The Lack of Forest

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To all that I lack

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The book consists of: my own narrative (laid out in a traditional way: black text on a white background); statements from other people presented in negative (white text on a dark-grey background); quotations from academic literature arranged as calligrams; visual materials, which are captioned in black type on a light-grey background.
The remaining design choices are purely aesthetic. The texts that are not my own statements have been deliberately treated as negatives, that is, as mirror images. In this way, we want to emphasize that they are the key material for obtaining the positive. For years I followed the stories of people who knew this area before the storm. It is precisely this material—their memory and their experiences—that forms the point of departure for my reflections and narrative.

We've grown accustomed to thinking of the forest as a strictly natural space, subordinate to the forces and laws of nature. These associations are reinforced in us by images of wild forest depths or ancient backwoods, such as the Białowieża Forest or the Carpathian Forest. The forest appears as a zone detached from everyday life, one could even say 'marked by otherness' into the space of the unfamiliar (Zadrożyńska, 1983), a peculiarly external world – orbis exterior (Stomma, 1986).

Meanwhile, the forest is as much a natural space as it is a cultural one. Like any landscape in which we function as individuals or groups, it is on the one hand shaped by social and cultural behaviours, beliefs or values, while on the other hand, it then shapes the very attitudes and beliefs. In his ground-breaking work *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama argues that every landscape is first cultural and only then becomes natural (Schama, 1995). Within this notion, he draws our attention to the fact that landscapes are not only physical spaces, but also places constructed through narratives and memories. Their perception is greatly influenced by cultural constructs such as myths, stories and historical events, i.e. everything that our memory contains – both individual and collective. Like a palimpsest, landscapes have layers of meaning, imprinted by human experiences and cultural interpretations over the centuries. These are shaped by human activity, including agriculture, forestry, settlement and artistic expression. Different groups may experience and interpret the same landscape in different ways due to their origins and social position. For Schama, a classic example of this mechanism is the Białowieża Forest, along with its ecological and symbolic complexity.

The significance of the forest as a cultural landscape and the ways in which it is used have been evolving alongside social changes. The most obvious use is of an economic nature. The forest has been managed to meet needs and provide food, raw materials and work. At the same time, it can function as a border that defines regions, enclosing communities in forest areas, as in the case of the Tuchola Forest. It also remains an important sphere of identity narratives, whether in terms of heritage, national symbols or frontiers. Historically and contemporarily, it has also been a land of rebels and those in danger — a space in which one could either find refuge or be exiled to. Suffice it to recall the times of the Second World War, as well as the so-called migration crisis on the borders of Europe.

Polish folk culture is characterised by diverse tree symbolism (Simonides, 2010) and a lineage of traditions interwoven with the forest (Barcz, 2020; Piotrowski, 2025). Within this framework, the forest was seen as a place to look for happiness. According to legends and folk tales, it is where a persistent seeker can find salvation, reward and solace, as well as medicinal and useful plants.

The forest is also a source of beauty and artistic inspiration. It stimulates the imagination, evokes deep emotions and encourages reflection. It is a space for seeking bonds with nature, and a space of spirituality which does not have to limit itself only to religious notions.

> However, despite the evolution of expectations towards the forest and the ongoing social change, ambiguity remains one of its main characteristics. The forest is not a space that humans can completely dominate. Such a belief stems from an understanding of nature as being in opposition to the world of culture – a classic (and today, much criticised) opposition deeply rooted in the Enlightenment. Once, the forest space was not yet familiarised, and due to limited technological capabilities, it was used to a lesser extent. Communities felt dependent on the forest. Due to their ambiguity, the forest and the trees began to be seen as connectors between the known and the unknown, heaven and earth, safety and danger (Kowalski, 1998). Today, the forest is subordinated to technology and the economy, which mediate profound changes to its space: cutting down trees, planting new ones, building roads, and reforesting former wastelands. The forest can no longer be seen only as a manifestation of nature; it is now both a creation of humans and the environment. Following the lines of Donna Haraway, the forest thus becomes a natureculture (2003). And again, it is impossible to place it in a single, clear category.

Forests of the Anthropocene

Economic, technological, social, political and cultural changes, which have led to profound transformations in forests, have become one of the reasons for deeper reflection on human-environment relations in the social sciences and humanities. The concept of the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch in which humanity is the strongest and most influential geological force shapeshifting the planet, has been a particularly powerful impulse for these considerations. As a result, critical humanistic reflection began to raise questions about the scope of human influence on other organisms, the environment and landscapes, as well as the changes caused by humans, technology and industry. The degradation and mass exploitation of forests have become one of the focal points of debates on the attitudes and actions that have pushed us into the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty, 2009). Modern, scientific, and organised forestry, with its roots dating back to the eighteenth century, has been blamed. The Enlightenment model of landscape management is characterised by a tendency to reduce spatial complexity for meticulous documentation, centralised supervision, and a focus on productivity. Ultimately, its goal is to control and maximise profits – in this case, from timber resources, to which the forest landscape has been reduced (Scott, 1998). This

one-dimensional view of forests evokes associations with plantations and the colonial system. In the Anthropocene, palm plantations, pine monocultures, and the systems of power, management and violence – both symbolic and physical – embedded in them, are becoming an important axis of reflection on relationships within societies and connections with the more-than-human world (Haraway and Tsing, 2019; Barua, 2024). The landscape is not only a backdrop, but also a key agent of these considerations. It remains entangled in an ambiguous narrative about what has been destroyed and what needs to be repaired. The plantation is not only a place, but also 'a sociocultural type or an institution that hinged the Old and New World economies and political systems' (Cousins, 2023: 85); globality and locality meet here. It becomes a key landscape for understanding the mechanisms of oppression of global systems and ideas – colonialism, capitalism, racism, chauvinism, and misogyny.

> In the Anthropocene, capitalism is a force that not only pushes us into a new geological epoch, but also, as Anna Tsing writes, makes us live in ruins (Tsing, 2015). Tsing uses the term 'capitalist ruins' to describe the landscapes and social conditions left behind by the predatory activities of the system that encircles us from all sides. These landscapes are characterised by ecological destruction, economic uncertainty and social inequalities. The ruins of capitalism are a new cultural landscape. However, despite its ominous tone, Tsing's reflection is a call to seek opportunities for cooperation and, perhaps, hope. However, these will be processes full of friction, requiring us to open ourselves to what is entangled and unclear, to let go of the sense of security seemingly guaranteed by capitalist optics and thinking. Despite its capitalist trajectory, the pine monoculture can be a place of encounter and new relationships. For Tsing, life, including life in and with the forest, is always a joint effort of human and more-than-human beings. The expansion of capitalism and the degradation of the environment it entails are forcing humans and other organisms to seek new forms of relationships and adapt to changing landscapes. Ruins are not only a place of survival, but also of potential prosperity.

Forests in an Uncertain Future

Contemporary forests have become physically and discursively central to current global discussions on climate change, environmental crisis and biodiversity loss. Conflicts surrounding forests are intensifying and shifting in nature. Societal expectations regarding forests are gradually becoming more diverse, and understanding them becomes increasingly important for forestry, policymakers and forest managers. Controversies surrounding forestry are becoming increasingly complex, and their evolving dynamics are attributed to growing doubts and concerns about an

uncertain future. Our future is uncertain because the future of our planet with our climate change-bound forests is uncertain. There is no future for society without a future for the forest and with the forest.

> A climate catastrophe is a catastrophe of disappearing landscapes. Anthropogenic and natural disturbances – such as pollution, deforestation, fires, insect infestations, storms, gales and floods – transform familiar landscapes, often causing them to disappear rapidly. Ecological disasters (including the one that engulfed the Tuchola Forest) are becoming part of everyday life and our relationship with the environment. In addition to the often irreversible losses associated with biodiversity loss, the disruption of ecosystems as well as economic costs, ecological disasters lead to the loss of cultural landscapes – their emotions, values, practices and memory. Loss can lead to trauma. Recently, ecotrauma has come to be understood as a profound sense of shock experienced when realising the destructive impact of human activity on the natural environment. In other words, it is a sense of loss, grief and anxiety associated with the degradation of the planet and the awareness that the current way of life, based on the logic of constant growth and capitalism, is the cause of this state of affairs (Morton, 2024). Ecotrauma is rooted in the fear that the future may not come.

In its local dimension, ecotrauma is the pain and shock of losing a familiar, tame, close landscape. It is the reaction of the body and mind to a sudden break in the bond with the surrounding environment. On the one hand, it is a response to the deprivation of the physical and material, and on the other, to the deprivation of the symbolic and cultural – the biosocial space for living and becoming (Ingold and Palsson, 2013). In this context, Glenn Albrecht proposed the concept of solastalgia, understood as difficult emotions, stress and a sense of loss experienced in connection with changes in the inhabited environment or landscape. It is a form of nostalgia for a place where one still physically resides, but which has been lost due to environmental degradation (Albrecht et al., 2007).

> Ecotrauma is the lack of landscape. The Lack of Forest, which this book is about. The feeling of profound loss may remain unspoken or even suppressed in shock or in an attempt to rationalise the loss, in an effort to organise the new reality and build a new world. The emotional response to the loss of a relationship with the environment can be blocked by cultural references and moral clichés that deny the need for mourning or an intimate and spiritual response to the landscape or nature. Meanwhile, ecocatastrophes and the associated ecotrauma are becoming new challenges of the Anthropocene. Questions about the tools for working through and commemorating ecocatastrophes and ecotrauma are among some of the most pressing issues of our time.

Erecting monuments and other commemorative practices are deeply rooted in human culture. Monuments create and shape the politics of memory, contributing to the reinforcement of specific identities (national, cultural or social). They indicate what, when and how to remember. Monuments also have a therapeutic function. They not only commemorate loss, but also allow the expression of strong emotions, feelings of grief, pain, mourning or trauma. They become a place for social and individual processing of traumatic experiences (Sherman, 1999). After the Second World War, in the face of the unimaginable cruelty experienced by humanity, traditional forms of commemoration began to evolve, reflecting not only on the content of commemoration, but also on the form through which commemoration takes place (Praczyk, 2017). However, as Małgorzata Praczyk points out, despite this evolution in thinking about commemoration, the practices associated with erecting monuments remain largely an emanation of anthropocentric thinking and attitudes. The purpose of monuments is to commemorate human values, sacrifices, achievements or ideals characteristic of a given time or era, but the materials used to produce them come from the natural world and the interior of the earth, and the monuments themselves 'do not take into account the broader non-human context' (Praczyk, 2017: 12). As anthropocentric thinking collapses in the face of ubiquitous climate change, there is a need to develop new forms of commemoration that respond to the challenges posed by the aforementioned ecocatastrophes and ecotrauma.

> Ecomonuments are an attempt to meet these challenges and, at the same time, an effort to rethink our relationship with the more-than-human world. Often embedded in the landscape, they enter into dialogue with it, complementing it; instead of changing its structure, they focus on multisensory experiences. In ecomonuments, the material from which they are made or in which they are embedded is as important as what they commemorate. Often, by surrendering to the dynamics of natural processes, they break with the idea of monuments as commemorations that are meant to last forever. Diverse in form and content, the ecomonuments of the Anthropocene seek answers to questions related to coexistence and interdependence between species, as well as between the human and the natural, coming from mutual care and responsibility. Their content breaks with the imperative of creating a universal politics of memory. Instead, they focus on local communities and their needs. One could say that ecomonuments are an attempt to create space for polyphonic discussion within a specific, small group of people, aimed at creating a new community (Praczyk, 2017: 18). Within this framework, memory and commem-

> oration are only one aspect, and not always the most important one. It is equally important to create a meeting place that catalyses individual and social discussion about the local landscape and the crucial ecological and social issues, and to encourage dialogue. At the same time, ecomonuments open up space for the creation of a responsible utopia, understood in the context of prefigurative and affirmative humanities: 'one that identifies specific (often innovative) practices and types of relationships in culture and social life that can form the basis for building better models of community and coexistence' (Piotrowski and Domańska, 2017: 27)

When we place the categories of ecomonuments and ecocommemorations within the framework of responsible utopia, they begin to transcend the sphere of monuments and become strongly present in art as well, for example, in the category of feminist memory slag heaps, as described by Katarzyna Bojarska.

> The feminist slag heap of memory emerges not so much as a concept that allows us to describe and understand certain artistic practices and attitudes (...), but rather as an internal, organic mechanism for working with the past. (...). The heaps I am thinking of are similar to rubble and piles, sharing with them the condition of being an unwanted, incongruous element of the landscape (both natural and mental). (Bojarska, 2023: 127).

Art inspired by the environment or set in the landscape becomes an instrument for thinking about memory and the future in the times of the Anthropocene. One could say that it is a social practice, leaning towards the unobvious, the unexpected, and, on the other hand, necessary for survival in times of planetary catastrophe. Similarly, the category of prism, proposed by Roma Sendyka, aligns with contemporary artistic reflections on landscapes, memory, and the future.

> It arises as a result of external forces, which can be compared to external discourses: history, politics, economics, memory. The 'wedge', the physical presence of the object, does not allow these discourses to close, leaving the visitor with an unsettling feeling that something is still disturbing the orderly arrangement of this place. (Sendyka, 2013: 336).

The concepts of memory heaps and prisms can serve as theoretical lenses, tools for thinking about ecocommemoration. In other words, they can become a concept closely related to what is happening in the Lack of Forest and how the Mound works within it.

In Polish culture, burial mounds have deep symbolic, cultural and historical significance. Over the centuries, they have served a variety of functions, from burial and worship to defence, commemorating important events and people, and even serving as tourist attractions. As with the forest, their symbolism is complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, mounds are associated with funeral traditions, serving as resting places for the dead and spaces that functioned as places of worship in pre-Christian times. On the other hand, they are examples of memorial sites, symbolising national unity, Polish patriotism and resistance against occupiers. Mounds were meant to refer to durability, permanence and immutability. However, over time, they have become examples of the superiority of the forces of nature and the fragility of cultural artefacts introduced into the environment (in 1997, as a result of heavy rains, the Kościuszko Mound in Kraków began to crack, break off and collapse). Ultimately, the mounds, as emblematic elements of the landscape, are a meeting place for local communities or tourists visiting the city

Today, however, against the backdrop of the processes I have described above, mounds provide space for the search for new narratives. Their special feature is their suspension between the movements of control and surrender to the forces of nature; an element of the world that is both tamed and unfamiliar. Thus, contemporary mounds, understood as forms of ecomonuments and ecocommemoration, can be considered feminist heaps of memory, or prisms open to the search for other interpretations and new relationships in a world of ruins and times of ecotrauma, as Bojarska writes.

> Although (...) the artists do not work with real slag heaps as elements of the post-industrial landscape, their practice focuses on human-induced changes to the natural environment (expropriation and exploitation), the historicity embedded in the landscape, communication with weeds as carriers of repressed and unwanted meanings, experiencing ancestral catastrophe, and searching for a language of expression that will accommodate this experience and make it communicable and shared, building a system of relationships on which a new historical (and aesthetic) subjectivity will be based. (Bojarska, 2023: 128).

In the Anthropocene, mounds (and, more broadly, ecomonuments) become a metaphor for the search for other ways of relating to the environment, the forest, the landscape, and for new forms of coexistence in a world of ruins.

Their ephemerality, openness and lack of definitional closure bring mounds and forests closer together in their constant change, susceptibility to environmental factors and the multitude of interpretations by the ever-changing users of these spaces. Both appear as local utopias, testing grounds for new practices and multi-species relationships in a world of crises and loss. When we understand forests as 'constituted of a complex of continuously unfolding relationships, care and respect for forests implies that we consider the impact of forest practices on those myriad relationships'. (Himes and Dues, 2024: 8), The Lack of the Forest, together with its Mound, given to the forces of nature to commemorate the forest, become a new kind of dialogue about human-forest and human-environmental relationships. This is how a landscape is formed in which different ways of functioning in a world built on ruins are practised.

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I cannot imagine what it's like to be
in the middle of a hurricane.

Hurricanes were not part of the Polish imagination—they didn't belong among the dangers that tourists were warned about and that children were taught about in nature lessons. Downpours, storms—yes. But no one expected a hurricane.

No one expected it in August 2017, either. It was unimaginable, so no one was prepared. No one even thought that this could happen. Here? In Pomerania? It took just one night, a few hours, to shift that.

The hurricane came all of a sudden. It surprised not only the local residents, but also the scouts who had set up camp in the forest. That night, the children stood in the dark water of the lake, as far from the shore as they could. Hoping that the trees would not crush them, as they had crushed two of their friends.

The hurricane destroyed the roofs, uprooted the trees, broke the branches and scattered the seeds. It also marked the biographies, buried some dreams and broke many hearts. It generated a series of local stories. Within fifteen minutes, the forest disappeared, leaving a sudden void. None of the locals could talk about what had happened. They still don't talk about it today. Because of this silence, the hurricane continues. And the place, which still exists and yet is no longer there, awaits collective reintegration and acceptance.

I arrived there a few months later, not because of the forest, but because of my partner. It was our first meeting 'at his place'—back then, I didn't know we would end up living here. I slowly got to know the area and its inhabitants. With each of their stories, I delved deeper and deeper into the erstwhile forest. Into the wind of that night. I experienced that particular August hurricane only through traces—thanks to people's memories. It's thanks to their memories and shared attentiveness that I am getting to know a place I have never seen, but where I decided to build a home on the ruins of the past.

What remained after the hurricane marked this land with pain once again. I discovered the earlier pains gradually. We need relationships to re-familiarise ourselves with this place, to enter the landscape after the disaster. When we gave ourselves a chance to meet with a sense of loss, we opened ourselves up to the power of collective storytelling. Thanks to these bonds, the feeling of loss is slowly fading. Five years after the tempest, The Lack of the Forest is no longer a story of loneliness. It is a story of a new symbiosis emerging, of change taking shape. With each element of it, with every movement of the smallest slug, beetle or blade of grass, we are working together towards a shared future. We live in an era of multiple crises, but together we have solid tools to survive them.

A hurricane is a short-lived event, but being in a hurricane can last much longer. The state of devastation prolongs collective mourning. Nature and people regenerate slowly. They take their time to rebuild reality and regain a sense of security.

Hurricanes and the havoc they cause affect certain people, creatures, and ecosystems in specific areas, but they can also be understood as a metaphor for the contemporary condition of both humans and nature. Life in and after a hurricane corresponds to states of internal escape, a widespread sense of uprootedness, or being the object of systemic exploitation in the areas of work, politics, or ecology. They illustrate the permanence of uncertainty and fear.

Mindfulness of feelings, mutual care, saving what is dear to us or discovering it for the first time—all this constitutes intervention. Such an intervention, and at the same time a proposal to build a common story, constituted the years I spent in the forest and in the face of the Lack of Forest. This book is a testimony to that.

In order for reciprocity and community to arise, one must get closer, and in order to get closer, one must trust. I am not asking you not to be afraid—after all, we will be talking about pain and cataclysm. Please be afraid, but come closer. Lean in and open yourself to the story of the Lack of the Forest. Read it, giving credence that your story can also fill the void. Let it touch places within you that have not always been heard.

The wind speed that night reached 150–170 km per hour, which corresponds to a category 2 hurricane. It was not, of course, a meteorological hurricane formed over the ocean; however, like those involved in publicizing this local event on the global map of disasters, I deliberately use the word *hurricane* interchangeably with *tempest*, *storm*, or *gale*.

Photo taken on 6.03.2018

A wintery, yet snowless morning. I'm in Charzykowy, getting ready to leave for Warsaw. I'm setting off at dawn; the journey will take me five and a half hours. I don't yet know that I'll be travelling this route many times, as I will soon be living here. One day, this will be my world, but now I am going back. It is very remote here.

> I arrived a few days ago, at night. When I entered from the opposite direction to the one I'm about to take, from Poznań, the road led through a forest. There, I found a frozen lake, I found coldness and darkness. We spent the next few days at the home of my future husband's grandparents—he's the reason for my visit here. We were accompanied by a feeling of love. After two days, with my heart filled with warmth, I set off back to Warsaw. I head towards Tuchola—and experience a shock. Ruins emerge from the fog. I stand by the road and watch. At first, I don't quite know what I'm seeing—I can't hear anything either. Slowly, a low sound and crackling begin to emerge from the ruins. Work is in full swing—I hear chainsaws and the whirring of engines. Although I'm in the middle of this event, I cannot decipher it. What's going on here? I wish for immersive integration, but it doesn't work; on the contrary, the state of this place sticks to me and squeezes me. A logging operation on a scale I have never seen before, a bloodthirsty sawmill with a shameful scale of processing, an exposed conflagration or an optical mirage that emerged from the night and only pretends to be a lunar landscape. It slowly pierces my body, all over its surface. It pinches me under my skin.

I take a photo and send it to a friend in Warsaw, adding 'A Shitpit' caption. 'Quite a battleground,' she replies.

> Later, I find this photo, tagged as 'sawmill'. I remember that the road signs were glowing, and the headlights of cars pierced the landscape with bloody lines. They smudged like crayons rubbed with a finger, drawing a scene after a fight. An image of pain. And yet a promise of refuge. I encountered tragedy and love here—their combination rooted me deeply in this place and brought about my eagerness to commit to it.

Two or three months earlier, I asked if they remembered how old the spruce trees that had fallen in front of our door were. One of the older residents told me that when they moved in fifty years ago, his uncle said that they had been planted in 1910, when the forester's lodge was built. They remembered it exactly.

That wind was pure power, I tell you. Two of us had to hold the window so it wouldn't blow out. We couldn't even hear the thunder, we could only see long flashes of lightning. They lit up the sky as if you had turned on floodlights on a football pitch. And with each flash, you could see that another two or three of those huge spruce trees were missing. When it was over, we got busy rescuing our flats and the stairwell because they were flooded. Each and every resident fought against the water. Finally, it got light, somewhere around four or five in the morning—I remember that fog was rising above this battleground, and you couldn't see a thing. Only when it cleared... Tragedy emerged. There was simply nothing, nothing, not a single tree. Not a single tree from those that grew near our blocks of flats. Everything was lying in a heap, one on top of the other: high-voltage wires, broken poles. Everything turned into nothing.

Rafał, Mylof, 2018

We were standing in the house and suddenly there came a flash, and I thought: something's wrong, something's wrong. Suddenly, I turned to my husband and said, 'Krzychu, look, we don't have any trees.' 'What are you talking about?' 'Look, there are no trees around us.' And indeed, as we stood at the window and watched the flashes, it became light. When there are trees, it's dark despite the flashes. And suddenly it became light instead, which meant there were no trees left. [...] In the morning, the rescued boy knocked on my door and told me to go and see the damage. [...] I gave him Krzyś's shoes and we went for a walk. It was shocking. What we saw was simply indescribable.

Alicja, Duża Klonia, 2024

Rafał shows how the trees lay scattered

I look at the landscape through the car window. From the perspective of a moving car, the landscape is a transforming form. A dynamic set of colours that claim the right to lost continuity. From a safe distance, I capture this scattered fragmentation, saturating myself with the randomness of the views I encounter, the piles and gaps I catch. The click of the camera and the image becomes static—it emerges from the machine as a surprise. I don't quite understand this surprising pause. I look at the photo, which is supposed to be consistent. What is outside the window is ripped apart. I feel relieved because I can safely remain behind the glass.

My partner takes me to all the post-hurricane places, as if hoping to discover or confirm something. He knows the places well—I follow him, losing myself in a cartography that is new to me. We are speechless at every place. He accepts their condition with a lump in his throat, tolerating my exaggerated and certainly irritating reactions. He hasn't visited these places for months; it's his first time here since the storm.

Excited, moving forward, I dissociate myself in the face of this unusual image. I try to capture it, but it is too big, as if it has burst open. I stop to take a photo, to document this unprecedented event. Yet photography loses its function. I stand helpless in the face of a disaster, with my own cognitive apparatus inadequate. The image comes closer, but I feel it rather than see it.

Escapism, returning home—the end of the forest marks the beginning for me.

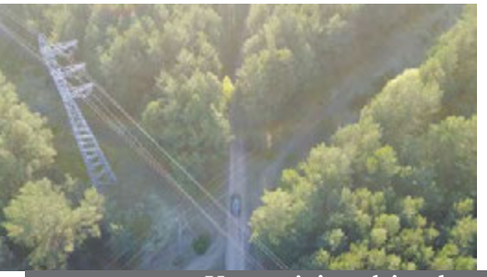
Our joint trips, wandering through the erstwhile forest, are attempts to embrace the incomprehensible whole. We want to reach all the surrounding areas and create a map of places that once existed. Save them by visiting them. In a way, reclaim them for ourselves and add them to our repertoire of memories. These places no longer exist, but by travelling to them, we pretend they do—he remembers them, and thanks to him, I am getting to know them. Since I'm arriving after their non-existence began, these visits are a form of mapping and searching for a new reality.

Some places we reach after dark. It's difficult for me to see the forest hollows or losses. So I listen to the wind whistling. Individual roadside pines creak ominously. Their sounds, carried by the wind, form a melody of calls, persistent and unanswered. They are like giant, bodiless giraffes, making sounds similar to those of whales. I imagine the pines stretching out to the sides, searching for their lost sisters and brothers. Or perhaps these whistling crowns are the result of roots slipping into the soil juices, an infinitely extended aerial mycelium? Perhaps we hear the movement of underground growth because we're in a state as if deep underground? This would explain the difficulty in speaking and moving. Just like moles, we're digging a tunnel in a landscape we cannot see. We try to feel it. The disappearance of the forest has brought out the spirits of this place. Set free, they wander through the open space like ghosts.

I will write about these places as unique, regardless of what they carried before. I will learn about some of the transformations years later; others, never. They will disappear before they allow themselves to be discovered. I find myself in the Lack of Forest, in the middle of this space, as if in the wake of a meteorite fall. Shaking with emotion, I synchronise myself with the trembling of the earth. We catch a common rhythm, synchronising our steps through the pseudo-emptiness.

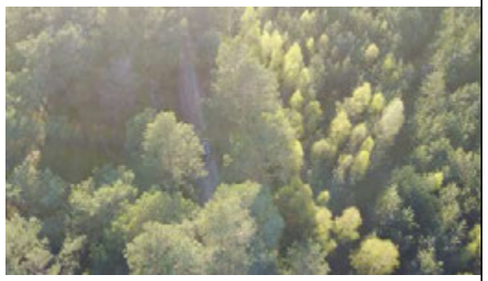
The first year in the Lack of Forest is a year without touching.
It is a year of working with sight: mapping the landscape through glass.

Two post-tempest maples



You can't just drive through. When you're driving, you think about different things, about your work, about your problems. Or you listen to songs, or you sing. But not me. When I drive down this road, I don't think about anything else. I just replay images: what used to be in a given place because I remember. [...] Maybe people from outside, who were here once and don't remember, don't perceive it that way—but when I drive this way, I always feel sadness and nostalgia. And the memories: 'Look, we found five porcini mushrooms here.' 'No, not here, it was there'—and there goes an argument. We can't see it clearly anymore. It's disappearing.

Łukasz, Rytel, 2020



Drone footage taken in May and September 2017—
approach road to Łukasz's house near the village of Rytel

One window had the curtains open. [...] And my grandson, who was looking through it, said: 'Grandma, there's no forest at all at Uncle Romek's.' 'What are you talking about?'—I didn't believe him. Until it got light and I looked out of the window myself. Everything was lying down there, everything. Absolutely everything. We were in shock. It was incredible.

You had to have strength to get through. You had to lift up your legs. Sometimes it lay half a metre above the ground, and you had to climb over it, like in the jungle. Even worse! It was often knocked down, interlaced, not only lying on the ground, but torn into pieces. When there was a storm, the trees flew as if a whirlwind was directing them. With two, three, and sometimes five trees, one on top of the other.

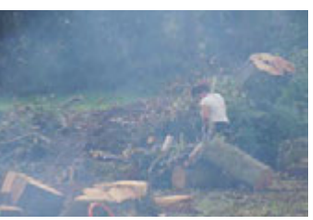
I said that God protected us, because we could have been crushed by the trees that were falling behind us and to the side. And everywhere. [...] All my fruit trees were gone. I had cherry trees, pear trees, everything gone. Yes, all of it. And not far from me, a whole newly built house collapsed. Only a few walls of the basement remained; the rest of it was lying all on the ground. We were in shock that the new house had collapsed.

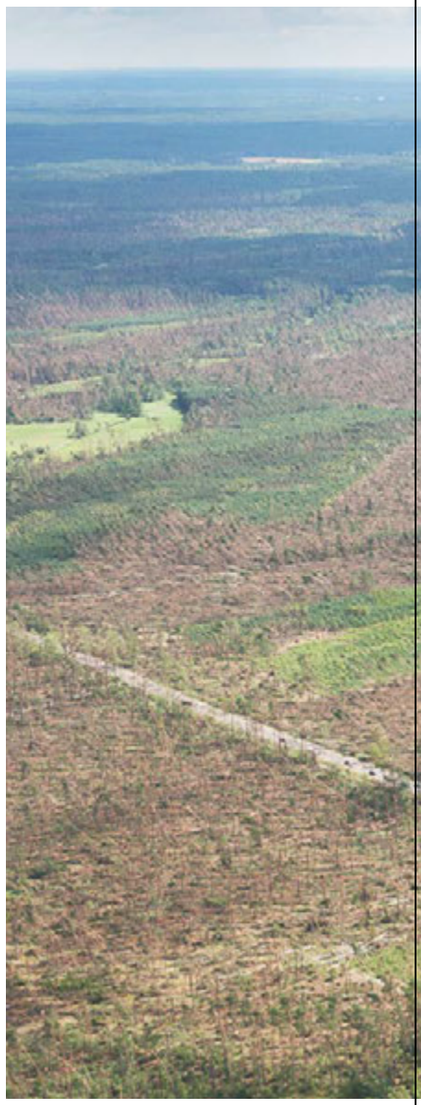
I was home alone. Our whole house was being flooded. I've got a new house, not some old ruin. And just like that, the new window was warped. Jesus, when I looked out the window, there was nothing but flash after flash. The squall was so bad that you couldn't see anything. There was so much water flowing down the street that everything was flooded. [...] And the cemetery, and all the places, where one would wish to go. No electricity to be found either; it was terrible. The fridges weren't working. You wanted to make a phone call—you couldn't. Nothing at all.

The wood lay there for a long time. It was a huge mess after all. Though our foresters got together and tidied up fairly quickly. Everyone helped—anyone who could, went. Everyone also had a lot of work to do at their homes, because everything had been knocked over. Those trees also had to be cut up. Everyone helped each other, from neighbour to neighbour. One neighbour had a saw, so he lent it to another.

Kalina, Teresa, and Renata—senior women from the "Autumn Rose" [Jesienna Róża] group in Rytel—talk over one another while recounting the night of the hurricane, Cultural Center in Rytel, 2024

For me, it was a night of terror. We were returning from a chanteys concert in Charzykowy via Krojanty when the storm caught us and we couldn't get to Berlinka. It was good that we stopped the car at the end of the road. That saved us. At first, we stopped in a lay-by and heard everything breaking around us. How good it was that my Henryk came with me! When he stopped at the end of Berlinka, I didn't even notice it—it felt like we were still moving. I said, "Henryk, don't drive!", and he said, "But I'm not driving". We were rocking and rolling, things were banging into us, pine cones were falling. The cove where we wanted to stop was completely blocked by trees, huge pines. There was no turning back. I looked at that cove as if it were a mirage. I didn't know if we were still there or if we were already gone, and it was just a ghost. And so we waited.





The A22 road, commonly called „Berlinka", 2017

Play

I never again found the place from the first photograph. To this day, I do not know where I took it. The post-storm reality is changing dynamically.

> I was there, in that real non-place, the temporary land of my dreams. The landscape opens up like a cavernous maw, unfolding like in a computer game, when a new level suddenly appears, completely unrelated to the previous one. The image sticks in your mind so firmly that you cannot shake it off. You have to cling to it, even though it seems impossible, illusory.

A hare sits on the road and looks at me. Its gaze pierces me. It doesn't run anywhere, although I wish to follow it. We remain motionless together until a sudden dash. When movement occurs, the space begins to unfold, as if from a roll. Like a dream, it swathes and caresses. There is now room for joy in these images.

