



THEMATIC ISSUE: ON ANIMALS, PLANTS, BRYOPHYTES, LICHEN, AND FUNGI IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND RESEARCH VOL. I

Plant Steaming Concrete Staining

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ABSTRACT

Seed Scarification: Serious Taking is a light, seed, and sound installation. Few hours after the activation of the installation in an art venue, an unplanned kinetic event takes place that is marked by a sonic loud *bang*. At an instance creating a division in time: one segment that spans the moment before the event; the second one being the perceived change of the aftermath. A composed photo blends both moments into a fictitious here and now. This happening is discussed in this essay from a primarily experiential stance, focusing on air, atmosphere and being.

KEYWORDS

artistic research; installation art; interspecies dialogue; respiratory philosophy; air; chokeberry; Bachelard; Merleau-Ponty

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In this essay, I describe an event featuring *Aronia m*. plant matter with the intention to make the elements that comprise it tangible and sensible to the reader. I invited respiratory philosopher Petri Berndtson to comment on some aerial dimensions of this *Aronia m*. event from his perspective. It follows after the detailed description of the event below.

The mixed-media installation *Seed Scarification: Serious Taking Two*¹ combines an industrial plant growth light module with the sound recordings from tuned human bodies and the electronic translations of dripping sap from the *Aronia m*.² plant. Both light and sound are directed towards *Aronia* seeds. The main source of inspiration for the work is the technique of seed scarification, one of the possible seed treatments that is used in the field of plant (*Aronia*) growth by *sapiens*. With the absence of other animal's teeth or acidic guts, to incite the development of the dormant plant seed, its outer shell is scarred by scratching with abrasive material like sand paper or a file. Through the cracks the seed embryo then can absorb water.

It is an *Aronia m*. plantation in the Midwest of Latvia that is the source of inspiration for most of my art and research since the first encounter in the summer of 2009. In particular, the workings are instigated and energized by *mere happenings* whilst wandering or playing at that plantation. They are sudden, epiphany-like events that I situate in the in between realm of the plantation and myself (Bartaku, 2021). I commit to these mere happenings that lie at the heart of my art and



research practice. It develops in the form of a practice-based doctorate at the Department of Art at Aalto University from 2016 till mid 2021.

Aronia's 'm.' stands taxonomically for either the native to the Northeast Americas *melanocarpa*, or for *mitschurinii*, after Ivan M. Michurin, a Russian horticulturist who experiments with *Aronia* in the first half of the 20th century. The scientific attempts to classify this living entity are ongoing. Therefore, very often the titles of research papers contain the common — colonial — plant name chokeberry.

As for the *Aronia* plants at the plantation, I refer to them as *Baroa belaobara*. These letters manifested merely at the plantation as the nomenclatureal morphing of *Aronia m*. And instead of common chokeberry I use 'berryapple', with the fruit resembling a tiny pome.

Recently, I have been sensitized more intensely to the sphere of the aerial through the practice-thinking loops by Petri Berndtson. I asked him to reflect upon the described event.

Bartaku has invited me to give my phenomenologico-respiratory-atmospheric interpretation of this unexpected Aronia event. In my PhD dissertation "Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing" (Berndtson, 2018) I discovered a new manner of investigating the world within the experiential atmosphere of breathing. I have built this phenomenological approach in dialogue with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Gaston Bachelard's thought. If this phenomenological atmosphere is taken seriously, it can become a new point of departure for investigation of all things and phenomena. It thus can be understood as a new phenomenological beginning into which all phenomena can be returned. I will read Bartaku's description of his Aronia installation within this respiratory and aerial atmosphere.

SET UP

The Space

Room 3 of SOLU, the public space of the Finnish Bioart Society, is where the installation is mounted. It measures four big steps from the glass door that separates it from the kitchen area, to the back window on the left and four big steps from left to right. The stone floor is painted with a substance that bounces back most of the light that it receives except where thin dark cracks branch inwardly from the left wall. The arm-length wide and deep window lets the light come in via the inner courtyard of the early 1900s residential building complex. Underneath the window hangs a ribbed metal radiator that carries water at human skin temperature. The ceiling is uneven and has varying heights which calls for a V-shaped ladder to install the electronic hardware. A narrow opening is filled with a glass window that connects the room visually with the kitchen.

