

VALENTINA KARGA

Well
Beings

in Times of Climate Anxiety

Edited by SEDA YILDIZ

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7

**PREHISTORIC POSTHUMANS
A VISUAL STORYTELLING
Valentina Karga**

59

**DEGROWTH AND THE ARTS:
A CHALLENGE OF ITS OWN KIND
Daphne Dragona**

23

**WAYS OF BEING,
WAYS OF BELONGING
Seda Yıldız**

75

**DOCUMENTATION OF
PUBLIC PROGRAM**

39

**RESONANT ENCOUNTERS
A PERFORMATIVE READING
Marlies van Hak**

89

CONTRIBUTORS

PREHISTORIC POSTHUMANS
A VISUAL STORYTELLING
Valentina Karga

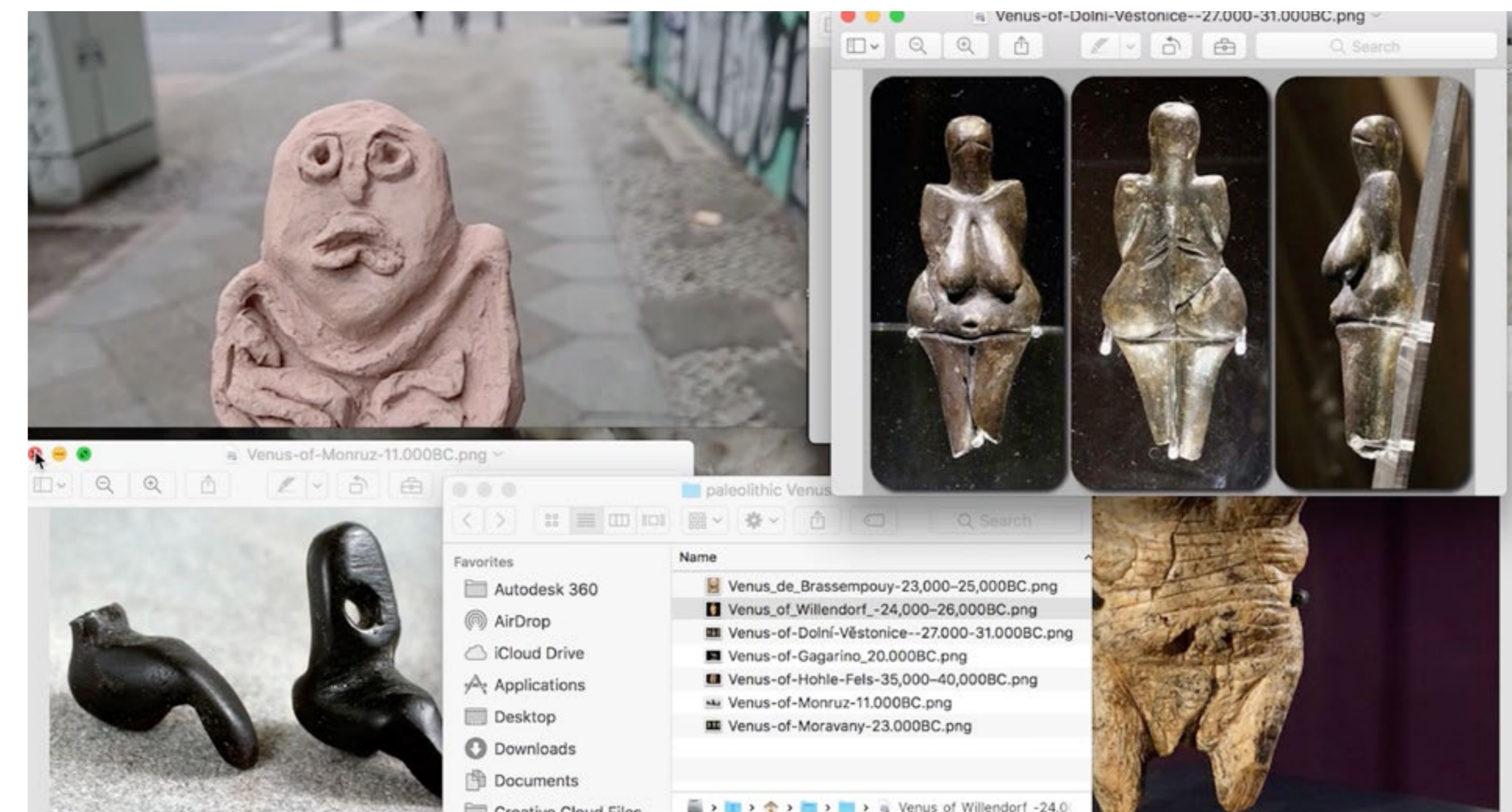
I became interested in prehistoric figurines years ago, I don't remember how. I have seen lots of them in archaeological museums in my home country, Greece.¹

At first I was interested in the ones with the clearly female features, the so-called Venus figurines, with the exaggerated breasts, hips, abdomen, and vulvas. Venuses from the Palaeolithic period are among the oldest human-made artifacts. It kind of flattered me, as a woman, to see that the ancient people had some sort of wonder or respect, for what I too possess.

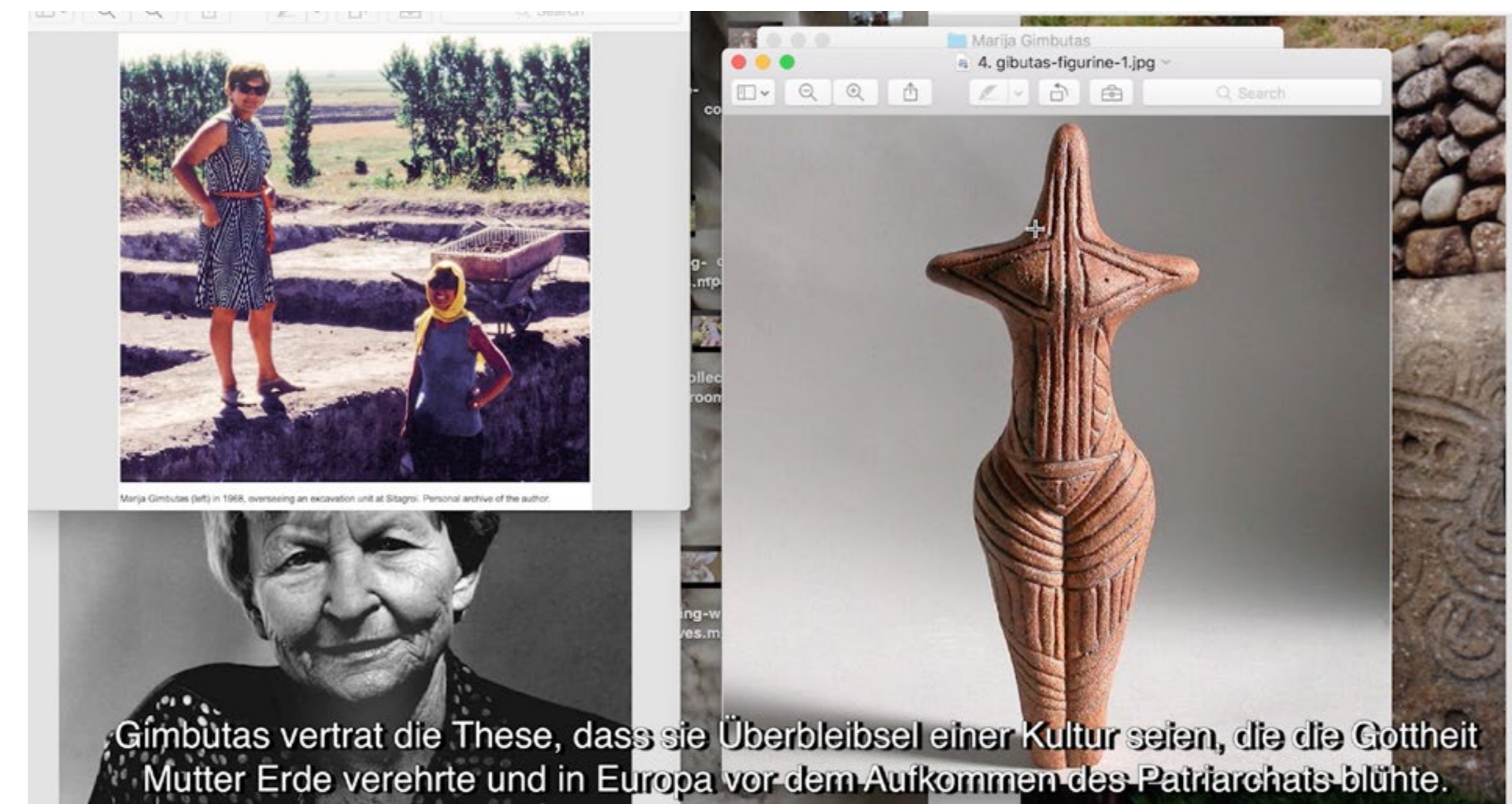
Except for the Venus of Brassempouy, which displays an excellent realistic representation of a female human face, most other well-known Venuses discovered from this period have abstracted faces. I particularly like the head of the Venus of Willendorf: it has no clear front or back, but rather it is omnidirectional. Its elaborate little lumps, which could symbolize eyes, or some kind of insect-like feelers, look in every direction.

During this digital "unearthing", I stumbled upon the work of the late archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who unearthed many figurines from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages in Europe.²

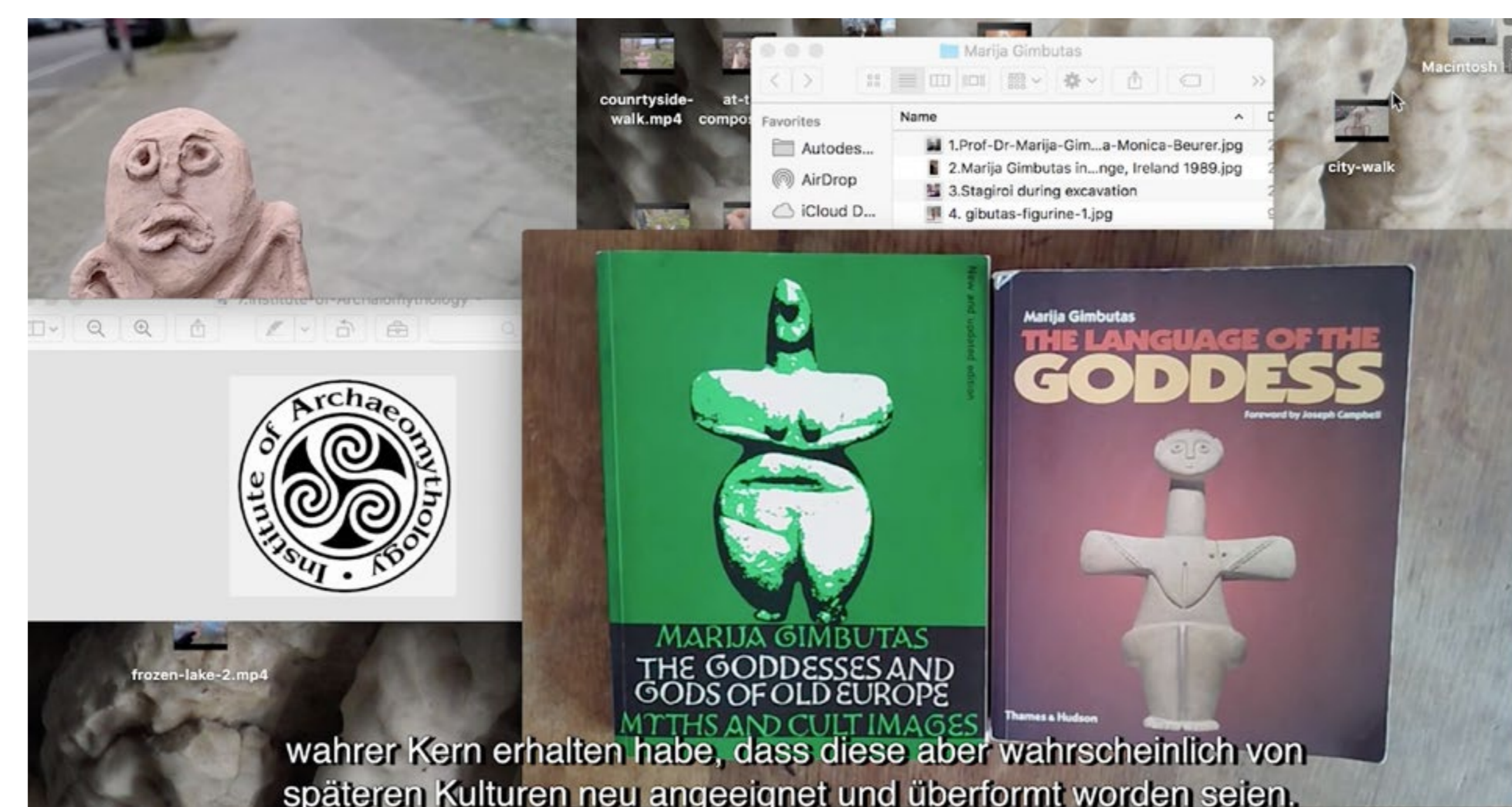
It was easy for me to view Gimbutas as a feminist role-model; apart from her decisive biography, I found her theories about a prehistoric civilization very



1 Images of Venus Figurines.



2 The life and work of late archaeologist Marija Gimbutas.



3 The interdisciplinary practice of archaiomythology.

appealing. She asserted that all of these figurines - which are also called "idols" and have clearly female features - were remnants of a mother-earth-goddess worshiping culture that flourished in Europe before the advent of patriarchy and male-dominated ideals.

