

ECOLOGIES OF DEATH, ECOLOGIES OF MOURNING: A BIOPHILOSOPHY OF NON/LIVING ARTS

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ABSTRACT

In the present condition of planetary environmental crises, violence, and war, entire ecosystems are annihilated, habitats turn into unliveable spaces, and shared “more-than-human” vulnerabilities get amplified. Here and now, death and loss become urgent environmental concerns, while the Anthropocene-induced anxiety, anger, and grief are manifested in popular-scientific narratives, art, culture, and activism. Grounded in the theoretical framework of queer death studies, this article explores present grief imaginaries and engagements with more-than-human death, dying, and extinction, as they are interwoven through contemporary art. It is there where an ecological ontology of death is being exposed and ethical territories of eco-grief unfold.

Introduction

The question of death has formed part and parcel of Western philosophy and cultural imaginaries¹ since antiquity. Yet, it is during the twentieth century that the problematic of death emerges in a different way (see, e.g. Elliot, 1973; Ericksen, 2012; MacCormack, 2020). The sheer numbers of victims of two world wars, the Holocaust, the Holodomor, and the Gulag, colonial and ethnic genocides, atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and numerous wars taking place all around the world,² have turned death into a bloody companion as well as a critical, material and conceptual point in Western philosophy and cultural theory. In the second half of the past century, thinkers and public intellectuals were asking what must have happened to the seemingly rational, autonomous human subject and the institution of reason that had allowed all these past and ongoing mass-scale atrocities to happen. The Frankfurt School, poststructuralism, and postmodernism ultimately undermined the Enlightenment belief in the hegemonic rational subject (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002; Lyotard, 1988), whilst twentieth-century art responded powerfully to the mass death and violence of wars and totalitarianisms. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), Mykhailo Dmytrenko's *1933* (1963), Edith Birkin's *The Death Cart – Łódź Ghetto* (1980), and Marina Abramović's *Balkan Baroque* (1997) are some of the prominent examples. What has, however, remained on the margins of those philosophical, cultural, literary, and visual engagements with enormous losses, protests against violence and war, and the accompanying grief and mourning, is the issue of more-than-human death—in itself, and not only evoked as a metaphor for human suffering and decease.

However, in the context of the presently unfolding planetary environmental crises, where both slow and abrupt violence, like Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, annihilate entire ecosystems and turn habitats into unliveable spaces, *death and loss become urgent environmental concerns*. In these conditions, socio-economic inequalities intensify, and shared more-than-human vulnerabilities get amplified (e.g. Geerts, 2023). Unsustainable living conditions, contributing to the mortality of humans and nonhumans, destruction of entire ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, and mass extinction *evoke* feelings of anxiety, anger, and grief, manifested globally and locally in popular-scientific narratives, artistic and cultural expressions, and environmental activism.

Grounded in the theoretical framework of queer death studies and feminist posthumanities, this article explores contemporary imaginaries of environmental crises and the interlinked engagements with more-than-human death, dying, extinction, and ecological grief (or “eco-grief”), as they are interwoven through the tissues of contemporary bio-, eco-, and new-media art. In particular, I focus on four different artistic projects that open up the problematics of loss, death, and grief, each in its unique way and dealing with a particular scale: American artist and biologist Brandon Ballengée's *The Frameworks of Absence* (2006-ongoing), dealing with extinction; Australian artist Svenja Kratz's *A Shrine for Algernon* (2009) and *The Immortalisation of Kira and Rama* (2010), focused on nonhuman death in the context of science and other forms of consumption; Finnish artist Terike Haapoja's *Community* (2007), engaged in the questions of death and vanishing that exceed any forms of classification (e.g., species); and last but not least, Finnish duo IC-98's *Nekropolis* (2015), which—along with their other works—indirectly and poetically tackles complex relations between ecology, death, transformation, and grief. While each of these projects deserves a space that this article cannot provide, I bring the selected artworks altogether to open up a conversation on the ways contemporary art shifts the cultural understandings and significance of death and grief. Indeed, it is in these spaces of *non/living* artworks (Radomska, 2016)³ where conventional frames of human exceptionalism are questioned, where ecological ontology of death is being exposed, and where ethical territories of eco-grief and mourning the more-than-human unfold.

In the following sections, I first zoom in on the ecological framing of death, grief, and mourning; subsequently, I discuss the theoretical perspective of queer death studies (QDS) and, in particular, its posthumanizing strand; the latter serves as a premise for unpacking the shifting landscape of our engagement with death and loss beyond human exceptionalism, as it is explored through contemporary artworks. Importantly and as mentioned above, due to the limited scope of this paper, and its philosophical rather than art-historical or art-critical character, I will not focus on a thick description and an in-depth analysis of the composition and aesthetics of the select art projects but instead, will pursue an investigation of what these artworks *do* to the conventional cultural framings of death, grief, and mourning.

