

Anamersion: Toward a postcinematic poetics of immersion

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Declaration

This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anja Kirschner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Anja Kirschner

8 December 2022

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List of accompanying material – submitted as ‘Supplementary Data’

(1) Practice-based work *UNICA* (Anja Kirschner, 2022, video): submitted as MP4.

(2) *UNICA* exhibition catalogue: submitted as PDF.

- *Anja Kirschner: UNICA*, edited by Junia Tiede, Dennis Brzek and Markus Hannebauer, with an introduction by Junia Tiede and Dennis Brzek and texts by Claire Finch, Lisa Jeschke and Luisa Lorenza Corna, *Fluentum* with DISTANZ, Berlin, 2022

(3) External link to official webpage of “Anja Kirschner: *UNICA*” solo exhibition at *Fluentum*, Berlin:

- www.fluentum.org/en/exhibitions/unica

(4) A selection of earlier practice-based works:

- *New Genres* (Anja Kirschner, 2018, site specific VR installation): submitted as 23 JPG files; including exhibition views from the solo exhibition “*New Genres*” at Kunstbunker – Forum für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Nuremberg, 14 July – 26 August 2018, and digital stills of the VR animation.
- A selection of drawings: submitted as 7 JPEG files; including an exhibition view from the group exhibition “*Kathy Acker: GET RID OF MEANING*” at Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe, 5 October – 2 December 2018.
- *Riley* (Anja Kirschner, 2017, video): submitted as MP4.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

The contribution of my practice-led research is the development of anamersion, a postcinematic poetics of immersion, which attends to the immersive conditions of contemporary life forms. Notions of mutational convergences of bodies, environments, and technologies and their differential mapping and navigation are developed in dialogue with Unica Zürn's figuration of (her) (female) body and its institutionalisation as one formation in her illustrated text *The House of Illnesses*, Kathy Acker's conception of the labyrinth as the site where codes are made flesh, and Porpentine Charity Heartscape's explorations of trauma in their computer games set in horror mansions, with special attention to the way writing, drawing, and algorithmic operations often co-constitute each other in their works and in my own practice. Bringing these predominantly pre-computational engagements to bear on technology-dependent forms of immersion in gaming and virtual reality (VR), my practice-led research provides an analysis of immersive, navigational, and environmental figurations through modes of drawing, moving image, and multimedia installation that respond to Wynter's call for a New Studia, and Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape's disruptions of anatomical, architectural, and textual figurations on its own terms. Developing anamersion primarily with reference to Sylvia Wynter's thought and, by extension, that of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Louis Chude-Sokei, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and others, emphasis is laid on the ways in which the over-represented genre of the human, *Man*, continues to manifest in and as bodies, environments, and technologies today. Understanding anamersion as a form of what Wynter calls *figuration Work*, anamersive approaches map, navigate, and traverse such generic structurations from the implicated and immersed positions, which have the potential to be in solidarity with the Wynterian unsettling of the genre *Man* by challenging conceptions of technology which carry over post-Enlightenment monohumanism into derivative posthumanisms, which continue to reproduce colonial logics with deadly consequences. Anamersion, as analytic and poetics, thus presents a significant and original

contribution to the fields of artists' moving-image and postcinematic studies, which focus on the environmental and navigational trajectories of moving-image and immersive technologies today and elaborates how these can be refigured to produce generative detachments and exits from the linear developmental narratives that underwrite a violent world order.

KEYWORDS: anamersion, immersion, post-cinema, postcinematic, moving image, gaming, virtual reality, navigation, mapping, drawing, figuration, humanism, genre, environment, body, hybridity, technology, Sylvia Wynter, Kathy Acker, Unica Zürn, Porpentine Charity Heartscape.

...we must attend to the material histories of our categories, as they are given shape and vitality by way of, and inside of, organismic bodies, even if (or especially if) ultimately our aim is to be rid of received categories because of the world-wrecking capacities and death-dealing effects. Otherwise, we will most likely build on foundations we would be better off destroying.

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*¹

¹ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 121.

Introduction

Anamersion

Anamersion is a neologism that signals a differential approach to immersion.¹ The prefix *ana-* (upward, towards; again, anew; backwards, against) abandons the prefix *im-* (in; into; within) and engages immersive technologies without presuming a discrete separation between an *immersant* and an *immersive environment* as a prior stabilisation.² In suspending such prior stabilisation, anamersion conceives immersion not as a mode of *relation* between an immersant and an immersive environment, where the former is absorbed in the latter, but as the site of their mutual production. For this reason, anamersive poetics figures bodies, technologies, and environments as one formation and deploys oriented logics in order to set in motion iterative processes capable of mutating the whole. In anamersive poetics, *algorithmic*, *anagrammatic*, and *anamorphic* operations become key to mapping, navigating, and traversing—in the sense of crossing with difficulty, going against—the ways in which something like a body and something like an environment are formed, together with the codes and violences that perpetuate themselves in and through such formations.

Anamersive poetics as *figuration Work*

Anamersion as a postcinematic poetics of immersion attends to forms of mapping, navigating, and traversing the immersive conditions of contemporary life forms and the ways in which post-

¹ The term “anamersion” was inspired by Johnny Golding’s term “ana-materialism” as developed in: Johnny Golding, “Ana-Materialism & the Pineal Eye: Becoming Mouth-Breast,” *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 19, no. 4 (2013): 66–80.

² “Immersant” is a neologism coined by Char Davies. See Laurie McRobert, *Char Davies’s Immersive Virtual Art and the Essence of Spatiality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 7.

Enlightenment conceptions of the human—what Sylvia Wynter terms the “genre *Man*”—continue to manifest in and as bodies, environments, and technologies today.³ The term “poetics” here designates a *doing* with transformative consequences, which can affect the material constitution of the/a world, though it is primarily conducted through cultural means, in this case language, drawing, and algorithmic processes, and their unfolding in the moving image.⁴ Anamersive poetics is, then, a form of what Wynter calls *figuration Work*, a working towards rupturing the hegemonic systems of figuration governing human societies through “great feats of poetic semantic engineering” capable of giving rise to “new imaginary schema.”⁵ They engage with and stretch Wynter’s theory of *being hybridly human*, which maintains that humans aren’t natural organisms that *then* make culture, but hybrid entities, constituted by the mutational convergence of the order of the flesh (*bios*) and the order of the word (*mythoi*).⁶ Wynter’s proposal of a New Studia, capable of analysing and intervening in the hybrid biocultural processes of “*code-made-flesh*,” provides an operational framework for anamersion,

³ Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Before Man: Sylvia Wynter’s Rewriting of the Modern Episteme,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, Katherine McKittrick, ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 91. “In reading Wynter’s project against Foucault’s argument that the modern episteme (here renamed post-Enlightenment thought) always already resolves difference as a moment of the (transcendental, pure, or teleological) Same, I track how Wynter recuperates what remains illegible in Foucault’s critique of Man: “the idea of race.” What she offers to the critique of modern thought, I argue, is an analysis of how in the Renaissance and post-Enlightenment epochs, two moves of naturalization—the secularization of rationality and the representation of the human through the workings of natural selection, respectively—would position Man in such a way as to disavow other, coexisting modes of being human.”

⁴ For related definitions of poetics, see: micha cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Colour Art in Digital Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022), 4. “Poetics, whether of language, media, or movement, are the observable meeting points of matter and agency.” And: Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel, eds., *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2020), 4. “[W]e invoke *poetics* as a category that can combine aesthetics and politics at once, and transform the two into the formalisation of a project.” My initial research was also influenced by Lyotard’s thought on poetry as figure, which exceeds both the “denotative function of language” and “the limits set by our phantasies,” in Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 316–322.

⁵ Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” *Boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (1984): 51. doi.org/10.2307/302808.

⁶ Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition,” in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 217. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gn6bfp.12.

though it departs from Wynter's proposal in at least two ways.⁷ While engaging with neuroscientific discourses on technology-dependent immersion, it remains sceptical of the explanatory powers of brain science and Maturana and Varela's concept of *autopoiesis*, which might itself produce limiting definitions of the human on a new level.⁸ As Denise Ferreira da Silva has cautioned:

In Wynter's reformulation of the ontological argument, her framing of the question of being—in particular the argument concerning the political nature of the modern universal answers, that is, the descriptive statements that overrepresent Man as *the sole/full Human*—emerges out of the possibility that any answer to the question of who and what we are, especially but not only scientific ones, may be unable to avoid recolonizing, via naturalization, all and any other possible modes of being Human.⁹

The development of anamersion therefore orientates itself further along Wynter's writing on hybridity, rather than Wynter's proposed solution of the *autopoietic turn/overtun*. Furthermore, while Wynter's emphasis is primarily on figuration through narration, from prehistory to the present, anamersion shifts emphasis to the ways in which navigation, rather than narration, has become the dominant form within immersion today.¹⁰ My research-by-practice explores the

⁷ Wynter, 245. "This is the telos of the Ceremony Found's New Studia, whose hybrid study of the Word/*ordo verborum* as non-linearly and intricately calibrated with the study of nature/*ordo naturae* ... will be that of the functioning of the human brain's natural-opioid behavior-regulatory system ... itself lawlikely activated in the terms of the specific positive/negative system of meanings of each pseudo-speciating genre of being human's sociogenic replicator code, then implemented as a living entity as that of the code-made-flesh. This telos will therefore call for its praxis of the Autopoietic Turn/Overtun to function in a hitherto unsuspected, trans-disciplinary, trans-epistemic, trans-natural-scientific cum trans-cosmogonic modality. Such a new order of knowledge, Césaire insisted, exists as one which "only poetry" – its *technè* of functioning and new "gravity of language" (Livingston, 2006) ... "can give an approximate notion of" (Césaire, 1996)."

⁸ Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realisation of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980), xviii.

⁹ Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Before Man: Sylvia Wynter's Rewriting of the Modern Episteme," 102.

¹⁰ Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 25. "The paleontologist Juan Luis Arsuaga proposes that the human is not only a languaging being but also a storytelling species. In my own terms, the human is *Homo narrans*. This means that as a species, our *hybrid* origins only emerged in the wake of what I have come to define over the last decade as the Third Event. The First and Second Events are the origin of the universe and the explosion of all forms of biological life, respectively. I identify the Third Event in Fanonian-adapted terms as the origin of the human as a hybrid-auto-instituting-languaging-

causes and consequences of this shift, and proposes different ways of mapping and navigating immersion. It is informed by a close engagement with postcinematic media and the technology-dependent forms of immersion particular to them.¹¹ Crucially, however, it also elaborates a more expanded and mutational trajectory of immersive technologies, opening divergent directions for postcinematic forms of immersion through them. It does so with special attention to selected works by Unica Zürn (1916-1970), Kathy Acker (1947-1997), and Porpentine Charity Heartscape (b.1987), and the way they refigure immersion from implicated and *anomalous* (gender) positions within and against the genre *Man*.¹² Through analysing affinities between their works and the strategies they deploy and transposing these to moving image, I develop anamersion as a postcinematic poetics of immersion, with the potential to be in solidarity with a Wynterian unsettling of the genre *Man*, as my original contribution to knowledge.¹³

storytelling species: *bios/mythoi*. The Third Event is defined by the singularity of the *co-evolution* of the human brain *with*—and, unlike those of all the other primates, *with it alone*—the emergent faculties of language, storytelling.”

¹¹ Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, eds., *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer: REFRAME, 2016), 1, <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/>. “If cinema and television, as the dominant media of the twentieth century, shaped and reflected the cultural sensibilities of the era, how do 21st-century media help to shape and reflect new forms of sensibility? Various attempts to identify the defining characteristics of these newer media (and hence their salient differences from older media) emphasize that they are essentially digital, interactive, networked, ludic, miniaturized, mobile, social, processual, algorithmic, aggregative, environmental, or convergent, among other things. Recently, some theorists have begun to say, simply, that they are *post-cinematic*.”

¹² Wynter, ‘The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtun, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition,’ 212. “In the case of the Darwinian naturally selected/dysselected sociogenic replicator code of our secular Western, (neo)Liberal-monohumanist genre of being hybridly human Man (2), both Virginia Woolf in 1929 and Carter G. Woodson in 1933 would come to parallel conclusions each from their respective relatively inferiorized and ostensibly genetically (and, therefore, natural dysselectedly cum dys-genically) determined perspectives of “otherness.” [...] Woolf would do so with respect to the gender anomaly she experienced vis-à-vis her British imperial ruling upper-class male peers, who had been discursively and empirically institutionalized as ostensibly the generic sex and, thereby, the normal gender. While Woodson would do so within the context of the racial anomaly in whose terms he was induced educationally to experience himself like the rest of his then apartheid-subordinated US “Black” population vis-à-vis the “White” Euro-American (optimally Anglo- American) population.”

¹³ Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument’, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260–61. doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015. “The argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves. [...] The correlated hypothesis here is that all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity,

The intensification of immersion in postcinematic media

The research leading to anamersion developed out of an engagement with narrative and genre through my moving image practice, which has spanned over two decades and shifted focus from cinematic to postcinematic media, as the latter began to enter into a competitive and mutational relationship with the former during this period, focusing on how postcinematic media modulate current dispositions in related but also entirely novel ways that distinguish them from cinema. It considers the wider impact of this shift and engages with postcinematic aesthetics and production processes within contemporary art practice, in order to play a part in a differential figuration of postcinematic immersion.

A key characteristic of postcinematic media is the intensification of technology-dependent forms of immersion, and the way computer games and virtual reality (VR) capture attention through mandated and absorbing forms of interaction. While traditional cinema sought to absorb viewers in fictional scenarios without giving them the ability to intervene in their unfolding on screen, postcinematic media such as gaming and VR have instituted action-based forms of media consumption.¹⁴ Here players can, and indeed must, engage in exploring fictional worlds through interaction and navigation, rather than being presented with them in the form of narrative montage. Game narratives and other diegetic elements, no matter how basic or complex, have to function in ways that enable player action and navigation, and as such are subordinate to the main mechanisms driving gameplay.¹⁵ Furthermore, while narrative montage often cuts between

struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth's resources...these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle."

¹⁴ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Electronic Mediations 18 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 18. "If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then *video games are actions*. Let this be word one for video game theory. Without action, games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book."

¹⁵ Galloway, *Gaming*, 8.

different places and times in order to build up a scenario, gameplay usually requires designing game architectures and environments that are navigable and continuous, ranging from the self-enclosed architectures of haunted houses, dungeons, and mazes, which date back to the days of early games design, to procedurally generated and thus potentially infinite open worlds.¹⁶ In dialogue with such immersive architectures and environments, this research-by-practice uses Unica Zürn's illustrated text *The House of Illnesses* (1958), which figures (her) (female) body and its institutionalisation as *one* formation, Kathy Acker's conception of the labyrinth "as a potential form of all bodies and their writing," and Porpentine Charity Heartscape's explorations of trauma in computer games set in horror mansions as three key instances through which it articulates the differences between state-of-the-art technology-dependent immersion and anamersive poetics.¹⁷ For while immersion is conceived as a spectator's or player's temporal absorption in a fictional and/or simulated scenario (e.g. immersion in a movie, a game, or VR), anamersion understands and figures immersion as an ongoing process/infinite regress in all directions, for which Zürn's *House*, Acker's *Labyrinth*, and Heartscape's *Horror Mansions* provide concrete examples. In drawing on practices that aren't exclusively conducted through computational media, my research demonstrates how artistic production can generate divergent forms and understandings of technology itself.¹⁸

¹⁶ Galloway, *Gaming*, 24.

¹⁷ Douglas A. Martin, *Acker* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2017), 226.

¹⁸ For recent examples of the latter see: Louis Onuorah Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2016). Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics* (New York: e-flux, 2021). Henriette Gunkel and Ayesha Hameed, *Visual Cultures as Time Travel* (London and Berlin: Goldsmiths, University of London and Sternberg Press, 2021).

Approaching immersion from the side of anomaly

While recent critical theory on immersive media focuses on the question of how to restore critical distance and, with it, the possibility of reflection and agency, and related approaches to games design and VR largely centre on how to deliver more emancipatory content on the level of narrative and character choices, the development of anamersion instead looks to the ways in which immersion operates when considered from the side of anomaly, and the differential forms of spatialisation and traversal movement this affords.¹⁹ What follows is a brief summary of the trajectory of the individual chapters.

Chapter I: On Postcinematic immersion

Chapter I defines the normative player position proffered by mainstream first-person-shooter (FPS) games (but also sometimes unintentionally jeopardised and undermined by them) as one that is oriented towards survival and expansion in hostile worlds, which replicate the genre *Man* and its biocentric and colonial logics.²⁰ However, based on analysing such games through the video *Riley* (Anja Kirschner, 2017) and the VR installation *New Genres* (Anja Kirschner, 2018), emphasis is laid on the extent to which the effects produced by immersive gaming also significantly depend on the situatedness of players, and the way immersion itself is negotiated as a result, and thus can only partially be mediated and mitigated by game design.²¹ These early works thus led to the realisation that it was necessary to move away from working

¹⁹ For recent critical approaches see: Pasi Väliäho, "Emergent Present, Imagination, Montage, Critique," in *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), and D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013).

²⁰ David Golumbia, "Games Without Play," *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (2009): 189. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.0.0077>. "There must be colonizers and colonized, predators and prey, rulers and ruled; the thought of a world without hierarchy is, in computer game terms, the ultimate nightmare. The lust for power experienced by players of games like *WoW* is not merely abstract: it is directly and deliberately embedded in what looks much like our own Western view of modernity."

²¹ *Infra* Chapter I, 44-47.

exclusively with existing games and VR technology in order to develop an anamersive approach that exceeds their present aesthetic and technological tendencies and limitations, a conclusion that ultimately led to prioritising the subsequent practical and theoretical engagements with selected works by Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape. While continuing to incorporate critical approaches to gaming and VR that challenge the dominant mechanisms of engagement and the sentimental dispositions elicited by such media, a distinction is therefore made between approaches seeking to change immersive gaming primarily by providing “better narratives” (more nuanced content, greater diversity, focus on learning, and reflection on ethical conduct) and those approaches that instantiate “better navigation” (operating as much on the constitution of the player as on the way in which immersion itself is understood), keeping in mind that the two can be nested, frictional, and mixed.

Chapter II: On Being Hybridly Human

Chapter II delineates a theoretical framework for analysing what dimensions technology-dependent immersion could assume if it is not approached from a generic, normative player position, but rather from the position of an anomaly. It does so by expanding the definitions of technology, immersion, and genre through the writings of Sylvia Wynter, Louis Chude-Sokei, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Kyla Schuller, and situates them in a broader trajectory of critical discourses on the race, technology, and sex-gender, which think these categories and their differential effects through each other. Focusing on how binary sex-gender differentiation operates in the racialising schemes of colonial modernity as a marker of civilisational superiority, it considers the biocultural codes that produce and regulate the category “woman” within the genre *Man* and its materialisation in bodies as well as architectures.²² Through this move, the

²² Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 19. “Indeed, nineteenth-century biopolitical strategies precede the twentieth-century division between culture and biology. Mechanisms such as the domestic home were understood to work at the level

house (and, by extension, the maze, the asylum, and the prison) emerges as an immersive technology for producing and disciplining female sex-gender. Zürn's *House of Illnesses*, Acker's *Labyrinth*, and Heartscape's *Horror Mansions* target and mutate this conjunction from anomalous positions in relation to genre-mandated binary-sex gender, to which all three of them refuse to conform. Through my research-by-practice, *House*, *Labyrinth*, and *Horror Mansions* are further framed as three instances in which (the afterlife of) the domestic home as immersive technology meets the haunted house, the maze, and the dungeon as archetypal forms of immersive gaming architectures, establishing ways in which thinking about one can productively inform the other.

Accordingly, Chapters III, IV and V focus on the ways in which Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape map, navigate, and traverse their own immersion and entrapment in generic structurations, identity categories, and their management as sex-gender anomalies. Zürn indicates in several passages of her autobiographical novels that she struggles with identifying as "either man or woman" and instead wishes to be neither.²³ Acker builds up a "pirate" sex-gender outside the binary through her life and work.²⁴ Heartscape refers to themselves as "trashgender" and "dead

of the organic body, cultivating a common sensorial repertoire and moral life over the time of individuals and of generations."

²³ Unica Zürn, *Der Mann im Jasmin* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1982), 132. "Wie wohl wäre mir, könnte ich etwas sein, was weder Mann noch Frau sich nennen würde. Vielleicht würde ich dann zu mir oder zu Dir kommen? Ich habe meines Wissens weder vom Mann noch von der Frau zuviel bekommen, jedoch genug um es hinderlich zu empfinden. Meine zeitweisen Bemühungen, weder das eine noch das andere zu sein, führten zu keinem Ergebnis. Warum? Weil ich mich allein mit diesem problem beschäftigt habe. Allein habe ich wenig zu einem guten Ende gebracht. Niemand, mit dem ich darüber sprechen kann. Das heißt: kein Leidensgefährte. Denn nur er würde mich ermutigen, in diesen Bemühungen fortzufahren. Und das ist meine Ratlosigkeit." ("If I could be something that called itself neither man nor woman, how at ease I would be. Perhaps then I would arrive at myself or at you? To my knowledge, I got little from man or woman, however, enough to feel that it's a hindrance. My intermittent efforts to be neither the one nor the other led to no result. Why? Because I was dealing with this problem on my own. Alone, I have brought little to a good end. No one to talk to about it. That is, no companion in suffering. Because only he would encourage me to continue in this effort. And that is my perplexity." My translation.)

²⁴ For the most fully articulated version of this, see: Kathy Acker, *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 3.

swamp milf” as a way of speaking about “disposability from a trans fem perspective.”²⁵ This places all three to the side of available sex-gender categories and within changing definitions of their own. Crucially for the development of anamersion, these definitions are not static but mutable, arising from an ongoing processes of *figuration work* aimed at rewriting the biocultural codes running through their bodies and their language, and rupturing the cisheteropatriarchal norms that confine them. Significantly, Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape undertake this *figuration Work* by working in hybrid modes where text, image, and code operate on and mutate through each other. Through research-by-practice, I analyse and respond to the specific algorithmic, anagrammatic, and anamorphic operations by which they achieve this, and elaborate them for the postcinematic moving image. The term “algorithmic” is here used in the broader sense of pertaining to a set of instructions that can be executed repeatedly in different media, including drawing, writing, and (as it is understood more commonly today) computation.²⁶ The anagrammatic, as a mode of reordering the given letters of a word or sentence into a new word or sentence, thus attains an algorithmic dimension. Beyond the narrow definition of the anagram as a textual rearrangement, the anagrammatic here also refers to the rearrangement of any given set of elements into new combinations, which may exceed mere reordering and provide a passage into an altogether different order. The anamorphic is derived from the painterly technique of anamorphosis, a perspectival distortion of an image that requires the viewer to assume a specific position or use the aid of a curved, reflective surface to bundle an anamorphic image back into its undistorted resemblance.²⁷ The subject of anamorphic illusions

²⁵ Porpentine Charity Heartscape, “Hot Allostatic Load,” 11 May 2015. <https://thenewinquiry.com/hot-allostatic-load/>. Heartscape has since referred to themselves as nonbinary.

²⁶ Matteo Pasquinelli, “Three Thousand Years of Algorithmic Rituals: The Emergence of AI from the Computation of Space,” *E-Flux Journal*, no. 101 (Summer 2019).

²⁷ “Anamorphosis,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 6 June 2016. www.britannica.com/art/anamorphosis-art.

is frequently a portrait of a person, rendered as a colourful smear, which in turn is often integrated into a scene or landscape. In anamersive poetics, the anamorphic is not taken as an optical trick, but as an analogy for a shift from a privileged singular point of view to a *smear*d perspective that flattens figure and scene into one formation.²⁸ Both the anagrammatic and the anamorphic can be thought through the algorithmic as particular sets of instructions that activate processual logics which drive conventional ways of viewing and speaking to failure, enabling divergent forms of distributed vision and speech (including those emanating from the media itself).

Chapter III: Mapping Anamersion

Chapter III develops these concerns through an analysis of Unica Zürn's anagrammatic poetry and her drawing "Plan des Hauses der Krankheiten" ("Plan of the House of Illnesses"), which depicts her body and its institutionalisation as one formation, or *body-building*.²⁹ Through reordering organic and architectural elements, Zürn's "Plan" dissolves the opposition between interiority and exteriority, mapping bodies and environments as continuous and navigable. Zürn's related reordering of text in her anagrammatic poems, which she believed to have an oracular dimension, is considered as a generative method for making text *talk back* in ways that destabilise notions of the authorial voice. Through a close reading of a dream described in Zürn's *Notizen einer Blutarmen* (*Notes of an Anaemic*, originally composed in 1957), which features a creature that can "speak without a tongue" and "plan without a brain," Zürn's vision is connected to a differential conception of avatars and artificial life, situated in a longer

²⁸ Infra Chapter V, 116-117.

²⁹ Unica Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose Verlag, 1999).

gender/genre nonconforming history of envisioning life forms not bound by the strictures of binary sex-gender, and its anchoring in anatomy and biological reproduction.³⁰

Chapter IV: Navigating Anamersion

Chapter IV focuses on movement, orientation, and navigation. It does so with recourse to three aspects of Kathy Acker's work: her conception of texts as environments, rather than linear narratives; her related and repeated return to the motif of the labyrinth as the site where codes are made flesh; and her search for "languages of the body," which exist outside "ordinary language" and the rules it must obey to produce legitimate statements.³¹ Acker's *Labyrinth*, like Zürn's *House*, is both a site of entrapment in genre and a site where languages of the body and algorithmic processes may be mobilised to unsettle the grammar that perpetuates it. In Acker's deployment of languages of the body and Zürn's recourse to the anagrammatic, the passage from one order of meaning to another must pass through a point of failure of the authorial voice, in order to become generative or oracular. Through her physical practice of bodybuilding, which requires driving muscles to failure through repeated exercises, Acker articulates an expanded notion of generative failure as a method for altering a whole over a series of repetitions.³² Applied to her writing, this takes different forms, one of which is her textual appropriation of works of Western literature (and, to a lesser extent, cinema), and their differential repetition, which voids their emancipatory claims by bringing out the violence inherent in them and the literary canon as such.³³ My lecture performance *My A-C-K-E-R: Demonology* (Anja Kirschner,

³⁰ Unica Zürn, "Notizen einer Blutarmen," in *Unica Zürn: Gesamtausgabe: Prosa 3*, vol. 4.1, 5 vols (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose Verlag, 1991).

³¹ Kathy Acker, "Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body," in Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, eds., *The Last Sex* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1993), 20–28. doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22944-4_2.

³² Acker, "Against Ordinary Language."

³³ Kerstin Stakemeier, *Entgrenzter Formalismus: Verfahren einer Antimodernen Aesthetic* (Berlin: b_books, 2017), 277.

2018) focuses on Acker's appropriation of Dario Argento's horror movie *Suspiria* (1977) in her novel *My Mother: Demonology* (1993) and the problem of orientation in a setting dominated by violence and horror.³⁴ The performance lecture connects colonialism, capitalist crisis, debt, suicide, and femicide to narratives centred around generic notions of linear progress, sequential causality, and identity as self-possession, and explores how Acker's environmental texts unsettle the generic mechanisms by which a particular set of meanings is secured (while others are disavowed), and thus enables oriented movement in previously barred directions.

Chapter V: Interacting in Anamersion

Chapter V shifts attention to interactive games design, and the way in which language becomes increasingly navigational within it, tracking this phenomenon from early games design to the interactive fiction works of Porpentine Charity Heartscape. It returns to a consideration of dominant modes of interaction in technology-dependent immersion based on *ecological validity* and contrasts them with Heartscape's strategies for enabling "ecological interaction" with their game *With Those We Love Alive* (2014) and their multimedia novel *Psycho Nymph Exile* (2017).³⁵ What is summarily referred to as Heartscape's *Horror Mansions* are game architectures and environments for encountering and recalibrating traumatic events and patterns, which disrupt the mechanisms of temporal escape from and/or normalisation of trauma dominating mainstream game design and virtual reality exposure therapies (VRETs).

³⁴ Anja Kirschner, "My A-C-K-E-R: Demonology" (Kathy Acker: Get Rid of Meaning (exhibition & symposium), Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe, 2018. A text version of the lecture performance is published in Anja Casser and Mathias Viegner, eds., *Kathy Acker: Get Rid of Meaning* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2022).

³⁵ Dawn Chan, "Porpentine Charity Heartscape Talks about Her Works in the 2017 Whitney Biennial," 13 March 2017. www.artforum.com/interviews/porpentine-charity-heartscape-talks-about-her-works-in-the-2017-whitney-biennial-67067. "I do love games. I think about them all the time, and they inform a huge part of my aesthetic. But the game industry tries to make something that someone can play forever. What they're manufacturing is the promise that you will not have to consider the ruinous passage of time, if you just lock yourself inside a game. A lot of what I make is so janky and short, pretty directly about being trapped as time passes, marking away the days, so those pieces kind of invert and unsettle that structure. It's an unstable fantasy, it spits you back out and hopefully you had an interesting ecological interaction with it."

Heartscape's games and writing invert the curative passage from real to virtual event, widening it out and making it multidirectional, instead of narrowing it down to the point of closure.

