

Daiana ȘARGAN
Babeș-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
daiana.sargan@ubbcluj.ro

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELATIONS: OBSERVING THROUGH EMBODIMENT AND MOVEMENT RESEARCH

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Abstract: The present paper proposes a (post- and) eco-critical reading of Alexandra Pirici’s ongoing action, *Encyclopedia of Relations*, staged at the Venice Biennale in 2022. While it addresses a considerable gap within Romanian performance art studies, this article aims to offer a case study of how artistic practice can generate alternative *modes of being together*. With no doubt, as Rosi Braidotti stated at the Biennale conference, the art exhibited at the 2022 edition works collaboratively with theory to become an imaginative tool of research. Following this lead, the article discusses Pirici’s performative work that takes the task of exploring non-human relational modes through *cognitive embodiment*. This approach underlines how performance art practices move beyond the aesthetic sphere, projecting solutions to emerging environmental crises and offering a fresh perspective on knowledge production.

Keywords: Alexandra Pirici, cognitive embodiment, posthuman feminism, contemporary performance art, postcriticism, ecologies of the body, transpecies ecologies.

Epistemology of Crisis vs Epistemology of Coordination

At the beginning of his *Compositionist Manifesto*, Bruno Latour derides time perception when a crisis is generally acknowledged by making the following observation: “This huge warlike narrative (...) predicated on the idea that the flow of

time had one – and only one – *inevitable* and *irreversible* direction (Latour, Manifesto 472). For him, the already *defunct time* and the rhetoric implied by the idea of emergency reveal rather a crisis of Janus-faced institutional and official knowledge production. In his book *Politics of Nature*, Latour identifies the fact that environmentalism and ecological movements do not address a crisis of nature but a crisis of objectivity (Latour, Politics 18-24). The question “how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts” (Arendt 6) cannot be approached anymore by *a critique* since its efficacy has long been lost.

Most theorists highlight the bumptious definitions of nature and the human relation to non-human otherness in the history of philosophy and anthropology. In pointing out the inadequacy of such definitions, considerable attention has been given to time perception within ecological thinking, thus linking time with narratives we create to make sense of our place within the world.¹ In restoring the knowledge about the nature-society division, there is a well-motivated insistence on renaming the current period within the theoretical framework. There is an obvious reluctance to the well-known *Anthropocene*, viewed rather as sterile, unable to generate lines of thought outside known territories, in detriment to concepts which upkeep the closing of this era. Cyborg manifesto author and philosopher Donna Haraway opts for *Chthulucene* as a more fitted word to pave the way for “real and possible time-space” (Haraway 160) for change, suggesting that the *Anthropocene* would not be enough to break from older narratives. Time narratives of enduring social hierarchical *Plantationocene* are opposed through the Derridean *l’avenir*² of mapping unforeseeable traces of co-existence and not of guilt-inflicted *anthropocentric* narratives.

While Latour suggests that modernity is a slogan of pressure, of *il faut être absolument modern* (to use Rimbaud’s syntagm), he also implies that there is a radical change in the way we perceive time, time-passing, as opposed to what modernity was – “a break in the regular passage of time” (Latour, Modern 10). It is precisely the modern inertia of looking at *the category of time* through the old lenses of species inequality. In closing a narrative that still requires overcoming modernist

¹ In line with Ricoeur’s ideas, to a certain degree, we create narratives to make sense of our experience of time passing. Moreover, in order to understand our place in the world, we need to grasp our experience of time.

² The Derridean *avenir* is still characterized by a messianic quality that impedes a more complex understanding of time as Michel Serres observes.

patterns, Latour proposes his now well-known *compositionist* tactic for moving forward to a narrative based on a performed connectivity between humans and non-humans, reconsidering agency.