According to Gimbutas, this matrilineal culture was peaceful. There was gender equality and the inhabitants were free of ranks and hierarchies. But the culture changed, as it became subordinated by the new imperialist population coming in from the north-east; this shift is described in the famous Kurgan hypothesis, which developed a theory for prehistoric migration patterns, and to which Gimbutas contributed greatly.

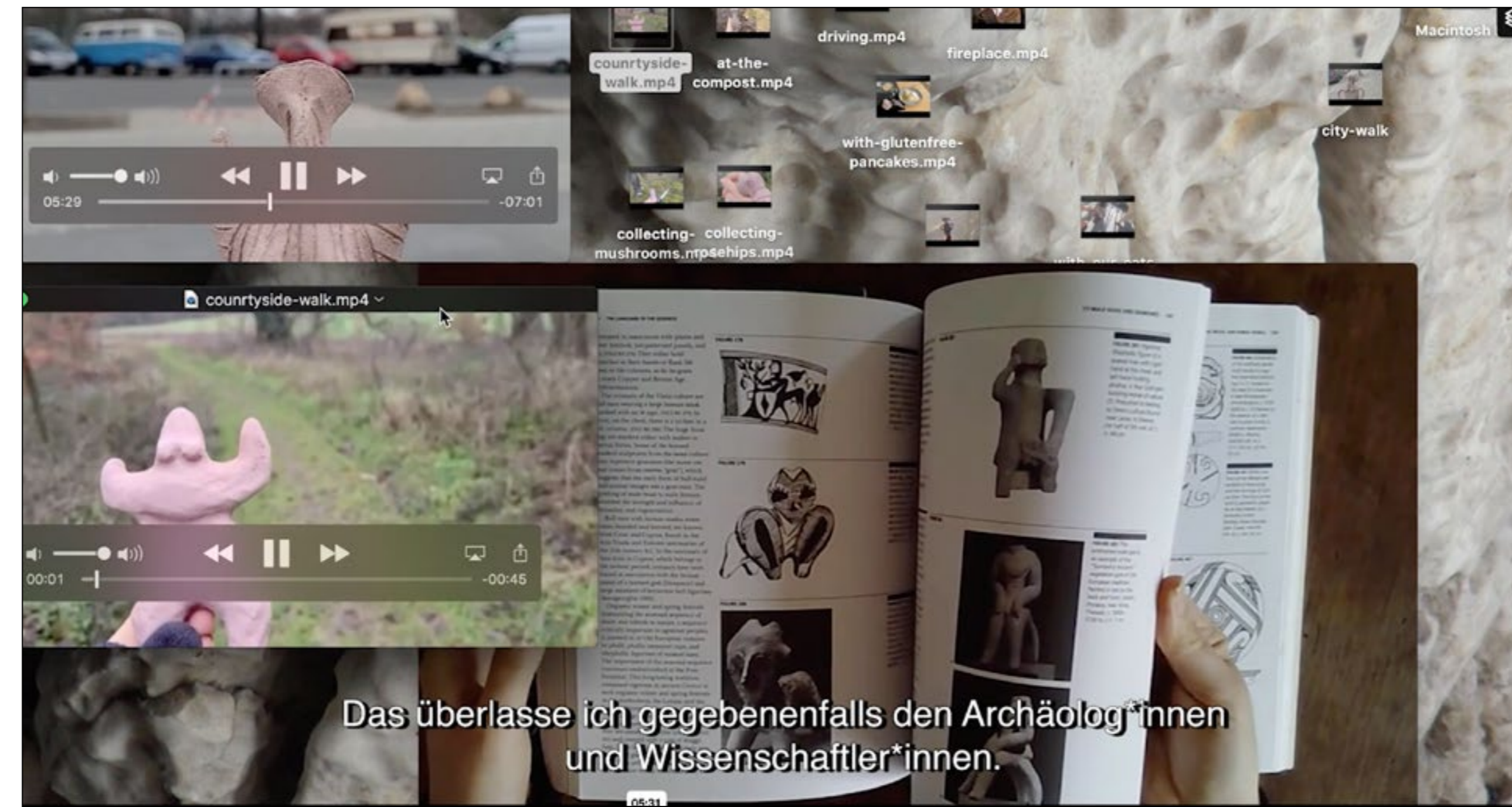
Gimbutas practiced archaeomythology, a field of study that brings together archaeological evidence with myths, folklore, traditional cultural beliefs and rituals, in order to make an interpretation. Generally, Gimbutas asserted that there is still truth in their original meanings, but they have likely been reappropriated by later cultures. I found this very interesting, because it suggests an interdisciplinary approach which is what I stand for as an artist.³

In the 1960s and 1970s, Gimbutas was a leading authority on late prehistory, also known as the

Neolithic period, in Eastern Europe; yet today she is often represented as an oddball. Long story short, many archaeologists and historians have concluded that Gimbutas was turning scientific research into pop literature, that she didn't have enough evidence to prove the Kurgan hypothesis, also accusing her of reverse sexism and that she was indulging in myth-making.

However, it seems this is not so simple. In their publication "The Dawn of Everything", David Graeber and David Wengrow write how, based on new DNA evidence, there really was an expansion of herding peoples from the grasslands north of the Black Sea around the time Gimbutas believed it to have happened: the third millennium BC. "Some scholars", Graeber and Wengrow write, "have even argued that massive migrations took place out of the Eurasian steppe at that time, leading to population replacement and perhaps the spread of Indo-European languages across large swathes of central Europe, just as Gimbutas envisaged."

This visual essay is not about reinstating Gimbutas' reputation. I will leave that up to archaeologists and scientists, if it is truly the case. As an artist, what I am interested in is the power of storytelling in shaping our world, and the use of history to do so.⁴



4 The "Language of the Goddess".

Prehistory is a highly speculative period. It leaves a lot of space for interpretation. What Gimbutas did, perhaps unconsciously, was to use her credibility as a leading archaeologist at the time to contribute to the second-wave of feminism; underlying the importance of giving more equal rights to women by proving that it was once part of human nature to do so.

Inspired by her methodology, I too combine different sources in crafting my storytelling. So, I am "reading" her work in the broader light of the 1970's: this was a time when feminist scholars began discussing how the devaluation of reproductive labor has resulted in the rise of modern patriarchal and capitalist ideals like progress and reason.

Today, with the expansion of feminist theory into post-human theory, we understand this to have deeper implications: these patriarchal ideals not only turned being a woman into a lesser form of humanity. They were also used to justify the overuse of natural resources, be they human or non-human, living or nonliving.

As my friend, the curator Petronella Grönroos has written: "The control of human reproduction—in the wake of the discovery of the patrilineal descent, as pointed to by Gimbutas and others—is parallel to that of the more-than-human world, which has marked the developments leading up to the human-induced

warming of the climate, sixth mass extinction, loss of biodiversity, and all the multiple disasters that follow.”

This story goes far beyond the conflict between patriarchal and feminist ideals. According to post-human feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti, the challenge in the Anthropocene, the historical moment when the human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet, while inadvertently threatening it, is the ontological decentering of not only the ‘Man’, but the ‘Anthropos’ in general. By this, Braidotti simply wants to question humankind as the measure of all things. The point is a new kind of understanding where we replace the binary opposition of man vs woman, or culture vs nature, and, in general, the idea of me or we against ‘the other’, and stress instead a non-dualistic understanding of life.

This makes me think that these prehistoric idols, such as those unearthed by Gimbutas, and those in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg’s Antiquities collection, should not only remind us of the possible significance of women in our prehistoric human nature.⁵⁻⁶ Instead, with their animal-like features and nature-inspired symbols, it makes me think that perhaps their role is, more importantly, to remind humans to constantly accept and integrate nature’s ‘otherness’ in general. That is, to live based on a more omnidirectional philosophy.



5 Creating copies of the prehistoric figurines unearthed by Marija Gimbutas.



6 Prehistoric figurines incorporated in daily life as a reminder to embrace nature’s otherness.

1-6 Valentina Karga, *Prehistoric Posthumans-A Visual Storytelling*, 2023, single-channel video.

Gimbutas herself also reached this understanding, but it sadly didn’t make the cut in terms of her legacy. In 1989, she wrote: “The main theme of Goddess symbolism is the mystery of birth and death and the renewal of life, not only human but all life on earth and indeed the whole cosmos.”

Aside from non-human life, being entangled in a kind of logic of separation, we humans tend to exclude not only people who are different from the normative society, but also parts of ourselves that don’t fit the image of what we believe to be the ideal person.

Furthermore, not only are all aspects of womanhood - as a kind of “other” - devalued and demonized, but so are showing emotions, which our culture also devalues and even demonizes. Exclusion and alienation are at the heart of all suffering.

As you can see, I made copies of the prehistoric idols and I carry them with me wherever I go. Nobody knows for sure what they were used for when they were created, and I’m mainly interested in discovering how I can use them now, give meaning to them, and make them a part of my everyday life.

They have become friends and companions. Sometimes, I play with them as if I were a little child. They helped me integrate parts of myself that I was forced

to unconsciously exclude: those often “othered” by the capitalist patriarchal paradigm. The woman-self, the child-self and the animal-, or, nature-self.

I found solace in the idols, during the uncomfortable task of deconstructing my ontological security in the name of self-love and healing. They were there as I was learning to take care of my bodily human–non-human collective, that is, the trillions of other life-forms that inhabit my gut, ensuring my health.

They help me cope with climate anxiety, grief and guilt over the various kinds of losses we are facing due to climate change. They remind me to hope for a future of more integrated “otherness”.



Original idol from Argolis, Greece, 13th century BC, MK&G Antiquities Collection



Original idol from Boeotia, Greece, mid 6th century BC, MK&G Antiquities Collection



Original Idol from Nahal Pattish (Gilat), Late Chalcolithic period, The Shelby White and Leon Levy Center Collection



Original idol known as Omphalos, Vinca Culture (contemporary Bulgaria), 5000-3000 BCE, Sofia Musuem, Bulgaria



Original idol from Babylonia, ca. 1000 BC, MK&G Antiquities Collection



Original Idol from North Syria, ca. 2000 BC, MK&G Antiquities Collection



Original Idol from Syria, ca. 2200-1750 BCE, The Met Museum Collection



Original Idol: unknown

Valentina Karga, from the drawing series *Prehistoric Posthumans*, homemade natural ink, 2020-2023

Valentina Karga, process image with object, 2022.
Photo: Valentina Karga



Installation view, Valentina Karga, *Well Beings*,
Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 2023.
Photo: Henning Rogge



**WAYS OF BEING,
WAYS OF BELONGING.
Seda Yıldız**

Emotional well-being goes hand in hand with physical well-being. How can we maintain our mental health amidst the environmental crisis? The number of people struggling with eco-anxiety, described as feelings of grief, anger, fear, and guilt about the future of the planet, is rising.¹ Closely tied to capitalism and colonialism, the climate crisis is one of the many disastrous consequences of viewing the Earth as a resource to exploit. The market, ironically, offers a huge range of self-care products to deal with climate anxiety. Could art and design provide another perspective to deal with the crisis by reconfiguring our relationship with the Earth?

Valentina Karga's first solo show in Germany, at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, covers personal concerns around climate change, self-healing, and ethical responsibility in art and design. The title of the show, *Well Beings* in plural, is a call to recognize the worlds of the different beings co-dwelling on Earth, including and beyond the human species. Based on her personal experience with climate anxiety, the artist-designer reconfigured conventional well-being objects such as hug pillows, weighted blankets, and oversized plush toys, inspired by the animal-like features and nature-inspired symbols of prehistoric figurines. "The roots of *Well Beings* date back 5,000 years" Karga says. The prehistoric figurines in the museum's Antiquities Collection are reminiscent of both female figures and animal features. The fact that we do not quite



Installation view, Valentina Karga, *Well Beings*, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 2023. Photo: Henning Rogge

¹ In a 2020 survey by the American Psychological Association, more than two-thirds of American adults said they'd experienced "eco-anxiety." The rate is higher in the UK, where around three in four adults (74%) reported feeling worried about climate change. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/worriesaboutclimatechange/greatbritain/septembertoctober2022>

know the intended purpose of these mysterious idols allows for speculative interpretations; Karga refers to them as "prehistoric post-humans," a nod to our interconnectedness and contemporary post-human theory.