I left Warsaw feeling very tired. Years of living on the road, in chaos, without order. Living from crisis to crisis, from process to process. The life of an outcast. The life of an artist, but one neither affiliated with any university nor permanently associated with any gallery. The life of a scholarship holder, a resident. Seemingly free, but so densely entangled. Subsequent commissions were dictated by the intensity of meetings and the effectiveness of persuasion. Seemingly conscious and emancipatory actions often turned out to be destructive. States of freedom and powerlessness mixed in an inseparable tar. All this took its dark toll. I waded through a muddy path that swayed with my tired body. Just as in this very landscape, reality was difficult to focus on, remaining shrouded in a shimmering fog. It was inaccessible and yet consuming. Many times I felt like a plant turning its cheek to the light, waiting for it to comfort me. I needed a base, a home, but I didn't know how to feel it. What I had, I carried on my back, like a turtle. My home was my arms. They carried so much that I couldn't hug myself with them. I didn't know how to bandage them either.

At that time, I was looking at ruins. They always attracted me. Boarding schools, vacant buildings and squats were the places where I stayed. Or an old rusty Ford, and sofas at the houses of temporary, or already-lost friends. Residency rooms, rehearsal rooms, studios.

The Masurian forests were green, wet and overgrown. Chaotic branches blocked the roads, and huge ferns and nettles made walking impossible. Fortifications and bunkers were covered with dark green lichen. I was born four kilometres from the Wolf's Lair, in the former East Prussia.

In 2018, I am taking my partner to my hometown. We are going to Mamerki, a place I often visited as a child. In the presence of the person to whom I revealed my world, I began to assume the poses of domestic hosts, as if from Zofia Rydet's ethnographic record. In a rather spontaneously arranged performance, I stood on the threshold of the bunker as if on the threshold of my own home, in a gesture of control and familiarisation. The photographs show a playful grimace, a form of flirting and an invitation to a world that contrasts with girlishness as much as it compulsively evokes it.

I grew up in forests seeded with bunkers (Mamerki area), and sought my identity in Sarajevo, Bosnia, where I studied. I spent my youth conjugating trauma in all its forms: collective, individual, environmental, cultural, war-related, social, sexual, educational, inscribed in the fabric of the city, in the space of nature. These themes were not concepts, but my everyday experience. Ruins seemed to be their safe outcome—present but dormant, removed from processes of use, deprived of function, exposing their past life in the form of dignified bankruptcy. I tried to convince others and myself that ruins are a metaphor for the condition of contemporary life. Especially us, the precarious workers and nomads, systemic outcasts and creators who, anticipating the future, perceive the whole world in terms of what is lost, aestheticising at most its successive subpages. I identified with this image of life, with the exposure of fragility, with the noise drowning out the lack of words, with the temporary community that turns the emptiness gnawing at the body into a soft cocoon.

Nomadic everyday life during the period of living in a car, 2010

Sarajevo, the social protests of 2014. The buildings went up in flames on the day of the premiere of my diploma performance at the Obala Open Stage of the Academy of Performing Arts

Sarajevo (2013–2015), stills from the film *The Dream of a Turtle*, 2018

I remember counting the trees growing by the roadside when I was a child. Behind them were fields or forests. Where I now live, the pine forest began right by the road and the trees were as thin as strings. They were planted so densely that one merged into the other. Driving through the national park, I had the impression of milky colours. My eyes, unaccustomed to this effect, behaved like a camera with a long exposure, which turns reality into a streak of vivid colours. The forest shimmered with a million of them.

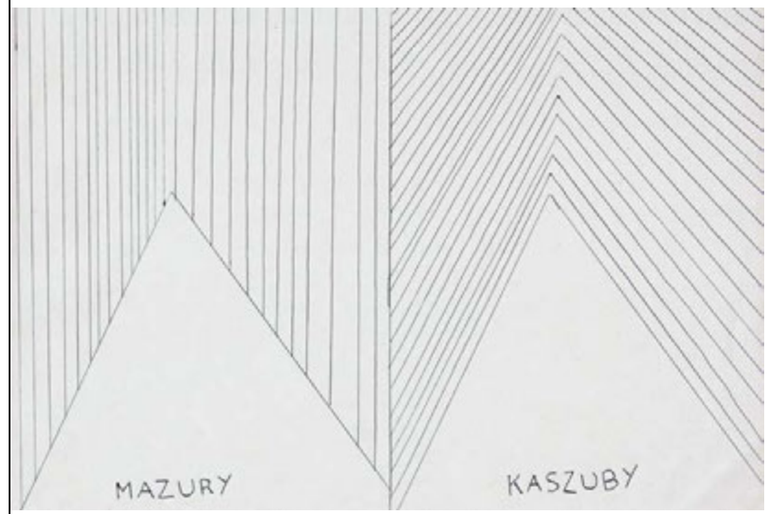
> "It must be hard for you here," Lucyna remarks on my origins. She reacts strongly to them—she perceives Masurians as open and cordial, while Kashubians as closed and distant. Regionalism is often emphasised here in Tuchola Forest.

People have lived on this land for generations. The permanence of one's place of residence is something unheard of in my region. There are no indigenous people there; only the effects of successive historical hurricanes remain. People were thrown into the whirlwind of events by external forces, often not knowing the answer to the question of where they came from and how they ended up here. A world of imagination and stories from which it is difficult to build a solid foundation. Those who ask questions will be met with tears or surprised and hostile looks; ignorance, shrugging shoulders, muttering under their breath, or even a punch in the face. In Charzykowy, or Charzykowo to use the local variant, we will live in the late grandparents' house. We will walk to the cemetery to visit them. We will eat ice cream in the same ice cream parlour they used to go to. A lot is changing here, but the changes are not accompanied by the storms of political history, but by stories of wildness and remoteness.

> The displaced persons found themselves in Masuria: workers arrived at the factory, as in the case of my paternal grandmother, or doctors transferred to work in re-Polonised areas, as in the case of my mother. This is agricultural and railway Masuria, Masuria where there are no lakes, where there is no hospital, where there is no secondary school. Where there is no tenderness. I left my family home out of absolute necessity—as quickly as possible. I left behind German inscriptions peeking out from under apricot-coloured plaster, forest areas riddled with bunkers and terrifying memories. I set off alone in search of a different life. For over fifteen years, I searched for a place where I could put down roots for the first time.

The blocks of flats where I grew up, on Wojska Polskiego Street [Polish Army Street] in Korsze

Mazuria of my youth

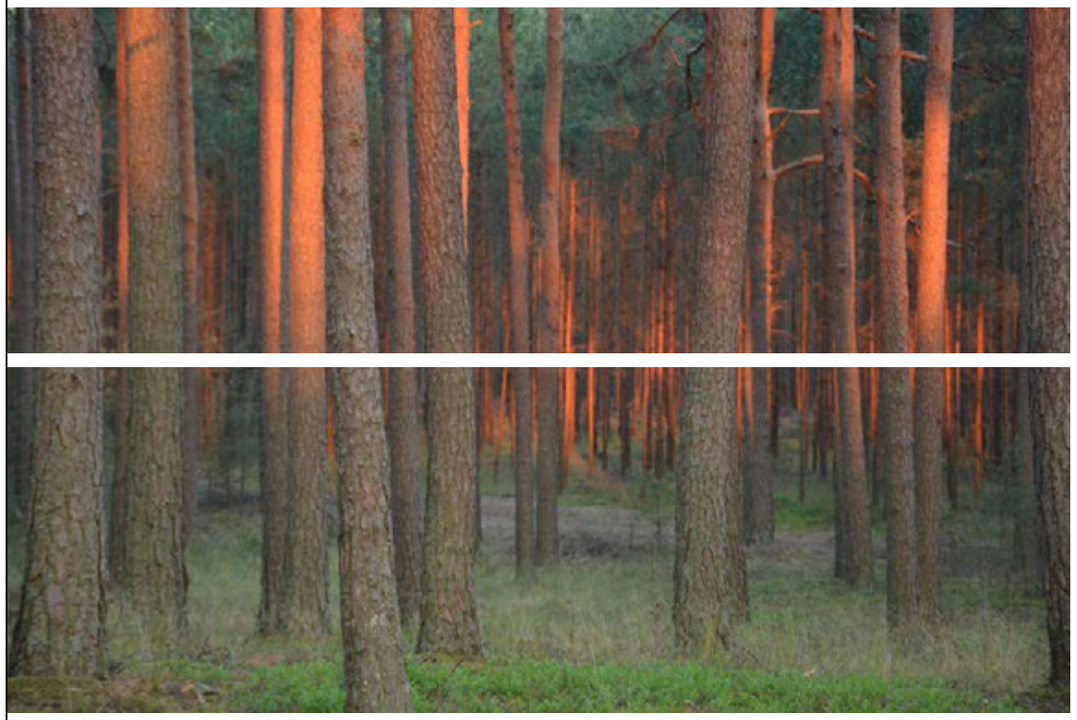


A drawing of *Kashubia/Masuria* made after my first visit to the Tuchola Forest, 2018

The Wolf's Lair, Gierłoż, Masuria, 2025

The woods by Lake Gardliczno, Tuchola Forest, 2018

The woods by Lake Płęsno, Tuchola Forest, 2018



Slush / Ślabra

On the second day after the storm, Lucyna goes for a walk with her dogs. She chooses a route she knows by heart. That is to say, she knew it, as of today, it is unrecognisable. She records an emotional testimony:

People who lived in the forests all their lives were known as Forest People. I encounter this term in every conversation. Knowledge, work, the ability to read nature, strong independence, and a character that does not succumb to fads or influences are traits respected among the Forest People. Only a few contemporary residents belong to the Forest People group. They are a special category of people who have practised living in the forest from birth until death. It was their forest, it was their identity. What will happen to the Forest People now that the forest is gone?

This used to be my forest. Now there are just trees lying on the ground. I am walking my dogs, feeling a bit lost. To say I feel a bit lost is an understatement. These are the remains of my forests, which will be cut down to the stump, and there will be no forest here for many years to come. I don't know if I will live to see the moment when it will be. Maybe Paulina and her children, my grandchildren, will live to see a forest here. The most beautiful areas, a beautiful part of the Tuchola Forest, 90% of which no longer exists. Where there used to be a huge forest, you can't go in now. My old road is inaccessible, there are trees lying across it. The dogs run around, looking for their old trails. That's all that's left. I walk towards the village, where I always used to go for walks. You can see the tops of broken trees that will be cut down. Here is a young forest, which is beautiful and gives hope. And there, in the distance, are tree stumps that will all be cut down. My beloved forests. My places on earth. What remains... I can't say for now. Everywhere I look, there are remnants of trees, and somewhere in the distance, birds. The only hope is in what is alive. There is so much deadness around. It's terrifying. But you know what? I have three chanterelles in my pocket. I found them a moment ago. Another hope. And another hope is this barrel that's left, which I've been visiting since I've lived here, that is, for seven years. This barrel, which wasn't taken by anything. [...] And our wonderful ślabra (eng. slush), which dogs always used to jump in and out of, and will continue to do so. There you go. Our smelly slush. Utterly beautiful.

Lucyna, Lotyń, 2025

Ślabra is the term that Lucyna and her daughter Paulina gave to a small river flowing through what used to be a forest. We found this recording while browsing through files on Lucyna's old computer, which collapsed after the storm. Lucyna looks away—the feelings return.

At the time of the storm, Lucyna had only been living in Lotyń for seven years. From the perspective of the Forest People and other residents, she was still a stranger. But her heart was already connected to the lifeblood of this area, so at that moment, it is bleeding profusely. Lucyna wants to do everything she can to weave the bonds back into this place, the existence of which, like that of the trees, is hanging by a thread.

A Dwelling / Domowisko

From the first day after the storm, Lucyna's dwelling is serving as a temporary shelter. Loggers and residents gather here to spend time on long post-hurricane mornings and evenings, when there is no water, electricity, access to nearby towns, mobile phone coverage, or contact with the outside world. Losses are being counted, wounds are being licked. They're clearing up whatever they can. Gifts arrive at Lucyna's house and are distributed among the residents. Artur, the village administrator, decides where to redirect the services to help those in need. Every evening, Lucyna met with Artur to determine the logistics for the next day. There was a lot of work to be done in the forest and around the houses. After work, everyone sat around the fire for a simple meal—usually sausages from the fire and potatoes. People came from all over Poland. Not only foresters and emergency services, but also other people willing to join the rescue operation.

> Lucyna recalls that one day, someone from Bydgoszcz arrived, having bought a bucket of chanterelles from a roadside mushroom picker on the way, and prepared chanterelle sauce for everyone. How happy this made the loggers who worked hard from dawn to dusk! Chanterelle sauce! A delicacy! Such gestures mattered. Lucyna recalls both the intimacy and the unique sense of community that characterised it. They were short-lived: "When something bad happens, everyone suddenly unites. A moment later, the spell is broken and the old mess returns. People point fingers at each other, try to gain something for themselves, and conflicts arise. Who owes what to whom." People even argued over the boxes she prepared and accused her of embezzling washing-up liquid. They used the compensation for lost belongings to buy new cars, there were even those who destroyed their own belongings in order to apply for financial support. There is no end to the discussions about who got less and who got more.

But it was necessary to help. Everyone got involved as best they could, to a greater or lesser extent. If someone did not come to Lucyna's house to offer help, the post-storm community noticed. Such people exposed themselves to gossip and exclusion. This happened, among others, to a local dairy farmer and his wife. "It was useless to explain what it means to milk cows every day because the machines had broken down. Someone then spread rumours that they weren't doing anything. But they spent half the day milking those cows!"

> There were more situations like this—including those that "spoiled", as Lucyna says, old customs and affected relationships. But above all, there was a sense of intimacy and people spent time together. In everyday life, this isn't present at all. Neighbours don't talk to each other, people barely socialise; barely greet each other from their gardens. And they never do so from behind their car windows.

In the period after the storm, Lucyna was writing a book and collecting photographs. She established an association to nurture the sense of community that had been born. It was a special time for her, and she gave herself over to the people. For weeks, her home was open to hundreds of visitors each and every day. She fed every visitor and organised rest for workers and residents in need.

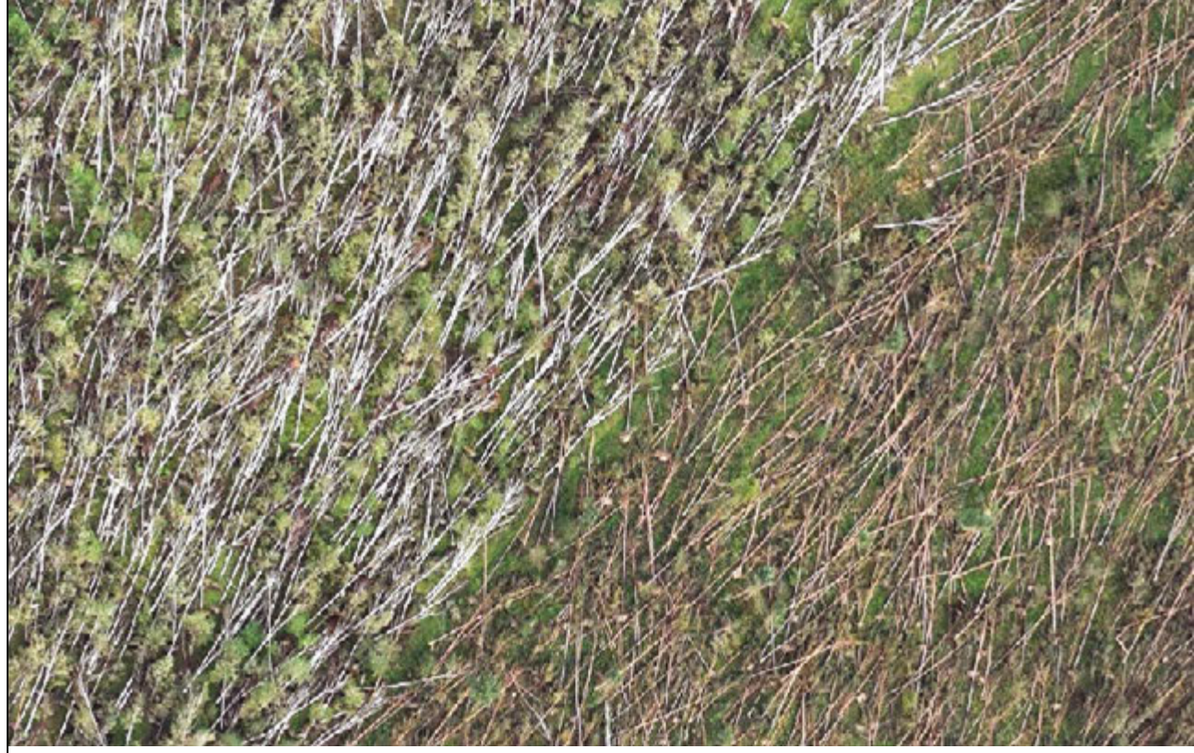
From the top: grass after the storm, bent towards the wind, guests of the dwelling holding down the tent in Lucyna's garden during strong winds.

Together with millions of beings, we work every day to restore peace and joy in this place. The system of human and non-human connections does not end, but grows stronger—whether we call it bonds or forms of survival.

Trees that have suddenly lost their ground—and their roots, a situatedness essential for life—create new, surprising shapes. A tree spreading horizontally rather than vertically clings to the ground. The branches that were supposed to reach the sky and the roots to be embedded in the ground now lie in a common line. This is not an image of peaceful rest, though. The fallen tree spreads its branches and roots wide, leaning on them, contracting, straining. Life slowly drains from it.

On the one hand, they are defenceless creatures stretching out their arms as if for an embrace; on the other, they are a terrifying force that is better not to be approached when unprepared or alone. One tree is so much matter that it takes an entire village to cut it up and haul it away. Lying side by side, the fallen giants still display their power.

A fallen, post-storm tree, is a tree vulnerable and in need of help, spreading its arms to be embraced.



Emilia's hands show the tangled trees

What we have accustomed to
calling 'the environment' might, then, be
better envisaged as a zone of entanglement. Within
this tangle of interlaced trails, continually ravelling here and
unravelling there, beings grow or 'issue forth' along the lines of
their relationships. This tangle is the texture of the world [...]. It has no
insides and outsides, only opening and 'ways through'. Scientists often stress
the importance of 'carving nature at the joints', as though the world were built
from solid blocks. The world we inhabit, however, is not carpentered but textured.
An ecology of life, therefore, must be about the weaving and binding of lines, not the
hammering of blocks. As an ecology of threads and traces, it must deal not with the re-
lations between organisms and their external environments but with the relations along
their severally enmeshed ways of life. Ecology, in short, is the study of the life of lines.

Tim Ingold, *Bindings against Boundaries: Entanglements of Life in an Open World*

The wind hit the wall of the Bory Tucholskie National Park. Parts of the forest covering a total area of 100 hectares were destroyed, but the hurricane mainly affected areas outside the National Park. The so-called commercial forests, intended for timber production—mainly monocultures of pine, spruce and birch—disappeared. Monoculture serves the timber industry and is created for large-scale timber extraction. In the long term, it creates a devastated landscape. It's not thought through for forest biodiversity, but for the efficiency of material extraction. It subordinates trees to the logic of growing them upwards for valuable, uniformly thick trunks, thereby weakening and limiting them (even seedlings in nurseries are prepared in a way that limits their free growth from the outset). It is not thought through for the long-term, sustainable development of the forest, but for the optimisation and monitoring of controlled profit. As a result, it depletes the soil, impoverishes the ecosystem and weakens natural defence strategies against external pressures such as pests or storms.

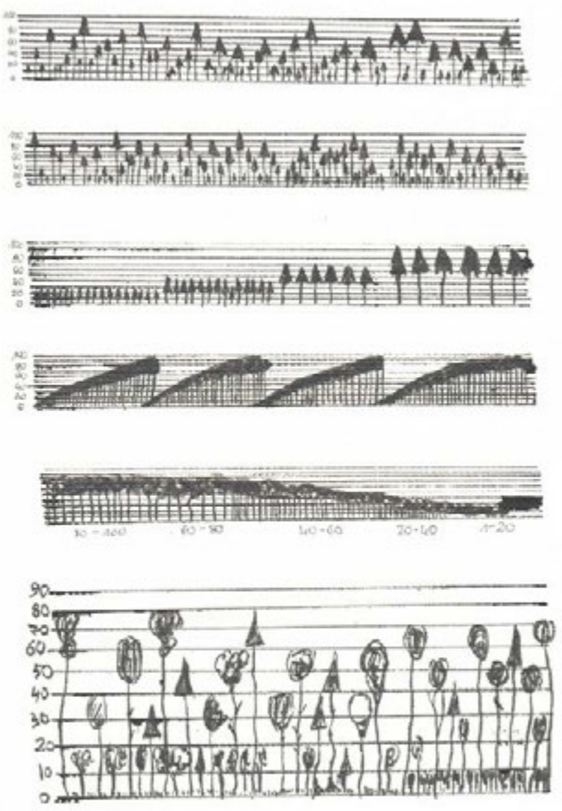
> Since the beginning of forestry, forests have been designed in a shelterwood manner, following the principles of closure. The idea is that in the event of strong winds, they are directed upwards—hence the first wall of the forest consists of low, densely growing shrubs, followed by slightly larger and wider trees, preferably deciduous and 'fire-resistant' trees (birch), and only at the very end resinous (and therefore flammable) and tall trees reaching up to the sky, such as pine, spruce or larch.

In the distant past, mixed forests dominated the Tuchola Forest. Beech, pine, hornbeam, linden, aspen and oak trees lived here. Predatory forest management, i.e. a model of forest use focused on rapid timber harvesting, had been intensifying since the 17th century. It was this practice that depleted the land and led to the creation of a pine monoculture.

> I've often heard from people outside the region—usually scientists, researchers, activists and environmentalists—that a forest laid down by the wind was not a 'real forest'. The commercial forest planted a hundred years ago was sometimes called a crop, a timber factory, a plantation. But no one here talks about it that way. For the residents, this forest was their living space. They found it beautiful as well. They marvelled at its qualities. To this day, they remember singular trees; they have a special relationship with them, and stories are connected with them. I grasp these narratives, imagining the shadow of a large spruce, squirrels on window sills, and morning mushroom picking. The forest was a point of reference, a definition of the world. It gave identity.

Map of the State Forests of the Republic of Poland, 1937

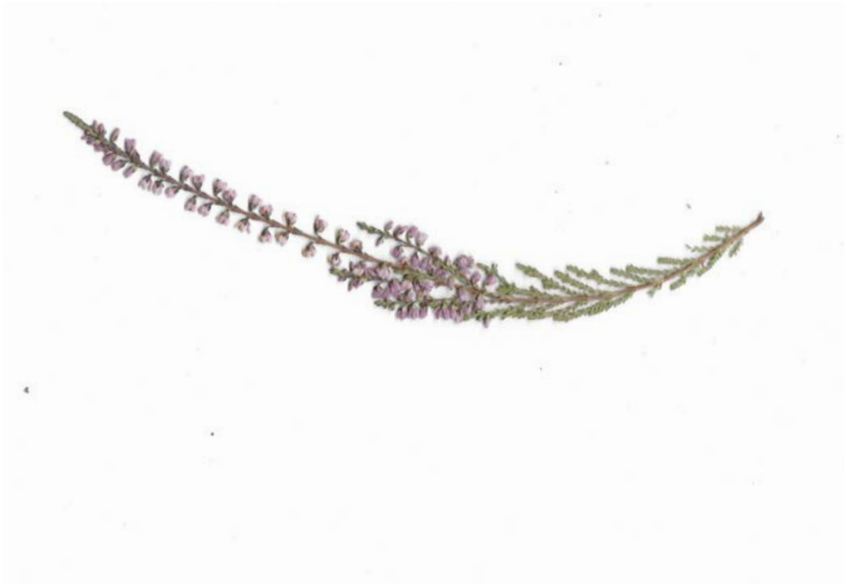
The remains of spruce trees felled by a storm in Duża Klonia, which we are walking towards



Dancing trees arranged in a stepped formation. The gale also stirred them into dance; the need for movement demanded to be noticed.

I am guided by the most general question that I have in my gut: what do we, as a society, value? How do we value it? What different protection regimes do we have and what value do we attach to them? Is it about the forest or about people? I am not questioning the rigid division between a timber factory and a real forest—I understand that there is a difference between a strict reserve and a monoculture. But at the same time, it seems to me that there is a similarity between the Tuchola Forest after the storm and those areas of the Białowieża Forest that were managed forests. When we think of them only as 'monocultures' or 'industrial forests' that no longer exist, and, well, too bad, there is no regime of care there. Perhaps there is something productive in thinking about areas transformed by humans as naturally valuable.

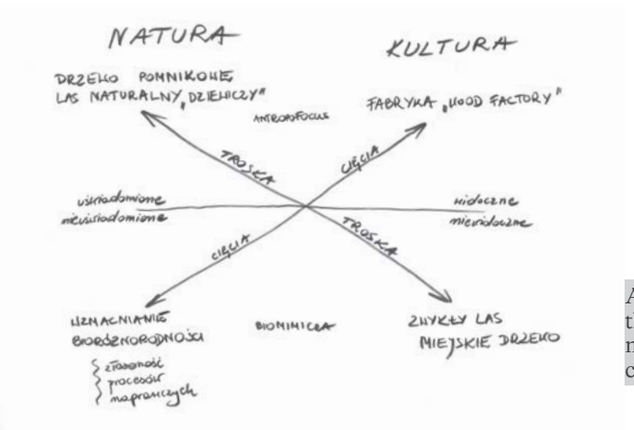
Reconstruction of a fragment of a conversation with Olga Cielemęcka that took place in the winter of 2023



After the storm, it was decided to break with monocultural extractivism and revive the old ecosystem in those habitats that carried soil of even slightly better quality. Deciduous trees were reintroduced—oaks, lindens, alders, hornbeams and even maples. Part of the forest was planted in a nursery, using knowledge about the mutual support of certain species through their roots and mycorrhiza. The planted trees are intended to support one another in the process of forest regeneration by forming root families. These are designed to guarantee stability and restore biodiversity. It's a forest planted with a view to a hundred years of growth—during this time, the trees will create such a strong root system that the only force threatening them will be the logger's chainsaw.

The categories of what is spontaneous or natural and what is planted and artificial have long been questioned—and continue to blur. The use of natural processes helps foresters in their work. This biomimicry offers hope that in a hundred years, part of the forest planted today will be a healthy, diverse ecosystem. If this comes, will we dare to call it unnatural and cut it down?

I want to weep over the forest that was a factory of planks and which the wind took away. May the system of care also embrace it.



A semiotic square attempting to define the relationship between what is valued more and less depending on the nature—culture classification.

The intense time took its toll—Lucyna visited the emergency room twice during the three weeks following the storm. For weeks, her body was in a state of constant agitation, exhausted by lack of rest and subjected to adrenaline overproduction. When the impulse disappeared, her body sank into illness: shortly after the storm, she was diagnosed with cancer.

> Since it happened, I've been trying to be tough. If I remain soft, just like I used to be, I will collapse. I have to be a little tougher, not all sentimental. [...] I really like these forests. I like to observe what's already there, observe with hope what's to one day be, perhaps even within my lifetime. [...] But I know that if I'm not tough, I will collapse. Tough, meaning that it doesn't cost me so much. This year, I already collapsed after losing my mother, and then my brother-in-law died....the things we get to experience. I must admit, I ransomed my time after the storm with stress [...]. I gave my heart, my time, my whole self to this action—and I would do it all over again. However, the emotions that were tearing me apart [...] were too strong. I don't know if it's because of that, but now I have cancer. [...] I've already had radiotherapy and surgery, and I'm still undergoing treatment. And these are things that may have resulted from such a 'blow' that knocks you off your feet. I must admit that I thought it didn't apply to me. [...] You know, when you have such an adrenaline rush that at some point your body can't keep up with it anymore, that's what happens.

The vastness and intensity of the activities exceeded the capabilities of local activists. They did not let others down, yet they overstepped themselves. Perhaps they took on too much, perhaps they felt they had no choice. It's no secret that the situation arose first from underestimating the scale of the threat, and then from a lack of systemic solutions: either the support from the authorities or the understanding of the needs of groups working in the field. In the early days, residents were left to fend for themselves. So they took up the work.

A lack of balance creates a straight line towards a crisis. Without rest, even the best motivations lead to awful consequences.

The storm revealed the critical condition of the local forest. It showed that the discussion about its economic role is not entirely grounded in economic goals, control, or power, but in safety, health, and relationships. It also exposed the boundaries we ought to set so that our management activities, whether those of care or profits, do not turn into (self-)exploitation and destruction.

The aim of this book is not to tell the story of the greatest storm known in the history of the Tuchola Forest. The Lack of Forest is an experiment that proposes using the very event of the hurricane as a model for testing solutions to the many past, present, and future disasters, which will only intensify in the era of climate crisis. The specific local context points to the need for discussions about ecology, social justice and responsibility. And about solutions that could allow us not so much to feel safe as to settle into an uncertain future. To understand the processes of change and to commonly agree on plans for sur/vivance. The hurricane exposes the dependence of our lives on the functioning of the entire ecosystem, exposing the complexity of regimes of care, commitment and value systems. These spaces require reflection and labour.

When I started working on the Lack of Forest, I thought that this event had marked these lands with violence. But violence was here before. The storm only revealed its layered nature.

Stills from a video recording by Łukasz, September 2017

Traveling the same route with Łukasz, 2025

The new forest will not be reborn in the same form as the one that disappeared. Along with it, certain practices are fading into oblivion. The residents feel that the storm has sealed certain processes. It has definitively closed a certain chapter. Farm animals are disappearing from the village, and people from the city are moving in. The disappearance of the forest has revealed the land's potential—no longer as a forest, but as a set of plots that can be transformed, sold, or built upon. The law states that forest areas should be rebuilt not built-over, but there are a number of rationales for subverting this rule.

We don't wander into the forest anymore. But we used to. Sundays were a walk. Besides, we used to walk through the forest to get to work. The forest wasn't that important, or perhaps it was, it was simply there. No one really paid attention to it. Like with a street in the city—you'd just walk through and you wouldn't notice it. Now, when you walk, you think a little differently. You wonder about how it used to be. Although, now everything has grown over a little, so there's not even a trace of what was "after". The perspective is different now, because it's been eight years. But you do remember that it once had been... The world has changed more than the forest. Because it all wasn't like that, and the forest too, wasn't...

(I want to ask what it was like, but the question sticks in my throat. 'Like that.' Important? Meaningful? Why can't I say it?)

[...] it was just a piece of road, that's all. And after the storm, the world transformed. Development continued and new plots were created. The village is now becoming some suburb, there are more people everywhere, everyone wants to have a house like those in the city, everyone has money and a car, and it doesn't really matter where they live. They can live wherever they want and destroy everything around them. A bloke is building a house here, where there used to be a forest. He bought about three hectares of land. I don't know how he got the permit, but he's building a house that... doesn't fit in with the environment at all. Most people build houses that don't fit in: they have to have porches, columns, verandas. Although no, there are no porches anymore, no verandas either—now there's concrete. Lots of concrete, corner windows—and it doesn't fit in. It's exactly like in the cities.

I've always liked it here. I first came here fifty years ago. I wanted to stay, and I did. But today, there are no villages left around. The potato mounds, the meadows for silage, are all ploughed, and there are fields everywhere you look. Villages are where farmers used to live, but now their children have gone to the city for work and everything has been sold off. The countryside is no longer ours.

Today, all the roads are paved. They were paved after the storm. There used to be a road here. It was not very busy and picturesque—now everything is paved and it has lost its charm.