Ecologizing Grief

Etymologically, the word “ecology” can be traced back to *oikos*, the Greek term for “house, environment.” Ecology thus describes the relations between organisms and their milieus. Beyond environmental sciences and particularly in the context of contemporary cultural theory, art, and the humanities, the concept of ecology has proved to be valuable for theorizing multiplex relationalities, interactions, and processes between nature and culture, the natural and the artificial, and between bodies and technologies, among others. It has been employed directly as part of more specified concepts like “media ecology theory” (as a study of media, technology, and communication, e.g., Fuller, 2005) and “queer ecologies” (e.g., Erickson & Sandilands, 2010), for instance; or indirectly, like in the case of “feminist technoeology”⁴ or “somatechnics” (understood as an enmeshment of bodies and soft as well as hard technologies and techniques; Sullivan & Murray, 2009).

Many of these insights refer to French psychoanalyst and philosopher Félix Guattari’s conceptualization of three ecologies (equated with the environment, society, and individual human subjects), where the term “ecology” describes a multiplex arrangement of relationalities between entities and their milieu, including “the whole of subjectivity and capitalistic power formations” (Guattari, 1989/2008, p. 35). What follows from there is a very wide understanding of the entanglement between nature and culture, where the planetary environmental disruption cannot be fully conceived in separation from the global mechanisms of advanced capitalism, cultural processes, social and political crises, communities, and individual human subjects (Radomska, 2017). It is also an understanding implicitly or explicitly shared by feminist posthumanities and new materialisms. The present paper adheres to such a multifaceted notion of ecology; here, death, as much as grief and mourning, involves numerous entities, processes, and relationalities, where each cannot be analyzed in isolation.

Building on my previous work concerned with queered and ecological framings of death exposed through contemporary practices of art/science and bioart⁵ (e.g., Radomska, 2020), in this paper, I focus on how artistic engagements with more-than-human death are often accompanied by (implicit) visual—at times even multisensorial—and affective explorations of grief and mourning the more-than-human.

While the questions of grief, mourning, and bereavement have been at the center of Western scholarship within and beyond the interdisciplinary field of death studies, most of these discussions have focused on the grief and mourning related to human death while leaving the loss of nonhumans/the more-than-human beyond their scope. It is during the past two decades that scholars within cultural studies, anthropology, philosophy, and psychology, among others, have started to problematize *ecological grief* (or *eco-grief*),⁶ that is, a form of grief experienced in relation to the present or anticipated ecological losses of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes, resulting from severe anthropogenic environmental change (e.g., Cunsolo & Landman, 2017). As climate change and health researchers Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis (2018) point out, experiences of ecological grief differ across geographical locations, cultures, communities, and even individuals within a given community. In a similar vein, thanatologist Kriss A. Kevorkian (2006) talks about *environmental grief*, defined as a “grief reaction stemming from the environmental loss of ecosystems caused by natural or man-made events” (p. 2).⁷ Kevorkian, along with other scholars engaging with the problematic of eco-grief (e.g., Rosenfeld, 2016), draws on the concept of *disenfranchised grief* (Doka, 1989): not openly accepted in society, where the loss is not socially acknowledged, the griever and their grief are often excluded, or the circumstances of the death are questionable in some way. Furthermore, inter- and transdisciplinary research on eco-grief is certainly indebted to indigenous knowledges and scholarship, anticolonial perspectives, and queerfeminist environmental humanities and posthumanities, including extinction studies.

The research on eco-grief is driven by several focal points. Firstly, it looks at the meanings and significance of present and anticipated ecological losses (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017). Secondly, it exposes our relation to nonhuman others, ecosystems, and landscapes, as well as values that we ascribe to them, and, by doing so, it sheds light on our ethical approaches to the more-than-human. Thirdly, it explores the ways in which eco-grief and mourning contribute to the changing cultural understandings, meaning, and significance of death and loss in a given place and context. And fourthly, eco-grief researchers also examine interactions and relations between environmentally-based grief and other forms of grief related to various modes of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003). Taking the idea of vulnerability as shared and a common denominator among humans and nonhumans (Shildrick, 2002;

Pevere, 2023), eco-grief scholarship turns its attention not only to the necessary leap between theory and action (i.e., the move from theorizing eco-grief to ethico-political stance these theorizations may mobilize; see e.g., Cunsolo & Landman, 2017). Eco-grief research also directs us towards ecological and ethical more-than-human sensibilities that may be activated through theoretical, cultural, and artistic engagements with eco-grief and mourning. While the primary focus within the field of eco-grief research goes to various forms of loss resulting from the planetary environmental crises, such as species extinction or the destruction of entire ecosystems, in my work, I apply the lens of eco-grief to inquiries anchored in the problematic of more-than-human necropolitics and nonhuman death that do not fall directly into the category of “environmental loss” and yet, result from the systematic objectification and dehumanization of nonhuman life. Such an understanding of the concept of eco-grief also forms part of the theoretical framework of queer death studies.