The exhibition is divided into two parts; the main room hosting an interactive parkour where visitors can engage with self-care objects, and a second room that expands on the artist's research. The newly created works for this exhibition range from well-being objects to a video essay, from ink drawings on paper to a mural. Arriving in the main room feels like entering a playground filled with pillows and huggable items. Earth-toned pillows, made from soft velvet fabric and natural materials, are dyed using logwood and eucalyptus. Unlike other exhibitions at the museum where touching the objects is not allowed (contrary to an Indigenous worldview where a way of preserving the entities involves touching), the artist encourages visitors to physically engage with the objects. "Let's cuddle," the *Collective Hug Pillows* suggest. The weighted blanket filled with glass beads invites us to *Cover up and get comfy*. These items, as the artist relates, are inspired by healing techniques that have been used historically. Following the instructions, I pick up a body warmer, an enlarged version of small figurines filled with grape seeds, and warm it for a couple of minutes in the microwave. I take a seat, make myself comfortable, and start breathing more deeply. I look around, slowly observe

other people, families with children, the elderly, cuddling with the well beings. In Karga's work there is something for all ages; to rest, let one's mind wander, or, like children do, repurpose the objects for play.

The artist-designer often re-uses materials and redesigns existing objects. This, as she describes, is both a challenge and source of creativity in her practice. As a design professor at University of Fine Arts Hamburg (HFBK), Karga invites her students to reconsider the role of a designer/artist who constantly needs to make new things in an age of overproduction. Western societies have long prioritized self-interest over the well-being of the whole. Perhaps it is time to reframe the question, "Is my desire good for me?" beyond human-centered thinking. Karga's answer is less about what's good for her and more about what's good for the planet. This is manifested in the *Hug Sofa* on display. The artist originally intended to design a sofa herself, but eventually repurposed an existing one, adding sewn elements that resemble the facial features found on prehistoric idols. The *Hug Sofa* traces the artist's roots; the eucalyptus leaves she hand-picked in her home town in northern Greece is used in extracting natural dyes to color the sofa.

In the second part of the exhibition, the 12-minute video essay *Prehistoric Posthumans – A Visual Storytelling* (2023) unpacks Karga's extensive research. The artist relates prehistoric idols to the work of Lithuanian



Installation view, Valentina Karga, *Well Beings*, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 2023. Photo: Henning Rogge

archeologist Marija Gimbutas. In the 1970s, Gimbutas interpreted small clay figurines from the Neolithic period as "earth goddesses" and symbols of a lost matrilineal era. Valentina Karga explains that while many of Gimbutas' male colleagues interpreted depictions of bodies with exaggerated breasts or vulvas as fertility symbols, Gimbutas saw them as part of a larger system of beliefs that prehistoric Europeans used for making sense of the world.² Drawn to Gimbutas' approach, Karga speculates that these mysterious creatures can be viewed as natural beings possessing a hybrid "other" quality beyond the binary of male/female and human/non-human. The video portrays the artist carrying copies of prehistoric idols throughout her daily routine; riding the subway and collecting mushrooms, waiting at the doctor's office and cooking. "They become my friends and companions, helping me to integrate parts of myself often othered by the capitalist patriarchal paradigm; the woman-self, the children-self and the animal or nature-self"³ she says. The lyrical video, which ties all the displayed works together, appears central to the show, yet I find the presentation on a small screen with headphones and a stool in front less intriguing. A selection of clay figurines from the museum's collection dating back to the sixth century are presented on a display case next to the video work. The surrounding walls feature a site-specific mural where Karga presents a broader selection of original figurines. Unlike the main room's tactile and interactive environment, this room features a distanced, traditional museum display. In the

² Valentina Karga, *Prehistoric Posthumans – A Visual Storytelling*. 2023, single-channel video.

³ Ibid.

corridor leading to the main room, Karga's natural ink drawing series, *Prehistoric Posthumans* (2022), referring to various prehistoric figurines, is on display.

Doomscroll (2023) confronts viewers with ecological disasters showcased on a bigger screen news feed. Speaking from personal experience, Valentina Karga says, "Doomscrolling (the act of spending an excessive amount of time reading negative news online) is what makes one lose control." Environmental educator Elin Kelsey stresses the necessity of employing hope in contrast to a learned reaction of helplessness when it comes to climate change. Kelsey advocates for "solutions journalism," which highlights responses to social problems, noting that only 2-3% of climate change news discusses available solutions.⁴ Viewing these images may trigger climate anxiety; a rational and healthy response as the clinical perspective suggests. According to the climate emotions researcher Panu Pihkala, a level of anxiety can be helpful. "Hope and anger are highly activating emotions; they can inspire constructive action,"⁵ writes Pihkala. This exhibition contains a space for discussing emotions related to climate change without judgement.

There is a level of optimism in the work of Karga. In the film *Adaptation* (2023), Karga and collaborators imagine a new trajectory for humanity's broken coexistence with nature. Using the potential of LARP (live-action role play) players take on roles going through different stages;

⁴ Doherty, Thomas & Pihkala, Panu. *Climate Change and Happiness* [Podcast]. 5 August 2022. Available at: <https://climatechangeandhappiness.com/episodes/episode-16-varieties-of-hope-with-guest-elin-kelsey>

⁵ Ibid.



Valentina Karga, *Hug Sofa*, 2023, cover made of natural cotton fabric, overlay hand-dyed with natural dyes. Photo: Henning Rogge

climate angst and adaptation. An hour-long live recording ends as the players, reborn as a collective being, discover a new way of existing in a world.

Though humanity has been late in taking action, it is not too late. According to scientific studies, we are still barely inside a zone where we can manage the remaining long-term effects, but only if we do what is required of us in the short term.⁶ *Well Beings* is a reminder to shift our actions from self-centered to nature-aligned. In the article “Blue History” written by Jessica Lehman, the author refers to the ocean archive as “a record of life on Earth.” Scientists indeed consider the ocean to be the largest recorder of human history. “We are all eventual material for the ocean archive: our bodies, our actions, our infrastructures,” writes Lehman.⁷ I wonder, then, how does the ocean memorialize us human beings? Repositioning ourselves as materials of the ocean archive can help us to perceive ourselves less as isolated entities. *Well Beings*, likewise, a journey from ancient figurines to speculative futures, recounts the ways Earth’s past extends into its present and future.

24.3.-3.9.2023
Valentina Karga
Well Beings
Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg
<https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/>

⁶ Figueres, Christina & Carnac, Tom-Rivett, *The Future We Choose: Surviving the Climate Crisis*, 2020, Bonnier Books

⁷ Lehman, Jessica. (2017). *Blue History. The New Inquiry*. <https://thenewinquiry.com/blue-history/>



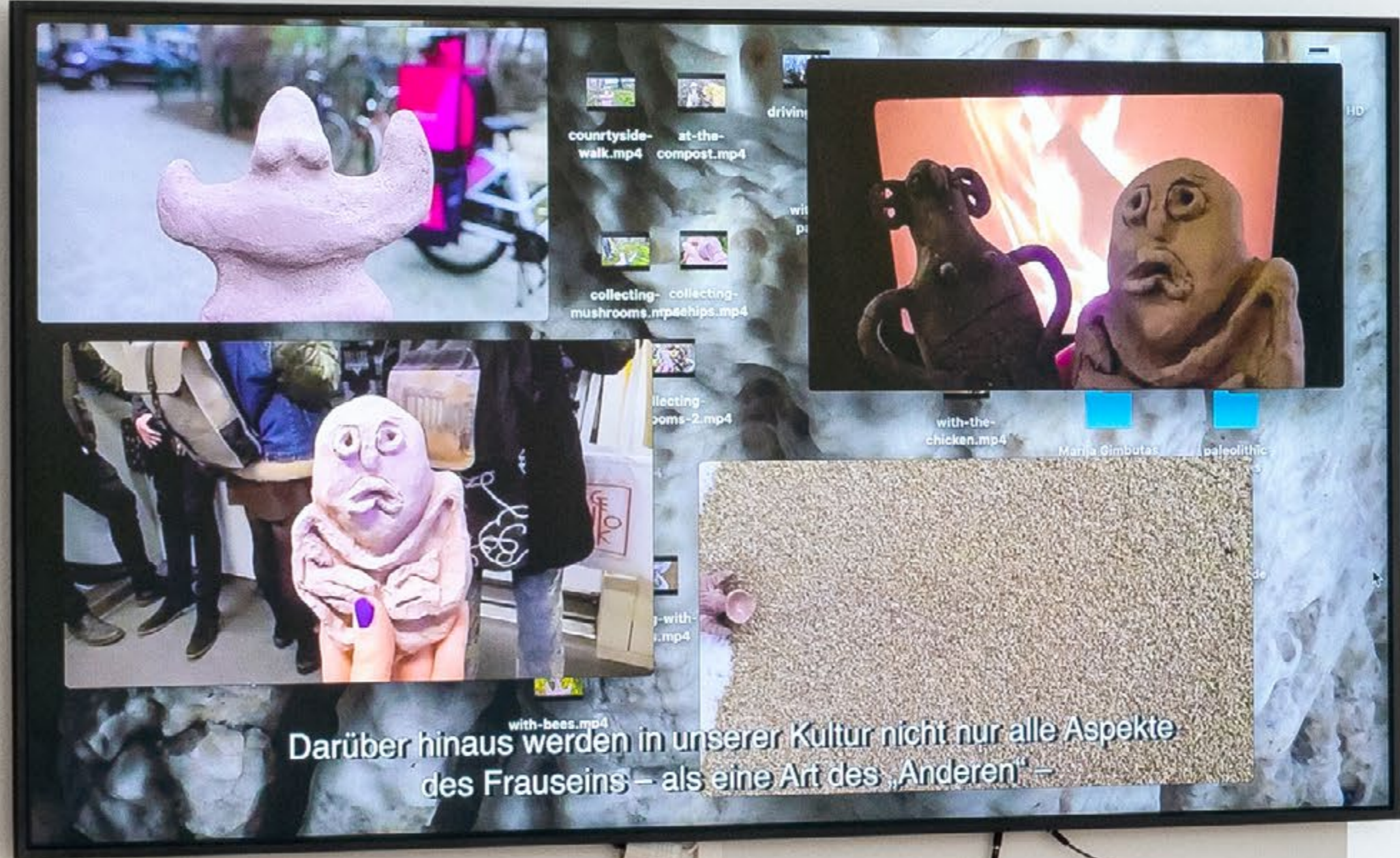
ADAPTATION, 2023, Video, 16:11", Valentina Karga in collaboration with : Polyxeni Angelidou (choreography), Nina Runa Essendrop (LARP design), Lukas Grubba and Sarah Pech (filming and editing), För Künkel (costumes), Junya Fujita (sound) and students from University of Fine Arts Hamburg (HFBK) (players): Maren Stocklöw, Anna Stapelfeldt, Inga Zhaivoronska, Ben Bakhshi, Alex Bruk, Tolani Abayomi, Oskar Bruheim, Zheming Li, Mo Walker, Mu-Heng Tsai, Rosa Thiemer, Yuting Chen, Folke G. Matthes, Priyanka Sarkar. Photo from behind the scenes: Polyxeni Angelidou

Installation view, Valentina Karga, *Well Beings*,
Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 2023.
Photo: Henning Rogge



Lasst uns kuscheln Let's cuddle

Installation view, Valentina Karga, *Well Beings*,
Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 2023.
Photo: Henning Rogge



PRELUDE POSTHUMAN: EINE VISUELLE ERZÄHLUNG

In den 1970er Jahren verarbeitete die Schweizer Künstlerin Marina Abramović 1973-1984 Ideen, die sie in der Performance 'The Artist is Present' (1974) in New York City verwirklichte. In der Performance 'The Artist is Present' (1974) in New York City verwirklichte sie die Idee, sich selbst als Kunstwerk zu präsentieren. In der Performance 'The Artist is Present' (1974) in New York City verwirklichte sie die Idee, sich selbst als Kunstwerk zu präsentieren.

PRELUDE POSTHUMAN: A VISUAL STORYTELLING

In the 1970s, the Swiss performance artist Marina Abramović processed ideas that she realized in the performance 'The Artist is Present' (1974) in New York City. In the performance 'The Artist is Present' (1974) in New York City, she realized the idea of presenting herself as a work of art.



Installation view, Valentina Karga, *Well Beings*,
Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 2023.
Photo: Henning Rogge



Deck Dich zu und fühl Dich wohl
Cover up and get comfy

**RESONANT ENCOUNTERS
A PERFORMATIVE READING**
Marlies van Hak

29 APRIL 2023, 15:00

MUSEUM OF ART AND DESIGN HAMBURG
(MUSEUM FÜR KUNST UND GEWERBE HAMBURG)

“Hello everyone, my name is Marlies van Hak. I am happy to meet you and the Well Beings this afternoon.