Materials Placing

Light

A ready at hand custom rectangular paper panel is put in place to block the light. Six 3 cm long pieces are cut from a roll of white, plastic double-sided adhesive tape of 15 mm width. They are pressed against the wooden window frame at six places. Along the edges a small amount of light is reflected by few parts of the space. The same technique is applied to the window on the right next to the glass entrance door, preventing visual connection with the kitchen.

The aluminium body of the LED growth light module is aligned with the boom box of the sound system. Its black reflecting power cord joins the speaker cables that are pressed together with plastic tighteners. The power is pressed into a multi-socket plug halfway the tiny speaker, into which the signal cable of the boom box plugs in, in the top right corner of the room.

Air

For the duration of the exhibition, the air is enriched with the volatiles released by Aronia m. branches, fruits and leaves. The latter are red-green-yellow-orange this time of year, with this kind of summer. A hot plate is placed on top of the windowsill, half an arm length in front of the window panel. A stainless-steel cooking pot with a capacity of five litres becomes heavier with the tap water filling it up until halfway. A tin can is positioned in the middle of the pot and on top of an aluminium cylinder (height 100 cm x width 50 cm). It receives the drops that condense on the reversed placed lit of the pot when the plant matter releases its compounds soon after the water is brought to a boil. The plant matter is cut and hand-picked at 100 m distance from SOLU and 50 m from shore of the Baltic Sea. Observing the plant's height (3 m) and width (2 m) and the 2 cm diameter of the fruits. During the opening days of the exhibition, fresh plant matter is inserted into the pot on a daily basis (see Fig. 3). The tin is emptied



Figure 1. Seed coated berryapples string lit up by LED plant growth module. Detail of installation Seed Scarification: Serious Taking. Gesellschaft für Tanzforschung, Symposium Tanz der Dinge / Things that Dance. Karlsruhe, 5-7 October 2018. Photo: Bartaku (Bartaku, 2019).

every hour, with the liquid being stored in glass bottles with sealable cap and transferred from there into 20 ml spraying bottles. They are displayed on a table standing between room 2 and 3, at disposal for the visitors.

Sound

One directional speaker of 60 x 60 cm (Panphonics) is attached to the ceiling with four pieces of fishing wire that pass through a metal ring before being knotted onto a metal hook in the middle of the back panel of the speaker. It directs the sound that originates from a USBkey stored audio recording file IdeaHouse Recording_edit for tanzDD.aiff (Vitkauskaite, 2016),³ via a media-player to the Aronia m. seed string. A second sound file is Dripping Aronia Berries.aif (Jeron, 2016): a recording of the dripping of the plant's sap onto electronic sound hardware. It is played via a cylindrical non-reflective low frequency subwoofer. A black signal cable is plugged in and connected to a small speaker. The power cables of this Genelec speaker set are plugged into a white extension socket. The cables are held together

with shiny, black reflecting plastic tighteners. The point of departure for the positioning of the speakers is where the cracks in the white painted floor, coming from the centre of the right wall, converge into a single point.

Seed String

At 55 cm on the left from the subwoofer the seed string is laid down. It points perpendicular to the entrance door, right under the ceiling speaker. The seeds are attached on a black reflecting cotton wire using a needle. They are varnish-glued onto 22 berryapples as shown in Fig. $1.^4$

Result: Air Force Staining

On the evening of 29 August 2019, the exhibition opens to the public. The audio, LED-light, and hot plate are turned on. With visitors entering room 3, they expose the seeds to a concentration of *sapiens* breath. For 128 minutes they conjure up with the air that is released by the heated plant matter and the SOLU air.

This mixture is then entering and morphing porous matter and minds:

Air ID⁵

Fumingly you fill the air. Entering bodies through nostrils, striking the back side of eyeballs. Striking the inner skull mass, the breast balloon, the heart, down into the belly, waist, knees, cuffs, heels, tows and rushing back up. Filling the mouth, exhaling whilst striking throat, tongue and lips. Mix back into the air.