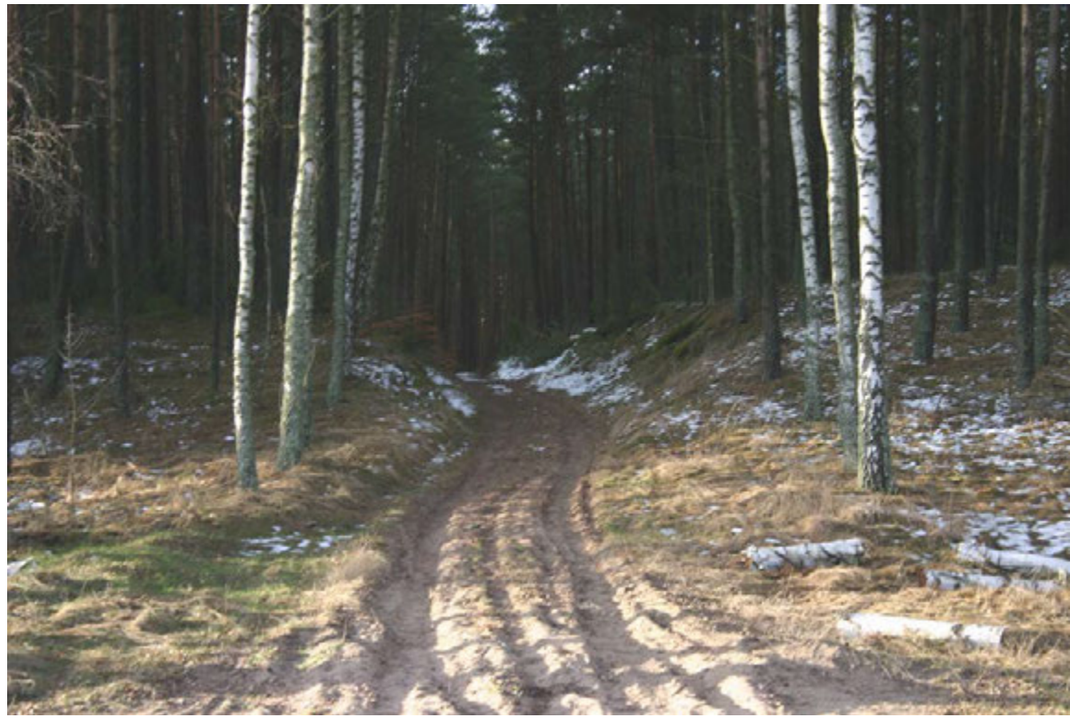
The distances have also become smaller. Because when there was a forest, it was quite a distance: you walked and walked through it. And now you can see everything from everywhere. Unfortunately, a lot has changed—Łukasz is moved as he shows more photos—Everything is done on a large scale; the entire structure has changed. There used to be small farmers, and now there are businessmen who don't care about the forest. Why would they care about the trees—the crucial thing is to be able to plough easily.

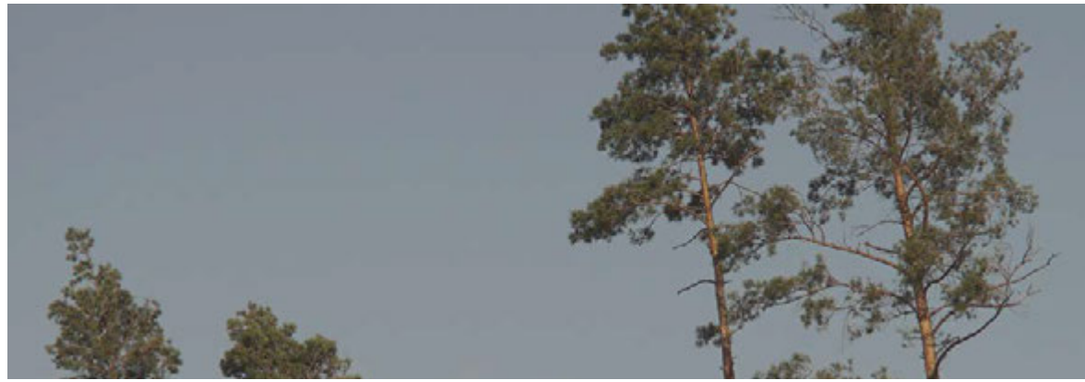
Everything is changing here. Planting a forest means ploughing, sometimes very deeply. The effect will last for decades. It will not be a nice, smooth forest. Everyone wants more and more. The village that used to be is here is no longer. When we first moved here in 2000, cows used to graze in the meadows, but now it's a thing of the past.

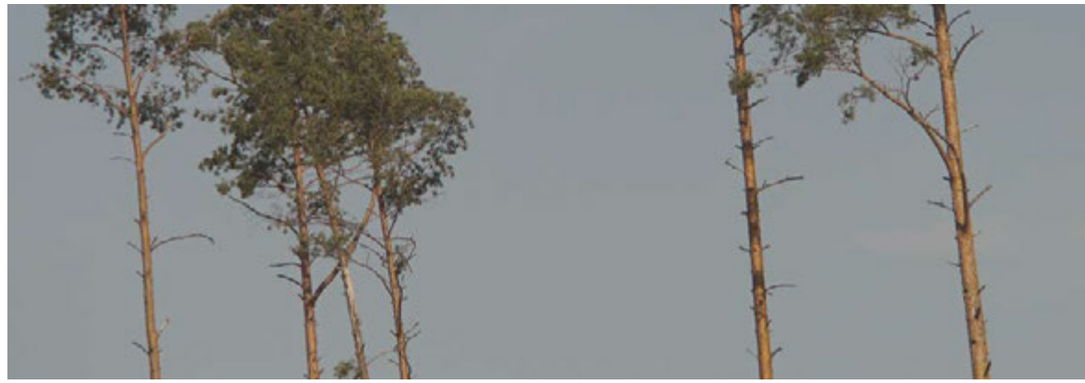
Utterances by Łukasz and Krystyna,
Lotyń, 2025

Those who are here today are left with forms of remembrance. The landscape intrudes on reality with all its opacity. The forest is always something else, whether in a feeling, in a memory, in an image or in a story. The hurricane has exposed all its layers: historical, natural, social, personal, collective, financial, economic, political, familial, and emotional. Lives that had previously converged—people and trees, clinging like skin to bark—have scattered. It is no longer possible to designate a common place here. You ought to take any space that becomes free, a couple of centimeters away from what's known.

Remains of wooden fencing around a meadow used for grazing cattle.







The exploited land remained bare and in need. Sick and wounded, it accepts our bandages to begin the healing process. Its health determines the quality of our lives.

Nothing will unfold for
us unless we move toward what
looks to us like nothing (...).

Alice Fulton, *Powers of Congress: Poems.*

When the crisis was over, people stopped going to the forest. Some still showed up in response to organised activities, like tree planting organised by the local forest district. But on a daily basis, it was difficult to find a living soul here.

> Many people who lived in the forest found it difficult to come to terms with the loss. At the same time, each of them believed that these mournful emotions should not be expressed—instead, it was necessary to show support, strength and readiness to act. Repair the damage as quickly as possible, and do not mention the sad things. The events of that night remained untold, and the loss—irreparable. People's hearts were broken, as they often repeat today. However, their first instinct is not to talk about this either. They stopped going to the forest so as not to confront the disappearance of what was dear to them and not reopen old wounds. Many Forest People find it challenging to look at the void left behind in the places they visited every day, to come to terms with their destruction. When the forest disappeared, the force of decay invaded the familiar space. It was frightening and encouraged repression. But by renouncing the forest, they also had to renounce a part of themselves.

The first people coming back to the forest was only possible once their emotions had subsided and the seedlings of new trees had turned green. A new reality had been constituted. Did the forest miss its people? Did it wait to receive the weight of their bodies, the tenderness of their touch, cosmetic treatments in the form of cutting the fruiting bodies of mushrooms, collecting herbs and roots, lying in the moss? Could it remain indifferent? For decades, the forest had become accustomed to people. Inscribed in the stories of their ancestors, it had become an effortless certainty, a space or a path that was taken for granted. In the face of this indifference, the storm forced a renewal of relations. The time has come to re-establish everything. There is little left, and nothing can be taken for granted anymore—each and every thing is important, and requires caution. We walk through the forest, in the mud, on tiptoes.

On the third day after the storm, they set about cutting down a spruce tree in the centre of the village.

After the storm, the fallen trees still had green crowns. They formed a chaotic, sprawling composition. As they are arranged, stacked, cleaned and removed, a composition of woodpiles stretching to the horizon emerges; the music of chopping, the ballet of excavators driving across roads covered with stones. The forest rumbles with machinery.

New Cosmogonies

I was drawn to a forest I'd never known before, and which revealed its entrails to me. It was as defenceless as a huge naked body, on which I could be a bacterium, a cleaner fish or a mycorrhizal fungus.

This exposure of the scale of forest matter changes the parameters of time and space. The exposed myth ceases to apply, but the primordiality liberated from the land's insides refers to distant and imagined spaces. It is a time not only of recreating the forest and our relationship with it, but also of composing a new cosmogony. At The Lack of Forest, we are, in a sense, in the future, looking at the world after the catastrophe. This time is necessary now, even though it is yet to come.

I started a chronicle—a chronicle of the forest after the storm—and I released it, so to speak, into the village. There are four entries. There is no conversation. There is no memory. I am looking for the reason, and I think it is because I am an outsider. Just as you are from the outside, I have been living here for fourteen years, and I can see that they are not traumatised. They are very simple people. Their children—my age, younger—are already more open to the world. The others think: something happened, something is gone, the end. The end. And unfortunately, something did happen. The financial loss for everyone is enormous. But as soon as they managed to get or gain something in return, that's where they draw comfort from. Profit, compensation, whatever you want to call it.

> I wanted to get this group, or at least part of it, interested and integrated enough to commemorate the storm's anniversary. To remember. That's how history is made, after all. I wouldn't want someone to distort this story in twenty or thirty years, to format it, to strip it of our experiences. And it's not that we deserve some kind of reward. [...] But why can't we work and build on such a levée en masse?[1] In situations like this, people can unite. It was unique. [...] And now that life is over.

They [the villagers] don't want it. But I repeat—not because they're traumatised. Although I think it was certainly difficult for the older people from Lotyń. For people who saw the enormity of the losses, it was despair and crying. [...] But when I set up a local association after the storm, precisely to maintain this temporary community, I realised that they didn't want it. They live in the here and now. What was there yesterday and will be there tomorrow, everything disappears—just like this forest. I try to get them to somehow think about it. In response, I hear: "Why? Why talk about the tragedy?".

Lucyna, Lotyń, 2025

1 Lucyna consistently refers to social engagement after the storm as a "general levée en masse."

Similar to Lucyna, I believe that overcoming this form of collective mutism is essential for the functioning of our community. Pain transformed into taboo, shrouded in silence, causes a rupture—not the first in the history of this part of the world. The region has been steeped in suffering for decades. The unclear status of the Kashubian population, German influences, the 'bloody Pomeranian autumn'[2], the events at the beginning of the Second World War—these are stories whose traces are still visible in these lands[3]. It is hardly surprising that people who have been making an enormous effort to forget for decades are tired. It is difficult to turn towards current suffering when the history of eighty years ago has not yet been mourned. The land that was supposed to endure and help hide everything suddenly revealed its weakness and harm. The land, which was a point of reference and a solid foundation for intergenerational continuity, revealed its fragility and transience.

> I had seen the wind as a rousing force, capable of shaking people awake. I waited for flashes of their awareness, for a sign that the wind resonated. No such recognition ever came. There were no conversations, no events, no initiatives, no gatherings. The wind came and went; something disappeared and was simply gone.

At first, I understood the refusal to experience the catastrophe of the Lack of Forest as a capitulation, a sign of a lost relationship, the vanishing of a primal bond. It took me a long time to see in it a protective strategy: against the annihilation of the world, against the impossibility of helping it. Something that had been our foundation, a sign of permanence, something that exceeded the span of our own existence, connecting the distant past and future, turned out to be weaker than we were. Something that set the horizon yielded almost without a fight. Faced with catastrophe on this scale, one must admit that every life, the whole of life, is endangered.

> Though the houses are still standing, our trees lie fallen. We lack foundations. The weakness of this land is our weakness.

2 This refers to Intelligenzaktion in Pomerania. In Chojnice, in Raciąż and other nearby localities, there are places where executions were carried out at that time (including the Chojnice "Valley of Death").

3 About 2,000 people were executed in these areas in 1939.

In the age of climate catastrophe, the crisis is not being resolved, and it cannot be. Yet the answer to it is not to live in tension. Working with the Lack of Forest is an invitation to loosen up. To record the social history of this place and of this forest. To make the effort to remember—in a sense that means caring, returning value and tending. Remembering is the condition for this forest's survival. Thus, calling attention to it triggers processes of renewal.

Photographs from *The Lack of Forest* series, 2019

The Need for Visits

I did not experience the moment of solidarity that everyone here recalls. As a resident without the experience of that August night, I was not part of the collective pact of mourning. Yet the devastated landscape plucked at the strings of entropy dwelling in my soul. With each conversation, I began to understand that my presence at the Lack of Forest was needed. By documenting, by telling the story of disorder, I unwittingly became a mediator of relations, a catalyst for grief. Being an outsider, I carried no burden of that night's storm, no obligations toward other community members. The collective avoidance and freeze I sensed only deepened my need to move through the impasse. I was drawn to the forest's remnants, guided by an almost magnetic pull. I came to the Lack of Forest at a time when everyone else wanted to leave. Today I understand that I entered the forest in response to the absence of presence—in a way, on behalf of those who were forced to avoid it after the catastrophe. I became part of an exchange, a participant in a shared process. I was no longer alone but woven into mutual obligations and duties. That was my role in the life of our community. My form of taking root was movement.

When I realised this,
I began to listen to the stories.

I Cannot Look at the Lack of Forest

We were standing in the garden, doing small maintenance tasks. Rafał was telling his story. He's from Koszalin, where he started a family and worked hard to earn his dream: a house in the middle of the forest. He's withdrawn and unsure in interactions. He wears a tough-guy mask, but he's a sensitive person—one of the first with whom I had deep conversations about nature and art. Rafał moved to Mylof twenty years ago. He loved the old spruces in front of his house, the water, the dam, and the Brda River. The Forest People taught him to love his surroundings and to benefit from them. Together with his family, he lived in his dream place on Earth.

During the night of the storm, he didn't know what was happening. He only remembers that when he stepped outside to smoke a cigarette, he saw countless insects climbing up the walls of the buildings—hundreds of tiny beings migrating across the old plaster. Rafał recalls the moment when he and his wife froze, staring at this unusual sight. They didn't know they were witnessing a battle for survival.

People who lived in the forests said that a few hours before the storm, they saw the animals gathering on fields, in the middle of open land. [...] And then someone said that the animals sensed danger, and they were trying to hide somehow. Even the crickets were seeking shelter high up under the gutters. We didn't know what it meant; we thought, "They're here, alright"—maybe for the light, maybe for something else.

Rafał, Pawłówko, 2025

That night, there were more scenes like that: animals emerged onto fields and meadows, watching people driving by, as if trying to warn them. Yet people didn't understand the behaviour. On the night of the storm, fallow deer escaped from rural enclosures, including one albino. Rumour has it they live in the nearby forests, having assimilated with red deer. And that from time to time, albino deer can be spotted.

Krystyna, Lotyń, 2025

Dogs refused to go for walks. From six o'clock—four hours before the first thunder—they were signalling, whining. We didn't understand their warnings.

Lucyna, Lotyń 2025

When morning came and only the stumps of the trees remained, Rafał and his wife could not believe they were looking at a forest cemetery. They looked at a forest that suddenly no longer existed. He cannot reconcile himself with it. Since then, he has driven every day through places that once were dear to him and now are unrecognisable—dangerous, dark, sad. Once the trees—as if signs—pointed the way home. Today, every turn looks the same. We are travelling across a burnt field, searching for the way home. And for Rafał, there is no real home anymore; his home was the forest.

I simply cannot look at the Lack of Forest—Rafał confesses. I begin to understand the toil of experiencing a catastrophe. The storm lasted a moment. But what about those from whom it took something? For Rafał, the forest was not a point on a map, not an abstract idea or a form of property—it was part of his identity. After its loss, he found nothing that could bring relief. Relief came only from the forest.

A grasshopper climbs the block of flats where Rafał and his wife used to live, and in front of which they stood on the night of the storm

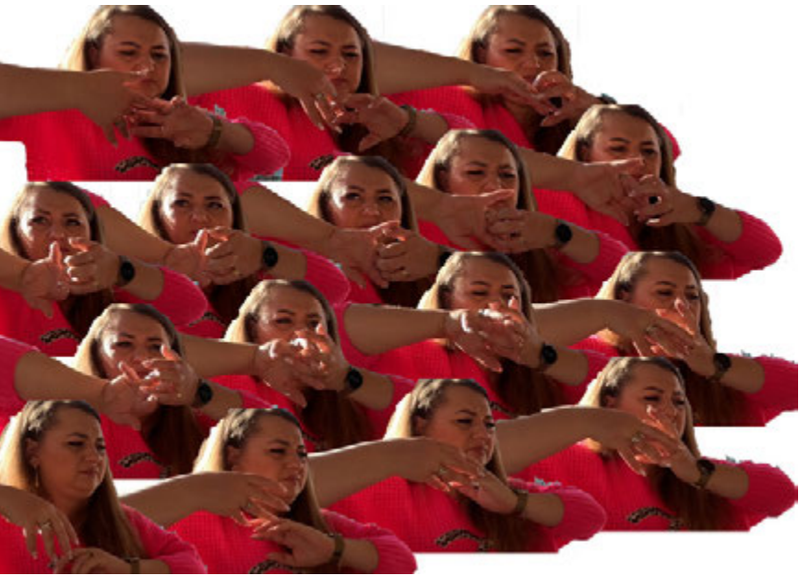
In 2024, nearly six years after our first conversation, I met with Rafał again. He tells me he had a breakdown. Shortly after our talk, he quit his job for health reasons—he had to change professions and his entire life. When he rebuilt his health, found a new job, and caught his breath, he decided to move away from the Lack of Forest. He could no longer bear the tension caused by the wound in the landscape.

He and his family moved to the village of Pawłówko, untouched by the storm. The ability to walk into a forest is a basic daily need for Rafał. Without it, the quality of his life deteriorates significantly. The forest, which he calls his closest companion, anchors him more deeply than social ties. The forest is his home.

Roe Deer Observing the Hurricane from a Safe Distance of a Former Meadow Turned into a Field, found object, wood from the Lack of Forest, 2020

You couldn't walk down the road. Not just because trees lay across it—let me be clear. Have you ever played pick-up sticks? When you scatter them and narrow them to the width of a road—that's what it looked like. Heavy machinery couldn't deal with it.

Ryszard, head of the Zapora village, 2025



Ryszard and Emilia are showing the trees twisted like pick-up sticks.

Metaphors and imaginations permeate our experiences. I didn't see the fallen trees on the streets, but I thought of them often. I made my first pick-up sticks in 2020 from twigs from the Lack of Forest. I collected them from the still-unplanted swaths of forest.

> The branches and my favourite gnarls had been lying there for about two years, long enough for the sun and wind to give them a characteristic silvery colour. I sorted them into piles according to size or the traits I had previously assigned to them. They resembled small bonfires.

The game of pick-up sticks from the Lack of Forest often accompanied us in our forest experiences. I played it with my stepdaughter, who was three at the time (she was born the year of the storm). We agreed on which shapes earned more points. Later, I labelled them with patterned cards to make the game easier. The time of our first meetings flowed with the remnants of the forest.

One day of gathering material for pick-up sticks from the Lack of Forest.

Persistence of Pain

Persistence is not only a physical phenomenon but also an emotional state describing the impossibility of reacting—a form of freezing in the face of deep fear. The brain protects our survival: the so-called reptilian part activates like a fire siren during danger, immobilising us or triggering flight, fight, or freeze responses unconsciously. Persistence is also a term for one of the traits of vision. The "persistence of vision" is underlying the extracorporeal moving image.

Research on environmental trauma caused by natural disasters shows that people who have experienced a hurricane or tsunami often suffer delayed post-traumatic stress disorder. Catastrophic events frequently remain incomprehensible, and the experience unintegrated. Those who lived through them usually cannot connect prolonged withdrawal or depression with environmental change.

When Rafał told me that he relived the tragedy every day, I understood that for many people here, every glance into the clearing of the former forest is like a frame of a painful film replayed anew. A jammed reality, a permanently repeated pain.

Holding twigs from the Lack of Forest in my hands, I try to care for fragments of the place's history into which I am growing emotional roots. They travel deep into the history of this land, to its core. The whole world I will discover in the future will grow out of this place. Many of us know such a place. We are bound to it by an invisible but perceptible thread.

A hand will soon scatter the twigs like pick-up sticks. It has held them so long that it has lost feeling. Prolonged exposure to pain can have a numbing effect.

I try to capture the nature of the mutual relationship where love and pain meet. Fire is both a threat and a safety. The hearth and the blaze.

Persistance of Pain, video, 5 min, 2024

Palimpsest, photo-collage, 2025

Western philosophy has, for centuries, stripped plants of subjectivity, agency, soul, freedom, and autotelicity. Plant life appeared senseless, weak, and prone to destruction. In a world of general enfeeblement—an emanation of fragility and vulnerability—the once-established boundaries of autonomy are cracking. The passivity of plants is, and will continue to be, questioned. We will learn more and more about stability and survival strategies from them. Plant life is about occupying space, positioning oneself in relation to the soil, arranging oneself toward the sun, and assuming postures in relation to other organisms in the assemblage. It is the antithesis of singularity and the quintessence of balance. Without plants, we do not exist. Yet they endure without us.

Whereas the fragility of a plant is easy for us to imagine, it is far more difficult in the case of trees, whose solid trunks, spread and majesty of their crowns are culturally and semantically associated with dignity and strength. In 2017, in the Tuchola Forest, the forest's stability was shaken. A tree became thin and brittle as a hair, and the wind combed through the forest.

We are the ones who created weak forests. And only we can decide whether to begin strengthening them.

A photograph of an oak in Duża Klonia, which, during the storm, lost only one branch—the heaviest one. The rest of the tree, and thanks to it, also the house beside it, survived. The house would not have survived the entire tree falling. Both still stand.

Positively understood, the dispersed life of plants is a mode of being in relation to all the others, being qua being-with. Dispersed in acts of living, all creatures share something of the vegetal soul and are alive in the most basic sense insofar as they neither coincide with themselves nor remain self-contained, but are infinitely divisible below the death masks of their identities. If this is so then we have a lot to learn from plants that have mastered this way of being, which is their virtue (again, in accord with the ancient meaning of *are ¯te ¯*), not a vice of insufficient self-idealization and self-universalization [...].

Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*

Archaeological Station, Białe Błota, Lotyń area, 2017

I look at the lack as a place for imagining, where everything is only beginning to be determined. The forest is no longer a metonym for ecological strength. Instead, I see in it an example of processes of ruination—a space weakened by years of exploitation through a fragile plantation grown on exhausted soil and buffeted by drought, wind, and escalating pest gradations. A long-unquestioned rule ceases to apply. We need to rethink the forest—situate it anew within its environment—and with that, perhaps rethink the very essence of life within and in relation to the environment.

> In situations of catastrophe, it becomes clear that our lives are not—as we like to think—autotelic. We depend on environmental processes, vulnerable to their violence, reliant on their constancy. Like plants, we need sun, water, and one another to live.

When, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Polish government banned entering forests, true life began at the Lack of Forest. In the areas I monitored, reforesting intensified. Before that happened, a final phase of clearing took place. People from nearby villages arrived with trailers to load the branches remaining on the ground; some threw the larger ones directly into car trunks. Soon, mounds of tree remnants appeared next to rural homes—wood that would serve as fuel for years to come. But some piled a mound only to decide not to burn it. They wanted to keep it. Tree remnants stripped of function began to resemble monuments. Locals seemed to be cultivating their own practice of memory. Although their first impulse was practical—accumulating a resource—ultimately, some force pushed them toward a non-exploitative decision: they chose to keep part of the collected wood as an act of remembrance. Not only of the storm, but of fading images and practices, of the values that once composed the forest. These household mounds are a visual signal—showing that something has happened in this region that changes us permanently—an apprenticeship in impermanence.

A household mound of Lotyń inhabitants.

Dwarfed trees were planted on the edge of the Szast Protected Forest—stunted specimens of hawthorn, alder, and even some pines. The forester I visited the Szast Protected Forest with calls it a failed “bonsai” experiment. Evidence of how difficult it is to restore biodiversity in depleted areas. It requires care, long-term planning, and a change in the objectives of forest policy.

When the stress of city life began to loosen, kept under my skin like a close companion, my body refused to cooperate. For the first time in my life, I felt I could press the "rest" button, and when I did, all the tense tissues holding up a fear-tired body collapsed. Local doctors and relatives wrote dark scenarios. I'd better prepare for surgery, befriend a neurosurgeon. Their words made me shut down.

> The community I was beginning to join suffered from loss; I suffered from illness. Their hearts were breaking; my breaking was the spine. Outside, the pandemic was unfolding; we were all closer to dying. I travelled to the Lack of Forest so I wouldn't have to think about it. Its ravaged state was a support, a meeting in weakness. Approaching the mounds, the heaps of uprooted and broken trees did not sting, they soothed. Not yet intimate, but already announcing something.

Every step sent pain through me, but every day I lengthened my walks. One day, I climbed one of the familiar piles. I bounced lightly, like a nestling in its nest; I wanted to fly, to feel lightness, transformation. I wanted the wind to take me into a dance, to lift and heal me. To let me begin again. Being in a place of suspended ontology allowed me to feel, briefly, the fullness of life.

Video stills from the *Forest Stack* video, 2020

Slowly, it dawns on me that I am settling here—that some part of me was strengthening while another was abandoning me. Holding tufts of my hair in my hands, I feel my inner cry settle onto the wind and scatter like dust. I am deep in the terrain. August 2020.

It was mainly solitary visits to the Lack of Forest during the first two years that provoked thoughts of childhood. It was the smell of the forest—reminding me of early-morning mushroom hunts with my parents, pine-scented bubble baths at my grandmother's, or the soil that was one of the most fascinating characters in our endless outdoor games.

It was a space of freedom, a carnival. The wind brought not only devastation but reversal: it gave the space an undefined status and undefined rules. One could enter and shout, run in and jump, and each movement seemed to dissolve instantly in the density of the air, the intensity of colours. A boundless field where human presence disturbs nothing.

Earth is Water, Silence is a Wave

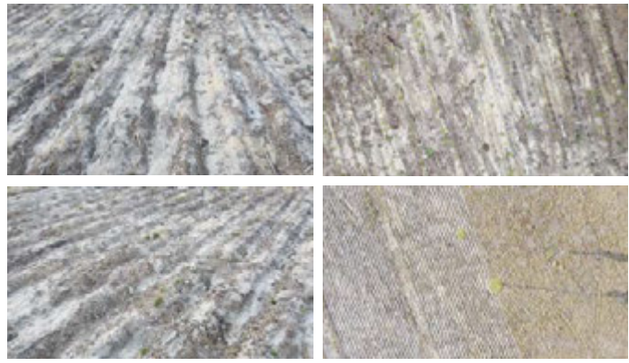
I am, and yet as if nothing is. The space surrounds me with the care of boundlessness. In an ocean of air, I listen for every rustle. The expanses of silence begin to fill with sound, a music that stimulates growth and heals. I hear it clearly. The trees orchestrate.

Today we live through a storm, trees — you and I.
I whisper the quietest words nearby,
while you roar in the gale on high,
like green lions' cry.

The poem *Storm* (1927) by Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, for which I composed music for and was often sung in the Lack of Forest.

A score in which trees are notes marking the pitch.

When I imagined the ploughed land as waves after a squall on a lake, the trees began to sing sea shanties to the words of Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska that echoed in my memory. Music has become an important layer of the Lack of Forest life.



Today's science offers knowledge about how traumatic experiences and fears are passed down through generations. The artefacts my community and I create, including this book, record not only the need to share the experience of living at the Lack of Forest but also the need to build a platform for experiencing loss. The absence of a discursive narrative around the hurricane has made it necessary to gather the scraps and transform them into a collective memory of a difficult event. To determine our point of reference. We need a safe space for experiencing to bring into being something one can lean over, to calm the pounding thoughts when they arise.

> We all care about the future. We do not want our sorrow to disrupt the building of order or burden the community. We do not want to pass down trauma; we want to resolve the matter of pain. At the Lack of Forest, we seek a space for expression that allows the exchange of thoughts, emotions, and experiences of landscape loss. Efforts to address the crisis and to place the events of the 2017 storm within the broader context of memory studies, trauma, and their environmental implications are meaningful to us. People at the Lack of Forest have a unique opportunity to experience how human life transcends the individual, the personal, and the conscious. It connects with the matter of the world. Here, entanglement is not a metaphor but a reality. Nonhuman agents—plants, animals, minerals—carry traces of the same experiences; they are witnesses and transmitters. One only needs to open oneself to this story. Let us listen closely.

The choir of the trees which were left after the storm

On other days, when I looked at the empty terrain, it seemed to me that it needed nothing. Under my foot, I'd find a juicy puffball mushroom, touch it with my finger to release the spores. Press it several times and watch the wind carry them away.

To step into mud.

To feel thick dew, gather a spiderweb.

To touch mould, mycelium, and slime, examine the channels carved out by bugs. To see wood crumble into dust. First into small squares, precise like design tasks; finer parts into fibres, into hairs. Still others, solid and thick, hold themselves within the bounds of their inner bark, punctured by a million tiny black holes. Inside microorganisms feed. They will consume everything that can be consumed; they will coil and devour one another. The grey calm of the skin betrays none of this.

A feeling like a sudden bodily drop, when the viscera levitate, searching for their place, a point of reference. I feel, very clearly, a connection with what lies beyond the skin, yet I do not know how to practice it. I sense the smell of pine, the freshness of rain, the depth of the strong scent of soil that soothes. All this is here, in me. What I see enters my nervous system, spreads as a shiver under the skin. I feel the pathways branching. I see them and I am them all at once.

The forest has put on an invisibility cloak: it is not here, though it is. Is it? Or isn't it? Let us search under, between, through, among, and across—everything loops.

Sometimes the earth seemed silent, dead, and indifferent, as if someone had cut a sheet of paper in half lengthwise—split it in two—and released its meaning. The index became a symbol, no longer requiring people; it became only a distant spectator. The deafness wanted to be respected.

This silence did not accept steps; I'd stop on the threshold. How do you embrace a space? How do you read our shared geography?

With my breath, I widened my body; invisible feelers extended from my back, trying to reach all the way to the horizon. Mucous threads seeped from my pores. They crawled across the ground to the windthrows, searching for life within them, smuggling in water. To the hummocks of rustling stumps, to cover them with an aura. I stood there and, through willpower, expanded the surface of my body into a thallus, an imagined sheet, a wad or gauze that could dress the earth with a bandage. It seemed to me that I could hear the life-sounds of the undergrounds. They responded to my calls and touches. From the soles of my feet to the crown of my head they charged me, fed me, stimulated my circulation, informing me of their presence. The earth was not dead, but dormant. It gave signals, asking to be visited.

