



EMILIJA ŠKARNULYTĖ

ÆQUALIA

CANAL PROJECTS

To presume a given distinction between humans and nonhumans is to cement and recirculate the nature culture dualism into the foundations of feminist theory, foreclosing a genealogy of how nature and culture, human and nonhuman, are formed. Hence any performative account worth its salt would be ill advised to incorporate such anthropocentric values in its foundations. —Karen Barad



Contents

- 7 **Foreword**
Summer Guthery
- 12 ***Æqualia*, the River Nymph in search for a Future of Multispecies Adaptation**
Sara Garzón
- 32 **Pacu Seringa, a cry for life**
Sara Lima
- 49 **Meeting of Waters**
Kate Sutton
- 57 **Emilija Škarnulytė's Lyrical Waywardness: Phantasy Looks Deep into the Heart of the Possible**
Chus Martínez
- 63 Acknowledgments
- 65 Colophon



Foreword

I am immensely grateful to Emilija Škarnulytė for entrusting Canal Projects with her visionary work, allowing us to present her first institutional exhibition in New York. Her dedication to exploring the intersection of art, science, and environmental consciousness has left an indelible mark on our community.

This film and exciting new exhibition were co-commissioned by Canal Projects and the 14th Gwangju Biennale and would not have been possible without the unwavering support of our partners and sponsors. The collaboration emerged from conversations with Sook-Kyung Lee, the Artistic Director of the Gwangju Biennale and a Canal Projects advisory board member. For this, I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to the Canal Projects Board of Managers and Advisory Board, the YS Kim Foundation, and the Gwangju Biennale Foundation for their generous contributions and belief in our mission.

I would also like to express my sincerest thanks to the Canal Projects team: Assistant Curator Dr. Sara Garzón, Gallery Assistant Maya Hayda, and Exhibitions Manager Andrew Lee, who together have taken on the production and conceptualization of the exhibition and its accompanying catalog. In addition, I acknowledge the incredible support provided by the Lithuanian Cultural Council, the Lithuanian Culture Institute, and OCA: Office for Contemporary Art Norway.

Within this publication, you will find essays on Škarnulytė's work by art historians and writers, including Amazonian journalist Sara Lima, curator and thinker Chus Martínez, critic Kate Sutton, as well as a curatorial essay by Sara Garzón. Martínez explores the philosophical implications of mythological thinking, while Sutton addresses the ways in which the artist presents us with different forms of adaptation. The questions of how and why to consider what it means to think outside the human experience were further explored as Canal Projects partnered on public programming with MOTH (More Than Human Rights), an interdisciplinary project at the NYU School of Law. This collaboration included a book launch and a conversation between MOTH founder César Rodríguez-Garavito, Jaqueline Gallant, a lawyer at NYU Law's Earth Rights Advocacy (ERA), and Škarnulytė on the implications of applying rights to the human, non-human, and interconnected ecosystems.

To reflect on the experimentation and urgency conveyed in Škarnulytė's film, we also invited the river journalist Sara Lima from the Amazonian Mycelium-SUMAÚMA project, who writes a more-than-human account titled "Pacu Seringa: A Cry for Life." This chronicle tells the story of the dying fish in the Xingu River. We are grateful to the team of editors and mentors at Mycelium-SUMAÚMA—Raquel Rosenberg, Ana Magalhães, Talita Bedinelli, Jonathan Watts, and Elain Brume—for all of their support in this invitation to think together.

Together, we have created a space for reflection, dialogue, and transformation. I invite you to join us in celebrating the convergence of art, nature, and human experience in *Æqualia*.

With deepest gratitude,

Summer Guthery
Artistic Director





Æqualia, the River Nymph in search for a Future of Multispecies Adaptation

Sara Garzón

Emilija Škarnulytė conceptualizes her artistic practice as one that envisions the world through the lens of a future archaeologist—an approach that challenges contemporary anthropocentric thinking by reflecting on how future generations might interpret and understand the present. This speculative outlook prompts us to question whether the answers to our current environmental and epistemic crises might find redirection in ancient mythologies, nature-based rituals, or, perhaps, in the forgotten ways of non-human existence. Škarnulytė's immersive installation *Æqualia* (2024) takes up this inquiry, casting her as a mythical entity—half-person, half-fish—who traverses the *Encontro das Águas*, the confluence of the Rio Solimões and the Rio Negro, two rivers that meet but never fully merge. Through this intersection, the artist explores the notion of becoming other, interconnection, and the transformation of boundaries, challenging our assumptions about the human-nature divide.

Æqualia is the third installment in a series of Škarnulytė's works that engage with rivers as sacred sites. In this piece, the artist embodies a mermaid-like chimera that exists at the junction of myth and science, offering a dual narrative that both addresses ecological concerns and interrogates the limits of human perception. The installation combines drone and underwater footage, immersive sound, and a poetic fictional element embodied by the mermaid. By blending speculative fiction with documentary-style filming, Škarnulytė creates an immersive space in which viewers are invited to question their relationship with the natural world, the unseen forces that shape it, and the boundaries that separate human knowledge from non-human agency.

The film's visual language plays a critical role in its thematic exploration. The opening sequence draws the viewer into the depths of the *Encontro das Águas*, where the camera floats in and out of the murky water. The mermaid's body appears fluid and seamless as it glides through the turbulent waters, her movements mirror the fractal swirls that characterize the confluence of the two rivers. These swirling patterns,

which resist full integration, serve as a metaphor for the artist's engagement with complex systems, where nature and culture, human and non-human, material and spiritual realms intersect. The visual rhythms of the water, along with a dynamic soundscape rich with the rush and pulse of the rivers, immerse the viewer in a sensory experience that transcends traditional modes of representation, urging us to reconsider our relationship with water and ecosystems.

In crafting *Æqualia*, Škarnulytė draws on the work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, particularly her theories on the sacred feminine and goddess worship in pre-Indo-European cultures. In *The Civilization of the Goddess*, Gimbutas argued that ancient societies revered the female principle of life, associated with water as both a life-giving and transformative force (Gimbutas 1991). The mermaid, as a hybrid figure that occupies both human and non-human realms, embodies this duality—an entity that transcends the boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds, the material and the ethereal. For Škarnulytė, this liminal figure becomes a means of interrogating the tensions between human perception and the non-human worlds, offering a space to reflect on the fluid and ever-changing nature of identity—both mythological and contemporary.