Describing their games as being written from "a very dissociated perspective where the point of view is almost smeared into the environment," Heartscape opens an anamorphic perspective, which is transposed into postcinematic moving image in *UNICA* (Anja Kirschner, 2022).³⁶

Chapter VI: Anamersion

Chapter VI deepens the discussion of how anamersive navigation diverges from the forms of navigation associated with technology-dependent immersion, drawing on the insights gained from engagements with Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape. In the context of anamersion, navigation must be understood as *traversal*, crossing multiple dimensions. Multimedia installations such as *New Genres* and *UNICA* promote anamorphic ways of seeing that are multiple, distributed, and smeared, rather than emanating from a single point of view. In *UNICA*, drawings, moving image, animation, sound, and sculptural elements are conceived according to algorithmic and anagrammatic principles: patterns are generated and repeated with variations from one medium to another, driving medium-specific patternings of perception to failure over a series of mutational transpositions. Through this method, an anamersive coherence is established that holds open a space in immersion, enabling a dynamic form of figuration Work, or anamersive poetics, that attends to the hybridity of the virtual and physical, cultural and biological, running through and encoded in and as bodies and environments.

³⁶ Julie Muncy, "Porpentine's New Twine Game Isn't Just a Twine Game," *Wired*, 13 September 2017. www.wired.com/story/porpentine-twine-game/.

Chapter I: On Postcinematic Immersion

The proliferation of gaming and VR technologies has transformed moving image production in the twenty-first century, giving rise to postcinematic forms. The term “postcinematic” captures the reciprocal connections and overlaps between moving image, gaming, and VR, and other algorithmic media, as articulated in the definition of post-cinema established by Shane Denson and Julia Leyda:

Post-cinema is not just after cinema, and it is not in every respect “new,” at least not in the sense that new media is sometimes equated with digital media; instead, it is the collection of media, and the mediation of life forms, that “follows” the broadly cinematic regime of the twentieth century—where “following” can mean either to succeed something as an alternative or to “follow suit” as a development or a response in kind. ... Thus, post-cinema asks us to think about new media not only in terms of novelty but in terms of an ongoing, uneven, and indeterminate historical transition.¹

While cinema significantly shaped the perceptual dispositions and the imaginaries of the twentieth century, the increasing ubiquity of gaming and VR mutates cinematic logics and modulates the perceptual sensibilities and imaginaries of the early twenty-first century.²

Departing from a linear developmental account of the uneven transition from one media regime to another, *mutation* indicates that the crossover between cinema and gaming goes both ways. Immersive media such as gaming and VR do not replace moving image, whether in the form of

¹ Denson and Leyda, *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, 2.

² Pasi Väliäho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), 7. “If, as several philosophical studies have asserted, the silver screen defined the frame of mind, bodily dispositions, memories, desires, and sense of self of the twentieth-century observer, today’s digital screens materialise a relatively unparalleled set of perceptions, imaginations, and capabilities for observers in the twenty-first century. Our cerebral movies are now intermeshed with images performed in online video worlds, with viral videos that spread across the globe in an instant, and even with pantographic images that heat up the reality of contemporary wars, to name just a few. Many, if not all of these images take the form of computer-generated animations, which arguably imply a perceptual reality different from that implied by their cinematic and photographic predecessors. Furthermore, they are images that appear to be in several aspects distinguished by their action-oriented nature: images we interact with, play with, operate with; images that, like toys or instruments, require gestural manipulation and cognitive engagement based on anticipation and immersion rather than contemplation.”

cinema, TV, or artistic productions. Rather, moving image incorporates production and postproduction processes that are increasingly computational and aesthetically derivative of gaming, while games are becoming more cinematic, offering more engrossing and expansive worlds, greater naturalism in depiction, and more complex stories and characters. In turn, successful game franchises are adapted into movies and TV series. These convergences are driven by the entertainment industry, but also by consumers, amateurs, and artists.³ They find their expression in hybrid formats such as in-built video-recording functions in games and in *machinima*, which harnesses game engines for the production of moving-image content for others to watch.⁴ The proliferation of immersive technologies also extends beyond these more literal instances, seeping into the fabric of contemporary life and its technological mediation more broadly. The rise of immersive and algorithmic technologies and their associated modes of presentation sets a mood, a framework, and a model for interpreting the world and shaping the dispositions within it, which influences how current events are transmitted and perceived on a global scale and, as such, also has an impact on their unfolding and consequences.⁵ Immersive technologies such as gaming and VR thus also affect the lives of those who do not have access to them, or who choose not to interact with them directly. My-research-by-practice approaches this mutational shift and its wider implications through a consideration of mainstream gaming,

³ Artists working with games include David Blandy and Larry Achiampong, Danielle Braithwaite-Shirley, Jacky Connolly, and Zach Blas. See also the recent exhibition *Worldbuilding: Gaming and Art in the Digital Age*, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist at Stoscheck Collection, Düsseldorf, 2022, which brought together key artists in this field over the past decades.

⁴ <https://www.twitch.tv/>. As a response to a growing interest in *machinima*, popular gaming franchise Grand Theft Auto (GTA) introduced “Director Mode” in GTA5, which allows users to direct their own *machinima* videos using the GTA games engine.

⁵ Juho Hamari, “Gamification,” 2019. doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeos1321. Hamari distinguishes between two forms of gamification: “(1) *Intentional gamification*: where gamification is defined as an intentional process of transforming practically any activity, system, service, product, or organizational structure into one which affords similar positive experiences, skills, and practices as found in games.” And “(2) *Emergent gamification*: where gamification can be defined as a gradual and emergent, albeit unintentional, cultural and societal transformation stemming from the increased pervasive engagement with games and gameful interactions.”

the technological means by which content is delivered, and the fictional scenarios that dominate it, before looping back to the undertaking of modulating, unsettling, and rupturing immersive logics along anamersive lines. It does this through the video *Riley* (Anja Kirschner, 2018), made from recoded gameplay, and the site-specific VR installation *New Genres* (Anja Kirschner, 2018).⁶ Both works draw on *Call of Duty*, a massively popular FPS franchise that trades in historical and future-likely war scenarios, paradigmatic of a wider trend in survival-oriented gameplay, whose overriding narratives revolve around survival on a post-apocalyptic earth and the colonisation of space.⁷ Games of this kind perpetuate what have always been specifically Western and modern fantasies of civilisational supremacy, with their inherently catastrophic horizons staved off by the axiomatics of survival, competition, and limitless expansion.⁸ What makes gaming such a powerful vehicle for delivering, elaborating, and intensifying the violent thrust of Western and Westernised modes of *being/feeling/knowing* is its ability to produce immediate and visceral forms of sensory-motor immersion through the use of advanced computational technology that fuse organic, technological, and phantasmal registers with unprecedented force.⁹ Technology-dependent immersion in gaming and VR differs from immersion in other media, such as cinema and literature, where immersion is broadly defined as a form of temporal absorption in a fictional world. Research on immersion therefore distinguishes between two forms of immersion: immersion arising from an absorbing mental

⁶ Infra Chapter I, 44-47.

⁷ Popular post-apocalyptic game franchises include *PlayerUnknown's Battleground*, *Fortnite*, and *Fallout*. The colonisation of space is the subject of *Mass Effect*, *No Man's Sky*, and *Eve Online*, amongst many others.

⁸ Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 125–127. Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 29–31. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54822-7.

⁹ Sylvia Wynter frequently uses the phrase “being/feeling/knowing” to indicate the co-dependence of ontological, epistemological, and affective registers.

involvement and immersion produced by a technological system capable of overpowering the senses.¹⁰ By examining the differences between media-specific forms of immersion, as well as the hybrid formats resulting from their overlap, my research-by-practice seeks out anomalous convergences that unsettle rather than stabilise the generic forms of being/feeling/knowing promoted by mainstream gaming, and develops anamersion as a differential poetics of post-cinematic immersion through such anomalies.

Technology-dependent immersion

In twentieth-century film theory, immersion is equated with a sense of immediacy and loss of distance towards depictions on screen, in contrast to experiencing the screen as a window onto a scene one remains outside of.¹¹ Immersion thus betokens a perceived proximity to a fictional scenario accompanied by a diminished awareness of one's corporeal self and its physical surroundings.¹² In narrative cinema, absorption and imaginary projection into characters and scenarios remains passive in the sense that viewers are unable to alter the presentation and sequence of events unfolding on screen. In contrast, gaming and VR place immersants inside dynamic scenarios, which unfold in accordance with the actions they take within them. While narrative cinema relies on framing and montage to direct attention, gaming and VR typically present players with continuous, frameless environments, which have to be actively explored through navigation, and thus reveal themselves in accordance with the movements and the dynamically adjusting field of vision of player-controlled avatars. Privileging navigation over

¹⁰ Sarvesh Agrawal et al., "Defining Immersion: Literature Review and Implications for Research on Immersive Audiovisual Experiences" (New York: Audio Engineering Society, October 2019), 2.

¹¹ Nikolai Bockholt, "VR, AR, MR and What Does Immersion Actually Mean?," Think with Google, May 2017. www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/en-154/insights-inspiration/industry-perspectives/vr-ar-mr-and-what-does-immersion-actually-mean/.

¹² Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 13.

narration and montage, and modelling navigation in naturalistic gaming and VR environments on the way one perceives moving through the physical world, technology-dependent immersion capitalises on directly manipulating the sensory-motor and neurological mechanisms by which immersive simulations are more readily accepted by the brain as physical reality. At the same time, immersion in gaming and VR can have many additional facets. Game theorists Staffan Björk and Jussi Holopainen distinguish between four main aspects of immersion: sensory-motor immersion (absorption in a task requiring skill), cognitive immersion (absorption in a mentally challenging activity), emotional immersion (absorption in a story), and spatial immersion (absorption in the simulated environment).¹³ While these are not exclusive to gaming and VR, all of them are brought together with varying degrees of emphasis and unprecedented force within such media. Thus, technology-dependent immersion in VR and gaming is “frequently accompanied with spatial excess, intense focus, a distorted sense of time, and effortless action.”¹⁴ While moving image has been primarily conceptualised as a time-based medium, immersive gaming and VR can be said to have a privileged relationship to space, in ways that will become significant for anamersion and its investment in developing traversal forms of mapping, orientation, and navigation within immersion.

The instrumentalisation of presence

Giving the immersant the feeling of being physically present in a gaming or VR environment is called *telepresence*, or simply *presence*. Achieving presence is one of the main goals of immersive technologies. The sense of presence in games and VR simulations is generally associated with greater fidelity to naturalistic depiction, enhanced by technical features such as

¹³ Staffan Björk and Jussi Holopainen, *Patterns in Game Design* (Boston: Charles River Media, 2005), 206.

¹⁴ Mandeep Handa, Er. Gagandeep Aul, and Shelja Bajaj, “Immersive Technology: Uses, Challenges and Opportunities,” *Business Research*, 2012, 1.

high image resolution, wide field of view, fast refresh rates, and surround sound. As more lo-fi immersive experiences show, achieving presence cannot be defined in technical terms alone, as it remains tied to subjective perception.¹⁵ However, perception is more easily manipulated by immersive technologies than by other media, due to their ability to command most or all of the immersant's attention and field of vision. This is valid both for screen-based games, which dynamically adjust their framing to the user's navigational input via handheld controllers, and the more all-encompassing synthesis of simulated environment, field of vision, and bodily movement afforded by VR.¹⁶ The pursuit of ever-greater naturalism in depiction targets and impacts both conscious and nonconscious processes, which assimilate and integrate sensory information to produce a sense of one's body in space and time and anticipate imminent events based on pattern recognition, selectively feeding information to the higher levels of consciousness, which would otherwise be overwhelmed by the volume of information processed by the cognitive nonconscious.¹⁷ Therefore it is both compelling and imperative to analyse the intra-actions of organic, technological and phantasmal registers that arise through immersive gaming and VR. Games engines achieve naturalistic approximations to perceptual space by modelling simulated environments based on Euclidean geometry. Here, everything consists of mathematically calculable three-dimensional objects placed on a unifying perspectival plane whose trajectories extend towards a vanishing point on the horizon. Naturalistic games and VR simulations thus instantiate a Western representational model that emulates—but is not

¹⁵ Daniel Mestre, "Immersion and Presence," 2019. www.ism.univmed.fr/mestre/projects/virtual%20reality/Pres_2005.pdf.

¹⁶ Väliäho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain*, 74–75.

¹⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 27–28.

isomorphic with—perceptual space and the physical world as such.¹⁸ In doing so, they promote specific forms of figuration that are entrenched in objectification, calculation, and instrumentality.

As Char Davies writes:

3D computer graphic techniques, as commonly used in VR environments, tend to rely on 3D Euclidian geometric models, Renaissance perspective and the xyz coordinates of Cartesian space, all applied in a never-ending quest for visual realism. The resulting aesthetic/sensibility (what I call the "hard-edged-objects-in-empty-space" syndrome) reflects a dualist, objectifying interpretation of the world. When these techniques are combined with what have already become conventional methods of user interaction (such as hand-held joysticks, pointers, gloves, etc.) the effect—regardless of content—reinforces a particular way of being in the world in terms of mastery, domination and control. It is important to understand that virtual space is not neutral. The origins of the technology associated with it lie deep within the military and western-scientific-industrial-patriarchal complex.¹⁹

Ecological validity and trauma as life form

The capacity of simulated worlds to convey realness, at least on the level of immediate perception, is referred to as *ecological validity*. Ecological validity indicates that skills acquired through naturalistic simulations generally transfer well to the physical context.²⁰ The quest for ecological validity can be observed in an extreme form in the military utilisation of gaming and VR for combat training and strategic purposes, for which these technologies were originally developed.²¹ It also expresses itself in their subsequent uses for treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in war veterans with virtual reality exposure therapies (VRETs), as analysed in

¹⁸ Patrick Heelan, *Space-Perception and the Philosophy of Science* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1983), 247. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520908093>.

¹⁹ Char Davies, "Virtual Space," *Space: In Science, Art and Society*, 2004, 15–69.

²⁰ Alexis Paljic, "Ecological Validity of Virtual Reality: Three Use Cases," in *New Trends in Image Analysis and Processing – ICIAP 2017*, ed. Sebastiano Battiato et al., vol. 10590 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 301–10. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70742-6_28.

²¹ Dyer-Witford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, 7–8.

the work of Orit Halpern and Pasi Väliäho.²² In training as in therapy, achieving ecological validity is ostensibly directed towards real-world application, albeit, according to their analysis, in a foreshortened logic more concerned with tuning nonconscious cognitive responses than making narrative and ethical sense of combat situations and their wider context.²³ Väliäho and Halpern use the concrete example of *Virtual Iraq*, one of the most widely known VRET applications for war-induced PTSD, to argue for a link between trauma and neoliberal forms of subjectivisation more broadly. *Virtual Iraq* recreates combat situations experienced by Gulf War veterans in the field as customisable VR simulations. Its purpose is to repeatedly expose PTSD sufferers to the scene of their original trauma until the triggers for neurological stress responses become blunted. The traumatic event is thus gradually normalised until it no longer elicits automatic stress responses in the sufferer, and thus functionality—though not necessarily meaning—is restored. As Väliäho concludes in his analysis of *Virtual Iraq*, what is thus produced is not really a cure, but rather a normalisation of trauma, with implications that reach from the military context into the everyday. Ultimately, it is through the figure of the PTSD patient that Väliäho unlocks the logic of neoliberal subjectivisation more broadly:

Crucially, the traumatized PTSD patient represents the other side of the moving, adapting, and calculating biopolitical *subject*, *Homo economicus*. Indeed, because traumatic experiences entail change, deformation, and reformation, they are paradoxically emblematic of the adaptive, flexible, and constantly transforming individual. As fundamental marker of indetermination, trauma crystallises the basic neoliberal imperative that the subject always be ready to become something other than it was.²⁴

²² Orit Halpern, “The Trauma Machine: Demos, Immersive Technologies and the Politics of Simulation,” in Matteo Pasquinelli, ed., *Alleys of Your Mind: Augmented Intelligence and Its Traumas* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2015), 217.

²³ Väliäho, *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain*, 81. “In this context, images of explosions, attacks and death teach adaptation to catastrophic contingencies and a permanent state of crisis by “reprogramming” affects related to painful memories, by modulating those “reptilian” aspects of brain activity having virtually no connection to phenomena such as insight, understanding or planning for the future. There is no mention of the “moral of the story,” no questioning of what the patient saw or did – such issues are deemed irrelevant or even incomprehensible.”

²⁴ Väliäho, *Biopolitical Screens*, 84.

Väliaho demonstrates how the logic behind *Virtual Iraq*, VREs, and survival-oriented gaming in general is underpinned by contemporary neuroscientific approaches to the brain, which hold that emotions evolved as “biological functions of the nervous system,” originating in the evolutionarily prehuman, subcortical areas of the brain that operate beyond the immediate reach and control of higher cognitive functions such as self-consciousness, symbolisation, and language.²⁵ Immersive simulations of violent and traumatic events thus directly activate the nervous system’s survival mechanisms, triggering automated fear, fight, or flight responses. They thus command attention in immediate and visceral ways, calling up specific behavioural patterns, which are understood to originate in the evolutionarily older, or reptilian, parts of the brain that precede and circumvent modulation by culture.

Biocentricity vs. biocultural hybridity

The emphasis that such neo-Darwinian neuroscientific accounts place on the primacy of biology resonates with Wynter’s identification of a biocentric world view governing modern conceptions of the human as a *natural organism*, who *then* makes culture. While Wynter draws heavily on neuroscience and autopoietic conceptions of the brain, she unsettles the primacy given to biology in such accounts, emphasising the mutational character of biological and cultural processes that date back to the advent of language.²⁶ According to Wynter, the biocentric *origin narrative* occludes the *sociogenic* factor in human development as a way of securing the ongoing domination of the genre *Man*, against which she advances her theory of biocultural hybridity, or being hybridly human.²⁷ As Väliaho’s analysis of the convergence of trauma and

²⁵ Väliaho, *Biopolitical Screens*, 76–77.

²⁶ Wynter, “The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition,” 217.

²⁷ *Infra* Chapter II, 54–56.

neoliberal subjectivisation indicates, when thinking about the immersive conditions of contemporary life forms, Wynter's emphasis on the by now global imposition of generic Western modes of being and material provisioning needs to be thought not only in relation to their continuing dominance but also in relation to their present-day corrosion from within, as the axiomatic mandates of self-possession, limitless expansion, and evolutionary adaptation qua "survival of the fittest" become increasingly unattainable even for those ostensibly included in its exclusive definition of the human, *Man*.²⁸ Or, as Kerstin Stakemeier and Anselm Franke put it:

The liberal order is crumbling. The promise of individual self-realisation through labour and property it once offered is likewise disintegrating amidst a maelstrom of devaluation and unliveability, exposing the illiberal nucleus at the core of market-based freedoms: the unfreedom of the dispossessed. This crumbling of the liberal order lays bare the illiberal principles underlying its construction, which are based on centuries of colonial expansion and dispossession throughout the modern era.²⁹

Escapism and rewards in game worlds

It is precisely in the psycho-economic context of increasing socioeconomic precarity and environmental instability rebounding to the heart of Empire that immersive gaming leverages the contradictions arising from the circumstance that even though players may wish to comply with colonial, military, and neoliberal logics, their own lives are becoming increasingly disposable and untethered from the capacity to reproduce themselves in non-simulated reality. Acquiring and maintaining status in a game is often seen as compensation for struggling to do so in the AFK ("away from the keyboard") world.³⁰ The capacity of gaming to offer well-defined structures

²⁸ Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 324.

²⁹ Anselm Franke and Kerstin Stakemeier, eds., *Illiberal Arts*, PoLYpeN (Berlin: b_books, 2021), 232.

³⁰ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020), 30–31. "In 2011, the theorist Nathan Jurgenson presented his critique of "digital dualism," identifying and problematising the split between online selfhood and "real life." Jurgenson argues that the term IRL ("In Real Life") is a now-antiquated falsehood, one that implies that

of tasks and rewards within immersive fictional worlds, which feel more engaging than the players' life world's AFK, can result in intensified patterns of consumption and addiction and increased withdrawal from active participation in life outside the domain of gaming.³¹ The most recent, popular, and addictive internet games worldwide are expansive and open-ended massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), usually set in permanent worlds allowing for advancement and interaction with other players, reinforced by sophisticated AI.³² As David Golumbia argues in "Games Without Play," playing such games actually is more like working or being trained than playing:

I am suggesting that programs like *WoW* and *Half-Life* do not merely resemble the capitalist structures of domination but that they directly instantiate them and, in important ways, train human beings to become part of those systems.³³

The Subject, discursive vigilance, and the rewriting of knowledge

As the crisis of the liberal paradigm of self-possession and self-making and its illiberal flipside play out across figurations of the human, Wynter calls for an urgent overturning of the Western episteme and its mode of being:

...the rewriting of knowledge...towards which our growing irrelevance compels us, must necessarily entail the un/writing of our present normative defining of the secular mode of the Subject. Defining, rather than definition, because the latter does not exist as a reality except by and through our collective system of behaviors, systems which are

two selves (eg., an *online* self versus an *offline* self) operate in isolation from each other ... Jurgenson advocates for the use of AFK in lieu of IRL, as AFK signifies a more continuous progression of the self, one that does not end when a user steps away from the computer but rather moves forward out into society away from the keyboard."

³¹ May-li Seah and Paul Cairns, "From Immersion to Addiction in Videogames," *British Computer Society*, 2007.

³² Joel Billieux et al., "Internet Gaming Addiction: The Case of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games," in *The Textbook of Addiction Treatment: International Perspectives*, 2015, 1515–1525.

³³ David Golumbia, "Games Without Play," *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (2009): 194. doi.org/10.1353/nlh.0.0077.

themselves oriented by the ordering modes of knowing or epistemes of each human system.³⁴

This embattled Subject has not really disappeared after a century heralding the “death of the subject” and the “subjectless turn” in theory, because he is still here in praxis. As Denise Ferreira da Silva writes:

...the political significance of his death derives precisely from the ontoepistemological irrelevance of his death: the subject may be dead...but his ghost—the tools and the raw material used in his assemblage—remain with us.³⁵

The Subject lingers on and keeps re-emerging in new places, including subjectless theories themselves, demanding discursive vigilance. As Tiffany Lethabo King writes in “Humans Involved: Lurking in the Lines of Posthumanist Flight”:

The erasure of the (white) body-as-subject-as-ontology has been more effective in covering the bloody trail of white/human-self-actualization than it has been at successfully offering a way around and beyond the entrapments of liberal humanism.³⁶

This has two important consequences for thinking about technology and the human: first of all, before moving on to posthumanisms, what is meant by “human” needs to be defined.³⁷ And secondly, technology and artifice have to be considered in their capacity to unsettle rather than extend the self, challenging conceptions of technology as supplement and extension of the self,

³⁴ Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found,” 22.

³⁵ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxiii.

³⁶ Tiffany Lethabo King, “Humans Involved: Lurking in the Lines of Posthumanist Flight,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 178. <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.3.1.0162>.

³⁷ Alexander G. Weheliye, “After Man,” *American Literary History*, Twenty Years of American Literary History: The Anniversary Volume, 20, no. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 2008): 321–336.

which are predicated on modern, humanist notions of the self as self-possessed and self-making, and which carry over genre-specific definitions of the human and artifice as the latter's extension, into normative posthumanisms, with deadly consequences.³⁸ As Claire Colebrook writes:

If life is understood as that which extends itself through artifice, then we are left privileging a (predominantly) European mode of life that furthers and expands itself by co-opting and harnessing artifice for the sake of extension and self-maintenance. One becomes always other than oneself, always through an ever-renewable technology. This is the self of social life, where to be is to be an ever-flourishing individual for whom making is always self-making. [...] thinking about artifice as that which precedes and overturns (rather than extends) subjectivity has a series of direct implications.³⁹

Anamersive poetics is therefore not invested in the stabilisation of a self-possessed and self-making subjectivity (as coherent, rich, and autonomous inner life), but rather in accounting for the way artifice unsettles subjectivity. The task of anamersive poetics is then to find ways of mapping, navigating, and traversing immersion in life worlds dominated by generic structurations that run all the way through bodies, technologies, and environments. In doing so, anamersive poetics seeks to be in solidarity with Wynter's call for a "re-writing of knowledge" and its related "un/writing" of the Subject, conducted from positions that do not exist outside or at the threshold of current governing figurations of knowledge (what Wynter calls "demonic ground"), but are produced from anomalous positions situated within it.

³⁸ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism," ed. Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, Michael Lundblad, and Mel Y. Chen, *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013): 671–72, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement "Beyond the Human," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2 (June 2015): 215–18.

³⁹ Claire Colebrook, "All Life Is Artificial Life," *Textual Practice* 33, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 11–12. doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2019.1559478.

Phantasmal Media

In the realm of mainstream FPS gaming, with its overriding thematic focus on post-apocalyptic survival and the colonising of other worlds, the Subject continues to appear alive and well.⁴⁰ But it is also here that its mechanics, the construction of a coherent sense of self with a linear narrative trajectory, codified into game-design features such as navigation in the FPS perspective and in Euclidean space, appear most open to exposure and decoding. Since avatars and their worlds have to be computationally constructed and programmed through and through, games have the capacity to both reinforce and expose what Fox Harrell defines as *phantasms*, which encompass “cognitive phenomena including sense of self, metaphor, social categorization, narrative, and poetic thinking” and, as such, modulate or even determine the ways one perceives and operates within the world.⁴¹ Harrell has coined the term “phantasmal media” to indicate that computational media have a heightened capacity to both create *and* reveal phantasms, not least because they can create dynamic models of real-life scenarios and simulate how different user actions will impact them. In simplified terms, and speaking in reference to games, they can either reinforce generic ways of being/feeling/knowing or prompt players to consider their own dispositions as contingent on subjective world views, encouraging them to see self and world in plural and more complex and poetic ways.⁴² In this sense, Harrell’s research into computation and the imagination presents an inquiry into what Wynter terms codes-made-flesh, conducted primarily with regard to application through data structures, programming, and games design. While I draw on Harrell’s useful and broad definition of the

⁴⁰ Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, 80–84.

⁴¹ Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression*, 4–5.

⁴² Harrell, *Phantasmal Media*, 52.

phantasmal, the focus of my own research is more speculative, using moving image and drawing as methodologies for reimagining immersive technologies by other means.

Decoding and unsettling generic phantasms in *Riley* and *New Genres*

An understanding of how phantasms are prompted, reinforced, and put into operation in mainstream gaming constitutes an intermediary stage in imagining how they could be otherwise. In the early stages of this inquiry, I therefore engaged directly with mainstream gaming, selecting *Call of Duty (CoD)*, one of the most popular FPS franchises worldwide, as a point of entry.⁴³ Coming to the game with no prior exposure was a formative and confounding experience, which I documented and analysed by screen-recording my early gameplay. I selected *Call of Duty: Ghosts* (2013), which is set in a preposterous and apocalyptic future-likely war scenario: after the Middle East has been nuked, and the global balance of power shifts, a US Special Operations unit has to fight against an invading South American superpower behind enemy lines. It is played primarily from the avatar-perspective of one soldier, who is guided through the game by his brother and his father, who commands the unit, and additionally includes segments played as the non-human character Riley, a military-trained German Shepherd. I was intrigued by the inclusion of a non-human playable character, the first of its kind in the *CoD* series and highly popular with players, and the way it later came to resonate with reports that Trump awarded a medal of honour to a military dog involved in the raid that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019.⁴⁴ Though I cannot prove a link between

⁴³ *Call of Duty* is second on this chart of best-selling video game franchises worldwide: Statista, "Best-Selling Video Game Franchise Worldwide as of December 2021, by Unit Sales," accessed 20 October 2022. www.statista.com/statistics/1247964/best-selling-video-gaming-franchises/.

⁴⁴ Katie Rogers, "Trump Shares Photo of 'Wonderful' Dog in ISIS Raid, but Not a Name," *The New York Times*, 28 October 2019. www.nytimes.com/2019/10/28/us/politics/trump-baghdadi-dog-conan.html. For a particularly gamic account of the raid itself, see also: Glenn Swann et al., "Visual Guide to the Raid That Killed Isis Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," *The Guardian*, 31 October 2019. www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/28/visual-guide-to-the-raid-that-killed-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi.

the popularity of *CoD*'s Riley and the decision to publicly give an award to a military dog at the White House, it is well documented that franchises like *Call of Duty* actively push exchange between the entertainment and military-industrial complexes. *CoD* does so by incorporating real-existing weapon designs and trading in future-likely conflict scenarios, which are based on mutual consultations between game creators, weapons manufacturers, and military personnel.⁴⁵ As my recoded gameplay documents, my own entry into the game was neither smooth nor characterised by instant integration into the world of *CoD* and its axioms; rather, it was both alienating and hilarious to find myself addressed as a male soldier and botch my way through the game in a manner that got my avatar swiftly and repeatedly killed. As a consequence, I gravitated towards the non-combat segments of the game and tried to remain in them for extended periods, dwelling in the transitory vestibules prior to the main action, where the game animations go on loop after a short interval, because players are neither expected nor encouraged to linger.