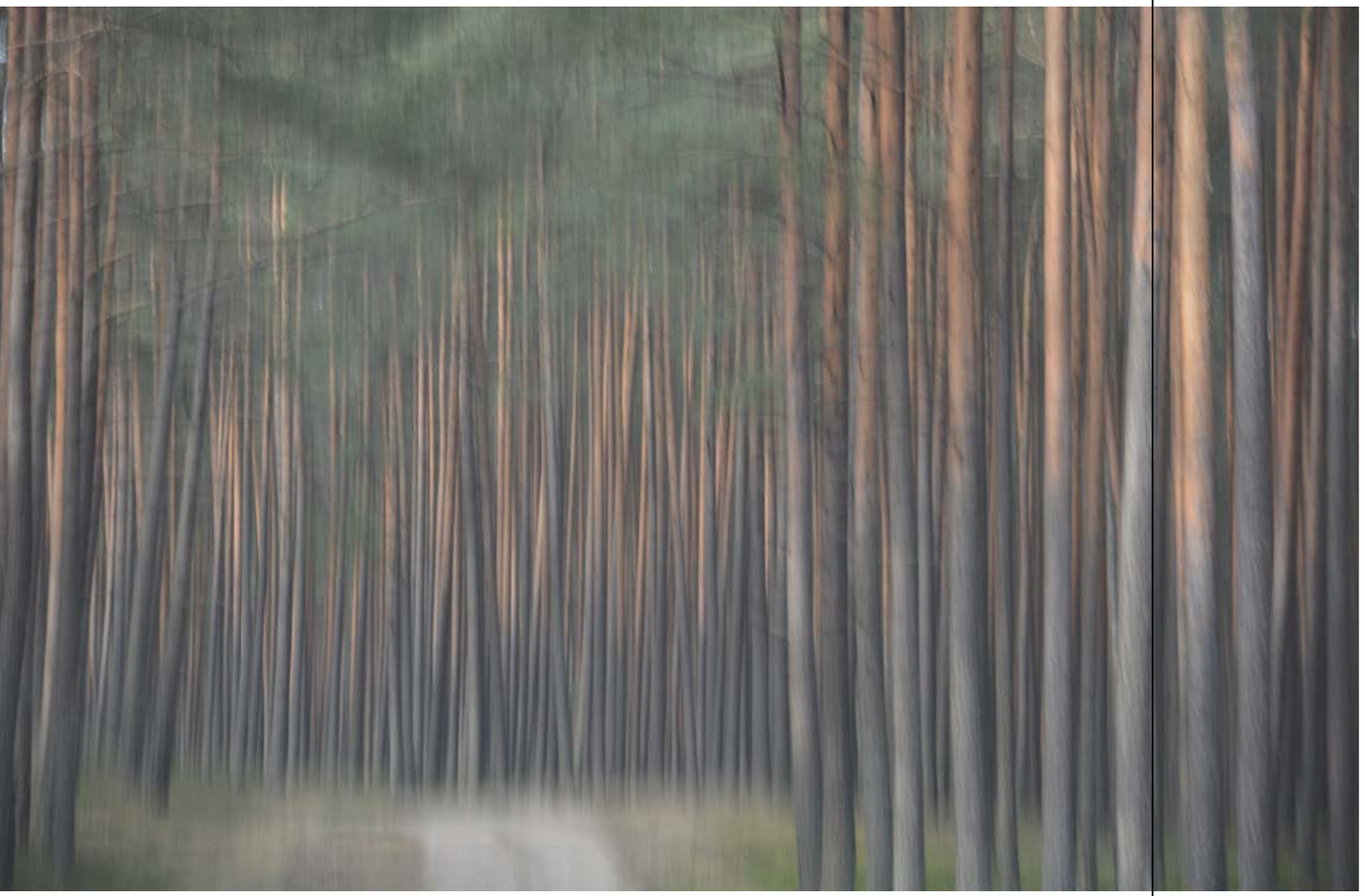
On my route, one mound stubbornly kept appearing, which I would pass on my way to the Tricity. In April 2019, for the first time, I dared to approach it.

> I took Uciek with me—my canine guardian, who darted without hesitation into the treeless thickets. Uciek has always loved the Lack Forest. He would lie on the bare earth on his back and roll endlessly. It looked like an attempt to merge, to press the boundary of earth and fur, a practice of union, of approaching the largest possible corporeal volume.

We walked over mud dried by the sun to a crisp. The mounds on either side loomed threateningly; I aimed the camera at them like a shield. The Forest seemed to be collapsing. I placed myself in a kaleidoscope of forest debris, which shimmered before my eyes. Sun-drenched fragments fell into them. I squinted and continued walking. There was nothing smooth here; everything was rough, parched, crunching, scratchy, brittle, and crackling. The trees seemed to shout at me, though I did not hear. After a while, I reached the mound. The camera fell limply onto the cracked mud. The mound drew me like a magnet.

> There were many mounds. When I moved here, the landscape was dotted with them, an element of constancy for me. But this one was enormous. My body trembled at contact with the insides, gazing at me through the black holes, with the chaos of form, the silence of expressive, tangled intricacy. Sun-dried wood reminded me of bones.

Soon after, the mound disappeared, leaving in my heart a sense of despair or panic. Surely, my daily experiences contributed; they didn't seem to stop spinning, any more than the natural processes. In my private life, changes were underway. I was no longer only a Borowianka or Kosznajrdka by marriage; I had assumed a new set of roles: wife, stepmother, daughter-in-law, caretaker, neighbour. I was partly familiar, yet still foreign. A woman from afar. An artist who does not paint—an incomprehensible being. Deprived of my previous context, I fled to the remoteness of the Lack Forest for relief. I went there as if to meet a friend to exchange thoughts. In the wind and emptiness, I found a new language—one activated by being.



In a global state of precarity,
we don't have choices other than looking
for life in this ruin.

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*

From top: an injured wolf,
a family of moose – exhibits
at the Pisz Forest District

That day, as usual, I arrived at the forest district office early in the morning. I already knew that things are done very early here. Foresters are early birds. Over time, I, too, began to appreciate waking at dawn, quietly putting on a coat, the sight of mist descending after the night, and the forest animals peering from the roadside. I now know almost every corner here. On the threshold, I am usually greeted by an information board, the magazine *Forest Echoes*, and a seasonal decoration (different depending on the time of year). Sliding doors lead to a sombre, narrow corridor. Maps or thematic boards hang on the walls: tree pests, breeding birds, endangered frog species—these are just some of the educational treasures one can read on the walls. I usually read them while waiting for a meeting.

These are not the only artefacts I have observed in this place. Initially, I noticed the faded maps behind non-anti-reflective glass and wood specimens, which particularly fascinated me when they revealed their pathologies. I ironically thought that all that was missing was a large deer antler, a stuffed fox with bared teeth, and a wolf greeting visitors at the entrance—not out of stereotype, but habit formed during visits to other district offices. For example, at the Pisz Forest District, which I visited while researching hurricanes in the "Szast" Protected Forest, a special display of stuffed forest animals was created. Arranged in seemingly natural positions, they were meant to look as if they had never left the forest. A ghostly collection of bodies, which foresters called "accident animals."

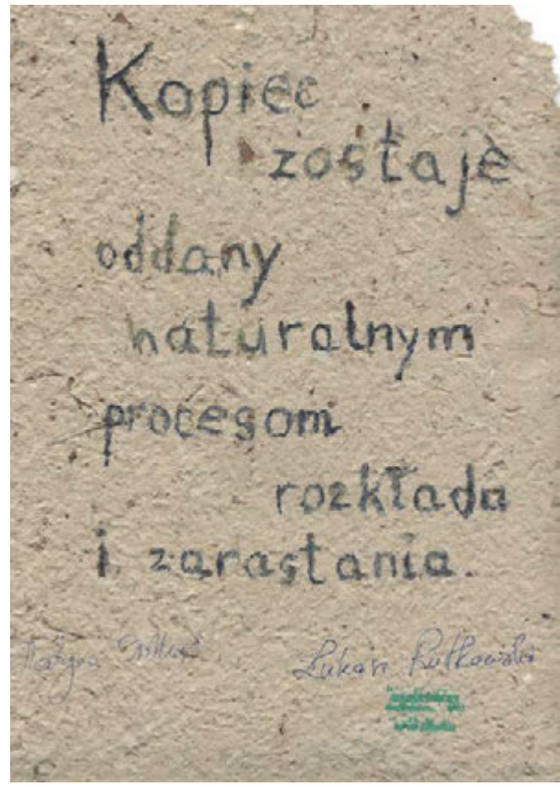
I remember my first visit to this place. I arrived there straight from the road, confused by the disappearance of mounds I had grown accustomed to. I was told that removing the mounds was an inevitable part of post-storm cleanup, which foresters are legally required to complete within five years. Soon, all of them would vanish. The thought terrified me; I felt I was losing something precious. Something we would all lose.

Just before turning into the district, I discovered that the mound near Męcikał had disappeared—the one I had recorded a few weeks earlier, the first one I had come to know and love. The ubiquitous mounds had formed the everyday landscape over the previous three years, and to me, they had always been there. I felt the need to preserve at least one. I decided that enough was enough with the disappearances. I decided to act. With flushed cheeks, I explained to the then-administrators the idea of creating a living monument—a form of commemoration that would preserve at least a fragment of the lost forest. I remember being met with caution at first.

Ultimately, I received permission for the creation of the Mound-sculpture. Frequent visits to the forest district are related to formalising the transformation of the Mound into an art installation. We use the language of courtesy and diplomacy, and we prepare legal documents for our lawyers. We agree on the wording of clauses. I am particularly concerned with the installation's continuity, so I want to include a clause stating the project's ongoing nature. I want the Mound to be protected regardless of personnel changes. I am working with yet another team, and in such changeable, sometimes unfavourable conditions, protecting the process is important. The forest district manager expresses understanding and asks for the next round of amendments. Today, we will again not sign the document.

We discuss further amendments. The forest district expects me to assume responsibility. The Mound is in a public space; at any moment, it could be vandalised or set on fire. One day, a child—not necessarily playing alone, merely in the presence of a careless adult—could climb it and fall. The same could happen to a reckless adult. The danger also comes from the Mound's instability. I have noticed parts of it being taken—mainly roots revealing resinous heartwood, likely collected by locals for kindling. We must therefore reconsider the scope of responsibility, return to the lawyers, and then meet again.

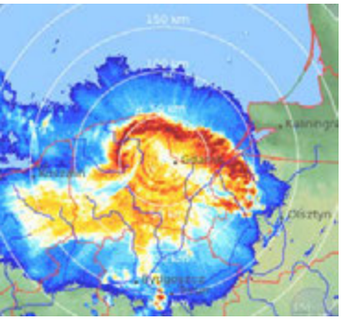
Before the end of the meeting, I take out another document, handwritten on paper made from plant and paper waste collected at the Lack of Forest. It contains heather and bird cherry, fibrous Rowley's elder, some crumbled Challenger, larch needles, a handful of dried reindeer moss, St. John's wort, raspberry leaves, and some green peat. Using a feather from a white-tailed eagle found near the mound, dipped in pigment extracted from common privet growing near my home, I wrote: "The Mound is surrendered to processes of decay and overgrowth." This principle is important: care for a living monument should not consist of shaping it, but tending it; the mound will be shaped by natural processes. In doing so, I integrate decay, decomposition, and chaos into the ordered world of the managed forest. This is an agreement heralding the arrival of a different paradigm, a "different" forest. I show the document to the forest manager, who looks at me, perplexed. I suggestively push it toward him. "Should I sign this, yes?". "Yes, if you agree with this statement." The forest manager looks at the sheet for a long moment. What else could he read here? What meanings in this sentence trouble him? By signing, would he abuse his authority? Would he make a fool of himself? I can only imagine the doubts arising in the uniformed man's mind. "Here?" he finally asks, reaching for a pen. "Yes, on the right; I'll sign on the left. And the stamp, too."



A document signed with the Forest District, handmade paper with the addition of plants from the Lack of Forest; pigment: common privet; signatures: the Head Forester of the Rytel Forest District Łukasz Rutkowski and Martyna Miller, artist

The creation of the living sculpture of the Mound—a meeting place—is also a moment of concretising the entire project that I am developing with the local community after the hurricane.

The Mound-sculpture is actually two mounds, initially piled in early 2020, thanks to my initiative and the efforts of the Rytel Forest District. It consists of around a hundred and twenty root systems along with trunks (called "stumps" by the foresters), which were collected with the help of machines. The part of the Lack of Forest where the Mound was created was one of the areas that still needed clearing two years after the storm. I determined the location of the Mound based on practical advice provided by the foresters. We considered both the site's accessibility and significance. The Mound was built from wood collected around the village of Suszek and Lake Śpierewnik. These areas are adjacent to the site where a scouting camp was destroyed during the hurricane. This area is considered the epicentre of the wind.



Radar scan of the storm from the radar in Gdańsk, night of the hurricane

My intention was not only to commemorate a time of crisis but also the efforts of the entire community to endure it. The Mound thus memorialises the loss felt by residents when the forest disappeared, but it also invites observation of the change initiated by the hurricane. I hoped that the commemoration would provide a reason for reflection, encouraging visits to the abandoned forest. Over time, the Mound has become a local meeting place, a space for conversation and observation. It has filled the void left by areas devastated by masses of fallen trees.

It was built from waste, disorder—something that would usually be hidden or cleared away. Something considered meaningless. Something meant to be removed. Yet these were the roots of mighty trees, the exposed operational systems of the forest. In another world—a world capable of mourning the non-human—they would need to be buried. The Mound is a form of tomb. It was created so we could come to terms with loss calmly. At the same time, it does not stop at testifying to death—it is also a place of salvation. In this sense, it testifies to the agency of art. Through artistic intervention, I saved this place, allowing it to thrive and create its own unique story.

One can see the Mound as the spirit of the Lack of Forest. Spread between the past and the future, it assists in rites of passage, liminal states, suspended or anticipatory states. It reminds us of the wind. More specifically, the circular motion of the wind that moved across the entire area.

The wind not only devastated the landscape but also initiated proceeses of change. It shuffled the existing order, scattered seeds and spores to unexpected places, and mixed the worlds of many organisms. It brought revolutionary energy to a place that perhaps thought it did not need it. The wind can be thus associated with freshness and breath—it can remind us of the need for rest and respite.

Nevertheless, the Mound conceals a secret. Created from remnants, it contributes to the mythology of the Lack of Forest. It is difficult to seek a spirit in a managed forest. We usually do not attribute magical properties to it, stripping it of sacred power. We believe that spirits prefer natural states of ecosystems—primaeval forests and wild corners of reserves. Not disorderly nurseries or managed plantations.

The Mound of uprooted trees embodies the intention and power of the wind that transformed the reality of the organised, predictable, managed forest. It introduced elements of decay and decomposition, giving the cycle of life movement. It revealed the power of entropy. The disaster showed that years of work and planning are lost in the face of nature's force. Economically, the hurricane caused losses; in the emotional realm, it brought disruption and grief; in a symbolic realm, a crisis of values. The forest was meant to guarantee happiness, safety, peace, and abundance. The wind, taking the forest, demanded a reevaluation of priorities, where the extraction of forest resources and land threaten the forest's existence. It demanded recognition and appreciation of the inalienable relationship in which human life depends on the forest's life. It forced reassessment and introspection, encouraging reflection and listening to the voice of the forest spirit.

The Mound, as a new place, establishes a zone governed by laws and values different from those previously applied to the surrounding forests. In this small enclave, about a kilometre away from the nearest human settlements, in the middle of the Lack of Forest, we suspend the logic of production and sale, and reformulate the logic of functionality and utility, pointing to goals that could not previously be defined here.

Through its existence—slow settling, decay, habitation, buzzing, crawling, being pierced, being perched upon, shedding, drying, fruiting, resin exudation, being scattered, hiding, exposing, carrying meanings—the Mound shows the process of reclaiming what was considered lost. It exposes life processes in all their intensity. Life is autotelic. It is an independent whole from which one can draw vital forces—not only observing efforts to rebuild, but also healing wounds resulting from human experiences. Immersion in the life of the Mound allows participation in the act of restoration, crossing beyond the category of loss. Observing an object that, from afar, appears frightening and inhospitable, while up close teems with life, allows one to be transformed to the side of life after life, into the realm of spirituality.

Observing the Mound is observing the becoming-landscape, matter in constant motion. A whole dispersed into individual elements of life; elements of constellations; organisms functioning in relation to other organisms and natural forces. The Mound allows experiencing the essence of life in relation to others. Any singularity or individuality is denied here. Only the whole, the dynamic of interconnected elements, can begin the process of restoring what has disappeared.

Observing this world and being present in it stimulates engagement and empathy. Through processes of projection and identification, we occupy a place in the world of interdependencies. The consequence of observing life piling up is often extreme emotions. Visitors to the Mound in the Lack of Forest experience awe, awakening, elation, gratitude, anxiety, a sense of the extraordinary, or disgust. Spirituality emerges from affect.

As a rise from destroyed matter, a tomb of the forest body, the Mound triggers a series of associations. For me, contact with each mound—from the first approach to the embankment near Męcikał to the Mound-sculpture I care for—has evoked and continues to evoke a cascade of anxieties and cultural flashbacks. These emotions and involuntary images that appear before my eyes reveal the banality of cruelty and loss that we experience. With the belief that they will disappear, we bury them—metaphorically or literally—deep in the earth. But contrary to what we were told, the earth does not want to accept everything.

The Mound piled and unshielded, it does not hide evidence of our loss but exposes it. In this sense, it is the antithesis of a tomb. It challenges both us and the earth, which will decide which parts to integrate and which to reject. For the residents of the Lack of Forest, it is a place and an event, a body and a language to tell its story. It requires action.

Mounting a plaque at the Mound-sculpture and naming it symbolically transforms it into an object for reflection, a living monument of mortality. Although it is gathered forest material, the interventions around it make it something other than the surrounding forest matter. As a structure created with machines, it is not only part of the ecosystem but also a story about it. By giving it the status of an installation, it gained the capacity for representation.

From top: a photograph from 1892 depicting a pile of American bison skulls awaiting grinding into fertilizer; Vasily Vereshchagin, *The Apotheosis of War*, oil on canvas, 1871

Life processes and their presence in creative practices have been the subject of my exploration and artistic research for years. I began many artistic endeavours guided by intuition or a subconscious mechanism that pushed me into unfamiliar or incomprehensible places. Often, at a particular stage of realisation, I began to understand that they were directly related to an important but forgotten event in my life. Creative work was my practice of restoring memory—a practice of reconstruction.

Memory Carp

In the project *Memory Carp*, I studied the figure of the carp—a fish no longer wild but transformed into a cultural construct. Depending on the region, the carp serves different rituals and legitimises different mechanisms. In parts of Catholic Europe, it is a traditional Christmas Eve dish; in the Americas, an aquatic weed to be eradicated; in China and Japan, a symbol of strength and determination associated with male energy, presented to sons on their seventh birthday.

In the project, I primarily examined the relationship between the movement of the figure and its immobilisation. I began research in Szczecin, collaborating with the Maritime University, and continued it in Tokyo, Matsusaka, and around Lake Biwa. I worked with Shinodayama Koi Farm and the National Institute for Environmental Studies (NIES). Only in Japan did I recall an experience that became key to the emerging image in my research. At age three, I fell into shallow water—an irrigation ditch near my housing block. I remember lying on my back, unable to move, water flowing past my eyes as individual blades of grass danced and blurred. Beyond them, the white sun appeared, rays spreading across the water's surface like a spiderweb. I remember lying there, unable to breathe. I could not move. I knew I was drowning, yet could do nothing myself, needing someone's help.

To Japan, I brought another childhood memory—a glass fish from Chodzież, a colourful element of a grey everyday life. This popular ornament from the PRL (The Polish People's Republic) era remained with us through the political transformation. I remembered that it was placed on a hand-embroidered doily on the TV in the centre of my grandmother's apartment. I took it as a relic, a magical carrier of my memories.

Sexinsitu

Since 2016, I have been developing another project focusing on the body, its limitations, and possible expansions. *Sexinsitu* aims for a new visibility of sexuality: focusing on experience rather than fantasy, it restores its social dimension. Participants are invited into a dark studio and asked to reconstruct an intimate memory, once shared with someone, through body work and memory. The difference is that on this day, they are alone—yet in the presence of witnesses: me and my camera. The person's body opens and expands in absence. Searching through body movement and body memory for the missing partner, I practice mindfulness of everything around.

> By emphasising the intimate dimension of interpersonal relationships, we can experience connections on a planetary scale. Through recorded testimonies, a unique archive of sexual experiences is created. It is a story of intimacy and cosmic possibilities, of circulation, memory, movement, and imagination.

> In 2023, I presented this project at the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw. Zofia Gramz, my friend, artist and illustrator, attended the opening. After leaving, she approached me, moved, saying she saw in this work an image of destruction: fragmented body parts, limbs detached from torsos, captured in moments of endless disintegration. For me, the project at the exhibition was the most intimate and precise depiction of life as I perceive and feel it, how I experience it, and how I sense its energy flowing through the world. Talking with Zofia made me realise that the project can evoke associations of a completely different order in others. I thought I had captured and presented sexuality as a life-giving, powerful force—yet the universe created in *Sexinsitu* remained closely linked to death.

Today, with further projects behind me, I better understand the inseparability of these two categories: life and death. Both accompany all processes and continuous transformation, equally occurring in humans, insects, or plants. *Sexinsitu* is a living archive, reflecting all that is unspoken, absent, and incomplete—life and its lack.

Exidiopsis effusa on a spruce trunk, mushroom filaments resembling hair

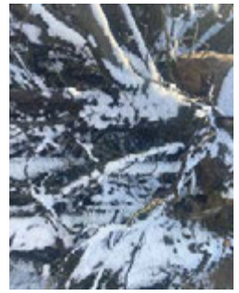
In the human world, forests have owners and are subject to legal regulations; from the perspective of a praying mantis or the rice moth, this means nothing. The Mound is a lens, a metonym for a storm. It calls us to take an empathetic position toward ourselves and each other, to practice active experience.

The decomposition of wood occurs very quickly. Over the course of four years, the mound has noticeably settled, and with each season, decomposition becomes increasingly evident. In late spring, insects are most present, feeding on dead matter, and the Mound transforms into a veritable feeding ground.

Next stages of wood decomposition on the Mound

Fungal structures piercing through the wood with a *tameshiwari* motion

In summer, beetles appear, and the sun dries the wood to splinters. In autumn, fungi and slime moulds take over the Mound. Fungi are strong, breaking through weakened, hollowed wood, forcing their way between the rings, splitting trunks apart and deforming them.



Winter is also a time of fungi, ice and particularly accelerated processes of disappearance. Under the snow cover, things happen that are invisible to the eye. With each spring, we welcome the Mound anew.

It can be assumed that the contents of the display cases serve an educational purpose. I placed wood splinters in them, known in forestry terminology as wood chips. They were collected from the same location at different times. Arranged together, they reveal various states of the wood, ways of treating it (or, if you prefer, processing it). This is not a simple circulation of matter, but a shift within its life. The journey from branch to board is not obvious. The stages of producing OSB boards constitute an ontological transformation. Although the material in the display cases is substantially the same wood, each is treated differently, generating distinct meanings. In the first case, the wood chips are handled with care; in the second (let's call it mimetic), they are arranged as they once lay in the landscape; in the third, they are in a phase of transformation. These three works are in dialogue with each other—like three stages, three logics, and three ways of existing.

The glass display cases are heavy and old—they remember the times of the previous political system. They transport us to a nostalgia-laden past, now very distant. Some of us—me included—remember them from childhood and early school education. Today, no one would use them in schools, so they also represent a past, a world that no longer exists. They testify to the fact that even the realm of education has changed.

I collected the chips between 2019 and 2020 near the Mound-sculpture. A few months earlier, I had seen machines grinding them into ever-higher golden piles, filling the air with the scent of pine. Over time, they faded; the yellow gave way to soot, then to a silvery colour. Some chips, under the weight of others, had pressed into the soil, reminiscent of an extravagant parquet floor. Encountering a splintered floor in the Lack of Forest gave me the feeling of being in a planetary home. Seemingly outside, yet inside, safe. Nestling in the ruin.

The underwood of the Lack of Forest

The first display case contains fragments of crushed trees arranged on a chipboard base. Composing it took several weeks, a painstaking reading of the smallest forest particles, giving them attention, drying them, cleaning them, and pinning them. Each chip was pinned to the base, revealing the individual character of each fragment. The obvious association is with curated specimens, similar to insect display cases, herbaria, or other special examples of fauna or flora. Such educational materials are still used in forestry and nature education facilities or natural history museums.

In the second display case, wood in a similar fragmented state is not neatly arranged—it lies there in a heap, forming a pile of fragments, a familiar element of a deforested landscape. This case is meant to resemble mounds created during forest cleaning. I wanted to enclose a piece of fleeting reality behind glass. The display glass strains, like window panes during a storm. The wood fragments scratch at the glass, taking on the look of falling limbs. Soon, they resemble the figures plunging into hell in Hans Memling's *Last Judgment* triptych, which I studied in early childhood. Every process has a moment of doubt, a confrontation with one's own humanity. When I look at the case I piled up using fragments from the forest floor, I sink into mourning.

In the third display case, I placed an OSB board, the final and desired product made from wood chips. After the storm, a Kronospan factory—a mega-sawmill processing wood on an immense scale—was expanded in the Lack of Forest, much to the complaints of the residents. Kronospan situates the disaster in the context of global supply chains, big capital, and politics. It reminds us that forests are an important economic resource. In Poland, they cover a third of the country, and forestry contributes about 2% to the national GDP.

> The OSB board has a bright yellow colour—the same as freshly ground, fragrant pine wood. It differs significantly from the wood in the other cases—discarded, gathered from the forest floor, weathered by sun and wind. UV radiation has broken down lignin, while moisture and precipitation have added a platinum-grey tone. The growth of microorganisms, such as algae, lichens, or fungi, also contributed to the effect. Beyond the logic of sale, an extraordinary life unfolds.

All the display cases present materials treated as by-products or waste. Fragmented wood, sawdust, and wood powder are secondary processing products, discarded like hair cut at a hairdresser's. The three stages, like frames in a film, show the movement of matter—the tension between commonness and uniqueness, utility and persistence. Much of our functional world is made of wood. It warms and builds our homes, forms the beds we sleep in, the tables we eat at... it also makes this book (and others we read). Wood is everywhere.

Material collection with Anka Smugała, 2020.

In the
nineteenth century, when
capitalism first became an object of
inquiry, raw materials were imagined as an
infinite bequest from Nature to Man. Raw materials
can no longer be taken for granted. [...] In capitalist farms,
living things made within ecological processes are coopted
for the concentration of wealth. This is what I call "salvage," that
is, taking advantage of value produced without capitalist control
[...] Sites for salvage are simultaneously inside and outside capitalism;
I call them "pericapitalist." All kinds of goods and services produced by
pericapitalist activities, human and nonhuman, are salvaged for capitalist
accumulation. If a peasant family produces a crop that enters capitalist food
chains, capital accumulation is possible through salvaging the value created in
peasant farming. Now that global supply chains have come to characterize world
capitalism, we see this process everywhere. "Supply chains" are commodity chains
that translate value to the benefit of dominant firms; translation between noncapi-
talist and capitalist value systems is what they do [...] The conversion of indigenous
knowledge into capitalist returns is salvage accumulation. So too is the conversion of
whale life into investments.

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World.*

The Mound-sculpture inherited its name from local earthen mounds collectively referred to as “mounds”(in Polish: kopce). This word was spoken repeatedly by us together with other residents of the Lack of Forest. While other mounds in the landscape were fragmented and recycled, this one was intentionally preserved. A form of preservation understood as submission to natural processes, removal from the regime of sale, and from the logic of the timber trade. The Mound is, after all, a living structure, undergoing successive transformations. Within a few years of its transformation into an object with special status—a work of art, a land art installation—and the surrounding area into a space of autonomy subject to social will (where the social extends far beyond the human), its uniqueness was confirmed by the self-organising biodiversity. Along with the signing of the documents, the decaying mound, together with all the processes occurring around it, was transformed into a “forest biocenosis”[4].

The Mound is a guardian of biodiversity. Plant life is better understood as an interdependent constellation, where relational arrangements are crucial. It functions through a collective process of spreading, branching, occupying new spatial positions, and forming symbioses or parasitic relationships. Matter slowly decomposes, creating living space for other organisms. Tree remains become burrows for small rodents, foxes, or birds, moisture refuges for fungi and slime moulds, homes for microorganisms that feed on wood tissue. Small bodies fill the solid body of the tree, and once dried and drained of sap, they gnaw and shred it to splinters. The effects of these actions are reminiscent of the work of foresters and their outcomes. Here, however, there is space for diverse bodies, for millions of life trajectories that serve all participants and life itself. The installation, as a remnant of a hurricane that, at first glance, destroyed the rhythm of life in the forest and turned it into a bleak cemetery, is both an affirmation of life and life itself.

4 This is important in the context of the category of duration—the Mound is now protected. Considering that it is the foresters who decide what in the forest is valuable and what is not (however unfair this may sound from a perspective other than that driven by economic obligations), this is of great importance for the preservation and autonomy of this place.

It is also a call for large-scale support of life-giving processes while simultaneously limiting their commodification. Ecologically, this is self-evident—the hurricane is not merely a destructive force. As a natural phenomenon, it has always existed and, in the long term, safeguards species turnover and biodiversity. Fallen trees, if left in place, and unploughed soil, provide opportunities for more demanding species to establish populations in the devastated areas. Constructed from hurricane debris, it symbolically underscores the need to safeguard enclaves that support ecosystem recovery, especially in areas where official obstruction has prevented natural forest regeneration.

> The Mound is an exhibition of chaos, the embodiment of entropy and the literal, anarchic, revolutionary force of the hurricane. Yet, if the hurricane is treated as a metaphor, it represents external pressure intruding into our world based on global extraction of natural resources, profit prioritised over life, thriving on uprooting; a world of consumer comfort in the shadow of climate catastrophe. The Mound confronts these associations and images. By recognising them without succumbing to them, it constitutes a form of resistance.

The life of the mound also sets the rhythm for subsequent visits and the stories created around it (and because of it). The Mound is the heart of a community recovering from the hurricane. A place important for those who strive to remember the forest that disappeared. For those who refuse to participate in the process of erasure and seeking an outlet for their experiences and emotions.

The installation is frequently visited and photographed. Over the years, it has become an important site for meetings, educational and artistic events, and a pretext for visiting the abandoned space of the Lack of Forest.

From the left: Alicja, Maciej, Jarosław,Martyna, Anita, Uciek, Ola, Ignacy, Daria, Banksy, Anka, 2023

From the top: the exposed Warsaw rubble at the Warsaw Uprising Mound, the Warsaw Uprising Mound, a fragment of the Operation Storm Park (Park Akcji Burza), aerial view of the Warsaw Uprising Mound from the south-west.

A Place of Memory that's Alive

The Mound is an object known from the culture of commemoration. In the Polish context, the most important mounds commemorate significant historical events. The most famous, Kraków's Kościuszko Mound, is a key site on the map of collective imagination, building the cult of a national hero. However, for the Mound-sculpture, the point of reference is another mound—the Warsaw Uprising Mound, constructed from rubble following the wartime destruction of the capital. The strategy of creating and reclaiming it in the post-hurricane landscape was inspired by the practices of Warsaw residents in the 1950s. While many buildings were designated for demolition by the Warsaw Reconstruction Office, there were practices of taking over vacant buildings, performing minor repairs, and showing "care" for the property as an argument to postpone demolition[5]. To some extent, my guiding logic was similar: I wanted to create a space removed from the plans for designing a new forest, while also opposing familiar strategies of forest commemoration[6].

I wanted the Mound-sculpture to be a place where people could freely celebrate or renew their relationship with nature; to learn it and experience it consciously. I wanted to transform the ruin of the forest into an experience of holistic, shared completeness.

I understand ruin not as a state of physical collapse, but as a process of exploitation and aridification. According to Anna Tsing, we live in a world of global ruins, of which we are partial architects. We have created and continue to make them in the name of progress, labour, profit, or order. Yet Tsing examines these ruins as spaces where past and future negotiate, revealing potential arrangements. Today, the landscape is no longer a landscape, but an assemblage where very different entities clash and cooperate. Relations are unintentionally designed within it. The Mound is a place where such relations are formed, strengthened, and made visible. It helps reconcile trajectories of paths and intersections of life forms[7].

5 More on this in Grzegorz Piątek's book *The Best City in the World*. I thank Szymon Maliborski, who spoke with me on this topic when I began the procedure of formalising the Mound-sculpture.

6 These commemorations concern people rather than non-human beings, or forests as such. On the politics of memory of the State Forests, Agata Konczal writes in the text *Forests (of) an Uncertain Future. An Essay on the Vitality of the Forest and Forest Disasters*, and "green commemorations" are carried out, e.g., by the Zapomniane Foundation and other independent projects commissioned by families of victims, etc. I want to thank Magda Olszowska for our conversations about creating green commemorations and their social, engaged dimension.

7 Closer to this approach are prisms or slag heaps, which researchers of cultures of memory describe. Katarzyna Bojarska in her text *The Feminist Heap of Memory* and Roma Sendyka's *Non-sites of Memory*.

The Intensification of Nature

The hurricane in the Lack of Forest is one of many such disasters that have occurred in recent years. I remember strips of Masurian forest cut down by a tornado in 2012. In 2021, Paulina, living in Chojnice, told me about a wind near Ustka that tore through her family's agro-tourism site in the forest. In 2018, storm Vaia destroyed fifteen million trees in Italy—I learned about this during a conversation with Amina Chouari, a PhD student studying the drying of the Venetian lagoon. In Germany, insect infestations have devastated vast areas of spruce forest in the Harz region. In the Dominican Republic, a hurricane that struck the island in 2017 led to the Surviving Storms project. That same year was labelled an extreme "Atlantic hurricane season", causing not only massive ecological loss but also the deaths of 3,364 people.