Queering Death

Queer death studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field of research, developed through conversations with queerfeminist and trans theorizing, anticolonial scholarship, environmental humanities, and posthumanities, as well as interrelated fields, e.g., critical animal studies, and often accompanied by dialogues with critiques emerging from environmental and social justice movements (Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke, 2019, 2020). QDS pushes the boundaries of more conventional death studies research by zooming in on the problematics of death, dying, and mourning through the critical lens of Anthropocene necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003; Lykke, 2019), marked by entangled necropowers of (neo)colonialism, (neo)imperialism, extractivist capitalism, and human exceptionalism. Crucially, in the context of QDS, death and mourning emerge as an ethico-political inquiry anchored in global power structures. QDS scholarship is marked by its critical approach to normativities and exclusionary notions of the human, linked to the idea that the death of those who differ from the normative human subject in terms of gender, sexuality, racialization, class, able-bodiedness, species, and geopolitical location, is posed as less grievable (Butler, 2004) or not counting at all.

However, along with redirecting attention toward marginalized stories of death, dying, and mourning, QDS also involves key analytical shifts.

Here, “queer”—in its verbal and adverbial forms—becomes a methodology: a way of critical defamiliarization, of undoing normativities, and mobilizing new knowledge configurations, combined with “an opening of other more affirmative horizons” (Radomska & Lykke, 2022, p. 124). Queering refers to both: deconstructing normativities and mechanisms of normalization in their broad understanding and beyond the singular focus on gender and sexuality (e.g., Giffney & Hird, 2009; Chen, 2012); and also undoing heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, binary gender and sexualities, all driven by reproductive biopolitics and reproductive futurism. As a critical analytical move, *queering* in QDS operates in tandem with *decolonizing*, aimed at both dismantling racialized and (neo)colonial necropolitical violence, and de-universalizing Western modern onto-epistemologies of death; and with *posthumanizing*, which tackles the planetary-scale machinery of annihilation of the more-than-human world in its ontological, epistemological, and ethico-political dimensions. Consequently, posthumanizing death involves responsibility, accountability, and care *for* and *in* dying more-than-human worlds (Radomska & Lykke, 2022). The artworks discussed in this paper have such a strange-making effect: they defamiliarize traditionally human-centered notions of death, and they push the frames of grievability, unsettling thus dominant grief imaginaries,⁸ mobilizing different sensibilities, and posing the question of ethics surrounding more-than-human death as much as life. In the following section, I bring into conversation two projects that, in very different ways, open up the questions of absence and what remains after the other no longer is.

Grieving Beyond: From Extinction to Absence

Whenever the themes of art and extinction are brought together, one of the first names that comes to mind is American visual artist, biologist, and environmentalist Brandon Ballengée. His works are primarily concerned with how climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and the sixth mass extinction event, as well as environmental catastrophes, alter—in short- and long-term scales—both human and nonhuman communities and populations. Ballengée is particularly known for his haunting series of photographs of terminally deformed specimens of marine creatures whose deformities had resulted from the toxic aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 (*Ghosts of the Gulf*, 2014); and for *Collapse*



Figure 1. Brandon Ballengée, *The Frameworks of Absence*. 2006–Ongoing. Artist cut and burnt historical artifacts. Installed at *The Armory Show*, New York, NY, 2015. Photo: Casey Dorobek. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

(2010–12), a large-scale installation piece in the form of a pyramid display of 26,162 preserved specimens representing 370 marine species placed in gallon jars and, according to Ballengée, intended as a reference to the fragility of the Gulf’s ecosystems.

Yet, in this section, I would like to look closer at a different in its character and medium project by Ballengée, namely, *The Frameworks of Absence* (2006–ongoing). The project directly addresses the issue of extinction while employing a narrative culturally and symbolically associated with funerary traditions and rituals. Throughout the years, the artist obtained and collected prints of presently extinct animal species dating from 1640 to 2014. As Ballengée mentions in the materials accompanying the works, including respective pages on his website, each image was printed at the same time as a given species became extinct. Subsequently, the biologist/artist meticulously cut images of extinct animals. This procedure resulted in the images without the depicted subjects—and this is precisely what is in the project referred to as a “framework of absence” (Fig. 1).⁹