Thank you, Valentina for your beautiful work, and thanks so much to you and Seda for co-curating this series, *Well Beings in Times of Climate Anxiety*: for inviting me to read from my writing. I would also like to thank the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe for hosting the exhibition and the public program, as well as the Hochschule für Bildende Künste.

Seda and I met in Rotterdam, when she was in town to host a workshop and present her latest book at a local space for artist publishing, PrintRoom, where I worked at the time. The conversation with Seda, about editing and activating archives, and about making things public, was one of those unexpected encounters that resonated – and that led to us sharing a moment here today.

In response to Seda’s invitation, my reading will tune in to experiences with attentive listening and encounters with water. It will explore the porous lines



Performative reading *Resonant Encounters*, Marlies van Hak, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 2023. Photo: Öncü Gültekin.



Performative reading *Resonant Encounters*, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 2023. Photo: Marlies van Hak.

between lived experience and language, and between personal memories and critical reflections.

What I will be reading today, is a collection of words – of meandering lines that sometimes dip and dive, then surface again, to leak into a next pool of thoughts. I would like to take Seda’s invitation to me, to do a public reading of words, and pass it on to you, to respond in a language of your choice. After the reading and listening, there will be time to reflect: in silence, through gestures, or in dialogue. If you feel like responding in writing, we invite you to use the paper cards and leave some words. For now, please make yourselves comfortable.”

Part 1.

Recently, I moved to Utrecht, in the Netherlands. To be honest, I had not expected to live in a city without a river again. Being close to water seemed one of those basic needs, for years now. Flowing rivers calm me down. They make me feel connected, as a body of water to other bodies of water. It might be my zodiac sign, Pisces.

Utrecht is not built on the banks of a river. But bodies of water are everywhere. Around the corner of my apartment block, which is located in the Poet’s

Quarter, is a human-made canal. It leads to a small historical port where vegetables were once brought in and traded. On site, one can find some remains of industrial heritage, by now renovated, and the outcome of a recent restoration project: the remodeling of a wooden ship from 1746. Its 'original' was meant to sail the rich across the seas. I have passed this reconstructed Dutch admiralty yacht a couple of times during my strolls through the borough. I am tempted to learn more of its history someday. Interestingly, the recent building of the replica was an employment opportunity for people with limited access to the labor market.

Part 2.

In a biweekly letter exchange, which we named *River Stories*, London based cultural geographer Olivia Sheringham and I engage in an ongoing conversation about the fluvial or, in other words, all things river. The fluvial may refer to fluidity and movement. It may also refer to notions of filtration and getting stuck. As conversation partners, we are interested in the porous boundaries of language – in what we cannot immediately understand with words, but which might dare us all the same to be attentive to different modes of storytelling and worldmaking.

The correspondence is a space where ideas of the not-yet-known, the messy and the relational can be explored. We ask ourselves how to move beyond our usual medium of text in the process of making things public, and how to actively challenge our positions as writers. These positions, like texts and rivers, are never neutral. Some of this is inspired by hydro feminism, a mode of thought that considers the human body, which is mostly made up of water, as equal and not privileged to other natural bodies of water. Water connects all entities. How can we think with water, and how can we listen to it? What can we learn from watery encounters, watery commons, fluidity and porous borders? How does silence relate to storytelling?

Olivia and I share a reading journal, with notes and musings on thought-provoking texts. We draw inspiration from deep listening, decolonial theory, queer phenomenology, and artistic and ethnographic work on belonging, memory, migration, and care, to name a few. To physically encounter rivers, lakes, marshes, or oceans, we turn to listening exercises.

Part 3.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 8.

Dear Olivia,

Thank you so much for your reflections. I truly enjoyed reading them, since your research experience and work as a geographer leads to interesting perspectives – especially for someone who is less familiar with politics of migration. I really like how you arrive at the point, via sites of violence, that the unpredictability of water could bring hope and ways of resistance (within, despite, and against certain infrastructures).

Thank you for sharing this idea, and for sharing the article *Wading into research. Thinking with and in the river Quaggy* by two British geographers. The researchers asked several participants, who are engaged in monitoring this urban river and caring for it, or who live nearby, to select a favorite location for an interview. This meant not only talking about the river, but also wading into it. As academics, they ask what water does to the research. I was particularly inspired by the way they illustrate their encounters with the Quaggy and locals, with their stories and memories. They quite strikingly and honestly describe the limitations of their academic work: of interviewing as a method and putting things in words. This reminds them of their ethical commitments (their position as researchers) and what it means to ask others to articulate their thoughts. They stated they might not have the right to ask. There is something to be said for the misty and muddy, here, and for the opaque.

When I opened the virtual map that traces the project's audio recordings along the river Quaggy, I stumbled onto a conversation about the river and its boundaries. Lately, I have been thinking a lot about boundaries, what they do, and how they relate to water. There is a sentence in an article by Elvia Wilk, titled *This Compost: Erotics of Rot*, that has stuck with me for a while now, and I quote: "Only when a boundary materializes can it become a site for transgression."

A river needs banks to flow, porous as they might be. Black feminist author Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes about marine mammals and echolocation. They send their sounds to bounce off something, to be able to navigate the oceans. In her book *Undrowned*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs voices the need for banks as spaces of rest and of support amidst flow. She asks how generative boundaries differ from destructive borders.

Sound, like water, needs membranes to resonate or banks to collide against. To listen deeply, we cannot do without the membranes in our ears. What can a practice of bouncing sounds teach us about our situatedness in the depths and surfaces of this world? Can we think of boundaries and borders as sites of possibility as well as restriction and control, in interaction with the fluvial and the watery? Should we?

I would like to conclude this week's letter with this morning's deep listening exercise I chose to perform. It is part of the collection of listening exercises by artist Martine van Lubeek. Its title is *Hearing Water* and it goes like this:

Hearing Water

Go stand/sit/kneel down close to the river. Start to listen to the soundscape surrounding you.

Now slowly zoom in on the sound of the water. The way the water crashes against rocks, the way the water softly touches plants, the way the water moves the sand. Listen attentively to each single sound, each single note the water produces and slowly zoom out again to be able to hear the whole symphony of watery sounds.

During the exercise, I was seated on a small rock at a sandy patch at the river Waal in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, not far from the city's historic harbor. The water level was higher than it usually is, there wasn't much left of the beach. Clear sky, sunny but cold. The initial soundscape is a mixture of traffic crossing the bridge above me to the right, a few birds flying overhead, a woman approaching calling her dog, the dog jumping in the water next to where I sit. The engine of a barge passing downstream. Listening



Recording water, Kleine Geul, 2023.
Photo: Isolde Venrooy.

closer, I hear the river hitting the shore, first to my right (upstream), then to my left (downstream). The sound is an easy rolling of water, or a louder crashing of waves, sometimes a roaring in the distance where ships pass the groins, the waters rumbling, plunging. Looking up, I let my eyes rest on the words that were painted on the bridge years ago. It says: "refugees welcome". These words make me wonder, again, about streams, infrastructures, borders.

Part 4.

A recent issue of *Simulacrum*, a magazine for arts and culture, was dedicated to water. Mateo Vargas, a non-binary Mexican filmmaker and visual artist, contributed a text titled *Black Waters: The Flow of History*. Mateo Vargas' multi-media work centers on historical intersections of identity, land and diaspora. In the article, they talk about the Cuautitlán River their grandmother used to bathe in and drink from as a child. Back then, it provided the local community with fresh fish and irrigation for farming. Nowadays, its toxicity is a real danger to human and non-human life. As an artist, Vargas aims to examine ways to question neo-liberalism and capitalism's role in the climate crisis and how the crisis affects communities in the Global South. In addition, Vargas is interested in the loss of language and oral histories their 'abuela'

(their grandmother) grew up with. In documenting the river, and documenting stories of family members, who sometimes interview each other, they let the water speak: “I attempted to transform my singular voice into a communal reconstruction of collective memory,” the artist explains. The short documentary *Aguas Negras* (2021) is their artistic account of the river’s duality: both a site of life and of death.

It is disturbing to learn about the Mexican waters of criminalization and war, and of all the mourning, but this artistic practice is also an example of collective work – of agency-beyond-the-I. I sometimes wonder, or worry, that my work lacks action. A major part of my practice as an editor, writer, and program developer is text based. How can I turn my words into action without taking center stage? How can I do so as a white person who identifies as a woman – and as a human amongst the more-than-human on this bruised planet?

From the point of view of an editor, one way to take responsibility is to take on the role of critical friend to artists and scholars. Supporting their practices, for instance through researching, editing, teaching or curating, is a means to carry forward the necessary work of unlearning and relearning certain scenarios, anew. How can we hold space for lived experiences and struggles, such as the artist’s grandmother’s

relation to the river, and counter fossilized systems of oppression and prevailing narratives of neglect? It is through major environmental disasters, such as the recent earthquakes that impacted the lives of many Turkish, Syrian and Kurdish people and animals, that failures of politics and policies are brought to light. In the painful exposure of precarious conditions, overseas or nearby, we sometimes forget how all of us are complicit, and how every one of us has the potential to practice acts of care.

Part 5.

MONDAY, JANUARY 23.

Dear Olivia,

Last Friday someone shared the article *Blue History* with me, written by Jessica Lehman and published in *The New Inquiry*. Have you read it, maybe? I really liked how the author refers to the ocean archive, and I quote: “a record of life on Earth, formed and filtered through marine dynamics, and only available to us in partial and unpredictable ways.” She compares this ocean archive to the traditional archive, which “stops and isolates history; [...] periodizes and indexes the past, [and] sits in a building, often with limited access.” The author ends the article with the following, my apologies for the spoiler:

“[we must] understand that we are all eventual material for the ocean archive: our bodies, our actions, our infrastructures. The ocean archive catalogues the different ways we have been laid to waste and have wasted, moving our materials in planetary dynamics that might memorialize and reshuffle inequalities, yet unevenly and without stable utopian promise.”

When I recently came across this letter to Olivia again, a wave of thoughts was set in motion. It reminded me of the idea that both archives and interpretations of archives are situated, in continuous flux, and full of voids. The position of the researcher or artist that engages with them is not fixed or stable either: we are equally in flux and affected by context and matter. Our part as humans should be a humble one to play, but often we are still acting as if we have been granted the position as protagonist: the main character of the story.

Archives tend to be leaky, like memory, which can be a blessing as well as a curse. Archives are a potential polyphony of stories and relations, while subject to colonization at the same time. How can we, then, critically question time, linearity, heritage, and hegemony when we encounter archival matter – like text and stories, for instance, but also oceans, soil and land?

One thing that I keep returning to is the idea that archives are never neutral. The same goes for bodies of water: yours, mine, the river’s. In my reading journal, I find a quote by Astrida Neimanis, a leading scholar in hydro feminism. Neimanis writes that, and I quote: “the waters that we comprise are never neutral; their flows are directed by intensities of power and empowerment. Currents of water are also currents of toxicity, queerness, coloniality, sexual difference, global capitalism, imagination, desire, and multispecies community.” She also states that “Humans are leaving a planetary mark that will be clearly legible in the planetary archive of the future.” The ocean, its currents and soil have a capacity to remember that reaches far beyond an individual’s. This is something we tend to forget.

Part 6.

I remember participating in another deep listening session, together with a small group of students. The session was led by Martine van Lubeek, who designed the collection of listening exercises of which *Hearing Water*, which I described earlier, was one.

This particular session took place at the windy banks of a large pond in an urban park: both a fixed geographical location on the map, and a watery

site. It was raining. According to Van Lubeek, our listening expands as soon as we start recognizing that “dripping differs from dripping, leaking from seeping, and sprinkling from spraying.” Deep listening is a way to create intimacy, and to make kin in this world. It requires time and practice. For this exercise, we stood in a circle, watched carefully and curiously by a flock of geese.

After warming up our shivering limbs through moving and breathing exercises, guided by Martine, we entered a collective space of attentive listening – listening with, through and as bodies of water. We were invited to close our eyes, and to envision the inhaling and exhaling of hydro particles, to tune in to internal noises and let extraneous sounds enter our ears. In relative silence, we were experiencing our bodies oozing in and out to their surroundings. Deep listening, as a potentially transformative method of multidirectional and multispecies navigation, became our embodied strategy of mapping that moment in time.

Part 7.

Walking through London one afternoon earlier this week, looking for a spot to write this final part, I remember the pool I used to go to for evening swims.



Recording water, Kleine Geul, 2023.
Photo: Isolde Venrooy.