Therefore, the Cartesian epistemology of *irreversible time* (one-dimensional and linear) reveals a time based on fixed controlling coordinates imposed on nature, whereas ecological theorists demand an understanding through forming and deepening relations with non-humans. On one hand, the Cartesian view is reiterated by *transhumanism* as Rosi Braidotti underscores in her study about *Posthumanism*.³ In re-thinking man's relation to time, Michel Serres proposes multiple temporalities that fold and are layered, a time that does not flow but percolates. For Serres, understanding time implies epistemological consciousness and a way to look into how man positions himself within the world. In his relationship with *temps*, understood as *time* and weather (Serres 26-29), Serres shares a view of topological, flexible time, not that of rigid irreversibility, but relational time, not flowing, but percolating.⁴ Sometimes misunderstood though no less relevant is Arne Naess' proposal of *deep ecology* which demands a re-evaluation of nature as a value and not as a resource while considering humans as an integrated part of it and not a dominant agent. Relevant to the present case study is Khyle Whyte's distinction of time as kinship to which Alexandra Pirici often refers in her interviews. The type of *knowledge* Pirici proposes in her performance *Encyclopedia of Relations* from 2022 could be described and better grasped through Whyte's proposal.

According to Kyle Whyte, the environmental crisis is too often described by a discourse that recasts the same *imminent* aspect of *urgency* by outlining a pattern of *crisis epistemology* unfolding throughout human history. A pattern of what he calls a recurrent *presentist narrative* (Whyte 55) in the face of change that works towards escaping culpability from (nowadays) the feeling of what Glenn Albrecht named *sostalgia* (Albrecht 44-59) or apex-guilt, or shadow time. Describing the approach of *crisis epistemology*, he defines under the same conditions of "modernising" and "progressive" movements regarding indigenous tribes from America an approach

³ Rossi Braidotti, *transhumanism* describes humans' attempt to control nature and time. The epistemology of *transhumanism* is that of quick change through technological enhancement and nanotechnologies to respond to emerging climate crises consisting of violent change and rapid solution in detriment of the well-being of the overall environment and the non-human inhabitants of the Earth. Please see the chapter "Post-Humanism: Life Beyond the Self" in Braidotti 13-31.

⁴ In his conversation with Bruno Latour about topological and intuitive thinking in connection to multiple temporalities, he asserts that: 'More intuitively, this time can be schematized by a kind of crumpling, a multiple, foldable diversity.' For more, please see Serres and Latour 59.

that seeks temporary advancement and modernisation with long-term ecological disastrous consequences. In line with ecological thinkers before him, he proposes an *epistemology of coordination* of “knowing the world through kin relationships” (Whyte 58) instead. Whyte locates the real solution in producing another kin(d) of knowledge about nature and social collective that leads to envisioning other kin(d)⁵ of co-existence.⁶ In essence, Whyte points out that *discourses of urgency and immediate fix* can no longer be used as an excuse to disregard racial and species equality.

In opposition to the liberal individualism⁷ perpetuated by *capitalocene*⁸ and hierarchical approach of colonialism, Whyte, like many theorists, proposes moving concomitantly, on one hand, in retrospective, before the *bifurcation*⁹ (Latour, Manifesto 476) as Latour would name it, therefore before the understanding of *nature* and society shaped a hierarchic mode of “who will be allowed to talk about what, and which types of beings will remain silent” (Latour, Manifesto 475). On the other hand, a forward movement in re-defining and relocating the human place within inter-species relationships.

In the frame of such an intertwined connection between time and knowledge, it is required a kind of *infra-language* (Latour, Social 49) to use Latour’s idiom, and artists sought to imagine such narratives and create knowledge, modes of being, and *figures of fiction* with such language. Indeed, artworks have worked harmoniously along theory, paving the way for collective co-existence. In this light, on projecting knowledge through kin relationships, artworks have become *artistic research* in themselves, and not incidentally many theorists make recourse to visual art.

⁵ Donna Harraway notes and uses the worldplay kin/kind, a pun that she borrowed from Shakespeare, see Harraway 161.

⁶ As Whyte asserts, crisis needs to be “interpreted through a deeper history and traced back to the moral bonds of relationships among the diverse beings and entities dwelling together in shared environments. Something like a crisis cannot be understood without appealing to the history of moral bonds between beings and entities affected by real or perceived crises.” For more, please see Whyte 55.

⁷ Timothy Morton points out the “feeling of being powerless” imbued by the usual “shoulds [...] being preached to as individuals” discussing the idea of how capitalism locates the ecological crisis in alternative ways of consuming; see Morton 39.