In the film's central sequence, Škarnulytė, as the mermaid *Æqualia*, swims through the Encontro das Águas, where the Rio Solimões and the Rio Negro meet but do not merge. These rivers, with their distinct chemical properties—one milky and sediment-laden from Andean glaciers, the other dark and nutrient-rich from the Amazon rainforest—embody the complexity of nature and the impossibility of neat categorization. The fluid instability of these waters is mirrored by the mermaid, who resists easy definition and exists as an in-between entity, much like the rivers themselves. The meeting of the rivers forms a boundary that remains fluid but refuses to fully merge, an evocative metaphor for Škarnulytė's larger exploration of boundaries, hybridity, and the tensions between human and non-human realities. The fractal dynamics of the rivers, as reflected in both the visuals and the sound design, become a chorus that mirrors the blending of human and non-human forces. Through this entanglement, *Æqualia* evokes an epistemological rupture, urging the viewer to reconsider the limitations of human knowledge and our relationship with complex, non-human systems.

The figure of the pink river dolphin, or boto, adds another layer of symbolic resonance to *Æqualia*. Known for its ability to navigate the distinct waters of the two rivers using echolocation, the boto is a creature of mystery and transformation in Amazonian mythology. As a prominent figure in river belief systems, the boto often represents both the beauty and the danger of the river—places where the laws of nature and reality are in constant flux. The boto's ability to shapeshift, to move between the physical and spiritual realms, is emblematic of the Amazon's relationship to the material and spiritual worlds. In fact, the boto's presence in the film echoes the ecological crises facing the Amazon, including the recent drought that led to the mass death of pink river dolphins in the Encontro das Águas. As Škarnulytė's mermaid encounters the boto, the two figures act as symbolic agents that challenge us to confront our interconnectedness with the natural world and the consequences of environmental degradation. This fluidity between human and non-human, land and water, forest and mountain, is mirrored in the two figures' own transformation as they encounter each other, as if seeking the possibility of mutual adaptation.

In the context of Brazilian art, avant-garde artists like Marcos Chaves (Rio de Janeiro, b. 1961) and Maria Martins (Minas Gerais, 1894–1973) have also utilized the imagery of the boto and the Amazonian river to explore ecological concerns and the

intersection of technology and environmental destruction. Through installations and visual metaphors, these artists comment on the fragile state of the environment and the need to rethink the relationship between nature and culture. Škarnulytė's film *Æqualia* aligns with these concerns, using mythological figures like the boto and the mermaid to reconsider the boundaries of our contemporary notion of the human inviting us to reconsider the role of myth in reimagining our relationship with the world around us, in fact, allowing us to imagine our return to water—as the undoing of our structures that problematize what Gilles Deleuze articulated as a “body without organs” (Gilles, 1983).

Ultimately, *Æqualia* aligns with contemporary theories of the more-than-human, as articulated by scholars such as Karen Barad and Donna Haraway, who advocate for a view of the world as an entangled network of human and non-human actors. The mermaid, as a hybrid figure, embodies the entanglements Barad describes in her concept of “agential realism,” where meaning and matter emerge from the intra-actions between bodies, forces, and worlds (Barad 2007). The film's exploration of the liminal space between human and non-human, culture and nature, represents an invitation to move beyond anthropocentric frameworks and engage with the more-than-human world in its complexity in search for futures of multispecies adaptation. In *Æqualia*, the mermaid and the boto are not just symbols, but agents in the entanglement of life, urging us to rethink the material agency of the creatures and ecosystems that share our world, and to reconsider the entangled responsibilities we hold in this shared existence.