Riley

In the video *Riley* (Anja Kirschner, 2018), I use the FPS perspective of my soldier-avatar as a kind of camera through which to observe Riley the dog sniffing around in the antechamber of a military control centre in a preprogrammed loop, and to record my avatar getting stuck on walls and doorframes, not yet comfortable with this body and its navigation [see **Figure 1, 49**]. By dwelling in a space in which playing a game and making a video coincide with each other, a dense and complicated experience of immersion unfurls. On the one hand, the extent to which the quality of this experience is determined by the constitution and intentions of players, and the

⁴⁵ Keith Stuart, "Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare: 'We Worked with a Pentagon Adviser,'" *The Guardian*, 28 August 2014. www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/aug/28/call-of-duty-advanced-warfare-pentagon-adviser. Simon Parkin, "Call of Duty: Gaming's Role in the Military-Entertainment Complex," *The Guardian*, 22 October 2014. www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/22/call-of-duty-gaming-role-military-entertainment-complex.

way immersive environments, even the most naturalistic and generic ones, are negotiated as a result becomes palpable. On the other hand, the discrepancy between actively playing a game and passively re-watching the recorded gameplay reveals how forceful and immediate technology-dependent immersion is on a perceptual level, regardless of the scenario or one's own disposition. While active gameplay unites and perceptually blends disparate visual elements, such as jumping between wide-angle and gunsight mode and overlaid graphics of navigational maps, weapons caches, and scores, recorded videos of gameplay appear jerky and visually incoherent, exposing imperfections and flaws in the game animations and drawing the eye to background detail.

In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander Galloway extensively discusses the origins of FPS games, reflecting on how the seemingly uncomplicated egocentric naturalism associated with the FPS perspective in gaming and VR follows on a cinematic history in which its equivalent, the subjective shot, has been closely associated with difficulty in seeing, dissociation, and monster-vision.⁴⁶ Due to the action-based nature of gaming versus passive spectatorship in cinema, gaming succeeds in unlocking the full identificatory potential of the subjective shot. As Galloway writes

Where film uses the subjective shot to represent a problem with identification, games use the subjective shot to create identification. While film has thus far used the subjective shot as a corrective to break through and destroy certain stabilizing elements in the film apparatus, games use the subjective shot to facilitate an active subject position that enables and facilitates the gamic apparatus.⁴⁷

In my later multimedia installation *UNICA* (Anja Kirschner, 2022), I work extensively with camera

⁴⁶ Galloway, *Gaming*, 46, 50.

⁴⁷ Galloway, *Gaming*, 69.

techniques and cinematography to capture and exploit the shifting convergences of computational, gamic, and cinematic ways of seeing in order to attenuate the generative detachments from identification with a single and stable subjective point of view produced by them, thus gradually building up an anamersive poetics of postcinematic immersion.

New Genres

My subsequent work, the site-specific VR installation *New Genres* (Anja Kirschner, 2018), was made for an exhibition space situated in a former WWII bunker in Nuremberg.⁴⁸ I decided to construct an exact copy of this space as a VR environment in the games engine *Unity*, with the assistance of a 3D designer and a programmer, to gain a better insight into the design and production processes of VR environments. I kept the elements simple so that both I and later viewers of the work would be able to correlate the virtual and physical space occupied by *New Genres* and observe how perception of the physical space and its surroundings was altered by the passage through its virtual replica. In the choreography of the installation, viewers are led through the physical space of the bunker before arriving at the VR simulation, in which a canine avatar based on Riley can be seen circulating through the bunker from a point of view located just behind and slightly above its head, fusing FPS and third-person perspective [see **Figure 2 and Figure 3, 50**]. The digital rendering of the physical space is based on Euclidean geometry, but also includes teleporting the canine avatar through virtual tunnels, marked in black tape on the walls of the exhibition space. Teleporting is one of the most used and effective ways to challenge stable spatial perception and is here used to suggest that a non-Euclidean tunnel system surrounds and extends beyond the bunker architecture. This is kept deliberately simple, repetitive, and visually uncluttered as a way of training the viewers to acclimatise themselves to the coexistence of different, geometrically incompatible spatial regimes that are nevertheless

⁴⁸ <https://kunstbunker-nuernberg.org/anja-kirschner/>

given continuity and coherence through the AI-controlled movement of the avatar, which is spat back out into the bunker through a different exit points at each turn. As viewers exit the exhibition, they are able to collect two texts written by the art historian Kerstin Stakemeier and myself. The texts address the postwar reconstruction of Nuremberg's historic city centre, which replicated Nazi-era architectural interventions aimed at consolidating a fabricated *altdeutsche* past and called attention to manifestations of fascism in the structures of contemporary architectural and social spaces. Exiting the exhibition space, viewers find themselves back in a large square surrounded by buildings ranging from the reconstructed medieval city walls to modern office blocks. In *New Genres*, a deliberate and carefully calibrated use of VR is thus put in the service of denaturalising habitual ways of perceiving and moving through physical space, sensitising viewers to the artificial codifications that saturate seemingly natural and historic environments. This approach is then further developed in *UNICA* (Anja Kirschner, 2022), where the focus shifts from third-person animation to motion-capture technology as another means of correlating physical and virtual movements in space.

After developing anamersive poetics through an engagement with technology-dependent immersion in mainstream gaming and VR environments, my research branches out in three related directions. It exploits the shifts and slippages produced by technology-dependent immersion and enhances them in the context of postcinematic moving image and multimedia installation. It looks to examples of immersive environments and their mapping and navigation in computational and non-computational media, and the way these can productively inform each other. It draws on a theoretical framework that is not exclusively trained on immersive technologies, such as gaming and VR, but rather on the underlying conventions and codifications that have gone into the development of such media and their modes of representation. It does so because contrasting mainstream game design with more critical

approaches does not sufficiently define the difference between generic forms of immersion and what I name anamersion, which requires a broader and more fluid conception of immersion and the algorithmic, not exclusively limited to computational media as they exist today. Drawing on approaches that challenge the dominant mechanisms of engagement, aesthetics, and sentimental dispositions elicited by the phantasmal media of gaming and VR put forward by Harrell, Väliaho, Golumbia, and others, I distinguish between approaches seeking to change immersive gaming primarily by providing “better narratives” (more nuanced content, greater diversity, focus on learning and reflection on ethical conduct) and what I term “traversal navigation” (which depends as much on the constitution of the player as on the ways in which immersion itself is understood), keeping in mind that the two modes can be nested, frictional, and mixed. Combining Harrell’s notion of phantasmal media with Wynter’s theory of being hybridly human establishes a framework for analysing how the genre *Man* is encoded in immersive gaming and VR, making them privileged media for replicating, but also for disrupting, what Wynter calls biological and sociogenic replicator codes. With these disruptive ends in mind, I analyse the differential ways of mapping, navigating, and traversing immersion proposed by the body-buildings of Unica Zürn, Kathy Acker, and Porpentine Charity Heartscape. In refiguring biocultural hybridity and technology-dependent immersion through these examples, anamersive poetics focuses on the dimensions immersion can assume, *if it is not approached from a generic, normative subject position, but rather from an (gender) anomaly within it*, such as the *House of Illnesses* pace Zürn, the *Labyrinth* pace Acker, or the *Horror Mansion* pace Heartscape.

Illustrations (Chapter I)



Figure 1: Anja Kirschner, "Riley," 2018, video. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2: Anja Kirschner, "New Genres," 2018, exhibition view at Kunstbunker, Nuremberg. Photographer: Johannes Kersting. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3: Anja Kirschner, "New Genres," 2018, screenshot of the VR simulation. Courtesy of the artist.

Chapter II: On Being Hybridly Human

This chapter lays out a theoretical approach to the intra-actions of the organic, technological, and phantasmal specific to anamersion, anchored in Sylvia Wynter's theory of being hybridly human, alongside texts by Louis-Chude Sokei and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, which engage with Wynter and extend her project, as well as Kyla Schuller's related writing on impressibility. These related approaches analyse post-Enlightenment conceptions of the human and of technology as specific instantiations of Western logics and imaginaries and unsettle their over-representation through critical race theory, Black feminism, and Black technopoetics. Through these theoretical engagements, the cultural codes and technologies for producing binary sex-gender and the category woman in the genre *Man* emerge in their historical relation to the racialising regimes of colonial modernity and more specifically also in their historic relation to the house as an immersive technology for shaping female sex-gender. The (afterlife of) the house is thus conceived in relation to a more expansive notion of technology and immersive environments more broadly, positing Zürn, Acker and Heartscape's body-buildings as anamersive figurations that map the mutational convergence of material and cultural processes and time.

Caribbean Pre-Posthumanism

In *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (2016), Louis Chude-Sokei makes a compelling case for bringing Wynter's thought to bear on contemporary questions of technology, arguing that the most incisive thinking on technology and the human can be located in Latin American and Caribbean traditions "where blending, hybridity, and catalysis have been primary theoretical models for generations."¹ Delineating the intertwined histories of race and

¹ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture*, 18.

technology, and drawing on Sylvia Wynter, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Wilson Harris, Chude-Sokei develops the notion of a *Caribbean pre-posthumanism*, arguing that an overemphasis on techno-organic mixing as identifier of the posthuman—as was pervasive in cyberpunk, cybertheory, and cyberfeminism in the wake of Donna Haraway’s influential essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1984)—underestimates the fact “that notions of hybridity and blending between human and machine are actually dependent on earlier ideas about miscegenation between human (white) and animals/machines (blacks).”² While Haraway’s manifesto dated the boundary breach between human and animal to late-twentieth-century American scientific culture, for Wynter this breach dates back to the emergence and articulation of the category “human” within colonial modernity. Chude-Sokei’s research thus opens up ways of unsettling the modern conception of the human and, with it, that of technology as a universal, racialised marker of civilisational superiority and white supremacy.³ Extended into the present, Chude-Sokei’s investigation into the intertwined histories of race and technology counteracts white posthumanisms in which technology and AI are framed as augmenting and overcoming the biologically human, without sufficiently questioning the grounds on which both the human and the technological are defined, thus extending one through the other without breaking the colonial logic underlying both.

Genres of the Human

Modern, universalist, and racialising conceptions of technology and linear technological progress, and the way they are used to hierarchically divide humankind, correspond to what Wynter identifies as a *genre*-specific conception of the human: *Man*. According to Wynter, the

² Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture*, 17.

³ Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture*, 82.

genre *Man* emerged from Enlightenment humanism's secular conception of the human as "natural man," a rational being, subject to the state (what Wynter refers to as *Man 1*), and its mutation into *Homo economicus*, a biological and economic being competing for survival (or *Man 2*).⁴ Wynter contrasts the genre *Man* with other genres the human, and analyses the mechanisms by which it has come to *over-represent* itself globally as if it were isomorphic with the human itself.⁵ In Wynter's analysis, each genre of the human is underwritten by its order's behaviour-regulating *master code* of *symbolic life/symbolic death*. In the case of the modern definitions of the human, this master code mutated from *rational/irrational (Man 1)* to *selected/dysselected (Man 2)* based on Darwinian notions of natural selection. What distinguishes the modern genre of the human, *Man*, from other genres of the human, is that it over-represents itself via its biocentric definition of the human, which projects its intra-human form of by now global domination onto the extra-human agency of nature and, subsequently, of evolution.⁶ Conflating notions of evolutionary biology with economic competition and Malthusian narratives of natural scarcity and overpopulation, the genre *Man* promotes a *monohumanism*,

⁴ Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 318.

⁵ Wynter is here in dialogue with Foucault's thought and expands it by fully developing the colonial dimension of post-Enlightenment conceptions of the human. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 421–422. "One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area – European culture since the sixteenth century – one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it. It is not around him and his secrets that knowledge prowled for so long in the darkness. In fact, among all the mutations that have affected the knowledge of things and their order, the knowledge of identities, differences, characters, equivalences, words – in short, in the midst of all the episodes of that profound history of the *Same* – only one, that which began a century and a half ago and is now perhaps drawing to a close, has made it possible for the figure of man to appear."

⁶ Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition," 228–229. "Within the terms of the first Civic-humanist cosmogony, the West had mapped its reprojected human agency onto the extra-human agent of Nature/Human Nature. While the second Liberal-humanist reprojected human agency had been mapped onto the extra-human agent of Evolution, as defined within the terms of Charles Darwin's bio-cosmogonic charter in his bourgeois origin narrative, *The Descent of Man* (1871). Both forms of reprojected human agency were to have specific consequences. For one, they served to charter the secular West's two sociogenic replicator codes enacting of each form of Man (as the incarnation of symbolic life) and of its Human Others (as the embodiment of symbolic death)."

which operates hierarchically along what W. E. B. Du Bois conceptualised as the colour line, with blackness being placed at the threshold to the non-human and projected as the constitutive “chaos” against which the order defines itself, in addition to ranking humanity according to economic fitness, assigning vast numbers of the global population to dysselected, *less-than-human* status (Frantz Fanon’s *les damnés*). Opposing the monohumanism of the genre *Man* in her essay “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument” (2003), Wynter writes:

...all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth’s resources... – these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle.⁷

Wynter thus identifies the dissolution of the genre of *Man* as an urgent undertaking, since the atrocities and catastrophes accompanying its post-1492 expansion to the present are inherent to its logic.⁸

Being hybridly human

For Wynter, the mutational shift that needs to be effected to end the genre *Man* is comparable to (and in excess of) the shift set in motion by the founding heresy of humanism, which turned Man from the subject of God to the subject of the State, a secularisation effected under the pressure of the Copernican Revolution and the rise of the natural sciences. It is with recourse to

⁷ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” 260–261.

⁸ Similar lines of argument are also laid out in Nicolas Mirzoeff, “It’s Not the Anthropocene, It’s the White Supremacy Scene; or, the Geological Color Line,” in *After Extinction*, 123–149, 2018; Dana Luciano, “The Inhuman Anthropocene,” in *Avidly*, 22 March 2015., <https://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2015/03/22/the-inhuman-anthropocene/>; Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

Fanon's singular insight in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) that "[b]eside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny" that Wynter seeks to affect the new heresy of being hybridly human, which insists that humans are not natural organisms that then make culture, but hybrid entities, constituted by the intra-actions between the biological and the stories they tell about themselves.⁹ As Wynter writes,

...our "stories" are as much a part of what makes us human – of our being human as the imperatively artificially co-identifying, eusocial species that we are – as are our bipedalism and the use of our hands. This is necessarily so, then, as a function of the Event of the origin of our specifically human mode of living being as a hybrid biological and meta-biological species. And as such a species, our behaviors are no longer solely determined by laws regulatory of purely biological life, but also by laws of auto-institution specific to our also third level of existence.¹⁰

Defining the human on the biocentric model of the natural organism is thus positioned as a cosmologically specific *origin narrative* through which the genre *Man* projects collective agency onto the extra-human agency of nature and evolution, obscuring humans' capacity to affect their hybrid, biocultural constitution, since the advent of language and symbolic thinking, or what Wynter refers to as the Third Event.¹¹ Wynter's contention that what presents itself as "nature" and "instinct" may be based on differential reprogramming via culture, or code-made-flesh, powerfully disrupts what Väliäho identified as contemporary, neo-Darwinian discourses on the brain, in which culture is but the top layer over an older, reptilian, formation geared towards purely biological survival at all costs.¹² It does so not by erasing the difference between the

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 4.

¹⁰ Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtun, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition," 217.

¹¹ Wynter, "The Ceremony Found," 217.

¹² Supra Chapter I, 37.

biological and metabiological levels of existence, but by bringing the biological within reach of the metabiological.¹³ In order to exit from the genocidal and planetary destructive domination of the biocentric monohumanism of the genre *Man* via the new heresy of biocultural hybridity, Wynter calls for a New Studia, inspired by Aimé Césaire's vision of poetic knowledge in which "the study of the word will condition the study of nature."¹⁴ This New Studia would not merely constitute *another* science, on the mode of existing sciences, but develop a new conception of knowledge outside the governing order and its related epistemes. As such it would make possible, so Wynter says, the "extra-territoriality of our self-cognition," or conceiving of *being human as praxis*, rather than noun, beyond the mechanisms of cognitive closure through which genres of the human stabilise and reproduce themselves. As Wynter writes

...the telos of the Ceremony Found's *New Studia*, whose hybrid study of the Word/*ordo verborum* as non-linearly and intricately calibrated with the study of nature/*ordo naturae* ... will be that of the functioning of the human brain's natural-opioid behavior-regulatory system ... itself lawlikely activated in the terms of the specific positive/negative system of meanings of each pseudo-speciating genre of being human's sociogenic replicator code, then implemented as a living entity as that of the *code-made-flesh*. This telos will therefore call for its praxis of the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn to function in a hitherto unsuspected, trans-disciplinary, trans-epistemic, trans natural-scientific cum trans-cosmogonic modality. Such a new order of knowledge, Césaire insisted, exists as one which "only poetry" – *its technē* of functioning and new "gravity of language" (Livingston, 2006) ... "can give an approximate notion of" (Césaire, 1996)¹⁵

¹³ Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, 163. "In contrast to a biocentric view of the species, Wynter argues, "We can experience ourselves as human *only* through the mediation of the process of socialization affected by the invented *tekhne* or cultural technology to which we give the name culture" ... In other words, the technology that is culture, Wynter argues, is evolutionarily significant such that with the emergence of semantic technologies humans gained a technology that developed the power to direct the specific terms of the nervous system's order of perception and categorisation, harness its drives to its now culturally defined sociogenetic own, and even override the genetic-instinctual sense of self where necessary, activating, by their semantic reprogramming, the opioid system (reward and punishment) in culture-specific terms *as if it were instinct*."

¹⁴ Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry 1946-82* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1990), xlix.

¹⁵ Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition," 245.

Wynter thus proposes a type of study that would bring together heterogeneous disciplines, and at the same time transform them beyond their current state, suspending and refiguring their knowledge claims with recourse to the poetic.

The auto of poesis

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson departs from Wynter's focus on neuroscience of the brain and her stress on the *autonomy* of human agency in ways that extend the poetic *figuration work* also called for by Wynter's project.¹⁶ As Jackson writes in "Organs of War: Measurement and Ecologies of Dematerialization in the Works of Wangechi Mutu and Audre Lorde":

I want to push her [Wynter's] theory of sociogeny beyond an exclusive focus on the nervous system and problematize the question of the "auto" of poesis by reinscribing the embodied self as a kind of openwork produced by a lattice of agencies rather than primarily self-authored closed system.¹⁷

Jackson does so through a consideration of Mutu's *Histology of the Different Cases of Uterine Tumors* and Lorde's *Cancer Diaries*, which focuses on the complex ways in which antiblack racism comes to be embodied in gynaecological carcinogenesis, which disproportionately affects Black women.

For Lorde breast cancer is not simply a matter of malignant and recalcitrant cells; it is that, but it is also a physical index of patterned social relations that pollute physical, psychological, environmental and social worlds.¹⁸

Expanding on Achille Mbembe's theorisation of necropolitics, Jackson demonstrates how, in the example of gynaecological carcinogenesis, Black women's bodies become war zones "such that

¹⁶ Wynter, "The Ceremony Found," 244.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, 163.

¹⁸ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 191.

the distinction between the body and war's weaponry no longer rests on a solid boundary between human subjectivity and external environment."¹⁹ Jackson's engagement with Wynter and her elaboration of the embodied self as *openwork* resonates strongly with Unica Zürn's conception of the *House of Illnesses*, and expands it by bringing into focus how antiblack racism ruptures and mutates sex-gender along the colour line.

Gender as function of genre and sex as function of race

Wynter understands the mutual imbrications of genre and gender as constitutive of each mode of being human:

...the shared etymological roots of both terms, genre and gender, need to be recognized as the non-arbitrary ones that they are, given that in all human orders the narratively mandated gender roles are everywhere a central function of the enacting of our no less narratively instituted genres or modes of being human (...) the noun "Man" now also functions as an ostensibly neutral and universal term, whose real-life referent categories are imagined to include, at the level of gender, all women as well as all men (thereby transforming the latter into the generic sex); at the level of class, all classes (thereby making the Western and westernized members of the bourgeoisie into the generic class); at the level of sexual preference, all sexual preferences (thereby making heterosexual preference into the generic preference); and, at the level of "race" or human hereditary variations, together with their genres of being human being classified as "cultures" and "religions," all such "races," their hereditary variation and genres or "cultures"/religions, thereby making the Indo-European race or hereditary variation into the generic "race."²⁰

Reading Wynter with Kyla Schuller's work on how binary sex was consolidated in the nineteenth century as a *function* of race makes it possible to substantiate the ways in which binary sex-gender continues to operate in the racialising schemes of colonial modernity, as well as to

¹⁹ Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 205.

²⁰ Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project," in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African American Studies in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2006), 130–131.

challenge the morphological dimorphism which Wynter sees as operating across all population groups and genres of the human.²¹ Where Wynter stresses the biocentricity of the genre *Man* in almost sole reference to Darwinian theories of evolution, Schuller argues that recent scholarship increasingly points to how nineteenth-century Western discourses on sex and race were less biologically deterministic than they have been cast:

Rather, race and sex functioned as biopolitical capacities of impressibility and relationality that rendered the body the gradual product of its habit and environment, differentially positioning the claims of individuals and races for belonging in the nation state.²²

Stressing the influence of Lamarck on nineteenth-century discourses about human evolution, Schuller argues that there existed a “palimpsestic model of race before genetics.”²³ According to this model, the capacity to receive impressions, retain them, and change as a result of them was posited as a particular quality of the “civilised” body. However, impressibility also signalled the vulnerability of the “civilised” body and thus required stabilisation through a *new* concept of binary sex difference. As Schuller writes:

Sex served to balance somatic vulnerability of the impressible races by dividing the civilised body into two halves: the sentimental woman, who possessed both a heightened faculty of feeling and a more transparent animal nature, and the less susceptible and more rational men, thereby relieved from the burdens of embodiment.²⁴

Nineteenth-century discourse on sex-gender could therefore be described as a racialising figuration of the human in which binary sex-gender differentiation is considered as a particular

²¹ Wynter, 117–19. For an extended discussion on this point, see also: Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 40–41.

²² Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, 5–6.

²³ Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 12.

²⁴ Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 16.

achievement of Western population groups. In this palimpsestic model of race, biocentricity is maintained, not via an exclusive focus on biological determinism, but through the spectre of the re-emergence of an animal substrate, which can only be tempered but never fully eradicated by culture. To safeguard against this vulnerability, woman is cast as sentimental and impressible *by nature*, from which man, as the generic sex-gender, can differentiate himself *through reason*. According to Schuller, as well as Wynter and Jackson, denaturalising the dominance of the genre *Man* requires the elaboration of accounts of the “coconstitution of material and cultural processes over time,” which they approach through the frameworks of biopolitics (Schuller), biocultural hybridity (Wynter), and antiblackness (Jackson).²⁵ Here, organic, technological, and phantasmal processes are thought in their historical and geographical situatedness and mutational convergence, with emphasis on the ways in which they materialise in and as specific environments and bodies.

The House as a technology of shaping female sex-gender under the genre *Man*

Unica Zürn's *House of Illnesses*, Kathy Acker's *Labyrinth* and Porpentine Charity Heartscape's *Horror Mansion* can thus be understood as concrete examples of how such mutational convergences are figured through drawing, writing, and games design from anomalous sex-gender positions within the genre *Man*. Zürn's *House of Illnesses*, in which her body and its institutionalisation appear as one formation, Kathy Acker's *Labyrinth* as the site where codes are made flesh, and Porpentine's *Horror Mansion* “as a central all-encapsulating landscape, a kind of residential wilderness where all dramas and follies can play out to their most fermented conclusion” all have a non-arbitrary relation to the (afterlife of the) house, and by extension the hospital and the maze, as *immersive technologies* for shaping female sex-gender under the

²⁵ Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, 27.

genre *Man*, with technology here understood in the broader sense of cultural technology.²⁶

As Schuller writes,

Mechanisms such as a domestic home were understood to work at the level of the organic body, cultivating a common sensorial repertoire and moral life over the time of individuals and generations.²⁷

This connection was already well understood and targeted by feminists in the nineteenth century, giving rise to, amongst other movements, the “Grand Domestic Revolution,” which sought to transform the material conditions of women in North America by intervening in domestic architectures and urban design along feminist principles.²⁸ Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape’s body-buildings testify to their antagonistic relationship with domestic, mythical, and institutional architectures, and the particular ways in which these instantiate and perpetuate generic norms, which manifest in several, linked forms: in Zürn they primarily present as pathologising discourses on “female disorders,” which she reframes as “detective fiction,”²⁹ in Acker, as the male-dominated Western literary canon and its obsession with “finding one’s voice”,³⁰ and in Heartscape in the ways in which generic violences are enshrined in many anime and gaming worlds.³¹ Their approaches thus open up connections between literary and popular genres and the ways of being/feeling/knowing particular to the genre *Man*, which they associate with a range of violent and deadly operations, from the familial to the eugenic and genocidal. By

²⁶ Porpentine Charity Heartscape, “Dumb Drawings,” Patreon, *Porpentine Are Creating EVERYTHING* (blog), 25 January 2019. www.patreon.com/posts/dumb-drawings-24207171.

²⁷ Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, 19.

²⁸ Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighbourhoods and Cities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982).

²⁹ *Infra* Chapter III, 67-68.

³⁰ *Infra* Chapter III, 75.

³¹ *Infra* Chapter V, 113-114.

figuring their bodies not merely *inside* buildings, but as hybrid body-buildings, Zürn, Acker, and Porpentine attend to the organic, phantasmal, and technological intra-actions through which something like (their) bodies and (their) environments are formed, providing specific mappings of immersion, hybridity, and hacking code-made-flesh. Each body-building thus produces its own poetic account of “the coconstitution of material and cultural processes over time” or, to be more precise, the mutational convergence of material and cultural processes *and* time.³² In Zürn’s *House Of Illnesses*, temporality is unformed, only distinguishable as “immutability” and “constant changes,” of which she chooses the latter;³³ in Acker’s iteration of the labyrinth as “straight myth” it is the construction of linear time itself that secures entrapment,³⁴ which Acker traverses by *substituting space for time*,³⁵ while in Porpentine’s games set in *Horror Mansions* temporality manifests as an *ecology* of the repetitive looping of trauma and the making perceptible of the “ruinous passage of time,” as opposed to mainstream games designed to keep players in immersive flow states.³⁶

When read through an expanded notion of technology as cultural technology and of biocultural hybridity, the *House of Illnesses*, *Labyrinth*, and *Horror Mansion* can be understood as prefiguring, in the case of Zürn and Acker, and refiguring, in the case of Heartscape, the postcinematic and navigational logic of immersive gaming and VR, and at the same time

³² Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, 27.

³³ Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

³⁴ Kathy Acker, “Moving into Wonder,” in *Bodies of Work* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1997), 97.

³⁵ Kathy Acker, “My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini,” in *Literal Madness* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 246.

³⁶ Chan, “Porpentine Charity Heartscape Talks about Her Works in the 2017 Whitney Biennial.”

disrupting and exceeding it. With these disruptive and excessive ends in mind, Chapters III, IV, and V analyse the particular ways of mapping, navigating, and traversing that Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape develop through their immersive body-buildings, and rethink technology-dependent immersion through them *and* Wynter, in order to arrive at an anamersive poetics.

Chapter III: Mapping Anamersion

Unica Zürn's drawing "Plan des Hauses der Krankheiten" ("Plan of the House of Illnesses") maps a body and a building as one. It serves as an entry point into anamersion, by providing a model for figuring immersion not as the absorption of an immersant in an immersive environment, but as a more totalising and simultaneously also more dispersed process. The possibilities and limitations of mapping, navigating, and traversing such a formation are developed through a close examination of Zürn's "Plan" and an engagement with it through a series of drawings entitled *SKINS* (Anja Kirschner, 2020) and *PATTERNS* (Anja Kirschner, 2021). Through combining features of "Plan" with elements derived from postcinematic production processes, anamersive poetics is established as algorithmic, anagrammatic, and anamorphic approaches that interfere with the reproduction of generic biocultural codes.

Plan of the House of Illnesses

The drawing "Plan of the House of Illnesses" forms part of Zürn's book *Das Haus der Krankheiten* (*The House of Illnesses*), which she produced between 30 April and 9 May 1958 in Ermonville, France [see Figure 4, 79]. According to Zürn's postscript, the text and drawings had to be published together, indicating that both are integral to the book.¹ "Plan" depicts a two-dimensional floor plan of a hospital, with its chambers and halls formed of body parts and organs. It is a body-building. This hybrid has multiple dimensions: in the text, the protagonist describes herself as inhabiting the House of Illnesses as one figure alongside others, identified as "Dr. Mortimer," "guards," and "enemies," while the organic rooms are both of her (female)

¹ Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated]

body *and* of unspecified others.² On the “Plan,” these rooms are annotated as the “cabinet of the solar plexus,” the “chambers of the hands,” the “hall of bellies,” the “vault of the head,” the “rooms of the hearts,” “the room of the eyes,” and the “bosom parlour,” as well as a “shooting range for the enemies,” a “secret corridor for the enemies,” “hiding places for enemies,” and the “watchtower of Dr. Mortimer.”³ While there appears to be an “inside” and an “outside” to the House of Illnesses, there is no way of conceiving its organic, architectural, and phantasmal features as separable, and thus to establish a clear opposition between interiority and exteriority. Against a biocentric conception of the body as an organic and bounded entity, it offers a map of its biocultural emergence and antagonisms, incorporating elements that precede, coincide with, and exceed the individuation of a specific body. As a map, “Plan of the House of Illnesses” invites the possibility of a differential navigation that traverses—in the sense of “crossing with difficulty, going against”—the ways in which something like a body and something like an environment are formed, together with the codes and violences that perpetuate themselves in and through such formations.

