

## Metabolic Records

“We can experience things—can touch, hear and taste things—only because as bodies, we are ourselves included in the sensible field, and have our own textures, sounds and tastes.”

David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 1997

When I was asked to write a text about Agnieszka Brzezańska's exhibition *Ancestors* at BWA Warsaw, it almost seemed ironic. For it was she with whom I recently spoke about the governing systems that start by using language, and which repeatedly bring us into dispute with our experience of the environment and art. What we say, see and hear shapes our sensations, the ways we communicate and participate. As of right now, while you are reading this text, your allowance to make up your own connections to the exhibition is cut – listening to my voice.

There is a current shift of interest in western knowledge production that is inspired by ancestral knowledge, shamanism, animism, and ritual practices that can be observed in scientific and artistic research as well as in popular climate fictional narratives. Using Brzezańska's work as an example, there is a trajectory that revolves around the notion of "nature culture"[1] and its influence on the production of this ancestral knowledge and beliefs. In her practice, she uses plants, ceramics, naturally dyed fabrics, water, soil, flowers, and sand that evolve over long periods of time. The material carries biomarkers that track the artist's movements in her environment, such as the Wisła River, one of the largest biodiverse habitats in Poland, which she traverses every year. We might think that our natural ancestry lies in our genetic makeup, but what if the reception of culture has a much stronger influence on its evolution than we think? The microbial ancestors we individually carry with us change throughout our lives. They remember our traumas, fears, each time we took antibiotics, the burgers we ate, our moments of ecstasy and sadness, and our wishes and desires. They regulate themselves through communication, and scientists don't know exactly how many generations actually have an impact on the genetic code within our microbes.

In her artistic work Brzezańska shows a confidence in this self-regulation of natural organisms. Her hands work with what we call the primordial soup[2], which has boiled and mutated over millions of years to the present, constantly connecting present-day clay, paint, water etc. with ancient knowledge from various cultures. For example, by creating new ceramic tops for burial vases in ornamental shapes reminiscent of plants, she switches the formal straight design of the supports that originally exist to contain burnt human flesh. “Plants are (...) important to the task of unpacking heteronormativity because thinking with plants necessarily means thinking critically about vegetation, ownership and cooperation, gender, and sex organs at human and non-human scales.”[3] The line between the dead material on the inside and the living on the outside gets blurred, giving the impression that dead and living matter is in communication.[4] When we think about vases in general, they carry ancestral stories and images that can be found in almost every culture worldwide, they often are the only artistic evidence left of vanished cultures, ideas, and histories.

In previous works the artist had worked with the constant flow of matter that derives from bodies of water. Her ceramic models for fountain sculptures to be realised in public space resemble flowing liquids that have the ability to organically erode given structures. “Despite the fact that we are all watery bodies, leaking into and sponging off of one another, we resist total dissolution, material annihilation. Or more aptly, we postpone it: ashes to ashes, water to water.”[5] These models for fountains served as stands for screen displays. “As technological

civilization diminishes the biotic diversity of the earth, language itself is diminished. (...) As the splashing speech of the rivers is silenced by more and more dams, as we drive more and more of the land's wild voices into the oblivion of extinction, our own languages become increasingly impoverished and weightless, progressively emptied of their earthly resonance.”[6]

Brzezańska paintings in the show are created in this very fluid language: Inanimate objects, animals, microbes shapeshift over the canvas, and it is hard to tell if symbiotic, demonic, or parasitic interactions take place. Hand sized ceramic creatures (tea pets for ceremonies) look at us with tiny faces. They seem like blown up microscopic representations of the living membranes of archaea [7] or their hydrocarbon skeletons that last for hundreds of years on the bottoms of the oceans. They smile: “The story of the earth is at stake, as we participate in it. (...) (We have an) absolute obligation to become capable, to render each other capable of changing the story, a story of ongoingness, cultivated in the earth, in the tunnels of the earth. (...)”[8]

The organic flow in *Ancestors* seems familiar, it derives from narratives and beings that exist much longer than we do. And while paleobiologists, biochemists, and archaeologists use diagnostic biomarkers to get information about the composition of our ancestral (microbial) ecosystems, they get me thinking about the tiny natural and cultural particles we breathe in and out that might compose us much more accurately than our family trees, registers and identity politics. “Culture, it is argued, alters not only our minds, but also the very bodies in which we live.”[9] The symbiotic relationships we continually weave are inextricably linked. “Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialised in deeds, deeds which crystallise our actualities [...] And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms.”[10]

1 Nature-culture was coined by Donna Haraway in 2003 to recognise that natural and human environments, including non-human and more-than-human beings (such as spirits, creation ancestors, divinities) are intimately bound or entangled within different places.

2 “When ultra-violet light acts on a mixture of water, carbon dioxide, and ammonia, a vast variety of organic substances are made, including sugars and apparently some of the materials from which proteins are built up. [...] before the origin of life they must have accumulated till the primitive oceans reached the consistency of hot dilute soup.” J. B. S. Haldane, *The Origin of Life*, 1929

3 “Ricochet– Cultural Epigenetics and the Philosophy of Change,” Alex Head, p. 50, 2021

4 Under hylozoism, every object is claimed to have some degree or sense of life. David Skrbina, “Panpsychism in the West”

5 Astrida Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water”, p.104.

6 David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p.86, 1997

7 The word archaea comes from the Ancient Greek ἀρχαῖα, meaning “ancient things.”

8 Donna Haraway: “Story Telling for Earthly Survival,” Film by Fabrizio Terranova, 2016

9 Alex Head, “Ricochet – Cultural Epigenetics and the Philosophy of Change,” 2021

10 Sylvia Wynter drawing on Aimé Césaire, 1995

Carola Uehlken, 3 June 2023

CAROLA UEHLKEN is a transdisciplinary curator, and artist-researcher based in Berlin. She focuses on the entanglement of living and dead material and the many (im)possibilities in knowledge production towards a shift of understanding the human entity as ecosystems. The courtroom, governing systems and the administration apparatus are taken as a tool to reflect upon their performative aesthetics, their linguistics and at the same time bitter effects on marginalised groups, other-than-human species and geopolitical infrastructures. With disobedience against ruling systems she opens up potential readings of pasts and futures in which collaboration and participation support new, weird, climate-fictional narratives that enable critical perspectives and personal stories in all their complexity. She advises international art collections, organises art festivals, workshops and exhibitions and supports independent projects on the verge between art, science and society. She is writing and publishing art critic articles for artists catalogues and independent publishing platforms.