” (Latour 61-62). This is very much appropriate to our story of Syrinx because the reeds she has metamorphosed into are a keystone species in landscape ecology (SijiMol), meaning that they have a disproportionately large effect on the communities in which they occur. They play an important role in species protection, shore protection and pollution control (Ostendorp), their biomass is used for biofuel production and reed bamboos could be the most important non-timber forest product for the subsistence and support of the economically weaker strata of the society (SijiMol). Wetlands in general, of which reed marshes are part of, are some of the planet's most productive ecosystems, filled with great biodiversity, sustaining the lives of fish, birds, amphibians, invertebrates and plant species while also providing important goods and services to society (LIFE III). Reeds, then, are intertwined between human and non-human building and sustaining

of communities.

Another way to talk of Syrinx's metamorphoses is to say that she has "become-with" the environment, a concept Haraway proposes in opposition to "becoming": "Becoming-with, not becoming, is the name of the game." she explains, "Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding. Natures, cultures, subjects, and objects do not preexist their intertwined worldings" (Haraway 2016:12). To Haraway it is relationality all the way down (Weigel). This becoming-with is a process she calls "sympoieses" as opposed to autopoiesis or self-producing, and it is the sort of ongoing, multispecies stories and practices we need today, in precarious times, in which we are at stake to each other (Haraway 2016:55).

What nice thinking this is to apply to a space and time in transition. By metamorphosing into a gradient zone of which she herself will be part of, Syrinx has created places of refugia which provide the conditions for multispecies to interact and get entangled, to braid new patterns and structures with each other and thereby becoming-with each other. She has stopped fleeing and started to weave networks between the binary places for a better and sustainable way of living. I can imagine how rich and dense and full of life our front gardens could look like if we would follow Syrinx's path.



4.1. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Sympoièse au Crépuscule*. 2022. Oil on canvas.
40 x 50 cm.

INTERLUDE. REED DIE-BACK

As we see reeds dying back at a fast rate in sizeable areas in Europe, this has significant impacts on important wetland functions (biodiversity, stability of river and lake margins, water quality) and local economy (Brix, 1999). Like so many other habitats all over earth today, reed marshes are in substantial decline (Ostendorp 1989, Graveland 1998, Brix 1999, LIFE III 2007, SijiMol 2016). What we are losing in today's mass extinction is much more than individual species numbers, or even individual species as "life forms", as the environmental philosopher and anthropologist Thom van Dooren explains. We are also losing "forms of life", a distinction he drew from the anthropologist Stefan Helmreich. "Life forms" are organisms in their ecological relationship, and "forms of life", in an adaption from Wittgenstein, are "those cultural, social, symbolic, and pragmatic ways of thinking and acting that organize human communities". Van Dooren takes this thinking further, beyond the human, by looking closer – paying better attention – to what happens in non-human communities. Through his research he has gotten to know different species in new ways and discovered the richness of their "forms of life". This made him realize that "knowing more draws us into new kinds of relationships and, as a result, new accountabilities to others" (van Dooren 8-9). This could also be a way to tell *Syrinx's* story today.



4.2. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Reeds*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 60 x 50 cm.

5. THE AMBIGUITY OF STRUCTURES

Someone who has been working for quite some time around refuge places for a menaced diversity is Gilles Clément, gardener (a title he prefers over the next one), landscaper, botanist, entomologist, and biologist. Clément also saw the importance of in-between places as refugia in the modern landscape. His concept of the *Tiers paysage* or the Third landscape refers to what is in-between two categories; that of shadow on the one hand and light on the other. In these two categories two structuring elements have been dominating the landscape: tree and grass (Clément 24-25). A reductive approach in which many figures have disappeared, to which his attention was drawn when he was observing the radical opening up of agricultural fields in the valleys on the one hand and forest production with rapidly growing monospecific plantations higher up on the plateaus on the other hand:

It was in the observation of this binary system (open/closed, shadowy/luminous), but also in their multiple variations and perturbations that the idea formed that maybe modern conditions of occupation and planning have left spaces between them, where something *other* than the potent mark of devices, agricultural markets and technical thinking is expressed (11).

Clément's Third landscape consists of a collection of spaces that are, either by chance or by inaccessibility, abandoned or not exploited by humans. They can even be the rare spaces that have never been subjected to exploitation. They are the abandoned spaces, pending spaces, retained spaces, non-cultivated spaces (8-13). The Third landscape is "a territory," Clément states, "that shelters a diversity that is generally chased by human activity: agriculture, the city, concrete. We find insects, birds, mammals that we don't find elsewhere, simply because they cannot live elsewhere" (Corbou 123). As a landscape architect, Clément has also deliberately designed several landscape parks around this principle. In the Henri-Matisse park in Lille he created Derborence Island, named after the primary forest that still exists today in Switzerland. Placed in the middle of the parc, raised on a 7.5 meters high concrete socle, it

is a scenography of the abandoned space on a surface of 2500 m², unreachable to humans (Images 5.1-2.). Here nature can develop itself following its own dynamic (Clément 73). Some species were planted, but ninety percent has come from the birds and the wind (Corbou 119). To me this project seems like a reversal of Lefebvre's concrete slab. I have this image of a reversed slab of concrete, with a layer of earth that has come attached to it and which will now serve the uncovered seeds. Protected by the height of the socle they find themselves like *Syrinx* becoming-with a new refugia for themselves and for other species.



5.1-2. Gilles Clément. *Ile Derborence in Parc Matisse*. 2500m² of raised Third landscape within the 8 hectares park. 1996. Lille.