Traumatic bleed

In her autobiographical novel *Der Mann im Jasmin: Eindrücke aus einer Geisteskrankheit* (*Man of Jasmine: Impressions from a Mental Illness*, originally written in the 1960s), Zürn recalls that she started working on the manuscript and drawings of *The House of Illnesses* whilst sick with jaundice, which she contracted after attending a large assembly against the atomic bomb.⁴

Although there is no direct reference to the atomic bomb in *The House of Illnesses*, the motif

² Zürn. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

³ Zürn. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

⁴ Zürn, *Der Mann im Jasmin*, 3.

reappears in a later ink drawing titled *Atom Bombe* (*Atomic Bomb*, 1964), which Zürn produced whilst in a mental asylum in La Rochelle [see Figure 5, 80]. The words “Atom Bombe” and the date and place of the drawing’s production are written in bleeding block letters with the same ink, rendering drawing and writing not as distinct but as converging orders of signification. Extending the logic of the anagram, where a letter might be detached from a word to form another word, here a letter may be detached from writing to form another image. Conversely, the three large ink splotches exploding on soaked paper approximate a form of writing: a non-verbal language for the unspeakable.⁵ The ink stains of *Atom Bombe* and the organic-cum-architectural hybridity of “Plan of the House of Illnesses,” though different in execution, both generate a sense of movement in all directions and with it a mutational proliferation of meanings coursing through them.

In *The House of Illnesses*, Dr. Mortimer, who is identified by the protagonist as “my personal death,” mutates from a short-sighted physician to a military figure, which elicits the exclamation: “I possessed the most disgusting death of all death personalities: a militarist!”⁶ Dr. Mortimer, as physician and militarist, may be linked to the atomic bomb, to National Socialism, and to Zürn’s father, who had been a colonial officer in Namibia and later joined the Nazi Party; events which produced a complex dynamic of attachment, guilt, and trauma in Zürn.

No Cure

From the age of sixteen, Zürn was employed as a steno-typist and later as a dramaturge at the UFA film studios in Berlin. Despite having worked at the Reich’s cinematic propaganda machine between 1933 and 1942, Zürn maintained that she was unaware of the atrocities committed by

⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

⁶ Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

the Nazis until she learned about the concentration camps from an underground radio broadcast.⁷ According to Zürn, the revelation triggered her first mental breakdown in 1945, and was responsible for her reoccurring episodes of severe mental illness thereafter. Zürn produced *The House of Illnesses* two and a half years before she was committed to a mental institution for the first time. She would be in and out of several such hospitals until her death by suicide on 19 October 1970. According to her semi-fictionalised accounts, these multiple institutionalisations produced no (lasting) cure—rather, they threw the notions on which cure was built into question. Zürn understood that the psychiatrists who treated her were concerned about the role that drawing and writing (particularly her dedication to anagrams) played in the course of her illness.⁸ When Gaston Ferdière (the same poet and doctor who made Antonin Artaud undergo numerous electroshock treatments)⁹ advised Zürn against drawing and writing anagrammatic poems, Zürn retorted in a letter: “Fine! No anagrams and drawings. But it is no good to lie around reading detective novels all the time, don’t you think, dear Doctor?”¹⁰ Zürn’s reference to detective novels may refer to published case studies by psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, which fascinated the Surrealist circles Zürn moved in and were often presented in a style reminiscent of detective fiction. Her biographer Esra Plumer particularly singles out the case studies of Jacques Lacan’s teacher, Gaëtan de Clérambault, who “was known for his acute clinical gaze, which neatly classified female criminal behaviour by the use of a process of physiognomy,” as well as for his “detective-like attention to such details as the look, dress and movements of patients.”¹¹ Given the long history of establishing and elaborating classificatory systems for

⁷ Esra Plumer, *Unica Zürn: Art, Writing and Postwar Surrealism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 17.

⁸ Plumer, *Unica Zürn*, 135.

⁹ Kevin Repp, ‘The Strange Case of Dr. Ferdière’, 2011. <https://psycheandmuse.wordpress.com/dr-ferdiere/>.

¹⁰ Plumer, *Unica Zürn*, 118.

¹¹ Plumer, *Unica Zürn*, 118.

deducing criminality and insanity from anatomical markers, Zürn's "Plan of the House of Illnesses" disturbs the mechanisms through which contemporaneous clinical discourses produced and reproduced pathological bodies, and the ways in which these were not above genre but beholden to it—alluded to by Zürn's derogatory reference to "detective fiction." Zürn's anagrams, as textual rearrangements, and her anagrammatic drawings, as a rearrangement of bodies, disavow the logics of such classificatory systems and the hierarchies and causal relationships they establish, within limits. As Zürn states: "House of Illnesses, you are no house of cure."¹² Rather, the house is the site of a differential processing of the protagonist's immersion in a more total scene of sedimented horrors. During a brief absence from the House of Illnesses, the protagonist is confronted with the familiar outside world as sickening and immutable, whereas the house itself has accustomed her to "constant changes."¹³ The episode ends with her voluntary return to the house, but not with an end to illness.

Although the sun was shining, the world did not seem beautiful to me. As if everything was known to the point of tedium. As if there were no miracles out here. And everything—the faces, the surroundings—seemed to have stopped, like a clock. Not the slightest thing had changed. This made me feel melancholy. In the House of Illnesses I had been used to constant changes. There, the animated imagination reigned and lived. Here, in the world, habit ruled with frozen hands. Without realising it, I had turned around and slowly but resolutely walked back down the street. ... Full of fear, I thought that the House of Illnesses might no longer be there.¹⁴

This passage indicates that the House of Illnesses is not only a place where one encounters one's personal death but also a place of mutation, where phantasms are in constant animation. Close to the end of the text, the protagonist states: "I stroked my fingers softly over the

¹² Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

¹³ Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

¹⁴ Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

breathing veins of pearls and silver that wove up the walls, forming pure, solemn shapes,” which elicits a trembling that resolves “softly and calmingly” in a sigh, and gives her renewed courage to leave “this dignified abode.”¹⁵ The difference between an “inside” and an “outside” is here figured not as a clear division between self and world, but as different degrees of mutability and immutability within immersion. Put differently, in the terminology of Wynter, the world surrounding the House of Illnesses is immutable in the sense that it keeps replicating itself in adherence to rigid codes, according to which Zürn’s protagonist remains an unviable life form—a pathological anomaly within the genre, confined to a mental institution. These codes have catastrophic consequences that manifest themselves in colonialism, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb. Her abandonment of the notion of cure within a catastrophic matrix that produces her illness does not lead to her stabilisation and recovery. Instead, the mutability of the house de-borders illness and make it mutate into a “method” for negotiating one’s immersion in a catastrophic world. These mutations betray the code *as code* and scramble its components: the naturalised binary organisation of the anatomical body, the classificatory detective fictions, the medical-military crossover, which are saturated in forms of violence specific to the genre *Man*. Due to the protagonist’s refusal to be cured on such generic terms, the code can only partially—and not successfully—reproduce itself in and through her. Taking courage from her encounter with mutability, she may even leave the house in the knowledge that these mutations could proliferate and interfere with the world’s organisation at large. As Zürn’s own biography bears out, this comes at great cost. A cost that Zürn herself, as an isolated case, could not sustain.

Neither man nor woman

In Wynter’s theory of being hybridly human, singular and liminal perspectives can and do

¹⁵ Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

generate valid challenges to generic codes, but these have to be amplified to succeed, since large-scale mutations of master codes and, with them, epistemic shifts can only be effected on a collective level.¹⁶ Drawing on scientific terminology, Wynter calls the realm from which such challenges are mounted *demonic ground*, “to suggest the possibility of an observer/site off observation that is non-analogically oriented, that is, one outside the present discursive formations and meaning ‘fields’ of our present order and its related episteme.”¹⁷ Zürn’s House of Illnesses is, then, a formation without such a ground. Instead, it has to stage its antagonisms with generic codes and their deforming effects from within. The choice of architecture is not arbitrary. The sphere of female sex-gender under the genre *Man* has been, and still largely was during Zürn’s lifetime, heteronormative domesticity, and its primary space for reproducing and materialising its codes in and as female bodies was the house.¹⁸ Where such normative coding of bodies failed, this space shifted and expanded to medical and disciplinary institutions as architectures for containing and correcting pathological deviations from the norm.¹⁹ In Zürn’s non-anatomical body-building, divergence from the genre-mandated form of female sex-gender is figured not only as an organic-cum-architectural mutation, but also as a quasi-diachronic process. The House of Illnesses contains no longer visited as well as regularly frequented rooms, such as the cabinet of the solar plexus—“the only place in my body which cannot deceive me”—and the bosom parlour, where “everything has terribly changed, and thus it only instils me with despair.”²⁰ Zürn’s aversion to certain rooms speaks to her mooted dis-

¹⁶ Wynter here is in dialogue with Foucault’s notion of epistemes: “In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice.” Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 183.

¹⁷ Sylvia Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (1987): 207, fn. 3. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354156>.

¹⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 437.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1988), 258.

²⁰ Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

identification from sexed and gendered categories, while the organs with which these are associated remain distressingly present and continue to signal deceptively. It is a plan and a navigation of a body in which sex-gender transgresses Zürn's protagonist and her form.

Dispersed passages throughout Zürn's collected writings testify to her unease with binary sex-gender and generic male *and* female categories. In *Das Weiße mit dem Roten Punkt* (*The Whiteness with the Red Spot*, originally written in 1959) she states:

If I could be something that called itself neither man nor woman, how at ease I would be. Perhaps then I would arrive at myself or at you? To my knowledge, I got little from man or woman, however, enough to feel that it's a hindrance. My intermittent efforts to be neither the one nor the other led to no result. Why? Because I was dealing with this problem on my own. Alone, I have brought little to a good end. No one to talk to about it. That is, no companion in suffering. Because only he would encourage me to continue in this effort. And that is my perplexity.²¹

It is significant that Zürn finds herself without "companions" to accomplish or even fully comprehend what she (intermittently) strives for. However, Zürn is clear on this much: in *Notizen einer Blutarmen* (*Notes of an Anaemic*, originally written in 1957–1958), Zürn explicitly detaches herself from self-realisation through the work of art, as granted to and practiced by generic male authors and artists:

I turned around and around inside myself and listened into and observed myself. By doing so I got fed up with myself. If I would have been a man, I would probably have created a work of art from this state. But being what I am—and I don't want to be anything else—I only blathered.²²

Zürn states that if she had been a man, she might have created a work of art but "as that, which I am—and I don't want to be anything else" she was merely issuing scrambled statements. Not

²¹ Zürn, *Der Mann im Jasmin*, 132. [My translation.]

²² Zürn, "Notizen einer Blutarmen," 39. [My translation.]

only is Zürn's way of being/feeling/knowing framed within the field of pathological production, falling short of raising itself to the level of the artwork, in her self-understanding as someone who is "neither man nor woman," her speech cannot appear as anything other than "blathering" within the aesthetic and discursive fields of the governing order. However, if Zürn's statement "I don't want to be anything else" is taken seriously, then Zürn does not *fail* to create a work of art, nor does she fail to be a man *or* a woman. She does not *want* to achieve legibility or recognition on any of these terms.

Talking (back) without a tongue

Zürn's commitment to blathering instead of self-realisation through the work of art is matched by the way she appears to be doodling, rather than flaunting technical skills of draughtsmanship in her drawings.²³ Both crystallise in her dedication to anagrammatic reordering of letters and signs. In Zürn's hands, the anagrammatic becomes an immersive, procedural, and quasi-algorithmic operation, which in the narrow sense applies to Zürn's anagrammatic poetry, but in the wider sense inflects all of her making. In divergence from other Surrealists who deployed automatic techniques for artistic self-extension, the automatic and artificial in Zürn do not expand her self and her voice.²⁴ Rather, they unsettle and displace it. Describing her method for producing anagrammatic poems, Zürn writes:

Anagrams are words and sentences created by rearranging the letters of a word or phrase. Only the given letters can be used, and one may not help oneself to others. Finding anagrams is one of her most intense preoccupations.²⁵

²³ For comparison, see the (porno-)graphically precise drawings of female bodies by Hans Bellmer, who was Zürn's partner from 1953 to 1970.

²⁴ Plumer, *Unica Zürn: Art, Writing and Postwar Surrealism*, 132.

²⁵ Zürn, *Der Mann im Jasmin*, 18. [My translation.]

Zürn carefully chooses a first sentence for her anagrammatic compositions, which is sometimes taken from the work of other poets.²⁶ Once an anagrammatic sequence is initiated, it produces its own statements, which Zürn frequently describes in terms of asking the anagram a question and the anagram answering back.²⁷ To Zürn, this has an oracular dimension: a sentence is not only reordered, but more importantly than that, this reordering pressures the text to *talk back*. In other words, Zürn's anagrammatic poetry is a generative form of "speaking without a tongue." Zürn's process can be traced from examining her anagrams in her notebooks and papers, in which words are taken apart and reassembled systematically, guided by an algorithmic logic that breaks words down into individual letters, driving language to generative failure, before reassembling the letters back into new words [see Figure 6, 81]. As Luisa Lorenza Corna observes:

A scrap of loose paper is filled with rows of handwritten, crossed out letters and words, divided by horizontal lines into three sections. Below the lines, the same sentence—"Der Geist aus der Flasche" ("the ghost out of the bottle")—is broken into its individual characters and then rearranged to form a new, legible phrase. Each line separates a cycle of trials and errors, a combinatorial game that transits from "meaning" to "meaning" by passing through semantic pandemonium.²⁸

The motif of "speaking without a tongue" is also present in Zürn's description of a dream in *Notes of an Anaemic*, in which a girl with the body of a snake miraculously carries on living, talking and planning revenge on her tormentors after they have removed her organs:

Last night I dreamed of a beautiful, dangerous creature, half girl, half snake, who was murderous. For that reason, all important organs with which she could cause mischief were removed from her. They took away her eyes, tongue, heart and the like to make

²⁶ Plumer, *Unica Zürn: Art, Writing and Postwar Surrealism*, 102.

²⁷ Plumer, *Unica Zürn*, 104–5.

²⁸ Luisa Lorenza Corna, "Planning Without a Brain (2009–2022)," in *Anja Kirschner: UNICA* (Berlin: Distanz, 2022), 55.

her completely harmless. Since she was so beautiful, they wanted to preserve her as a feast for the eyes, by mummifying her so skilfully that she appeared alive. When this was done, it turned out to our horror that the creature spoke without a tongue, saw without eyes and lived without a heart, was of great strength without blood and made plans without a brain. Much more lively, ardent, intelligent had she become, possessed of hatred and desire for revenge—filled with a power and rage that were inhuman.²⁹

A discussion of this dream, albeit under different signs, can be found in an essay accompanying the multimedia performance *Stimmen aus dem Innenraum (Voices from an Innerspace)* by Valie Export, Patricia Jünger, and Susanne Widl in collaboration with Peter Weibel.³⁰ The essay frames Mary Shelley, Ada Lovelace, and Unica Zürn's investments in forms of artificial, algorithmic, and anagrammatic life as reactions to women's reductive and traumatic confinement to the realm of biological reproduction and the domestic, drawing on material from their novels, journals, and letters to substantiate these claims. Unica Zürn's "anagrammatic body" is framed as a precursor to artificially generated life:

The anagrammatic body is a body permuted, numerically transformed, a body of multiplied organs, a body as an image, the advent of the immaterial, digitalized body. [...] Owing to the anagrammatic body, women attain the perspective that life and mind can be created artificially by transposing the letters of life, the genetic code, the language of mathematics.³¹

The essay remains critical of such transpositions, arguing that in striving for forms of artificial life, the women under discussion replicate the logics by which they themselves have been objectified, unable to escape the "unconscious social text" of a phallogocentric culture through a "mere" rearrangement of its letters. It suggests that a true escape could only be achieved if the

²⁹ Zürn, "Notizen einer Blutarmen," 33. [My translation.]

³⁰ Valie Export, Patricia Jünger, and Susanne Widl, "Voices from an Inner Space," *Ars Electronica Catalogue*, 1988.

³¹ Export et al. "Voices from an Inner Space." This quotation and subsequent in-text quotations are all taken from the same document.

“vagina” as the “lost, mutilated vowel in the alphabet of our culture” was recovered. This reductive reading implies that there is only one way of conceiving technology, and only one way of displacing the phallus as master signifier, paying scarce regard to the evidence that, in the work of the historical figures it refers to, differential notions of technology and artificial life also emerge. In Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a creature is assembled from parts taken from corpses. However, it turns out not only to be sentient but also highly articulate, narrating its own story in chapters XI–XVI of the novel: it *talks back*.³² Likewise, the creature in Zürn’s *Notes of an Anaemic* is neither tamed nor silenced after the removal of its organs. It clearly possesses intentionality and can operate without a tongue, or a vagina, symbolic or otherwise. Zürn’s dis-identification from biological and symbolic codings anchored in a perceived anatomical dimorphism and its mapping onto naturalised, binary sex-gender categories achieved through her expanded engagement with the anagrammatic exceeds a mere rearrangement of the phallographic code. In Zürn, the missing tongue mutates from a sign of fatal deficiency to a generative opening. In the works of Zürn, as in those of Acker and *Heartscape*, the generic performance of originality and authenticity called one’s own voice is not a solution but a problem, because it solidifies the mechanisms of their confinement within a world they do not want and cannot bear to live in. As Acker writes in “Dead Doll Humility”:

A writer who had found his own voice presented a viewpoint. Created meaning. The writer took a certain amount of language, verbal material, forced that language to stop radiating in multiple, even unnumerable directions, to radiate in only one direction so there could be his meaning. [...] If had to force language to be unidirectional, I'd be helping my own prison to be constructed. [...] Since didn't have one point of view or centralized perspective, was free to find out how texts she used and was worked.³³

³² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (London: Routledge, 1888), 140–201.

³³ Kathy Acker, “Dead Doll Humility,” *Postmodern Culture* 1, no. 1 (September 1990). <https://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.990/acker.990>.

Significantly, by not forcing language and vision to issue from a single point, Acker, along with Zürn and Heartscape, achieves mutations by which texts become environments that open up in multiple directions. Crucially though, they do not take their bodies and the houses in which they were forced to be formed out of the equation, but refigure them as body-buildings that are planar, dispersed, and dissociated rather than anatomical, unified, and self-identical. This makes their texts, drawings, and games comparable to immersive environments as encountered in gaming and VR, with important differences: in contrast with generic forms of technology-dependent immersion, which strive for identificatory proximity between player and avatar within immersive environments that privilege a unidirectional navigational logic geared towards survival and scoring, Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape open up space for multiple dis-identifications, smeared perspectives, and pathways radiating in all directions.

SKINS and PATTERNS

Engaging with these concerns in the medium of drawing, the series *SKINS* (Anja Kirschner, 2020) and *PATTERNS* (Anja Kirschner, 2020-2021) develops anamersive figurations that incorporate postcinematic production processes, as well as elements of Zürn's "Plan of the House of Illnesses." *SKINS* attends to the ways in which the bodies of avatars are assembled from 3D base meshes and the 2D surfaces, or "skins," which cover them, and arrive at non-anatomical arrangements from such references [see Figure 7, 82]. Since the surfaces of three-dimensional bodies are broken down into polygons, skins tend to have a shard-like appearance, reminiscent of archaeological depictions of broken vessels. To approximate this appearance, *SKINS* was produced by working with cutout shapes derived from digital images, which were duplicated, mirrored, and grouped into different arrangements [see Figure 8, 83]. By emulating the way in which the positioning and size of skins within digital files is determined according to computational efficiency, these drawings constitute a form of training that moves away from

intentional artistic composition towards an algorithmic compositional logic. However, since the drawings start from the skins rather than from a pre-existing three-dimensional figure, such as an avatar, the shapes on the drawings suggest but can never be assembled “back” into a coherent three-dimensional figure.

The *PATTERNS* series continues this engagement with generative composition and speculative figures. They consist of intricate patterns that conjoin organic, botanical, and technical forms, and were devised following a quasi-algorithmic process of manually copying and mirroring an initial design and making it gradually unfold into a larger pattern, while introducing small variations and ruptures into each iteration [see Figure 9, 84]. Through this practice, a mutational logic emerges in which the analogue process of drawing begins to incorporate digital principles but also alters them through repetition. The shard-like *SKINS* with their associative links to archaeology evoke the broken remains of architectural structures and domestic objects. The wallpaper-like *PATTERNS* harks back to domestic and decorative designs. Their imagery is influenced not only by Zürn’s *House of Illnesses* but also by Larry Mitchell’s book *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions* (1977) and the way its protagonists mobilise “the domestic arts” against the violent exclusions of “the public arts.”³⁴ In *The Faggots & Their Friends*, domestic spaces become laboratories for non-heteronormative and communal living arrangements in which queer solidarity, sociability, and survival are practiced daily in many forms. The imagery of *PATTERNS* and *SKINS* thus invokes the domestic, but also disturbs the association with it, suggesting that change may rely on the identification of codes and patterns and iterative modification, rupture, and recoding. In *The Faggots & Their Friends*, queer companionship is directed against the politically expedient separation of the public and the

³⁴ Larry Mitchell, *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2019), 14.

private, also discussed in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's paper "Sex in Public" (1998).³⁵

For Berlant and Warner, as for Mitchell, queer world-making maintains awareness of its antagonistic relationship with the heteronormative codes and patterns inscribed by the domestic and the nation, and frustrates their repetition, while also generating entirely different forms from them:

The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies. [...] Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation. These intimacies do bear a necessary relation to a counter-public—an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation.³⁶

Read against these discussions, Zürn's *House of Illnesses* maps the immersive biocultural hybridity of codes and bodies and their antagonisms from an anomalous and isolated position that cannot avail itself of a counter-public, and thus keeps "turning around and around" in itself.

In comparison to Zürn's *House*, Acker's conception of the *Labyrinth* presents a jump in scale and possibility. It is more ambitious in scope and more explicitly connected to cultural production in literature and popular culture and to the philosophical and feminist discourses surrounding it. As a figuration of biocultural hybridity at large, it affords more dynamic forms of navigation, through which new geographies emerge.

³⁵ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2, Intimacy (n.d.): 554.

³⁶ Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 558.



Figure 5: Unica Zürn, Excerpt from "Ein Märchenbuch für Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern," 1964. Watercolour and ink on paper, 32 x 25cm. Copyright Brinkmann & Bose Verlag, Berlin. The inscription reads: "12.9.64. Irren-Anstalt: La Rochelle | Frankreich" ("12.9.64. Mental-Asylum: La Rochelle | France").

DER GEIST AUS DER FLASCHE / GEIST AUS DER FLASCHE
DRUHE FRASS LECHE BEIHA SAGTE
DER GEIST AUS DER FLASCHE
DRUHE LECHE FRASS SAGTE

DER GEIST AUS DER FLASCHE
DRUHE FRASS LECHE BEIHA SAGTE
DER GEIST AUS DER FLASCHE
DRUHE LECHE FRASS SAGTE
DRUHE LECHE FRASS SAGTE

DER GEIST AUS DER FLASCHE,
SCHLAGE DAS RUDER FESTE
SAU DER GRACHE SIEGEL FESTE
DIE FRAU DAS SEGEL RECHTS
LEG' AUS, DER ERSTE FISCHER
FAUCHT DES GROSSES ADLER
DER FELS GESICHT, DER AUS
DER FLASCHE STIEG, DER
FAUCHT DER ADLER: GROSS
DAS FEUCHTEGLASS DER GIER

DER GEIST AUS DER FLASCHE
DER GEIST AUS DER FLASCHE

Figure 6: Unica Zürn, Excerpt from "Eisenbahnheft," 1960-1970. Ballpoint pen on paper, 22 x 16.8cm. Copyright Brinkmann & Bose, Berlin.



Figure 7: Anja Kirschner, "SKINS#01," 2020. Granite pencil and acrylic on paper, 101 x 72cm, 202.
Photographer: Jens Ziehe. Courtesy of the artist.

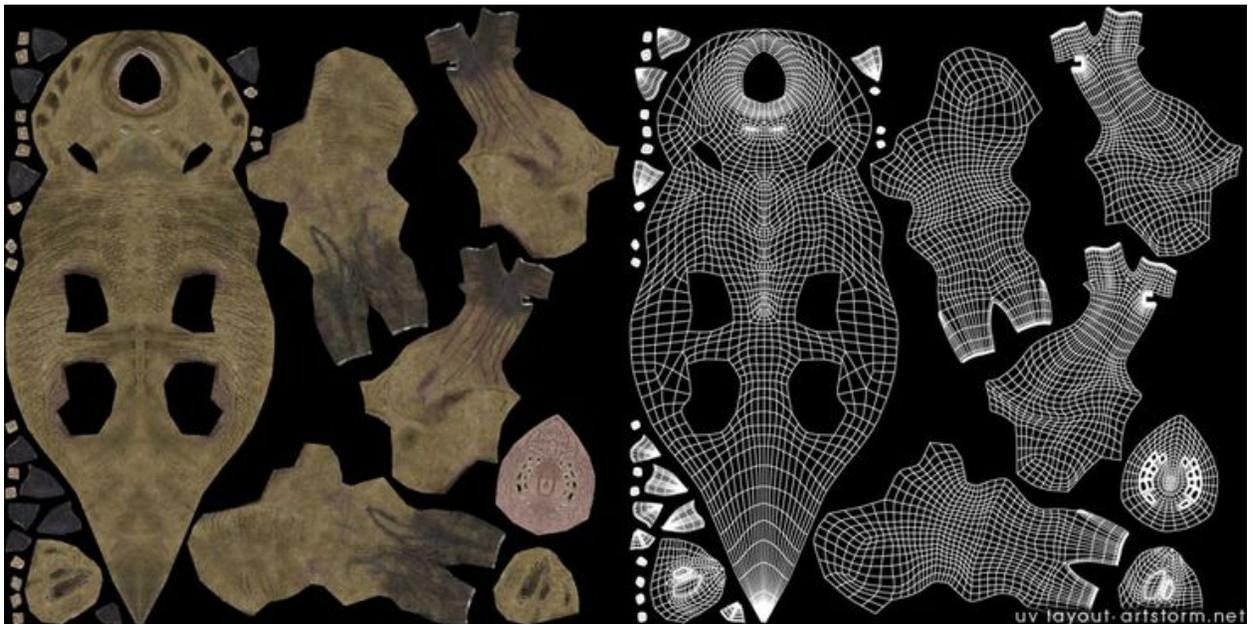


Figure 8: Johan Steen, “Destrachan – UV layout.” Source: <https://artstorm.net/journal/2007/08/destrachan-finished>. Accessed 20 October 2022.

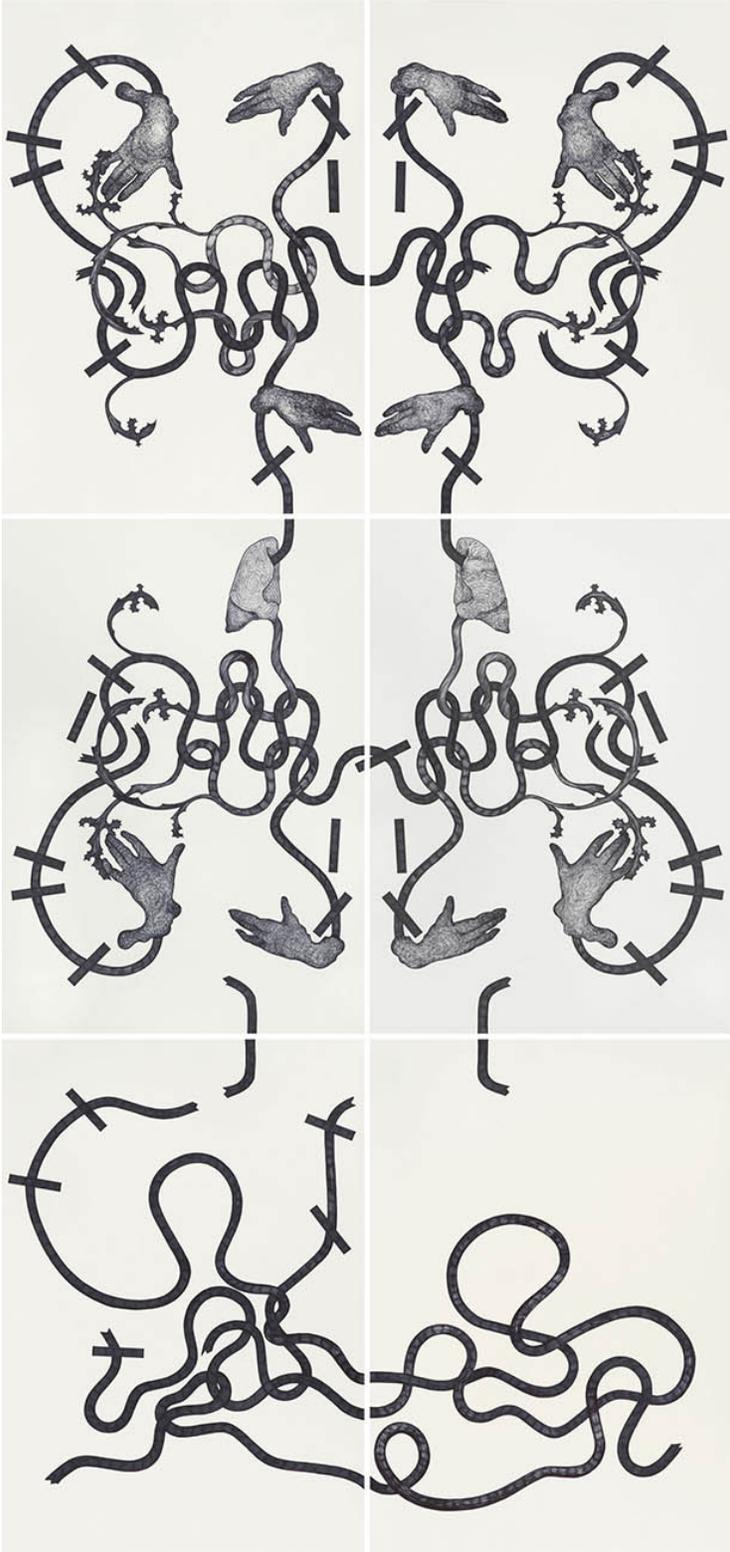


Figure 9: Anja Kirschner, "PATTERN#02," 2021. Marker pen on paper, 4 x 101 x 72cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Chapter IV: Navigating Anamersion

Through a close examination of the variegated motif of the labyrinth in Kathy Acker's work and her related conception of texts as environments or *de-narratives*, anamersive poetics is further defined as differential operations of spatialisation, iterative modification, and traversal navigation within immersion.¹ For Acker and Zürn, the work of art conceived within the aesthetic and discursive fields of the genre *Man* is a transgression of their being and doing. Its notions of (male) authorship and creativity hold no emancipatory promise for them, only more violence, and must therefore be driven to failure in ways that are intimately bound up with a de-bordering of language. Acker intentionally calibrates her assault on (male) authorship and the Western canon via her appropriation of literary works, which she retells in the voices of multiple "I's" and personas, which operate as dynamic shifters. Such textual appropriations under changed signs complicate the categorisation of Acker's texts and produce generative detachments and devalorisations of the literary canon. As she writes in her novel *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1984):

One may generalise by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. Meaning for example: a book no longer has anything to do with literary history so the history of literature you're taught in school is for shit.²

Acker's practice of appropriation thus constitutes an *oriented movement* from a given order to another by way of repetition, with variation. It is calculated to make the meanings of the given order fail to reproduce themselves successfully in its modified reiteration. Acker's textual appropriations of works of Western literature (and, to a lesser extent, cinema) and their differential repetitions void their emancipatory claims by bringing out the generic violence

¹ Larry McCaffery and Kathy Acker, "An Interview with Kathy Acker," *Mississippi Review* 20, no. 1/2 (1991): 89.