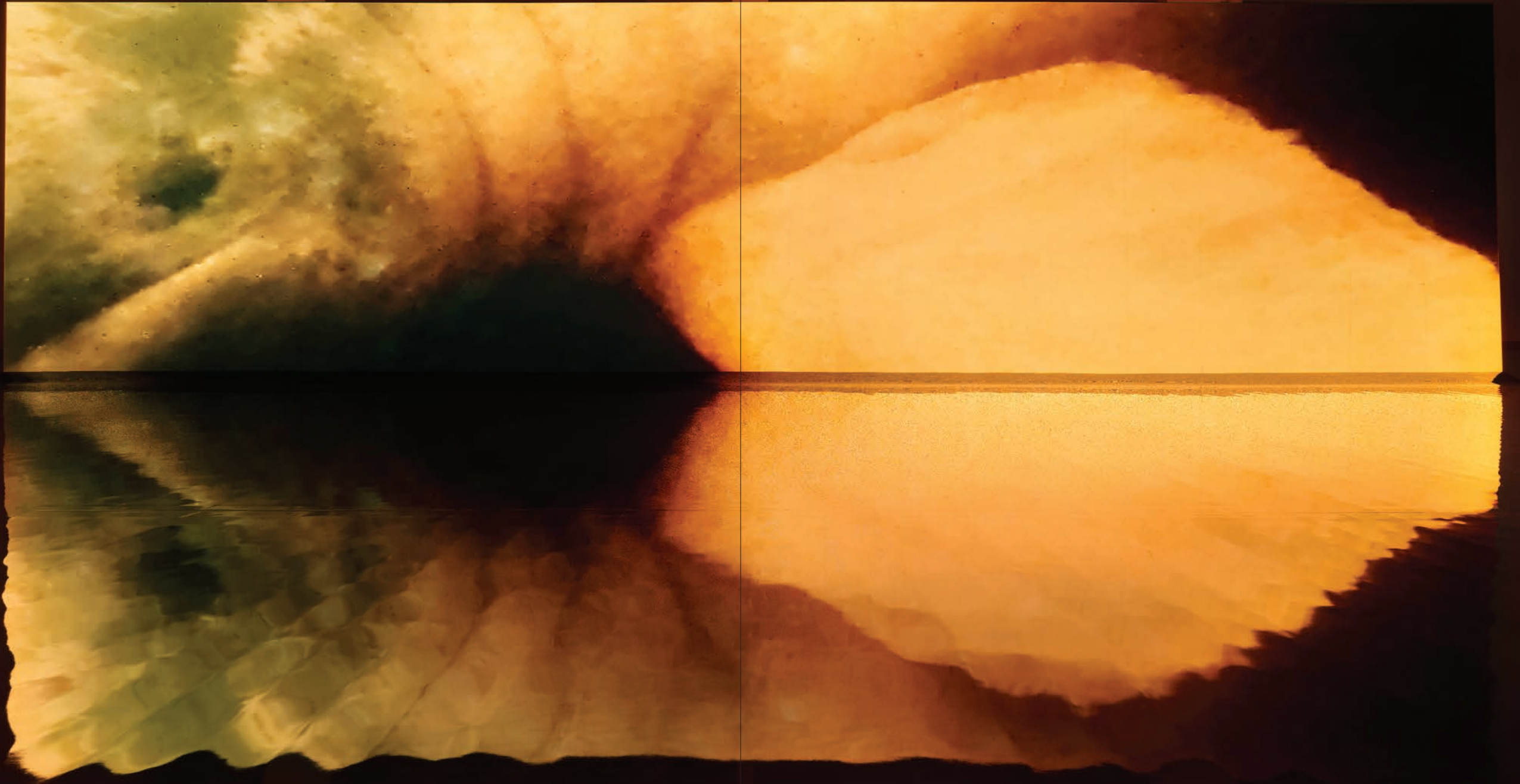
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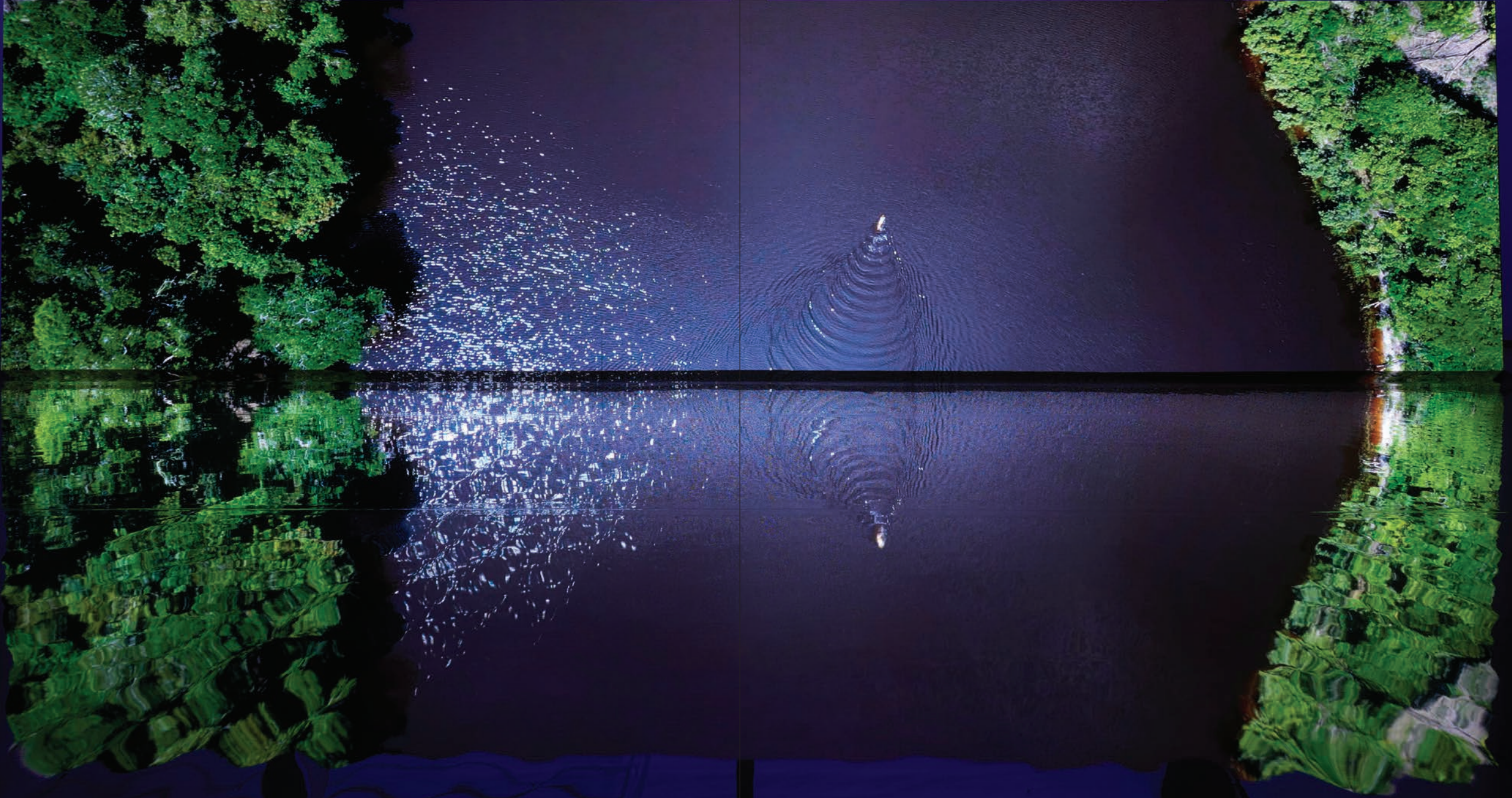
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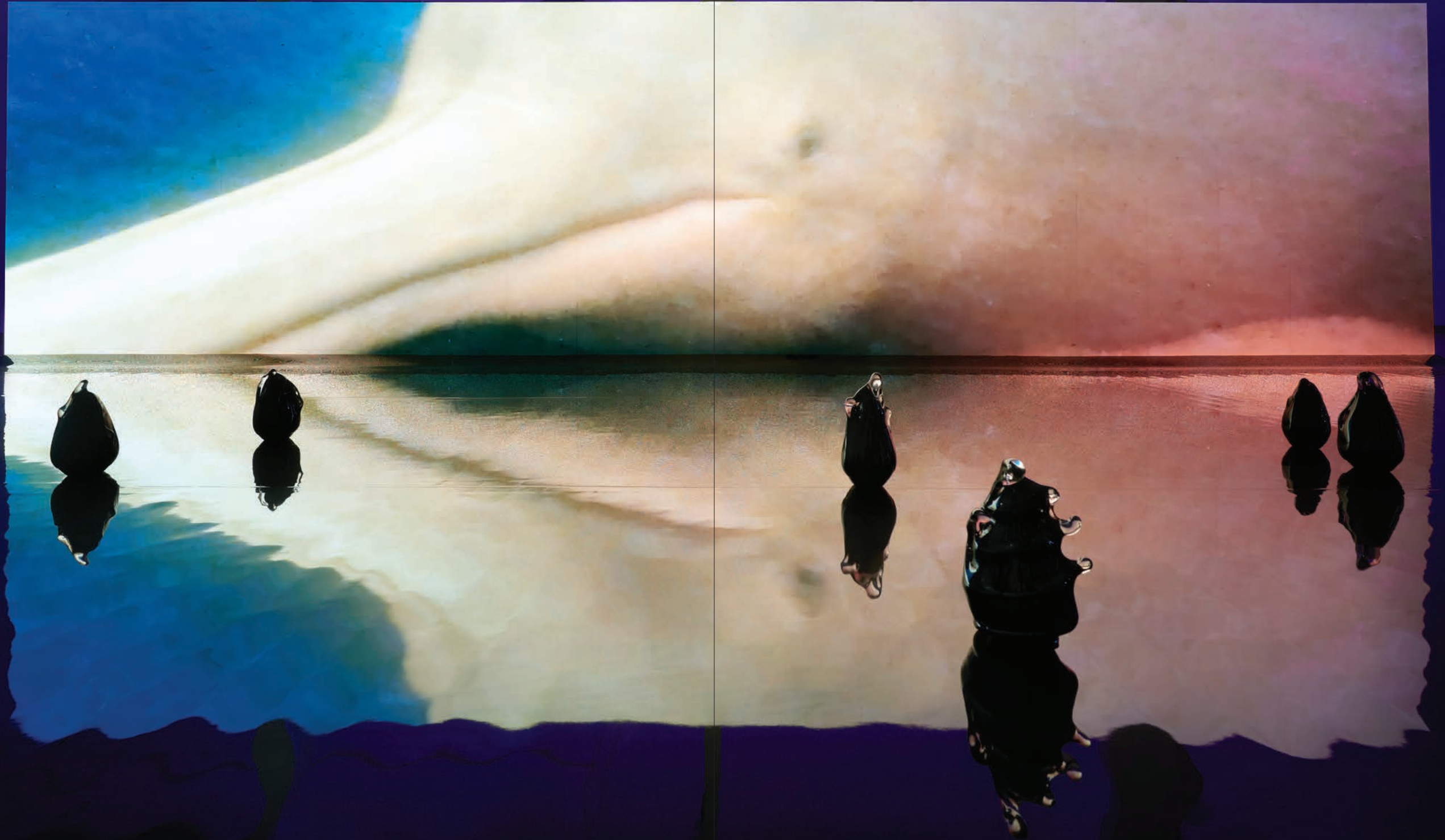














