Thinking Like a Mountain

Supplement

A Blackbird's Song

Valentina Gervasoni

> *I refer to our need for the sun, the wind, the sky, the need for touching, smelling, sleeping, making love, and being in the open air.*[1]

An Orobic Journey. Pausing on Migratory Restlessness, Community, and Multispecies Geographies is a complex, heterogeneous organism that was conceived with the twofold objective of encapsulating the experience of two years of planning and design and of expanding upon what the online magazine represented—a tool for reflection, exploration and dialogue that accompanied the biennial across its various stages. The book encompasses the encounters that saw artists engage in dialogue with professionals and scholars from Italy and beyond, and also with the public, as well as visual material, essays, conversations, research, and interviews that initially populated the online magazine. The editorial process did

1 Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM Press/Kairos, 2018), 190.

not come about exclusively to document and describe what happened in *Thinking Like a Mountain*, but rather to produce content which could take its place alongside the program, flesh it out, and sometimes even call it into question. The magazine constituted the main critical tool for conducting analysis and contextualization alongside the local and project-based dimension. In this sense, the editorial line served as a parallel research device: the magazine—and today this book—represents a forum in which to highlight the questions that came into being as part of the program, often recurrently, and which here found their initial configuration, while remaining open and making no claims to comprehensiveness. In addition, there are personal readings, containing more general considerations that arose from the intense life of this biennial. Inevitably, the levels of the discourse will become fused, because there are multiple, often overlapping planes involved in this time frame.

The Carrier Bag

In *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986), Ursula K. Le Guin proposes abandoning stories of action and success that focus on heroes—complete with protagonists, phallocentric weapons, and linear timescales of conquest and destruction—and instead rethinking human evolution through a different prism: the carrier bag, an instrument so essential for gathering, foraging, and collecting; for containing and receiving, rather than for attacking, striking, and killing. The author asks that we tell new stories, while

recognizing at the same time that people have been weaving, sowing, singing, recounting, and writing non-heroic stories since the beginning of time. For me, *Thinking Like a Mountain* is this carrier bag, this shell: links that intertwine with other links, stories that tell other stories, to paraphrase Donna Haraway.

The idea of the mountain that we embraced with this project was never a theme but an epistemological lens, a way to redefine the perspective through which we imagine the contemporary moment, to open it up to the unexpected and to reciprocity.

The encounter with the local areas made it clear that relationships are always an imperfect process, sometimes asymmetrical, often laborious. *Thinking Like a Mountain* was born out of this fatigue. Not the sort of fatigue considered to be an obstacle, nor that which measures time on the basis of the logic of the result, but a relationship-based fatigue that came out of the time of listening and out of the complexity of the dialogue with the local communities, administrations, and associations; a fatigue that came out of reciprocity, expectation, negotiation, mediation. Out of getting visions and practices, customs and professions to live together. Out of allowing things to happen in the time required for them to be transformed. Out of carrying this carrier bag. A laborious process that became a method of working and of new understanding.

Patient, almost invisible work, which is not reflected in photographic documentation, in press reviews, on social media, in the public narrative (where there is a tendency to reduce complexity to a single voice, a sole name) or even in the works produced, but which moved amid the social and material interweaving of the places—reminding us, above all, that curating is not a mere act of selection but is about safeguarding complexity, a practice of accompaniment, capable of intertwining different voices, stories and time frames; it is about standing side-by-side with the artists and the communities.

A fatigue that here became a form of care, even if on occasion those links showed themselves to be more fragile, or episodic, than anticipated, with the “making humanness” less solid than as envisaged at the start of the project—on occasion due to time limits, which prevented the dialogue from being properly consolidated, and on occasion because the design dimension, inevitably, prevailed over the possibility for encounter and for adherence to the initial principles. There were places in which the collaborations remained more formal than fully engaged in, and others where we worked within a long-term perspective, jointly planning pathways of mediation based on the recognition of the outdoors as an educator, to transmit skills and tools to those who live in those territories, in an attempt to respond to the desire to imagine forms of cultural and social investment that would be capable of generating sustainable economic consequences, new opportunities for work based on outdoor education, and the enhancement of the natural

and cultural heritage. Others generated unexpected, genuine connections and responses that were “human” in the most sentimental and vulnerable sense of the term.