Atlantic Hurricane Season, 2017
The background image is derived from NASA. The data comes from the National Hurricane Center, an atlantic hurricane database

Regardless of the latitude and longitude in which I speak about the Lack of Forest, similar experiences of hurricane phenomena recur. At the same time, we know that phenomena of this scale and intensity will occur more frequently and in more places. This will significantly impact the quality of life in Western cities, making some neighbourhoods dangerous. Urban and architectural projects often rely on prevailing wind directions, so projected changes may disrupt natural ventilation and affect indoor thermal comfort. In practice, this exacerbates housing crises, a persistent social phenomenon. It seems that today the stake is not the rebuilding of cities, but of nature and landscape. It is essential for sur/vival.

Within this idea, we advocate for new design approaches that draw wisdom from plants, embrace interspecies relationships to exchange knowledge and build regenerative capacity—not metaphorically, but in reality.

This will not be easy. Fantasies about the return of nature and the cessation of human interference in the natural world are illusory.

Anka

I met Anka during the Black Protests in 2020—demonstrations carried out by women and their allies against the tightening of Poland's abortion laws. We organsised one of them together in Chojnice. Using the material I have used to cover the Mound during its first winter, we created a several-meter-long banner and marched through the snowy streets of the town. Later, we meet again in the police station's corridors, accused of violating the pandemic lockdown for political reasons. Still later, Anka becomes my companion on trips to the Mound, opening me up to the richness of mound-life.

The first organism we notice living around the Mound is the black click beetle, which appears on the path during our walk. Anka calmly offers it a piece of leaf or stem, and when it accepts the invitation, she observes it with complete focus. The small, muscular beetle wanders into the centre of her palm, which does not worry her: insects sometimes nibble her, but even that does not make her afraid or trigger a reflex to pull away. During this walk, we also encountered the purplish ground beetle—an insect I would often come to recognise from then on.

From top: the Black Protest organised by me and Anka in the winter of 2021 in Chojnice; The Mound covered with a banner from the protest during the first snowfall in its history.

Together with Anka, we prepare the first educational meeting at the Mound, which we invite residents to. Much to the foresters' initial displeasure, we'd dig a soil profile. We'd observe the processes that have been unfolding in the soil of the Lack of Forest for hundreds of years up to today. We'd show the effects of sedimentation of successive soil layers. We'd give the people who came to the Lack of Forest—many for the first time in years—the chance to see the interior of the earth from which they come and which carries them. We'd create the possibility for them to step into the roles of researchers, archaeologists and seekers who could take home the soil samples they have excavated and described, placing them in a visible spot or scattering them in their gardens. These soil amulets of memory now reside in many homes in nearby towns and villages.

In 2021, in Opolno-Zdrój, in the framework of the Office of Post-Artistic Services – among many friends, some of them artists – we conducted Energy Trees workshops, which consisted of honouring trees designated for felling as a result of the expansion of a local lignite mine; giving them agency through the sharing of memories and conversations as well as commemoration through special plaques.

Working with soil helps to understand that the disappearance of trees is part of a much longer history and a much larger whole. In moments of threat and uncertainty, referring to entities with a longer life cycle brings comfort. Touching what is very old or majestic, something with dense, concentrated energy, can help soothe the nervous system. In the case of soil, it is not just about energy but also about gravity. Working with the lack-of-forest soil profile is an exercise in grounding, meant for residents of post-storm areas. It is also an exercise in opening to what surrounds us. In recognising what has been here long before the storm and realising that it will remain for decades to come.

With Łukasz and Krystyna, we walk across the grounds of the scout camp from which Łukasz rescued children on that hurricane night. Krystyna becomes noticeably animated only when we reach the research station in Białe Błota, less than a kilometre from the Mound—it is clear she has spent half a century here. The storm damaged these buildings as well, so the future of the station is uncertain—it will likely disappear, just as the forest did. As archaeologists, Krystyna and Łukasz are used to various forms of disappearance, so this neither surprises nor worries them. The only unknown is what will happen to the collections, that is their greatest concern.

Krystyna hands me a fragment of pottery from an excavation in Ostrowite; it was once part of a vessel used by people who came from the middle Danube. My companion is impressed by the undulating decorative line and the extraordinarily precise design, evidence of the artisans' high craftsmanship. Archaeologists dig in Białe Błota, Lotyń, Odry, and Raciąż.

Human remains excavated from a tomb in Gockowice, a cemetery of the Pomeranian culture. The bones date from the Wielka Wieś phase of the Przeworsk Culture and were uncovered by Krystyna and Łukasz from graves surrounded by stone enclosures. Their age is estimated at 2,700—2,800 years.

Landscapes are not stages,
containers, or mere environments for human
and nonhuman actors. Landscape is not merely visually
akin to a body; it is the skin of the earth. Land is not property
or territory; it is a time-being marked by its own wounds and vitality,
a layered material geo-neuro-bio-graphy of bones and bodies, ashes and
earth, where death and life meet. Etymological entanglements already hint
at a troubling of assumed boundaries between allegedly different kinds: Earth,
humus (from the Latin), is part of the etymology of *human*, and similarly, *Adam*
(Hebrew: [hu]man[kind]) derives from *adamah* (Hebrew: ground, land, earth), giving
lie to assertions of firm distinctions between human and nonhuman, suggesting a
relationship *of* kin rather than kind—a cutting together-apart. Time-beings do not
merely inhabit, but rather are of the landtime-scape—the spacetimemattering of the
world in its sedimenting enfoldings of iterative intra-activity. Memory is not merely a
subjective capacity of the human mind; rather, "human" and "mind" are part of the
landtimescape—spacetimemattering—of the world. Memory is written into the
worlding of the world in its specificity, the ineliminable trace of the sediment-
ing historicity of its iterative reconfiguring.

Karen Barad, *Eco-deconstruction. Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*

The Mound recalls the time when most of the forest's roots were above the ground. Plato described humans as heavenly trees, with invisible roots rising toward the sky, toward the world of ideas. During my first wanderings in the Lack of Forest, I was especially fascinated by the roots curiously writhing above the ground—those that extended their feelers, testing the reality above the soil. They were like fragments of a nervous system—the forest's exposed brain. I looked at them as if at a text I could not read. I felt that signals were running through these forest neurons. Forest wiring through which energy flowed. Everything was still alive and trying to communicate.

> Illuminated by sunlight, the endless labyrinths of roots reminded me of the enormous role they play every day—sustaining life in all its forms. Life that can no longer be sanctified, but that we can still care for. Not treating it from above anymore, but striving for reciprocity in the relationship. Regrowth processes are processes of renewal, which take place equally both in the landscape outside and inside living organisms. Refined interdependence is the only absolute guarantee of our survival.

Is there anything more symbolic than roots torn from the ground and piled into stacks? Is this not an expressive metaphor for the contemporary world, woven of identity crises, capitalist turmoil, masses of people forced to flee, wars that unfold regardless of cost? A contemporaneity without a home to which one can return in peace. A contemporaneity of climate catastrophe and species extinction. A contemporaneity woven of mental health crises, depression, and suicides. Of prosperity that brings no joy, but instead unleashes sinister instincts or guilt toward others.

Until now, roots were hidden underground, metabolising death into life—plant, animal, or human remains. They transformed them into new cycles of life, setting them into further circulation, into new networks. Now they lie open, stretching their arms toward the sky, pretending to be lush crowns. Earth and sky have switched places, and it is hard to find balance. I stand before them unsteadily, stubbornly trying to piece together what has been shattered.

Touch Systems, object, 2018

Anka and I organised more gatherings at the Mound-sculpture. When the installation was created, forest infrastructure was built next to it—a bicycle parking area and a picnic shelter with benches. Before every event, we checked the weather forecast, responding to RCB alerts. Weather in the Lack of Forest is always exaggerated: if the wind blows, it howls; if the sun shines, it scorches. Rains slash sideways or arrive suddenly, turning into heavy downpours. Sometimes the spaces are enveloped in endless silence—so intense that the sound of swallowed saliva can be frightening. Observing the fauna is the surest way to judge the weather: the sudden absence of beetles, the lack of birdsong, and no woodpecker tapping likely means a rapid change is coming.

We talked about this one day, sitting on the benches installed by the forest district. A beautiful rose chafer moves nearby—until it finds a piece of bread on the ground, buries its head in it, and accompanies us for hours. It is seeking relief from the sun, just like we are, hiding under the wooden shelter. These infrastructural elements are necessary for us to spend time in the Lack of Forest, yet they are not neutral. The presence of people at the Mound influences various decisions made by foresters—more trees are designated as dangerous. One day, I will arrive, and the pine from cluster K1 will no longer be there.

In the Lack of Forest, Anka and I discover more places. I come here almost every day now because I am taking care of the Mound. Anka works in the National Park; she cares for the Animal Display Enclosure at the Park's Nature Education Centre on a daily basis. These are creatures that, for various reasons—sometimes mechanical injuries, sometimes genetic defects, sometimes learned habits or temperament—cannot return to the forest. They will remain in the enclosure for the rest of their lives. Among them are white-tailed eagles without developed flight feathers, swifts without legs, and a hyperactive squirrel. Anka is particularly close to Leon the marten. We often talk about the daily human struggles that life in the Bory region brings, far from larger urban centres. Outside of family life, it is hard to find fulfillment here. Still, Anka did not want to leave. She loves these places and practices photography.

But the low salary and poor working conditions in the National Park pushed her to emigrate. A full-time job at the National Park is not enough to support herself and the animals, or to help her mother. Before studying Nature Conservation, she completed forestry studies in Poznań. She could have joined the ranks of the State Forests. Out of love for nature, she cannot bring herself to do that. She decides to emigrate for work, and I lose my first Lack of Forest friend.

Czesław

Czesław works in one of Poland's important environmental protection institutions. He is a committed nature enthusiast, co-creator of one of the National Parks, and a friend of the arts. During a meeting in Warsaw's Ochota district in 2023, he meticulously recounts to me the entire history of forestry from the 19th century to today. He makes me aware of things that are hard to believe and complicates my view of forestry practices. The State Forests, under the 1924 law and subsequent amendments, are obliged to engage in nature protection—a third of the activities of national, landscape, and nature reserve parks is financed from their budgets. The Forests' logo appears on every forest sign, including the Mound sign. At the same time, the interests of the State Forests and the national parks conflict. Foresters use a language in which forest protection and logging are not contradictory. On the contrary, they appear as a necessary occurrence, as support for natural processes and as long-cultivated wisdom.

Czesław says the idea of the State Forests originated during the creation of the new Polish state. Poland was to be rebuilt based on a strong forest. The forester was a synonym for a good steward who helped people in their contact with the forest and trees. One could go to them for advice or ask for help. They were close to local communities. Over the years, forestry has gradually distanced itself from its communities. A system of forestry schools was developed, very often located in isolated places. Foresters educate other foresters there, far from the rest of the human community. The political transformation of the 1990s was a time of prosperity for the State Forests, which in fact continues to this day. However, this does not mean that the organisation does not experience crises: internal and external, resulting from political changes and state policies.

Last year, the State Forests celebrated their hundredth anniversary. Perhaps it is the right age to reconsider their mission, position, and challenges? So they can reach maturity and make important decisions in the name of the common good. Today, when the paradigm of forest stability is shaken, when the forest is no longer strong, it is difficult to base the idea of the state on it. We need a planetary perspective, designed for long-term action, resource regeneration, improvement of soil quality, and natural biodiversity.

I define the state of being “in the hurricane” as a complete lack of control over the situation. It causes a kind of powerlessness, bewilderment, and fear. Being in the hurricane, I could not see a solution; I panicked. But it didn’t last long. After some time, I began to overcome the fear and push myself to take action. It gave me a surge of adrenaline. I began to do things I would not normally do.

Anka, a letter to the Lack of Forest before her first departure to Iceland in 2023.

When I first encountered the storm, I felt fear. I had the impression that I could do nothing. I thought everything was beyond my control. I was terribly afraid of what I would see in the morning, even though the hurricane lasted only an hour. I worried about all the creatures, especially the forest ones. Did they have somewhere to run? Did they sense the danger signals earlier and manage to hide from the catastrophe? The next day, I cried when I saw photos of the familiar forest near Rytel... That forest was gone. The trees had disappeared.

Yet a forest does not consist only of trees. It is an entire ecosystem that will regenerate over time. This process can also be supported. Knowing this gave me the strength to help in villages in the areas most affected by the catastrophe, together with others. It also allowed me to take action and dispel the darkness of the place with wonderful people during the Lack of Forest project.

Anka, 2022

Struggle, object, wood from
The Lack of Forest, tufted hairgrass,
unglazed ceramics, 2024

I found these two compatible pieces of wood near the Mound. One of them resembles a fist raised in protest. One could place a flag or a banner in it. But the hand is held in the grip of the other branch. This one shoots upward into space, with fingers extended in the air, from which dry blades of tufted hairgrass bud.

> Hairgrass is the grass inhabiting the Mound—a pioneer species covering the soil of the Lack of Forest. It had particular significance for me. I loved placing my hand into the mound's miniature jungle created by it, a sensual thicket, and stroking its golden—and, after prolonged sun exposure, ruby—locks. I would immerse myself in it sometimes with my hand, sometimes with the camera. A beautiful jungle reveals itself to a machine zoom or to the human eye. All you need to do is lie down or crouch to watch the ballet of the hairgrass. Lean in and move through an extraordinary world, the colour of shining straw. Something unnoticed at first, especially for an eye untrained in gardening, reveals itself in the moment of touch. The trigger of sensations is a small pleasure, the tickling of ankles, hands, and cheeks.

After the catastrophe comes a radical change of scale. From an enormous forest before which people sometimes trembled, but which for centuries soothed and elevated, allowing one to experience cathartic ecstasy, attention shifts to the clumps of drying grass swaying in the wind. In the hairgrass, only the fingertips are immersed, gently brushed by delicate spikes. The hand reaches as deep as possible into the hairgrass's mane, while the rest of the body guards the experience, taking on pleasant shivers—the body tenses and contracts to allow wading through the grass. The tickled hand rewards the numbness of the other limbs, and the neurons take over the storytelling. The feeling of immersion returns, mediated by the screen's magic. The video material reveals the beauty of alternating blur and sharpness. In a slowed rhythm, giving a sense of breath and relief.

> Experiencing the forest after the forest requires effort, intention, sharpened reflexivity, and an analytical gaze. It is a form of devotion, of difficult co-being, a form of struggling with the feeling of loss and the need to accept it. In every lack-of-forest existence, there is a fight for a place, for return, for functioning again. But for human participants, it is also a struggle for conscious life in an interspecies relationship. For the possibility of writing the history of the disappearance of our forest—a history that otherwise no one would record. For gathering experiences that we can pass on, that we can return to, that fill the emptiness after the catastrophe with events full of complexity and meaning. For the courage to enter the forest that supposedly isn't there. With the feeling that the ground opens under one's feet, only to harden a moment later, holding us upright.

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In the Lack of Forest, I usually move slowly. Hours-long excursions sometimes yield valuable finds. I discover many fragments of wood that tell me their own stories. They resemble body parts, emotional states, objects known from everyday life or art history. I collect smaller stumps and roots, chips and knots, dried fragments of plants, and found rubbish. The ruin of the forest is a vast cultural reservoir for reflection and contemplation of the world.

> The forest needs us. When we walk through it, it offers us artefacts to strengthen bonds and develop a shared story. A new sound, an unfamiliar smell or an unusual object—the smallest item reveals itself as something valuable. It stands out, elevates, and reflects with colour. Walking in the Lack of Forest allows one to practice a dormant and very ancient—and yet primordial for our species in this region—gatherer identity. Since the beginning of my relationship with the Lack of Forest, I have been gathering in it—or perhaps with it—objects and moments. I also collect the story of this place. I place one piece next to another, a third next to the first, creating patchworks. Each piece is only a splinter of an infinite whole that can only attempted to be conveyed in a polylogue.

Objects from the *Studies of Arboreal Motion* from the Lack of Forest series, 2024

An Arm, an object from the Lack of Forest series, 2024

From the top: A woodpecker's anvil from the area of the Mound / 2024, Scattered cones under the anvil, Parasol mushrooms that appeared en masse in the post-storm areas in 2024 / forest route Gród Raciąż—Mound

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing writes about landscape as a heterogeneous space in which continual disturbances occur. These may be caused by a non-living force, such as wind or fire, or by living beings. A disturbance itself is a moment in which the complex elements of systemic engineering are revealed—a spontaneous network of connections and encounters that undergoes a sudden transformation at the moment of disruption. In this way a patch emerges: a new configuration of forces that makes further life in a given place possible. Order is established as a result of unintentional design—even if human forces are present in the configuration and pursue specific goals, in reality their intentionality is sharply limited by the entirety of cooperative forms: dependence on soil, climate, so-called pests, newly appearing species, the level of groundwater, and so on. Intergenerational living spaces are created by assemblages of many organisms, each striving to pursue its own interests. Hence disturbance always depends on point of view. Tsing argues that from a human perspective, a disturbance in the form of an anthill being destroyed is very different from one that levels a city inhabited by people. From the ant's perspective, the situation looks entirely different.

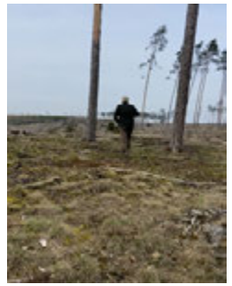
A praying mantis climbing onto the Mound—a resident of the Mound since 2024.

Would mantises appear in this area if there were still trees here? And how will their presence affect other species?

Waldemar

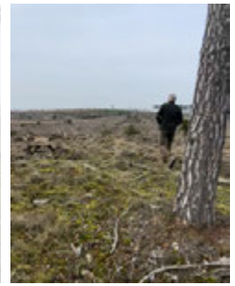
He promised me a walk. We would look for the birch crosses he once mentioned. They were placed in the forest by people who likely knew the victims of the wind. We met at the Mound on a frosty morning.

> We step off the path and enter deep into the remains. Waldemar walks ahead of me, it is a cold November morning; he takes steps decisively and nervously. I sense that he cannot fully identify the place we are searching for. In his steps, I feel both uncertainty and determination. With his body, Waldemar somehow cuts through the established silence, the membrane stretched between the four pines left after the storm. I observe his dialogue with the trees, which points him in the right direction. He disappears for a moment behind one of them, and I quicken my pace so as not to lose him. When we arrive at the spot, I notice tears running down his face. He wipes them with his hand.







Waldemar walks through the Lack of Forest, in search of the crosses, passing four pines left after the storm.

Did I tell you, ma'am, that the grandparents of those children came to us? They came to the forest district, we talked for a long time... It was very difficult. You know they were lighting candles on those birch graves. I told them they couldn't do that. At first, they refused; they considered it heartless. I explained that in periods of drought, which are now unpredictable, this could lead to another tragedy. I had to threaten that otherwise the graves would disappear, and I very, very much did not want that. Then they admitted that their pain had overshadowed their rationality and imagination. They did not realise they could cause further misfortunes. After some time, the candles disappeared.

Waldemar, Rytel, 2025

Suddenly, I hear a scooter. People were running away from the riverside. When I heard the sound, I didn't know where such strength came from, but I jumped over the fence. Over a metal fence—I had such strength in me. Something switched in me, and I had to inform them that they could not drive through. It was a boy with a girl, with the trees falling behind them. Someone there luckily held them back. When the boy saw me, he told me everything—his name, that he was going to Rytel because his mother was there. I didn't know him then; today we know each other very well because the storm welded us together. "You won't get through this way," I tell them. We led them through the neighbours' garden—the neighbours were reluctant, thinking they might steal something. Well, people differ; they have different hearts. I took the boy and the girl home. They wanted to go to Rytel, I said, "absolutely not." And then I looked at him, and I saw he was in socks. My heart broke. He was running away from the trailer with the girl in his socks.

A year after the storm, we went to visit those scouts. We brought wool socks as a gift for the parents, knitted by a neighbour from Lotyń. And why? Because when the children fled the camp and reached us, they had no shoes, no socks, nothing. They came with bare feet.

Emilia, Duża Klonia, 2024

Photo of Anita's feet during one of the walks in the Lack of Forest. Bare feet here express a sense of safety, freedom, and carefree contact with nature—trust and connection with the earth.

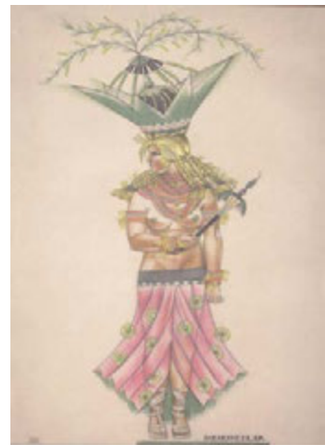
Footwear of the children from the scout camp near the Mound. They remain in the areas of the Lack of Forest to this day.

The figure of Devana appeared with the first Lack of Forest spring, when nature began to regenerate and the spaces of the Lack of Forest shone with emptiness. I fantasised about the presence of people in this space of renewal, pulsing with life and green. I recalled the figure of Marzanna, something very important to me in childhood. I remember the first school drowning of Marzanna, which triggered an emotional response in me. The image of a burning female figure among greenery and bright colours of the sky, in daylight, remained vivid in my memory for a long time. Devana is Marzanna's twin sister, much less known and rarely depicted, and rather forgotten in the collective imagination as the guardian of spring and renewal. Devana was described by Jan Długosz and Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer. Zofia Stryjeńska made her portrait in the series Slavic Deities[8].

Other Slavic beliefs depict Devana in a demonic and collective form—no longer as a young woman, but as a nightmare dwelling in forest undergrowth, mountain caves, and other hidden natural places. Superstitions concerning motherhood were linked to this version of Devana. The dziwożony were portrayed as hideous, hunched women with long tangled hair, sometimes with a fern-decorated red cap on their heads and with long breasts or pathologically elongated nipples, which they threw over their shoulders. It was believed that the dziwożony kidnapped young girls and young wives. They also abducted infants from cradles, replacing them with their own: an ugly changeling. One could free oneself from the dziwożony using St. John's wort. It is one of the first plants that appeared around the Mound.

8 Kazimierz Moszyński, *Folk Culture of the Slavs. Part 2: Spiritual Culture*, Grafika Publishing, 2010

In *The Golden Bough*, James G. Frazer describes customs present in Poland and the Czech lands in which the figure of Death (Marzanna) is drowned or destroyed. A young fir is brought from the forest and decorated. Such an adorned tree is called May or Summer, the Bride or the Beautiful Lady, and people parade with it through the village while singing a ritual song. In other parts of the country, it was not a tree but a beautiful young woman who embodied the goddess, dressed up and paraded through the village.



Zofia Stryjeńska, *Dziedzilia* from the *Slavic Godlings* series, National Museum in Warsaw, 1922

Devana* came to me as the opposite of the fear I remembered from childhood. From the moment I first looked into the eyes of a drowning figure, I became deeply connected to the idea of greeting spring. I was looking for a figure, a patroness, who would show me the other side of the Lack of the Forest—this vital, dance-like, and engaged side. Though eerily similar to death, Devana heralds the arrival of a new beginning, a time of fertility and growth. Thus, Devana became the figure I referred to during meetings at the Mound. I embodied her many times, piece by piece. First, it was elements of costume—wooden wings—then an eagle feather fan, and finally, a braid made of intertwined ivy. At that time, I didn't yet know the demonic side of the dzwiwożona forest spirit. However, even in this sphere, I found a point of similarity—as I spent a lot of time outside home, I was misunderstood by many in the local community, and seen as an odd fish. A childless woman, wandering alone through the ruins of the forest, doing something mysterious and imaginative. My presence was incomprehensible to many, including some of my close ones.

* Devana (the Slavic swamp figure) and mullein (a plant) carry the same name (Dziewanna) in Polish

The legend of Devana has a pan-Slavic reach. The Polish version says the goddess walks the fields on February nights and protects them from freezing. In iconography, she is shown together with a wolf (or wolves), whom she protected from death at the hands of peasants and who served her. She is portrayed with a basket or a nest of skylarks at her feet, whose chirping foretold the coming of spring. In her hands, she always holds a candle, which she uses for divination and to protect homes from wolves, lightning, and evil. In Christian culture, this candle is known as the gromnica. Through Christianisation, she was replaced by the Virgin Mary of the Gromnica (eng. Candlemas). Gromnica often appears in sayings related to the coming of spring. In the past, wicks for gromnica candles were made from mullein, and the plant was sometimes called wick-plant, royal candle, or Our Lady's braid.

Devana costume / a fan Feather from a white-tailed eagle found near the Mound.

Grażyna

When we observe an eagle during a bird-watching walk, we notice the comical way in which a marsh harrier chases it away. Grażyna says that it's typical for smaller birds to drive off the eagle. The marsh harrier lives in the surrounding reed beds. For many years, its population in Poland was on the brink of extinction. In the 1970s, DDT was widely used in plant protection. When the harriers ate fruits from cultivated plants, dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane entered their bodies, causing their egg shells to become unusually soft. The female harriers couldn't incubate such fragile eggs, halting the population's growth.

> The interaction between the eagle and the marsh harrier is quite extraordinary. When Grażyna talks about it, the soundtrack to her words is the loud cry of the marsh harrier, aimed at expelling the twice-as-large intruder, appearing from the blue sky.

In the Lack of the Forest, the population of the white-tailed eagle is reviving as well. Here, the predatory birds have ideal conditions for hunting. Eagles are seen less often, but their traces are typical as they frequently shed their feathers.

A marsh harrier attacking a white-tailed eagle, observed in July 2022 over the Śpierewnik Lake near the Mound.

I find various tracks around the Mound. Mainly fox footprints, hooves of deer and elk and boar tracks. But there are also hoof prints from the horses that Paulina takes care of. She founded the stable after the storm. She had planned to go to the United States, but the then-president denied her a visa. She found out exactly the day before the hurricane. And after the storm, everything changed for Paulina. The hurricane gave birth to her stable and to her family. Paulina's mother recalls those moments:

> There was no electricity for a long time. People didn't have it for two or three weeks. And a year later, seven children were born to us.
> — How's that?—Just like that. Including my grandson. Seven children. After the storm. Nice, right? No denying it, there were quite a few post-storm children. It's an undeniable fact. People got closer to each other. They got together at the bonfires we organised. Also my daughter with my current son-in-law. And then Stasiu was born—these were the stories.

Lucyna, Lotyń, 2025

A group of locals from the Lack of the Forest on the pier at Śpierewnik Lake during birdwatching in the summer of 2022. In the foreground, a group of children are focused on the eagle. One of them, distracted, will soon throw the binoculars into the water and cry until one of the participants jumps in and touches the muddy bottom beneath the pier to retrieve the lost object. It's a beautiful, hot June day. The girl stops crying, and I grow pensive, remembering the story of the scouts, often told here. It was from this shore, from this pier, that they jumped into the water to escape the falling pines. And they stayed in it until midnight, until the wind passed.

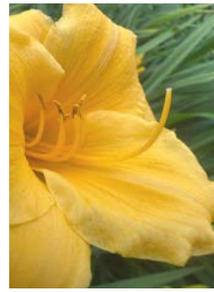
The Little One

I sculpted the little one from the ends of the woody parts of the daylily. It's a popular plant around here because of its long flowering period, beautiful flowers, and relatively low needs. When the frost comes, the plant dies back, leaving dry leaves used for weaving and making wicker products, as well as the woody stems. These stems release juicy yellow flowers in the spring, summer, and early fall. At the tips of the woody stems, delicate clusters sometimes form, remnants of the daylily's large flower heads. Most of them fall off in the winter due to snow, wind, or mechanical damage. I pull the stems in spring, when the snow melts, and the earth softens under the first warm rays of the sun. The air has that characteristic muddy smell. Just grab the stem and gently pull, and it slides out, covered in earth.

For sculpting, I only use the very tips. Each has a characteristic shape that resembles small hands with three, four, or sometimes five fingers, splayed in a gesture of grasping or embracing; these are open hands, tiny, and very touching through their smallness. They evoke a need for care in me.

Initially, I wanted to create a miniature Mound from these tips. It was supposed to be an amulet to cast the spell of time, to halt decay, an intimate totem protecting our relationship. I joined the individual twigs like the threads of mycorrhiza, patiently and meticulously. Over time, the body of the Mound began to take shape, gaining its corresponding complexity. At the same time, the delicate twigs resembled small outstretched hands, attracting bundles of energy. They needed space, air, stretching out like unruly starfish, a structural mat drawing nourishment from its surroundings, pushing its polyps in all directions. I joined each end with the next, one by one. It was a very slow process. The most challenging part was finding the right element. I had to make many attempts to find the one that fit, finger to finger, with matching lengths, spread, and expression. The small structure began to gain dynamism and elasticity which required care.

The daylily symbolizes hope, rebirth, and the beauty of a single day, since its flowers open for only one day and are replaced by others the next. In this way, it also becomes a symbol of transience and longing. Unexpectedly, even to myself, this time in a from of sculpture it took the shape of a newborn.

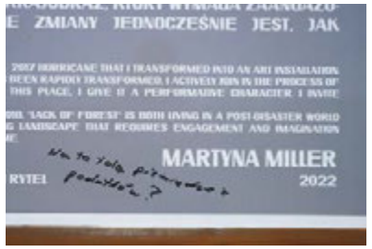


The sculpture of the infant symbolises a new cycle of growth—a new order based on the need for care.

Paulina's horses do not know the forest before the storm, any more than I do. Every time I notice the traces of horseshoes near the Mound, I think about how we are creating this strange community together. We are always guests here.

Beer can stuck into the Mound, filled with empty beer cans and trash. We take it with us.

On the same day, Anka and I notice a phrase painted on the board with a marker saying: „This is where our taxes go." After some time, someone will make the writing unreadable (but not erase it). The Mound is being protected.



Dog food left near the mound, like in a feeding trough—more signs of life and human presence

The dug-up ground around the Mound. At first, I think it's a trace of a quad bike, but it turns out to be fire protection measures taken by the Forest District

Martyna, Anita, Agnieszka and Ola by the Mound, 1.05.2025

The Mound and the Flying Hands

I place several sculptures on the mound, which we all look at together. Ceramic hands dangle loosely from the mound's branches. Anita gazes at one of them and recalls a dream that has haunted her for many years. A dream of a flying hand. She calls it a horror, though she can't quite define whether the emotions it stirred in her were positive or negative. She says that in the dream, she didn't so much see the hand as hear it, as if it were calling. When the dream became so persistent that it had to be told, the hand took on a visual form. And today, on the Mound, it was seen.

In our conversation, the idea arises that the hand haunting Anita's dreams is a lingering trace of past horrors. Perhaps a collective trauma that became tangled in her genes, an inheritance from family members or from her community. We talk about the body that expands, holding within it the experiences of other bodies. How many such stories are there among us, yet we don't share them because there's no space for them?

Anita, as always, suggests a tea ceremony. We sit down and begin setting out the cups. The first sip is for the body, the second for the mind, and the third for the spirit. Agnieszka begins telling a story about Croatia. When she first visited the country in the late 90s, she cried. Tears uncontrollably streamed down her face and body. She felt a tingling under her skin, a tremor that overwhelmed her body, extending beyond its everyday physicality. The landscape felt gentle, kind to her, yet she experienced it more intensely than anything she had before.

„Ti si naša"*—The Croats would say to her, and she returned many times to hear those words.