Pacu Seringa, a cry for life

Sara Lima, river journalist

Amid the destruction of the Xingu River by the Belo Monte dam, a representative of the more-than-human victims—based on local knowledge and science—tells river-journalist Sara Lima his species spends each day dying.

I want to vent.

I, Pacu Seringa, a fish from the Volta Grande (Great Bend) region of the Xingu River, need to vent.

Where do I go? My mother, the Xingu River, is dry.

I have no more water.

Many of us are suffocating to death.

We are suffering because our river lacks oxygen.

Tucunaré, whitefish, croaker, and I... We all are asking for help so that you listen to us.

It is a lament. An appeal for water, for life, for Volta Grande do Xingu, destroyed by the construction of the Belo Monte Dam.

Belo Monte... Portuguese for Fine Mountain. It's actually a Fine Monster!

We need water so we can spawn. For nine years we have not been able to spawn right. Our cycle is no more and our fry dry out and die.

We are disappearing.

The fruit from the trees in the igapó forest, where we used to swim, are falling on dry land. The camu-camu, the gully plum... everything we loved to eat is falling to the earth because the water no longer reaches the trees.

We are the river's greatest assets.

any of us have already died. Others of us are resisting the lack of water, the lack of our territory, of our spawning grounds, our igapó forests.

We are dying, in distress because of human recklessness.

They've walled up the river and we're stuck. We have nowhere to go.

Before the dam, we had a connection with the river, with our mother.

I'm just one of the millions who are still left, trying to adapt to this new Volta Grande.

Trying to adapt.

I'm weak. I can't move. I don't know how long I'll make it?

I don't know if I'll make it through another journey to the spawning grounds to lay eggs. Will I ever have any little fry?

Before the river was crystal clear. It would tell us when it was time for us to start spawning.

The water would start to rise in October. In November, it would begin to reach the bottom of the trees. The fruit would begin to fall in the water and we would eat them.

When the water started to enter the Igapó, we would go with it and tuck away our eggs. When they were born, our small fry followed the water as it began to dry. They followed the river. It was the cycle of life. The water was connected to the fish, it let us know when it was time to go.

Our Xingu mother would tell us: 'Come on, it's time to go!'

The water slowly receded each day and we would follow the great and majestic Xingu.

She would speak to us. And we would place our nurseries at the calm watersides and wait for our fry to grow.

Our mother took care of us.

Food arrived at the right time too.

This connection we had with the river was really a connection with a mother who cherished and cared for us. She gave us the protection to live.

Today our mother is sick. She is forgotten.

It isn't her fault, because now she is being controlled by man's hand.

It is an off-kilter control. The water rises and recedes, rises and recedes, when the dam wants it to. Mother Xingu can no longer tell us that it is time to spawn, that it is time for us to leave the nursery, that it is time to eat.

She is no longer calling the shots. She is confused.

They are using her waters as a commodity.

They've made a new canal that never existed. And we are unfamiliar with this new man-made Volta Grande.

We, more-than-human beings, inhabit the River, we live embraced by our mother's waters and we depend on her.

Many of us are being born with defects.

The whitefish and the croaker – who were long, lovely – are being born hunched. They are suffering, trying to adapt to this new river. With this new deformed, curved body.