Another of Clément's projects linked to his concept of the Third landscape can be found on the roof of the Saint-Nazaire's submarine base in Brittany. This base dates back to the Germans in the second World War and has a surface of 3 hectares on top of a concrete slab 9 meters thick. Here, Clément has found a place to valorize the typical plant species of the Third landscape. As was the case at Derborance Island, certain places on the roof have been planted, others were left open to welcome species brought by wind and birds (Clément 75). In this project there is again the idea of species growing on top of a concrete slab, but it is also a very good visualization of finding an in-betweenness in our landscapes. The plants find themselves literally in-between the beams of the bombs exploding rooms of the military base (Images 5.3-5.).

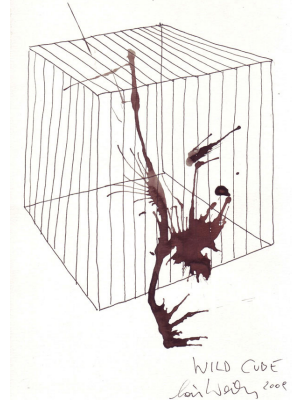


5.3-5. Gilles Clément. *Jardins du Tires paysage*. 2009-2011. Gardens on the submarine base of Saint Nazaire, Brittany. 2 hectares.

A similar concern for free species growth can be found in the work of the artist Lois Weinberger. In his art spontaneous vegetation comes sprouting up from broken up concrete, or from a line cut in the pavement. Plants and trees grow from seeds carried by the wind in barred rectangular cages named *Wild Cubes*, where they are protected from human weeders on the outside (Images 5.6-9.). In Weinberger's work, given a little help from the human, the dominated lives and grows. The dormant seeds under the concrete slab take their opportunity to start their proper metamorphoses.



5.6. Lois Weinberger. *Cut*. 1999. Spontaneous vegetation. 100 m. University of Innsbruck.



5.7. Lois Weinberger. *Wild Cube*. 2009.



5.8. Lois Weinberger. *Ruderal Enclosure. Burning and Walking*. 1993. 800 x 600 cm. Salzburg.

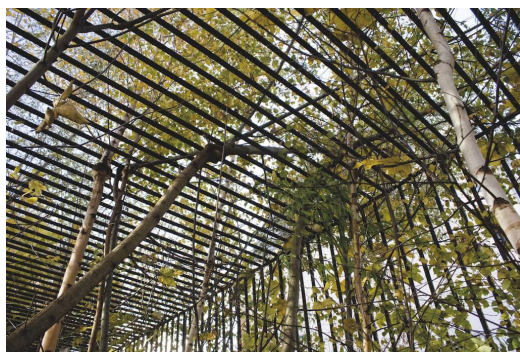


5.9. Lois Weinberger. *Spur*: Spontaneous vegetation. 60m. Köln.

Resolutely choosing weeds to work with, making them thrive within human's ordered reductive non-living anthropological forms like cages and concrete, Weinberger's work is full of menacing violence and death and life and survival. To me the plants in his *Wild Cubes* represent the constant friction human and non-human species are faced with in relation to structure: there is a need for structure, and then there is the need to escape from these structures. At a certain point the structure protects them from the outside and this helps them grow freely. This is the message we always read about Weinberger's cubes. But at a certain point they will also hold them down. Or the plants are forced to grow in a way they would not if the structure would not be there, it may even deform them (on the other hand, and interesting to think in times of transition: the structure could also get deformed by the plants). (Images 5,10-5.12.)



5.10-11. Lois Weinberger. *Wild Cube*. 1991/2011. High yield steel, spontaneous vegetation. 400 x 500 x 1200 cm. Belvedere museum, Vienna.



5.12. Lois Weinberger. *Wild Cube Ruderaleinfriedung*. 1998/1999. High yield steel, spontaneous vegetation. 40 x 4 x 3.70 m. Neue Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Universität, Innsbruck.

This tipping point between the need for structure and the need to escape is impossible to predict in a model, an institute, a society, a painting. It depends on too many factors. Weinberger saw the weeds as a symbol of the freed mind. They went against the idea of a 'primary nature', against 'the esthetic of the pure and the true, against ordering'. He thought the wild vegetation growing on postindustrial sites and on urban fringes to be untamed, and by consequence more 'natural' than the tightly controlled zones of contemporary 'wildness' in society. Ruderal plants to Weinberger are the always present lower class of the plant world, the 'mass' that is always ready to break through the surface of human order and stability (CG concept). According to curator Dieter Roelstraete Weinberger's choice of weeds might be the defining aspect of his work (Van Cauteren et al. 33). Weeds are the ultimate anti-hero, as opposed to the much used metaphor of the tree (33). They are a statement, a political message, one that says that Weinberger is on the side of the trampled, the homeless, those who are unwelcome.

The question of power then, is very present in Weinberger's work, but for me it is mainly because the role of the dominant and the dominated is so ambiguous: is the structure of the wild cube or the broken up concrete slab protecting or rather holding back the plants and weeds? Are the weeds trying to escape the structures, or are they using them to free themselves? As in Clément's larger working concepts, free mitigation is important, but in Clément's work the friction is less pronounced; the *living* seems much more *at its place*. This is of course due to the fact that in Clément's landscaping work the plant species and living world around them are not only meant to present this friction; they are foremost meant to grow together, to "become-with" the anthropological elements. According to Clément the Third landscape brings us back to an outsider state, not an outsider world: the space expresses neither the power nor the submission to power (Clément 25). To him these territories should be hospitable to the diversity that is driven out every other place today, and our valorization of them is linked to what should be a central occupation: that of protecting and maintaining life (Clément 69).