As I approach the pool and its café with the big windows facing a park, I notice a wall that hadn’t been there before. Large syllables are mounted to it, forming the following sentence: IF YOU WRITE A STORY, THIS IS WHERE IT TAKES PLACE. Trusting that my body has taken me to the right place, I sit down at a table and open my notebook.

In 1999, American composer and performer Pauline Oliveros wrote *Quantum Listening*, a manifesto for listening as activism. I must admit it is the only piece of writing by her that I have read, and only recently, so I am by no means knowledgeable about her extensive legacy. Since Oliveros and her sound meditations are of importance to many artists, some of them mentioned today, I would like to share a few of the ideas she articulates in this text.

For Oliveros, Deep Listening was a lifelong practice. The more one listens, the more one hears. She writes, and I quote:

Deep Listening is active.

Listening shapes culture, locally and universally.

Compared with reading and writing, relatively little attention is given to developing listening skills, or even to considering the nature of listening.

Deep Listening is exploring the relationships among any and all sounds, whether natural or technological,

intended or unintended, real, remembered or imaginary.

Thought is included.

Deep Listening also includes the environmental and atmospheric context of sound.

The perceiver and the perceived co-create through the listening effect.

The skin listens too.

Listeners near one another affect or influence one another with active listening.

These nine lines, collected from different paragraphs of *Quantum Listening*, show the scope of listening as a means to connect with and navigate the world, from the very near (our skins, our memories, the blood circling through our veins) to the universe and all it entails. Active listening, and listening to listening, is relational and, therefore, potentially transformative. It is multidirectional. The elements involved are subject to change. An eardrum, a porous membrane, is affected by a wave of sound, and in turn, affects the sound while transmitting it. The responsiveness is mutual, due to vibration. According to Oliveros, the world is “a complex matrix of vibrating energy, matter and air, just as we are made of vibrations.”

If vibration connects us with all beings, it is, in a way, like water. According to hydro feminism, water is what makes us fundamentally part of everything else. It sustains us, surrounds us, connects us – to the very

local and the vastly global, in many ways. Every body of water is different: materially, sensorially, culturally, historically. Every body of water plays a part in a collective process of worldmaking. Some bodies more than others, which is the cause of much planetary harm and political damage.

We have granted ourselves the seemingly solid center of it all, for far too long now. From the overflowing of riverbanks and the flooding of plains to the rise of acidity in oceans and reservoirs, and its social and ecological implications: we are complicit. What do we do with this knowledge? How could we act, and react, taking less of center stage? From what, and from whom who came before us, can we learn?

Listening more consciously and less selfishly, with our entire beings in attunement to other beings, might be one of possible moves towards turning the tide.

20 seconds recording of water.
Silence.

“Thank you for being present here today, and thank you for listening. We invite you to stay in the space for a while longer, to write any of the thoughts you might have on a card (even if it is just one word).”

KEYWORD: IF YOU WRITE FOR THIS IS WHERE IT TAKES PLACE

**DEGROWTH AND THE ARTS:
A CHALLENGE OF ITS OWN KIND**
Daphne Dragona

Most of the pressing and recurring issues discussed in the field of arts today are closely related to the urge to downscale, to degrow, to let go of the imaginary of progress. Calls for social and climate justice, for a decolonisation of culture, for an opposition to established forms of patriarchy aim for the acknowledgement of multiple worlds, of their needs and potentialities. Exhibitions, festivals, biennials, artworks and publications address the need for forms of resistance against forms of exploitation and extractivism. This discourse and context also refers to shifts needed within the art world itself with regard to cultural representation and inclusion but also to events' scale, budget and footprint. Can the art world itself, though, with its institutions and people really aim to degrow and stand as a paradigm for the societal, political and environmental changes needed? What does it mean to apply a logic of downscaling to the arts? Which limitations are to be taken in mind and where do possible contradictions lie?

Degrowth is not a new idea or concept. When the term first appeared in the early 70's, it was the period of the rise of the environmental movement. André Gorz used the word "décroissance," to stress the incompatibility of capitalist 'growth' with planet's scarce resources and to underline that unavoidably "human activity finds in the natural worlds its external limits".¹ Gorz clarified at the same time that the problem lies

¹ André Gorz, *Ecology as Politics*, Trans. by Patsy Vigderman and Jonathan Cloud. (Boston: South End Press, 1980), 13

² Ibid. p.8

³ Matthias Schmeltzer, Andrea Vetter, Aaron Vansintjan, *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World beyond Capitalism*. (London/ New York: Verso, 2022), 159

⁴ Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*. (London: Marion Boyars, 2001)

⁵ Vincent Liegey & Anitra Nelson, *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide*. (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 12

most of all in the mentality, the way of thinking of contemporary life.

"It is not so much growth that must be attacked as the illusion which it sustains, the dynamic of ever-growing and ever-frustrated needs on which is based, and the competition which it institutionalizes by inciting each individual to seek to rise above all others".²

This illusion about growth and progress, as other scholars clarify, is a construct of the West, of the Global North directly connected to the exploitation of the South.³ Degrowth is specifically about letting go of this imaginary and demanding change based on individual and political action. It is about respecting the limits of the planet while realising and acknowledging mutual dependencies on a social and ecological level. At the core of it, lies the idea that all lives need to be equally respected with their needs considered and fulfilled. Practices of degrowth are based on the principles of conviviality and co-existence.⁴ To succeed a transition towards a more sustainable world though, the common western understanding of "time, gender, death, and democracy" need to change.⁵ One needs to leave behind the idealisation of optimisation and productivity based on an antagonism for superiority and dominance over other individuals, sexes, peoples, species. The pretext *de-* describes exactly this need

to actively change an existing situation, to un-do and un-make a condition understood as given based on linear progress.

Degrowth is a recurring proposal, a critique, an idea, a slogan, a movement. It has especially been discussed in relation to the financial crisis as well as in relation to depletion, waste and the planetary emergency. The recent pandemic brought the discussion on degrowth again to the foreground. The first lockdown seemed like a period of an attempt to slow down human activity in order to save lives and not the economy, while also allowing the more-than-human world to breathe. Soon, though, it was proved that this was only a pause with the aim to return to the ‘normality’ of productivity and progress the soonest possible. The economic sector had to make up for the lost time, accelerating as much as possible in order to avoid a worse economic crisis emerging. The chance, though, might have not been entirely missed. Liegey and Nelson argue that “degrowth invites us to systematically analyse each of the crises we face,”⁶ becoming a tool and an answer, while Mathias Schmelzr, Andreas Vetter and Aaron Vansintjan emphasize that degrowth constitutes not only a critique but also a proposal and a vision for a better future.⁷

A number of art exhibitions and events organised in the last decade addressed the potential and challenges of degrowth. Among them was the show *On the Met-*

aphor of Growth (2011)⁸ hosted at Kunstverein Hannover, Frankfurt Kunstverein and Kunsthaus Basel-land in Germany with exhibits divided at the different venues raising questions about how and why growth is understood as desirable and natural. *The Plus de Croissance. Un capitalisme idéal...*(2012)⁹ Noisiel’s Ferme du Buisson in France followed, focusing on the ambivalence of the myth of growth in times of financial crisis addressing its potential but also its limits. *Slow Future* at Castello Ujazdowski in Warsaw in 2014 underlined the necessity of exiting the myth. As Serena De Dominicis notes having studied the specific aforementioned shows, even from the order of the titles one can realise how the critique on growth was strengthened¹⁰. To an extent and at that moment, the imaginary of endless growth was collapsing in the discourse of the arts, but the question that was open was how institutions themselves were changing while supporting this shift of perception.

The public program *The poetics of degrowth. How to live better with less?* of the XII Biennial of visual arts (2016) in the city of Monterrey, Mexico, for instance, was criticized for its contradictions. While it was specifically asking how “to decolonise our imaginaries from the promise of happiness sustained on consumption, accumulation of material goods and economic policies of unlimited growth”, it was at the same time supported by FEMSA, one of the biggest Mexican

⁸ <https://www.fkv.de/en/exhibition/uber-die-metapher-des-wachstums/>

⁹ <https://www.la-fermedubuisson.com/fr/plus-de-croissance-un-capitalisme-ideal>

¹⁰ Serena De Dominicis, “Art against growth. Looking at the possibilities offered by the gift paradigm”, https://www.academia.edu/34869801/Art_against_growth_Looking_at_the_possibilities_offered_by_the_gift_paradigm (last accessed 30.7.22)

⁶ Vincent Liegey and Anitra Nelson, 83

⁷ Schmelzter, Vetter and Vansintjan, 180

corporations, presented as “an example of continuous growth and expansions”.¹¹ Contradictions are not rare. Often cultural institutions are only thematically addressing the problematics of growth and not examining their own progress-oriented principles, goals, sponsors, code of ethics and modes of operation. Tate Modern, as it is widely known, faced numerous acts of protest against the sponsorship by BP which finally ended in 2016. Since a few years, a rich program of events related to the environmental issues is presented while a detailed and transparent program regarding climate action and sustainability is applied.¹² This is the direction that most big art institutions are now embracing using sustainability tools and advisory networks in an attempt to reduce their carbon footprint and to influence individuals, collectives and institutions in societies to take action. The recent Helsinki Biennial (2022) was an event that has greatly succeeded this thematically and practically carefully assessing the environmental cost of all activities, reducing decisively traveling, freight, waste.¹³

When it comes to topics such as degrowth, a holistic approach and a form of planning based on an “adaptive capacity” is needed. This according to Harvey and Perry would be the result of “a unique combination of values and principles, institutional culture and function, commitment to public engagement, financial and human assets, acquisition and use of information, know-how and a mandate for decision-making.”¹⁴ An event also

¹¹ Sofia Avila, “Degrowth in the Mexican Art Biennial: Opportunities and Paradoxes”, <https://degrowth.info/de/blog/de-growth-in-the-mexican-art-biennial-opportunities-and-paradoxes> (last accessed 30.7.22)

¹² <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/tate-and-climate-change> (last accessed 30.7.22)

¹³ helsinkibiennaali.fi/

¹⁴ PA.Gray et al., “Strategies for Coping with the Wicked Problem of Climate Change,” in *The Future of Heritage as Climates Change: Loss, Adaptation and Creativity*, eds. David Harvey and Jim Perry (New York: Routledge, 2015) and as also discussed in the article of Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez mentioned and quoted later in this article.

¹⁵ RAUPENIMMERSATTISM (In German: Die kleine Raupe Nimmersatt) means The Very Hungry Caterpillar, and it is a children’s picture book designed, illustrated, and written by Eric Carle, first published by the World Publishing Company in 1969, as explained at the webpage of the exhibition <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/projects/2020/raupenimmersattism/>

¹⁶ Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, “For Slow Institutions”, *e-flux Journal* issue 85 (2017) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155520/for-slow-institutions/> (accessed 30.07.22)

worth mentioning within this context is *RAUPENIMMERSATTISM*¹⁵ (2020) realised at Savvy Contemporary in Berlin. Just like the other shows mentioned *RAUPENIMMERSATTISM* discussed “the myth of endless consumption” but with an important twist. The team of Savvy decided to turn its attention to those found at the other side, the ones living in poverty and the margins, having to survive with the leftovers of the capitalist system. The show exemplified the problematics of growth and affluence by discussing openly and directly the paradoxes found in one of world’s most powerful economies, Germany.

No matter how much art institutions might try to adapt their programs, another factor needs to be taken in mind with regard to degrowth. Art institutions themselves keep increasing in number and the same happens with their activities.¹⁶ There is at the moment a problem of overproduction. A certain event or else gig-economy prevails in the arts and affects the way independent curators and artists work. A pressure for new ideas, new projects, new constellations leave little room for change in the rhythm of production. Questions of storage and preservation with reference to works and exhibition materials remain open. Realising this, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez addressed a call for institutions and curators to slow down and pay attention to quality of research, to collective work, to sustainability and resilience, and to pay attention to levels of engagement

with the public and the team.¹⁷ Such a shift would re-define the role of the arts in taking a critical stance and having an influential role in society, but hardly would it involve the art market. In a recent article of his, Julian Stallabras reminds us that it is always the “gravitational force of money that bends art”. Stallabras underlines the trap of generalisation in the case of the arts. There is not one art world but “many divergent intersecting circles” with different economies, audiences, shows, and importantly, artists. Similarly, in the case of degrowth there might be biennials, festivals and exhibitions like the ones mentioned in this article that emphasize exit, conviviality and interdependence, but the art fairs and the art market itself have little interest in the topic. The art world remains fragmented and paradigms of artistic practice with reference to degrowth are to be found mostly outside the art market. These are works based on research and experimentation examining the limits of growth and discussing its costs to populations, ecosystems and the planet itself. Studying examples of such projects, one realises how artistic production itself can assist in a process of downscaling and how artists address the topic following different methodologies.