It is then, with the remaining visitors sipping their red and white wines, that the loud *bang* reaches our ears coming from room 3. There, at an instant we find ourselves staring at the new scene. Most of us look at the reflecting blue jacket underneath high-blond hair and into the blue fixated eyes of a boy. His nose is flattened by the glass of the window in the thick wall in the back. When a feminine figurine appears behind him, he turns away from us and dissolves into the shadowy background of the inner courtyard.

Our gazes move down now towards the white floor with its cracks accentuated by the

reddish-purplish berryapple extracts. They branch out from under the window to the middle of the room. Four hands pick up the window panel from the ground and place it back on the windowsill. The scattered *Aronia m.* solids and liquids remain untouched on the floor. The cooking pot remains untouched as well.

Fig. 2 is the resulting image of the blending of two separate photos. The first one is taken right after the installation had been mounted. The other one is taken from almost the same position, right after the just-mentioned 'event:' the window panel launching into space, pushing the aluminium pot from the hot plate down onto the floor. *Aronia* matter is shock-pressed out, seepingly spreading over the cold stone surface, mingling with paint particles, seeping into the cracks. This photo-edit shows time as the perception of change and serves as the visual reference for the results discussed below. Fig. 4 shows the installation during the exhibition period after the opening event.

DISCUSSION

Recently, I have been sensitized more intensely to the sphere of the aerial through the practice-thinking loops by Petri Berndtson. I



Figure 2. This image is the result of the blending of two photos taken at two different moments of the installation work during the vernissage on 29 August 2019. Serious Taking Two: one prior and the other one after the cooking pot with *Aronia m*. matter falling on the floor of room 3. This work is part of Bartaku's solo exhibition Leaky Light3. 30 August - 26 September 2019. SOLU space (Bioart Society). Photo edit: Bartaku.



Figure 3. Detail of installation, *Aronia m*. leaves and branches in alu cooking pot. Photo: Bartaku.

Figure 4. Installation view in room 3 on 30 September 2019. Photo: Mari Kaakola.

invited him to reflect upon the above-described event. The following discussion is by Petri Berndtson.

Bartaku has invited me to give my phenomenologico-respiratory-atmospheric interpretation of this unexpected Aronia event. In my PhD dissertation "Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing" (Berndtson, 2018) I discovered a new manner of investigating the world within the experiential atmosphere of breathing. I have built this phenomenological approach in dialogue with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Gaston Bachelard's thought. If this phenomenological atmosphere is taken seriously, it can become a new point of departure for investigation of all things and phenomena. It thus can be understood as a new phenomenological beginning into which all phenomena can be returned. I will read Bartaku's description of his Aronia installation within this respiratory and aerial atmosphere.

How would Bartaku's *Aronia* event appear to a respiratory and aerial philosopher and especially to a respiratory and aerial phenomenologist (Škof & Berndtson, 2018)? I investigate all phenomena within the phenomenological atmosphere of breathing and air. In relation to this methodological atmosphere Bartaku has given me a task. This task is that he wants that "this happening is discussed in this essay from a primarily experiential stance focusing on air." The happening that he is speaking about is "an unplanned kinetic event [that] takes place marked by a sonic loud bang." The bang creates "a division in time".

First of all, as I begin to interrogate Bartaku's description of his Aronia event I must say that his description is missing something highly important. It does not explain what the intent of installation was if everything would have gone according to the plan. All the focus is on "the unplanned kinetic event". But what was the planned event that gave the horizon of possibility to this surprise that was not planned? So, what was Bartaku's plan?