⁸ The term *capitalocene* was coined by Moore to describe the “age of man”, “the age of capital”, in which capitalism is the “world-ecology power, capital and nature, dependent on finding and co-producing Cheat Nature.” (Moore 595), borrowed later on as well by Harraway and other theorists. Capitalism is understood not only as an economic or political force but also as a mode of organizing man’s relation to non-human otherness.

⁹ Latour borrowed the term *bifurcation* from Alfred North Whitehead and used it to pinpoint the moment when “*matters of facts* were invented” (or *res extensa*); see Latour, *Compositionist Manifesto* 476.

It is the case of Alexandra Pirici's performance *Encyclopedia of Relations* that projects an alternative mode of sociability through *embodying* relations between various non-human agents, from abstract relations between memory and touch to describing various interactions seen in nature. In short, the bodies of the performers overcome human socio-cultural patterns of moving and describe alternative collective ways of interacting and living with nature. In this sense, her work is an attempt and, I believe, a very solid exploration, to produce a fresh perspective on how bodies (matter) can interact outside known patterns of sociability. Such sensory experience of knowledge requires a time of making kin through bodily understanding.

Just like Latour's figures of fiction, Pirici's performative enactments live as fragile modes of being. Engaging with such art would also require an *infra* looking on behalf of the critic, as Laura Pavel puts it, in her theoretical approach that marks the postcritical turn within Romanian theoretical framework (Pavel 10). In the following lines, I would attempt to *prolong* the fragile *figure of fiction* proposed by Pirici by looking at its specific ontology and thinking with the help of Latour's theories, cognitive science, and anthropological studies of the body.

There are already studies that analyse how literature and art bring forward the consequences of human impact on nature, worth mentioning is *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion and Environmental Narratives* by Alexa Weik von Mossner. Her study relies on the premise that reading is also an embodied (cognitive) process and she also relies on the power of *ecodystopian* and *ecotopian* narratives to warn the readers. However, in the case of *Encyclopedia of Relations*, the focus is on the artist's process of embodying networks of non-humans and humans as a proposal of a new perspective on collective co-existence. Alexandra Pirici's ongoing action from the 2022 edition of the Venice Biennale uses choreographed movements to meticulously track relations that might be an alternative to the current social status.

Embodied Cognition. Describing through movement and embodiment

Encyclopedia of Relation comes as an artistic research into the theoretical discussions aforementioned, engaging in a dialogue with these ideas. This dialogue commences with the title itself, strategically leveraging a productive tension that

challenges the very notion of knowledge production.¹⁰ The artwork is a work of revision of what nature is and what a collective means, exploring different methods of re-composing the fabric of sociability. This *embodied encyclopedia* starts from the very premise that knowing and observing the environment is a deeply intimate and bodily process. The *other* is interpellated through grasping their movement always in interaction. There is indeed a keen eye for materiality and the agency of non-humans. Art and imaginative narratives have proved essential to making sense of ongoing crises and changes, though, as Bruno Latour suggests, they have been “deprived of their ontological weight” (Latour, *Modes* 239). For Latour, art, or *beings of fiction*, has its own weight and objectivity that “populate the world” and their ontological fragility is due to their need of being “reprised, taken up again by subjectivities that would not exist themselves if these beings had not given them to us” (Latour, *Modes* 242). As such, the *beings* from *Encyclopedia of Relation* have their own ontological trajectory that relies on the viewers’ *embodied response*.

Her usage of choreographed movements and live sculptures adds a tranquil slowness that is better described by a *time of coordination*. Following Nijinsky’s innovative statue-like movements, Alexandra Pirici’s main choreographic strategy is to slow down every performative action giving them a sculptural quality. The usage of live sculptures emphasizes time passing, as if a second performance happens in the space between the staged action and the viewer’s response and process of grasping. Through a different approach to time, akin to a quasi-slow-motion, a spatiality between the work and the viewers is made visible. In this sense, there is the *embodiment* proposed by the performance and the ongoing *mirroring embodiment* of understanding, or what Wiek von Mossner called the viewer’s emotional response that relies on a “mirror neuron system and on related simulation processes” (von Mossner 190). Without overinterpreting, it is proper to say that bodily relations to movement, space, and time are made visible through such choreographic strategy giving materiality to what has been the abstract acts of observing and knowing. Karen Barad would name it continuity or interconnectedness between matter and meaning, though without that “relational wildfire” (Harman 191) implied by her idea of *agential realism*, though Pirici’s recent works are strongly influenced by Barad.