The most functional collaborations did not attempt to avoid the contradiction between artistic/institutional autonomy and working with people, places, and communities, but kept alive the tension between the structure of the work and the conditions of its reception. It is probably on these borderlines that we tried to move—even when the relationship may have appeared contradictory or even opportunistic.[2]

2 See: Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum*, 2006. Over recent decades, the proliferation of biennial events, fairs masquerading as multi-side exhibitions, and art programs in the public space, has redefined the way in which art interacts with local areas. For our purposes here, we should state that the consultative committee of Manifesta, questioning the point of staging the umpteenth biennial, asked itself a question as simple as it was radical: “Biennials don’t work, so why start another one?” [See Camiel van Winkel, “The Rhetorics of Manifesta,” in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Brussels: Roomade; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 219]. Almost a decade of biennials later, this question not only continued to be asked, but provided the foundation for the birth of the International Biennial Association (IBA). During the first conference and general assembly of the association, Maria Hlavajova, in her keynote speech subsequently entitled *Why Biennial?*, recognized that the transformative potential of the biennial lies in the possibilities it affords to invest in an individual and collective ethic, to be an institution in a state of continual creation which negotiates constantly with social change and with the mutable composition of its user base. However, this expansion-–celebrated on occasion as a counter-discourse to cultural democratization, openness, and colonial modernity (Okwui Enwezor, amongst others, has claimed that biennials have produced an effect of radical decentering in the world of art, calling into question the power structures and the traditional institutions that, in a conservative, dominant way, have historically been consolidated in the West. See Okwui Enwezor, “Place-making or In the ‘Wrong Place’: Contemporary Art and the Postcolonial Condition,” in *The History of A Decade That Has Not Been Named Yet* (Lyon: JPR/Ringier, 2007)-–often corresponds to a feeling of saturation for those in the industry and the ever-increasing perception of an extractivist approach: many proposals risk being reduced to exercises of representation, where the breadth of the social, environmental, and political themes maintains a distance from the real world that it presumes to represent; and where inclusivity translates into a neutralization of the differences in class, language, provenance, and competence of the generic and generalist public (biennials as a product of mass culture and mass tourism) at which they are targeted, ending up with the depoliticization of dissent. As per the recent analysis conducted by the writer and theorist Joshua Segun-Lean (See Joshua Segun-Lean, “The Trouble with Art Biennials Today,” in *Frieze*, no. 248 (2025)), contemporary biennials are tending more and more to aestheticize risk and vulnerability, developing around these concepts a language that is emotive and reassuring. Many of these large events base their rhetoric on empathy, affect, care, subjectivity—keywords that, while drawing their inspiration from social movements and feminist or decolonial practices, are often reduced to aesthetic codes. The upshot is an apparent politicization, a discourse that thematizes agency, the body, or the identity, without really interrogating the economic and institutional structures that produce in the first place the inequalities that it claims to want to denounce. They often announce their desire to put in place a dialogue with the cities that host them, but the impact of these events is almost always more

The program was meant to develop through pauses, deviations, and expectations, in contrast with the productive logic of a great many cultural activities, and to operate instead through attentive listening. With the magazine, first, and then with this book, we sought a space in which to listen, to welcome the questions that gradually emerged, broadening out the scope of our investigation and at the same time exploring the themes addressed more deeply. Despite this, we soon realized how much these limitations—not just theoretical but applying also to the time and resources available—were becoming increasingly restrictive in relation to the breadth and interconnection of the questions being opened up.

We wanted, for instance, to initiate a multi-layered reflection on linguistics, on the words that we are losing and on those that we have not yet invented in order to designate what is changing—above all in terms of climate change, which requires new perceptive and linguistic codes. From this perspective, the question of language concerns not only translation and storytelling, but also the ways in which language conserves, hands down, and regenerates local knowledge and new forms of understanding, in step with the visual culture underpinning the construction of the collective identity, memories, rituals, and intergenerational dialogues.

symbolic than concrete: the infrastructures are temporary, the networks ephemeral, the local economies of only marginal importance. In certain cases, they act like parasitic organisms, which feed off the energy and human and economic resources of the places in question, without offering them instruments of autonomy or continuity in return.