Post Growth (2020) is a project developed by Disnovation.org working at the intersection of contemporary art, research and hacking in collaboration with artist, curator and writer Baruch Gottlieb.¹⁸ The project



Disnovation.org with Baruch Gottlieb, Life Support System, 2020. Photo: disnovation.org

¹⁷ Julian Stallabras, “Contemporary art is popular – but it’s still about money and power”, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/stallabras-contemporary-art-market-audience/> (accessed 30.07.22)

¹⁸ <https://disnovation.org/postgrowth>

¹⁹ Personal communication with Nicolas Maigret, 2022

²⁰ Personal communication with Baruch Gottlieb, 2022

²¹ Maxence Grugier, “Post Growth: a Toolkit for Radical Transitions (1/2)” <https://www.makery.info/en/2021/03/01/post-growth-imagine-la-boite-a-outils-de-la-pres-croissance-1-2/> (accessed 30.07.22)

²² <http://shadowgrowth.earth/>

takes its title from Tim Jackson’s book “Post Growth–Life after Capitalism” and uses the term “as a container for desirable futures beyond the imperative of growth”¹⁹ “which is driven by international finance”.²⁰ For them, at the core of the discussion on growth lies in their opinion the issue of energy. The project unfolds around a series of different units consisting of interviews, a toolkit, prototypes, a game and a living installation, all shedding light to different aspects of energy production and consumption. Some of the formats are participatory because they want people to engage with the topic directly, by sharing experiences and stories, seen as they say as “tools for transmission and collective discussion”.²¹ Referring to the energy produced by fossil fuels (which means by remains of ancestral organisms), to the role of ecosystems in energy processes, as well as to the energy that human bodies produce and consume, the group stresses that such information and knowledge need to become accessible. Similarly, with their following project *ShadowGrowth*²² (2021), a digital tool calculating and depicting CO2 emissions as opposed to GDP numbers, they revealed hard truths about growth.

A number of projects created by Superflux, a group working on art and speculative design, points to the importance of trying to imagine what the world would be like after the myth of growth has collapsed. Their scenarios which emerge through large scale

installations, objects and videos are not necessarily dark and pessimistic. They rather tell stories of “active hope”, driven by “ideas, myths, stories, objects that can help people navigate precarity”.²³ Superflux imagine the day when a new world will be born in the ruins of the world that chased progress. *Refuge for Resurgence* (2021)²⁴ introduces a symbolic scenery where different species are invited to sit together on one dining table with unusual wooden cutlery and furniture planned to accommodate all. Their film *Intersection* (2021)²⁵ invites viewers to imagine what will happen after states, media and the market have damaged societies and the planet. This will be possibly the era of the “Craftocene” as they call it, when tools will be made from the waste of the Anthropocene, and this crafting will help to build not just tools but also worlds as Anab Jain explains.²⁶ Questioning human centered design, Superflux address a call for a more-than-human politics through a manifesto that underlines the need to change values and scopes passing from “fixing to caring”, from “innovation to resurgence”, from “independence to interdependence”.

For Valentina Karga, artist, designer and professor in design, it is the study and understanding of closed systems that can assist creators to change their perspective. Approaching the earth itself as a closed system and as an infrastructure, she underlines how dependent we all are on it. “Nature, planet Earth,



Valentina Karga, *The table that eats itself* (decomposing at the Floating University, Berlin), 2021
Photo: Gilly Karjevski

²³ Daphne Dragona. “Interview with Superflux”. *Neural Magazine*. Issue 71. eds. A. Ludovico, D.Dragon, J. Parikka (upcoming)

²⁴ <https://superflux.in/index.php/work/refuge-for-resurgence>

²⁵ <https://superflux.in/index.php/work/refuge-for-resurgence>

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Daphne Dragona & Valentina Karga “What Supports Us: A conversation about Infrastructures”. *Current-Art and Public Space*. Eds. L. Bernhardt, J-L. Zajczkowska & N.Unger. 2022., 9

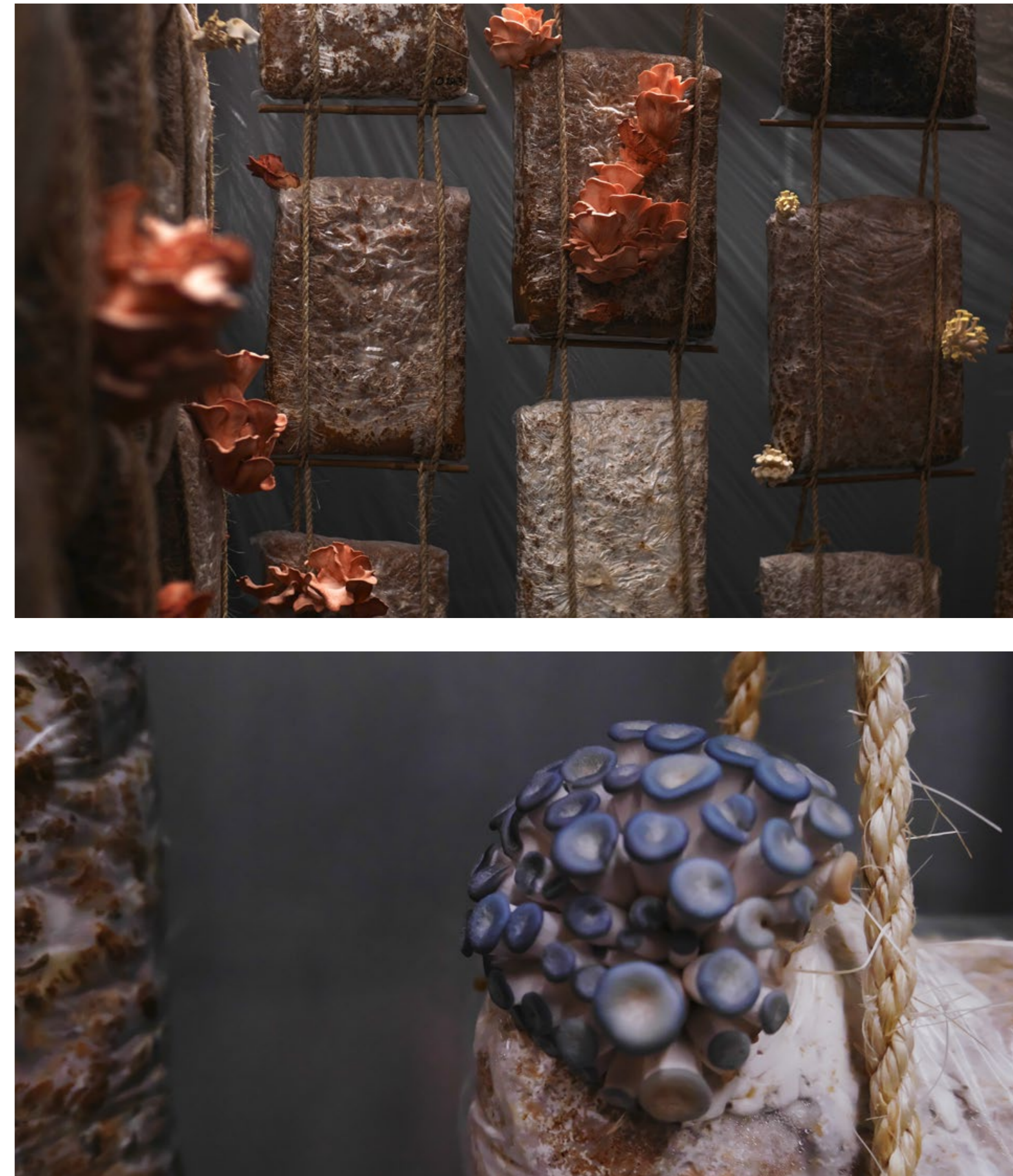
²⁸ As presented at EMAF 2022 with the title “The Thing is” <https://www.emaf.de/work/?id=36000&lang=en>

with its materiality” is what she calls “*infrastructures’ infrastructure*, because all the materials we use to make our infrastructures are eventually coming in some form from there (since Earth is materially closed)”.²⁷ Since her early work, Karga experimented with strategies of self-sufficiency concerning energy and food. Karga proposes an adoption of DIY and collective techniques based on the sharing of experience and knowledge as this is the only way “to learn to practice together under a (post human) commons worldview, something that has been largely neglected in the past”. The artist emphasizes the importance of using organic materials, such as natural dyes, natural textiles, reused wood, hay and clay, that can be composted, if necessary, or inorganic minerals that are not bound together under chemical processes such as rammed earth instead of concrete, and for artistic production. One of her most recent works is a self-compostable sculpture. Made of cotton fabric, cardboard, soil, hay and corn leaves, and waste, *The table that eats itself* (2022)²⁸ was designed for people to sit around and join a dining performance feeding themselves and the table, helping it to compost itself while engaging in discussions about myths of progress, capitalism, needs, food and waste.

Practices of degrowth are based on collective but also individual action involving self-reflection regarding one’s own activity and impact on the planet. Matthias Fritsch is an artist and filmmaker researching circles of matter

and biological processes. Through his work, he is studying the habits and rhythm of the planet's human and nonhuman inhabitants. He focuses on the impact of anthropogenic activity on soil and the living environment while introducing prototypes for more sustainable living. Among those are a set of 13 personal commandments, indoor composting furniture, fermentation techniques, and gardening strategies for a changing climate²⁹. For a recent project of his, the *Mycelium Garden* (2022)³⁰ Fritsch explored the role of fungi in breaking down organic matter, feeding on energy and forming the basis for plants' life. Created and presented as a living sculpture made of fungi, organic material and a wooden structure, the work had its own cycle with the artist as its daily gardener. The installation differed from day to day with moments of blooming and moments of harvest. The harvest of edible mushrooms was offered to the visitors and the staff of the institution. The numerous mycelium bags were distributed to people interested in cultivating mushrooms after the show finished. The structure was disassembled back to its original components for reuse and literally left no trace of waste behind.

Interestingly, artistic works like the ones mentioned above refer to the day after, to the period after a possible sociopolitical and environmental collapse, and propose speculative or pragmatic strategies, prototypes and tools. They are direct and consequent, questioning accumulation and growth. Works made of organic material,



Matthias Fritsch, *Mycelium Garden*, 2022.
Photo: Matthias Fritsch

²⁹ <https://www.technoviking.tv/subrealic.net/>

³⁰ As presented at the exhibition Weather Engines at Onassis Stegi in 2022. <https://www.onassis.org/art/works/mycelium-garden>

³¹ Liegey and Nelson, 12

based on living organisms, that change over time or capture the traces of human activity on the planet are works that make people aware of time and scale. The artists invite audiences to observe and acknowledge changes, and to realise that life on the planet is based on individual and collective action, on interdependence and conviviality. As Liegey and Nelson write, degrowth is anyway “an invitation to go on the inevitably long journey of the decolonisation of our growth imaginaries, moving from cultural awareness to a systemic and material transformation changing our everyday practice”³¹. In the field of the arts, both institutions and the people working in the field need to reassess priorities, to set goals and to work collaboratively, planning works and events that address the needs of the audiences, involve them, and respect the environment. Possibly this is the only way to escape contradictions and move towards a reality where open discussions about growth can happen, sustainability goals are reached, and also the arts themselves with their places and people are safe and secure.

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<https://springerin.at/en/2022/3/degrowth-und-die-kunst/>

Superflux, *Intersection* (still from film), 2021.
Photo: Superflux



**DOCUMENTATION OF
PUBLIC PROGRAM**

WELL BEINGS IN TIMES OF CLIMATE ANXIETY

Public program conceived by
Seda Yıldız & Valentina Karga

UNIVERSITY OF FINE ARTS HAMBURG (HFBK),
MUSEUM OF ART AND DESIGN HAMBURG (MK&G),
HAMBURG OPEN ONLINE UNIVERSITY (HOOU)

APRIL-SEPTEMBER, 2023

Well Beings in Times of Climate Anxiety program features lectures, discussions, workshops and a sound bath session that could help viewers to confront their feelings, worries and fears about the climate crisis.

Focusing on the emotional effects of the climate crisis, the program brings together a climate psychologist, a curator and writer, a climate activist, a sound therapist, a researcher and editor, as well as an environmental scientist. By inviting various individuals from different fields to unpack this urgent topic, the program aims to create a form of togetherness at the intersection of art and social engagement that might help us prepare emotionally and intellectually to be open to change in times of climate crisis.

Some of the events are available as videos in the Mediathek of HFBK: <https://mediathek.hfbk.net/12go/-/get/1/32>

CAN THE ARTS DEGROW? CHANGING THE PACE IN THE MIDST OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Presentation and discussion with
Daphne Dragona
(Curator & Writer, Berlin)

26 APRIL 2023, University of Fine Arts Hamburg
(HFBK)

Can artistic and curatorial practices help us adopt a more sustainable way of living? Is slowing down at all possible? Numerous artworks and cultural projects nowadays question the imaginary of progress and highlight the need to resist ongoing forms of exploitation. The talk will discuss the challenges and promises of degrowth, and present paradigms that point towards a different path of action.