¹⁰ I use the term *artistic research* in the understanding of Konrad Fiedler of artistic production as a creative vision.

Thus, for instance, Pirici's *Encyclopedia* begins directing the visitors' attention by placing two performers randomly in the audience who sing two different notes concomitantly. The polyphonic texture of the sounds averts the viewers from a heavily visual context (of the Biennale's exhibition) and prepares them to follow different shapes and patterns of grasping. The polyphonic sequence indicates how different paths of attention could be followed at the same time as in a *fugue*. It reiterates the tension of different perspectives through auditory and bodily sensations, which will be sustained for the viewers throughout the entire performance. Slowing down by using an auditory path shifts focus, training a way of perceiving and knowing without focusing on a necessary emotional response. In contrast to other eco-artworks, Pirici does not seek an intense emotional response but rather addresses the idea that understanding the environment is not a disembodied act of perception. This emphasis on the embodied nature of knowledge forms the focal point of her work most of the time. There is no nostalgic guilt narrative or fetishised representation of nature, but rather a simple act of recording more or less abstract relations through the body.

The choreographic material ranges from rocks and waves forming a shore, hybrid animals, the relation between an individual and his shadow, pigeons exchanging food, embodying different species of trees, paintings, songs, and artificial intelligence, including also moments of spoken words. The performers (12 in total, working in shifts of 6 at a time) take on the task of overcoming the patterns of anthropomorphic movement and thinking. Little explanations or descriptions are given to what is enacted, mostly a performer announces what is about to be embodied, for example: "...and waves meet rocks to form a shoreline"; "...and tree branches grow around each other without touching negotiating space and access to light, through crown shyness"; "...and automated system meets indispensable human labour, cognition, and decision making to become an artificial intelligence, a form of which we will now try to embody". As mentioned above, the viewer is presented with the embodied process of observing various collective non-humans' patterns of collaborating symbiotically or assembling different less fortunate relations in dialogue, while abstract relations between tones, memory, and touch are just as important.

Back to the title and its tension, the encyclopedias were knowledge products belonging par excellence to Enlightenment that had the pretence of being exhaustive.

The so-called Age of Reason erudite believed in objectivity and in a “disembodied eye, (...) observer” (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 9) of scientific analysis and cataloguing by this conducting knowledge under the Newtonian premise of human exceptionalism. Based on a “view from nowhere” (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 9), that is dissected and defined through difference, it is a clear counterpoint to the notion of *relations*. Alexandra Pirici is historicising *per se* this pattern of grasping and thinking, orienting towards what is left outside of an encyclopedia and what cannot be isolated. It is a concept that comes in contrast with the form of performance itself, a frameless artwork, an ephemeral act, a rather fluid form with a great degree of permeability, a bodily art. Pirici’s approach to knowledge is rather opposed to the scientific discourse of cataloguing and defining. Her performance calls attention to what is left out by definitions and lists.

The ongoing action proposed by Pirici focuses on knowing and describing the world through a subjective point of view. So far, the natural world has been studied through rational scientific categories of representation. The performance is derived from an earlier project undertaken during the pandemic that set out to represent nature through the interaction between the body, sensations, and various natural elements. It is deeply tied to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological investigations that urged:

“[relearning] to feel our body (...) we are our body. In the same way, we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body” (Merleau-Ponty 239).

In this sense, Pirici’s *embodied encyclopedia* prompts the viewer to ponder on the idea that knowledge could be reclaimed from general scientific notation to pure subjective perspectives. Her way of observing through embodiment is that of “we know because we are of the world” (Barad 184). In contrast to reading a traditional scientific encyclopedia, Pirici’s work draws attention to the very fact that Descartes’ heritage of a purely rational being is obsolete and, instead, she attempts to represent nature not by dominating it and forcing it into definitions, but through the very sensory experience that was considered illusory by Cartesians. Her work brings awareness to how the power of knowledge shapes our behaviours. Our habitual

patterns of moving become symbolically meaningful in the social-cultural context to which we belong (Mauss 73). In this manner, Pirici's performance works with the fact that knowledge is not only in the hands of a few scientists, but it is something that should be reclaimed by bodily subjective perception. By observing patterns of movements, we observe patterns of relating to the environment and patterns of sociability. Furthermore, by studying other beings' patterns of moving and interacting, there is an experiential knowledge acquired, tied to the embodiment of such dynamics that open to new modes of co-existence.

