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A dialogue between Philipp Modersohn and Martyna Šulskutė on interdependencies between peat lands and people.

PM: Peat contains the existence of countless plants that once lived and never decay. The peat bodies form organic archives of plant material. Is it fair to say that peat can be considered the memory of these landscapes and its inhabitants, including humans?

MS: We humans need material objects to be reminded of the past. Un-decayed materiality preserved as peat from thousands of years ago, offers us clues to be interpreted and answered.

However, if I look at a piece of excavated peat, that would say little to me. But, when a biologist looks at the example cored out of the peat bog depths, he or she can tell what plants and insects lived during that layer formation. So, if peat layers are archives, such an archive differs from the usual clues (mnemonic devices) for memory and remembering. These layers become a source of knowledge for the non-human time scale: the Earth's past, extinct species, and climate history. It's like a geo-archive, which strongly connects cultural memory with Earth history, and tells the story of humans as one among Earth's many inhabitants. But it's up to us if we are keen to make Earth's history part of our collective memory.

On the other hand, we can anthropomorphize the peatland a bit and ask how much it can "remember". And then one could say it has memories stretching back thousands of years, provided its peat decomposition hasn't been accelerated by amelioration or excavation.


We rustle, rattle, whistle.

PM: I recently learnt that land was the first resource to be transformed into capital, a process that began in 15th-century England with the enclosure of commons by walls and fences. In their natural, waterlogged state, peatlands resist enclosure. Could this be why they were dismissed as wastelands in Western Europe? Only through drainage – and the arduous ‘cultivation’ into farmland – could they be capitalized?

MS: Probably totally true. Peatlands are physically less strictly bound, constantly re-shaping, and sort of fluid in nature if healthy. But I just think of their mythological aspects too. They were places for underworld Gods and creatures. It probably also took some time for such places to lose their sacred status. I wonder how that would compare to the conquest of space (or, in other words, the sky) where God used to dwell, too?


We are archives of past landscapes.

PM: Peatlands are difficult to traverse, to fence, to control, to exploit. Historically, they were places where marginalized people were sent to colonize the margins – but also where they found refuge, learning to live with and from the land. What roles do such ecosystems, and the humans within them, play in what you've called "authoritarian landscapes"?

MS: I think that historically, people always knew how to live in wet places. Such places could be protective if you knew how to navigate them; they were also harvesting places. For example, in Lithuania, where I come from, we have the word kūlgrinda, a hidden path on the peat bog bed, so one could pass through sinky places and escape enemies. However, authoritarian regimes count on resource mining and the hierarchization of resources to consolidate power. So, wet peatlands are of little use to them. Harvesting or navigating around through them is a more democratic business; it belongs to the locals. For example, Saddam Hussein in Iraq drained the Mesopotamian marshes, erasing the historical Marsh Arab culture. After the war with Kuwait, he had doubts about their loyalty to him, and one of the primary means to destroy the whole culture was draining the wetlands that were intertwined with indigenous ways of life. Thus, authoritarian regimes rearrange landscapes using political power. And not only do landscapes get rearranged, but also histories and memories. Stories of what is culture or savage, what is civilized and what is backward, what is resource or waste, who belongs where – all can be challenged.

PM: In The Exhausted of the Earth, sociologist Ajay Singh Chaudhary writes: “The political divide of this moment is [...] about those who stand to gain – from fundamental system preservation or right-wing climate realism – and those whose current exhaustion fuels that system, as much as petrochemicals or industrial agriculture.” Exhaustion is both depletion and collapse – of energy, of reserves, of ecosystems and bodies alike. In this shared state of exhaustion, human and eco-logical, what dependencies emerge?

MS: Thinking from an anthropological perspective, it reminds me of Thomas Hylland Eriksen and his concept of an overheated planet. Present overheating connects different layers: personal and global. It reflects on how everything is speeding up: production, consumption, climate change, and our personal lives; to the point that it becomes overwhelming both for an individual, and the planet. Modern minds and neoliberal economies encounter enormous challenges, and our lifestyle and environmentalism should look for new perspectives, and embrace indigenous ways of seeing more. Maybe even bringing Gods back; let the landscape be sacred again. Perhaps we should turn our gaze downwards and make the peat Gods become more prominent to us than the ones in the sky.

PM: Peatlands cool the air, absorb heavy rains, and slow hurricanes. A third of the Earth's soil-bound CO_2 is stored in peat. Qualities that absorb – or resist – extreme weather condition. Once they are drained, peatlands loose these qualities. Beyond the catastrophic consequences, could this be seen again as an exhaustion to perform these qualities? A resistance to resist?#

MS: Resisting to resist but probably still holding potential, at least in drained areas, to become otherwise, to remember how to be wetlands?

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PHILIPP MODERSOHN is an artist who is currently researching a short film project in which peat lands are protagonists. This dialogue took place via email after a trip to the peat lands of the Baltic region. All images stem from his short clip for Sensing Peat: https://www.sensingpeat.net/philipp-modersohn-en

Philipp's book Attitudes of Stone, supported by the Kemmler Foundation, will be published in September.

MARTYNA ŠULSKUTĖ lives in Vilnius and is a social anthropologist and sound storyteller who engages in offbeat practices of future-making among different communities and their tangled relationships with home, landscape, and identity across time.

CO-ORDINATES.EU is a growing network of residencies, institutions and artist-run spaces operating in remote or peripheral locations across Europe.

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CO-ORDINATES.EU is an initiative by Kemmler Foundation.

General inquiries:
hello@co-ordinates.eu