The frameworks are, however, accompanied by another component of the growing piece. Namely, after being cut out, each of the images of an extinct animal was burnt, and the remnants (or “ash,” as the artist mentions on his website) were placed

in tiny symbolic urns (Fig. 2). The remaining “frames”—accompanied by the detailed historical information about a lost species and the author of the original image—were displayed along with the urns in 2015 at the Armory Show at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in the US.¹⁰ Those visitors who decided to acquire an image with an urn were asked to “scatter these ashes in memory to species gone” (Ballengée, 2023). The project was accompanied by *The Book of the Dead*, an 85-page volume which depicts all the species included in the series. This eclectic combination of symbolically significant cultural artifacts and rituals (e.g., urns, the scattering of ashes, *The Book of the Dead*) addresses audiences in a special way: by drawing attention to species extinction through the means that are familiar and that resonate with culturally accepted forms of commemorating an individual’s death. In this way, an abstract “absence” is brought much closer to home.

While in Ballengée’s work absence is very concrete and refers to extinctions of particular species as specific absences, absence as a different space, and perhaps—or even certainly—a space without humans, pervades the oeuvre of the Finnish artistic duo IC-98, formed by Visa Suonpää and Patrik Söderlund. Over the past 25 years, the artists have worked with a variety of mediums and in different formats (from site-specific objects or installations



Figure 2. Brandon Ballengée, *The Frameworks of Absence*. 2006–Ongoing. Funeral urns, ashes. Photo: Michael Ahn. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

to video/animation work), always at the thematic intersection of the environmental, the social, and the political. IC-98 is nonetheless most known for its meticulously scripted animation works, which are based on pencil drawings combined with digital effects and sound installations.

These pieces often show a world at a different temporal point in the unknown (to us) deep future, presumably a world recuperating from human-induced violence or catastrophe; yet, a world that is not deprived of other life forms or processes, and a world unfolding “in terms of geological time” (Elfving & Söderlund, 2015, p. 163). More-than-human temporalities are a key point of reference.

Nekropolis (2015–2016)¹¹ is one such HD animation, realized in collaboration with Markus Lepistö, Juan Duarte Regino, and Sink (Fig. 3). The piece is 32 minutes long and is screened on a seamless loop. It is conceptualized as an interpretation of English writer and philosopher John Ruskin’s lecture “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” (1884), dealing with the issues of pollution linked to industrialization. IC-98 combines the visual motif of the storm-cloud with a context where nature and culture can no longer be thought as separate, and where the categorizations of sacrum/profanum and transcendence/immanence collapse. As Finnish curator and researcher Taru Elfving (2022) writes, the animation work shows



Figure 3. IC-98, *Nekropolis*, 2016. Animation still © IC-98. CC BY 3.0

souls gathering for their last journey, but there are no golden rays of light to guide them, no weightless rise off the ground. The dichotomy of immanent and transcendent begins to sway. The invisible forces and elements of embodied existence gain material presence here. Souls appear to be accompanied not only by their beloved companion species, the swallows, but also become gradually indistinguishable from swarms of insects or particles of some kind—be it dust, pollutants, pollen, spores. (p. 7)

In its visually poetic and melancholic way, IC-98 disrupts the monument of human exceptionalist narratives on death, subjectivity, and the human/nonhuman divide. The artists set the scene for thinking and imagining with processes and relationalities, unfolding in a manner consistent with Guattari’s proposal for a transversal understanding of ecologies.

Biophilosophizing with Non/Living Arts

Discussions concerned with posthumanizing grief imaginaries and mourning the more-than-human require taking one step back, namely, looking closer at the ontological underpinnings of the very concept of death and a frequently ascribed to it value. Historically speaking, the binary juxtaposition between “life” and “death” (and, by extension, living and non-living, but also human and nonhuman), indicating conceptual contours of both life and its counterpart, death, may be traced back to the very beginnings of Western philosophy. Philosopher Eugene Thacker (2008) points out that this binary is characteristic of the dominant engagement with the concept of life in Western philosophy (to be found in, for instance, the works of Plato, Aristotle, or Kant), characterized by its focus on life’s “essence” and delimiting categories, such as, e.g., the boundary between the living and non-living. Yet, as Thacker notes, there is also a more marginal style of examining life: biophilosophy, which does not look for “essences” and “boundaries of articulation” but instead prioritizes a rigorous, critical, and creative mode of asking “What relations are precluded in such-and-such a division, in such-and-such a classification?” (Thacker, 2008, p. 141).