Therefore, Pirici's *Encyclopedia* enables one to access a new perspective on knowledge by embodying other behaviours and non-bipedal movements, or rather it makes the viewer aware that knowledge is also a matter of perspective. Since the seventeenth century, knowledge production was placed in the hands of scientists and legitimised by official authorities; bodily, subjective knowledge was disqualified and seen as incapable of offering truth. The dualism of objective/subjective knowledge mirrors the dualism between body/mind. David Le Breton emphasises how the Cartesian existential condition through *cogito* is the root of the Western depreciation of the body and the rejection of sensorial experience and bodily perception as being unreliable.¹¹ As a result, much of the knowledge and representation in the West is produced and legitimised through scientific defining and analysis. As such, Pirici successfully challenges this knowledge-production process while stepping further in the opposite direction by substituting what was scientific observation with the experience of the body.

Towards another understanding of human perception and experience, it is also the case of the latest scientific debates about cognition as embodied action taking great inspiration from Merleau-Ponty. Whereas cognition is not a mere internal representation or some kind of mirroring, it is based on continuity between inner consciousness and the outer phenomenological body. The concept of *enactive cognition* underscores the fact that, contrary to the Cartesian idea of *cogito*, our brain is embodied, and thus cognition is embedded in action, and it enables actions (Varela, Thompson, Rosch, 172-178), such as speaking, looking, walking, etc. It stands in opposition to modernist theories of cognitivism which described knowing as a passive reception of the exterior. The emphasis falls on the interaction between

¹¹ Le Breton emphasizes how the division imposed by Descartes gave birth to the individual. He further explains that in the West, the body is understood as something to possess. In other words, we are not our body, but we possess our body.

the body and the environment and that the act of knowing is mediated by the body and thus becomes an active act of perception and representation. Nowadays this process is becoming invisible and suppressed and Pirici takes the task of bringing it back to attention through aesthetic experience.

Back to understanding *human dualism* (mind/ body), Émile Durkheim distinguished between the biological and social body.¹² For Durkheim, biological aspects are tight to individuality, while the social body is impersonal and connected with moral behaviors. Stepping further, Mauss observes that our bodily behaviours (such as walking, standing, etc.) are not natural, but a social construct and are different from one culture to another (see Mauss 95-123). However, through repeating patterns of moving, David Le Breton argues that the presence of the body becomes transparent and is ritualistically erased (Le Breton 119-139). In this sense, Alexandra Pirici's chorographical strategy of embodying something-else-than-human makes even more visible the presence of the human body. If we are used to taking the presence of the body for granted in the quotidian (controlled) environment, in such a context, we are made aware of how we perceive the world with the body. As mentioned earlier, defamiliarising and stripping the body out of its habitual patterns of movement is the main technique used by Pirici. For instance, the choice of covering the body with quietness and natural sounds made by the performers themselves (like bird singing, wind, and sometimes classical melodic sequences) reframes it from the daily noise, making the presence of the body inescapable and, to a degree, unfamiliar to the viewer.

In fact, in the West, our social interactions are shaped in such a way that they cover the presence of our bodies. The body becomes an accessory. Le Breton argues that by socialising the body, our culture tames the duality mind/ body. It makes such presence more discrete through established social behaviours (Le Breton 92). Pirici's work, in fact, negotiates a way of being in the world and of being our body, not possessing it. By showing what an actual live, embodied encyclopaedia would look like. Her attempt to represent and translate interactions of non-human agents is made by borrowing the movement of those interactions and re-contextualising it through the bodies of the performers. For example, how pigeons communicate, share

¹² For Durkheim, man is at the same time: "an individual being that has its basis in the body and whose sphere of action is strictly limited by this fact, and a social being that represents within us the highest reality in the intellectual and moral realm that is knowable through observation: I mean society" (Durkheim 15).

food, and stand together supporting each other's weight, standing chest by chest, suggests an embodied language of sociability and coordination. Placing human bodies in vegetal and animal postures, the artwork proposes a bodily encyclopaedia that can make sense of the world around, not rationally, but making sensorial experience as valid as rational analysis.