* The croatian saying Ti si naša means "You're one of us"

Atlas of Creatures Encountered at the Mound in The Lack of Forest

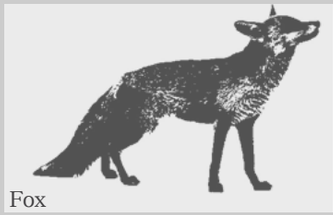

Artemisia Annua


Black Hairstreak

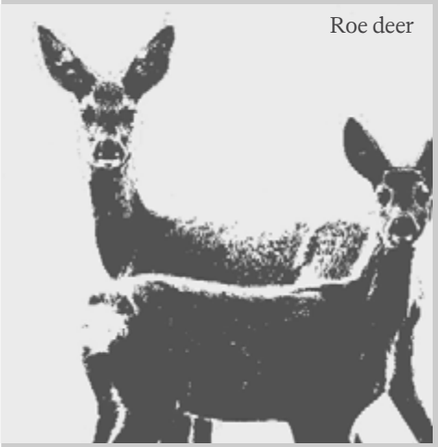

Woodpecker


Wood ants

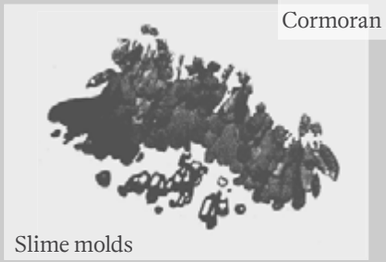

Swallowtail butterfly

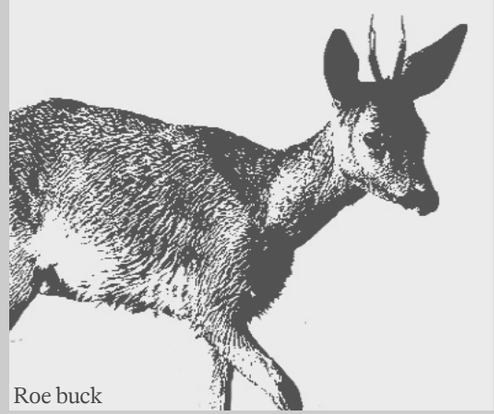

Fox

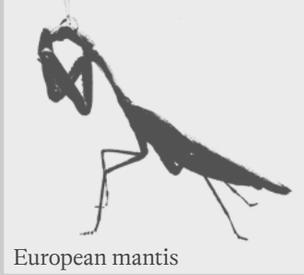

Rose chafer


Roe deer


Cormoran


Slime molds


Roe buck


European mantis


Bearberry

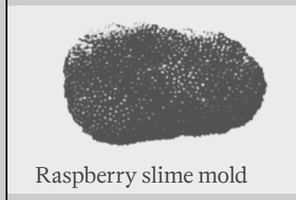

White-tailed eagle


Common goldeneye


Yellowhammer


Scolia hirta

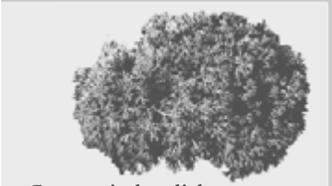

Ragwort


Raspberry slime mold


Frangula

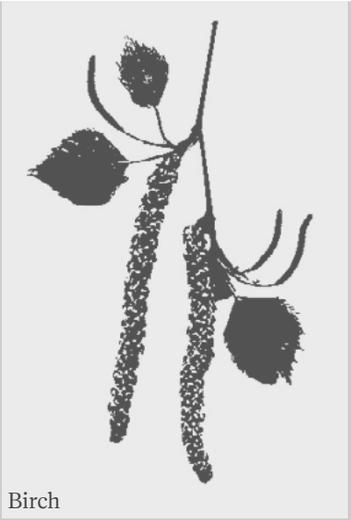

Longhorn Bettle / Pyrrhidium

Purple emperor



Green reindeer lichen

Tansy



Birch

St. John's wort

European nightjar

Juniper

Andrena

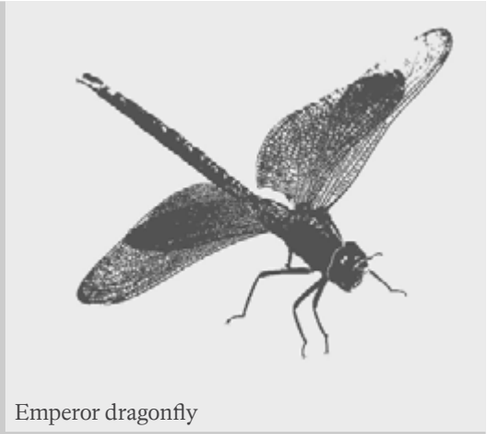
Pine weevils

Thistle flowers

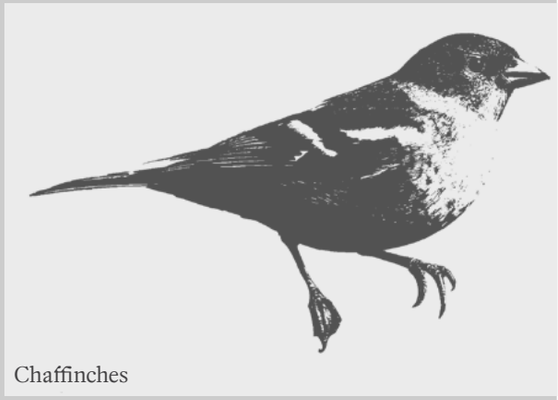
Great crested grebes

Deer

Hare



Emperor dragonfly

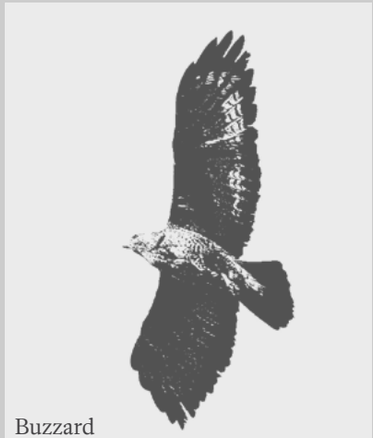


Chaffinches

Raspberry

Red admiral

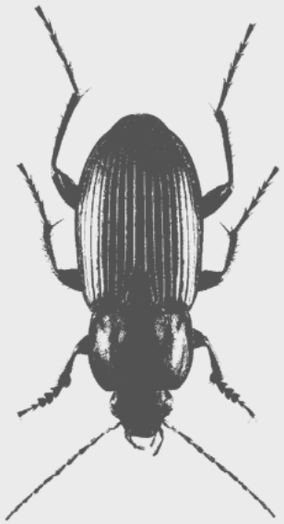
Heather



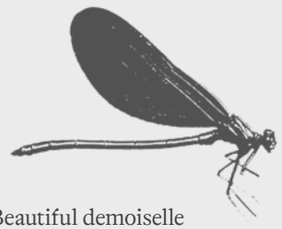
Buzzard

Woodlark

Tench



Migrant hawker



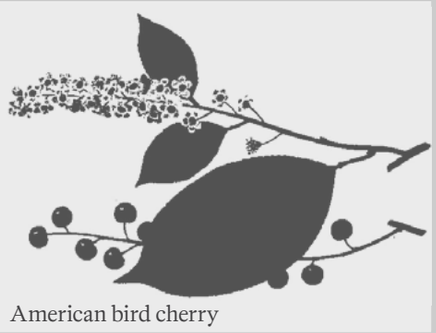
Beautiful demoiselle

Oak

Red Kite

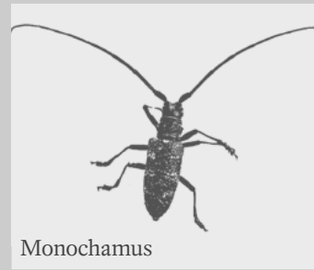
Marh tirt

Mullein



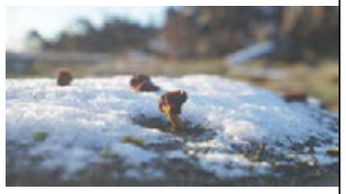
American bird cherry

European mole cricket



Monochamus



Mushrooms of the Mound







Structure of the Mound's icicles, 2021































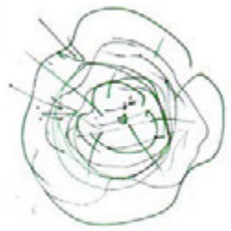




The traces of the tragic events of August 2017 are slowly disappearing. They are still recalled by fragments of the remaining stands and single broken trees. But we have also been left with a monument from this event: the Mound sculpture by Ms Martyna Miller. It is a particular kind of monument, because although created from dead wood, it is at the same time alive, inhabited by numerous insects and birds. It serves as a shelter for animals. Its appearance changes as a result of the work of fungi that decompose the dead wood, as well as rain and snow. Its appearance changes with the seasons, and also with the time of day.

And around the Mound, the vast expanses of a new forest stretch.

A fragment of forester Leszek's speech from the exhibition opening in Rytel, reconstructed at my request.



Drawing by Waldemar depicting pine heartwood.

The Future of the Mound

Waldemar believes that the Mound, due to the properties of the pine wood from which it is made, has a chance to survive forever. We will follow the processes occurring within it for the coming years—probably ten, maybe fifteen. And then, depending on how much heartwood accumulates in the Mound, we will decide what to do next with this place.

Some stumps exude significant amounts of resin. There are days when I find plenty of it; it flows onto the grass and sand around them, creating temporary amber tears—melting into a sticky, long-lasting, fragrant liquid the moment they are touched. The stumps that secrete large amounts of resin disappear. Local residents take them from the mound for firewood. It is an ideal material for natural kindling, knows as tinder.

What if,
when speaking of the indeter-
minacy of our form of life, we did not mean
the shape of the human body but the shape of our
movements in time?

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World.*

As life-enhancing entanglements disappear from our landscapes,
ghosts take their place. [...] While we gain plastic gyres and
parking lots we lose rainforests and coral reefs.

Anna Tsing, Nils Bubandt, Elaine Gan, and Heather Anne Swanson, eds. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene.*

At the entrance to the Rytel Forest District headquarters, an informational board was placed, stating that the windstorm consumed 80,000 hectares of forest, "approximately the area of Warsaw." Comparing a forest catastrophe to the area of the capital has a practical dimension: it allows one to imagine the scale of destruction, the size of the area that was degraded, and to estimate the amount of work invested in rebuilding it. But the reference to wartime destruction of the capital also has a cultural dimension. It invokes a collective imagination filled, through historical policy, with "deadness and silence," with ruins and mud. It is worth noting that such comparisons once operated in the opposite direction: when Warsaw was destroyed in 1944, it was described as a deformed landscape. Writers spoke of a city that "ceased to bear the features of a city—even of a former city. Warsaw resembled rather a grim creation of unbridled nature"[9].

9 Grzegorz Piątek, *The Best City in the World. Warsaw in Reconstruction 1944—1949*, W.A.B, Warsaw, 2021.

The graphic I created illustrates the scale of tree destruction—approximately 10,000 m³ – superimposed onto a visualization of Central Square (Plac Centralny) based on the design by A-A Collective. This juxtaposition is not accidental. A key element of the square's design is the restoration of the "phantom map" of pre-war Warsaw: cobblestone surfaces reflect the former street layout, while lawns mark the outlines of tenement houses that no longer exist. The square becomes a palimpsest—a space of memory where the current landscape overlaps with the city's lost structure.

My graphic adds a nature layer to this narrative: the woody debris does not form a regular block but spills across the visualisation of the square, washing over the historical contours of streets and houses. The fluid, organic matter of the forest contrasts with the geometric logic of the design—the sharply defined lines of reconstruction and urban precision.

The Mound resembles a shaggy creature devouring successive elements of the city's architecture. Like in a disaster movie, a destructive foreign body – the body of nature pushed out of industrialized space– threatens everything in its path. It adds an organic, emotional dimension to the city but also marks it with a hauntological uncanniness. This hulking entity, formed from the remains of the storm, visits the capital to reveal its losses and thus warn of approaching future dangers. Much like the character *Okusare-sama*[10] from the Japanese animated film *Spirited Away*, though it terrifies with its outward appearance, it hides immense layers of sensitivity and a need for help within. In my work, the woody debris plays a similar role: though it looks like a monster, its core is a cry from nature, which we push to the margins, treating it as raw material, an obstacle, or waste.

In the Central Square project, the city's past returns as a precise drawing of streets and facades. In my visualisation, however, what the city represses in the present returns – an organic trace of a landscape that has been disturbed, consumed, or exploited. The Mound of forest forces itself between the reconstructed lines of tenement houses, seizes historical paths, and hangs over the empty spaces of former courtyards. It is a material sign that Warsaw, like every city, is built not only on the ruins of buildings but also on the ruins of ecosystems.

Particularly eloquent is the shrouding of the Palace of Culture—a relic of the socialist era—in dead, post-disaster wood. The power and majesty of the past wither in the face of the monstrosity of current phenomena. The juxtaposition of seemingly alien spaces—the ruins of the forest and a Warsaw rebuilt on rubble—triggers questions about the deep dimension of interdependence and the need for policies that direct attention toward what is repressed beyond the realm of the perceptible. Here, I will not dismantle the particular technical, organisational, or financial dimensions of the matter. I am calling for the foundation of change—for the recognition of a collective need to integrate difficult events and initiate processes of assimilation. This is essential for creating a better future. Without it, a fragment of shattered reality turns into a specter hanging over us. Into a ghost, into a monster that haunts. Uprooted roots piled high, woody debris, no longer just hangs over the city but overwhelms the landscape of Warsaw. It seeks a resting place, an explanation. The Mound superimposed on Warsaw does not have to be post-disaster—it comes, after all, from a managed forest. It is therefore also an excess produced by foresters in the name of expansion, progress, and advancement. It is this very specter that somberly haunts the city, which, like any other, is built on the ruins of a natural ecosystem and with the help of its materials.

10 *Okusare-sama* literally means "Rotten Deity," but is also translated as "Stinking Spirit." It arouses fear because it looks like a monster made of mud, garbage and faeces. The courage and tenderness of the film's heroine make it possible to learn its story: it turns out to be a deity trapped in pollution, aching and suffering from the excess of filth. Thanks to Chihiro's care, *Okusare-sama* is cleansed of waste, and the beauty and value hidden in its nature are revealed. This plot thread has the potential of an ecological metaphor.

Warsaw's rubble occupied a volume of approximately 18,000 m³. A ruined city is something different than a ruined forest. People died in those ruins – in Warsaw eighty years ago, n Sarajevo in the 1990s, a few years ago in Syria, or today in Gaza. However, I believe that in order to prevent tragedies, neglect, and violence, our imagination must reach far beyond the human sphere to perceive the complexity of planetary processes and geopolitical interdependencies. I feel a close affinity with a way of thinking that inextricably links ecological, social, and systemic issues (eco-social sustainability).

Our era
of human destruction has
trained our eyes only on the immediate
promises of power and profits. This refusal of the
past, and even the present, will condemn us to continue
fouling our own nests. How can we get back to the pasts we
need to see the present more clearly? We call this return to multiple
pasts, human and not human, "ghosts." Every landscape is haunted by
past ways of life. [...] As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what
was there before. Ecologists call this forgetting the "shifting baseline syn-
drome." Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality.
Admiring one landscape and its biological entanglements often entails for-
getting many others. Forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privi-
lege some assemblages over others. Yet ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to
our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier
tracks and traces.

The Art of Living on the Damaged Planet, Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene

The people I talked with often spoke of the destroyed landscape as if it were a postwar scene: a battleground. Foresters use the term “huraganowisko” (hurricane-site) to describe the post-storm areas—a neologism that directly echoes “battlefield.” Over and over, in conversations with local people, a military language emerged, one tied to the darkest images of history—histories of cruelty, wars, extermination. Stacks of timber like ghetto walls, tree remnants, mass graves, stumps, bombs, detonations, shots; this is the language present in the Lack of Forest. A palpable form of oppression, violence, and the macabre surfaces in private conversations, yet it remains unconscious. When I point out this language, my interlocutors deny it, sometimes even demand that the metaphor be annulled. When I ask why, I hear that these events cannot be compared. One must not speak this way; sometimes it is considered improper.

Perhaps it is difficult to acknowledge traces of war just beyond the fence, close to the warmth of home. To admit that those times still persist, even if today the war is elsewhere and the stakes have changed. To remember that the ground still carries a not-so-distant memory of terrible events. People in these regions waited a very long time before stopping to identify forests with death. The storm dangerously recalled that dimension of the forest.

The shame of being caught using metaphors that strip wartime history of its uniqueness is a return to distinctions. Linguistic meanings expose too much. Distance and silence become a rescue for an everyday life, snapped like branches.

If we look at forests as the result of long-term design, as a post-monocultural mound of wooden matter, then they become an architectural formation, an industrial creation whose making requires specialised hyper-machines, dozens of bureaucratic and politically significant permits and documents, modified seedlings, thinning operations, and many skilled workers. Forests, just like their ruins, are architectural constructs subjected to strict procedures, scrupulously accounted for. Landscapes that appear to us as natural are, in fact, projects and property belonging to other people, managed by them and governed by strict, often extractive aims. In this light, the management of a forest landscape resembles the management of a city landscape. A tree and a building fall under the same categories of big capital, the logic of investment and sale. Transactionality, utility, temporariness, rental—these characterise relations both in the city and in the managed forest. The only difference is that they are home to other species.

Post-storm timber stacks

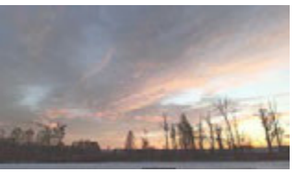
Photographs from excavations in the Valley of Death in Chojnice. The discovery of the remains of further victims of the Pomeranian Intelligenzaktion in 2024 was made by researchers from the University of Łódź under the leadership of Dawid Kobiałka.

When, at a meeting with Centrala, I show them photographs from Lack of Forest, they search out twin images from Warsaw illustrating ruderal species which, in 1945, were described by Prof. Roman Kobendza as growing on the grounds of the former ghetto.

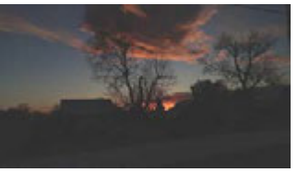
Mulleins on the ruins of Warsaw. Photograph from the archive © Chomętowscy / FAF, part of the imaginarium of the Centrala group, which together with Natalia Budnik in 2023 carried out a green commemoration in Warsaw’s Muranów as part of the project Roots of the Uprising, implemented by the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH).

Krystyna suddenly stands up and walks to the window. “The view from the window is so ugly. A real tragedy”, she states sharply. I walk over to her and pull back the curtain. “I like it,” I reply, adding that many people would dream of such a view. A guileless rural landscape, an open sky and the space made open by the Lack of Forest. Here and there, chickens wander about, observed lazily by a cat lying on the gravel road. On an electricity pole, a stork’s nest waits for spring to welcome its tenants. Krystyna looks out with clear dissatisfaction, falls silent, and freezes. I would like her to change her mind. But I have no arguments that could convince her. Soon we will go to the Mound, then visit the pond behind her house and spend more hours talking.

In the evening, I receive a series of messages as Krystyna sends me more landscapes photographed from her window. She captures the beauty of mornings and dusks. She notices the arrangement of clouds, the colour of the sky and the mistiness. I add a heart emoji to each photo but do not comment, so as not to disturb this fragile moment of trust.



A closing up of emotional conversation, the inability to express relationships and speak of closeness, the lack of spontaneous expression—these are common phenomena in these areas, just like the experience of war. Not only war, but also the Soviet era, and later the transformation, form a barrier and reinforce traits known as Kashubian: withdrawal and coolness. The collective experiences of people and their families or neighbours may create an aversion to revealing the tender. Executions, separated families, cold childhoods, poverty, successive paradigm shifts, deaths of loved ones, never-told stories, and now also the hurricane—all this contributes to a bodily tension and a fear of fragility.



Krystyna is a specialist in telling stories. She is an archaeologist who has worked as a researcher affiliated with the scientific base of the University of Łódź for some fifty years, operating in the Lack of Forest near the village of Suszek. She pieces together the stories of the area from fragments of vessels she reconstructs, from bones she describes and studies. And yet appreciating a simple element of everyday life in a neighbourly conversation is difficult for her. Words get stuck in the throat; we stare out the window in silence.

Searching for a way to overcome the communication impasse, striving toward another narrative, slowly forming paths of understanding—including non-verbal ones—that can open the flow of expression and enable a process of collective soothing: these are the qualities emerging from our encounters. They form the meaning of our relationship with the Lack of Forest. The time of the landscape’s regeneration has brought a moment in which the fates of the community and its forest can be intertwined again.

I meet Łukasz Ossowski for the first time in 2020. He is still embittered. At first he says he remembers little and that time does its work. After a moment, however, he admits that every day the storm stands before his eyes and that what happened will mark his whole life.

The period after the storm was a time of particular closing off. In a conversation with one of the local activists, I learn that a collective mutism arose, a kind of speech blockage, an inability to articulate needs or complaints. A state of shock. From the very beginning, the storm was accompanied by a series of neglects. One could start with the lack of warning about the approaching storm or the lack of political support until Monday (the catastrophe occurred on a Friday night, on Saturday and Sunday, the affected had to cope almost alone), and then a sequence of evasions—delay in delivering military help, the absence of a decision to declare a state of natural disaster. Over time, politicians began appearing in the region, but local residents did not then ask for support. They treated self-help as a necessary, obvious truth. The sight of politicians was rather an opportunity to meet "a person from the television" than a responsible leader to whom one could voice needs or make demands. "Dazed by their presence, they would more readily ask for an autograph or a photo," my interlocutor recalls bitterly. She was the only person protesting. In Rytel, during the visit of the then-Prime Minister, she appeared in the crowd with a sign: "She can't do anything. Declare a state of disaster!" People in the crowd began pushing and driving her away. They did not want her to represent them. Even though it was a solitary voice[11], her photo was reprinted by every Polish media outlet.

There is no tradition of civil disobedience in the local community. Historically, its manifestations often ended tragically. Perhaps subconsciously, residents were not ready for such costs and, even in moments of heightened emotional tension, saw no point in protesting the authorities' actions. Here, reality moves at its own pace; power changes rarely and the places at the table have been set for years.

Those who fought to publicise the issue, including all local leaders like the village administrator of Rytel, Łukasz Ossowski, were quickly held accountable for alleged insubordination. He returned to work in the technical gas plant. The pressure also affected his wife. Power, even sluggish, does not like being stepped on.

11 The mechanism of fear of small numbers breaking out of the voice of the majority is described by Arjun Appadurai in the book *Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay on the Geography of Anger*.

Łukasz Ossowski, as every year, visits the hurricane monument in Rytel designed by Jan Sabiniarz. This is the eighth anniversary of the storm.

How to commemorate the storm? Wind leaves traces that people tidy up. Nature testifies to change; it carries it every day. It revives that memory with cascades of processes of overgrowth and presence. Life in the Lack of Forest did not stop for a moment. Eco-commemoration is the idea of revealing reparative processes and amplifying their voices. It is the calling into being of a living structure which, referring only to itself, will point to autotelic processes without disrupting them. It will show life in its biological, material, manifold manifestation.

How to commemorate events connected to the climate crisis, to the loss of species in the sixth mass extinction? Are these forms of remembrance or speculation about the future? Is there sense in mourning a forest that has not ceased to exist but has only transformed into another form, from vertical to horizontal? Its power does not diminish; detrital processes are intense and unceasing.

Or perhaps we feel the need to mourn because of the impossibility of returning to a state in which nature is given over to decay and regrowth? The category of return is key to the condition of human collectives. Return means regaining bonds, fighting for memory, grieving histories, undertaking the work of restoring the continuity of life, and beginning the processes of rebuilding.

What does the return of the forest mean for us? The tightening and strengthening of forest policy. The extractivist imperative of cultivating a forest destined for timber sale, the necessity of exploiting it economically, deep ploughing and the refusal to let the soil rest. Measuring the forest in categories of timber volumes, planting successes, and growth efficiency. The return of the forest is subordinated to the cycle of human labour and production.

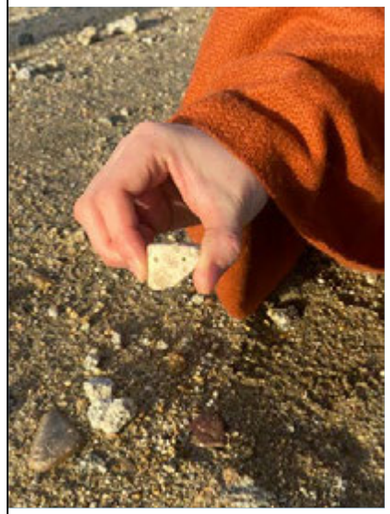
But there is another dimension. We, local recipients of the forest, tend not to think of its reconstruction but of its persistence. The forest is a constant—something we oppose to the temporality of our own lives and fates. Its disappearance signals aberration or a curse. A healthy forest should not die, vanish in whole swaths, dry out, or be decimated. The return of the forest, from the human perspective, is always a process of coming to terms with catastrophe.

The forest's persistence in its natural state is, in turn, a nostalgic utopia. Its source lies in the tenderness we form in relation to the forest, a tenderness that must yield to the rules of today's extractive policies. These policies are, in part, dictated by the need to meet our everyday needs—wood is still a noble material, both practical and architectural. And yet the death of a tree is a loss we struggle to accept. It is like an internalised wound subjected to processes of agreement and rationalisation, agreed upon and necessary, yet impossible to fully experience.

> There are ways of appreciating the forest, such as natural monuments, landscape parks, and reserves, for which one must still fight for—or at least remain vigilant- and protect those that already exist. These are places designated by humans, whose singularity has earned them notice. Singularity shapes human imagination. Yet in the natural world, there is no room for any singularity.

How, then, to commemorate biodiversity rather than a single case? The spherical head movement of an owl attests to the entire mechanics and spectrum of positions; a single wolf track is the trace of a trajectory (it follows one track and precedes another). The movement of a slime mould is almost invisible, but so consistent—tracing it requires weeks. The decomposition of a tree by beetles or mycelium becomes noticeable only over time. The same applies to the growth of reindeer lichen and to its drying. We sense the stink bug (so-called odorek) by the smell it releases. It is not about scale but about noticing movement pertaining to the whole of life, of which we perceive only a fragment; catching a trace. We sometimes manage to convert these indices of materiality into signs, subordinating them to our perceptual capacities. This is, of course, a simplification. The essence of life's movement remains continuity and elusiveness. The forest is multiplicity; here everything happens at once, simultaneously and incessantly—one thing after another, on, in, and through the rest.

> We, too, function within this active diversity. It is not about the speed of life or the illusion of grasping and seeing everything (what Braidotti called the "pornographic imagination"). It is about the life-giving flow of movement, about the synchrony of time with space, about a form emerging in sunlight and vanishing at night. About breath and trembling, about waves. About what and how binds us, how we intermingle. About systems of mutual dependence, about sensitivity and vulnerability that also mark human lives.



Anka brings a little stone from the Lack of Forest to life

The activity of the Dzikie Karpaty (eng. Wild Carpathians Initiative) consists of monitoring logging plans in the area of the Carpathian forests. People living both locally and in distant parts of the country meet here to physically check tree markings (bright orange dots indicate that a tree is designated for felling), as well as the actions of foresters. Their actions are interventionist: first, they request a list of planned works on an annual basis, then they monitor these areas, checking whether the actual state matches the description on maps and in documents. Very often, what in foresters' documents is marked as a managed forest in fact contains tree stands of monumental size. The initiative conducts research and then reports irregularities to the foresters. If, despite this, dots appear on trees of monumental size, a struggle for their survival begins, involving offices and the media. As a last resort, members of the group use their own bodies to defend the trees. The level of this determination is an inspiration to me.

The hurricane brought certain practices to an end. The disappearance of the forest meant that the former gatherers of forest goods (especially berries and wild mushrooms) lost their seasonal income. Some will decide to travel to more distant forests. Those who have the chance will move away; still others will take up employment at the Kronospan factory built on the site of the former modest sawmill. The factory transformed both the community (its employment structure) and the space (it changed the audio-sphere and increased nighttime light pollution). The enormous enterprise has plans for further expansion. And at its present scale the factory significantly affects the area as more wood can be processed here in a single day than a private forest owner could process in a lifetime. "You can hear it at night," say the residents. "It's always bright from those lights," they shudder. They also admit they feel the ground tremble under the intensity of the factory machines.

> At the beginning of my life in the Lack of Forest, I signed a petition against further expansion of the Kronospan factory, in which residents wrote about the deterioration of their living conditions because of the constant noise, the trembling earth, and the roar of trucks.

The issue of developing the forest-less areas brings up considerable controversy among residents. In the territories of the Lack of Forest, fences are budding, preparing for private estates, and perhaps future factories as well.

> After the storm, to enable trucks to haul away the endless amounts of wind-thrown wood from the Lack of Forest, part of the forest roads were reinforced. "Access to the forest changed," my interlocutors explain. "These areas, some eight years ago, were still inaccessible, wild, ventured into only by people living nearby, those who knew these forest nooks—today there are routes visible from satellites, from GPS, accessible to cars, with industrial and tourist routes laid out."

More and more often, one hears about the loss of meaning in maintaining the existence of private forests. True, the owners of these forests, just like the State Forests, are obliged to clear and replant the area destroyed by the cataclysm. Still, many people in the region have not undertaken this work because they believe it will not be profitable. And the reason for abandoning it is often not only limited resources but also broken morale, loneliness, or a sense of time. This is especially true for older people. A new forest needs decades to grow—decades they know they will not live to see. The benefit of saplings only a few years old will be none, while the labour required is enormous, often not possible for pensioners. After the storm, the area was full of fraudsters who undervalued the price of wood or stole it. Trust and faith in the sense of owning a forest dropped drastically. With compensation money, people bought new cars and renovated their homes. Their children went away to study or work, often abroad. The tradition of tending private forests is, to a large extent, coming to an end.

> But the state forest is no longer stable either; it has been marked by temporariness, just like human life. Subordination to market principles has lowered its resilience, making it fragile too. Weakness and uncertainty have overtaken one of the oldest and largest natural ecosystems in this part of Europe. Today, the forest also needs its commemorations.

Together with the Mound and the community of the Lack of Forest, we advocate for creating commemorations that reflect the nature of the forest, shaped with as little human intervention as possible, based on environmental interviews and the needs of local communities, incorporating local materials into the process of remembering, making use of the vegetation cycle. Eco-commemorations accept and highlight the continuous cycles of rebirth and decay. They arise with the understanding and respect for the idea that nature can represent itself. Our task is to find and establish the translation—the conditions necessary for it to be perceived.

> The Mound is a place of memory and an eco-commemoration—not a monument, but life. A cherished fragment of the matter of the Lack of Forest, reclaimed after the hurricane, annexed as a favourable dwelling place by the fauna and flora of this habitat. More a home than a sculpture, a form showing decomposition through the process of inhabitation. In its impressionistic constancy, in its multi-species individuality, in its temporary symbolic quality, it changes the history of this place. It changes the world of humans and non-humans around it.

The Mound strengthens the relation; it is a vehicle between the time of the hurricane and the time of the new ecosystem's rebirth. A time capsule that bears witness to the storm for future generations of humans and non-humans. A repetition of disappearance, but with extended exposure. To be with it is to consciously experience the essence of catastrophe, to acclimatise to a world in which survival depends on acting with it, never against it.

> The hurricane was an event accompanied by tension and anxiety. Thanks to the Mound, we can draw closer to those feelings today. We can safely accompany one another in the return to those moments. We can confront them in the presence of burgeoning life, of sunrises and sunsets, in the perspective of duration. Here we have the chance to experience catastrophe in controlled conditions, to face it without fear—not only at night, but also during the day, both alone and together. We can observe its next stages, monitor them, study them. Or feel it briefly, allowing an emotion to pierce us, only for it to disappear a moment later. It is, therefore, a laboratory of entropy, a study of dematerialisation and resistance.

Depending on how we observe the Mound, it will offer completely different perspectives. So it was with the storm: those who were in their houses remember the water opening windows and doors. It was omnipresent and unstoppable. While some watched it from a greater distance, and they spoke of a sky full of flashes, of whiteness, brightness reminiscent of daylight, a disco almost. And the Mound: from afar and always familiar, of the same posture and mass, a steady, anchoring point of reference. A point on the map. But when we come closer, it reveals its full mutability. Its fragments and splinters glimmer; changes, wounds, and cracks become visible. There are new growths and battles for space. New inhabitants are dying in its entrails and emerging from them. Sometimes defending their homes, sometimes momentarily failing to notice the difference between the Mound's body and our own. New states of fragmentation are progressing incredibly quickly. The Mound is a continuum of movement and stillness, a complementary dance of action and perception. It functions as though it were simultaneously its own photograph and itself—its portrait and its place of life. A constellation whole, inhabited within itself. A body from which we do not extract elements. An organism from which we do not separate organs.