It can be found in process philosophies of Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, Alfred N. Whitehead, and Gilles Deleuze, as well as, I argue, in contemporary queerfeminist and new-materialist theorizing. Biophilosophy as a mode of engagement with both life and death is woven in the work of queerfeminist philosophers: Claire Colebrook’s queer passive vitalism; Patricia MacCormack’s ahuman ethics; Rosi Braidotti’s *zoe*, Erin Edwards’ conceptualization of the corpse or Sarah Ensor’s terminality, to name some of the key thinkers.¹² There, life is often conceptualized as a material force, an intensity, a form of dynamism, inventiveness, creativity, but also a potential for destruction and idleness that extend beyond the organic, and directly tackle the issue of death.

Put simply, biophilosophy zooms in on what transforms life; it explores life as a multiplicity that traverses binaries, evades anthropomorphization, and reckons with the issues of relations, their dynamics, and mechanisms of exclusion. In consequence, biophilosophy concentrates not only on ontology (what is life? and what is death?) but also on ethics (what relations is life embedded in? what is its relation to death? what gets excluded? and what values are being ascribed in these processes?).

It is not a certain “image of life” (Deleuze, 1994) that constitutes a starting point, but rather, multiplicitous differences, processes, and materialities imbued with a potential for generation as much as for self-annihilation. Processes of living and dying, and growth and decay are not approached here as binary oppositions, but as complex interwoven phenomena. Approaching death in a biophilosophical manner involves focusing on the complexity of relationalities, intra- and interactions (Barad, 2007), as well as linkages and divisions, in place of individual forms of life and the ways in which they may be qualified.

Finally, operationalizing a biophilosophical perspective allows one to explore life/death not as a fixed opposition, but instead, attend to these phenomena and processes through an “ecological” lens: as “non/living” matters, where the slash (“/”) in the inscription indicates the processual, material and temporal entanglement, and relationality between what one may conventionally deem as “living” and “non-living,” “growth” and “decay,” or “life” and “death.” Such a reframing tackles the vibrancy, dynamics, and ambiguity of the relationship between the two components of the conventional binary. The concept of the non/living stems from a transdisciplinary theoretical and practical engagement with bioart, bioscience, and philosophical approaches to life and its relation to death. While originally coined in order to theorize and narrate transformations of biomatter as they are sustained and *presented*—and not only represented—in both the laboratory and the art gallery contexts of bioart, on a discursive level, the concept seems promising also in other settings. Namely, the non/living might be useful in situations where no biological materiality is on display and where the viewer may instead experience the documentation, other objects, or audio-visual traces dealing with life/death processuality or problematics. Such works often move beyond that which is presented, putting further emphasis on the issues of memory, commemoration, empathy, grief, and mourning.

• **Community Beyond Species. Grieving the More-than-Human**

Eco-grief, as fleshed out through contemporary artworks and cultural expressions, is not always defined as grief by curators, critics, cultural commentators, or artists. And yet, the artworks themselves generate a space of experience, affect, and ethical relationality, mobilized in connection to



Figure 4. Terike Haapoja, *Community*, 2007. Installation view. Oulu Art Museum. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

more-than-human death, disappearance, vanishing, extinction, abuse of the more-than-human, environmental violence, and ecocide.

One of the projects that deeply touches the problematics of death, its intimacy, as well as the relation with the dying and with oneself, is New York-based Finnish visual artist Terike Haapoja's work *Community* (2007). In her various individual artworks, as much as in collaborative projects, like Gustafsson&Haapoja (formed with writer Laura Gustafsson), Haapoja concentrates to a great extent on the questions of animality, non-humanity, mortality, ethical relationship with the nonhuman world, as well as multispecies politics, planetary social and environmental justice, and human and animal rights. While there are many other projects by the artist herself or the Gustafsson&Haapoja duo, which deal with the themes of life/death and grief in their broadest understanding,¹³ here I zoom in on her earlier work, primarily due to its unique combination of aesthetics, poetics, intimacy, and the central theme.

The work *Community* (Fig. 4) builds on Haapoja's earlier projects: *Entropy* (2004) and *In and Out of Time* (2005),¹⁴ which all involve the use of an infrared camera to videorecord dead animal bodies during the extended time following their death. This type of camera registers infrared radiation emitted by all bodies and visualizes this data in the form of images. *Community* consists of projections-recordings displayed on several round screens distributed in an almost entirely dark space of the exhibition. The infrared recordings, lasting for several hours each, capture the dead bodies of animals of different species right after the "moment" of their death. While an individual dies, the materiality of their body with multitudes of microorganisms—a true multispecies community—remains vibrant (Bennett, 2010; Lykke, 2021). In a poetic way, the recordings show the bodies that—with passing time—slowly cool down and their images vanish from the display of the screens (Fig. 5). Members of the audience may enter the exhibition space and spend time among the displayed recordings, witnessing and participating in a peculiar way in these intimate processes