Thinking Like a Mountain

We would also have liked to explore what is a pressing issue: the change in the economic and social models that govern the life of peripheries, and especially within the province of Bergamo, those communities living on mountainsides. The gradual collapse of an economy based on seasonal tourism, often monocultural, has thrown into crisis a productive system and, indeed, an entire ecosystem. From the mapping of the territory,[3] it is clear that it is those areas farthest from the major population centers and service hubs which are most often subject to a form of economic hardship that tends to translate into an educational gap. The data show that economic poverty and educational poverty feed into each other, because the lack of cultural resources and social networks results in reduced opportunities for employment. At the same time, economic constraints limit access to cultural and educational resources, constituting an objective obstacle for children and young people from underprivileged families in both the short term and the long term, because the probability that, as adults, they will succeed in avoiding financial hardship is reduced accordingly. The mountain, long described as a resource or as an untainted “elsewhere,” finds itself today at the center of a radical rethinking of its own inhabitability: who can live there, work there, and pass through it, and under what material and symbolic conditions? What, today, is the heritage of the 1980s? It was a period that, in the prealpine territories, saw the mountain slopes becoming subject to wide-ranging urbanization and to an extractive utilization of the countryside. And then there is the associated need to

3 According to the analyses by Openpolis - Con i Bambini using data from Istat, Svimez, Miur, Iccu-Abi (January 10, 2020).

ask ourselves questions vis-à-vis the phenomena of gentrification, as much in urban centers as in rural and mountain environments, where the rhetoric of the return to nature is interwoven with a logic of economic and cultural exclusion. It is a process that is not only ecological, but also class-based, and which calls into question the redistribution of power and resources.

Also connected to this is a more specific reflection on regenerative ecologies, interpreted as an ethical and political practice that above all recognizes the history of a part of the country wounded by extraction, deforestation, and overbuilding. In addition, this perspective provided the source for the necessity to turn our gaze towards the invisible dimension of every ecosystem—the dimension of the soil and of the life forms that live on it.

Moreover, the generational issue remains partially implicit: the passage of knowledge, the transmission of gestures, the distance between those who remain and those who return, between those who inherit a territory and those who reinvent it. It is a question of continuity and mutation, rumbling underneath many experiences of the project.

Another node that has remained marginal is a consideration of what it means for a European cultural institution to properly adopt a non-anthropocentric, non-proprietary, and non-rational perspective: How to construct a curatorial practice that has what it takes to embrace natural subjectivities—animal, plant, mineral—in a world that is fully

infrastructural, industrial, and secular? Research could be expanded, not simply by not excluding ancestral traditions and non-Western cosmogonies, but also by exploring in a more incisive way the less-studied Western forms of understanding and knowledge, such as those of the pre-industrial rural communities, characterized by a non-utilitarian relationship, in continuity with the natural cycles. What can we learn from these communities at risk of extinction? What could be the value of assets and of work in a future shorn of any perspective of capitalist growth?

While the program endeavored to give voice to multiple subjectivities, there remains the requirement to carry out a more probing investigation into collective disidentification—into how communities and individuals can free themselves up from the roles and categories inherited from colonial and patriarchal modernity. Non-human subjectivities, non-normative marginalized bodies, queer and trans existences, the economies of care and of mutualism are still partially invisible, but they are perhaps the most urgent issues to be addressed with a view to rethinking the very concept of community, no longer founded exclusively on local identity or on embedding in the local area; it was on this that we tried to focus our attention.

Where, then, can we meet each other, as a community and as individuals, within a reality that appears less and less reversible in terms of its effects, and which often exceeds our capacity to understand it and to really inhabit it?