² Acker, *My Life My Death by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, in *Literal Madness* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 251.

inherent both in them and in the canon as such.³ This is demonstrated with recourse to selected texts and drawings by Acker and an engagement with them through my performance lecture *My A-C-K-E-R: Demonology*, which focuses on Acker's oriented logic at work in her retelling of Dario Argento's horror movie *Suspiria* (1977) in her novel *My Mother: Demonology* (1993).⁴ While Zürn deploys the anagrammatic and oracular and the (generically weaker) aesthetics of "blathering" and "doodling" in her texts and drawings, Acker develops the notion of *languages of the body*—derived from dreams, sex, and bodybuilding—as situations in which the body *talks back* without the mediation of literary conventions.

Labyrinth as "straight myth" and its unsettling through oriented logic

In Acker's essay "Moving Into Wonder" (1995), the labyrinth, in one of its many iterations, is both a space and a construction over linear time, with linear time cast as a hegemonic, male construction. Here, linearity is figured as one of the main building blocks of the "straight myth" that cements male self-realisation through a temporality that women cannot escape.

If Daedalus was the first artist, art began out of division. The word art began to be used as soon as there was separation between imagination and state. Prior to Apollo's rape of Daphne and to Apollo's reign, there was no such division. When Daphne and the Maenads danced, imagination became actual. The labyrinth, that construction of Daedalus's, covered up the origin of art. Covered up the knowledge that art was, and so is, born out of rape or denial of women and born out of political hegemony. One form of Daedalus's construction is time. When time is understood as linear, there is no escape. No escape for us out of the labyrinth. I said that the labyrinth has been built. But time is not only linear. ... let us, by changing the linearity of time, deconstruct the labyrinth and see what the women who are in its center are doing. Let us see what is now central.⁵

³ Kerstin Stakemeier, *Entgrenzter Formalismus: Verfahren einer Antimodernen Ästhetik* (Berlin: b_books, 2017), 277.

⁴ *My A-C-K-E-R: Demonology* was performed at the symposium accompanying the group exhibition *Kathy Acker: GET RID OF MEANING* at Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe in 2018. A text version of the lecture performance is published in Anja Casser and Mathias Viegeler, eds., *Kathy Acker: Get Rid Of Meaning* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2022).

⁵ Acker, "Moving into Wonder," 97.

Moving away from *the* myth and its instantiation of linear narratives of progress and naturalised forms of domination, Acker's work passes through deconstruction to a differential conception of the mythical as a myth, from which new logics and codes can be generated affirmatively.⁶ As Claire Finch argues through a close reading of Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) in their lecture "My Construct (a Cunt) and I Had to Find the Code," Acker's approach to texts as environment allows movement in all directions and thus opens up a new biocultural geography, no longer beholden to biocentric and linear developmental narratives:

Both the body and the text are generated by movement through a place. But place is not just location. About *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker writes that it was "my first attempt to find a myth, a place, not the myth, the place." The spatialization of myth is what pulls the writing out of mere deconstruction, what makes it powerful. [...] Acker is giving us a new map. Because logic in Acker is always oriented, occurring either east or west, below or above. A new geography means a new way of thinking, means an attempt to break out of one system of logic (empiricism, the Empire's project), and into another.⁷

The importance of the connection of text to place, or even of text as place, manifests itself in Acker's writing as well as in the hand-drawn maps she produced alongside and sometimes reprinted in her novels. In comparison to Zürn's "Plan" as floor plan, Acker's maps often include navigational elements such as arrows, dotted pathways, or compass roses that enhance the oriented logic at work in her mappings by indicating trajectories for movement [see **Figure 10, 98**]. Like Zürn, Acker never writes from a non-place located over and above the materials from which she composes her texts. Her multiple "I's" and personas are viscerally located in and

⁶ Sylvère Lotringer, "Kathy Acker / Sylvère Lotringer ('Devoured by Myths')" in *The Last Interview* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2018), 108–110.

⁷ Claire Finch, "My Construct (a Cunt) and I Had to Find the Code," unpublished text of the lecture given at the symposium *Kathy Acker: Get Rid of Meaning*, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, 2018. A revised version is published in Anja Casser and Mathias Viegner, eds., *Kathy Acker: Get Rid Of Meaning* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2022).

transgressed by specific places, as mundane and mythical as the school and the labyrinth, which they navigate with difficulty and traverse with intention. In comparison to maps of computer game spaces and diagrams of the pathways players are able to take to arrive at different outcomes, Zürn's and Acker's hand-drawn maps occupy a sphere adjacent to and in excess of the possibilities of gaming, VR, and post-cinematic media as they exist today. Unburdened from the objectives of designing functional game-worlds that have to be implemented computationally, they offer more complex and multidimensional models for mapping and navigating technological, organic, and phantasmal immersion. Adapting, extending, and elaborating their approaches through working across drawing and moving image, and eventually bringing these together in the immersive multimedia installation *UNICA*, allows me to step outside the technical and aesthetic restrictions of VR and gaming as they exist today and to enter into a more speculative engagement with immersion.

Text as Environment, de-narrative, “to substitute space for time”

In Acker's writing and the maps that accompany it, there is movement in all directions: against verticality, linearity, centre. This movement scrambles the codes of canonical Western literature and its narrative forms. It provokes a shift from narrative towards its multidirectional expansion, or what Acker calls text as environment or de-narrative:

...the way I would have spoken about what I was trying to do at that time was to talk about trying to make a text that was an “environment” rather than a centralized, meaningful narrative. I guess what I wanted was to have a narrative that was a kind of “de-narrative.”⁸

The form of the de-narrative affects temporality, in the sense that a narrative in the generic sense would achieve narrative coherence by having a beginning, middle, and end (even if it was

⁸ McCaffery and Acker, “An Interview with Kathy Acker,” 89.

not presented in that order). It would not authorise movement in all directions, but forge a path through its materials, which could be reordered on a linear timeline. In contrast, Acker's de-narratives do not follow a single, unidirectional temporality that would allow for linear reordering. Instead, they require different mappings of time and space, such as "A Map of Time and No Time," where connecting paths between locations are indexed as "time," "no time," and "something else" [see Figure 11, 99]. "A Map of Time and No Time" spatialises different temporal orders and their absence as pathways, reminiscent of the unformed temporality of Zürn's *House of Illnesses*, which prioritises "constant changes" over access to linear time and the attendant notions of progress and cure, which necessarily must be judged with reference to an established timeline. Considering the possibilities opened up by privileging spatial over temporal figuration in *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Acker writes:

To substitute space for time. What's this mean? I'm not talking about death. Death isn't my province [...] I'm telling you right now burn the schools. They teach you about good writing. That's a way of keeping you from writing that you want to do, says Enzensberger, from revolutionary that is present. I just see. Each of you must use writing to do exactly what you want. Myself or any occurrence is a city through which I can wander if I stop judging.⁹

Acker's formulation "to substitute space for time" and her connected perception of herself as a city is directly relevant to anamersion's refiguring of technology-dependent immersion. It opens up the possibility of treating moving image not primarily as a time-based, but as a space-based medium. Gaming and VR reinforce that tendency by often making the players forget about the passage of time altogether while immersed in a game world. However, Acker and Zürn's work raises this tendency to a new level, since it is not that the linear passage of time is forgotten, but that other temporalities and atemporalities are introduced into it, as with "A Map of Time and No

⁹ Acker, *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, 246.

Time” or Zürn’s likening the world outside the House of Illnesses to a clock that has stopped, while inside there are “constant changes.”¹⁰ In distinction from gaming and VR, the immersive environments of Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape are navigated not from the single point of view associated with a stable protagonist/avatar, but from the shifting and dispersed perspectives of “I’s” as architectures or even cities. This neither follows the logic and aesthetics of survival-oriented FPS games nor represents a single character’s narrative “journey” of self-discovery. It creates a space within immersion, an anamorphic opening, through which what is figured as navigation is no longer bounded by fixed coordinates and the separation of bodies and their environments, but their mutational convergence.

Acker de-borders identity by figuring it as a geography, in which her “I’s” and personas change names and genders, and yet, as Acker’s identities shift, their oriented logic continues through them and is in fact contingent on their shifting. In my performance lecture *My A-C-K-E-R: Demonology*, this is repeatedly signalled through the graphic use of slashes (/) separating the names of figures appearing and surrounding Acker’s appropriation of Argento’s *Suspiria*, playing on the multiple meanings of the slash as a punctuation mark (in text) and as injury (in slasher movies). The slash thus is both a violent wound inflicted on female bodies in *Suspiria* and a sign for the shifting of identities orchestrated by Acker to denaturalise that violence. Through long lists of names, the performance lecture connects Acker’s shifting identities to her related meditation on how the relationship between mothers and daughters in patriarchal society is treated in the writings of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray [see **Figure 12, 100**]. While Kristeva argues for the necessity of “psychic matricide,” Irigaray advocates for the need to “reinstate the mother as another person,” a proposition that guides Acker’s shifting between different identities

¹⁰ Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

in *My Mother: Demonology*.¹¹ In the novel, as in my performance lecture, this strategy of shifting is explicitly connected to autobiographical elements connected to Acker's mother, Claire Lehman, from whom Acker was estranged and who died by suicide when Acker was thirty years old. Claire Lehman was in debt and no longer able to maintain the Upper East Side lifestyle she was accustomed to leading. Having one's identity tied to property here becomes a deadly snare, from which Lehman does not find an exit.¹² In *My Mother: Demonology*, Acker exorcises the spectre of her actual mother in as far as she sets out to write about her, but then shifts to writing about/as "Laure":

At first, my fictional Laure was going to be a mixture of my actual mother and the historical figure Colette Peignot, whose pen-name was Laure; thus part of the reason for the rubric "my mother." But by page three of my manuscript, Laure was interesting me and my mother wasn't.¹³

Only by substituting Laure and a host of other figures for herself and her mother can Acker begin to map the vexed relations of mothers/daughters/women/witches in patriarchal society, and with them the operations of sex-gender and race that subtend them. Through this strategy, Acker denaturalises generic identities within an economy that structurates bodies and their environments to death. In *My Mother: Demonology*, as well as other Acker texts, this often feels like switching between different avatars, while remaining within the oriented logic of "reinstating the mother as another person."

¹¹ Kathy Acker, "Paragraphs," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, *Identities*, 28, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 90. doi.org/10.2307/1315245.

¹² Stakemeier, *Entgrenzter Formalismus: Verfahren einer Antimodernen Ästhetik*, 271–272.

¹³ Acker, "Paragraphs," 90.

Oriented logic and found languages

A section of *My A-C-K-E-R: Demonology* focuses on Acker's oriented logic at work in her retelling of a scene from Argento's *Suspiria* (1977). Here the labyrinth is a boarding school for ballet dancers, which happens to be run by a coven of witches. As is the case with Zürn's protagonist in *The House of Illnesses*, the search for an escape leads Suzy, the heroine, to a place concealed further inside the building. In the scene that marks the turning point of Suzy's immersion in horror, she sits up in her bed at night and listens to her teachers' footsteps, which she counts and later retraces, thus discovering a secret inner tract of the building. Acker writes about this scene:

... when the heroine [Suzy] walks upstairs, she's thinking that there's something that she has to find out and then she realizes, as if suddenly, that she doesn't understand at all, that she's in a semi-magic horror world in which she is not able to understand.¹⁴

This "semi-magic horror world in which she is not able to understand" can nevertheless be accessed by Suzy when she navigates according to the sound and count of footsteps. There is an oriented logic to the movement of bodies through the building that can be transmitted and repeated. Relying on this new form of navigation, Suzy realises that she is not only immersed in horror but also able to chart a way through it—to save herself or to be destroyed anyway:

When it was night again and I was alone in my bedroom, all the lights in the room suddenly went out. I was faced with a decision. I could either give up, try to hide my head, metaphorically, and let all the chaos that was threatening me, as if winds, do whatever it would. Which it probably does anyway. Or I could consciously enter the chaos and try to understand and be responsible for what was happening.¹⁵

¹⁴ Acker, "Paragraphs," 89–90.

¹⁵ Kathy Acker, *My Mother: Demonology* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 78.

Abandoning the idea that that which cannot be approached rationally cannot be approached at all, oriented logic opens pathways to spaces that have been obscured, distorted, or sealed off, enabling different understandings and, with them, different possibilities for responding to generic violences. As Acker writes elsewhere in the novel, making the convergences of historical and phantasmic elements more explicit: “This historical development, from lepers to Jews to witches, is clear. It is the history, our history, of prejudice, sexism, and racism.”¹⁶ In Acker, as in Wynter, the histories of population groups forced into inferior, anomalous, and unliveable positions thus provide ways of framing and decoding the catastrophic tendencies inherent in the genre *Man* and its hierarchical ordering of the human along racist, sexist, and ableist logics. Acker’s research into such histories for *My Mother: Demonology* allowed her to see that, through this engagement, suppressed knowledges and, with them, different languages also come into view:

Reading this book [*Ecstasies*, by Carlo Ginzburg] led me to realise that a history I had taken to be minor, the history of witchcraft, could be viewed as an alternative major history, as a history of women. So I became fascinated by witchcraft and by related subjects, such as dreaming. I started working with some people who knew those disciplines. *My Mother: Demonology* came from that place. Dream was a language I accessed; I did not make it up. I did not compose it. I became interested in languages I could access, find. I realized that there were other such languages, languages which could be found.¹⁷

Deregulating property in one’s own voice

In accessing “found” languages, Acker develops many iterations of the labyrinth in her writing, of

¹⁶ Acker, *My Mother: Demonology*, 76.

¹⁷ Acker, “Paragraphs,” 91.

which the labyrinth as “straight myth” is only one kind. Douglas A. Martin poignantly summarises the variegated motif of the labyrinth in *Acker* (2017):

A provoking web of texts and dreams and the interplays, overlays of biographemes—mutual, prodding in encountering, encouraging each other, move, to uncover more—give rise to that eventual, mythic, metaphor of the *labyrinth*: which Acker comes to see as a potential form of all bodies and their writing.¹⁸

Where the labyrinth appears “as a potential form of all bodies and their writing,” such writing refers not only to what can be written by and about bodies but also to forms of writing done by the body, in excess of and in distinction from what Acker calls “ordinary” language. Acker defines languages of the body, such as dream, as languages that can be found and accessed, but not owned, in the sense that they exist outside of the intentional control of the author and his mastery over language. In “Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body” (1992), she further meditates on this distinction and its possibilities with recourse to her practice of bodybuilding. She describes how bodybuilding is based on a controlled way of driving different muscle groups to failure, achieved through repetitive exercises. Acker experiences this process as absorbing, disorientating, and opening up to the unexpected:

In this world of the continual repetition of a minimal number of elements, in this aural labyrinth, it is easy to lose one’s way. When all is repetition rather than the production of meaning, every path resembles every other path. Every day, in the gym, I repeat the same controlled gestures with the same weights, the same reps ... the same breath patterns. But now and then, wandering within the labyrinths of my body, I come upon something. Something I can know because knowledge depends on difference. An unexpected event. For though I am only repeating certain gestures during certain time spans, my body, being material, is never the same; my body is controlled by change and by chance. [...] By trying to control, to shape, my body through the calculated tools and methods of bodybuilding, and time and again, in following these methods, failing to do so, I am able to meet that which cannot be finally controlled and known: the body.¹⁹

¹⁸ Martin, *Acker*, 226.

¹⁹ Acker, “Against Ordinary Language,” 26.

The controlled repetition and failure in bodybuilding holds open the space to encounter what “cannot be finally controlled and known” through the meaning-making operations that are continually imposed on and materialise in and as bodies. Through (muscle) failure the body talks back and asserts the limits of its compliance, as well as its boundless unknowability. In listening to and welcoming the unknowability, changeability, and mortality of the body, Acker embraces an awareness of the body that removes it from patriarchal control and its management as threat.²⁰ Although differing from Zürn’s figuration of the body as a House of Illnesses, there are parallels to be drawn between Acker’s practice of bodybuilding and her related notion of the body as house or labyrinth and Zürn’s anagrammatic approach to the body and her related anagrammatic poetry. Both pass through controlled repetition, disorientation, and failure—of muscles, of syntax—which is generative, creating a quasi-dialogic space in which the body or a sentence talks back. While Acker’s bodybuilding body tends further to the organic than Zürn’s anagrammatic body and its inflection towards the algorithmic and artificial, neither follows a biocentric model, which naturalises domination over bodies, whether one’s own or those of others.

The materialisation of resistances

In the biocentric view, the body is anatomically mapped as a biological base unit over which one gains mastery through culture or fails to do so. With this move, the biocentric model not only separates code and flesh, but also naturalises specific forms of violence and domination as expressions of evolutionary rather than biocultural processes. In distinction, the biocultural model, or what Wynter calls being hybridly human, posits domination as an artificial expression of codes-made-flesh and enables resistance and recoding. In the hybrid, non-anatomical body-

²⁰ Acker, “Against Ordinary Language,” 27.

buildings of Zürn and Acker, the body's resistances, illnesses, and failures talk back in non-verbal languages that articulate the unspeakable, which is transgressed by and excluded from the meaning-making fields of the dominant order. Understanding anamersion as a form of *figuration Work* that draws on Wynter's notion of biocultural hybridity alongside Acker's and Zürn's body-buildings, failure—of bodies, of language(s)—can unsettle generic codes and assume generative dimensions. In anamersion, biocultural antagonisms precede, run through, and rupture separations between code and flesh. By figuring bodies not as bounded and separate from their environments but as one formation, anamersion opens up a complex and multidirectional mapping of their ongoing production and its mutations. These mutations are neither immanent "becomings" nor the autonomous products of a "rich creativity," but the materialisation of resistances—of bodies and of language(s). In Zürn's *House of Illnesses*, Acker's *Labyrinth*, and Heartscape's *Horror Mansion*, generic codifications and their technologies for shaping and reproducing binary sex-gender are traversed by operations such as copying, repetition, and anagrammatic reordering arrived at via the logics of dream, trauma, illness, and muscle failure. This oriented movement against the reproduction of the genre *Man* creates a space within immersion in which marginalised and unviable life forms assert themselves. It passes through disorientation, since the generic mappings and coordinates that frame and trap their bodies—such as anatomy, linear time, and Euclidian space—are in the process of being refigured. As Finch writes on Acker's novel *Empire of the Senseless*:

Senselessness, a positive thing on the same level as dreams, thus means a kind of physical disorientation, an unmooring from your typical mind-body configuration, and perhaps – we can suggest – from the entire heteronormative organization of the body and its pleasures, more broadly.²¹

²¹ Finch, "My Construct (a Cunt) and I Had to Find the Code."

In looking for patterns across these differential figurations of bodies and environments in Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape, an anamersive approach to technology-dependent immersion seeks to drive the reproduction of generic logics in VR, gaming, and postcinematic moving image to failure. Anamersive poetics expands on Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape's algorithmic, anagrammatic, and anamorphic strategies to develop differential forms of mapping and navigation within immersion. They engage with current forms of gaming and VR and their production processes through drawing and moving image and installation, in order to extend them speculatively beyond their current technological form and its dominant tendencies. Through this speculative engagement, they assert that artistic practices should not be beholden to follow and appropriate technologies developed by the military-entertainment-industrial complex, and instead develop alternative notions of technology that unsettle and replace them.

Illustrations (Chapter IV)



Figure 10: Kathy Acker, Excerpt from "Dream Map 2," 1977. In Acker, Kathy, Blood and Guts in High School (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), 51.

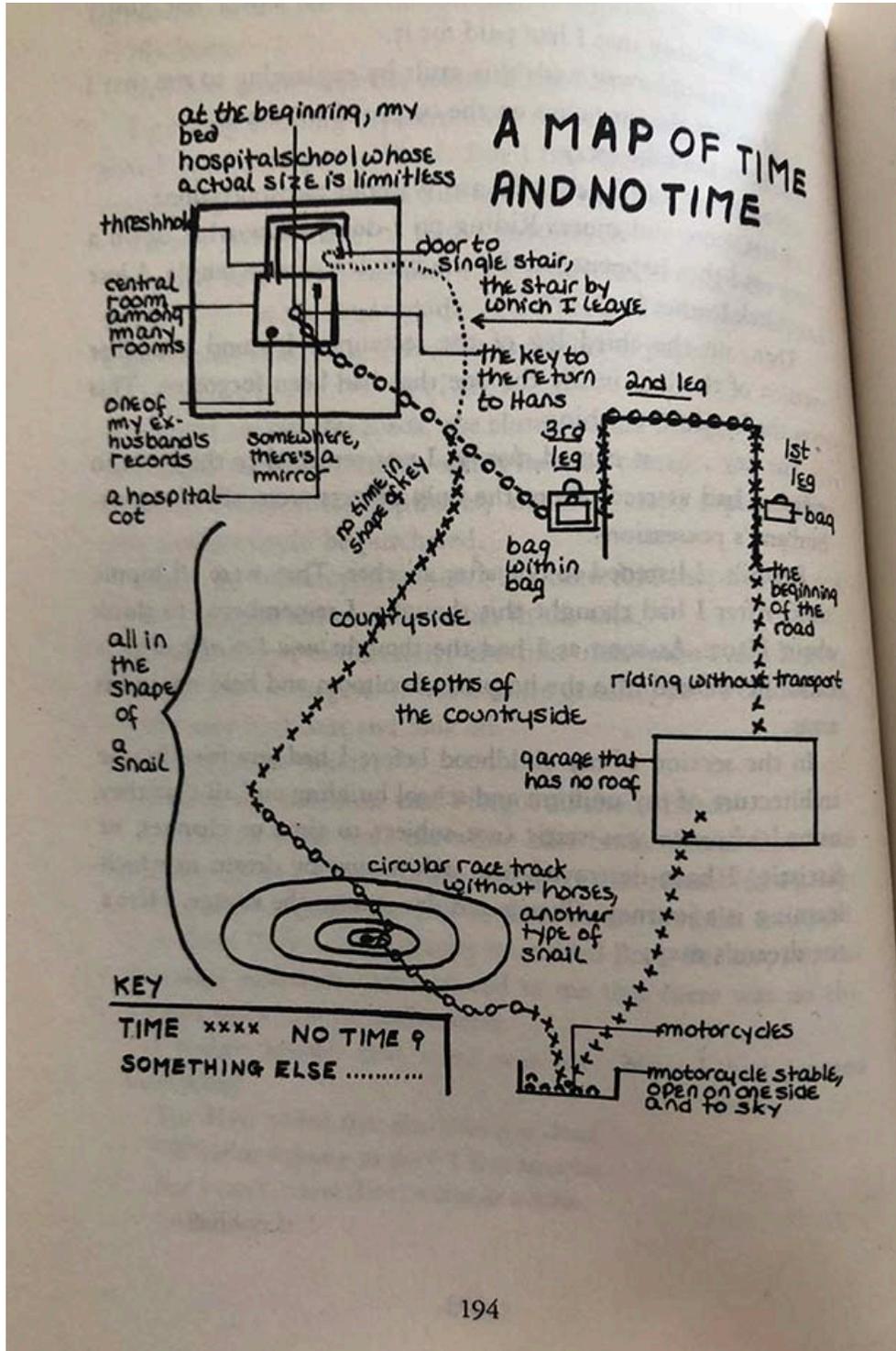


Figure 11: Kathy Acker, "A Map of Time and No Time," date unknown. In Kathy Acker, *My Mother: Demonology* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 194.

**KATHY / SUZY / COLETTE /
LAURE / B. / BEATRICE /
MIRANDA / DEMONIC
WOMEN/ CHINESE WOMEN /
WOMEN IN DEBT / WOMEN
WHO FAIL TO COMMIT
MATRICIDE / MATRICIDES /
SUICIDES / FEMICIDES /
WITCHES / MATER
SUSPIRIORUM / CLAIRE / ...**

Figure 12: Anja Kirschner, "My A-C-K-E-R: Demonology," 2018. Slide from the performance lecture.
Courtesy of the artist.

Chapter V: Interacting in Anamersion

Examining Zürn's *House of Illnesses* provided coordinates for an anamersive approach to mapping immersion, and Acker's *Labyrinth* for navigating within it, which did not rely on a separation between an immersant and an immersive environment, but instead figured them in the process of their mutual production. Turning to Heartscape's interactive fiction games, the emphasis shifts to delineating anamersive modes of interaction within immersion. While high-end games franchises and VR simulations strive for more realistic and absorbing forms of technology-dependent sensory-motor immersion, Heartscape promotes a notion of *ecological interaction* over and against ecological validity in gaming.¹ Guided by their knowledge of damage and trauma, Heartscape's interactive fictions disrupt the mechanisms of temporal escape from reality or normalisation of trauma, which dominate mainstream game design and VREs.² They are primarily made for readers/players who have themselves been marginalised and traumatised, and remain oriented towards the formation of more liveable worlds, which necessarily must pass through the navigation of ongoing damage, most minimally by holding open a space where a form of processing or ecological interaction can occur. While Zürn and Acker implement spatialisation, navigation, and modes of "talking back" through algorithmic, anagrammatic, and anamorphic operations in non-computational formats, such as writing and drawing, Heartscape's work is primarily conducted in computational media. Their practice is contextualised within the history of early games design and the ways text-based games use language and computational code to construct game spaces and facilitate navigation within them. While Heartscape thus approximates the convergence of writing and mapping primarily in

¹ Supra Chapter I, 35.

² Supra Chapter I, 35-37.

digital rather than analogue media, like Zürn and Acker, all three nevertheless share certain concerns, motives, and sensibilities regarding the spatialisation of text and the navigation of damage in body-buildings and *body-scapes*. The meeting points of their practices provide additional coordinates for anamersive poetics and their elaboration in my own research-by-practice.

Terraforming

Heartscape is an artist, writer, and games designer whose interactive fictions are situated in algorithmic spaces with multiple dimensions, inflected by trauma. Heartscape's games and interactive fictions frequently return to the house, palace, or mansion, but also strike out for new geographies beyond these architectures.³ Referring to themselves as "dead swamp milf," echoing Zürn and Acker's preference for self-descriptions outside available identity and sex-gender categories, Heartscape, who identifies as nonbinary, defines the wider scope and ambition of their work as *terraforming*, by which they mean creating worlds that they can live in:⁴

I certainly view what I make as kind of terraforming. (...) I really hate this world and so when I make something I'm making something I can bear to live in. (...) Women like me, we don't have existing institutions or social safety nets we can really cleave onto. For a lot of people, even if specific things fail them, they know that they have a place in the world on at least a vague level, but we don't even have that. And I think it can be really draining to kind of trick yourself into thinking that one will ever be accepted by the world. So yeah, I just want a place where we can live.⁵

³ For examples, see Heartscape's games *With Those We Love Alive* (2014), accessed 20 October 2022, <https://xrafstar.monster/games/twine/wtwla/>; *almanac of girlswampwar territory & the girls who swim as fertilizer through the warm soil cloaking the roots of the glorious tree of eugenics* (2018), accessed 20 October 2022, <https://porpentine.itch.io/almanac>; and *Quest of Mansion 64: Ferment Down and Clover* (2019), accessed 20 October 2022, https://xrafstar.monster/games/2d/quest_of_mansion/.

⁴ Porpentine Charity Heartscape, "Bio," accessed 20 October 2022. <https://xrafstar.monster/cv.html>.