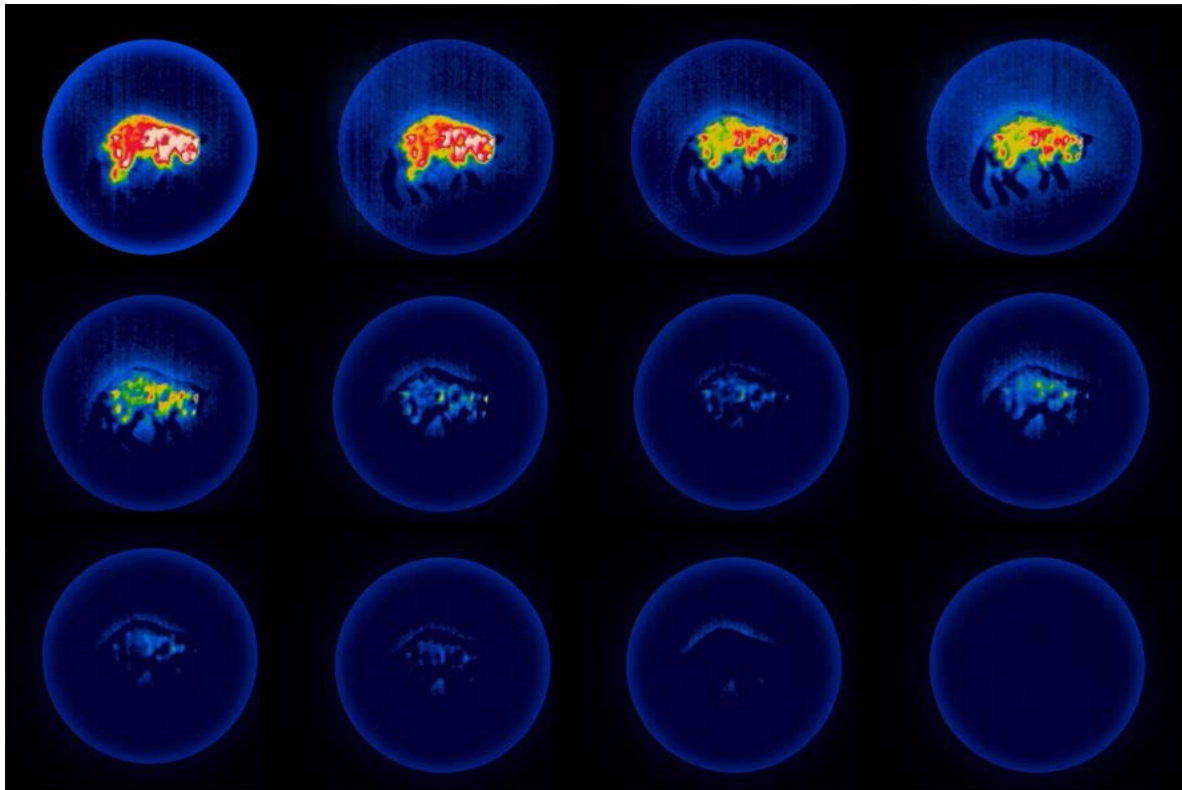


Figure 5. Terike Haapoja, *Community*, 2007. Stills from the video. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

of passing away/vanishing that exceed species boundaries. Witnessing then becomes a meditation or even a mourning ritual. Simultaneously, the notion of community gains another layer—we all die, regardless of boundaries signified by species or bodily contours.

• **Biophilosophical Territories. Death Deterritorialized**¹⁵

The question of presence comes in a different way in the work of Australian new-media artist Svenja Kratz, who has worked to a great extent with tissue engineering in the context of art-science practices and bioart. Relations between life and death, the biological and the artificial, as well as the issues of immortality, immortalization, and memory have been prominent in her work. During the years 2008–2011, Kratz worked with the Saos-2 (osteosarcoma cancer) cell line, originally derived from an 11-year-old girl in the 1970s. For the past fifty years, the Saos-2 cell line has been used worldwide in biomedical research. The artist named the anonymous

donor “Alice.” The presence/absence of Alice in the form of an immortalized cell line and the non/living ecology of biomatter used in research and art, are explored by Kratz in the series of exhibitions, forming part of the rhizomatic project *The Absence of Alice (AOA)*. *AOA* involves the use of different media: from the Saos-2 cell line and other biomatter, through photography and video, to sculpture and installation (Kratz, 2012; Radomska, 2020). Each exhibition—reminiscent of a peculiar “wonderland”—creates a space where different non/living elements and objects enter into relations with one another, simultaneously exposing the life/death and presence/absence entanglements.