Let us interrogate this Aronia event within the phenomenological, that is, within the experiential atmosphere. In order to begin, let us first ask: what is a phenomenological atmosphere? What is meant by a phenomenological notion of atmosphere? An atmosphere is something that we experience all the time. We are always already within an atmosphere. Our existence is atmospheric. An atmosphere itself is not a thing or an object. There is no perception of things or objects without the experience of atmospheres as in Merleau-Ponty's (2012) words "[e]very perception takes place within an atmosphere of generality" (p. 223). All perceptual things and objects are always surrounded, enveloped, and intermediated by experiential atmospheres (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 23). This means that we cannot ever take or withdraw things, objects, or phenomena out of atmosphere. This does not mean that we cannot change and transform atmospheres. It only means that there cannot ever be a thing or a phenomenon without an atmosphere. Our experience has "figure" and "background", "thing" and "non-thing" structure in which the atmosphere is "background" or "non-thing". Merleau-Ponty also uses notions of "field", "dimension" and "horizon" which are often used in very similar meanings as "atmosphere" or even in synonymous meaning. These notions are also "non-things". What could be atmospheres or atmospheric phenomena? In Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty (2012), for example, speaks of sexuality as an atmosphere. He writes: "sexuality...is continuously present in human life as an atmosphere" (p. 171). "[O]ur entire life ... breathes within a sexual atmosphere" (p. 177). This means that sexuality as an atmosphere or a field surrounds, envelopes, penetrates, and intermediates all things, phenomena, and events of our life. As an atmosphere "sexuality is everywhere and nowhere" (p. 400) and for this reason we cannot "identify a single content of consciousness that would be 'purely sexual' or that would not be sexual at all" (p. 177). Other atmospheres of our life that Merleau-Ponty mentions are, for example, "a social atmosphere" (p. 382), "an atmosphere of death", an "eternity" as "the atmosphere of time" (p. 414) and the "past" as "the atmosphere of the present" (p. 467). In The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty radicalizes his phenomenological thought. If in Phenomenology of Perception he wrote about perception that "[e]very perception takes place within an atmosphere of generality" (2012, p. 223), then in his late work he writes: "Perception is not first a perception of things, but a perception of elements (water, air...)" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 218). The perception or experience of elements of water, air, earth, and fire is the most general atmosphere in which "every perception takes place". I am investigating Bartaku's "unplanned kinetic event...that is marked by a sonic loud bang" within this phenomenological atmosphere.

Could we compare this sonic loud bang to the Big Bang from which the universe was created? Could this be Bartaku's surprising small (big) bang? The Big Bang is the beginning of everything. But, of course, before the Big Bang there was something that exploded. The Big Bang, for example, in German is Urknall and in Finnish alkuräjähdys. These words mean the beginning bang or the beginning explosion. Also, in phenomenological philosophy the beginning is the most important notion. Phenomenology is about returning to the beginning or finding a new beginning. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012), phenomenology "consists entirely in describing [the] beginning" (p. Ixxviii). In Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy this beginning can be understood as the experiential atmosphere of the elements which is always before the perception of things. In Gaston Bachelard's (1994) phenomenological words, "consciousness rejuvenates everything, giving a quality/value of beginning to the most everyday actions" (p. 67). So, we can speak of Bartaku's small beginning bang. This sound of the bang is "an atmospheric sound" which "vibrates in" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 236) everybody who shared the space of SOLU that day. That atmospheric sound of the bang still vibrates in Bartaku. That past sound is "the atmosphere of [his each and every] present" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 467) moment. And as Bartaku tells us the bang created "a division in time". Also, that division in time is a dimension of atmospheric temporality. There was a new beginning after the bang. Nothing was the same after it. The bang awakened people from their state of everydayness into the mysterious world where everything changes and has a new starting point. The bang is the beginning of Bartaku's art. Bartaku became a poet who began to have a wonder-full dialogue with this bang. This article is a great example of this wonder-full dialogue between Bartaku and the bang-created new time of the atmosphere. In Merleau-Ponty's words, Bartaku's bang can be understood as a creation of "a mythical time where certain events 'in the beginning' maintain a continued efficacity" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 24).6 This new beginning as a new mythical time is "the atmosphere of time" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 414) which still vibrates in us so much that we are still pondering it, for example, in this article.