⁵ Alexander Iadarola, "Interview with Game Designer Porpentine Charity Heartscape," *Mask*, 29 May 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20210506000828/http://maskmagazine.com/the-greatest-hits-issue/work/porpentine-charity-heartscape-reprise>. In an Instagram exchange with Heartscape from 1 August 2023 they have stated: "There is nothing to suggest that I am a woman. I have not categorized myself as such, even if I have used playful language in many random places. I am nonbinary. Stuff like that interview, it was just something I had to say due to cultural

When the house, palace, or mansion appears in Heartscape's games, drawings, and writing, it is ambivalently figured as a place of horror, but also as a space of intimacy and mutation. As they state in one of their regular blog posts:

I keep returning to the mansion as a central all-encapsulating landscape, a kind of residential wilderness where all dramas and follies can play out to their most fermented conclusion.⁶

What is summarily referred to here as Heartscape's *Horror Mansions* (though they can also be apartments, palaces, and cities) are game architectures and environments for encountering and recalibrating traumatic events and patterns, born of sexual abuse and anti-trans and anti-nonbinary violence suffered in familial settings, foster homes, and shelters, as well as in queer safe spaces, and enabled by a myriad of generic brutalisms from cultural, political, and socioeconomic exclusion to discriminatory and deadly medical and eugenic practices.⁷ For Heartscape, who, unlike Zürn and Acker, was not assigned female at birth, the house as a technology for shaping female sex-gender holds an added dimension of torture and horror that opens up on "disposability from a trans fem perspective."⁸ But in its most minimal form, it is also a space in which "weird women with cocks who are exiled from society" will cradle each other through episodes of post-traumatic stress, as in Heartscape's self-described "post-anime

pressure and discrimination against nonbinary identity. Sources like that from the nascent start of my career will have inaccuracies because of the intense violence and censorship in my country."

⁶ Heartscape, "Dumb Drawings." Patreon. *Porpentine Are Creating EVERYTHING* (blog), 25 January 2019. <https://www.patreon.com/posts/dumb-drawings-24207171>.

⁷ Heartscape, "Hot Allostatic Load," 11 May 2015. <https://thenewinquiry.com/hot-allostatic-load/>.

⁸ Heartscape, "Hot Allostatic Load."

sapphic gurowave trauma-romance” *Psycho Nymph Exile* (2017), published in print and PDF format, with additional multimedia content that can be accessed through her website.⁹

The *Horror Mansion* in games design

While Zürn and Acker’s references are predominantly non-computational, Heartscape’s *Horror Mansions* are memetic architectures passed along from the early days of games design, in which the haunted house provided an elementary layout for navigation-based gaming in the survival horror genre. Initially implemented as text-based games using no or rudimentary graphics, haunted houses feature in *Adventure 3: Haunted Mansion* and *Mystery House* (both 1980), *Haunted House* (1981), *Ghost Manor* (1983) and *Sweet Home* (1989), and are a staple of many other early games [see **Figure 13, 120**]. In the context of gaming history, the haunted house is thus a hybrid architecture in which the anachronisms of Gothic horror meet the technical affordances of early games design. It offers itself as an economic, operable, self-enclosed game space, prior to the arrival of computational means that make contemporary open-world exploration increasingly possible and prevalent, and still remains a favoured architecture for horror and mystery games today.

Narration as navigation

Modes of writing, drawing, and mapping frequently converge in Heartscape’s practice, as they do in Acker and Zürn’s, and even more so since game design depends on a combination of those elements. However, there is also a significant shift: while Zürn and Acker’s hand-drawn maps push narrative into navigation, Heartscape’s writing is so ensconced in the world of

⁹ Donna Kazimarki, “Porpentine Charity Heartscape’s New Novella Is Science-Fiction About Living with Trauma and Slime Sex,” *East Bay Express*, accessed 29 November 2020. www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/future-poems-for-trashgender-girls/Content?oid=5040666.

games that it might be more accurate to say that they depart from the ubiquity of navigational logic in gaming and wrests a post-gamic narrative form from it. In other words, for Heartscape, who was born in 1987, gaming and anime (rather than literature and cinema) are the dominant media with which they grew up, and their writing comes from those places. In distinction from literature and cinema, narration in games is implicitly delegated to a function of navigation. This means that diegetic elements are designed to enable players to move through a game and execute actions within it. Even in games with complex and elaborate narratives, players tend to scan diegetic elements primarily for the navigational information they hold, and games design often encourages this by allowing players to skip over expanded narrative sections and return faster to the action-based core of games. Diegetic elements in games therefore function differently from their counterparts in literature and cinema, because they are designed to instigate concrete player actions. In a game, the mention of a “basement” will literally indicate a place that players must go to, while in literature and cinema, it conventionally induces ominous foreboding and/or signals the existence of something hidden, which can only be anticipated to be revealed in the set course of a text or film, but not actively sought out as a site.

Heartscape continues to work predominantly in the format of text-based games, and many of their interactive fictions are based on hypertext, with minimal use of lo-fi graphic elements. The main building blocks of their game environments are thus not images, as in Zürn and Acker’s hand-drawn maps, but rather navigational and actionable units of language. In the context of text-based games design, hypertext developed alongside and over parser, which requires players to type simple instructions in order to progress through a game. These can be as basic as typing “go left,” “right,” “north” or “east” **[also see Figure 13, 120]**. In the medium of the parser game, the spatialisation of narration is achieved in its most literal form, because text functions to point and move players through the game. Analysing this process from the player perspective, it is useful to compare the parser games themselves to the way their text-based environments are sometimes transposed back into hand-drawn maps by players **[see Figure**

14, 121, and Figure 15, 122]. I collected a number of such maps in order to think through shifts and affinities between the spatialisation of narration in gaming and the non-computational mappings of Zürn and Acker. In order to understand this process from a design perspective, it is instructive to look at preparatory game maps made by designers, as well as the design interfaces of the applications they use to create their games **[see Figure 16, 123].** These assorted mappings show how early interactive fiction games created conditions under which text and environment, or rather text as environment, could be technically realised. Under the influence of text-based games, players would train themselves to perceive text as actionable space. While many of these early game narratives and their mappings appear rudimentary and technical compared to the complexity of Zürn's *House of Illnesses* and Acker's *Dream Maps*, Heartscape's interactive fictions, which are indebted to both hypertext and parser-based games, achieve comparable levels of complexity. While Heartscape prefers to work with Twine, which operates with hypertext, the aesthetic influence of parser, with its more reduced vocabulary for text-based navigation, is also palpable in their work. As they explain:

Twine creates passages of words, which could be any kind of writing. Hyperlinks are just infinitely versatile. So while parser is created for spatiality, hypertext is suited to representing emotions and thoughts and more complicated things than mere physical space.¹⁰

In one of Heartscape's most popular hypertext games, *With Those We Love Alive* (short *WTWLA*, 2014), their skill in creating gaming environments that evoke complex, multidimensional, fictional, and psychological spaces with minimal technical means can be seen fully at work. In *WTWLA*, a palace forms the focal point of a horrific, residential landscape, which is constructed through text only **[see Figure 17, 124].** Navigating through the game space of *WTWLA* requires clicking on hyperlinked words. Players must circle between the

¹⁰ Finch Kaye, "Beautiful Weapons," *The New Inquiry*, 25 June 2013. <https://thenewinquiry.com/beautiful-weapons/>.

palace and adjacent locations where they have to execute repetitive tasks: waiting for the orders of an evil empress; crossing the garden to enter a workshop where they craft items for her use; returning to their chambers to rest and apply hormones. It is through the minimal number of elements and their repetition that the palace, the workshop, and the garden gradually start to unfurl into a multidirectional narrative environment. A carefully orchestrated economy of repetition with variation here allows for an iterative expansion of the text as environment that approximates the sensation of moving from one location to another within a world whose map gradually takes shape in the player's mind.

An organism that can 'bind itself along an infinite number of spines'

Through *Heartscape's* practice, different conceptions of technology, hybridity, and the algorithmic that do not adhere to a linear developmental model and a strict separation of analogue and digital media come into view. These promote an understanding that new technological inventions do not automatically constitute progressive updates of prior technologies, but also can and do result in more narrow, regressive, and instrumental ones, which are usurping and displacing alternative technologies and their more expansive and emancipatory potentials. This is particularly apparent when it comes to issues of access to technology and the perpetuation of cisheteropatriarchal and racist stereotypes and biases in gaming and in computational data and code more broadly, affecting all areas of contemporary life.¹¹ *Heartscape's* practice is significant in this context, as it promotes and advocates for the greater participation of marginalised groups in games design, building a significant community

¹¹ For a consideration of data assemblages and coloniality with recourse to Wynter, see Ezekiel Dixon-Román, "Toward a Hauntology of Data: On the Sociopolitical Forces of Data Assemblages," *Research in Education* 98, no. 1 (August 2017): 44–58. Coloniality in/and computing were also the focus of the symposium *Recursive Colonialism: Artificial Intelligence & Speculative Computation*, Critical Computation Bureau, online, 2020. More concrete examples of coded bias in a contemporary North American context can be found in Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Crow* (Medford, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2019).

of trans* and nonbinary game designers and followers around their work. Heartscape's awareness of how software design and commercial logic shape the mainstream gaming industry and make it less accessible to marginalised groups is frequently thematised in their work and writing. Participation in high-end games design has become more and more dependent on advanced knowledge of coding, while personal computers are increasingly designed to make their internal workings less accessible to users. Heartscape seeks to undo this divide and the inequalities resulting from it, promoting a return to the ethos of earlier and more accessible software applications, and with them to an approach to computing "where the distinction between the 'use' and 'programming' of a computer has been weakened and awaits near-total erasure."¹² By championing lo-fi aesthetics and accessible software applications, Heartscape refuses to be shut out from creation and encourages others to do the same, especially those whose lives have been made exhausting and deadly:

A side-effect of being a minority is exhaustion, loss of time. I have time for Twine. The stories of people who would not write them for lack of time, lack of energy, can be told. When you remove the code barrier, people are free to experiment without burning out.¹³

In their text "Creation Under Capitalism and the Twine Revolution" (2012), Heartscape champions Twine, a free open-source software for making interactive narratives, for its user-friendly design, which does not require prior knowledge of coding. Referring to Twine's design interface in which sections of texts and their hyperlinks are graphically displayed as movable boxes connected by lines, Heartscape describes each Twine story as "a unique organism of information" which "binds itself and can bind itself along an infinite number of spines, extending

¹² Porpentine Charity Heartscape, "Creation Under Capitalism and the Twine Revolution," *Nightmare Mode*, 25. November 2012, <http://nightmaremode.thegamerstrust.com/2012/11/25/creation-under-capitalism/>.

¹³ Heartscape, "Creation Under Capitalism."

in every direction” [see Figure 18, 125].¹⁴ Harnessing the hybridity of text as environment and organism, both on a technical and imaginary level, their phrasing points to text production as a mutant formation that combines organic, technological, and phantasmal elements and extends itself in all directions, evocative of the organic-cum-architectural poetics of Zürn’s *House* and Acker’s *Labyrinth*. Heartscape asserts that the impact of a game does not depend on its production values, but on the imaginary and emotional landscapes it can conjure, trusting in the economic and immersive power of language: “When it comes to feeling something true, a handful of words can outweigh millions of dollars of investment in cutting-edge graphics.”¹⁵ They denounces the gatekeeping mechanisms of the gaming industry, as well as those of the arts and academia, which underwrite those of generic technology:

They want us to believe that our thoughts are not worth voicing. How the fuck is life worth living if the brains we have right now aren’t good enough? The audience/performer dynamic as it exists is built on capitalism, on academia, on a proper way of doing things defined by people who do not have our best interests at heart and indeed don’t care if we live or die. [...] We’re supposed to be crippled by our unawareness of the previous body of work which everyone knows but us, the required reading list of straight white dudes, and the Latin of academic theory.¹⁶

It is here that Heartscape’s notion of terraforming sets itself most clearly apart from and against the more generic forms of immersive world-building and its violences prevalent in mainstream gaming. For exclusion and exhaustion also create the desire to escape from unbearable conditions, which in turn is exploited by the gaming industry.

¹⁴ Heartscape, “Creation Under Capitalism.”

¹⁵ Heartscape, “Creation Under Capitalism.”

¹⁶ Heartscape, “Creation Under Capitalism.”

Ecological interaction over the immersive pull of flow

Mainstream games design aims for increasingly more totalising forms of technology-dependent immersion in order to capitalise on players focus and time through inducing flow states, which can lead to hours and hours spent in front of the screen. According to the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, who elaborated the concept of flow in the 1970s, these states are characterised by intense absorption and the pleasure of losing oneself in an activity.¹⁷ Flow, together with navigation, is a key aesthetic principle of games, VR, and social media and the optimal state for their consumption. As Jay David Bolter writes:

The user becomes part of the event loop that drives the action ... [she] not only experiences flow, she actually becomes part of the program's flow.¹⁸

Against the immersive pull of flow, *Heartscape* proposes the aesthetic principle of ecological interaction:

I do love games. I think about them all the time, and they inform a huge part of my aesthetic. But the game industry tries to make something that someone can play forever. What they're manufacturing is the promise that you will not have to consider the ruinous passage of time, if you just lock yourself inside a game. A lot of what I make is so janky and short, pretty directly about being trapped as time passes, marking away the days, so those pieces kind of invert and unsettle that structure. It's an unstable fantasy, it spits you back out and hopefully you had an interesting ecological interaction with it.¹⁹

Many of the most popular immersive mainstream games can take days and even weeks to play or are potentially open-ended. In contrast, *WTWLA*, one of *Heartscape*'s longest hypertext

¹⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

¹⁸ Jay David Bolter, "How the Videogame Aesthetic Flows into All of Culture," *Wired*, 5 July 2019. www.wired.com/story/how-the-videogame-aesthetic-flows-into-all-of-culture.

¹⁹ Chan, "Porpentine Charity *Heartscape* Talks about Her Works in the 2017 Whitney Biennial."

games, takes about one hour of playing time. While *WTWLA* also builds through repetitive actions, it foregrounds their repetitive nature, making players aware that time is passing by making them go through periods of waiting in the game, where nearly nothing happens. At decisive points, players are asked to draw sigils on their skin (for “new beginnings,” “severings” etc.), marking their passage through the game on their physical bodies [see Figure 19, 126]. By virtue of these instructions the screen-based game viscerally seeps into and connects to the AFK world of the players, weaving them into a continuous but unstable loop of actions oscillating between screen and skin. *WTWLA* is further punctuated by passages in which players are instructed to do breathing exercises and are given a choice about how often they repeat these. Both the breathing exercises and the drawing of sigils are integral to the game, but also serve to remind players of their own bodies and stress levels, allowing them to process the interactive fiction they participate in according to their capacities. While the breathing exercises in *WTWLA* are reminiscent of therapeutic and meditative practices designed to cope with anxiety and panic by soothing the body’s automatic stress responses, the drawing of sigils harks back to practices of symbolisation, manifestation, and the making of spells, associated with witchcraft and magical healing rituals. The resurgence of magical and body-based therapeutic methods within queer communities with significant exposure to violence and trauma stems from justified antagonisms towards established psychiatric, psychotherapeutic, and psychoanalytic practices, which historically categorised non-cisgender normative bodies as anomalous and pathological. It is also based on research showing that conversation-based forms of therapy can be inadequate when it comes to treating trauma, and can even re-traumatise sufferers, while body-based and combined approaches are more appropriate.²⁰ In a

²⁰ Combined approaches to treating trauma were popularised by the best-selling book *The Body Keeps the Score*, among others. Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2014).

sense, *WTWLA* offers such a combined approach in the form of a game. It is not only the insertion of such therapeutic and magical elements, or their janky aesthetics, which enables what *Heartscape* refers to as ecological interaction. It is also the immense sincerity of pain and of terraforming, as they coincide in their work, and are held alongside each other, that inverts and unsettles the structure of conventional gaming franchises, which capitalise on risk-free immersion in violent scenarios. Instead of facilitating absorption in game-worlds that replicate the generic logics of survival and further acclimatise players to post-apocalyptic and colonial brutalisms on earth or in space, *Heartscape*'s work disrupts the conduits and feedback loops between damage and its normalisation.²¹ They create carefully calibrated spaces for complexity and difficulty without smoothing over damage or turning it into a form of entertainment. By acknowledging damage as damage, *Heartscape* facilitates differential ways of mapping, navigating, and traversing the conditions that produce it, and the way these materialise in and as bodies and environments. Their work shares Acker and Zürn's concern for preserving space for an encounter with bodies and their languages that cannot be foreclosed with recourse to "ordinary language." In an interview, *Heartscape* remarks that if people could more easily talk about their work "it would mean it wasn't about the unspoken things that I care about, or the slimy, decomposed things."²² The interviewer, Alexander Iadarola, then asks *Heartscape*:

AI: What's interesting to you about making work where language has an uncertain, or devalued role? PCH: Well, I mean, if people already had the answers there wouldn't be a therapeutic value to it. AI: What do you think makes a therapeutic work successful? PCH: I don't really think about success. I think with therapy you have to make a lot of space. You can't force people. A lot of therapy is providing stimulus and then listening to that. There's kind of a lot of space in my hypertext where there's just this passage of time where you can hear your own thoughts. There's also this looming dread on the horizon.²³

²¹ *Supra* Chapter I, 36.

²² Iadarola, "Interview with Game Designer Porpentine Charity *Heartscape*."

²³ Iadarola, "Interview."

For people with brain damage

Heartscape's notion of the therapeutic does not seek to normalise traumatic events through their simulated repetition, closing any interpretative space around them. Their games and writing invert the curative passage from real to virtual event, widening it out and making it multidirectional, instead of narrowing it down to the point of closure. This is perhaps best illustrated through their novella *Psycho Nymph Exile*, in which Heartscape, who refers to themselves as "trashbrained," strives for a form of writing that would be adequate to living with trauma and damage and the way they materialise in bodies and language.²⁴ According to Heartscape, *Psycho Nymph Exile* came out of the question of life after damage, which links their thematic concerns to those of Zürn's *The House of Illnesses* and Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*. As they state:

I'm interested in bodies that no longer have the thing that was supposed to be their primary reason for living...A crystal, a womb, reflexes, membership in an institution. 'Useless' women. What they are left with is themselves. How frightening.²⁵

In *Psycho Nymph Exile*, Heartscape seizes on risk-free depictions of violence in gaming and anime and injects trauma back into them, thus inverting and unsettling habituation to their brutalisms. Their protagonists, "a disgraced biomech pilot and an ex-magical girl" basically enact what would happen if avatars and anime characters such as Sailor Moon could suffer from trauma as a result of the fantastical battles they are made to fight.²⁶ While animated,

²⁴ Kazimarki, "Porpentine Charity Heartscape's New Novella Is Science-Fiction About Living with Trauma and Slime Sex." In this interview, Heartscape states: "I want a book that's more legible for people with brain damage...so that it doesn't have to be this punishing experience."

²⁵ Kai Cheng, "No World For Us: Broken Girls and Embodied Trauma in Porpentine's *Psycho Nymph Exile*," *Audiostraddle*, 7 March 2017. www.audiostraddle.com/no-world-for-us-porpentine-psycho-nymph-exile-364589/.

²⁶ Porpentine Charity Heartscape, *Psycho Nymph Exile* (London: Arcadia Missa Publications, 2017).

digital, and algorithmic bodies cannot be damaged like physical ones, Heartscape's recourse to trauma defines a point of connection rather than disconnection between them.²⁷ Refiguring anime and computer game characters through the damaged protagonists of their novella, shows them as traumatised by their creation, as much as the reader is traumatised by Heartscape's. With this move, Heartscape instigates a mutual being thrown out of risk-free immersion, into a much wider field of anamersive bleed, which encompasses both fictional and historical worlds and the feedback loops circulating through them. *Psycho Nymph Exile's* protagonists are affected by a mysterious illness called despair syndrome with temporal purge (DSTP), which brings forth a myriad of colours that are used to fill a "vast pillar made of rainbow shards" in another dimension, a technology for ensuring the survival of their own [see Figure 20, 127].²⁸ The existence and proliferation of DSTP upholds that world and its violent order, at the expense of those it afflicts. The perceived proximity between a violent world and what that world defines, manages, and exploits as pathological responses to it links the tenor of Heartscape's novella with Zürn's *House of Illnesses* and her accounts of her hospitalisations. In both Zürn and Heartscape's texts, established medical authorities are mocked for the patriarchal and sexist diagnostics they offer.²⁹ For Heartscape as for Zürn, the abandonment of a notion of cure within the matrix that produces illnesses equals a commitment to and necessity for a different use of language, and, with that, the modification of codes-made-flesh. While Zürn's preferred form is the oracular anagram, Heartscape's writing is informed by the languages of gaming, anime, and

²⁷ This point of connection is expanded by Matteo Pasquinelli, who elaborates the crucial role the notion of trauma played in cybernetics, and the changed ways in which it continues to inflect augmented intelligence today. Matteo Pasquinelli, ed., *Alleys of Your Mind: Augmented Intelligence and Its Traumas* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2015), 10. https://meson.press/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/978-3-95796-066-5_Alleys_of_Your_Mind.pdf.

²⁸ Heartscape, *Psycho Nymph Exile*, 6.

²⁹ Heartscape, *Psycho Nymph Exile*, 26.

artificially generated text, which mutate literary form. Preserving some of the interactivity of *WTWLA* (with its sigils and breathing exercises) in *Psycho Nymph Exile*, Heartscape gives readers opportunities to come away from and return to the main text by various routes. To this end, the novella also functions as “a multimedia survival kit for another dimension” and is interspersed with images and links to hypertext poems, mini-games and a 3D poemscape that can be accessed via Heartscape’s website.³⁰ Comparable to Acker and Zürn’s texts as multidirectional environments which include texts, drawings, and maps, Heartscape’s links to related online materials expand the book form and introduce ecological forms of interaction.

Anamersive multimedia formats

Zürn, Acker and Heartscape’s strategies for expanding text as environment through the inclusion of maps and other materials provide coordinates for anamersive poetics, where such strategies are transposed to postcinematic moving image and installation. Anamersive multimedia installations create forms of immersion that are dependent on movement between different media (such as moving image, drawing, and sculptural elements) and the attendant modes of perception stimulated by them. They carefully choreograph and calibrate the way these modes of perception carry over from one element to another, inflecting perception in particular ways. While immersive gaming and VR simulations require the use of a single display technology such as a screen or VR headset, and thus privilege one mode of perception over others, anamersive multimedia installations produce immersive environments by more dispersed and often more economical means. My multimedia installations *New Genres* (Anja Kirschner, 2018) and *UNICA* (Anja Kirschner, 2020) extended immersive environments from VR

³⁰ Porpentine Charity Heartscape, “Porpentine Charity Heartscape Website,” accessed 14 March 2022. <https://slimedaughter.com/nymph/>.

and moving image to the architectures and surroundings of the exhibition spaces.³¹ Through choreographed movement among different media, these hybrid installations provoke larger mutations of perception to take place, making it possible to perceive a historical city centre as an architectural simulation of a fake past (in *New Genres*), a building as a body, and a forest as a destroyed city (in *UNICA*). Through their more dispersed arrangement, anamersive multimedia installations distinguish themselves from the immersive format of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which each element is orchestrated in such a way as to harmonise with and amplify all the others, evoking the illusion of a synthetic whole.³² While the *Gesamtkunstwerk* format wants to enthrall and overwhelm, imposing its totalising vision onto its audience, anamersive multimedia installations operate through ellipses, friction, and transposition. They produce moments of disorientation in which different modes of perception are made to overlap, but these are always unstable and orientated towards creating a space for ecological forms of encountering, engaging, and navigating within immersion.

‘Smearred into the environment’, reverse anamorphosis

In provoking shifts from one patterning of perception to another and exploiting and expanding the intervals of their overlap and bleed, anamersive approaches as elaborated in the multimedia installations *New Genres* and *UNICA* offer a smeared or anamorphic perspective onto their materials and the patterns repeated and variegated within them. The figure of the smear derives from an interview with Heartscape in which they state:

A lot of my games have been kind of submerged...They're written from a very dissociated perspective where the point of view is almost smeared into the environment.

³¹ Supra Chapter I, 46-47.

³² Such a *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach is often taken in immersive Live Action Role Playing Games (LARPs). Lars Konzack, “The Wunderkammer-Gesamtkunstwerk Model: A Framework for Role-Playing Game Analysis and Design,” 2015, 8.

They have trouble conceiving of themselves as a person.³³

The phrase “smeared into the environment” and Heartscape’s attendant difficulty with assuming and representing a bounded body or self resonates strongly with the poetics of Zürn’s *House* and Acker’s *Labyrinth*, and provides further coordinates for anamersive poetics. Gathering visual material for “smeared perspectives,” I amassed and analysed a small collection of anamorphic images of portraits distorted into landscapes. Anamorphosis is a painterly technique developed during the Renaissance, in which a perspectively distorted image can only be viewed “correctly” from a specific vantage point or when reflected in a curved surface. When viewed from any other point, anamorphoses appear as smears, sometimes skilfully integrated in landscapes **[see Figure 21 and Figure 22, 128]**.

Making an analogy between anamorphosis and the way in which generic forms of representation operate, versus the “smear in the environment” perspectives of Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape, articulates the way the anamorphic works in anamersive poetics. Figuratively speaking, the bounded appearance of a person (*Man*, or the *Subject*) is an effect of the governing systems of representation and their technologies (legal, medical, linguistic, computational etc.), which keep bundling this entity into a legible and valorised unit from the vantage point of its genre, which over-represents itself as universal (*the* perspective, not a perspective). When viewed from other vantage points (in particular from Wynter’s demonic ground), *Man* changes appearance from a bounded entity to a violent process encompassing biological and metabiological, human and nonhuman elements. These have temporalities that exceed individual lifespans and manifest themselves materially in organic bodies, and as such cannot be abolished “in Theory,” as Jenny Nachtigall observes:

³³ Muncy, “Porpentine’s New Twine Game Isn’t Just a Twine Game.”

Nobody likes the modern subject, but arguably that is beside the point. As a product of the class, raced, and gendered structure of capitalism, and as its conduit, the subject cannot simply be abolished “in Theory.”³⁴

The smeared or anamorphic perspectives developed by Heartscape, Acker, and Zürn arise from their anomalous positions within the genre *Man*, and their antagonisms with it. They do not create a new ground, but rather a new form of spatialisation. These smeared or anamorphic perspectives can be likened to what Maxi Wallenhorst describes as a “formal infrastructure,” produced by dissociation:

Dissociation does not only take shape as a relatively distinct episode one is able to leave behind by being melodramatic—or not. Skillfully abstracted away from experience, it can also become its own style. A style in which the fact that there are parts which don’t seem reconcilable indicates neither romanticist fragmentation nor pseudo-deconstructive relativism. Their non-integration is not reduced to a formal gesture but becomes a formal infrastructure in its own way—that can hold, for example, the beautiful and the analytic, in their disparity, without collapsing one into the other or approximating them in a collage.³⁵

Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape’s spatialisation of narrative forms and their becoming navigational and interactive provides key coordinates for anamersive poetics. While Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape’s work shows different but related approaches to text as environment through book and game formats, my own research-by-practice elaborates the possibilities for anamersive postcinematic moving image and multimedia installations. Focusing on Heartscape’s notion of ecological interaction within immersion, and its relation to trauma and its processing,

³⁴ Jenny Nachtigall, “The Modern Subject, A Dead Form of Living: Notes on the Aesthetics of (a Fractured) Vitalism,” in *Postapocalyptic Self-Reflection* (Vienna: Westphalie Verlag, 2019), 74.

³⁵ Maxi Wallenhorst, “Like a Real Veil, Like a Bad Analogy: Dissociative Style and Trans Aesthetics,” *E-Flux Journal* “trans | fem | aesthetics,” no. 117 (April 2021).

anamersive poetics is further defined as differential spatialisations of immersion itself and distinguished from the ways in which immersive environments are constructed in technology-dependent forms of immersion in gaming and VR. Anamersive multimedia installation provides a speculative form or infrastructure for producing immersive environments that can hold different elements without collapsing them. They de-border the bounded format of immersion within a game or VR simulation and expand it across different media elements and the exhibition space and its surroundings. A choreographed passage through several media and their attendant modes of perception exploits the disorientating bleed between such modes, stimulating and generating mutational forms of perception. These afford smear-like, anamorphic perspectives, not organised around a single, privileged point of view, but according to an oriented logic that gives a distributed immersive environment cohesion and intention through movement (e.g., Zürn's body and its institutionalisation as one formation, Acker's multiple "I's"). As a speculative form of immersion which refigures organic, technological and phantasmal elements, anamersion opens up differential notions of technology, in which art practices do not follow technological developments, but inform them and constitute technologies in their own right.