The work with the Saos-2, like any animal and, particularly mammal, tissue, requires special conditions: sterile environment, temperature, amount of oxygen, and regular procedures of “cleaning” and “feeding”. Any oversight may lead to the contamination of tissue culture. Yet, one of the key elements in culturing mammal tissues is the use of fetal bovine serum (FBS) as a nutrient for cell cultures. FBS is perceived as a by-product of an abattoir. It is derived from the blood of calf

fetuses removed from slaughtered pregnant cows. Simultaneously, there is no viable synthetic equivalent, which makes FBS necessary for animal tissue engineering. It is this reliance on and incorporation of others' death—often out of sight in popular discourses on science and bioengineering—that takes a prominent stage in the artworks forming part of *AOA*, notably in *A Shrine for Algernon* (2008–2011)¹⁶ and *The Immortalisation of Kira and Rama* (2010).¹⁷ In a similar way to Australian bioart duo The Tissue Culture & Art Project formed by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr,¹⁸ Kratz focuses on our complicity in consumption. She looks at how nonhuman animal bodies are “sacrificed” in the name of science, but also in other, less esteemed modes of our “devouring” of the world: as food, leather, glue, jewelry, decoration, all sorts of accessories, or as objects used for entertainment. Without providing black-or-white answers, Kratz brings to the fore the ethical conundrum and simultaneously creates a space where one may reflect on, commemorate, or even grieve.

A Shrine for Algernon is an installation consisting of a life-like polymer clay sculpture based on a plaster cast of a fetal calf body acquired by the artist from a local slaughterhouse (Fig. 6). She named the calf Algernon. The sculpture is placed on a steel surface attached to a wooden table, intended as a reminder of the cold abattoir spaces. There is mock blood dripping from Algernon's eye down onto the base to which the table is attached. There, one can see a pool of dark maroon blood with Alice's face visible in it. In addition, there are also elements, such as green growth, feathers, and rhizomatic roots. As the artist notes, drawing on Deleuze, these elements refer to creative transformation, processuality, and relationality (Kratz, 2012). Recognized, remembered, and perhaps even grieved, death is no longer an exclusively human affair. Algernon is brought from the context where anonymous deindividualized animal bodies are “destroyed” into the setting where he (*post-mortem*) acquires a name and a subjectivity, and where “his death becomes a question to think through” (Radomska, 2020, p. 121).

The issues of the use of nonhuman animal bodies in human consumption (in its widest understanding) and the employment of FBS in tissue engineering return as themes in *The Immortalisation of Kira and Rama*. Kira and Rama are two fetal calves acquired by Kratz from an abattoir with the purpose of using their



Figure 7. Svenja Kratz, *Evoking the Dead: A Meditation for Kira and Rama*, 2010. Salt Compound, Video Projection, MDF, Faux Blood, Wood. Installation view. Metro Arts, Brisbane. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



Figure 6. Svenja Kratz, *A Shrine for Algernon: Instance #1*, 2009. Wood, glass decanters, MDF, polyurethane, polymer clay, pigment, oil paint, stainless steel, feathers, fishbone fern roots, oil. Installation view. QUT Visual Art Gallery, Kelvin Grove. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

bodies for the project realized during the artist's residence at SymbioticA Centre for Excellence in Biological Arts. In a similar way to Algernon, Kira and Rama received recognition as subjects only after their death. The concept of the project—like other works by Kratz—evolved over time and through several different pieces. Initially, the installation consisted of an Egyptian-inspired custom-made bioreactor inside which the cells isolated from Kira's and Rama's skin were placed, accompanied by mixed-media dioramas including the calves' remains: preserved hearts, fragments of hides, and teeth. The cells had earlier been frozen, and a portion of them "immortalized" through DNA and chemical manipulation. The artist's own narrative and the titles of particular artworks, like *Evoking the Dead: A Meditation for Kira and Rama*, emphasize even further the symbolic and material flows and enmeshments of life and death constitutive of the uncanny ecology of the project, and its investment in the strange-making of our relation to death, life, and biotechnology. Simultaneously, as Kratz herself admits, working on the project and cutting open Kira's and Rama's bodies were not free from sorrow.

Outro

In this article, I asked about the potentials of queering present eco-grief imaginaries and the ways in which art and cultural expressions may mobilize different ways of mourning the more-than-human and—what follows—also open up new ethico-political sensibilities that are responsive to multiplex, transversal, interwoven ecologies of relations, processes, entities, power structures, and various technologies that shape more-than-human entanglements. I was not interested in psychological aspects of eco-grief, nor in an art-historical analysis of the select artworks. Instead, my primary objective was to unpack the philosophical and cultural dimensions of more-than-human ecologies of death, grief, and mourning. The four art projects I discussed focus on: extinction and non-liveability in the context of environmental crises (Ballengée); absence in a deep-time setting and beyond the frames of human exceptionalism (IC-98); non-human death in the context of science and other forms of consumption (Kratz); and last but not least, the very processes of death and vanishing that exceed species and any other forms of classification (Haapoja). They all tackle our sensibilities in relation to what death is and which deaths count as grievable, creating a more posthumanizing imaginary of grief. Finally, they all push us towards an ethical reflection that might be the first step to rethink how we may stay with the trouble of "terminal" ecologies as a "lifelong and shared condition" (Ensor, 2016), and by extension, how we may better care for increasingly exposed and violated more-than-human worlds.