Before our mother Xingu ran free of man's hand. She called all the shots, she had her strong and fearless currents. She was a wild River.

Today she is sick, depressed, sapped of strength.

What will happen to us?

I wonder if we'll hold out another year?

Or if we'll cease to exist?

Our waters are being enslaved to generate power. Little power, because the river

is dry nearly half the year and, with the climate collapse, the drought has grown, starving those who walk the land.

They are using our waters, the force of our lives to generate this energy and who is it serving?

Do they not see us? Don't they notice us here? Don't they notice that they are destroying our home?

I'd like to scream to the world: don't let us die!

We want to live. We want to reproduce.

We want to populate our rivers.

We want our spawning grounds back.

We want our water back.

Enough with the deadly ventures and extermination of nature. We want peace in our lives.

We just want to swim, to play in the river's currents.

We want the government to leave us alone and stop building dams.

Stop allowing them to contaminate our rivers with mercury, with cyanide.

Enough.

We can't take any more.

We want our mother back!









Meeting of Waters

Kate Sutton

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, or so the saying goes. But we forget that those ashes and that dust will one day be the ocean floor, that the Amazon rain forests will wither into deserts, that the life cycle of our planet stretches beyond what a human with our 80-year-eyes could ever fix firmly within our vision. The Earth's current topography is but one iteration, a freeze-frame from billions of years of alterations and adaptations. We think of its contours in terms of land mass, but our planet has been primarily authored by water, a substance that is itself essentially alien, having been ferried to the surface one cosmic collision at a time. The water molecules in our bodies are older than our Earth. They have traveled farther than we can imagine, tearing through galaxies we have yet to discover, and colonizing planets we will never live to know. And now they sit in our skin, a blip of their existence while an entirety of ours.

We recognize water as the essence of life, even as we continue to know so little about its trajectory: where it came from, where it's been, where it will go next. Even in its brief terrestrial sojourn, water remains a stand-in for the unknown. When we speak of "life on Earth," we mean life on solid ground: "Earth," in its humblest, least capitalized form. And yet, oceans cover more than seventy percent of our planet, a number that can only increase as the polar ice caps slink back into the seas. The oceans' contents are still relatively uncharted, their deep recesses are as much of a mystery for us as the surrounding solar systems. Astronauts have been known to train underwater, a paradox in that the closer you get to the center of the Earth, the closer you get to the experience of outer space. Water forces bodies to adapt to the changes in pressure and gravitational pull, to the challenges of navigating through liquid rather than air, of reckoning with the nuances of all that "life on Earth" can entail.

In hypnobirthing mantras, the speakers will tell you to take a deep breath and allow your body to make the adjustments it knows it needs to make, the shifts and stretches and "accommodations" for what is to come. This phrasing is highly strategic; it keeps the emphasis always on what your body *already* knows, to shield future mothers from the freefall of the unfamiliar. It assures us that the way we move in our bodies is just but one of myriad possibilities, and that, in close consultation with our limbs, we could just as easily choose another way, like the astronauts underwater.

Nodding to the human capacity for adaptation, Emilija Škarnulytė's film *Aldona*, 2013, tracks the artist's visually impaired grandmother as she navigates a park full of old Soviet monuments in present-day Lithuania. The protagonist takes careful steps in sensible shoes, her hands tapping along the surface of the statues she can no longer fully see. Škarnulytė's camera lingers on her grandmother's fingers as they trail along the bulbous nose of an oversized Vladimir Ilyich. What do these memorials mean when they are not perceived as a visual image, but as a mass that must be physically negotiated? *Aldona*, it is revealed, lost her eyesight in the wake of Chernobyl. Her life since has been one of accommodations, a process of learning not just how to live without her vision, but also how to live without the ideology she was born into.

"There is a time when the past and the future part like curtains, and the present stops fleeing," Lithuanian artist and theorist Aleksandra Kasuba wrote in "The Absolute Now," a section of her 2016 text, *The Mind Gazing at Itself*.

It happens when I become other than myself—at one with a bird straining to rise, a branch swaying outside the window, a shadow wrapping itself around the corner. When I am other than myself, the past separates from the future. And in that suspended state—bracketed by before and after—awareness crosses over from the visible to the invisible, to a world inhabited by forces watching me as I watch them—the world a mirror held up to me and I a mirror to the world.

Škarnulytė quotes from this passage in her film *Circular Time (For Alexandra Kasuba)*, 2021, which puts footage of some of Kasuba's environmental works in dialogue with the reflective panels of astronomical observatories. The condition Kasuba describes—"when I am other than myself"—speaks to a kind of conscious estrangement and the sheer possibility of self-redefinition, the resolution to move differently through space and time. In *Aldona*'s case, this resolution was involuntary; her means of perceiving her world had been stripped from her, along with the ideological principles that had served as guideposts. Kasuba's argument holds up this moment as one of creative intervention.

Škarnulytė has played with this possibility of becoming "other than" before, most notably in a series of moving image works in which the artist appears in the water, her legs sheathed in a mermaid-like tail. In the eleven-and-a-half-minute film *No Place Rising*, 2015, Škarnulytė assumes this chimeric form to infiltrate the Arctic straits around an abandoned Cold War-era submarine base in Norway. This transformation is not a minor adjustment, nor is it an immediate one. At times, the artist appears to glide under the surface of the cold, dark waters; at others, the camera reveals the sheer aerobic effort required for propulsion with one's legs bound together under the weight of the prosthetic. Her body did not already know this; Škarnulytė had to rigorously train to expand the capacities of her limbs and lungs, to make possible this new way of navigating the world. But, as in the passage of Kasuba's writing, by proposing herself as a mirror to the world, the artist also proposes the ability to reauthor that world.

When *No Place Rising* was first shown at the CAC Lithuania in 2015, it was on a massive screen angled up against a mirrored ceiling that effectively distorted the dimensions of the room, immersing the viewer in visuals of shifting scale. Aerial shots positioned the artist as a slip of silver sending ripples out across the surface of the water around the old submarine canal, while more closely framed underwater shots tightened around her body and that of a nearby jellyfish. Its movements remain so alien to our own, but also not inimitable, particularly against the wooziness

induced by the sense of spatial distortion. This mild vertigo is further fed by the fact that the sea is not clear and pristine, but thick with organic matter that catches the light as the lens moves under the water. In looking through the image, we feel the "solidness" of the liquid, and the resistance it offers to the rays of sunlight that push down into its depths.