Transmutations of other-than-human intelligence to a more abstracted form through the performers' bodies could be described by the above-mentioned term from cognitive science: the *enactive embodiment of cognition*, which is "not a representation of a pre-given world by pre-given mind (...) but (...) the enactment of a world" (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 9). Such a process is at the base of Alexandra Pirici's choreographic approach that becomes through sculptural movements an act of producing knowledge about a way of perceiving the environment. A gesture of incorporating and moving trajectories, to use Latour's term, from *beings of reproduction* (nature) to *beings of fiction* (art) proves fertile in this exploration, and art has the ability to re-organise and make sense where other discourses are still limited.

For instance, the phenomenon of *crown shyness* from vegetal intelligence, which consists of trees growing branches around each other without touching, is translated through embodiment. The visual canopy of trees we are so used to seeing in reality and photos is understood as the relational dynamic of the trees. The embodiment strategy consists of placing the performers in front of a wall seeking to remind them of the way the tree canopy grows on the empty sky. One performer places his body on the wall while the next performer's body shape and position are modelled by the first in a way not to touch the other one. The choreographed movements display also a different quality of time, as the following performers follow the same patterns of placement, slowness, and coordination with the other bodies. It is knowledge based intimately on relational movement and direct experience. Representation is negotiated through the perspective of embodiment, and it generates a different way of grasping, deeply related to the materiality of the trees and their behaviours. Embodiment functions as a tool to make visible and describe better non-human collectives and their mode of interaction as mentioned earlier in the example of embodying the pigeon. The *encyclopedia* proposed by Pirici is not made of definitions, but of embodied live images which leads us to reconsider how we represent and know the world around us. Much like Judith Butler, who views

performativity as central to gender identity, the proposed performative language in the works describes the identity of non-humans as fluid, shaped by actions and inter/intra-actions. In line with Butler's theory, performativity is used to reinforce power structures and knowledge (Butler xii). In contrast, Pirici makes the opposite gesture of destabilising official knowledge by presenting what is left out of objective knowledge. Such an approach produces a performative identity formation that is not definable by imposing explanations but rather is contaminated by interactions. As a result, the representation itself of the non-human otherness is a live, performative action.

In the very act of the *embodied description*, Pirici unfolds an investigation of what trees are, composing attentively the idea of nature as an *assemblage of material agencies* (Clark 117). Timothy Morton would use the idea of *present and presence* (Morton 272) as the main resorts of such artwork in which there is an exchange and an inter-linkage of "unfolding (...) temporalities together in a way that becomes visible" (Morton 272). However, his re-working of Kant's *stimmung* (tuning) to the present interpretation would not be completely appropriate to Pirici's performance. As Timothy Bewes would simply put it, the artwork itself *thinks, it reads*, it is in itself a *mode of thinking* (Bewes 25-28) through embodiment as opposed to the eye of an outsider. The bodies from the performance become volatile and, in a way, porous, permeable, always emerging through interaction with other bodies and with the space. Through performativity, the body itself becomes the site of knowledge by incorporating observations about nature. Translating the vegetal intelligence of dividing the light emphasises a bodily dynamic of organising bodies in space projecting an alternative mode of interaction between performers. The performers are constantly shifting movements and sculptural forms through interaction with other bodies, spaces, and objects present at the time of performance. There is not a clear figurative representation of the *crown shyness* or an interest in scrupulously constructing a mimetic image, but it is an *embodiment* of the artist's understanding of a natural image of the forest. Nonetheless, this precise technique allows a different perspective on knowledge production, of who is able to produce knowledge and what knowledge should be like if we challenge the so-called official power resorts of knowledge production.