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Endnotes

1 In my work, the concept of “cultural imaginary” refers to a cultural fantasy landscape comprising a collection of culturally dominant representations, images, and ideas. In the context of Western philosophy, cultural discourses, and beliefs, these ideas have often described the relation between nature and culture as a hierarchically arranged dichotomy; the body as inferior to and separated from the mind; and the subject as autonomous, contained, and unified. Such a definition is attuned to Rosi Braidotti’s understanding of the cultural imaginary as “a system of representation by which a subject gets captured and captivated by a ruling social or cultural formation: legal addictions to certain identities, images and terminologies” (Braidotti, 2006, pp. 84–85).

2 While the numbers of victims should not provide the sole reason for engaging with the problematics of death, the realization of historical estimates – of, for instance, up to ten million civilians killed between 1885 and 1908 in the Congo Free State, ruled by the king of Belgium Leopold II (e.g. Hochschild, 2006), or fourteen million civilian victims of Hitler’s and Stalin’s politics in the “bloodlands” of Eastern Europe in the years 1933–45 (Snyder, 2010)—has both a chilling and a sobering effect.

3 Put briefly, the concept of the non/living addresses complex entanglements of the processes of living and dying, growth and decay, characteristic of biomatter. I return to it in a more elaborate manner in the second half of this article.

4 Feminist techno-ecology refers to “multiplicitous relationalities between differential organic and inorganic matter, ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ technologies and techniques, as well as other power mechanisms and processes” (Radomska, 2017).

The special issue of the journal *Australian Feminist Studies* 32(94) is entirely devoted to the exploration of the entanglements between the ecological and the technological.

5 Bioart (or BioArt) refers to the current of contemporary art that takes biomatter as its medium and employs scientific methods, tools, and protocols. Its emergence can be understood as a playful, critical, and creative response to the development and presence of biotechnologies and related procedures in contemporary scientific and popular-scientific discourses and cultural imaginaries. See e.g. Mitchell, 2010; Reichle, 2009.

6 The concept of eco-grief is linked to the akin concepts of *climate grief* (e.g., Running, 2007) and *solastalgia* (Albrecht, 2005), understood as the lived experience of negative environmental change, which became formative for present discussions on climate anxiety and other negative climate-change-related impact on mental health.

7 The terms of eco-grief and environmental grief are often used as synonyms.

8 The concept of “grief imaginaries” is grounded in queerfeminist approaches to the notion of cultural imaginary, mentioned in endnote 1.

9 See: <https://brandonballengee.com/the-frameworks-of-absence/> (retrieved February 1, 2023).

10 The second edition of the project was shown in 2018 at EXPO Chicago.

11 See trailer: <https://vimeo.com/171650764> (retrieved March 1, 2023)

12 Here, I concentrate on the overall characteristics of biophilosophy as a posthumanizing strategy of engagement with both life and death, pointing to their inherent

entanglement. I suggest that biophilosophy may work as an approach of a viewer who focuses on relationalities between the living and non-living in the experienced artworks. And simultaneously, it may serve as a method of interweaving various elements of death/life ecologies employed by an artist in their practice. For a more detailed discussion on queerfeminist framings of biophilosophical concepts, see Radomska, 2020.

13 Not the least Gustafsson & Haapoja’s recent project *No Data* (2021). See: <https://www.terikehaapoja.net/gustafssonhaapoja-no-data/> (retrieved February 20, 2023)

14 See the respective works: *Community* (2007) - <https://www.terikehaapoja.net/community-2008/>; *Entropy* (2004) - <https://www.terikehaapoja.net/entropy-2004/>, and *In and Out of Time* (2005) - <https://www.terikehaapoja.net/in-and-out-of-time/> (all retrieved March 2, 2023).

15 The title of this sub-section refers to the ways Kratz’s works move the concept of death beyond the frames of human exceptionalism (Radomska, 2020)

16 See: <http://www.svenjakratz.com/portfolios/a-shrine-for-algeron-instance-2/> (retrieved February 28, 2023).

17 See: <https://www.svenjakratz.com/skprojects/the-immortalisation-of-kira-and-rama-2/> (retrieved February 28, 2023)

18 See: <https://tcaproject.net/> (retrieved February 28, 2023).

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