The artist has repeated these purposefully disorienting staging tactics in other installations, forcing viewers to rethink how they navigate the space. *Mirror Matter*, 2018, a dazzling sixteen-minute film based on a CGI rendering of the mirror-studded chamber of the underground (and now defunct) Super-Kamiokande neutrino observatory, was projected along the dome of the Berlin Planetarium so that the formal rhyming within the composition stretched down and around to encompass the audience. For the 2021 installation, *Eternal Return*, Škarnulytė sent a projection along the curved wall of the Tate Modern's cavernous South Tank. Her underwater footage of glimmering cutlassfish set an uncanny echo to the space's heavy industrial columns as if beckoning them to set statics aside and shimmy.

This temptation does not just extend to the architecture. Škarnulytė's careful orchestrations of the installations of her work, with their scale and strategic deployment of the sublime, remind the viewer that they are not rooted in their body, that space is not as fixed as we presume, that in any given moment, our body is permeated by a thousand interstellar transmissions that we receive and release without ever consciously realizing. By inciting these minor acknowledgments and accommodations, we essentially pick the physics that we allow to govern how we move through time and space, and thus use our bodies to reauthor what is possible in our world.

Of course, in recognizing these expanded powers and possibilities, we also recognize the need for guidance. Over the last few years, Škarnulytė has turned her focus to water, as a force that sustains life and enables change. To navigate the alien oceans that have authored our planet, she has steadily built up a pantheon of new deities, all water-bound and each endowed with specific properties and interests tailored to address aspects of the anthropic relationship to water (from symbols of fertility to deep-sea mining.) In this she follows the work of Lithuanian anthropologist Marija Gimbutas, who pioneered theories of Goddess worship among the Neolithic cultures of Old Europe, offering a counter to then-presiding patriarchal narratives that cast female figurines as mere objects for men's pleasure.

The seven-minute film, *Xirasia*, 2023—all of these deities have names that sound plausibly ancient—animates this speculative matriarchal past by placing the curves of one of these fertility goddesses in conversation with the twists and turns of a river bed, that eventually yield to the brutish manmade symmetries of an industrial plant. In *Riparia*, 2023, Škarnulytė returns to the water as a sleek black phantom in the slate gray depths of the Rhône. This new goddess strikes a fluid contrast to the churn of a dam, an attempt to harness the river and bend it to a will other than its own. At one point, the film abruptly shifts to drone footage of the shores of a lake of runoff water, the pink of raw salmon flesh. Imagery from these two opposing bodies of water then gives way to a duet of chimeric creatures, whose tails are no longer forked, but elongated, like eels. The two performers wear elaborate headgear, obscuring their faces as their new serpentine skins wriggle and writhe around one another.

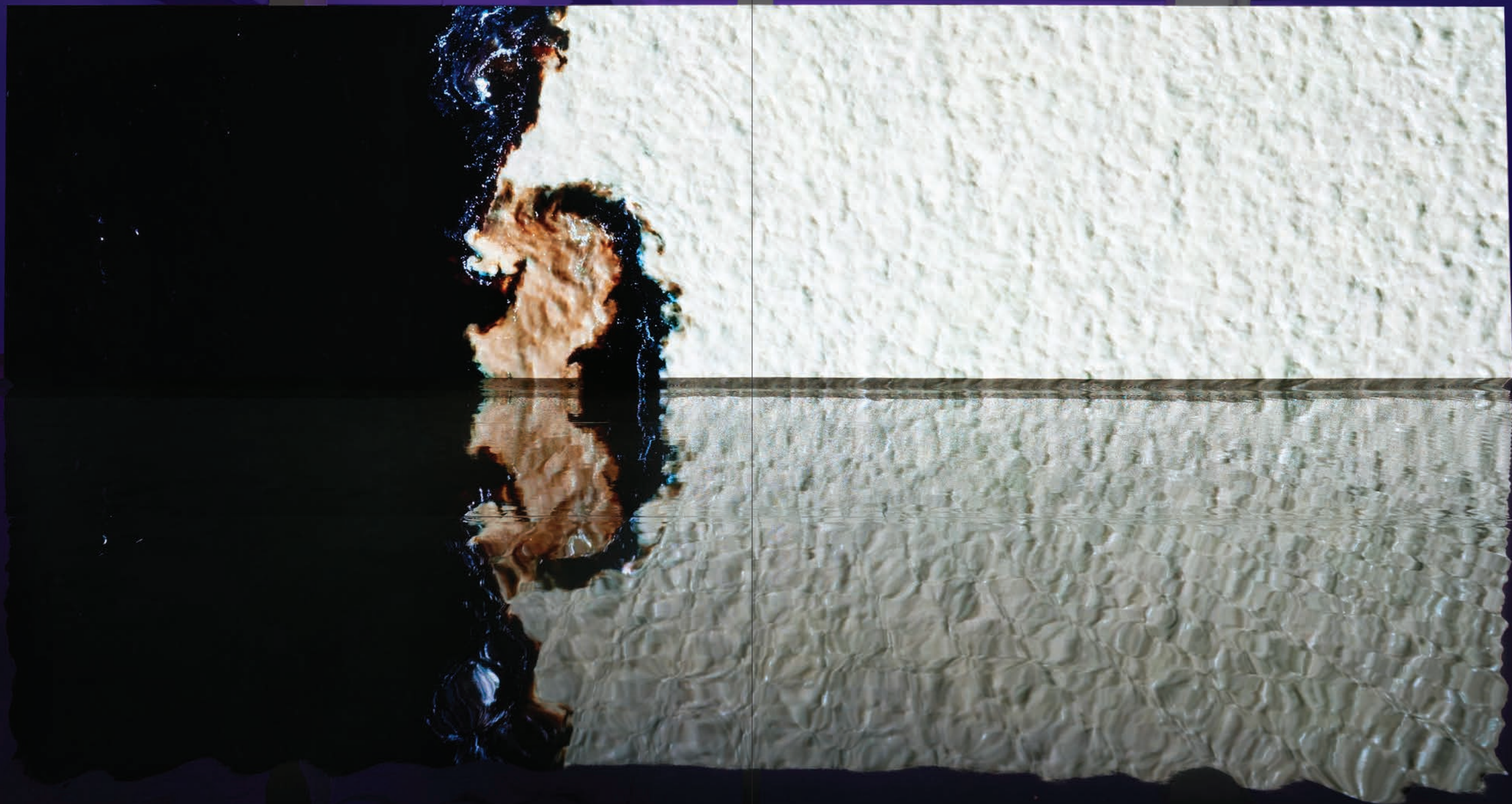
Equalia, 2023, takes this intertwining of bodies of water literally. Co-commissioned by Canal Projects and the 14th Gwangju Biennale, the nine-minute film traces the Amazon to its source, the so-called Encontro das Águas—"Meeting of Waters"—in