If we take Clément's and Weinberger's concepts back to Syrinx we can see how, in ecological terms, reeds provide an "inevitable structural frame" for the life of a highly specialized fauna (Ostendorp). Syrinx has become a sort of protective structure or a Third landscape and this form then, this structure, this Third landscape, will over time become indivisible from its place and the life within it. And as with Weinberger's *Wild Cubes* and Clément's landscapes it is the humans that can either destroy or facilitate, and with that knowledge, as Thom van Dooren showed us, comes new accountabilities.

6. IDENTITY I

It seems at this point that my story is leading Syrinx into the new identity and role of an environmental protective structure, one I have brought her to through my ecological thinking and my wish to pull her out of her victim's role. But who was Syrinx really in Ovid's storytelling, besides being a victim of Pan's pursuit? Ovid describes her as a remarkable naiad that had been living in the Nonácrian woods all her life. She was a good huntress and quick on her feet; she had eluded the pursuits of lascivious satyrs more than once (Ovid 39-40). With this image of her in mind, it is safe to say that she has not been rightly treated by imagery history. In the best known paintings she is always rendered vulnerable by her nudity, despair, and pleading look, making doubtful movements between flight and surrender. In a number of these paintings it was Peter Paul Rubens who painted her. In true baroque style Pan and Syrinx are depicted with great focus on their dramatic corporeality and emotions, their bodies twisting in the typical diagonal composition. The chosen culminating moment of the story lies in the instant of the attempted capture of Syrinx by Pan who finds her, as in a corporal scene of hide and seek, taking refuge in the already present reeds that are forecasting Syrinx's metamorphoses. Rubens' style in combination with this story emphasizes the discord between the two figures. There is the wild lust and desire of Pan, emphasized by a muscular masculinity and his depiction as satyr, half-man, half animal, confronted with the vulnerable Syrinx in her piteous effort to escape. Incidentally, these paintings were also painted – in the most literal sense – in a dichotomic way: they were a series that came from a collaboration between Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder, the latter replaced after his death by Jan Brueghel the Younger (Images 6.1-3.). The work on the paintings was divided in two neat categories: Rubens painted the figures and the Brueghels the landscapes. A material metaphor for a nature-culture divide, a relentlessly stubborn notion that lives on until today and to which this paper can hopefully contribute a portion of the antidote that is needed to overthrow it. But it would be too easy to condemn these

paintings with today's view on these things. Of course today we would never depict Syrinx and Pan like Rubens did and of course we can see that Syrinx does not belong in the natural environment that is painted around her. But if we would move our eyes away from the dominant central scene – the one of the pending violence between humans – then we would be able to learn a lot about the other living things in the paintings: the reed marshes with its large number of its inhabitants, a diversity richly painted by the Brueghels. Looking at historical paintings like this is something Estelle Zhong Mengual, art historian and professor at Sciences Po, guides us to do. In her book *Apprendre à voir. Le point de vue du vivant*. (2021), she aims to show us how we can look beyond nature as a décor or a support for our emotions in works of art (Mengual 2021). There lies an abundance of other stories to be discovered and told in our history of painting and we can rediscover in them just what we could be losing today in times of environmental crises.



6.1. Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder. *Pan and Syrinx*. c. 1617. Oil on panel. 40 x 61 cm. Museumlandschaft Hessen Kassel.



6.2. Jan Brueghel the Younger and Peter Paul Rubens. *Pan and Syrinx*. First half of 17th century. Oil on panel. 51.4 x 85.6 cm. Staatliches Museum Schwerin.



6.3. Jan Brueghel the Younger and Peter Paul Rubens. *River landscape with Pan and Syrinx*. First half of 17th century. Oil on panel. 58.2 x 94.6 cm.

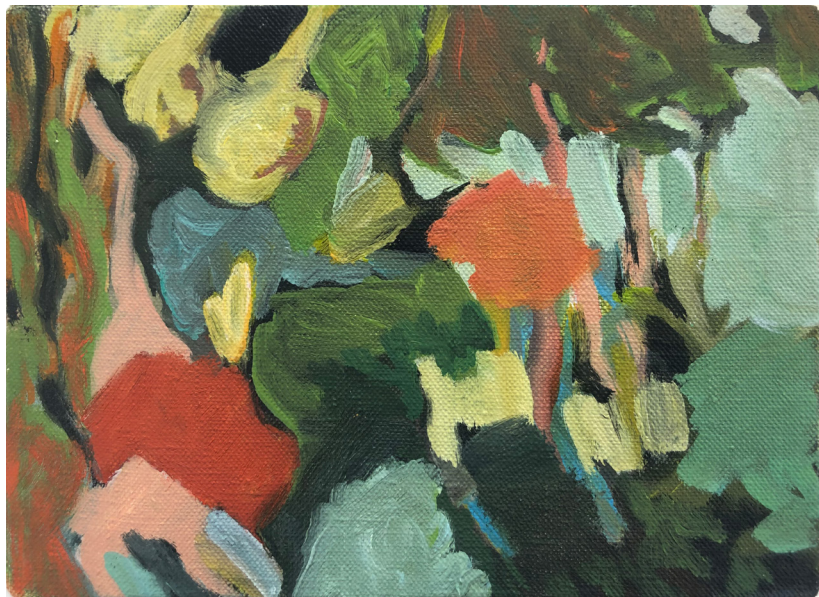
Meanwhile, to help Syrinx out of her culminating baroque moment of getting caught by Pan and to question how all this impacts her identity, I would like to pick up Henri Lefebvre's thinking on dominated space, because he also applies this to the body. As the body is dominated by overwhelming powers, brutal techniques or extreme visualization, Lefebvre explains, it can fragment. It can part with itself, "disappropriate". A "reappropriation" then, should be linked to the reappropriation of space (Lefebvre 193). "Appropriated space" for Lefebvre, is a natural space modified to serve the needs and possibilities of a group (192). In this reading Syrinx's body fragments as she undergoes the violences put upon her and she reappropriates it by becoming-with the reed marshes and their inhabitants.