Illustration (Chapter V)

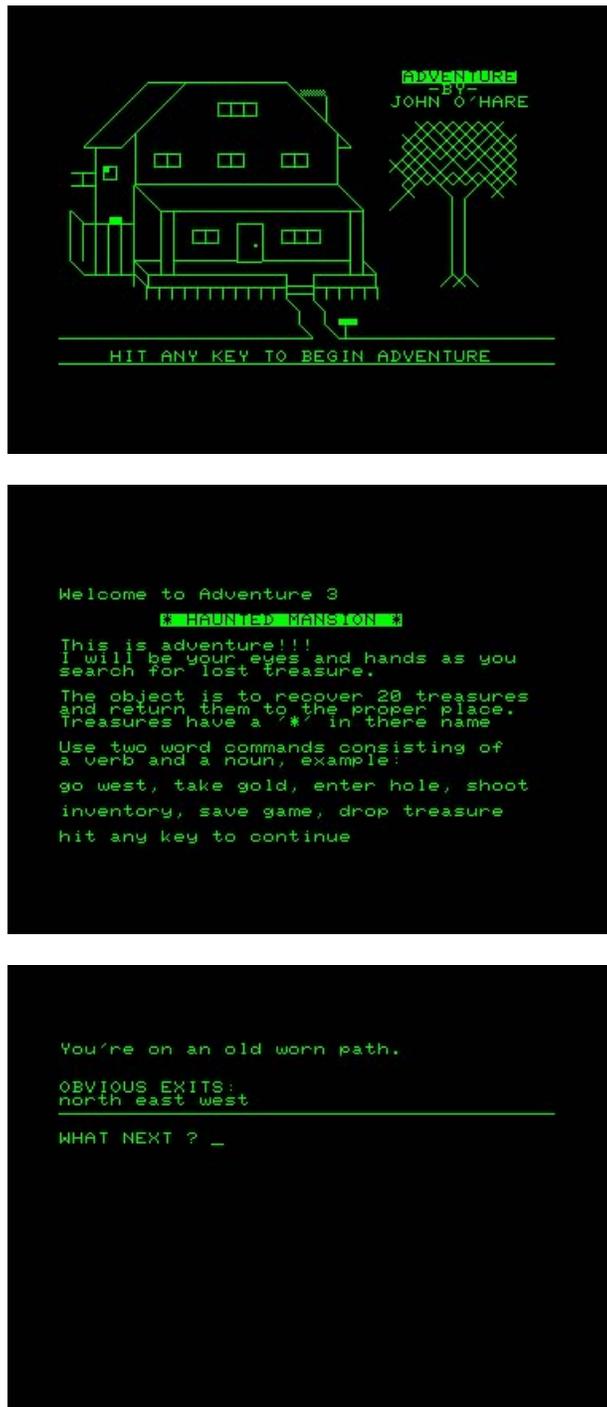


Figure 13: John O'Hare, "Adventure 3: Haunted Mansion," 1980. Video game. Source: <https://www.mobygames.com/game/pet/adventure-3-haunted-mansion/screenshots>. Accessed 20 October 2022.

```
Living Room                               Score: 15   Moves: 25
>go west
Living Room
You are in the living room. There is a doorway to the east, a wooden door with
strange gothic lettering to the west, which appears to be nailed shut, a
trophy case, and a large oriental rug in the center of the room.
Above the trophy case hangs an elvish sword of great antiquity.
A battery-powered brass lantern is on the trophy case.

>take rug
The rug is extremely heavy and cannot be carried.

>open case
Opened.

>take sword
Taken.

>take lantern
Taken.

>go north
You can't go that way.
```

Figure 14: Tim Anderson, Marc Blank, Bruce Daniels, and Dave Lebling, "Zork I: The Great Underground Empire," 1981. Videogame. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNN4VPIRBJ8>. Accessed 20 October 2022.

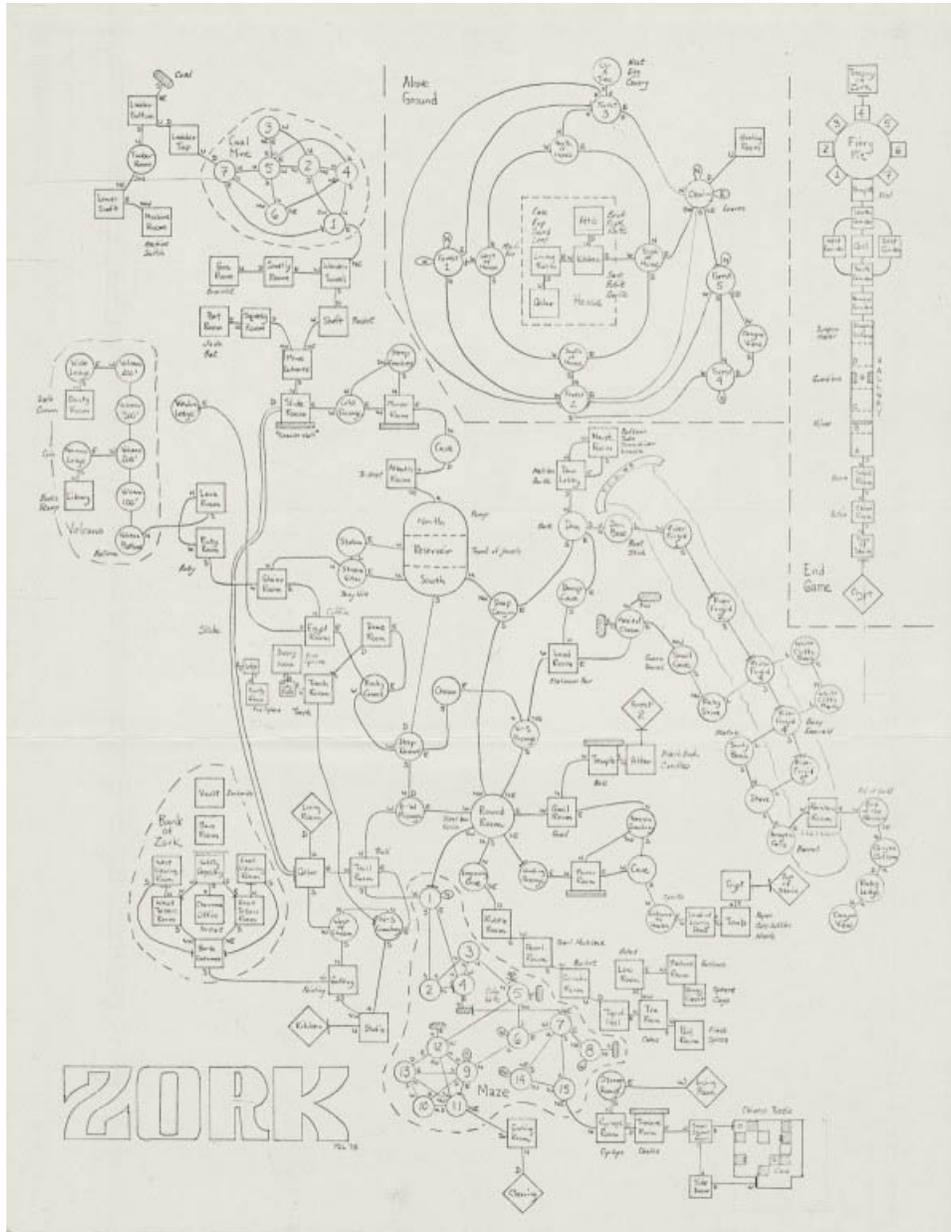


Figure 16: Dave Lebling, "Zork," c.1977. Hand-drawn map. Source: <https://i2.wp.com/blog.marksimon.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/mainframe-zork-artifacts-map.jpg>. Accessed 20 October 2022.

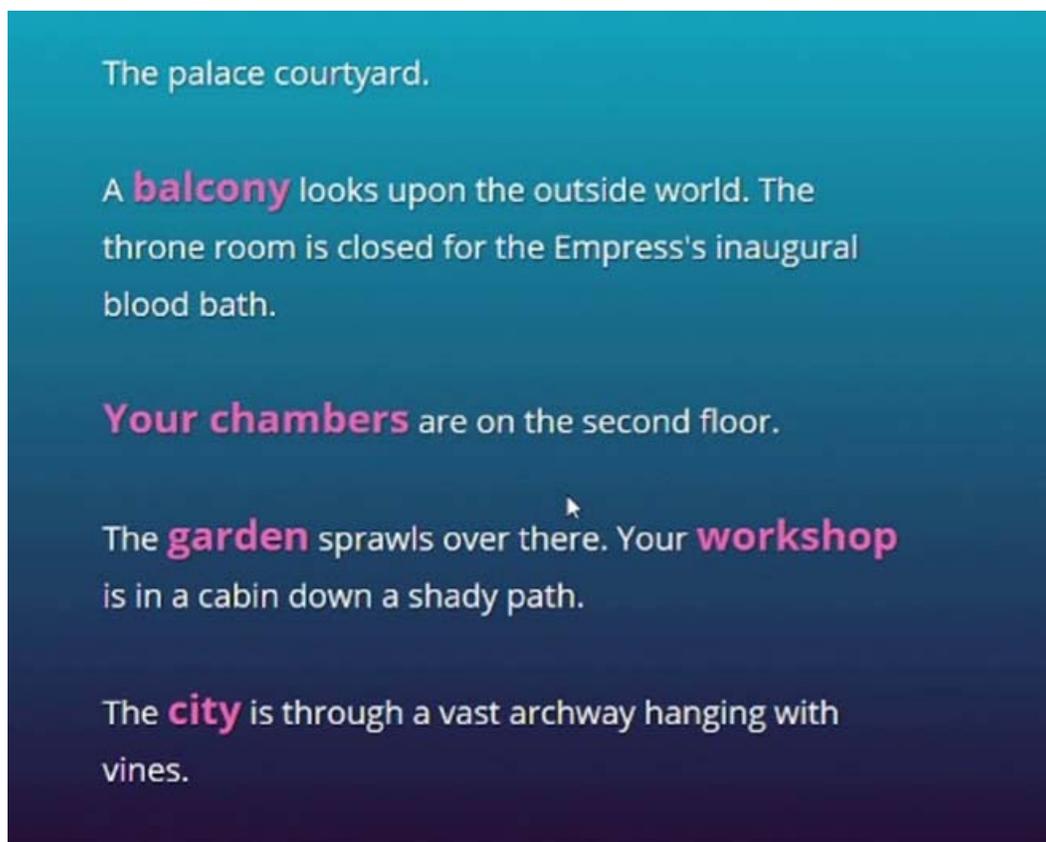


Figure 17: Porpentine Charity Heartscape, "With Those We Love Alive," 2014. Interactive hypertext narrative game made in Twine. Source: <https://xrafstar.monster/games/twine/wtwa/>. Accessed 20 October 2022.

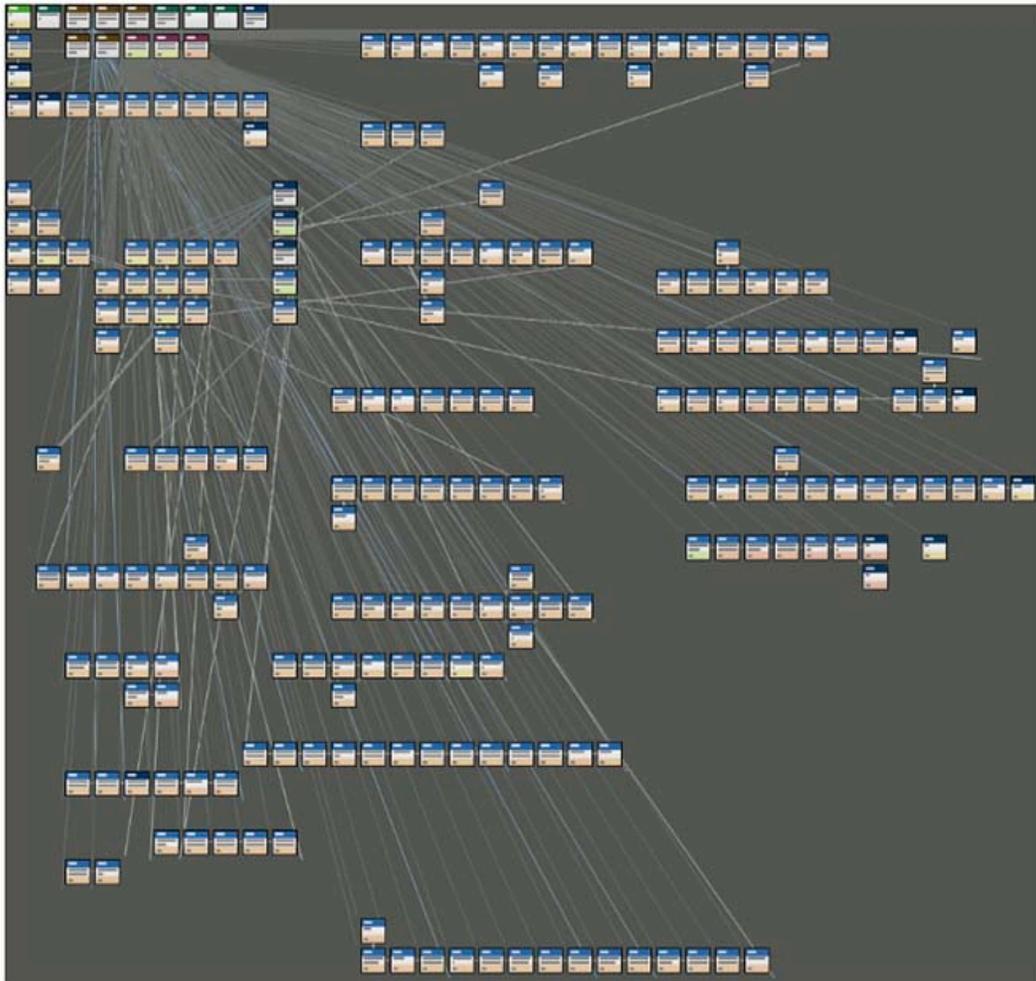


Figure 18: Porpentine Charity Heartscape, "With Those We Love Alive," 2014. Twine Map showing the Twine interface with individual hypertext segments and their connections. Source: <https://twinegarden.tumblr.com/image/106099201567>. Accessed 21 October 2020.

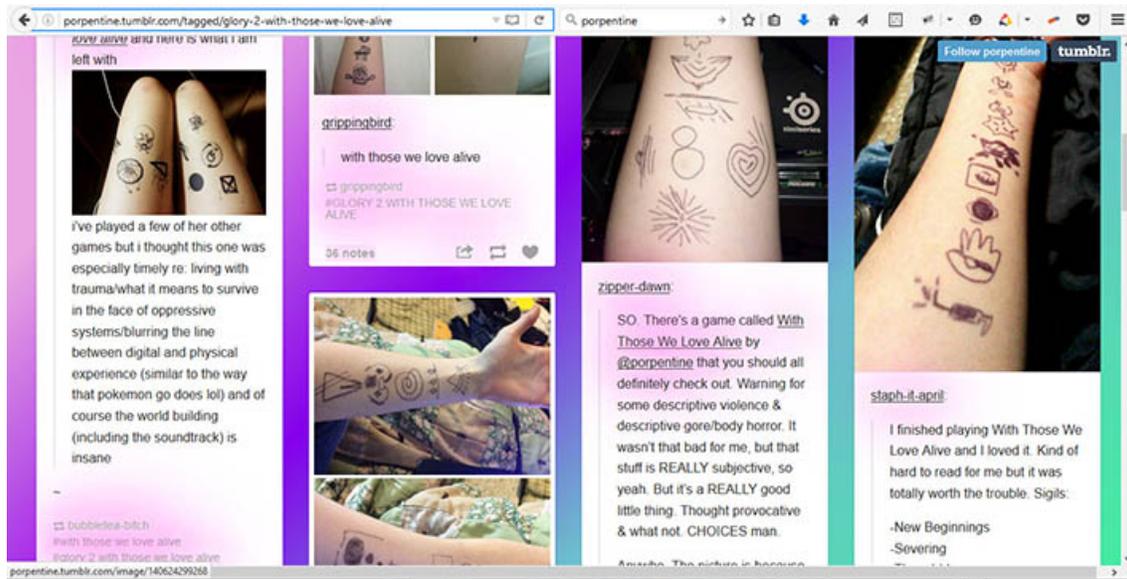


Figure 19: Various, photographs of hand-drawn sigils uploaded by players of "With Those We Love Alive."
Source: <https://elmcip.net/sites/default/files/media/work/images/por3.jpg>. Accessed 3 March 2022.



DSTP Symptoms

Future death¹

Temporal displacement²

Life-death³

Psycho-irradiation⁴

Pheromone poisoning⁵

-
1. The part of the brain that has a future is destroyed.
 2. Sudden and violent memory recall, brain shuts down against this annihilatory doom, memory-forming glands are jettisoned, the person's soul leaves their body, or another soul enters their body, and they are forced to act out its haunting.
 3. The sensation of being dead while still alive.
 4. The entire structure of your body changes down to the genetic code, twisted in the hands of god. Hair falls out and grows where it never grew before. Skin tone shifts by a degree. Mysterious rashes. Freckles shuffle their constellations. Skin hangs different. Depressed immune system. Mysterious pains. Crippling fatigue. And far more below the spectrum of observation.
 5. You will know.



Figure 21: Anamorphic painting of Prince Charles Edward Stuart. © West Highland Museum. Source: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/jacobite-1745/secret-portrait-object/>. Accessed 20 October 2022.



Figure 22: Anamorphic picture-puzzle with the head of King Ferdinand. c.1531/4. Woodcut printed from two blocks on three sheets © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Chapter VI: Anamersion

As demonstrated through an analysis of selected works by Unica Zürn, Kathy Acker, and Porpentine Charity Heartscape, immersive, algorithmic, and navigational approaches are not exclusive to computational media, though it is in gaming and VR that they find their fullest technological expression today. The spatialisation of text in Zürn's *House of Illnesses*, Acker's de-narrative, and Heartscape's interactive fictions also produces immersive environments, which are vastly different from computationally modelled worlds in mainstream gaming and VR, and do not produce the same forms of sensory-motor immersion that arise from the naturalistic depiction of three-dimensional space based on Euclidean geometry. Instead, they create complex multidimensional mappings of the ways in which technological, organic, and phantasmal elements converge and manifest in body-buildings and body-scapes. My own postcinematic moving image practice brings together aspects of both types of immersion in a frictional way to develop anamersion as a postcinematic poetics of immersion.

Navigation over montage

Anamersive poetics ruptures and mutates action-based and navigational forms of technology-dependent immersion in gaming and VR, which are emblematic of a more general tendency towards navigation.¹ The administration and surveillance of contemporary life increasingly relies

¹ Here, I am primarily referring to: Galloway, *Gaming*; Harun Farocki, "Parallel II," accessed 14 March 2022. <https://www.harunfarocki.de/installations/2010s/2014/parallel-ii.html>; Harun Farocki, "Computer Animation Rules" (Weimar: IKKM, 2014). <https://ikkm-weimar.de/publikationen/video-audio/ikkm-lectures/computer-animation-rules/>; Tom Holert, "Meshed Space: On Navigating the Virtual," in *Myths of the Marble*, ed. Alex Klein and Milena Hoegsberg ([publisher location? JH] Sternberg Press, 2018); and the conference series "Navigation Beyond Vision" (2019), co-organised by Tom Holert and Doreen Mende, with e-flux, and associated publications in *E-Flux Journal* (2019, 2020), as well as the MIT/Sternberg Press publication "Navigation Beyond Vision" (forthcoming), which explores the consequences of the rise of navigation in the postcinematic era for political interventions through art inspired by Farocki's thought.

on smart, networked, and interactive technologies, which create real-time and predictive simulations of the world, based on extensive data gathering, GPS mapping, and algorithmic analysis and evaluation. Based on the type and quantity of the information they are fed, and on the character of the algorithms trained to discern patterns and tendencies from such information, a field of possible choices and outcomes is established. Such computational processes do not so much produce narratives as they produce navigational mappings of self and world, which occlude what cannot be captured and converted into data. This navigational tendency is the subject of Harun Farocki's four-part video cycle *Parallel I – IV* (2012–2014). As the title indicates, Farocki investigates games in terms of their parallels with the management of contemporary life more broadly, understanding “the post-montage spaces of computer games as paradigmatic contemporary life-worlds that may be defined by an abyssal constructionism, the agency of which is a cause of ongoing struggle and contestation.”² Farocki's critical exploration of games and computer animations is driven by the contention that they do not capture the physical world in the way film cameras are able to do, but instead create model worlds, which are then “exhaustively explorable without montage.”³ Navigating through such model worlds in gaming and VR is usually presented through a continuous FPS or third-person perspective which is centred on the player's avatar and determined by its radius of vision and the affordabilities of the game world itself. In the video *Parallel II*, Farocki shows an avatar running over the edge of a finite game-space and falling through the vastness of a black screen. This scene, taken from a popular skateboarding simulation, is itself an ironic in-game nod to the constructed nature of computational space. Avatars do not fall out of game-spaces; rather, where gaming environments have preprogrammed limits, avatars hit invisible boundaries that

² Holert, “Meshed Space: On Navigating the Virtual,” 95.

³ Galloway, *Gaming*, 34.

prevent them from exiting the playable areas of a game. *Parallel II* includes multiple examples of avatars reaching such limits and bouncing off invisible, coded barriers.⁴ To extend Farocki's analysis, but also to complicate it for the present discussion of anamersion: one doesn't have to run to the edge of a game world to know that there are invisible barriers coded into it; neither do those barriers vanish in procedurally generated worlds—such as the space exploration game *No Man's Sky* (2020)—which are potentially infinite.⁵ In *No Man's Sky*, seemingly unimpeded player movement through an infinitely generated universe is actually organised around four narrow principal activities: exploration, survival, combat, and trading, which fall within the colonial logic dominating the genre of space exploration and fantasy games more broadly, and limit the possibilities of engagement from within.⁶ The distinction between the reproduction of a physical environment and the production of a simulated environment, and the critical powers of montage over navigation, which is so key to Farocki's argument, partially obfuscates the delineation of such codified limitations, because they can only be properly understood if these environments are conceived as forming complex feedback loops within larger life worlds, rather than occupying parallel spheres.

Immersion does not function like this for everybody

According to Farocki's analysis, the dominant player perspective in gaming coincides with a

⁴ In my VR installation *New Genres* (Anja Kirschner, 2018), this principle is visualised by creating a VR environment that is an exact replica of the exhibition space, and by marking such boundaries with fluorescent tape on the floor of the physical space, to give viewers a sense of their co-relation.

⁵ *No Man's Sky*, accessed 14 March 2022. https://store.steampowered.com/app/275850/No_Mans_Sky/.

⁶ Stefan Schubert, "Playing With, Not Against, Empires: Video Games and (Post)Colonialism," *U.S. Studies Online: Forum for New Writing*, 27 November 2020. <https://usso.uk/playing-with-not-against-empires-video-games-and-postcolonialism/>.

naive illusion of always being at the centre of the world, which is generated only for one's consumption. In the video *Parallel II*, the voiceover asks:

Does the world exist if I am not watching it? A child's viewpoint while taking long rides by train or car: everything that is passing by has been put there only for me, appearing out of the emptiness and then disappearing again into emptiness.⁷

While dynamic FPS and third-person avatar perspectives can and do reinforce a self-centred disposition, uncertain of the persistence of a/the world outside its purview, it is not the only form that player engagement can take. Being stuck inside or hovering just above the body of an avatar while navigating through a gaming environment can also produce forms of generative disorientation, and with it a renewed attentiveness to the malleability of perception and the naturalised codifications that run through virtual and physical spaces alike. Similarly, players may develop forms of engagement beyond the intentions of the game they are playing, instead of remaining within the game's own terms. The text *Runescape Teen Brothel*, written by stupid and illustrated by Charity (short for Porpentine Charity Heartscape), is an example in point.⁸ It describes the online encounter and ensuing friendship of two trans fem teenagers, who set up a brothel in the mediaeval fantasy MMO role-playing game *RuneScape*, and later loose each other's avatars in its desert. Such interventions within mainstream immersive gaming can and do produce forms of interaction and (dis-)identification, which are largely unforeseen and unintended from the perspective of the games' designers, even where they encourage more player-directed modification and in-game exploration. Thus, rather than being pressed into total identification with the logic of a constructed world, as Farocki fears, or the logic of survival, as

⁷ Farocki, "Parallel II."

⁸ stupid, *Runescape Teen Brothel*, accessed 14 March 2022. <https://porpentine.itch.io/runescape>.

Väliaho develops more comprehensively in *Biopolitical Screens*, what comes to the fore in such testimony is that anomalous player engagements cannot be those described by Farocki and Väliaho, because they cannot project themselves into being such subjects.⁹ While mainstream gaming may reinforce a self-centred, competitive, and survival-oriented player disposition, this remains a genre-specific formation open to some, by degree, and denied to or rejected by others, with differential life forms continuing to be generated alongside it, against it, and while sustaining damage from it. Anamersive poetics works with the generative disorientation that can arise from technology-dependent immersion in gaming and VR and speculatively fuse it with non-computational instantiations of more unstable, smeared, and multidimensional figurations of environments and bodies, including what cannot be converted into data and modelled computationally. Anamersive navigation proceeds in a traversal manner, where traversing is understood as crossing with difficulty and going against immersion in generic structurations, following oriented logics towards their own ends.

UNICA (2022)

Anamersive poetics is both instantiated and depicted in process by *UNICA*, in ways that have evolved and differ from earlier works such as *Riley* and *New Genres*. While the transposition from gameplay to *machinima*, pace *Riley*, and from VR to site-specific installation, pace *New Genres*, relied on the inclusion of computer graphics derived from mainstream gaming franchises, the multimedia installation *UNICA*, which combines moving image, sound, drawing, and sculptural elements, deliberately excludes computational 3D animations as seen in games, while continuing to reference them by other means, such as depicting a behind-the-scenes motion-capture process and choreographing camera movements and performances in ways

⁹ Supra Chapter I, 36.

that are derived from games and avatars. In doing so, *UNICA* opens up a space in which the perceptual, sensory-motor, and phantasmal patternings of technology-dependent immersion are depicted in the process of their production and mutation, rather than presented as a finished product. Instead of emphasising parallels between physical and simulated worlds, *UNICA* emphasises their hybridity and convergence, offering speculative figurations of the codifications and traumas running through and manifesting in and as bodies and environments. The title, *UNICA*, names a generative principle which animates the multimedia installation as a whole, derived primarily from an engagement with Unica Zürn's anagrams and her drawing "Plan of the House of Illnesses," Acker's oriented logic and Heartscape's notion of ecological interaction. This generative principle can be characterised by three main operations: repetition with variation (every scene within the work happens at least twice, with alterations); patterns and their modification (patterns are established and modified within and across the different elements of the installation); transposition of gaming aesthetics to moving image and soundtrack, which decouple audiovisual and sensory-motor immersion fused in active gameplay and enable perceptual shifts and anamersive forms of navigation.

The Video

The core element of *UNICA* is a 34-minute video, which interweaves scenes shot in three different settings: a Motion Capture Studio, a Forest and an Artist's Atelier. In the Motion Capture Studio, a strict correspondence between physical and computational space, modelled on Euclidean geometry, is established, while the Forest appears formed by natural processes and the Atelier focuses on artistic production based on visual association and the imaginary, before all three settings are woven together through a series of transpositions that unsettle the apparent distinctions between the technological, the organic, and the phantasmal. Its protagonists are an artist, UNICA A (Gabrielle Scharnitzky), and her daughter, a motion-capture

performer, UNICA B (Grete Gehrke). The action of the video begins and ends in the Artist's Atelier, where UNICA A is engaged in the production of drawings that depict intricate patterns connecting seemingly disparate anatomical, botanical, and technical forms resembling body parts, plants, and tubing [see **Figure 23, 147**]. These are based on my drawing *PATTERN#01b*, and the visual references collected during my research, which also feature as props [see **Figure 24, 148**].

The Motion Capture Studio

The action then shifts to the Motion Capture Studio, where UNICA B enacts a sequence of vignettes towards a stereotypical post-apocalyptic video game, establishing the technical process by which the movements of a performer are captured as data and used to animate a 3D model, based on Euclidean geometry [see **Figure 25, 149**]. These scenes are shot in an observational style, depicting different stages of the motion capture process. Bright markings on the studio floor outline the interior rooms of an abandoned house, in which UNICA B searches for clues and items for her survival, unfurling maps and notebooks and collecting weapons, batteries, and a petrol canister. UNICA B's performance on the motion capture stage is intercut with screen recordings of a software interface in which her bodily movements are mapped onto a manikin-like avatar labelled "Unica." In a further step, this data would then be used as the basis for naturalistic 3D animations, as seen in films and computer games. *UNICA* deliberately omits depicting such a finished end product. By focusing on the motion capture process rather than its outcome, attention is drawn to the sensibility of the performer, UNICA B, who must mentally superimpose a post-apocalyptic world onto an almost empty motion capture stage, aided only by basic instructions from off stage, outlines marked on the floor, and a few rudimentary props.

The Forest

This act of mental superimposition is then transposed to the Forest, where UNICA B repeats the same actions, with variations dictated by the change in location: her movements between the trees seem to be guided by invisible boundaries as she searches for and gathers small objects from the forest floor [see Figure 26, 150]. What she finds are not natural items, but domestic ones: shattered bricks, tiles, and crockery, concealed in the topsoil and in the roots of an upturned tree. Compared to the items she collects from the fictive house in the Motion Capture Studio, these are no longer of use, broken and decaying. Through UNICA B's actions and what they unearth, what appears as a natural landscape gradually registers as an artificial one.