Manaus, Brazil. It is here that the Rio Solimões and the Rio Negro run alongside one another for six full kilometers before mixing; like punished lovers from an ancient myth, their temperatures and temperaments are too distinct to allow them to fully merge. The chilly, café-au-lait-colored Rio Solimões primarily consists of silt-laden glacial melt from the Peruvian Andes. The Rio Negro courses through the Columbian jungles, whose decomposed organic matter gives the water its warmth and eponymous black hue. In the aerial footage of *Æqualia*, neither looks particularly safe for a human body. But Škarnulytė's body is already beyond the human, outfitted with a sturdy tail shimmering with coral-toned sequins. This new goddess passes easily between the two rivers in a way the water itself cannot. Pumping through the confluence of rivers, she is unexpectedly joined by the famous *botos*, the pink river dolphins. They flank her like the hounds of Artemis, their curiosity driving them closer to this foreign being. Their own bodies are no more familiar than the swimmer's, an observation made all the more poignant by the fact that mere months after the footage was taken, much of the population was lost to a catastrophic drought. (Some adaptations simply take more time than others.)

The theme of encounter informed Škarnulytė's staging of *Æqualia* at Canal Projects' space in New York in early 2024. Echoing the confluence of rivers, the artist erected a large standing screen against black reflective flooring that expanded and inverted the imagery of the film. This dark doubling distorted the spatial perception of its subject matter, suggesting stretches where the two rivers would meet twice, or never at all. Studying the floor was a series of Škarnulytė's sculptures, a fleet of sleek black-glass objects whose intricate forms resemble the fractal geometries of shark eggs. These objects hold the light in mercurial ways, casting their own shadows in a gesture that rescripts the reflections of the film. On the wall, the artist reproduced a citation from physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad's 2007 work *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

To presume a given distinction between humans and nonhumans is to cement and recirculate the nature-culture dualism into the foundations of feminist theory, foreclosing a genealogy of how nature and culture, human and nonhuman, are formed. Hence any performative account worth its salt would be ill-advised to incorporate such anthropocentric values in its foundations. The quote warns us not to draw too firm a line between bodies, but to instead allow for a gentle confluence, recognizing the porousness in our definition of what it means to be human.

In a conversation with Škarnulytė, thinker Timothy Morton reflected on our fluid genealogical inheritance to conclude that "We are already mermaids. We are made of fish. Our great-great-great times, a million great grandfathers, were fish." Morton's reasoning, "We contain the specters of fish, in order to be human." Through this logic, we can also return to the water. In so much as we are water, we are already alien. But we are aliens in order to be of the Earth. Our life is a series of accommodations; we are always in the process of negotiating our next adaptation, even if these possibilities are known only to our bodies. Škarnulytė's films hold up a mirror to bear witness to those processes, slowing space and time for us to gauge what it means to become other than ourselves.





Emilija Škarnulytė's Lyrical Waywardness: Phantasy Looks Deep into the Heart of the Possible

Chus Martínez

One of the significant developments of the twentieth century is the belief in the power of ideology. The identification of ideas and values that can create a coherent system of thought is a crucial aspect of the social and intellectual history of the era. We continue to feel that certain ideas hold a superior and more valuable position than others. In the past, there was a general attachment to ideas and values that seemed to defend the interests of disadvantaged or precarious communities.

However, these communities have begun to reject ideas that were theoretically in their best interest. In the early years of the new century, the first signs of change became evident. Individuals and groups began to feel a certain detachment from traditional ways of structuring social thought. This situation, which has intensified over the years, has created significant unease among those who consider themselves the legitimate thinkers of the common good. This unease has led to hysterical reactions and apocalyptic narratives, suggesting that rejecting certain ways of thinking will lead to disaster, the end of the natural world, and the collapse of the known good.

The philosophical and political discourse in the public arena has been increasingly replaced by more direct and threatening speeches. These threats, although often subtle and veiled, are perceived as such and provoke defensive reactions from those who stand to lose the most. The last thing people want to hear is that they are contributing to the disaster and will be its first victims.

How can we escape this vicious cycle? How can we create solid bonds with emotional and ethical values, stable enough to regain the trust of communities that feel hostility towards narratives that seem irrelevant to their daily lives? The answer lies closer to the innovative attempts of some artists to create a theater of ideas—a philosophy in action—than in traditional political disciplines. Emilija Škarnulytė's work embodies this approach. Her work emphasizes the strenuous effort to shape a new mythology and, consequently, a new experience of abstract but tangible realities that can have a real impact on our lives.

Her installations are not just about subjects like water, mining, gender, transmission, or metamorphosis. They are entire worlds, attempts to produce theoretical realities—realities that we can only grasp through the senses but that activate a different logic

and, therefore, a different path of thinking in all of us. A unique trait of her practice is the systemic disbelief in the hegemony of grand stories and grand values, and the implied superiority of verbal (descriptive) discourses so predominant not only in the media but also in video-making art ideologies. Through such innovative approaches, she creates connections that resonate on an emotional and ethical level, fostering trust and engagement with ideas and narratives that truly matter to people's lives.

The documentary ambition of artistic film practices was first modulated by the emergence of filmic essays in museum galleries, then by the introduction of fiction within the documentary film framework, and now—exemplified by works such as Emilija Škarnulytė's—by the use of fantasy not merely as a narrative resource but as another technology. Popular writers of fantasy employ magic as technology to explore what it means to be “human.” Fantasy and magic have been used since time immemorial to relativize human figures and capabilities. By emphasizing the possibility of changing shape and becoming other creatures, mythology, and ancestral tales remind us that we are not the only beings capable of making decisions or possessing knowledge about the cosmos.