6.4. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Syrinx*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 58 x 70 cm.

INTERLUDE. WAY OUT

When I see Syrinx blocked by the river Ladon and faced with the terrible choice to leave her body I also think of Paul B. Preciado, the philosopher and art curator who firmly sticks his head above the water to challenge the colonial heteropatriarchal, heteronormative world. Preciado, like Syrinx, was also faced with a choice that really wasn't a choice. He too attempted to escape from the serfdom of a binary system. His binary system was the one of sexual difference between man and woman. He recounts how, in the body of a woman, he saw himself incapable of assuming the role of belle or victim that women are offered in a "heteropatriarchal binary circus", and so he wanted to stop being a woman. He had no desire to become a man, he simply wanted a way out, to escape the mockery of sexual difference, the boundaries of its taxonomy. Talking about his transition towards a transgender person Preciado declares carefully avoiding the word freedom, because people should understand his phrase "way out" in its most common and concrete sense; he was looking for a door, an exit, a way out. To do this he had to "decolonize, disidentify, debinary" himself, and it brought him ostracization and social rejection, but that was not as disastrous or painful as having to destruct his life force, which he would have had to do should he have accepted the norm. And so he says he extricated himself from that confined "cage" (Preciado, 2020: 20, 24-25, 33-34). This stance is echoed today by a growing gender-questioning and genderfluid generation that says no to these cages, or no to a binary taxonomy. And so to me Syrinx is not only woman; she is man, trans, x, genderfluid, earth, multispecies, ...



6.5. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Flight*. 2023. Oil on canvas. 13.5 x 18.5 cm.

7. IDENTITY II

When I think of Syrinx trying to reappropriate her body through the space she finds herself in, my thoughts go to the artist Ana Mendieta. Mendieta worked tenaciously on the question of identity and the joining of body and earth in the 1970's. In her *Silueta* series, which have also come to be known as her 'earth-body' works, she joined her silhouette with the earth using organic materials, in different historical locations (Images 7.1-2.). John Perreault, the New York artist and art critic famous for his early writings on feminist art, writes that Mendieta saw the earth as a living body, and that she wanted to be one with that body. Perreault ascribes the power of Ana's work to its attempts to overcome the separateness from nature and spirit, informed by her own experience of exile from Cuba when she was an adolescent. Her concept speaks to all of us because we all share her sense of exile, says Perreault, because of the separateness from nature that has become ours in modern life (Barreras del Rio and Perreault 14). Of her *Silueta* series Mendieta herself writes:

I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs ... [in] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being (10).

Mendieta's art has often been described as unapologetically feminist. But this identification between women and body and women and nature within the movement of feminism was soon after seen as a reduction of women to nature, as an "essentialist" impediment to feminist repositioning of women in society (Foster



7.1. Ana Mendieta. *Untitled. Silueta Series*. 1976. The estate of Ana Mendieta, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

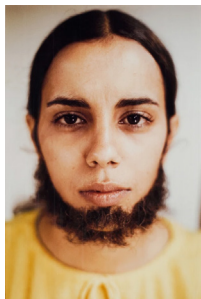


7.2. Ana Mendieta. *Untitled. Silueta Series*. The estate of Ana Mendieta, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

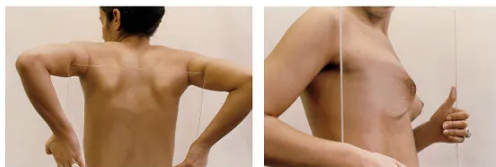
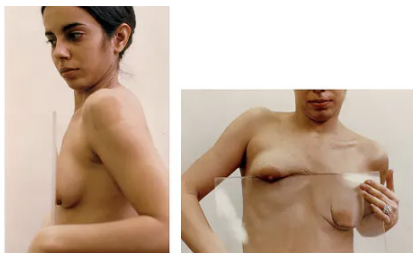
et al. 656). This now makes me doubt the way I joined Syrinx and the marsh reeds in an ecological-feminist marriage. In 1999, Catriona Sandilands, professor of Environmental Arts and Justice who has written extensive works on ecofeminism and queer ecology, writes “Heroic mothers defending home and hearth against a nature deformed by multinationalist corporate practice: this may be a compelling story, but it is not necessarily the source of valid feminist or ecological critique.” Philosopher Émilie Hache, whose work also revolves around political ecology and ecofeminism explains why this is so problematic. The oppression of women and nature are not two contemporary facts but they are related to each other: one leans on the other and visa versa. Women are viewed as inferior (but also irrational, more sensitive, impure, etc) *because* they are considered closer to nature. Nature then, is being desacralized and exploited *because* it is being feminized. This leads to a double devaluation of women and nature, which takes its place within the nature-culture divide that characterizes our culture, and to which ecofeminism has thus, ironically, contributed (Hache 237). For Hache the answer for ecofeminists is not to leave the idea of identification with nature behind, but to revalue the concept of nature. To reclaim it, reappropriate it as an intelligent nature, a non-impooverished nature (237-238).