Thinking Like a Mountain

After these two years of work, over and above any critical arguments or curatorial visions, I would like to respond to this profoundly political question in a very simple way: in the museum. *Thinking Like a Mountain* is a project that was born to bring those who inhabit and "make" the museum, emerge from our walls, real or imaginary as they may be, only to then have them return there, not so as to complete a full circle, but to remind us that the circle can never be truly complete. This is not due to the presumed authority of the museum, nor to the desire to impose interpretative models, but due to the possibility that the museum offers to become accustomed to the practice of conflict, as a constitutive element of the social life into which the institution, the museum, or the biennial, is inserted. The museum can embrace conflict in a generative way; its civic and pedagogical function makes it a space in which dissent, on various levels, can be exercised, listened to, elaborated together; where complexity is shared; where the community can try out forms of symbolic cohabitation that elsewhere would seem impossible.

Thinking Like a Mountain

What transforms a solitary vision into a collective force?
Learning to pay attention to the silence that a blackbird's song can bring into existence.[4]

For those who, like me, grew up near the Orobie but failed to really grasp their potential—out of a habit of proximity that made them of little interest, almost invisible, a territory often perceived as "empty" or marginal—*Thinking Like a Mountain* served to substantiate the polysemy of *mountainness* as a cultural experience even before it is a geographical one.

An Orobic Journey thus moves from the need to look at our *middle mountains* as territories permeated by an intermittent political relevance and crisscrossed by a multiplicity of inhabitants (both human and non-human) that continually redefine their frontiers and their meanings, towards a global resonance. The book is split into chapters that compile a diverse range of material, organized in such a way that the contents reverberate off each other. Every section is not enclosed in itself, but is grafted onto the next, creating a continuity that enables the themes to branch out and then return. The book begins with one of the short fables by the artist, Lin May Saeed, which serves as a narrative threshold and introduces the central themes of her

4 Vinciane Despret, *Living as a Bird*, trans. Helen Morrison (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 161. Studying the theories of animal behavior, in *Living as a Bird* (first published in French in 2019), Vinciane Despret does not seek a primary cause for birdsong; what interests her is enriching the panorama of the possible meanings of the actions of birds. Birdsong, she writes, is not just a way of delineating a territory, but a sophisticated process of adaptation, The territories of birds are sung territories, constructed through relationships. In an interview that appeared in *Le Monde*, Donna Haraway proposed the term "Phonocene" as appropriate for our epoch. For the Biennal de Pensament in Barcelona, Despret and Haraway returned to discuss the Phonocene, using the term not to categorize a geological era but to express an invitation to start listening and paying attention to birdsong, whalesong, and the buzzing of insects, as expressions of various ways to inhabit the Earth, and to do so in time to stop them disappearing.

research, which is geared towards exploring the possibilities for interspecies cohabitation. In the tale of *The Man and the Monkey*, the moment in which the human being, mounting a horse, learns to move around more rapidly is not to be interpreted as the inaugural act of a hierarchy among the species. For its part, the monkey embraces its inclination and decides to clamber onto the neck of a giraffe. One of Saeed's principal iconographic themes is that of the assembly of people and animals; scenes in which the artist interweaves her visions with the ancient myths of the Mediterranean, starting from the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This ensemble, here reconstructed through her preparatory sketches, becomes for us the thread that accompanies the passage from one chapter to the next.

While capable of formulating an *ante litteram* principle of ecological responsibility, the vision of Aldo Leopold—which provides the biennial's conceptual framework—brought with it, in any case, contradictions that emerge with even greater clarity today. The authors called upon to open the book—Serpil Oppermann, Giulia Rispoli, and Miriam Tola—highlight how the Western ecological imaginary, on which Leopold's thought was itself founded, can be inscribed within two dominant figures: nature as territory of extraction, and nature as wilderness. These two models have profoundly influenced the ways in which the West (or, for the most part, the white, cisgender, heterosexual male) has viewed, managed, and often appropriated the land. Moreover, they constitute the crucial departure point on which the entire

introductory chapter is based.