What Bachelard means by "consciousness [that] rejuvenates everything, giving a value of beginning" to the most familiar things and events is the wondering and imagining consciousness. For Bachelard, true wonder is reverie (Bachelard, 1988, p. 167). In the state of wonder we see the world anew as a new beginning. "On principle, phenomenology liquidates the past and confronts what is new" (Bachelard, 1994, p. xxxii). The wonder sees, hears, and breathes the world as a mystery. Normally we experience the world as a problem. A problem is something we want to solve. If we see Bartaku's bang within the atmosphere of a problem, then we see the whole installation as a mistake or a huge disaster. It is a disaster as all the planned artistic efforts, goals, and values are destroyed and now one begins to worry will the public react negatively to all of this and one might begin to worry: what got broken, are the floor and the walls dirty, is there a need to begin to clean them up, etc. Cleaning

up is, for example, part of solving the problem. It is important to understand that we see certain events and phenomena as problems only if we encounter them within the atmosphere of problems. Bartaku in his state of wonder does not move within the atmosphere of problems and thus he experiences this unplanned event as a huge mysterious opportunity of life, an opening to a new atmospheric dimension. True wonder is wonder-full openness within the atmosphere of the mystery to see amazing possibilities of the unplanned event.⁷

When I said that, according to Bachelard, the wondering and imagining "consciousness rejuvenates everything, giving a value of beginning" to the world it is important to understand what Bachelard means, in the first place, by this beginning. For him, the beginning is in the first place our oneiric relationship with the world of elements. This is something guite similar to what was previously mentioned about Merleau-Ponty's atmosphere of the elements. Bachelard says that he has learned his whole phenomenological approach of returning to the beginnings from the poets (Bachelard, 1994, p. 185). According to him, the poets "are born phenomenologists" (p. xxviii) as the true poets perpetually return to the beginnings as the reverie of the elements. Bachelard divides the true poets into four main groups depending on which of the four elements is their foremost inspiration. Thus, he speaks of the poets of the earth (terrestrial poets), the poets of the water (aquatic poets), the poets of the fire (igneous poets) and the poets of the air (aerial poets) (Berndtson, 2018, pp. 189-217).

When Bartaku requested me to respond to his idea that the bang as the happening is discussed primarily from the experiential stance focusing on air, we could say that we are speaking in the Bachelardian sense of aerial poetry. Bachelard defines aerial as follows: "everything that passes through air is dynamically and substantially aerial" (Bachelard, 1988, p. 30, footnote 5). First it is essential to ask what is meant by this "primarily experiential stance focusing on air"? What is the meaning of air here if it is understood in a truly experiential manner? This experiential air is phenomenological air. Experiential air is not the air of physical sciences. It is not, in the first place, the air that is a mixture of gases like nitrogen and oxygen. Experiential air is the invisible elemental atmosphere which we all share together and which surrounds us all. Air is the primary medium of our life. It is the in-betweenness between all of

us and between things and ourselves. Thus, it mediates all things. It is full of all kinds of powers. It is thick and full of living phenomena. We breathe this experiential atmosphere of air. We see, smell and hear within the mediation of this air. It inspires all our movements and carries our spoken words to the others. It is the primordial media of our communication. It is within this atmospheric medium that this surprising and unplanned kinetic event takes place. The bang changes the atmosphere. It does not only create a division in time as it creates a division in the atmosphere and it is this changed atmosphere that gives all things a new meaning. The bang spreads around "a new reality of being" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 68). The sound of the bang is an aerial atmospheric event (Merleau-Ponty's "atmospheric sound") and only as an atmospheric event which spreads, "emanates" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 172) and "passes through air" it can reach to everyone at SOLU and its nearby surroundings and living being like the boy with the blue eyes full of wonder. Aren't the children the greatest wondrous beings?

This bang as the beginning explosion transforms Bartaku's art as after it the attendees at SOLU receive a totally different atmospheric experience of it. And as it is delivered to a new unexpected witnessing participant in a form of the boy with blue eyes. It is not only the boy and the attendees, but also the creator himself who have gone through a transformation. All of this is true especially in Bartaku's case as ever since the bang his role as a berryapple artist has been to stand in wonder, to imagine, think and poetize his whole *Aronia* project anew as nothing is the same after the bang.