Erin L. Mccutcheon, who specializes in Latin American art, feminist artistic practices and their intersections with activist histories, writes that Ana Mendieta’s interest in the complicated notion of the purity of nature and the land was the reason she chose to work within the confines of a feminized earth in the first place. It was a conscious choice to expose how the female body as well as the land are, and have been for centuries, culturally constructed (McCutcheon 21). This questioning of a culturally constructed identity was already present in Mendieta’s earlier works like *Facial Cosmetic Variations*, *Facial Hair Transplants* and *Glass on Body* (Images 7.3-5), works that show how Mendieta investigates the notion of identity and gender in different ways, like transplanting the beard of a friend to her own face, or distorting her naked breasts by using a glass sheet (19). According to Jane Blocker her choice to

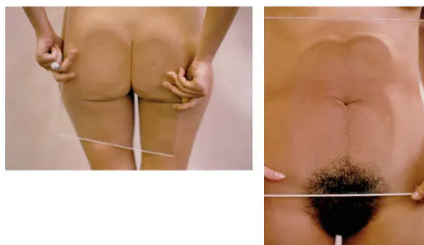
work with the notion of the binary to represent identity was to expose its untenability (Blocker, Mendieta 49).



7.3. Ana Mendieta.
Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants). 1972.
Chromogenic prints.
48.5 x 32.5 cm.



7.4. Ana Mendieta.
Untitled (Facial Cosmetic Variations).
1972, printed in 1997.
Chromogenic color print.
48.9 x 32.4 cm. MoMA.



7.5. Ana Mendieta. *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*. 1972, printed in 1997. Six color photographs.

Mendieta's work is uncompromising. In her early performances entitled *Rape Scenes* she confronted an unsuspecting audience with the gruesome image of her supposedly raped or murdered body (19). These rape scenes and the recurrent notions of violence, blood and sacrifice in her work should, according to McCutcheon, be seen through the eyes of mythology and the Cuban pre-colonial religion Santería. These place an importance on the connection of seemingly opposing forces and therefore do "not connect to modern notions of identity, life, or death very well" (19). In ritual sacrifice, which occupies a central part in Santerian religion, the sacrifice is not treated as a victim, but as a transcendent being giving its divine force to the one offering it to the gods, and blood in this process contains the potentiality of life (20). "In light of this perspective," McCutcheon writes, Mendieta's rape scenes take on a new significance. As a sacrifice, the woman is the ultimate victim of traditional notions of male desire; however, Mendieta wishes to distort this view in order to give the woman's death more profundity and significance [...] By associating the raped woman with a sacrificial being, she calls forth the complicated notion in Santería of blood sacrifice as a source of power, divinity, and life" (20-21). Mendieta's later *Siluetas* works are less violent. What she focuses on here is the parting with her personal identity as it is known in its bodily sense and leaving her imprint in the earth. These works are more a play with associations and memory (21).

This might also be a way to look at what has happened to Syrinx, a way that takes more in account than just pretending to be a new heroic story about how she can save nature by way of becoming a protective structure. There would still be reference to domination in that story. It could rather be seen as a search to revalue identity, to part from the binary nature-culture divide in a process of reclaiming and strengthening mutual identities. What makes Mendieta's work relevant in Syrinx's story and in the questioning of transitional periods as the one we are living in is that it is not just limited to the reconnection with the earth, but that it shows the richness of a search filled with death and violence, life and healing. As McCutcheon writes: "Santería taught Mendieta that life and death,

male and female, violence and nurture are all concepts that exist in direct connection with one another, not in opposition. Mendieta's art attempts to explore this instability" (21). With its basis rooted largely in her own life experience Mendieta's approach stems from the concrete, the tangible; it comes from *within* the bigger structure. I believe Mendieta's approach, including the use of Santeria, could now be looked at not as essentialism, as it has been suggested in the past, but as grounded in semiotic materialism, and more specifically in what Donna Haraway has coined, in her love for complicated words, 'symanimagenic sensible materialism' (Haraway 2016:88). With this term Haraway aims to bring animism into her world of 'symptiosis', without renouncing her dedication to materialism. In other words, with the concept of symanimogenesis she brings the semiotics of the spiritual essence of the natural world into the material world. For Haraway, "inhabiting symanimagenic sensible materialism, with all its pushes, pulls, affects and attachments" are part of the strategies that are needed for "the resurgence of this and other worlds." And this has nothing to do with *belief*, for "Believing is not sensible." Belief is "mired in both internecine and colonizing disputes" and "is tied to doctrine, profession, confession, and taxonomies of error" (88). I think Ana Mendieta's work can be viewed as a search of becoming-with, which according to Haraway is a material semiotics that is always situated, someplace and not noplacé, entangled and worldly (Haraway 2016:4). Therefore Mendieta's art is also abundantly filled with all the connected dimensions in life: death and violence, life and healing, urgency.



7.6. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Judith with the Lovely Replicative Baroque of Ferns*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 30.5 x 24 cm.



7.7. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Companion Species*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 30.5 x 24 cm.



7.8. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Landscape with Ana M.* 2022. Oil on canvas.
80 x 100 cm.