Leopold was deeply critical of industrialization and extractive capitalism, and even offered a certain Malthusian imaginary of uncontaminated, “wild nature” that, however, ignored the colonial politics and forms of social violence associated with the management of the native lands. The conservationist ideal of the return to the wilderness, as observed by Dina Gilio-Whitaker, cited both by Rispoli and by Tola, canceled out what the Indigenous cultures had developed as forms of local knowledge: practices of sustainability and coexistence capable of ensuring long-term survival in complex, healthy ecosystems. While Rispoli highlights how, despite these critical nodes, Leopold’s systemic vision paved the way for the elaboration of the theoretical frame within which the debate on the Anthropocene has played out, Tola questions the Western imaginary of nature as wilderness, showing how it is shot through with a deep-seated colonial ambivalence and focusing on the political and epistemic practices that create alternatives to extractive violence. Tola’s essay takes its cue from another text by Aldo Leopold, *The River of the Mother of God* (1924), which investigates the history of extraction in those areas of the Andes where the river of the title first surfaces. In his writing, there emerges an unresolved tension between the ethics of the land and the rhetoric of ownership. As Federica Timeto notes later in the book, the moment in which, in *A Sand County Almanac*, the gaze of the dying animal is reflected in that of the hunter becomes, for the author, a turning point, but this gesture of reconciliation

remains inscribed within a regime of anthropocentric vision, in which the human predator recovers his moral elevation through the death of the wolf. There is no reciprocity if the animal, in order to be recognized, has first to be killed. The very image of the mountain as a symbolic site of revelation risks being inserted into a regime of vertical vision, where the human regains the moral high ground through a detachment that, symbolically, separates once more the observer from the observed. Highlighting this limit, Serpil Oppermann critically questions the verticality inherent in Leopold's gesture. But what would happen if ecological understanding lay not in elevation but in flow? As she puts it: "Water resists the enclosures, inviting an ontology of flowing, filtering and sedimenting."[5] There thus emerges a critical position with respect to the method that guided us; a paradigm that Oppermann encourages us to recognize within the limits of a thought process that risks excluding the margins, observing with detachment instead of traversing and listening. An aquatic perspective dissolves the illusion of coherence and induces us to conceive of ecological systems not as stable forms, but as processes in a state of becoming, because such a perspective knows neither center nor borderline—it flows, embraces, erodes hierarchies, shifts frontiers, generating unexpected links.

The first section, *A Sense of Erratic Existence*, explores the concept of migratory restlessness, a scientific term denoting a broader and deeper condition than the simple act of migrating. It does not concern only the seasonal

5 Conversation with the author.

movements of birds or, by extension, the return of wolves to lands from which they have disappeared. It is the restlessness of the living world—human and non-human—in the face of limits that shift or do not exist (as Agnese Galiotto reminds us), of habitats that change, of ecological relationships that are reconfigured. This is the "rooting oneself and learning to become part of the landscape as a ferocious claim to life"[6] that can be seen in the becoming-plant of the work of Yesmine Ben Khelil: not a nostalgic return "to nature" but an act of resistance against the normative codes that demand a clear separation between identity and life forms. "On the contrary, it's about seeing people as always already plants, plants as always already human, and these distinctions as always already weird."[7]

This chapter is awash with a reflection on the planetary condition, according to the lexicon suggested by Dipesh Chakrabarty, whereby geological, biological, and climatic processes are dynamically interconnected, an entity of which the human is a part, but not its measurement nor its end. It is a condition that, as Marie Petersmann stresses in her contribution, also examines the political and legal systems, opening up questions on how to represent an "us" that can include heterogeneous differences and temporalities of planetary subjects. In what way can a more-than-human perspective help us to define and to translate into legal terms the conditions in which wild nature

6 Elvia Wilk, *Death by Landscape* (New York: Soft Skull, 2022), 9.

7 According to the definition, that Wilk states comes from Mark Fisher, as an external space that lies outside the perception of knowledge and shared experience.

manifests itself, not as an element placed in opposition to the human, but as an encounter between the species?