Alexandra Pirici's deeply honest exploration does not exclude, even hypothetically, the reversal of her previous premises in moments of spoken words

when knowing and human experience are proposed without the use of a body. There is a tension, perhaps, that could be interpreted as a less fortunate interaction, or more precisely, as an embodiment of the history of knowledge about the body evolving in relation to different perspectives. Through spoken word, she proposes a piece of the history of thought and looks at the body and the environment, in a collage made of excerpts written by Octavia Butler, René Descartes, and Ursula K. Le Guin¹³, enacted as a meeting between the three authors. The spoken text becomes an excursion into the way of knowing by means of repressing one's bodily reactions. The texts chosen reveal a difficulty, as Butler's *Nikanj*, to use words for a bodily experience, or as Le Guin characters who try to find a political, racist reason for holding oneself from crying. Speaking along with them, Descartes' ideas of a *res cogitans* reveal a totally opposite view. The other moment of the spoken word is a meeting between George Boole, Karen Barad, Edouard Glissant, Vaslav Nijinsky, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Nina Cassian talking along. It is an obvious homage to the authors mentioned and to the thinkers that paved the way of knowing through interaction but also a summary continuing the history of the way we perceive the body and interactions. This piece reiterates the idea that knowledge is produced in relation to alterity and emphasises how every theory and point of view relates to one another. Descartes and Barad are radically opposed, though their works are understood in relation to one another. Without bracketing the Cartesian perspective, on the contrary, giving it voice, Alexandra Pirici intertwines it with eco-feminist theorists and fiction writers and seeks again a productive tension.

Her assemblage has a fibrous, entangled quality, also weaving in references to two of Toyen's paintings, *Sad Day* and *Oblazky Evening*, merging them. Not unusual for the artist who in 2013 proposed, along with Pelmuş, the work *An Immaterial Retrospective of Venice Biennale*, which enacted various paintings from the Biennale's archives. In *Encyclopedia*, however, her reference to less-known surrealist women artists reveals a permeability to the Biennale context, which embraced a *feminist posthuman* approach by recovering many surrealist female paintings. These references entangle the work with the exhibition context not only through the curatorial decision to present this particular piece but also by negotiating entanglements with other objects of art. In this way, *Encyclopedia of Relations* is a

¹³ The fragments used are from *Lilith's Broth* by Octavia Butler, *A Discourse on Method* by René Descartes, and *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin.

performance *in situ*. It assumes a more neo-materialistic position of pleasure for collective knowledge, for collective intelligence, and for making visible the agency of objects in our collective knowledge production. In this case, it is the paintings that have either shaped or not exerted a strong influence on our collective cultural imagery.

Making kin-as-assemblages

While performance art emerged as a reaction towards capitalist practices in the aftermath of the Second World War (Goldberg 37-38), to a degree as political activism, and later on as critique of power resorts and social structures, Pirici's latest work radically diverges from the '60s and 70s practice. If this engagement with the social was based on critique, Alexandra Pirici latest work *traces associations and connections* seeking to compose relations made of *actants* that are seemingly foreign to each other (from artworks, AI intelligence, plants, notes, and tones), akin to an entangled, heterogeneous group. Her pieces "look at the type of aggregates thus assembled and at the ways they are connected to one another" (Latour, Social 31). The term "aggregate" is used by Bruno Latour to resume his performative definition of groups that connect and exist as long as they *perform* an interaction. In her case, the social is not "always already" but is something that needs to be *composed*.

One unexpected more abstract relationship that is presented is between memory and the sensory system, halfway through the performance. The viewers are asked to close their eyes while parts of the performance are brought up to their memory by sounds and touch, in other words, the viewers are asked to re-compose what they have just seen. It shifts radically the focus while prompting to notice other subtler relations and movements within the viewers themselves. The process of observing becomes more mindful of any sensation or response that arises from the part of the viewer, gaining a more meditative quality. The dynamic of being attentive to one's responses in relation to a stimulus would be developed and transferred to other relational contexts throughout the performance.

Waves meeting a rock are *embodied* at the slow pace of moving bodies, from which a shoreline emerges. The shoreline emerging from the interaction emphasises how one element is understood within relations. A mangrove tree is moved by wind and is *embodied* by the performers that move harmoniously together with their hands. Pigeons sharing food are translated into bodies that support their upper body

weight and equilibrium, while domino movements of hands embody a cliff. Behind every entity is a wavering of actants, mediators, and intermediates that ultimately build a network. There is a certain interest in banal interaction, one might say, but it is as well an attention to more “invisible” interspecies interaction.