CLIMATE DISTRESS - WORKING AND LIVING IN A TIME WHEN THE FAMILIAR IS DYING

Webinar by Steffi Bednarek
(Climate psychologist, UK)

26 APRIL 2023, University of Fine Arts Hamburg
(HFBK)

The acknowledgement of the reality of the climate and ecological crisis and its impact on us and our families and loved ones is both necessary and painful. A certain amount of climate distress is an aspect of living at this consequential moment in the history of humanity. In this webinar, the Climate Psychologist Steffi Bednarek will offer an insight into the psychological aspects and impacts of climate change and suggest working practices that support and normalize climate related emotions at work and in our private lives.

RESONANT ENCOUNTERS

**A performative reading by
Marlies van Hak
(Editor and researcher, Utrecht)**

29 APRIL 2023, MUSEUM OF ART AND DESIGN
HAMBURG

Marlies van Hak will tune into moments of attentive listening and encounters with water. The reading will explore the porous lines between lived experience and language - resonating personal memories and critical reflections. The reading will take place in an intimate setting, and hold space for dialogue and exchange.

**Sound Bath with Janina Tanck
(Sound energy practitioner,
Hamburg)**

29 APRIL 2023, MUSEUM OF ART AND DESIGN
HAMBURG

During a Sound Bath session, the sound spreads through our entire energy field.

Sounds have a profound effect on our body, mind and spirit. Because of the high percentage of water (70-80%) in our bodies and because our bones carry vibrations 40x better than air, everything in us is vibrated, activating the body's self-healing process. Together we will experience pure relaxation to the sound of the crystal bowls, meditate and bath in the sounds.

**Reading Group with Valentina
Karga and design class of
University of Fine Arts Hamburg
(HFBK)**

17-24 MAY 2023, MUSEUM OF ART AND DESIGN
HAMBURG

Lucy Lippard, "Overlay:
Contemporary Art and the Art of
Prehistory", 1983

ENCOUNTERING EMOTIONS ABOUT ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

**Online workshop with Panu
Pihkala (Eco-emotion scholar,
University of Helsinki)**

31 MAY 2023, ONLINE

Many kinds of emotions and feelings are evoked in us by ecological issues. In this interactive online workshop, Panu Pihkala will introduce the topic and facilitates reflection.



Webinar by Steffi Bednarek, *Climate distress - working and living in a time when the familiar is dying*, University of Fine Arts Hamburg (HFBK), 2023. Photo: Miriam Schmidt



Sound Bath session with Janina Tanck, Museum of Art and Design Hamburg, 2023. Photo: Öncü Gültekin



Presentation and discussion with Daphne Dragona, *Can the arts degrow? Changing the pace in the midst of the climate crisis*, University of Fine Arts Hamburg (HFBK), 2023. Photo: Miriam Schmidt



Performative reading *Resonant Encounters*, Museum of Art and Design Hamburg, 2023. Photo: Marlies van Hak.

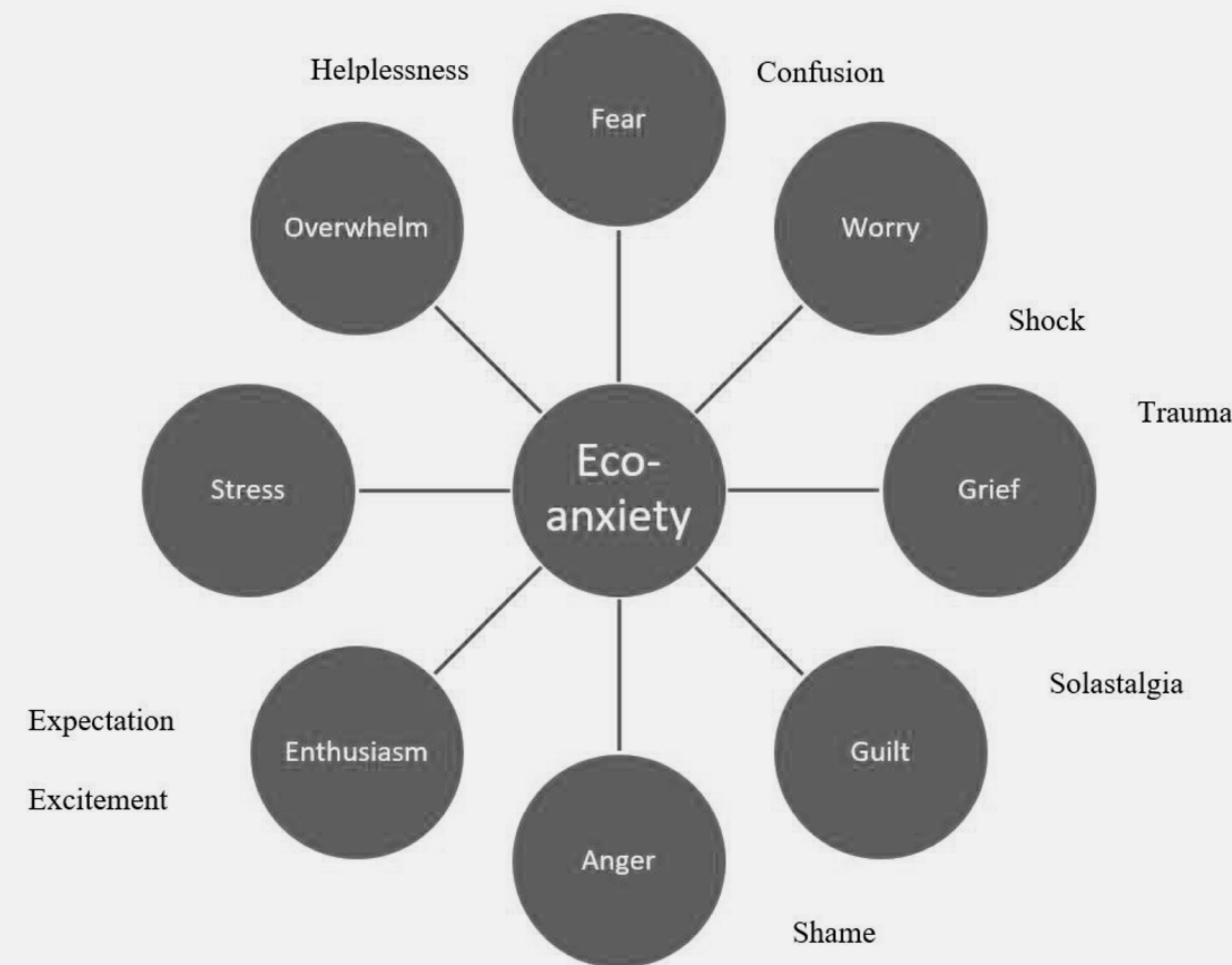


Figure 1. Emotions, feelings, affects, and mental states that can be commonly linked with eco-anxiety.

Figure 1.
Panu Pihkala,
Eco-Anxiety and Environmental Education.
Sustainability 2020,
12(23), 10149;
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su122310149>

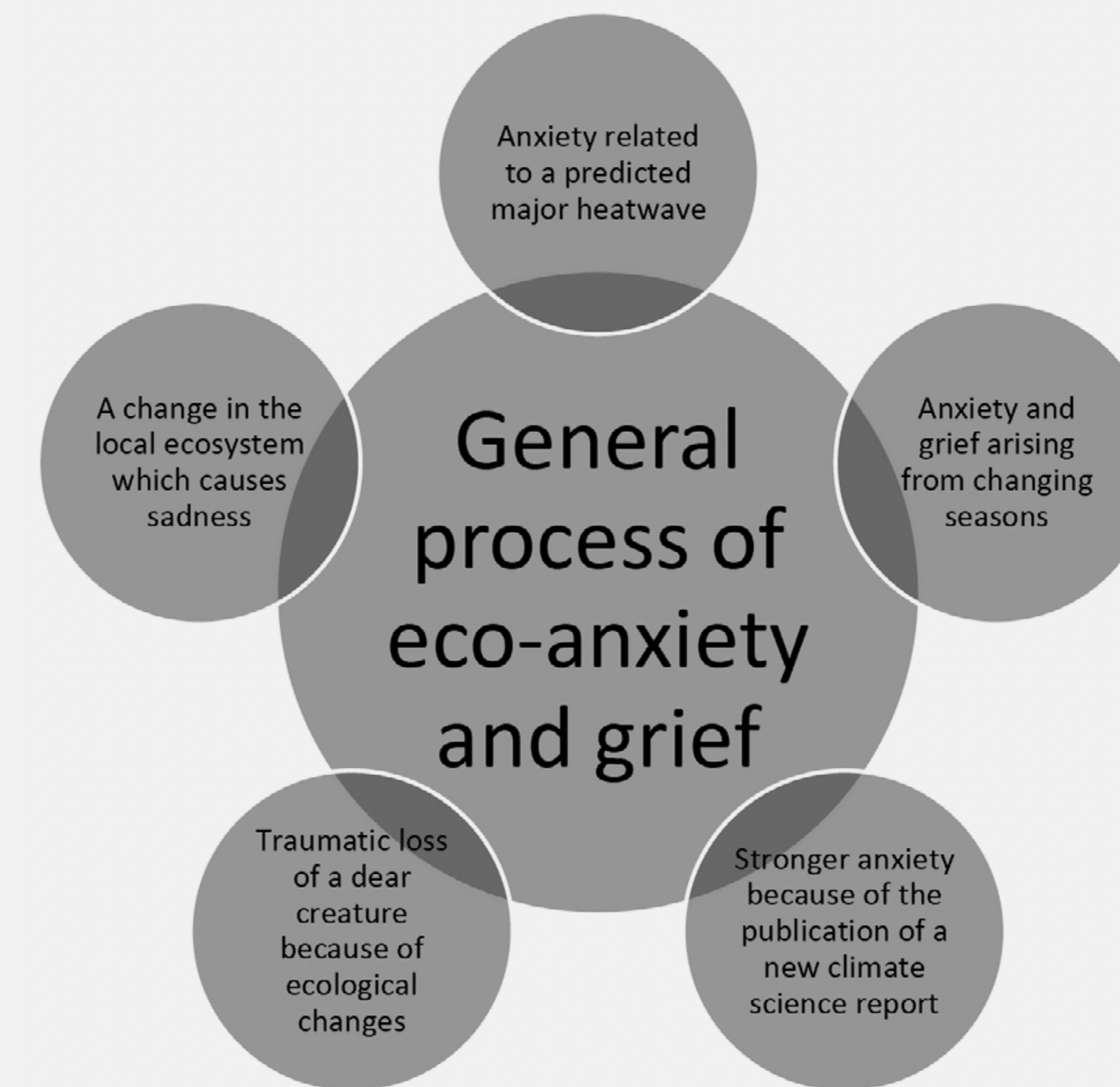


Figure 2. The general process and examples of more particular processes. Note: people naturally appraise both the particular processes and the general process differently.

Figure 2-3.
Panu Pihkala,
The Process of Eco-Anxiety and Ecological Grief: A Narrative Review and a New Proposal.
Sustainability 2022,
14,16628.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416628>



Figure 3. The three dimensions of Coping and Changing. Figure notes: For healthy adjustment and necessary transformation, all three dimensions are needed. People engage with the dimensions both consciously and unconsciously.