8. MOURNING

Ana Mendieta's art makes me accept Syrinx's parting with her human form. Her transformation complete, we must now accept that Syrinx's human body has actually, factually died. It has died in symanimagenic complexity. This story is not one of human exceptionalism in which Syrinx's survival is favored above that of other life forms in today's sixth mass extinction. We must acknowledge her passing, even Ovid's fable will not resurrect her. In Donna Haraway's words: "There are so many losses already, and there will be many more. Renewed generative flourishing cannot grow from myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and the extinct." Becoming-with the death doesn't necessarily mean dying with them, like Syrinx has. It also means being there to witness and mourn irreversible losses (Haraway, 2016:101). This mourning can be done through Syrinx's spirit, through her ancestry, which is still living in the material form of reeds. The reeds are no longer Syrinx, but Syrinx is still present in the reeds. In her book *Au bonheur des morts* (2017), philosopher Vinciane Despret explores how "the dead still play an active, tangible role through those who are living, who might assume their place in a family or in society; continue their labor or art; or thrive from a shared inheritance or an organ donation. This is supported by dreams and voices, novels, television and popular culture, the work of clairvoyants, and the everyday stories and activities of the living" (Despret, 2021). Likewise I want to explore Syrinx's resonance in and through the reeds, but therefore I first need to tell the second part of her story. We ended the first part with Syrinx's metamorphoses, right after the then defined culminating baroque moment when Pan thought he caught Syrinx, but was left clutching marsh reeds. Now we find ourselves in the following moment, when, while Pan is sighing in disappointment, he hears a thin, low, plaintive sound coming from the movement in the rustling reeds, made by the movement of air. He then binds some reeds of unequal length together in a sylvian pipe, names it syrinx and keeps it in his hands because he believes it will enable him to talk with Syrinx, always (Ovid 40-41). Like in Despret's stories the

deceased Syrinx is still present in an object that Pan keeps close to him and she lives on in the same object in Ovid's story of Io. To this day, she lives on in the reed flute. But still, somehow this also feels like a double death for Syrinx. It was her flight from Pan that killed her in the first place after all, and the name we now commonly use for the flute is not *her* name but *his* name; the 'Pan flute'. Even after her death Pan seems to have been able to dominate her. The concept of *Double Death* is also used in an ecological and environmental context, first used by the ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose. It happens when "so many losses occur that damaged ecosystems are unable to recuperate their diversity. The death of resilience and renewal, at least for a while. So many extinctions that the process of evolution is unable to keep up. More species die than are coming into being. The death of evolution itself, at least for a while" (Rose). In a literal reading of Syrinx's story, the rhizomes of the reeds (these marvelous asexual forms of reproduction and heterogenic non-dichotomic semiotic ways of entanglement) wouldn't have had the time to spread between Syrinx's metamorphoses and Pan's capture. This would not only end Syrinx's life, but all the lives, all the generations to be that would be sustained by the reed structure. Donna Haraway calls this the killing of ongoingness and the blasting of generations (Haraway 2016:214). "Extinction cascades involve failing connectivities," Rose writes in Ana Tsing's compilation of stories in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017). Thom van Dooren shows me that this should not only be seen as the connectivity between the generations of the endangered species and their environment, but also as *our* connectivity to other species. Human exceptionalism "holds us distant, intellectually and emotionally, from our more-than-human world" (van Dooren 126). Mourning can draw us to an awareness of multispecies continuities and connectivity. To this end, telling stories about the dead and dying can be an act of mourning, one that draws them into relationship with the living (126). With the help of Lefebvre this notion can be brought back to the importance of spaces. He claims that no place disappears completely. There are always sediments: that what is left of places. Each period, each layer brings with it its own conditions,

but the physical elements don't disappear into the religious-political [or in our case the symanimagenic sensible materialistic] space, and the religious-political [symanimagenic sensible materialistic] does not disappear into the historical, nor do any of them disappear in the practiced-perceptible space in which our bodies and objects cohabit. There is an overlap, a diachronic and synchronic reading of space at the same time. (Lefebvre). Like Mendieta's *Siluetas* evoke the body and its death through memory and association (McCutcheon 21).



8.1. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *The Mourning*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 60 x 50 cm.



8.2. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *The Living*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 60 x 50 cm.

9. TERRITORY AND COLLECTIVE PATTERNING

For the purpose of continuing this semiotic storytelling I want to presume that the reeds did have the time to propagate so I can turn to another part of Vinciane Despret's research, that of the concept of territory through the observation of birds by ornithologists (Despret, 2019). Territory is a difficult subject in times of transition and extinction. Haraway already pointed at our world full of human and non-human refugees without refuge (Haraway 2016:100). *Syrinx* leads me to Despret's work around birds' territory not only because the reed marshes provide many refuge places for birds, but also because – happily – *Syrinx* does live on in another element of today's world, and that is in the name of the vocal organ of birds which is called, yes, the *Syrinx*. Despret tells of the work of soundscape ecologist Bernie Krause, who instead of researching the individual sounds of animals, looked for "how animals compose together and how they compose with what surrounds them, such as the wind, water, other organisms, and the movements of vegetation" (Despret, 2022:25). Krause discovered that birds, insects, frogs, mammals, ..., all sing in acoustic collectives, as if occupying their own temporal bandwidth. "Acoustic collective [...] vocalize in distinctive kinship to one another." (Krause, 2012:88). "Due to this segmentation of sound niches and division in acoustic bandwidth that mitigates conflicts over sonic territory, songs rarely overlap," Despret writes, and so "the sounds and songs of the world are shaped in composition" (25). Despret takes these insights along with others to the territorial behavior of birds. When a bird is becoming territorial it is accompanied with a lot of theatricalization and incessant repetitions pacing the place and drawing out a map of its territory. The bird chooses a certain high point from which he will start appropriating the space around him by making repeated rhythmic trips and returns. This is accompanied by the singing. "Such is the dimension of any form of territoriality: it is expressive," says Despret (28). It is this expressiveness (and not aggressiveness! Conflicts hardly ever end up in real fights) that is at once an expression of the territory and a forging of the territory; it makes it exist. Besides

this expressive dimension there is also a geopolitical dimension to the bird's territory. It seems birds like to settle where others have settled, and this is not only due to the quality of the place. Despret refers amongst other to what ornithologist Fraser Darling had already written: that one of the most important functions of territory in breeding birds is the provision of periphery (Darling 183-91). And so, says Despret "what territories do is to create neighbors, and therefore neighborhood relations [...] It is a social organization that makes neighbors" (Despret 2022:30). This recurrent transforming of space influences behavior, it will "provoke changes in habits, ways of doing things, and ways of living and organizing" (24). Therefore territories are for the birds establishers of new relationships, and other ways of "relating" to others (24). Despret concludes: "We are far from the idea of the territory as private property, as a place of exclusive possession to which our modern legal and philosophical tradition has accustomed us" (30).