> Monolithic, grand statements of capture cannot withstand contemporary dynamics. We prefer a multitude of small things to a single large one. Small bits, tapestries, mosaics and viruses. Bubble tea, mini melts, and quantum physics. Collectivity. Aggregation. Miniatures, micro-portions, sharing, distance, and the negation of inaccessible property. At protests, every head looks like a pixel.

The world framed in a photograph is easy to grasp, but creating it is far more complicated. A photo is composed of myriads of tiny fragments that must be gathered and put into place. It's put together—but not necessarily like a puzzle because the fragments will not fit perfectly. In themselves, they have no fixed shapes. Pick-up sticks are a much better metaphor—either arranged beside one another, or scattered, forming a constellation. All similar, creating a mute tribe. These are not shapes but lines that link internal tensions. Exposed to view, they await a tender touch. Each will be taken differently, paid for with a different emotion and concentration. One has to extract them from the crowd—each line gains meaning through the path of its retrieval. Value appears together with touch.

Playing pick-up sticks with Hania, 2020

A tapestry embroidered by Anka for one of the meetings in the Lack of Forest. The blue dot indicates movement.

Study of arboreal motion, 2024

(...)meaning of plant life:
a certain place and rhythm of
movement (...)

Michael Marder, *Plant Thinking. A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*

Study of Motion. Trees

Tree trunks are information highways through which signals flow incessantly from the roots to the crown and back. Roots sunk into the earth communicate with leaves that gather solar energy. The trunk conducts information and nutrients, mediates oxygen production, and simultaneously provides living space for many organisms. But in the human understanding of mobility, they remain motionless and dead. Throughout its history, philosophy has pondered the phenomenon of life and growth. From Plato to Heidegger, the tree served as its metaphor. And although in many cultures trees symbolise life, morphologically they belong to the plant world, which for centuries was counted among beings marked within human thinking by muteness, passivity, and immobility. Trees, like plants, were more objects acted upon than beings endowed with agency, autonomously caring for themselves.

> Plants live, undergo processes of growth and expansion, compete with one another, reproduce and claim new territories, qualitatively and quantitatively, and also communicate with one another using a particular language. Communication happens underground and above ground. Underground electrical signals are transmitted through root systems, which thanks to fungi and mycelium, can carry information across considerable distances. In the case of monocultures, fungi take on part of this role—hence, foresters have long cultivated mycorrhizal seedlings to strengthen the underground mycelium, the forest's nervous system. Above-ground communication happens through the release of warning chemical substances into the air.

At the moment of the hurricane, this entire linguistic system was activated. Trees, like animals, sensed the coming threat sooner than humans. The animals managed to flee; forest fauna suffered almost no losses. Many habitats were destroyed, mainly of birds, but most creatures managed to take refuge in safe parts of the forest. Trees, however, could not escape. Some managed to shed seeds—a characteristic reaction to extreme stress and at the same time a survival strategy: scattering genetic material in the shortest possible time and in the greatest quantity, giving it over to the wind's dance. Having dropped their seeds, cones, and spores, they could do nothing more. Electro-information swept through the entire forest, which in silent panic waited for the first gust of wind.

Undoubtedly, that night the plant kingdom released a vast quantity of chemical information. One can think of it as a biological activity, an attempt to resist the destructive force. As an energetic embrace for the sake of collective survival. The recent years in the Lack of Forest incline me to think of that communal arboreal moment also as an excess, a biochemical feast that released into the air a surplus of life-giving power—enough to nourish all the difficult post-hurricane years. Being in the Lack of Forest, we catch this power from the air; we regain connections lost long before the storm. Trees torn out with their roots point to severed lines of communication that we must rebuild.

Grandma and The Forest

Until now, my story of the Lack of Forest began on a March morning in 2018: I arrived, and a ruin appeared before my eyes. After years spent outside, whether for personal searching, or participating in research with an international group of specialists, I discovered in myself information confirming a much older origin of my bond with the landscape of the lack. I understood this especially in conversation with someone from my research team called *In the hurricane. On the land.* During a seminar, Tiffany Shaw—an architect and artist from Canada, a Métis woman, whose practice explores elements of Indigenous culture and craft—said she wanted only to speak with her grandmother within a framework of her research. She believed her grandmother's experiences offered a unique possibility of insight into a real, important part of her own issue connected with Indigenous heritage, and also into something essential from the perspective of a world trying to work through the spectre of postcolonial violence. Tiffany admitted that earlier she'd had neither time, nor tools, nor strength to face it. Now, also because of her grandmother's age, she felt she must act forthwith. This courage in recognising intimate history and the desire to give it attention moved me deeply. Something clenched inside me, and something opened. The story of my grandmother returned to me, knocked from the inside of my skin. A story that had haunted me throughout my life, living in me unspoken, yet a reality that unweaves reality. After returning from Montreal, I found the recording of the conversation I had had with my grandmother when I was twenty. That was the one time she decided to speak. Never before and never later did she want to go back to the scenes from the winter forest near Zakopane.

With Grandmother at the entrance to the forest in Gierłoż—our backyard forest near the Wolf's Lair. Grandma doesn't enter the forest because of ticks, but claims she's not actually afraid of it.

My mother was killed when I was not even two weeks old. I was born on the second day of Christmas, and our mother and the family were murdered before January 15th. I know this from my brother and father. Father survived because he was at war. Mother went out with the cows [and left us behind]. You know, if it had been one baby girl, mother would have carried her in a swaddling cloth and breastfed her. But they made little balls of sugar, and my sister fed us with those, wrapped in cloth. It was soaked, and we sucked it. In the meantime, they had to move the cattle through the forest. Everyone had a cow, a goat, something, and they went with it. Because after all, you needed something to feed children with during the war, right?

A whole group of people went there. And they recognised the remains—because the bodies were dismembered. They were walking with the army the whole time. And mother was riding on a wagon, doing everything on the wagon. She gave birth to us on the wagon. And at some point, they had to lead the cattle through the forest due to a terrible air raid. Through the forest, you understand?

Everyone who went with those cows went through the forest. It was not a long stretch of road, due to what father said. But it led through the forest. And they never came out. They were all murdered there. And people would not have known that the corpses belonged to that group who went through the forest. They recognised them... do you know how? My mother's sister had given birth a week earlier. And she carried that baby wrapped in blankets, with her. And we were two, and we went a bit farther on the wagon. How could she carry two babies and lead the cattle?

Let me finish telling you how it was. They recognised that these were our remains: here were heads, here were arms, lying in piles. They said you couldn't recognise anyone. And during the day, they went to look for them; at night, no one would go into the forest, oh no. The cattle were gone, nothing left. And they wouldn't have known that these were the people who went with that cattle if they hadn't recognised the child. There was a branch, cut. Father says: "That child was impaled on the branch." And by that, they knew whose remains they were. They killed everyone, everyone. Men, women, everyone. Who went further with the cattle? I don't know.

Grandma told me this story only once, when I was already twenty. I recount it exactly in the words I heard—without editorial processing or imposed structure. But since childhood, I had dreamt a dream in which a baby carriage stands alone in the forest. In the dream, a shot is heard, although I do not see who dies. My gaze leads me; I want to look into the carriage, but I can see nothing in it except little moving hands, like tiny worms, reaching out for an embrace. I did not touch them; in the dream, I had no body, only sight. I stared at the carriage, turned away, and stared again. In constant rotation, once toward the carriage, once toward the forest, I walked away. The carriage receded, once again left alone. It and me. Alone.

Stories live in our nervous systems; they are triggered by a small or large stimulus, sometimes a word, weather, or wind. The unhealed wounds of our loved ones become our own.

In my other grandmother's house, in the living room above the leather couch, hung a painting of a forest landscape. It was pierced by a bullet. I remember clearly the tiny frayed threads of wounded canvas peeking out from beneath the paint.

The painting inherited from my grandmother hangs in my uncle's apartment. He walks every day, choosing ever-new, ever-farther, and less-obvious routes. Sometimes he drives to them. He is certain that one day he will find that place. My aunt tells how she and her granddaughters search for animals in it. She says, "Look, darlings, a hare just flitted," and the girls search for it, letting their eyes roam over the canvas. Sometimes they think they see other animals, other weather, or times of day. The painting comes alive like a forest.

The experience of war and suffering violence is ubiquitous in our part of the world. Piercingly current in 2024, when forests and the borders that run through them become the backdrop for new stories of a similar hue. I remember my grandmother Marysia's terror in February 2022—irrational, yet caused by trauma. Requiring soothing through conversation. After so many years, a Ukrainian was still a threat to her, not a victim. It took her a long time before she was able to accept that today this nation needs help—help she herself never received.

Paradoxically, the fact that I found myself in the Lack of Forest made it possible for me to gain insight into my own family history tied to the forest. Suddenly, the body of the forest was exposed: when there is no mystery, there is no fear. It is a form of forest I can face. Its spectral-like nature makes my story like others; I am not alone in it. Ruin levels everything with the ground, and so we are equal before it. Ghosts roam the emptiness; they are easy to encounter, for they have nowhere to hide. Everything here is exactly the same—it is and is not at the same time.

Because when that forest was cut down, there was no mystery left; everything became clear. Suddenly, you could see a kilometre this way, a kilometre that way—even some beautiful views emerged. One thought that our earlier impressions had been mistaken. I thought that the road went differently, normally. And suddenly it's clear that what exists is nothing like the lines drawn in one's mind. But now slowly the mystery is growing again, because even these new paths are being obscured by the rising saplings. Over this year, they have really made progress. They have grown so beautifully that the heart rejoices and fills. It returns, it returns home.

Emilia, Duża Klonia, 2024

The cross and plaque commemorating the Intelligenzaktion in Chojnice.

I do not know whether, somewhere about a two-week walk east of the village of Młodów—where the newborn twins, Maria and Anastazja, were baptised in the wagon—there exists a forest memorial to the death of my grandmother's family. The forest concealed this secret, as it has many others. Plants wrapped another mystery in their bodies.

The Lack of Forest is a radical refusal of mystery. On the exposed plateau, different stories, ghosts, and tales mingle and freely clash. Its re-growing resembles the process of scarring over. Slow healing, regaining strength, but also accepting weakness. I plug myself into this organism as if into a vast reservoir that helps me find my own paths.

My husband's grandfather died in the first days of the war. He worked at the post office. He was killed with a shot to the back of the head, and his body was thrown into one of the mass graves located in the area. He remembers his grandmother retelling this story to his mother when he was maybe seven. It was she who had to identify the grandfather, and the bodies were difficult to recognise. She recognised him by his teeth—in that family, there were good teeth; even his mother emphasised it. They also searched for jewellery. I ask him whether he remembers how he felt as a child when he listened to this story. He assures me he felt little. It was abstract and yet somehow familiar, almost a part of daily home life. What amazes him is how recent it was. Only eighty years ago. As a child, this had seemed very distant.

I try to elaborate on the meaning of this death, on the war and Nazism, on ideological blindness. In response, he begins to tell the story of his other grandfather. Six years later, in 1945, the Red Army entered Chojnice. The Germans who had been driven out were never to return to the town. When the grandfather was riding his bicycle home from work, drunken, victorious soldiers appeared in his path. He died from their bullets, entirely by chance—perhaps for fun. His life had no value to them.

Two stories—one opens, the other closes the time of war. We walk through the Valley of Death, listening to the song of a willow warbler.

Raspberries in the Valley of Death.
Raspberries on the Mound.

A phrase locally repeated in the first years after the hurricane was "God gave, God took away." A call for acceptance, an attempt to explain and justify the hurricane, to provide relief by placing it within transcendence. At the same time, it contained an element of shifting responsibility onto an external, otherworldly circumstance—and thus closing discussion and stifling engagement. An answer served on a plate, a bandage-like call to stop analysing. It intensifies a collective reluctance to draw conclusions and, therefore, to experience the emotions and states it triggers. I catch myself noticing that with time the hurricane becomes domesticated. It appears almost natural; it becomes "our hurricane." And although I do not exclude that its effects may have the dimension of a blessing for this land, I cannot agree with the narrative of an external force and divine plan.

> God did not give us this forest—the forest was planted by educated people employed for this purpose, working within the paradigm familiar to them and within specific political-economic commitments. First, they cut down and sold, to the last tree, what had grown here before; then they ploughed the soil again and placed saplings grown in nurseries, designed to become wood of the highest quality. Foresters watched over the forest and tended it so that, when the time came, they could cut it again. God did not take this forest, the hurricane took it, an extreme weather event resulting from anthropogenic climate change. With the wind came not only destruction but also change and the chance to find new ways of thinking about the forest and its protection. To form new modes of being, a new language for describing catastrophe, its connections with human and more-than-human beings. Without preaching, without dogma, without theology.

The hurricane monument in Rytel designed by Jan Sabiniarz

> Architecture-producing
> gestures are spatial transformations
> whereby natural processes are interpreted and
> amplified through individual and collective bod-
> ies. The emergence of an identity that responds to the
> relationships of the life of human collectivities and the
> natural environment

Centrala group, *Amplifying Nature: The Planetary Imagination of Architecture in the Anthropocene*

A lack of something forces a change of position. In the Lack of Forest, this happens quite literally, as we crouch to observe it. The forest that once embraced us now demands that we notice its tiniest inhabitants and appreciate its faintest traces of life. One must zoom in with the body, remain motionless for longer, take on an uncomfortable posture, dirty one's knees, and allow a beetle to tickle. A capricorn beetle bites Anka's finger; Mariusz points out marks left by another species; another time, a similar insect will land on Błażej's jacket, displaying its impressive antennae.

> The sky will redden; someone will quietly toss the word "blood" toward it; no one will comment. An emergency alert orders the cancellation of another meeting. They will fell a pine near the Mound, and I will save a few shavings from it. So much rain will fall that a stream will run down the path, and on a tuft of grass the droplets will stop and freeze. Being in the Lack of Forest is the creation of a world and of relations. During our meetings and wanderings, we observe the emergence of interspecies life. Meanwhile, down in the human spheres of life, after the hurricane, the interpersonal relations have descended into entropy.

After the hurricane, Lucyna created the association The Bus Stop Lotyń. When we meet in the winter of 2024, several months will have passed since it closed.

We used to meet at least a few times a season. Once a summer season, there were volleyball matches played by several teams. It was great—whole families with children came; besides playing, we talked and laughed. It was wonderful. But last year it was already difficult to assemble a team. I asked my daughter, who is 32: "Paula, you're a volleyball player, you like playing." And she says, "Mom, I don't have time", because she has horses, a stable. "Paulina"—trying to get through to her—"this is something that will endure. The stable will endure, and even if it doesn't, it's a matter of integrating with people, and that's the essence of life." [Nothing came of it.] And it's not because she's my daughter; it's that familiar message: "We have enough of our own matters." I say, "If people don't integrate and build relationships, be with one another, for one another, soon it will all go..." [here Lucyna makes a gesture of a head being cut off].

Renovation of the bus stop destroyed during the hurricane, from which the association run by Lucyna and local residents took its name.

Rafał complains about the lack of neighbourhood gatherings, meetings on the sports field, and about cars and the bar.

Look, to this day, there is no public transport to Mylof. None. If someone doesn't have a car, they ride a bike to Chojnice. Here is an enclave—there's some sign "Zapora 5," but who even knows what Zapora 5 is? People grew up in this forest. They spent all their time there; they knew everything about it, lived with it. And suddenly the forest is gone, and everything is different. Life happened under those trees, people left their blocks and met somewhere—out there, there was a playing field. Now, when I drive there, there's not a living soul. Cars are parked by that bar, but people are no longer together. They lost their relationship with the forest and with one another. That's what I feel; something is different.

The forest had been a catalyst for meetings, a shared concern, a point of reference. A friend one ought to visit. After the hurricane, returning to those practices was impossible; the community became stuck in a split between past and present, and unarticulated emotions undermined mutual trust. This is a moment for work, for reclaiming what has been lost. It is a struggle for agency in the face of the destruction of our anthill. The time of community will come. We are preparing a place for it, so that it has somewhere to sit and rest.

Those I talk with usually take up the subject of the catastrophe reluctantly. Its memory and its long reach create tension. This tension produces a suspension of language, aesthetics, habit, sociality, and even emotion. At times, in their stories, my interlocutors resort to reconstruction. When they run out of words, they show how life looked in the moments after the disaster. Into their sombre silhouettes—often colliding with a difficult, draining memory—an animal enters, acting as energy. I document how their bodies change, how they squeeze through trunks, jump over fences. Sometimes they exceed their former physical possibilities. In these encounters the body steps out of line, emancipates itself from the passivity imposed by the fallen trees. In the body's movement, an active memory of the storm is activated.

Luis Guillermo Vasco[12] writes that the condition for a community's survival is maintaining contact with the earth. If a community loses that bond, it ceases to exist. He describes the ontological dependence of life on earth as telluric thinking. He claims that sometimes, when a community or group of people turns away from the earth and betrays it, the earth itself becomes doomed to disappearance. It is the source of life, traditionally associated with the figure of the mother.

12 Vasco is an anthropologist researching mainly the indigenous peoples of Colombia, the creator of the idea of "pedagogy of confrontation." I became acquainted with his thought thanks to Catalina Mejia Moreno, a researcher at Central Saint Martins in London.

Human Gyotaku, 2020

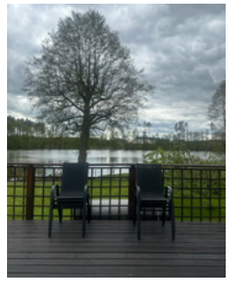
This is exactly how one walked—just to reach one's home, one had to move along the roads in a stork's gait. Step onto the thick one, pass over what follows— this is how people walked.

Teresa walks through a rubble of trees

Gestures of Lucyna

Lucyna's gestures describe the turmoil in her backyard in the weeks following the Storm. This was where the local command center was located. Today, the garden is quiet and empty; Lucyna has planted young trees in it.

Every day turning over chairs and tables for the night—Ryszard.



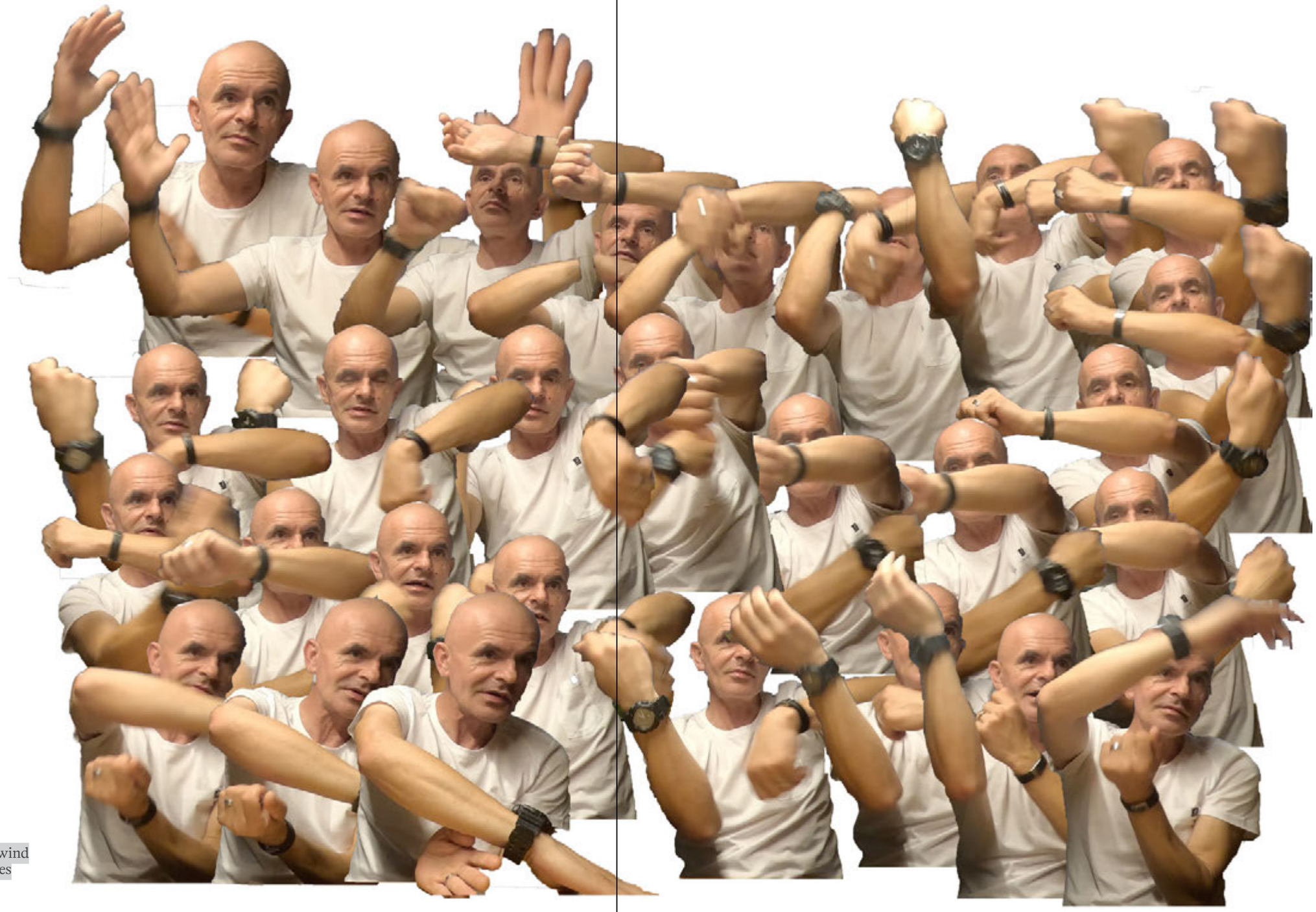
Marek shows how the linden tree in their garden was twisted

The trees were simply falling across the road, and we were driving with the three children. Just moments earlier a friend had called us and said, "Don't go this way, it's dangerous here—trees are being torn out by their roots!" She was in total hysteria, and we looked at each other and joked that she was so sensitive. We didn't take her seriously at all. So we drove through that forest—the forest was collapsing—and we had to reach some place with as few trees as possible. We made it to an intersection. We stopped right in the middle of it (Krojanty—the road to Brusy). We parked there. And soon someone else had the same idea, because another car pulled up next to us. I looked and said, "That man looks like your father." I called—and he answered. He was in a completely different car, unknown to us, because it turned out they had also been at those shanties event and were driving with friends. So when it became clear that we were us, my parents joined us. We were sitting in the car, seven of us, wondering what to do. The whole thing lasted no more than fifteen minutes. There wasn't time to think. After a moment, it was all over.

We left the car, got out, and saw scenes straight out of a disaster movie. Those clouds were still there... Everything had collapsed, the entire landscape had fallen apart. So we walked to my parents' place, because it was two kilometers away. Along the way we saw a car: a tree in front of it, a log behind it—trapped. Inside sat a woman. My father is a doctor, so we walked that whole way with our hearts in our throats.

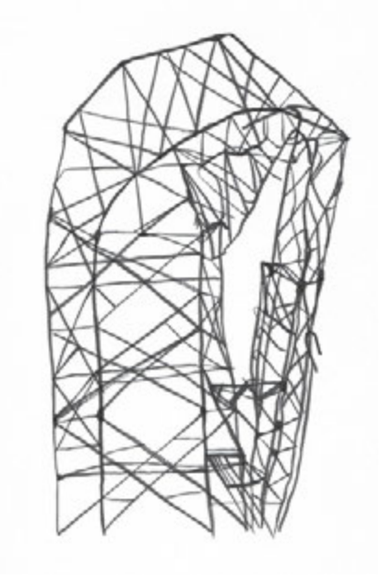
Marek and Gosia, Modrzejewo, 2025

Marek Konończuk, *After the Hurricane*, photographic installation, 2019



Rafał shows how the wind twisted the power poles

Reality fertilises and softens like a body. Suddenly, that which is inviolable, certain, immense, and solid yields under the pressure of a previously unknown force. The wind, ignored in everyday life, here toppled massive power poles with ease. Rafał is deeply impressed by this force. He shows me what the twisted object looked like and explains that it wasn't just the wind—it was mainly water, water driven by the wind. This is what the professor, who came to them after the catastrophe said. A professor whose name he no longer remembers. But he remembers the gesture that made visible how wind and water tossed around the enormous object.



Emilia shows how her body curls today when she finds herself in a real forest. It's enough that she drives through a forest in a car and her body curls as if the trunks were about to topple again and the forest collapses.

I would like to propose that
we inhabit what I'm calling "trans-corpo-
reality"— the time-space where human corporeality,
in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or
"environment." Trans-corporeality, as a theoretical site, is a place
where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle
in productive ways. Furthermore, the movement across human corporeality
and nonhuman nature necessitates rich, complex modes of analysis that travel
through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural,
biological and textual. Crucial ethical and political possibilities emerge from this
literal "contact zone" between human corporeality and more-than-human nature.
Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always
intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the
corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment."
It makes it difficult to pose nature as a mere background for the exploits of the
human, since "nature" is always as close as one's own skin.

Stacy Alaimo, *Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature*

After the Catastrophe

The trees in Hiroshima have a special status: they bear witness to the catastrophe and to the strength of life reborn. They are optimistic heralds announcing a better future, resilience in the face of destruction brought by humans.

I encountered one of these trees near the palace in Hiroshima in the winter of 2020—a willow enveloped in winter light. A sign by the tree tells me it is a great pussy willow. I go there during a residency, while travelling in search of koi carp. I am drawn to moats and various bodies of water, ponds, and puddles. I notice this tree because it is very sprawling. Its branches grow almost horizontally, so they are supported by wooden posts and wrapped with green wire so that it does not split in half. Its trunk is wrapped in fabric, likely linen or hemp, which has practically become the tree's skin along with its bark. It is not only a tree but a tree-in-a-network: an agglomeration of various materials and beings. On the plaque, I read that it survived the nuclear catastrophe: it stands 740 metres from the epicentre of the explosion.

On the tree I see traces of many agents—people, plants, fungi, and lichens. Many others I do not see, though I sense them, like the birds and the insects. And I sense that the age of this tree differs from the rest of the city's vegetation. As I approached it, a shiver ran through me—I felt as if this form belonged to another time. It spun a story from another world, one that political history has definitively closed. That story cannot be conveyed on any plaque. I stand before this tree and the way I experience this place changes. The story manifested through the tree seeps into me, and I will always carry it, for every encounter is a story.

This tree is an example of an assemblage that unthreads time and space. It is both a wound and a remedy. Woven into it is an unyielding, tragic quality that marks this presence with ambiguity. It shrouds the space in sorrow and glory, in a tale of loss and victory, catastrophe and the affirmation of life. And it does all this at the same time. It bears witness to humanity and at the same time cancels it. It is a tree of wisdom and failure. It speaks of death and of life, of sudden disappearance and simultaneous rebirth, just like the Lack of Forest.

Time in the exclusion zone
ceased to flow linearly, instead leaping be-
tween temporal points. Thinking in clear categories
of past, present, and future became disturbed. All three
began to overlap, intertwine, and transform one another [...]
Owing to altered time and alien space, creating an adequate mem-
ory of tragic events becomes problematic. The disorientation affected
not only the experience of time and space after the catastrophe, but
also other aspects involved in shaping this narrative. The lack of an
adequate language of description (one that cannot be anchored in a
specific place and time) undermined established forms of coping
with the crisis. Above all, it forced the search for new ways of
representing and mediating the catastrophe.

Aleksandra Ross, *Contaminated Techno-natures. Environmental narratives about Nuclear Disasters*

The atomic catastrophe is destruction on a huge and long-lasting scale. It is part of war, part of the political mechanism of killing. It is the harvest of human development and a testament to the global condition. Compared to the devastation caused by the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the mass death and radiation—the storm in the Tuchola Forest seems insignificant—a mere disturbance, the outcome of a weather anomaly and bad planning. When juxtaposed with global wartime tragedies, those who experienced the storm feel shame. As if this situation did not fall under the regime of care, as if it were not worthy of empathy. The articulation of one's experience and local history in a world where so many are denied voice and the right to feel seems like a sign of arrogance.

And yet, there is no path to peace other than through story-making. Every voice is a step toward another history, toward different ways of deciding and negotiating reality. The Lack of Forest has much to say. We have the right to speak. All of us—those awaiting another reality—should remain in conversation. As inhabitants of these ecosystems, co-creating and animating these entangled developing assemblages, we have much to pass on.

At the same time, we search for ways of finding ourselves in the new situation.

Cleaning up and planting the forest after the storm was a spectacle, one I partly missed. I know of the heroism and the tireless work of residents and foresters only from stories. I saw traces of their actions when someone showed them to me.

Mariusz, a forester, explains me the spelling of the Planting action, writing on sand.

Since 2018, foresters have organised the planting of trees. Mariusz draws in the sand the word sadziMY*—explaining why he writes the last two letters in capitals. We go to the planting sites, called placówki, which consist of fifteen trees each and are meant to grow for at least 100 years. During this time, each tree gains independence within its family and supports at least one other tree's growth. The planting sites are an experiment to see if rebuilding a healthy forest is possible on soil depleted by centuries of logging. The method uses the trees' ability to create root networks—mutual strengthening, nutrient and water exchange. Beyond oaks on poor soil, auxiliary trees, such as linden, hornbeam, or beech, are planted to support the main trees' growth.

From 2020, forest clearing accelerated; machines appeared, processing massive tree trunks into chips. Mariusz is deeply impressed when we observe their work from a safe distance. Multi-ton trunks and roots, so spread out that even when lying on the ground, they tower over me, looking like sticks or wings in the jaws of the chippers. During the day, the machines' roar dominates the Lack of Forest. If you can't see the source of the noise, it could be mistaken for the Lack of Forest exhaling underground tales.

I met heavy machinery in the Lack of Forest several times. From afar, they seemed robotic, and their immense movements drew me in. As I approached to understand their mechanics, I always noted, with some surprise, that inside each massive vehicle, there was a human. The presence of another being of the same species seemed to unsettle the operator, who tried to ignore it and continue work: chips flew, dust rose, engines buzzed.

Trap for bark beetles.

* sadziMY, meaning "we're planting", is written here with the in-word WE emphasised with capital letters.

I did manage to speak with a few drivers. I waved until they looked in my direction, performing gestures like a drowning person. They spoke with strong Kashubian accents— and perhaps some in other dialects—saying they had come from far away. They were not very talkative, even about casual topics, let alone the purpose and scope of forest work. When asked where the wood would go, they responded curtly or not at all. Sometimes they hid behind a frivolous joke, never greeting me, pretending that neither they nor I, like the forest, were simply there.

In the wilderness of the Lack of Forest, it's better not to meet anyone. Emptiness and the absence of people is a privilege, an experience of bliss. One can feel safe in this antithesis of a cave. A vast, spread-out bosom of nature, endless space bounded only by the horizon. Hard to believe that no one is there, that no one spies. In the meditative state of this post- and simultaneously pre-natural void, a suddenly emerging human figure is like a wild animal.

Over time, I meet more people in the Lack of Forest parking trailers, collecting undergrowth and storm remnants. At homes, small, then increasingly larger piles of firewood grow—harvested from the community's shared property, the forest. These are the last moments to gather wood before it is ground into chips.

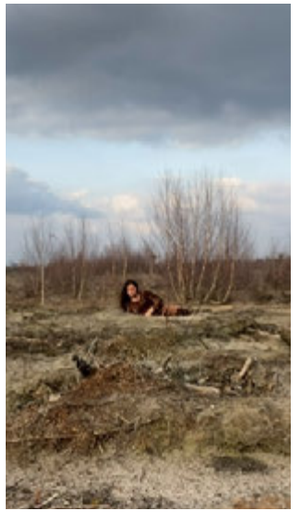
From top: oaks planted in the planting sites in 2018; Observations of harvesters' work with forester Mariusz

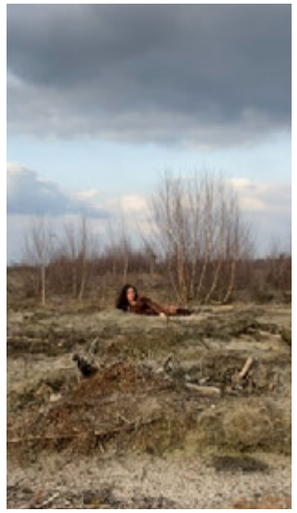
Positions

Crouching, jumping, hugging. These are ways of attuning the body to the Lack of Forest. You can place yourself in or against it. Freezing. When I lay on the cold ground, I became part of it. I was like a fitting puzzle piece, finally finding its ideal position. In one moment, I felt comfortable precisely there, my foot wedged between earth and root. From this fixed point, I enter a special state of observation: the earth behind my back, the sky and passing clouds in front.