The bang gave him a new order of things and within that atmospheric newness everything needed to be rethought, reinterpreted, and re-examined. Why one has to redo everything? Because after the bang one breathes differently and breathes different atmosphere, sees and thinks differently as one sees through transformed atmosphere and thinks within the atmosphere of the bang. Bang changed everything as it gave a new beginning. When the atmosphere as the context or dimensionality of our life is transformed, then everything that passes through it also is transformed. An easy way to understand this is how all the meanings of things change if we encounter them either in the light of the day or in the pitch-dark night. Accidents that give explosions may end up giving us artistic dynamite as happened also

to Alfred Nobel. Man, who is wonder-full openness to the mystery of surprising events is a Nietzschean person who says: "I am not a man, I am dynamite" (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 131). I wait with anticipatory astonishment where, when and how will Bartaku's aerial dynamite explode again in an unplanned manner in the future!

CONCLUSION

This essay is an experiment in which I tried to explain in detail matter, space, media and an unexpected event that are related to the installation work *Seed Scarification: Serious Taking Two.* I have composed the essay following the structure that is used in scientific papers.

I made a photo that stitched together the moment before and after the event. I spoke of division of time and emphasized the mixture of air that originated from plant, matter, humans and room 3. One that created an ever-evolving atmospheric ambience. One that tied all entities in that room together. Still, separated from the outside breath of the boy that appeared all of a sudden, with blue and white-blond reflecting from the upper part of his body.

Then I invited respiratory philosopher Petri Berndtson to perform an analysis on the described event. It has to be underlined that he did not experience the *Aronia* bang when it occured.

Hybrid identities, biocentrism, plant focus, -vitality or -power, is not what Petri Berndtson elaborates on.⁸ The photo edit remains excluded from the philosophical comments as well. Instead, he is attracted to air and atmospheric conditions, the most important notion of "the beginning of everything" before the "Big Bang" and the "small bang" in room 3. The latter then "awakens people" who find themselves pathing from "a new beginning". Like the crash cymbal hit by the drummer such that it re-orientates the directionality of the jazz quartet and takes their listeners along in unexpected directions. Perhaps awakening the dormant *Aronia m*. seeds, as well.

Accentuated are the intrarelations of that sonic perception, the big- and small-time scale and the human artist. Whereas the work would not exist without *Aronia m.* matter and air. As most workings initiated by Bartaku since his encounter with the *Baroa b.* plantation in Latvia in 2009, they are instigated by mere happenings at that plantation situated in between the encounter of *sapiens* and plants and their companions.

Rather, Berndtson depicts the atmospheric background against which these things and events are possible. He focuses on the conditions that make things possible. Perhaps this bang that reignites consciousness pertains – just like the 'mere happening' at the plantation does – to the reality of magic as described by Federico Campagna: "Magic's reality-system aims to console those who adopt it, by rebuilding their experience of themselves and of the world in a way that reveals to them their condition of eternal and pre-existing salvation" (Campagna as cited in Vandeput, 2021, p. 228).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The version referred to here is the second iteration of the installation. The sound hardware and scenography are modified due to the different properties of the SOLU art space where the work has been shown together with other works as part of: Leaky Light – Solo exhibition. Three selected works. SOLU, Helsinki (Fin). Aug. 27–Sept.26, 2019.
- ² The plant matter in this set up originates from a bush that is part of a planted line of *Aronia m*. species nearby SOLU (60.168647, 24.971583). Based upon visual appearance it is most probably a cultivar derived from *Aronia mitschurinii*, a hybrid of *Sorbus aucuparia* and *Aronia melanocarpa*. See e. g., Leonard et al. (2013).
- ³ Vitkauskaite, Ruta/Bartaku/Members of the Aronia Overture Unchoir (2014): Aronia Overture, part of Aronia Overture, Aiff file, Unpublished, Latvia
- ⁴ For a detailed account of the string making, see Bartaku, 2019.
- ⁵ Air Identification
- ⁶ Thanks to Saara-Maija Strandman for inspiring discussions concerning the topics I am writing about here.
- ⁷ In phenomenological tradition, both Gabriel Marcel and Merleau-Ponty make a distinction between the mystery and the problem as two fundamentally different ways of approaching the world. The problems are something that we try to solve. Mysteries cannot be solved. We can only live them and intertwine ourselves in a participatory manner with them (see Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. lxxxv; Merleau-Ponty, 1992, p. 133 and p. 136).
- ⁸ For this approach see e. g. Emanuele Coccia's writings on a "cosmology of mixture... everything is in everything" (2017, p. 71).