Fantasy has always served as a code, a preparatory language. For centuries, it has predisposed us to understand transitions and connections between species and dimensions of reality that our senses and minds cannot fully grasp through language alone. The fantastic code, combined with verbal language and visual imagery, yields incredible results. Our ideological education often undervalues the importance of creating contact atmospheres between communicators and communicants.

We often believe that the message alone is sufficient to reach others and foster the acceptance of ideas and values. However, we can affirm that if, in the past, there were conditions for accepting ideas without a prior experience of their reception, these conditions have radically changed today. More than ever, we need intermediate worlds. We need spaces of intersection between sets, between increasingly polarized communities, societies prone to nationalism, and militarized borders. The creation of these social free zones is easier through the use of the fantastic than through highly speculative political philosophy. Citizens are tired of organizational proposals, tired of measures to adjust and readjust their behavior, and tired of changes in social norms—though these are necessary and legitimate. The only way to counteract this generalized weariness, which is easily exploited by the media and reactionary powers, is through fantasy.

This is where the great strength of Emilija Škarnulytė's work lies. Her creations—stages of sagas filled with emotions, experiences, and human and non-human characters—demonstrate that fantasy remains one of the few fertile oases in a desert of daily hardships. In Škarnulytė's hands, fantasy is a malleable and highly fertile substance that produces unprecedented eloquence on perceptual, visual, and experiential levels. Her philosophical references, rooted in feminist and experimental practices, give her work the solidity of research that has historical depth and a clear goal: the creation of a value system that diverges from the succession of Western patriarchies.

By integrating fantasy as a technological tool, Škarnulytė helps bridge the gap between abstract concepts and tangible experiences, fostering a deeper connection and understanding. This approach allows us to explore and comprehend complex realities in ways that traditional methods cannot, thereby enhancing our ability to communicate and connect on a profound level. The term “technology,” derived from

the Greek roots “*techne*” (meaning art or craft) and “*logia*” (systematic treatment), refers both to the means created by humans to effect changes in our ways of life and to the skills needed to undertake them. Technology reflects and influences social change. Now that capitalist powers are incessantly working to consolidate what can truly be called the Age of Technology, it is essential—as Škarnulytė does—to remind ourselves that access to technology can translate into a new understanding of individual and social power. This understanding may differ significantly from the industry's imagination that produces and exploits technology.

While theoretically, technology may act as an equalizing force, in practice, it has intensified social disparities, discrimination, and heightened threats of war and genocide. Much contemporary “serious” literature attempts to confront these tensions directly, but fantastical series, such as Škarnulytė's chapter installations, use fantasy as a trope to negotiate the uneasy relationship between traditional ideals of democracy and humanism and the emerging threats posed by technocracy and totalitarianism.

Emilija Škarnulytė's fantasy is oriented towards creating a sphere to experience what I would call “the impossible-possible.” In Western modernity, the impossible-possible has a bad reputation. When the impossible becomes reality, it frequently refers to worst-case scenarios. Terms that reveal the positive potential of future possibilities are more related to innovation—a lesser term that never alludes to radical transformation but hints at modifications within a given system. The other major term is revolution, which means the reversal. Revolution aims to create a new world, but it cannot be said to have a universally positive connotation either.

Škarnulytė's working method involves the creation of powerful imaginaries capable of giving reality to difficult notions, such as identifying with the pain of the planet, creating a feeling within us of the emotions of non-human creatures, and fostering intuitions about the future of life that we have never had before. These intuitions need certain conditions to emerge, and artistic creation—through a weaving of different systems of images, video, bodies, and performances—can bring these conditions into being.

Her work focuses on emergence, on the production of new knowledge. These wisdoms manifest in the senses and strive to produce a new language. Her approach to transformation can be described as materialistic. The artwork becomes a substance capable of materializing these emergencies, bringing them into existence in a way that can transform the world as we know it. This ambition is indeed grand, and whenever we see one of Škarnulytė's works, we should consider the entire series related to that particular piece.

Ideally, her work should be present not only in exhibition spaces but simultaneously in many cities and spaces at once. Imagine not just a small community being exposed to her visual and perceptual thinking, but much larger communities and audiences. Škarnulytė's work has an immersive character, one that aims to “soak” the actual social bodies composing Europe, for example, in her thinking-through-images, in her exercise of the impossible-possible.

She is somewhat like a contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a moralist aimed at producing an original vision of human nature and fulfillment, along with an analysis of the forces hindering people from achieving happiness. That's what her work is about.



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Written and directed by: Emilija Škarnulytė

Editing: Vytautas Tinteris

Exhibition Architecture: Linas Lapinskas

Composers: Jokūbas Čižikas, Vivian Caccuri, Thiago Lanis, Savio de Queiroz

Sound mixing and mastering: Savio De Queiroz

Drone Pilot: Bruno Hayden Barreto

Underwater camera: Michael Dantas

Swimmer: Emilija Škarnulytė

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About Mycelium-SUMAÚMA

Based in Altamira, in the Middle Xingu region of Pará state, SUMAÚMA—Journalism from the Center of the World—takes a side. SUMAÚMA is an ally of those who defend enclaves of nature and centers of life. Altamira is the epicenter of both the destruction of the forest and resistance to this destruction. SUMAÚMA stands firmly on the side of life. We want to be part of a transformation. We want to connect supporters in distant cities with those fighting in the forest to protect our planetary life-support systems. Mycelium” is the name of the co-training program for forest journalists run by our trilingual journalism platform. Mycelium-SUMAÚMA is a relationship that puts journalism's focus on the forest movement/nature movement relationship.

Emilija Škarnulytė: *Æqualia*

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Curated by Summer Guthery and Sara Garzón, with assistance from Maya Hayda

Edited by Sara Garzón
Proofreading: Maya Hayda
Design: Scott Ponik

Texts by: Sara Garzón, Sara Lima, Kate Sutton, and Chus Martinez

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Installation views by Izzy Leung

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