UNICA B is on an overgrown *Trümmerberg* (debris mountain), called Teufelsberg, which is situated at the edge of Berlin. Created over a period of twenty-five years following World War II and rising approximately one hundred twenty metres above sea level, it was amassed from twenty-six million cubic metres of debris—roughly a third of the city's destroyed buildings—and planted over with a million trees.¹⁰ The transposition from the technical setting of the Motion Capture Studio to the artificial Forest, enacted through the figure of UNICA B, serves to open up a multidirectional and multidimensional field of convergences and feedback loops that connect post-apocalyptic game worlds to sites of historic violence and destruction. What is brought to the fore in this anamorphic transposition, which makes it possible to perceive the Forest as a destroyed city, speculatively achieved through postcinematic moving image, is a spatial, temporal, and material de-bordering of a projected post-apocalyptic future as already constituted by a catastrophic past.¹¹ What UNICA B performs in the Motion Capture Studio can

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Buried City, Unearthing Teufelsberg: Berlin and Its Geography of Forgetting* (London: Routledge, 2017), 92.

¹¹ For a related reflection on the de-bordering of time by nuclear war, see also Karen Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable," *New Formations*, no. 92 (1 September 2017): 56–86. <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:92.05.2017>.

be repeated in the Forest, with a meaningful difference. While in the studio, UNICA B collects a set of actionable objects stereotypically featured in games, such as a torch, a petrol canister, and a gun. In the forest she collects small pieces of debris, which cannot be used for in-game survival or chalked up as points in a score. Rather than reinforcing survival-oriented logic, the mutational transposition from the Motion Capture Studio to the Forest shifts emphasis to the logic of ongoing damage and the task of attending to and rupturing the codes of its artificial naturalisation and ongoing reproduction. UNICA B's performance in the Motion Capture Studio is presented as a form of *training*, which does not transfer to the physical world according to the logic of ecological validity, but according to the logic of ecological interaction. While ecological validity indicates that skills acquired through naturalistic simulations generally transfer well to the physical context, creating a parallelism between virtual and physical environments, ecological interaction attends both to their convergences and to their meaningful and generative differences, enabling ways of processing damage, rather than reproducing, normalising, or naturalising violence. Ecological interaction drives analogy to failure by loosening the codified correspondences between naturalistic simulations and generic conceptualisations of self and world, and instead opens up a space for generative detachments and refigurations. The mutational transposition from the Motion Capture Studio to the Forest is further accentuated by a switch in camera techniques. In contrast to the sober, observational style of the Motion Capture Studio scenes, the scenes in the Forest are almost exclusively shot with a camera drone and helmet-mounted camera, which was worn by the performer Grete Gehrke. These two distinct camera perspectives emulate FPS and third-person player perspectives in games and make it possible to see the Forest scenes as if UNICA B simultaneously appeared both as herself and as her avatar. The ensuing ambiguity is further enhanced by the way her movements in the Forest are modelled on those of avatars, a performance procedure devised together with the choreographer Zee Hartman. Grete Gehrke here walks, runs, crouches, and turns in a regular and angular way, which mimics the preprogrammed movement patterns of

avatars in games. The video thus enables viewers to see UNICA B as *both* unique *and* multiple in the same instant, *both* associated *and* dissociated from her avatar/herself.

The Atelier

Similar camera techniques are used in the Artist's Atelier, which mixes observational, drone, and helmet-mounted shots, multiplying the possible connections and convergences between UNICA A, UNICA B and "Unica" the avatar. The closing shots of the Atelier, filmed from the perspective of a camera drone hovering in the dark and watching UNICA A through the window, also alludes to the feeling of being watched or indeed watching oneself from the outside perspective of an assassin in the dark, a dissociated perspective that Zürn describes in a passage from *Notes of an Anaemic* (not included in the video's dialogue):

At the moment I have a taste of detective novels. The one who is not standing outside to shoot at my figure in the bright room - to thus shoot at himself, the one who does not exist, but who pretends to be standing outside at this moment - who? What in heaven's name has got into me? He is the miracle! Who? He or better IT!¹²

Through these multiple transpositions, dissociations, and reassociations, the title *UNICA* thus morphs from a reference to a proper name, "Unica Zürn," into the name of a generative principle, working through all its particular instantiations. These are made to cohere along anagrammatic, algorithmic, and anamorphic lines, as each "Unica" breaks out of her/his/its stable framing and particular location to connect with all others, opening up a multidirectional field of transpositions and consequential mutations: an anamersive *both/and*.

¹² Zürn, "Notizen einer Blutarmen," 37. [My translation]

As Luisa Lorenza Corna writes in her essay “Planning Without a Brain”:

Everyone is UNICA – a proposition which sounds inane if we consider the name’s etymology – UNICA comes from *Unikat*, which in German means ‘unique.’¹³

Such mutational transpositions are also the subject of a dream, likewise based on a passage from Unica Zürn’s *Notes of an Anaemic*, which is first told by UNICA A to UNICA B during a phone call, then read out by UNICA A from a book containing Zürn’s collected writings, and eventually taken up in the 2-minute animation that forms a coda to *UNICA* as a whole. In this dream a being, “half girl, half snake,” is brought into an operating theatre, where its organs are removed in order to render it harmless and, at the same time, to preserve its great beauty.¹⁴ In spite of its violent gutting, this entity cannot be killed, for it is animated by an enormous rage, which enables it to speak without a tongue, see without eyes, and make plans without a brain. Throughout the text, the pronouns shift between “she” and “it.” The video closes with the lines of Zürn, read aloud by UNICA A:

I regretted that the dream stopped, otherwise I would probably have learned in what way the being would have destroyed me. Or was the being myself? Or was it an image for my waiting for the miracle?¹⁵

UNICA strains towards this miracle and the conditions of its realisation: a rearrangement of the body and its traumas that would break with the reproduction of the genre *Man*, its codifications and its brutalisms, and move into a differential figuration, a more liveable form.

¹³ Corna, “Planning Without a Brain (2009-2022).”

¹⁴ Zürn, “Notizen einer Blutarmen,” 33.

¹⁵ Zürn, “Notizen,” 33.

The Animation

In the 2-minute animation that forms a coda to *UNICA*, the dream of the girl/woman/snake is recombined with motifs from the Motion Capture Studio, the Atelier, and the Forest. The animation shows a small child in a destroyed city, pulling at the coat of a figure buried under the rubble. A woman rushes towards them, lifts the child up into her arms, and then takes a running jump into the sky, where her body transforms into that of a snake. As the woman-snake ascends further into the clouds with the child clinging to her hair, both their bodies distort into an anamorphic smear that resolves into colourful ribbons [see Figure 27, 151]. The animation is hand-drawn, in a style derivative of the aesthetics of Studio Ghibli anime movies, deliberately eschewing the aesthetics of *machinima* and naturalistic 3D animations familiar from post-apocalyptic games. Based on my script and concept, it was realised by the animator Diana Gradinaru, who specialises in hand-drawn animation techniques. Its opening shots emulate the emotionally manipulative seriousness with which Ghibli classics such as Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) evoke the trauma of the nuclear bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki within the genre of children's animation. In *UNICA* this animation functions to form a particularly queasy multiplication of the figures of mother/daughter, catastrophe/miracle and hybridity/genre, harking back to Zürn's *Atom Bombe* drawing and the Teufelsberg and amplifying the emotional trauma circulating through the work as a whole. Here, the technique of hand-drawn 2D animation is deliberately used for its ability to depict a more comprehensive transformation of the body than motion-capture-based 3D character animation, in which a physical and a digital body are mapped onto each other. It points towards a different kind of artifice, one that breaks from an anatomical arrangement of the body and its corresponding avatar into an entirely different form of figuration. As such, it evokes a differential conception of artificial life that is not exclusively conceived in computational terms, but rather arises as a counter-imaginary to the regimentation, reproduction, and

destruction of mortal, organic bodies caught in the biopolitical and necropolitical machinations of Home, Nation, and Empire.¹⁶

The Sound

The sound design for *UNICA*, created with the composer, artist, and musician Wibke Tiarks, deliberately blurs the distinction between sound design for games and naturalistic sound design for cinema to produce a postcinematic and anamersive soundscape. Games characteristically use recognisable audio effects to accompany distinct in-game actions, such as walking, running, and jumping and collecting items, using weapons, and scoring points, which make it easier for players to comprehend in-game situations, objects, and actions and orient themselves in a game through sound.¹⁷ Due to the way computers optimise the loading and syncing of graphics and audio elements for gameplay, the sound of games often starts with a short delay at each scene change and is predominantly composed of short audio samples that loop throughout. In addition to this being a technical matter, repetitive melodies and the rhythmically regular footfall and breathing of avatars can have a hypnotic effect that enhances technology-dependent immersion in games and VR. Repetitive sound design is thus often deliberately used to create an acoustic patterning that prioritises sensory-motor over narrative immersion. In contrast, conventional sound design for film avoids repetitive foley and looping sound samples and always maintains sync with the image, striving for a more variegated and naturalistic soundscape. In *UNICA*, both conventions are mixed to subtly manipulate perception. Foley sounds in the Atelier, the Motion Capture Studio, and the Forest often begin with a slight delay, fall into sync with the images on screen, and then loop and detach themselves from the action.

¹⁶ Supra Chapter III, 74.

¹⁷ Karen Collins, *Game Sound: An Introduction to the History, Theory, and Practice of Video Game Music and Sound Design* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), 130.

By doing so, the sound of *UNICA* creates small moments of disorientation, which do not fully register on a conscious level but produce an anamersive effect, a space for generative perceptual detachments of sound and image within immersion. While the Atelier and Forest scenes frictionally mix both modes, the sound accompanying UNICA B's actions on the motion-capture stage is modelled almost exclusively on games, complete with sound effects that mark characteristic actions, such as the collection of actionable items. They sonically evoke active gameplay and thus interfere with the sober observational camera style adopted in the Motion Capture Studio. This postcinematic approach to sound design strengthens the way in which the distinct locations like the Forest, the Motion Capture Studio, and the Atelier can be read across each other. A melodic theme inspired by the soundtracks of post-apocalyptic games reoccurs across all scenes of *UNICA*, with variations, and acoustically connects UNICA A's drawings to the post-apocalyptic game scenario enacted by UNICA B, the overgrown *Teufelsberg*, and the animation. In the multimedia installation version of *UNICA*, this disorientating *and* cohering effect is further enhanced by the use of two separate projection screens, so the sound of the 2-minute animation can be heard looping incessantly alongside the sound of the 34-minute video, with the two soundscapes bleeding into each other with varying degrees of intensity, relative to one's position in the exhibition space. Attention can thus shift between two intermingling soundtracks, creating a sense of anticipation and recognition, which guides viewers from one screen to the other and enhances a sense of their frictional connectedness. Sound thus functions in a navigational and anamersive manner within the multimedia installation.

The multimedia installation

The inaugural exhibition of *UNICA* at *Fluentum* in Berlin, which ran from April to June 2022, provided an opportunity to expand the motives and concerns contained in the moving image elements of *UNICA* within the historic architecture of *Fluentum*, which is housed in a former

military compound, originally built for the German Air Force in the 1930s. Confronted with the National Socialist history and architecture of this location, I looked to Unica Zürn's *House of Illnesses* as a model through which to approach the exhibition space as a whole [see Figure 28, 152]. As a result, the multimedia installation version of *UNICA* presented at *Fluentum* evokes a mutational body-building and demands a specific type of anamersive navigation that runs counter to the immersive logic dictated by the monumental architecture of the building itself. The trope of the house as an immersive technology for shaping generic dispositions is here negotiated not only through moving image (as post-apocalyptic house, *Trümmerberg*, and city in ruins), but also through the installation (as military building), which works both within and against the National Socialist architecture and the choreography of movement enforced by it.

Anamersive choreography

If one were to move through the building as its original design intended, one would pass from a small foyer straight into a large atrium, walk towards a tall window at its far end, and ascend a symmetrical double staircase to a first-floor landing, and from here enter a large function room [see Figure 29, 153]. It's a design that demands a continuous onward and upward movement towards the function room, alternating between moments where one is pressed down by low ceilings and then dwarfed by the height of the spaces they open onto. The entire ground floor is clad in black marble, a material frequently used in monumental National Socialist architecture to suggest that the projected National Socialist Empire was to last a thousand years.

The spatial arrangement of the multimedia installation *UNICA* obstructs and redirects this patterning of movement dictated by the building's original design. A large, pale pink wall displaying three drawings from the *PATTERN* series blocks the passage from the foyer into the main space [see Figure 30, 154]. The colouring of the wall and the unfolding designs of the *PATTERN* drawings accentuate the pinkish veins in the marble walls by proximity and

association, highlighting the marble's organic rather than its monumental qualities. One has to come up close to examine the drawings, whose patterns repeat with variations and are broken in places, and then circle around the wall to reach the first projection screen, which is affixed to the overhanging ceiling at an angle, breaking the symmetry of the atrium and inviting viewers to assume a reclining rather than upright position to watch the 34-minute video [see Figure 31, 154]. A large sculptural seating element extends from the ground floor to the first-floor landing, where the second projection screen displaying the 2-minute animation is also affixed at an angle to the ceiling [see Figure 32, 155]. The tilted projection screens draw the eyes towards the cast concrete ceilings of the ground floor and first-floor landing, which are the only structural parts of the interior left exposed after its restoration in the 1990s, accentuating the underlying, modern building structure. The greyish-pink sculptural seating element has a coiling intestinal shape, part anatomical, part botanical, twisting around itself at the bottom of the stairs and tapering out into kidney-shaped cushions. Its design evokes the *PATTERN* drawings, and the removed organs appearing in the dream. When the viewer looks back into the atrium from the vantage point of the staircase, the entire space suggests the interior of a (rotting) body, with the double stairs fanning out like mutant lungs that frame soft internal organs. Since the entrance to the main function room on the first floor is closed, movement in the atrium becomes circular, rather than leading onwards, with both screens visible from the bottom of the staircase. Due to the different durations of both videos, the correspondences between them keep shifting and renewing themselves constantly, amplifying not only the extent to which all the elements of *UNICA* are connected with each other, but also the multiple dimensions these connections occupy, creating a *both/and and and and...* that keeps widening rather than narrowing the interpretative field occupied by *UNICA*.

UNICA as moving image work and as a multimedia installation instantiates anamersion as a postcinematic poetics of immersion that understands immersion as a condition which has no outside or constitutive ground. Navigation within immersion thus requires oriented logics capable not only of recognising codifications and patterns but also of mutating and rupturing them while on the move. The research-by-practice conducted through the realisation of *UNICA* extends the development of anamersive poetics beyond its instantiation in drawings, text, and computational media (which was primarily derived from an engagement with selected works by Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape) to postcinematic moving image, choreography, sound design, and installation, which works with and against the architecture and history of the exhibition space as body-building. Within the context of the moving image elements of *UNICA* itself, the transposition from the Motion Capture Studio to the Forest provides a particular test for the capacity of anamersive approaches to shift perception and train it to function in ways that disrupt naturalistic representation. Anamersive poetics, as implemented in *UNICA* in its fullest form, draws attention to the generic codifications that materialise in and as specific bodies and environments and produce points of rupture that denaturalise the operations of power manifesting in and as bodies, buildings, and landscapes. They enable an oriented logic that passes through damage and disorientation with the intent to unsettle the codes perpetuating generic violences, to drive their reproduction to failure, and to traverse them (in the sense of “crossing with difficulty, going against”). To these ends, anamersive poetics works with algorithmic, anagrammatic, and anamorphic operations that do not reinforce generic structurations but rather loosen their bonds, creating space within immersion, so anamersive *figuration Work* can proceed. Anamersive poetics thus shifts perceptions with transformative consequences, which can affect the material constitution of the/a world: what was made to appear as a body is a building, a labyrinth, or a city (Zürn, Acker); what was made to appear as

historical is fake (*New Genres*); what was made to appear as natural is artificial (*UNICA*); what was made to appear as artificial is traumatised (*Psycho Nymph Exile*); what was made to appear as “without a tongue” talks back (woman-snake, anagrams, languages of the body).

Illustrations (Chapter VI)

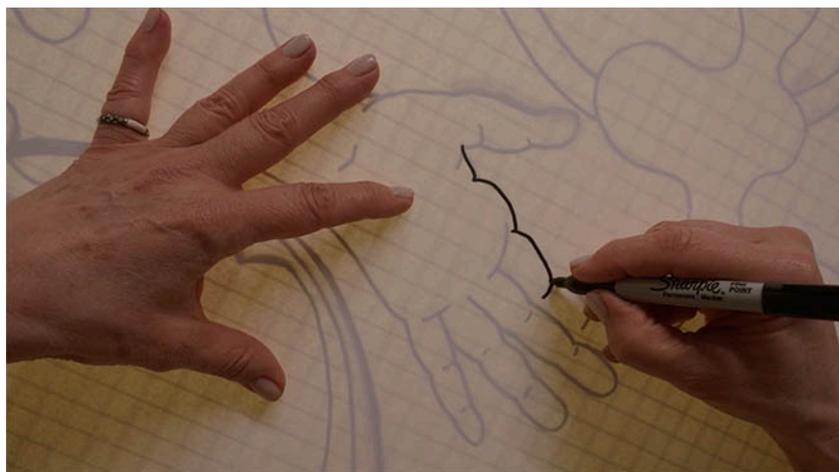


Figure 23: Anja Kirschner, "UNICA," 2022. HD Video. Three stills showing UNICA A in the Atelier. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 24: Anja Kirschner, *PATTERN#01b*, 2021. Marker pen, acrylics, and watercolour on paper, 4 x 101 x 72cm. Photographer: Jens Ziehe.



Figure 25: Anja Kirschner, "UNICA," 2022. HD Video. Two stills showing UNICA B in the Motion Capture Studio, and the motion capture software interface displaying the avatar "Unica." Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 26: Anja Kirschner, "UNICA," 2022. HD Video. Three stills showing UNICA B in the Forest. Courtesy of the artist.

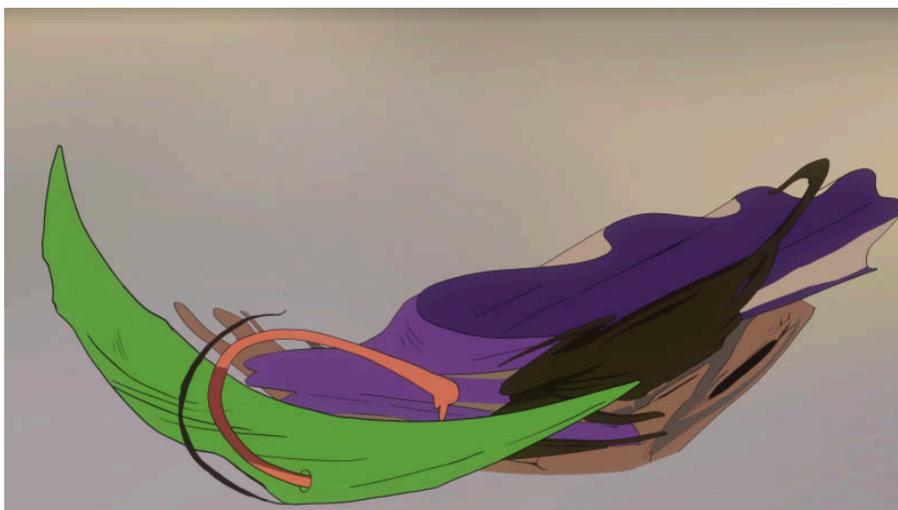


Figure 27: Anja Kirschner, "UNICA," 2022. HD Video. Three stills of the animation by Diana Gradinaru. Courtesy of the artist.

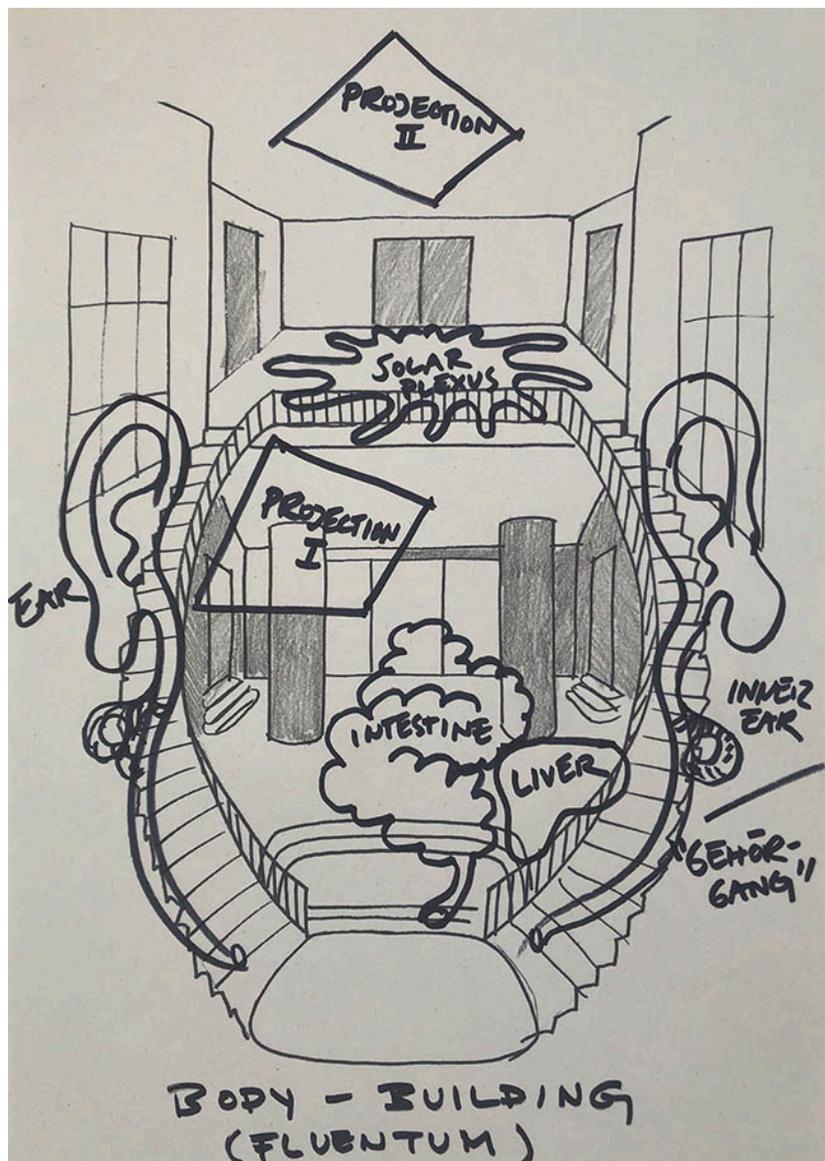


Figure 28: Anja Kirschner, "Body-Building (Fluentum)," 2021. Marker pen and pencil on paper, 21 x 29.7cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 29: The exhibition space of Flumentum before renovations. Source: <https://modernruins.de/index.php/lost-places/militaer-und-streitkraefte/us-armee/us-hauptquartier>. Accessed 20 October 2022. © modernruins.de



Figure 30: Anja Kirschner, "UNICA," 2022. Exhibition view at Fluentum, Berlin. Photographer: Stefan Korte. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 31: Anja Kirschner, "UNICA," 2022. Exhibition view at Fluentum, Berlin. Photographer: Stefan Korte. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 32: Anja Kirschner, "UNICA," 2022. Exhibition view at Fluentum, Berlin. Photographer: Stefan Korte. Courtesy of the artist.

Conclusion

Anamersive engagements attend to prior transgressions and structurations as they materialise in and as damaged life forms, and can be seen at work in the way Zürn figures (her) (female) body and its institutionalisation as *one* formation, or Acker comes to view the labyrinth as “a potential form of all bodies and their writing,”¹ or Heartscape conceives of the mansion as an “all-encapsulating landscape...where all dramas and follies can play out to their most fermented conclusions.”² Here, immersive environments, conceived as body-buildings and body-scapes, do not provide a temporal escape from one realm into another, but rather insist that life forms and their milieus are always hybrid and need to be figured and navigated as such. Exit is here understood not in terms of getting to the edge of a map but in terms of changing the parameters of mapping and navigation itself, and, in doing so, opening up hitherto occluded pathways in multiple directions which diverge from and unsettle generic ways of being/feeling/knowing, capable of mutating the whole formation. Drawing on Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape’s disruptions of anatomical, architectural, and textual figurations, anamersive poetics challenges the discrete separations between bodies and environments, which are reinforced by immersive simulations in gaming and VR that aim for ecological validity and naturalistic modes of spatial modelling based on Euclidean geometry. In accordance, anamersive approaches hold that there is no risk-free immersion, no dropping one’s avatars in and out of constructed worlds, no functional (for whom?) division between the physical and the virtual, trauma and cure, body and environment, that could be invoked or restored, only differential forms of attending to and intervening in the codifications running through organic, technological, and phantasmal manifestations.

Anagrammatic, algorithmic, and anamorphic operations keep these processes open and moving

¹ Martin, *Acker*, 226.

² Heartscape, “Dumb Drawings.”

in all directions, keep the immersion *anamersive*. This is precisely why Zürn's "Plan of the House of Illnesses" is such an important drawing and such a key point of reference for the development of anamersion. It maps not "between" but as continuum—it's not a "window" or a "mirror" but a multidirectional environment that provides a figuration of being hybridly human. As such, and alongside Acker's *Labyrinth* and her languages of the body, and Heartscape's smeared perspective and their notion of ecological interaction, it profoundly challenges and unsettles generic ways of being/feeling/knowing and holds open space for something that for them does not yet exist. The fact that this does not yet exist for them does not mean forms of it never existed in other life worlds against which the genre *Man* has over-represented and expanded itself. As Wynter demonstrates, differential ways of being/feeling/knowing have existed, continue to exist, and continue to be brought into existence. However, Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape do not exist outside the genre *Man*, but as anomalies within it, and this also generates *something*, including by the route of generative failure. Zürn's "Plan of the House of Illnesses," as well as Acker and Heartscape's work, is noteworthy, because through it the shift from narration to navigation can be seen as a continuous and mutational process that gives rise to oriented logics which traverse the labyrinthine architectures of biocultural structurations and, in the cases of Acker and Heartscape, arrive at new geographies and terraformed landscapes. These approaches not only disorganise the "the entire heteronormative organization of the body" but also hold open a space for "fem excess" not subsumed by the category "woman" and its entrapment in the house, hospital, or prison as immersive technologies for shaping female sex-gender in the genre *Man*.³

In bringing the environmental, anagrammatic, anamorphic, and algorithmic poetics of Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape to bear on contemporary forms of technology-dependent immersion in

³ Finch, "My Construct (a Cunt) and I Had to Find the Code."

gaming and VR, anamersion conceives of immersion not as mode of *relation* between an immersant and an immersive environment, where the former is absorbed in the latter, but as the site of their mutual production. Approaching technology-dependent immersion through modes of drawing, postcinematic moving image, and multimedia installation, my research-by-practice elaborates a more expanded and mutational trajectory of immersive technologies, opening divergent directions for postcinematic forms of immersion through them. While mainstream gaming and VR are predominantly designed to produce totalising forms of sensory-motor immersion, anamersive poetics ruptures and mutates action-based and navigational forms of technology-dependent immersion in gaming and VR, which tend to reinforce the biocentric axiomatics of “survival-of-the-fittest” and instead opens spaces within immersion in which hitherto anomalous, marginalised, and unviable life forms assert themselves on differential terms. Instead of striving for ecological validity and identificatory proximity between player and avatar within immersive environments that privilege a unidirectional navigational logic geared towards survival and scoring, works like *New Genres* (Anja Kirschner 2018) and *UNICA* (Anja Kirschner, 2022) loosen such patterns, giving rise to multiple dis-identifications, shifting and smeared perspectives, and pathways radiating in all directions. In doing so, they privilege what Heartscape terms “ecological interaction,” oriented towards the formation of more liveable worlds, which, in turn, must necessarily pass through the navigation and processing of ongoing damage. In *UNICA*, this is achieved by depicting perceptual, sensory-motor, and phantasmal patternings of technology-dependent immersion in the process of their production and mutation, and transposing a post-apocalyptic game scenario enacted in a motion-capture studio to the site of a *Trümmerberg* (debris mountain), making it possible to perceive a projected future-likely apocalypse and its aftermath as already constituted by a catastrophic past. Through this form of anamersive *figuration Work*, which uses postcinematic strategies to shift between modes of perception privileged by immersive gaming and VR and their differential repetition in moving image, my research-by-practice generates a mutational transformation of moving image that

gives rise to a differential, postcinematic form of immersion, or anamersion. Anamersive moving image is no longer time-based and narrative, but rather environmental and navigational, articulating the unformed temporality of trauma that traverses temporally and spatially discrete locations and binds them together through the repetition of patterns and triggers. Rather than reinforcing survival-oriented logic and the normalisation of generic violences, this transposition shifts emphasis to ongoing damage and the task of attending to and rupturing the codes of its artificial naturalisation and ongoing reproduction. In doing so, anamersive poetics seeks to be in solidarity with Wynter's call for a "re-writing of knowledge" and its related "un/writing" of the Subject, providing differential figurations of bodies, technologies, and environments that account for their mutational convergences and deploy oriented logics to set in motion iterative processes capable of mutating the whole. Anamersive poetics shifts perceptions with transformative consequences, which can affect the material constitution of the/a world: they draw attention to the generic codifications that materialise in and as specific bodies, technologies, and environments and produce points of rupture that denaturalise the operations of power manifesting organic, technological, and phantasmal formations. In doing so, anamersive poetics enables an oriented logic that passes through damage and disorientation to unsettle the codes perpetuating generic violences, to drive their reproduction to failure, and to traverse them to arrive at differential, more liveable figurations.

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Danielle Braithwaite-Shirley, *Black Trans Archive: We Are Here Because of Those That Are Not*, interactive online archive, 2020.

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