An invisible actor (or rather actors) brought to attention is the human labor behind artificial intelligence. This could also be seen as a moment where cognitivism and connectionist approaches to neuroscience and experience appear mechanistic and distant from the manifold and complex nature of human perception. The enactment of a neural network classifier involves the audience, as one performer prompts them to recognize what the other performers are embodying. The audience becomes the “human” who teaches artificial intelligence how to recognize symbols and patterns. For example, the audience is required to recognise a cat, a museum visitor with a tote bag, an ok sign, and a person on the bus. After identifying correctly, the performers’ micromovements transform the sequence of embodiments into images that seem to resemble characters from what could be a Rembrandt painting. Those final gestures highlight the necessity of human labor in the identification process of images when artificial intelligence borrows human knowledge to function properly.

While rapid technological fixes are dismissed, it is precisely a quality of being present with other species, of making time to make kin, or, to use Donna Haraway’s solution, to stay with the trouble. Alexandra Pirici’s attentive eye to the “banality” of interspecies connection prompts the viewer to have a different experience of time. As I emphasised above, a time of coordination. This slowness of embodying pigeons while sharing food, or waves meeting rocks to create a shoreline, deploys and translates into a responsible response to human impact on other species. In such moments, what I have called the second performance happens when the viewer’s response is shaped to enter a different time frame, time-perception. It is what Donna Haraway called *Chthulecene*, a tentacular living or thinking of interspecies that requires time to cultivate relations. The time of *Anthropocene* is one of “too late” while the *Capitalocene* is eager to accelerate and find rapid solutions with the use of technological advancement compromising eco-justice, with no consideration for long-term disasters. The time of *relations* is a slow embodied acknowledgment of the otherness and the many invisible modes in which “banal,” small movements generate changes on the whole network. In this light, Alexandra Pirici’s *embodied*

encyclopedia is an exercise in making kin, creating unexpected knowledge about the capacity to nurture and sustain life only by meetings between very different entities. Her idea of collectivity is formed through meetings and conversations as a practice of making kin, embodying the simple, more archaic sense of communities with an unrequited responsibility of just having to be together. From what seems to be banal emerges a tremendous shift in the way of being and co-existing in the world by taking time to be present in the wavering of connections humans and non-humans alike are being part of. Thus, in reassembling the social, Pirici recomposes the idea of time to simpler yet effective tranquillity, similar to that of haiku images, which are neither metaphor, nor symbols, but reveal a sensibility to natural, “insignificant” aspects of being in the world. While in the Oriental tradition, such time of knowing has been developed through Buddhist practices of meditation and what we call nowadays mindfulness, the West has relied, as I pointed out above, on the necessity of scientific *matters of facts*. It is in fact an old way of thinking long forgotten by the efficient Capitalocene with which Alexandra Pirici works on her encyclopedia. Noting the crisis of objectivity in her work is a tension that is looked at and understood. However, much like an act of being mindful, it is a simple acknowledgement of also letting go of old patterns of actions to make space for attentiveness to other ways of interacting.

Eugenio Barba invokes one of Hokusai’s haiku to refer to the fragile transmutation of natural elements into artificiality: “I am writing and/ erasing, rewrite again/ then a poppy blooms.” While the idea of representing nature through painting, science, and literature has often been likened to the transmutation of a field poppy into a vase (deemed impossible as the poppy would wither, as Barba would affirm), Alexandra Pirici’s mode of thought and artistic attention, embodied through reworking the dynamics observed in nature, presents a view of collectivity that is very much alive. To return to Bruno Latour, her *figures of fiction* expand on from the ontological context of the artwork to the subjectivity of the viewer. Even though the work does not seek to produce an instant intense emotional response, a transmutation is produced in the viewer’s emotional attention. It is that kind of vibrating presence that Latour assigns to art where “the audience creates the network” and “in following these networks, it is impossible to separate out what belongs to the work ‘properly speaking’ from its reception, the material conditions of its production, or its ‘social context’” (Latour, *Modes* 243). Every time their

solicitude is required, a performance of embodied response takes place that permeates the viewer just as much as they are willing to let the action of the performance expand into their subjective perspective and perhaps echo into another relation.

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