Additional information on “Mind map of ecological emotions” exercise can be found here:
<http://ecoanxietyandhope.blogspot.com/2020/07/mind-map-of-ecological-emotions.html>

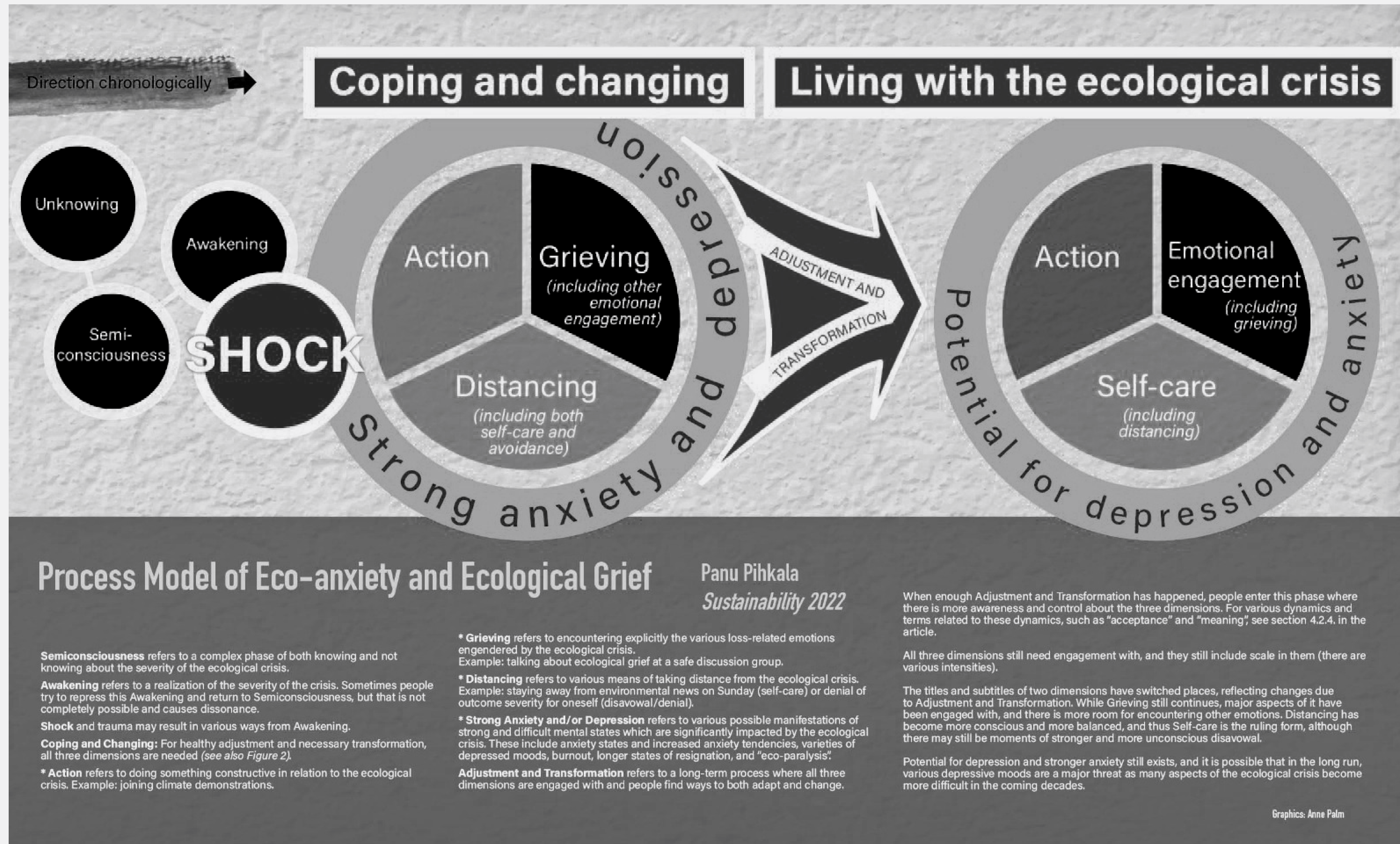
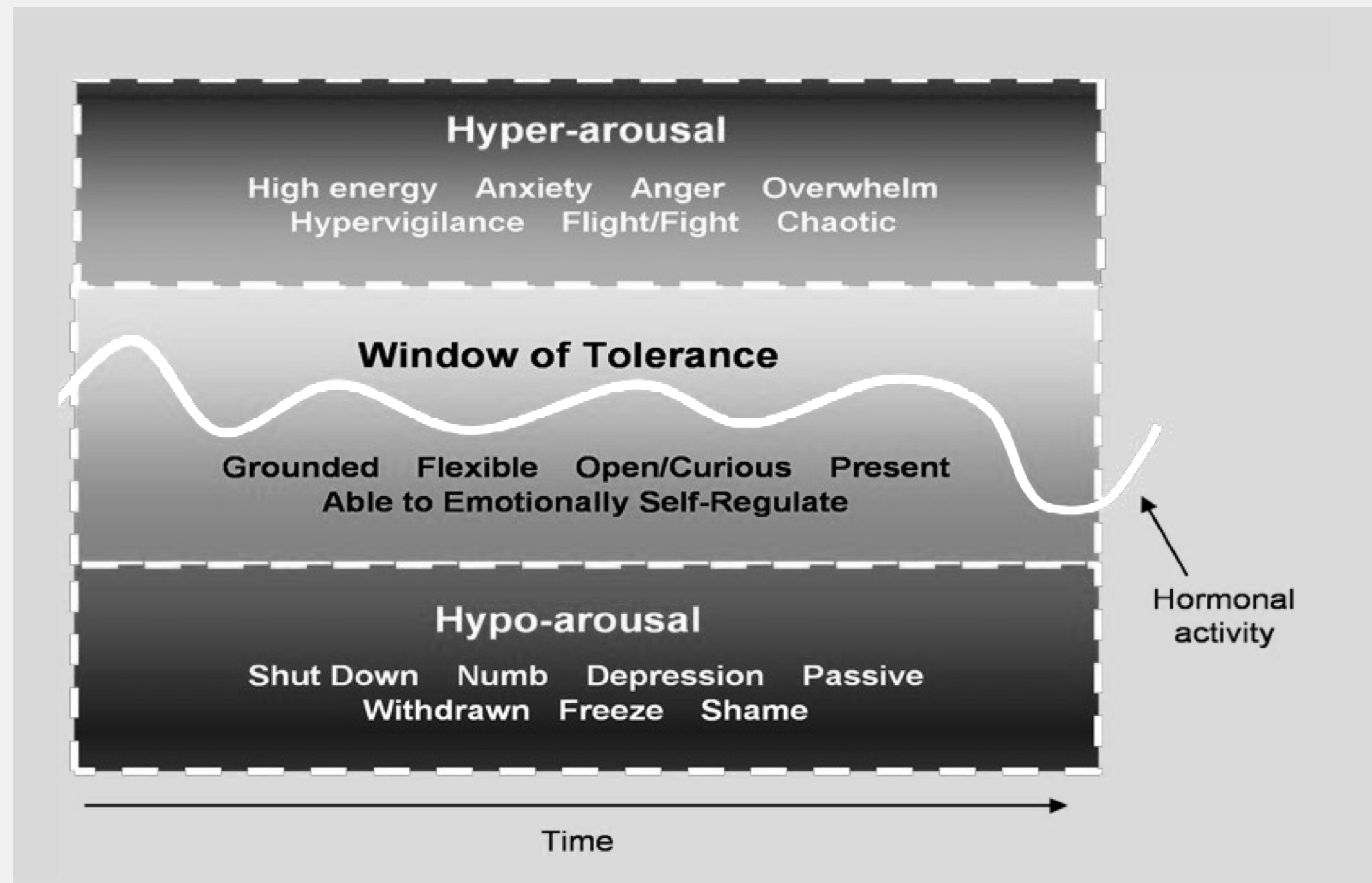


Figure 4. The new process model of eco-anxiety and grief.

Figure 4.
Panu Pihkala, The Process of Eco-Anxiety and Ecological Grief: A Narrative Review and a New Proposal. *Sustainability* 2022, 14,16628.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416628>



Window of Tolerance. Source: Jade Emery

“I don’t see anxiety about climate change as a problem to be solved or a condition to be medicated.

To me, it’s an important encounter with our awareness of our impact on the world and the reality that the world is facing a climate emergency.”

“Behind the anxiety there is often deep grief and anger. Once we touch these forgotten parts with our compassion, the heartbreak that lies hidden in their depths can slowly reveal itself. Our broken hearts have the potential to open us to a wider sense of self, one capable of seeing through the confinements that keep us separated from others and the world. If we dare to move through our despair, our heart can break open and become big enough to embrace life in its darkness as well as its richness. We often see the world differently as a result and have something to offer to the community in return.”

Quotations from the interview between Steffi Bednarek and BBC Current Affairs correspondent Aisling Gallagher. Titled “Is there a therapy for climate-change anxiety?” the article was published in *THERAPY TODAY*, June 2019.

<https://www.psychotherapyinbrighton.com/blogpost.php?permalink=is-there-a-therapy-for-climate-change-anxiety>

CONTRIBUTORS

STEFFI BEDNAREK is a psychotherapist and writer in the field of Climate Psychology based in Brighton. She has published on issues of psychotherapy, climate change and collective trauma in several countries and contexts. In her work Steffi draws on her Gestalt roots, her engagement with Climate Psychology and a mytho-poetic approach.

DAPHNE DRAGONA is a curator and writer based in Berlin. In her current work, she addresses the promises of degrowth for art and culture, and the role of technology in times of climate crisis. Her exhibitions have been hosted at Onassis Stegi, Laboral, EMST, Akademie Schloss Solitude and other institutions. Articles of hers have been published in various books by the likes of Springer, Sternberg Press, and Leonardo Electronic Almanac. Dragona was a curator of the transmediale festival between 2015-2019. She holds a PhD from the Faculty of Communication & Media Studies of the University of Athens.

MARLIES VAN HAK is a researcher, writer and program developer. Her work navigates multiple knowledge domains, on the rather fluid lines between theory and praxis. Her interests include cultural memory, artistic practices, public space, performativity, feminism and literature. Her work varies from conducting research and editing publications with artists and academics, to writing texts and project proposals for, amongst others, Guiding Voices in Rotterdam (2023), PrintRoom in Rotterdam (2022), Radboud University in Nijmegen (2021-2022), and TAAK in Amsterdam (2019-2022).

VALENTINA KARGA lives in Berlin and is a professor at the Hochschule für bildende Künste (HFBK) in Hamburg. She is currently working on challenging the notion of “self” by proposing non-anthropocentric future narratives. Many of her projects encourage engagement and participation, facilitate commoning practices and are concerned with sustainability. She works across different media, often inviting the public or community to complete the work, which she names “Art as Simulation”.

[PANU PIHKALA](#) is an interdisciplinary environmental scholar, writer and lecturer. He has a history with religion, and is an adjunct professor and docent of environmental theology at the University of Helsinki. Panu has led workshops about eco-anxiety and difficult eco-emotions since 2010. He has two popular books about eco-emotions in Finnish and was author of the widely discussed [Lancet study](#) about young people and climate anxiety in 2021. In early 2022, he published an overview of [climate emotions](#).

[JANINA TANCK](#) is a Hamburg based sound energy practitioner, NLP Coach and Reiki & Theta Healing Practitioner.

[SEDA YILDIZ](#) is an independent curator and art writer based in Hamburg and İstanbul. With a background in art practice, design and literature, her socially engaged practice spans curating, writing and editing. Her research interests comprise artist collectives and self-archiving practices, focusing on collaborative approaches to publicising art. Yıldız is the editor and co-author of the book *“Building Human Relations Through Art. Škart collective (Belgrade) from 1990 to present”* (Onomatopee, 2022).

Well Beings in Times of Climate Anxiety

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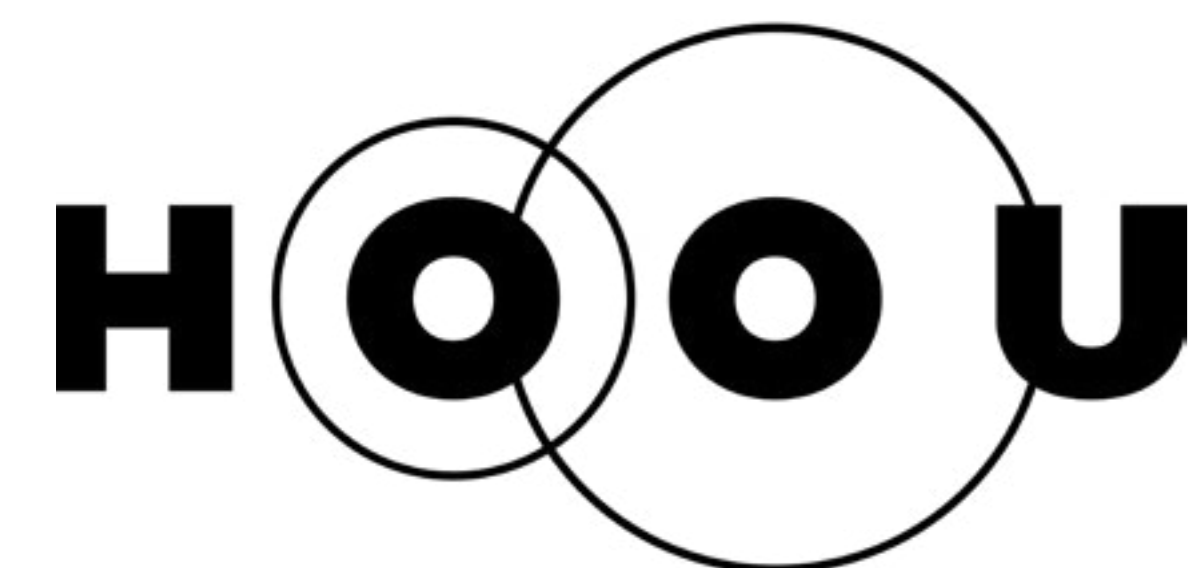
[Önder Dündar](#)

The public program and publication, *Well Beings in Times of Climate Anxiety*, accompanying Valentina Karga's solo exhibition at the Museum of Art and Design Hamburg (Museum für Kunst & Gewerbe Hamburg), took place between May-September 2023.

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