> Lying in the Lack of Forest is a posture aligned with the horizontal composition of the remaining trees and landscape. Lying changes your perspective, allowing you to see other elements of the ecosystem. Branches and grasses now appear gigantic, bending over us in a gesture of curiosity, sometimes menacing, sometimes tender, even comforting. Clouds rush across the sky like a kaleidoscope. Motion is rapid, galloping. Something shifts, drips, sticks, brushes. Insects become interested in the body. Not as prey or an object to manipulate, but somewhere to perch. Put simply, by becoming a seemingly immobile part, I become a site of life. My rest allows others moments of respite.

Since the forest is gone, one cannot enter it. Immersion is unattainable. How, then, to experience and feel it? One must bend and look closely to see that the forest is still there, at the ground.





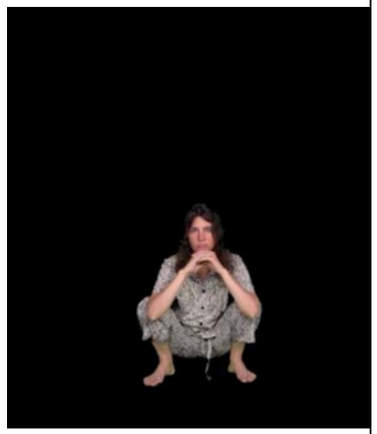
Changing perspective is the integration of otherness within oneself. Celebrating infinity and embodying perception. It allows a brief departure from ego projection, noticing movement and the body's vibration. For a moment, to feel what it is like to be a piece of wood, a stone, or soil.

In the Lack of Forest, severed connections can be restored. Observing the subtle movements of a brave animal, I feel tingling under my skin. Is interspecies knowledge shared? The animal helps me reconnect in the mode of human dissociation. Nothing here is obvious—seeing, feeling, understanding, cooperating. You can squat to feel that everything is only beginning.

Squat to the Earth

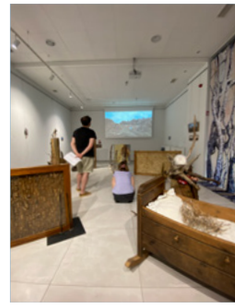
In the film *Squat* (2021), I examine the crouching position, proposing it as a way to ensure a better future. I recall it as I bend over the remnants of the Lack of Forest. The position is worth preserving, highly functional, and forgotten for unknown reasons.

> Performing a full squat is a demanding exercise that requires muscle tension and specific stretching. A full squat allows one to see what is hidden in the undergrowth, closest to the ground. It becomes a fundamental position in the Lack of Forest, essential for practising mindfulness and rest.



In our part of Europe, the crouching position is not entirely lost. It survived as the "Slavic squat." Compared to the full squat, to which Marcel Mauss devotes a chapter in *Techniques of the Body*, the Slavic squat is spectacular but unstable. The body rests on the toes, producing a characteristic pulsating motion. This makes the position easier but exceptionally wobbly, sustainable only for a brief time.

The exhibition at the Chojnice Cultural Centre—viewed in a crouched position—was designed so that this posture was ideal for observing artefacts created in the project.



Squat addresses catastrophe, crisis, precarity, and resistance. The film connects the forest's ruin with the spectral idea of progress, consumption, and "peaceful calm"—values promoted by the liberal world. The title plays on the English term "squat," which, in anarchist practice, refers to occupying someone else's property, often as a place to live. For some, it is social justice; for others, a crime and breach of the social contract.

> The film is also my homage to anthropology—my "home base," which I left for artistic work. The loss of our ability to squat, which I first read about in Mauss's *Techniques of the Body*, is one of the most beautiful theories of gift exchange and foundational for many of my projects. It has seeped into my life experience. It shaped my understanding of economy, community, engagement, and my own work. The relational dimension of the world underpins our understanding of planetary interdependencies and entanglement.

> Fundamentally these are mixes.
> Souls are blended into things; things are blended into souls. Lives are blended together, and so it is that the persons and things that are mixed each emerge from their own spheres and blend with each other: this is precisely what contract and exchange are.
>
> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*

Time of sleep. The future.
Why do we prefer unstable, exaggerated forms of bodily engagement? Positions that can last only a moment. Positions that exhaust us. Aren't we tired? We want to change something. We must change something. But we cannot hold the position. We cannot dwell in it. Squat to the earth. As deeply as you can. Not everyone can do it. We have forgotten much. But it will come. It is coming. It will hurt a lot. Try. Practice. Make yourself at home. Root yourself. Try. Practice. Practice every day.
—Text from the film *Squat*/score.

I was on the front line with
Australians. They had a significant advantage
over me. When we had to pause in the mud, they could
sit on their own feet, rest, and the mud remained beneath
their toes. I had to remain standing, my boots submerged to the
knees in mud. The crouching position is important. It is a posture that
all of humanity has retained, except our societies.

Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*

A Stick-Wand

I first showed my artistic works about the Lack of Forest in situ in April 2024, believing that exchange is the foundation of community life. In it is reflected care. We exchange when we share food, contaminate each other (Anna Tsing's term, emphasising the substantial nature of exchange), or follow each other. The exhibition From the Lack of Forest was my contribution to life in the Tuchola Forest lands.

At the Chojnice Cultural Centre, one featured work was *Map*—transferred onto canvas, faithfully reproducing the surface of a wooden stick. I focused on painting the marks left by insects, weather, soil, and other factors, telling the tangled map of encounters and living negotiations. This intimate cartography amplifies the paths, actions, and processes present on a stick from the Lack of Forest, found during one of my walks. A fragment of the missing-forest reality, caught and enlarged. A small piece of matter, significant through chance encounter. The entire collection of artefacts from the Lack of Forest stems from such encounters.

The stick was my companion for several years, travelling with me to distant places. I took it to Opolno-Zdrój for the Tree Energy Ceremony and for the presentation of the Marshal of Pomerania Province's scholarship, awarded for the further development of the Lack of Forest project.

During the obligatory group photo, I handed the Marshal the stick. I held the diploma; he held the Lack of Forest stick, like a trophy. To my surprise, the Marshal wanted to keep it afterwards. Apparently, he sensed its special value and treated it as a gift. I explained I had to keep it, which he accepted respectfully.

In August 2024, on the seventh anniversary of the hurricane, I opened another exhibition—this time at the Rytel Cultural Centre. Local forestry members attended. They were asked to speak. The head forester expressed sympathy for the Mound, stating it was a special object, a living home for many species, a shelter for others, a reminder of what is valuable. He urged care and highlighted that it would remain a "biocenotic hearth"—a place of biodiversity. After his speech, I received a bouquet made especially for me from plants growing in the Lack of Forest. Inside, instead of a note, was a wooden stick, beautifully carved by lack-of-forest insects. I learned then that Adrian, a person unknown to me, prepared the bouquet.

During the opening, I observed children playing around the *Map*. Approaching the painting, I noticed a man with a distinctive moustache explaining to children which insects created the holes and paths in the wood. Children played a guessing game; the man helped them with the answers. Not wishing to intrude, I observed from a small distance. At that moment, a woman approached me, proudly stating she was Adrian's wife, who the day before, had collected plants for me. Both of them work in forestry. Their children played near the painting. I learned Adrian enjoyed the *Map* from the previous exhibition. They searched for a stick most similar to the one depicted in the painting. He asked if I liked it. Of course I did.

I felt we had found and exchanged something crucial and immaterial. Despite differing roles, histories, and numerous storm-related local taboos, we found a common language. A delicate, caring language, hard to access, capable of describing a sensitive place uncovered by violent wind. Forest sticks became a medium of communication: mediating emotions, expressing appreciation, the effort, the complexity of events, and wonder. We recognised ourselves in these signals, looking at each other with trust and interest.

Working on the *Map*, I traced the lines carved into one of millions of similar wood pieces. I felt the need to create the image and offer it to people. Now I have received feedback. Proof that this representation works, that it has an audience. Sharing the stick required courage and trust that the message would be read. I interpret it as a trace of our mutual engagement, a desire to protect what is most precious, a call to love the land we inhabit, and to value all the resulting relations. The stick becomes our pact.

A photo with Adrian and his family in front of the Cultural Center in Rytel, August 2024

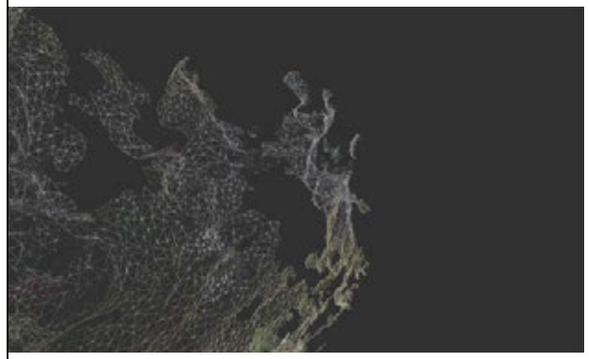
Map, Globe, object, 2024

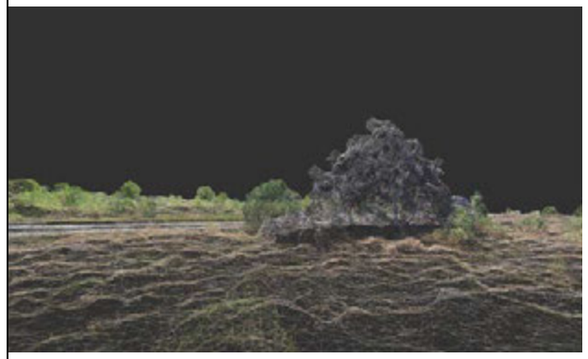
When I began coming to the Lack of Forest, I would get lost in it. Every turn looked the same, every path indistinguishable. My initial plan was to create a map of the forest that had disappeared—gathering remembered places, their histories, and the memories of people living nearby. I wanted, in some way, to reconstruct what had been here before and to revive the spirit of this forest. I thought that by doing so, I would connect with this place and better understand it. That was the main reason for inviting others to meetings and conversations in the Lack of Forest. I was counting on stories. In them, the forest before its loss appeared both magical and utterly wild.

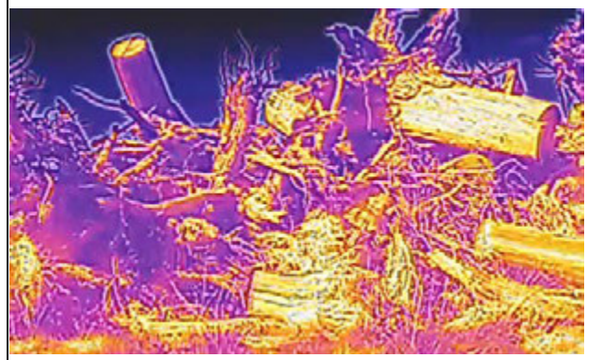
Ultimately, the map failed. Instead, we created a story. From the meetings, no objective map of the former forest and its destruction emerged, only our narrative. Mapping is an attempt at reflection. This book is more like an open archive. I interweave different voices, observations, and states—everything that emerges through prolonged presence and frames a post-hurricane everydayness. Sometimes these are raw or particularly extraordinary things. They stretch between locality and globality, hurricane and context, facts and imagination. I wanted to include in this book everything that co-creates the Lack of Forest for me and forms its world. It is a testimony constructed differently from media, political, or economic narratives. It is the social side of a forest that one day became a landscape of absence.

To write a
history of ruin, we need to
follow broken bits of many stories and to
move in and out of many patches. In the play of global
power, indeterminate encounters are still important.

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*







Scans, plans, and visualisations describe the character of the Lack of Forest well. It is a reality without depth, composed only of surfaces. Tree crowns float above a ground that resembles a sheet or crust, a plane as fragile as a flower petal. A flat structure, a cover of nothingness. Beneath the soil, nothing holds—nothing sustains our lands. We can peer beneath and see the bulges of an invisible silhouette.

Around the Mound, solitary trees still remain. Once part of a specific forest family, they now serve as a representative form for the whole area. Their singularity bears witness to the collective. They mark territory, define a space. They become reference points. Like roadside chapels marking both the familiar and the alien—even if in the Lack of Forest it is hard to separate one from the other.

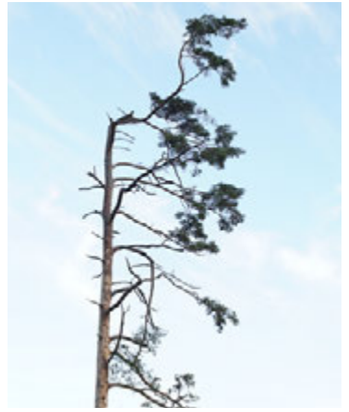
During our first excursions, Mariusz predicted that these solitary trees would disappear, toppling over due to wind, sun, and exposure as their trunks became exposed and vulnerable. Over the years, I have watched more of them vanish like the mounds once did. Points of orientation disappear and the loss of a single tree can truly disorient.

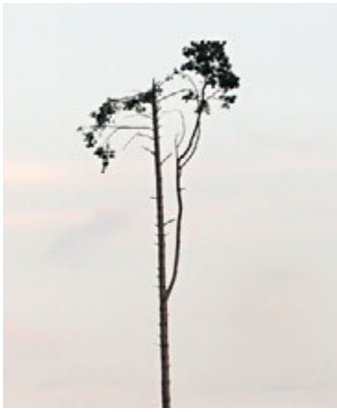
Being in the Lack of Forest, I often hear an incredible crack or thud, followed by a strike against the earth. A heavy, bassy vibration underfoot. Like a distant, barely muffled detonation of ruins blown somewhere far away, in deadly, lingering silence.

The solitary trees remaining after the hurricane shaped the ruined landscape. There were more of them, but they had already fallen and died. Many were cut down as "hazardous trees." The foresters abandoned those left. Located far from paths, roads, or monuments, they will remain until they fall over. Often they are seed trees, vital for the forest ecosystem. Foresters today call them biological trees, a category that stretches their fate beyond economic logic. They can stay, inhabited by birds or other species, as seed trees, the chosen ones in a plantation field.

In their surface appearance, many resemble veterans as they have no crowns, and after the hurricane, some have cracked internal tissues, hanging limply over the ground. The bear-like forms shaped by unnatural conditions caused by disruption. Their trunks are covered with hairy shoots, giving them a bushy character. We observe their daily struggle with a completely new environment, a heroic attempt at adaptation and survival.





The remaining trees send out new shoots with some covered from base to top. These shoots are a tree's protective strategy against dangerous surroundings: a layer that provides a microclimate, maintains the proper moisture, and serves as an additional source of photosynthesis. This is crucial, especially for trees that lost their crowns partially or completely during the hurricane.

> In timber production, such shoots are undesirable. Trees are planted densely to shield each other's trunks. They're close enough to each other to avoid needing extra protection, yet far enough to prevent whipping branches. Some species, particularly birches, produce branches that wound neighbouring trees. After a few years, young trees undergo thinning. Only those that stretched quickly and efficiently toward sunlight are bound to survive.

The trees left after the hurricane have no competition. Leaning like emaciated giraffes, they cling to the horizon. Sometimes they wear green armour, ornamental suits, and dance in the wind.

> I look at these trees and feel proud. Survivors of the forest, manifesting beauty freed from plantation constraints. They twist and bend, asserting their vivid presence as a reassurance. As if reminding us that the idea of wholeness is a human illusion. Here, there are only parts. Parts, fragments, bits, remnants—our world—up to the horizon revealed by the wind.

I preserve these particular heroines for later. I don't want to lose them like the mounds, so they can forever retain the temporary post-hurricane functions: marking paths, reference points, triggers of memory.

In the Lack of Forest, one can still find monumental oaks or yews—ghosts of bygone times. Planted by other people, in another country, another world, with another future in mind. They're hidden and to find them you need to go through thick, overgrown bushes. Przemek says, "Drive here, to the right, where the ground is hard." I drive into clumps of soft shrubs and grasses, I'd be scared to step on if I were on my own. The forester knows every plant within dozens of kilometres and wants to lift a veil of secrecy for me. Slowly, sprawling oak crowns appear from behind a crowd of smaller bushes. How had I never noticed them before?

> Przemek shows them proudly, calling them "his oaks." Two of the four are dead; green and black trunks tower over the devastated land. Approaching one, I have to quickly step back—the bass-like buzzing of hornets grows uneasily. This kingdom is already inhabited. The largest tree for the largest insect—a seasoned apex predator, ready to fight even a human to protect their nest.

The impossibility of approaching a tree, so guarded by insect sentinels, underscores the spectral character of the forest. The oaks are heroes of past grandeur, dreamt glory, another history, untouchable as its certain pages. They do not resonate with ancient harmony or medieval verticality. They are strained and chaotic, stretching skyward, sideways, along the extensions of their own limbs, full of inscrutable expression. Once, they hid in these forests with their stories. Today, these forests are gone. Speaking of nakedness before the dignity of oaks is difficult. It is a nakedness full of glory, yet exposed. An oak's nakedness is a testament to life's growth path and the satisfaction from which wisdom can be drawn. These thoughts accompany me as I observe branches reaching to the sky, straining lenses to frame their mighty limbs.

P: Because it's something like an ecological clump. And we just call these clumps old-growth. The idea is that in every clear-cut, we have to leave something old. Unless there's a clear-cut next to another clear-cut, then we can merge something, meaning leaving an even larger clump for a cut area.

M: But why?

P: For ecological reasons, to leave something for nature and for ecologists.

M: But what's the point if the whole forest is planted and nothing here is natural?

P: The thing is, clumps are chosen for various reasons, for example, because of their natural value, like the presence of some rare or protected plant in that area. Or because there are hollow trees there, inhabited or used for nesting by some birds. Sometimes there are also aesthetic reasons—for example, Douglas firs. Douglas firs are beautiful, so we leave fragments with Douglas firs, even though they're a non-native species. You don't have to fight everything to eliminate it completely. Douglas firs are actually great; they should be introduced in forests. I don't know why botanical associations haven't yet dispelled the notion that Douglas fir is foreign. It should be considered one of ours because it can regenerate here. If something can produce another generation here, it's a species that adapts. If it doesn't bother us and doesn't interfere with our native species—meaning it doesn't suppress them—it should be considered native. Something else is the bird cherry, the worst thing. It has delicious fruit, grows beautifully and quickly. But it displaces our species. It destroys them, overshadows them. It drowns out everything in sight. Bird cherry must be eradicated. And you have to believe that it was the foresters themselves who brought it here—it was supposed to be beautiful, but it turned out differently, as usual.

Przemek, a forester, Jeziorki, 2023

Pyrrhidium

One day, I notice a pyrrhidium on the window frame. I'm not sure whether I brought it home with a fragment of the forest floor, or whether it appeared here because of the spruces depleted by the work of the bark beetle. Or perhaps the beetle is plundering the larch covering part of the exterior walls of the house? The presence of the insect makes the space of the Mound and my home, for a moment, identical to me. The organism I recognised on the Mound, living there from the very beginning, found its way—without invitation or map—to another place important to me. In this interspecies encounter, manifests the principle that my private life is eco-political. I perceive how full reality is, how densely and rhythmically we move simultaneously in all directions. My home and the Mound are the same space.

Proliferating from pure loss,
plants offer themselves with unconditional
generosity. Silently, they extend themselves in space,
exposing their vegetal bodies in utter vulnerability to being
chopped off or plucked, harvested or trimmed, broken by a hurricane or burnt by the sun [...] as soon as ethics sheds its humanist
camouflage, the human subject will join plant life in a self-expropriating
journey toward the other.

Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life.*

Destrudo

The Lack of Forest opens a void within me. Just as the wind whirls over the field that was once forest, so there is a void inside me that I feel almost physically. An empty space that renders me silent. States of strange solitude, penetrating self-reflection, where suddenly all howling places and organs speak.

> Today's reality is saturated with emptiness, yet it suppresses it. It does not make room for lack, loss, or despair. We cling to small affirmations, to remedies for geopolitical collapses, to cynicism, and to doubt. We avoid sentimentality, always offer hope, and fulfil defined functions. Life with the Lack of Forest exposes me to the simplicity and truism that the world is fragile. It is a world of passing, temporality, of particular fragments that rot. It falls apart at the touch, it dematerialises.

By creating a world from a lack, my rediscovered tribe and I create our cosmogony. New myths, stories, systems of relations. A new time, a space that regenerates and heals. New forms of remembering and being.

From the left: 2023, 2019

Repeated Performance—*Forest Stack*, 2020, 2024

Repeated Performance—*Squat* 2020, 2024

Łukasz's Story

We are driving through the landscape of the Lack of Forest toward Białe Błota and Łukasz tells his story from the night of the storm. He was one of the villagers who decided to set out at night to search for scouts at a camp in the epicentre of the wind. We are exactly on that route. When I ask about his feelings, he seems confused. "Were you afraid of falling giants?" "Who would even think of that?" The necessity to provide help is so self-evident to him that it sounds almost like a moral virtue. For a moment, it makes me feel uneasy.

> Still in the village, they divided into smaller groups to make it easier to push through the thickets. Teams with saws went first, ahead, to clear the way. Łukasz was moving in a pair with another man. He remembers how they chose where to step, heading toward the meadows. It was helpful that he knew this forest so well—it's where he grew up. A path that would normally take fifteen minutes took them an hour and a half that night. Still very fast, considering that the authorities needed four to five hours to reach the camp.

Łukasz remembers absolute silence. No sound could be heard. The wind completely hushed a hundred children. When the hurricane subsided, most of the children hid in a stand of trees planted six years earlier, about 300 meters from the lake. Łukasz and his colleagues found them there and led them back in smaller groups, all the way to the village, to Lucyna's house.

> After the several-hour rescue operation, when the police finally arrived, Łukasz took a break to rest. He stared impassively at the fallen trees, the ruined forest. Suddenly, he noticed a man making his way between twisted trunks, carrying a bicycle on his back. He had fishing gear. A fisherman! He was slightly distracted by the trees lying around, but determined to keep going. For him, it was just another fishing night. It started to rain; a few trees fell. He waited until dawn and decided to return home. That was it.

Is it possible that he didn't notice the disaster while in its midst? What did it mean to him? Did it shock him? Was it unnoticed or immediately repressed? What did he feel when he heard about the hurricane the next day? What did his wife or children say when he returned home? Did they know? Were they worried? Or was he completely alone? And what difference does it make? Would he have been better off with his family or alone? How do you value experience and compare it? He refused to see the wind, and the wind left him in peace—perhaps that's exactly how it was.

Mushroom Pickers Return To The Lack of Forest

I think I met that man. One day, he arrived at the Mound on a bicycle. He was looking for a spot for mushroom picking that he remembered from before the hurricane. In the altered landscape, he couldn't find it. He began to tell a story about a car accident that happened in a neighbouring village. The organist's son died on the spot, crashing into a tree. Stories of life and death in the Lack of Forest resonate with a certain ease, as if the context of the hurricane accommodates them better than everyday life. After all, like other stories, they are a constant part of the local experience. The man I met at the Mound will remain for me a character from Łukasz's story, even if it wasn't actually him. A man on a bicycle speaking of death with a smile.

July, 2024

When I first visited the forestry office, the head forester asked me a question—a trust test that I could easily fail: "What do you think about the logging in the Białowieża Forest?" At that time, in 2019, the Białowieża Forest was a site of dispute over tree felling to control the bark beetle outbreak. Activists defended the forest, proving that even healthy trees were being cut down. At the same time, foresters justified their decisions under the law to "manage" according to their own criteria, based on their knowledge of the forest. The case gained international attention, as the Białowieża Forest is the oldest lowland primaeval forest in Europe. The forester's directness in raising the topic revealed the sense of threat from the foresters, who suspected trickery as soon as a civilian crossed the threshold of their office. But it also exposed the immense significance of politics for contemporary forests.

Fortunately, I had an excuse at the time. Shortly before this conversation, I had cut down four spruces in front of my house, planted by my husband's ancestors, eaten by the bark beetle. The conversation shifted from politics over the entire forest to practical strategies for dealing with this particular beetle, leaving the Harvester machines and my friends from Warsaw sitting on them in the background of the discussion.

At that stage of the project, the world of foresters seemed foreign and threatening to me. Men in uniforms, resembling soldiers, surely hunters, operating on maps, orthophotos, emblems, distinctions, and badges. They were using a rigid, formal language unfamiliar to me, sitting in offices reminiscent of relics from a former system. Visiting their offices meant leaving my comfort zone—a task that left me feeling distant, perhaps even afraid.

Yet, during conversations, we would find a shared understanding. We loved the same land and tried to care for it—each of us in our own way. With different strategies, beliefs, stakes, and goals within our personal dreams, but also different knowledge and experience. We wanted the same thing for the forest: well-being. I drew from the foresters abundantly. Thanks to what Mariusz, Waldemar, Przemek, Adrian, Andrzej, Mateusz, Leszek, as well as Ewelina and Natalia showed me, I learned more about forests than ever before. I hope I was also able to show them the forest as seen through my eyes and artistic research tools. That an exchange occurred, weaving our experiences into a collective mixture.

In 2024, I decided to visit the Białowieża Forest for the first time. I was guided by Katarzyna Hertz, an artist living in the strict forest and the founder of the Kraina Kresu Foundation. For several years, she ran an artistic project called *Forest Map of Memory*.

After a walk, we sat down to talk. I said that the next day I would visit the Szast Protected Forest, which had been destroyed by a hurricane thirty years earlier. It is located in Masuria, near Pisz. Only when I mentioned the village name did Katarzyna come alive and admit: "I was there then." "How so?" I asked. "You survived? That wind?"

Katarzyna had never spoken about her experience in Pisz before, and she didn't know that today there is a protected forest on the site where she camped as an eight-year-old. During our conversation, that memory returned to her; it turned out that memory is alive, and the experience was so remarkably similar.

I was nine, maybe eight years old. It was a terrible experience, truly dramatic. I arrived there that very day for an organised canoe-and-bicycle hiking camp in Masuria. We were supposed to float toward the centre of Poland. We pitched our tents, ate lunch, and decided we wanted to buy something sweet, so we all went to the shop. And while we were buying chocolate in the shop, a tornado started. I saw cars and trees flying; suddenly, everything was lifted up. And when we came out of the shop, there was nothing. Yes, there was no forest. There were no roofs on the buildings, and there were no tents to return to. We crawled under cables, under rubbish and trees. The whole camp was collapsed under trees. If we had stayed there, we probably wouldn't have been alive. We had to stay in some hostels where camp beds were arranged for us, and then we moved on with the camp. I didn't realise the scale of this event, but in fact, my parents were shocked that they hadn't sent us back. It was the 1990s, when nobody thought about safety on the scale we do today. Trauma, injury—there were no such categories. Only: "shake it off, we're moving on. It's just a tornado."—that's how they explained it.

Katarzyna, Białowieża, 2024

It turns out that there are more hurricane experiences, but their stories are lacking. The wind passes quickly, the forest grows slowly. I ask Katarzyna why she uses the word "tornado" to describe the storm. "Because I really remember that the movement of those objects and trees was circular. It starts at the bottom, spins, spins, and starts to escape upward. It looked basically the same, only you couldn't see that funnel, or whatever it's called. I think we were inside, simply." "In the eye," I correct her with the technical term. "Yes. You know, memory gets a bit blurred too, but I remember those images from behind the shop window, so swift and round. Because the speed of that event was incredible too, everything lasted only about twenty minutes." "It was the same in the Bory," I concluded.

The next day, together with Przemysław, my local guide, we drive into the Szast Protective Forest. I know this landscape! Przemysław unsuccessfully tries to cool my emotions, talking about the terraced arrangement of the forest, the population of the recovering capercaillie. But here it is simply like in the Tuchola Forest. I look at the trees, whole clumps that, bent, with tissues shattered by the wind, have been living for years. "And they even bear fruit"—Przemysław praises them.

All kinds of emotions pass through my body: euphoria, joy, wonder, fear, sadness and compassion. And above all, a sense of rootedness, thanks to which I can contain them all within myself. This feeling of rootedness, which does not belong to a place—I feel it in the Lack of Forest, in Szast, in the Wolf's Lair, in Warsaw and in Sarajevo, wading with my feet in the Genbei River in Japan or visiting the garden of the First Nations in Montreal.

We take root in a world of global ruins, learn to move across new maps. This world demands from us fragility and exchange. It offers us life emerging from everywhere— it is what flickers before us. This is the path we should choose.

Kasia walking with Mirka in Białowieża (Forest)

I am deeply grateful that this book was able to come into being. It is a summation of years spent living with the landscape of Lack of Forest, a record of efforts to regain a sense of rootedness and to build a home in a place that pointed me toward my own inner domestication. It has been an immense lesson in being with nature, in sensing entanglements, in understanding bonds. First and foremost, then, I thank the Lack of Forest itself—the space that called me to it, and with which I discovered so much together.

I thank the people close to me who supported me at various stages of the creation of this work, and later of the book itself. Without friends and loved ones, I would have found neither the time nor the strength; inspiration would have run dry. My thanks go to Anka, Ola, Michalina, Hania, Ida, Sylwia, Witek, Piotr, Sebastian, Weronika, and many others who stood by me throughout all these years. I thank all those who chose to meet with me, who shared conversations, memories, and photographs, and who guided me through this passage: Łukasz Ossowski, Lucyna Rutkowska, Krystyna Trzcińska, Łukasz Trzciński, Marek Konończuk, Gosia Konończuk, Ola Fryca, Anka Smugala, Anitka Smugala, Agnicha Janiczek, Monika Szczukowska, Emilia Ossowska, Ryszard Lissewski, my fellow researchers from *In the hurricane. On the land* multidisciplinary research project, the senior women from the "Autumn Rose" [Jesienna Róża] Cultural Center in Rytel, my companions from ceramic classes, Grażyna Jaszewska, Patryk Leśniewski, Daria Lunitz, Jarosław Urbański, Alicja Kochanowicz, Maciej Kwietnicki, Magdalena Świerczewska, Szaman, Łysy, Joachim Dąbrowski, Anka Zajkowska, Katarzyna Hertz, Olga Cielemęcka, Czesław, Grażyna Jaszewska, Łukasz Łuczaj, members of the Wild Carpathians Initiative [Inicjatywa Dzikie Karpaty], Anna Sidoruk, Monika Dorniak, Konrad Trzeszczkowski, Dawid Misiorny, Rosalie Hoffman, Aga Szreder, Magdalena Komornicka, Maciej Siuda, Jagna Lewandowska, Konrad Smoleński, Paweł Błęcki, Magda Olszewska, Uciek, Banksy, Sasha and many others who took part in the meetings by the Mound and who were hosted in the Lack of Forest.

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I thank the Rytel Forest District for a remarkable partnership—one that could have failed, but instead continues to succeed. Thank you for your trust and exchange, for accepting a project that speaks through artistic language and means, and for recognising that we share the same goal: nurturing love for the forest and a bond with nature. This recognition is deeply meaningful to me and, I hope, a lasting enrichment of how we think about forests. I thank the foresters Mariusz Brunka, Adrian Talaśka, Natalia Talaśko, Przemek Tojza, Konrad Szpak, Ewelina Szpak, Łukasz Rutkowski, Leszek Poltyn, and above all Waldemar Wencel, who was a pillar for me. I trusted the calm in his eyes long before I felt that this collaboration truly had a chance to succeed. I also thank Agata Konczal, who enthusiastically took up the collaboration and with whom I became friends; my team—Zofka, Weronika, Joanna, Renata, Josh—and you, Michał, for initiating the entire process. I thank the publisher for courage and freedom.

I also thank my husband, who unexpectedly left me shortly before the book was published. It made me realise that art and love for the world are immense resources that accompany me regardless of circumstances. Living through this mutual giving, through a sense of belonging with everything that grows, is reborn, and dies, I move beyond loneliness and more fully experience the essence of love. With gratitude, I offer this story of Lack, filled with tenderness and with an unending, piercing beauty.

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