The second chapter, *What Lies Inside a Mountain*, looks at mountains as stratified cultural constructions. Michael Jakob and Julius von Bismarck recall how the reproduction and mass-market circulation of landscape images rendered the landscape itself a circulating asset, a globalized visual object. The possibility of seeing a place before experiencing it created an autonomous imaginary, which ends up shaping the experience itself. In this sense, what for generations has appeared as a hostile and impracticable territory—the mountain—begins to be interpreted as an aesthetic object, a *locus* of the sublime. A place perceived as a threshold, a liminal opening. This brings to mind the words of Alessandra Mignatti, which appear later in the final chapter, when she recalls how Bergamo and its valleys would represent the wild for the community of people who had built, organized, and cultivated the city; the reference here is to sixteenth-century Venice. The forest—the Western equivalent to the biblical desert—was imagined as a space of regression to a state of nature, just as the valleys of Bergamo represented for the city the edge of the "Marvelous."[8] They are places that today are shaped by subsistence practices, sometimes residual but still carriers of a material knowledge that is capable of responding to the crisis of the modern model of the mountain, which is founded prevalently on a seasonal monoculture based on tourism. In their contributions, Mauro Varotto and Mosè Cometta describe the mountain as a

8 Alessandra Mignatti, "Il paesaggio del meraviglioso: Bergamo tra maschere, santi e riti pagani," 2008.

space modelled by power relations, asymmetrical economic flows and tensions between community practices and new forms of marginalization; but also as a place in which the political and social polarizations of the present are revealed, encompassing populisms, depopulation (or intermittent forms of frequentation that generate hybrid practices of inhabiting), and a lack of transformative responses on the part of the institutions. If the mountain is a cultural construct, how can we reinvent it today to make it a livable, sustainable, shared place? Overlapping with this reading is an analysis of the ongoing environmental transformations: the interaction between vegetation and anthropic activity, the increase in extreme rain, the appearance of tropical nights even at high altitude. The images of Agostino Iacurci give us the picture of a dystopian, increasingly artificialized landscape, almost a surrogate for the climatic futures that await us. Other images, compiled in the subsequent chapters, were created by Francesco Pedrini, who makes his way through woodlands compromised by the spread of auger beetles, seeking an open space for new cosmogonical visions.

My Land is Yours, the title of the book's third chapter, is a recasting of a phrase appearing in the video installation by Sonia Boyce, who drew her inspiration from the seventeenth-century frescoes of grotesques and allegories of the virtues of good government painted by Pietro Baschenis in the Angelo Mai Civic Library. The artist chooses to emphasize benevolence, as portrayed by a woman who presses her breast, from which flows abundant milk to nurture various animals. It was on observing this

figure, who lovingly shares what nature has endowed her with, that the singer spontaneously broke into the *Kyrie Eleison*, one of the oldest litanies of the Christian liturgy, the original meaning of which, conserved by the Byzantine rite, can be translated as “Lord, have mercy.” The prayer is interspersed rhythmically by the proclamation of the virtues. The sound of a single voice is duplicated and composed through the six channels of the installation with a view to interacting with itself and with the frescoed spaces, which amplify its echoes and undertones. In this play of refractions, the phrase “My land is yours” is superimposed. Not a land to be given or taken. It is a distant intoning of the violent dynamics typical of colonial history. The paradigm that it suggests, on the contrary, calls into question the legal regimes that undergirded the colonial orders, celebrating the willingness to share resources and spaces without presupposing hierarchies or claims to domination. As Brandon LaBelle notes in *The Joy of Cacophony*, partially quoted here,[9] “There are voices [...] that carry themselves into the public square, carry the lyrics and melodies of history and its meanings [...]. From *Il testamento del Capitano* to *Bella Ciao*, the songs of the ‘freedom fighters’ capture the imagination of activists and citizens alike, inspiring a sense of urgency surrounding anti-fascist struggles.”[10] Closing the first sequence is what seems to be

9 Brandon LaBelle, *The Joy of Cacophony* (Milan: Lenz, 2024).

10 LaBelle cites the ethnomusicologist Ana Hofman, the author of an important analysis on the modes of recovery of the songs of the partisans by groups of activists and choirs in the former Yugoslavia over recent years. Hofman indicates that the practice of “giving sound back” to the anti-fascist resistance makes it possible to carve out new channels and spaces of affective politics that help in the effort to overcome the “sense of uncertainty” or “political exhaustion,” as the author puts it. See Ana Hofman, “Disobedient: Activist Choirs, Radical Amateurism, and the Politics of the Past after Yugoslavia,” *Ethnomusicology* 64, no. 1 (Winter 2020).

an explicit request: “Silence”. However, rather than interrupting, it opens up a space of mutual care and listening.