These two dimensions of territory Despret has noticed in birds: the expressive and the geopolitical, are what bring me to Documenta 15. For their fifteenth event, which took place in 2022, the organizing commission of the prestigious quinquennial art exposition had invited the collective Ruangrupa to take on the artistic direction of the event. Ruangrupa opened this up by inviting other collectives over the world to participate. These collectives all came from someplace, not noplacé, bringing their own specific situatedness with them; they too are entangled and worldly, to revisit Haraway's words (Haraway 2016:4). They all brought their own specificity, history and knowledge to Kassel and connected it with that of others. If there was an overarching conceptual angle or a universal theme as one would expect for these art events, then it was one of building and cultivating social collaborations, communities and networks. And that of stepping outside our Western views of art. A lot has been written about the confusion and discord that was seen in preparation and during the event. Was it art we were looking at or activism? Scarce were the white walls with art to be looked at (although they were there too, and with good art on them to be looked at too). Archives, documentaries, mind maps, workshops, cooking sessions,

slogans, traditional and non-traditional art, ... sometimes these brought clear messages, sometimes there was confusion. And there was conflict, politicization, instrumentalization. Often the work of art was the residue, that what was left or made within or after the process, which in itself is the work of art: the search for alternative strategies of collaboration and community building in complex worlds. It is a process that is not unlike the theatricality of Despret's birds being both an expression and a forging of territory, while also being a constant exercise in partaking, sharing space (28) and respecting good manners to make living together as good as possible (30). And it is like the singing of the Krause's birds that are exercises of composition, attuned to and constantly influenced and changed by the environment. They are exercises in patterning. And this new way of patterning is not a reductive patterning, but one that comes from a situatedness, from being in a given place and/or being linked to a given place, through all the living and dead it beholds. It comes from digging up the dormant seeds beneath the concrete slab.

I would like to add a visual idea of how this situated patterning could look visually, and my thoughts go to the paintings of Portia Zvavahera (Images 9.1-3.). Her paintings welcomed visitors in the first room of the Arsenale at the Venice Biennale in 2022 and were full of magnificent patterns, rhythm and color that pair her inner life with traditions of figuration of Zimbabwean life and spiritualism. Human and non-human figures, shape-shifting animals, interweaving and becoming-with each other, hiding and un hiding in women's wombs and dresses, all navigating in the layers of patterns that recall Zimbabwean textile design. For Zvavahera painting becomes a form of spiritual catharsis, as she works through her dreams and visions that show a spiritual understanding of quotidian moments. Zvavahera has stories to tell, and her stories pattern (La Biennale di Venezia 194).

By now it has become clear to me that Syrinx's story doesn't need a culminating point at all; not the baroque moment of her near-capture nor the moment of her metamorphoses or any other point within the story I have tried to construct. As Anna Tsing wrote: "We need open-ended assemblages, in which things and species

tangle with and interrupt each other – mimicking the patchiness of the world” (Tsing, 2017:viii). The richness of Syrinx’s story lies in the many connections that allow a network of thinking that crosses boundaries of time and disciplinary fields. A story that can be full of unanswered questions and contradictions, unexplored pathways, unfinished reasonings. Ovid knew this, and we, in this tumultuous world in transition, are learning this again.

9.1. Portia Zvavahera. *Zvandakaoneswa (What I was made to see)*. 2021. Oil based printing ink and oil bar on linen. 209.6 x 297.8 cm.



9.2. Portia Zvavahera. *Ndirikuda kubuda (I want to come out)*. 2021. Oil based printing ink and oil bar on linen. 198.1 x 161.3 cm.



9.3. Portia Zvavahera. *Ndirikukuona (I can see you)*. 2021. Oil based printing ink and oil bar on linen. 183.2 x 187.6 cm.

10. HOLOBIONTIC FORMS IN A WORLD IN TRANSITION

How does all this relate to the image of an ordered world, like the landscape of Andreas Gursky or the art of the minimalists? Or to the image of an emptied front garden? All these movements of patterning, intertwining and connectivity make me think of what biologist Lynn Margulis calls a “holobiont”; All participants of “symbiosis” (which consists of any physical association between individuals of different species for significant portions of their lifetime) are called “bionts”. The resulting association between them is therefore called “holobiont” (Haraway 2016:189). This concept sprouts from bacterial biology and explains how everything that lives is dependent on the constant flux of bacteria. It has been eagerly picked up by other biologists and by science philosophers like Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway. They embrace the idea that that we are “an ensemble of cloudlike, hazily outlined acting units with relatively durable membranes, who can subsist thanks to what is supplied from the outside to the inside” (Latour 55), and that we are not “One and Individual” but rather “holding together, contingently and dynamically, engaging other holobionts in complex patterns” (Haraway 2016:60). This holobiontic way of thinking also challenges the “Darwinian view of life [which] regarded aggregates of individuals of common ancestry as identifiable units in competition with one another” (Gilbert, Sapp, Tauber, 2012:326). I imagine then that through these holobionts, old and new stories are interlaced with each other, as are multidisciplinary fields and multispecies, like in the story of *Syrinx*. The holobiont seems like an antithesis to rectilinear structures, concrete slabs and squares. Just hearing and pronouncing the word ho-lo-biont conjures up more ‘rounded’ forms than rectangular ones, as my mouth is forming a circle or an oval for the three o’s, and it evokes the visual roundness of the b and the o. Straight lines are for cartographic borders, they are for cuts in concrete slabs and stone pavements. Still, Gilles Clément and Lois Weinberger have showed that rectilinear forms and holobionts do not need to be other sides of a coin; they can also

work together, sometimes in friction and sometimes in symbiosis. Maybe these rectilinear structures need not be just as static as they first seemed (in a model, an institute, a society, a painting)? They are bendable. Another connotation with the word ‘holobiont’ comes from its first part: ‘hol’ or ‘holo’, which sounds like ‘hole’ or ‘hollow’, which makes me think of the many hiding places and refugia we need to sustain and protect in these transitional times, as Ana Tsing, Donna Haraway, Thom van Dooren, Deborah Bird Rose, Vinciane Despret, Gilles Clément, Lois Weinberger and Syrinx showed. There is also the sound ‘whole’, which makes me think of Ana Mendieta’s obsessive search to become “one with the earth” and, not unlike Syrinx, becoming an extension of nature and nature becoming an extension of her body. “Whole” then, not as something completed, defined and confined, but as a collective process and search of how we are being held together, like the art collectives have shown at Documenta 15. And this holding together includes keeping relations with the past, the dead and other ways of life, as Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren and Vinciane Despret showed. Furthermore, for it to hold together and connect, that what happens between the holobionts is of equal importance: these zones are essential, like Ger Londo’s connecting gradient zones or Gilles Clément’s abandoned Third landscapes, or the essential periphery of Vinciane Despret’s birds’ territory. All these holobionts and their in-between zones display a rich diversity of colors and forms in a mass of connectivity, much like the multispecies living in the marsh reeds. Finally, I see these holobionts constantly moving, expanding and contracting, opening up and closing, constantly painting new patterns, like the constant repetitive flights of Despret’s territorial bird, and these rhythms and paces somehow seem coordinated but not planned in advance, like Bernie Krause’s acoustic collective of the sounds of birds, insects, mammals, wind, . . . , that are all attuned to each other in urgent and necessary concentration.

This is a way to get a grip on today’s transitional times that are ours to share and deal with. These hard, uneasy times which seem like a giant chaos when we are trying to look at them as a whole from the outside. They seem like a giant chaos *because* we were looking

at them like that; with a distanced view that made us see dystopia's, wars and extinction in numbers and statistics, reductive territory boundaries and minimalist patterns. In this new century however we are starting to look *in-between* and from *within*. We are looking at what is at stake, closely, with great attention. And we are learning that by doing this we can also see the bigger structure. We can even see it better, because the bigger structure sits within the manifold smaller structures, and we can see it with all its connections between the infinite distinctive nuances, colors, patterns, histories and layers.



10.1. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Untitled*. 2023. Oil on canvas. 130 x 160 cm.

11. HOLOBIONTIC ART

Painting that is paired with this thinking starts from the same concreteness. It tests and challenges boundaries. It communicates with the erased. This kind of painting is living holobiontic activity. It is living transition. We might call this painting: holobiontic painting (say not contemporary times but holobiontic times, times of connectivity and multiplicity, manifold times. Say not contemporary painting but holobiontic painting, situated painting, ‘in’vironmental painting.) Holobiontic painting starts with living stories. The stories matter. As Haraway draws on Marilyn Strathern’s words “It matters what ideas we use to think other ideas (with)” she extends: “It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories.” (Haraway, 2016: 12,35) The stories matter. There are always structures, and sometimes they start dominating the stories, they take over. Stories then come looping back, sometimes they are joined by others, and with the structures they go through processes of erasure, overlap, entanglement, layering, intensity, mutation. Stories are always complex, never clearcut or clean. Painting can be urgent and violent and transforming. But always the stories are there, even if they are no longer readable as such. They are in the matter; they have become-with the matter.

But actually the painter is just one with the others. The body incorporates the adherence to an epoch. Art today is a collective in holobiontic activity. These are the times of holobiontic art.



11.1. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Untitled*. 2023. Oil on canvas. 110 x 90 cm.



121.. Lieve Kauwenberghs. *Outside the Loggia*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 49.50 x 40 cm.

NOTES

1. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway proposes the term “ongoingness” for the “nurturing, or inventing, or discovering, or somehow cobbling together ways for living and dying well with each other in the tissues of an earth whose very habitability is threatened” (132).
2. At the end of the 20th century Marc Augé argued that we were in a time of supermodernity, with which he meant a time that was actually an excess of the modern (Augé 42). Augé puts forward the hypothesis that supermodernity is a producer of non-places: places that are not anthropologic and that, unlike as in Baudelaire’s modernity, do not integrate the places that came before, these last now having been classified as “places of memory.” Non-places on the other hand are made up of transit zones for the world of the solitary individual, for the ephemeral, the provisional occupation. Examples of these places are hotel chains, vacation clubs, airports, railway stations, ... (Augé 100-101).
3. The story of Pan and Syrinx is a story told within / in-between the story of Io and it is an explanation of how the Pan flute came into existence. The story of Io is that of a beautiful maiden who was raped by Jupiter and subsequently turned into a white heifer so Jupiter could keep the rape hidden from his consort Juno. Juno, suspecting, asked Jupiter to present her the heifer as a gift and made Argus watch over her. Argus’ head had a hundred eyes that rested in relays, and it was with the Pan flute that Mercury, Jupiter’s son, was able to get Argus to fall asleep so he could liberate Io. At the end of the second part of the story Io will recover her human form after Jupiter promised Juno that Io would never provide her with cause for vexation again (Ovid 34-42).

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