In her essay, Amal Khalaf cites in this regard the experience of *Radio Ballads*, a project that takes its name from a radio series broadcast by the BBC in the late 1950s. The programs combined songs, music, and sound effects with stories of local communities. Each of the original “ballads” focused on telling the story of the experiences of life and resistance of workers and of those groups whose voice was otherwise rarely, if ever, heard in the media. The project considers the possibilities for understanding, listening, learning, and healing through shared storytelling, and demonstrates how compiling marginalized narratives is not a documentary gesture but a form of collective survival. Storytelling as action, as a way to stay alive together. It is within this picture that Khalaf recalls bell hooks, for whom love was a practice of freedom: a political and pedagogical gesture that asks us to present ourselves as whole, vulnerable, defenseless. Loving, creating, taking care of oneself thus become acts of everyday resistance, small, clandestine shrines in the ruins—places where stories are not extracted, but shared, and where storytelling returns to be an act of mutual generation.

In her contribution, Veronica Pecile talks about life within new, extensive communities and places that become outposts of resistance. She describes the commons as living processes,[11] permeated by practices of joint decision-

11 Thinkers such as Silvia Federici--in key books such as *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM

making, conflict, exclusion and forms of alliance, to understand both the contradictions and the generative possibilities of that which is shared, above all in light of the social and political transformations that are today affecting both urban and mountain landscapes. If the need emerges to reappropriate spaces through practices of embedding and self-determination, rethinking care as practice and as logic of relation, then care becomes an emblem of an alternative social system, which places relationships, co-responsibility, time, and nature at the forefront.[12]

Taking on a caring perspective also means placing social reproduction at the heart of collective life, acting on the material conditions that enable bodies and communities to exist—access to primary resources, recognition of rights, possibilities to inhabit a space not only physically. It is on this awareness that the fourth chapter of the book is based.

Zeyn Joukhadar's essay investigates the forms of solidarity that emerge within marginalized communities, adopting the viewpoint of a transgender person who has been subject to racial discrimination and has migrated to Italy. His analysis combines private aspects with the geological and social

Press, 2019) and *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004)--have shown how the idea of the commons is inseparable from the dynamics of modern capitalism, which tends to incorporate and extract value from what was historically outwith the economic sphere. Federici insists on the collective and cooperative nature of the commons, understood as social assets (land, forests, communicative spaces) managed by a community and not by the state or by individuals. Also aligned with this perspective is Ilenia Caleo, who proposes the use of the verb "commoning" to stress the performative character of "placing-in-common": not an entity to be administered, but a set of living practices that produce relationships, shared responsibilities and forms of coexistence. See Ilenia Caleo, "re/Play the commons. Pratiche e immaginazione politica nei movimenti culturali per i beni comuni," in Maura Benegiamo et al., *Commons/Comune* (Florence: Società di Studi Geografici, 2016).

12 See Francesca Brunori, Virginia Musso, "Per una risignificazione condivisa dello spazio: l'etica della cura nel commoning femminista," in *Genere e Progetto dei luoghi*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2023): 102.

history of the prealpine area of the Orobie, showing how space is never neutral, but always the result of economic and political sedimentations. Joukhadar asks an essential question: who belongs to a place? What does belonging mean for those who cannot enter their name into the municipal register, for those who do not have a rental contract, for those who cannot get a document with the right name and gender on it? It is here that the author introduces the idea of a precarious "us"; an "us" constantly called into question and often founded more on the excluder than on the excluded. Making reference to the term coined by Léa Rivière, *deuiller* (from *deuil* and *lutter*, bereavement and struggle), Joukhadar reflects on a collective practice of transition that concerns not only the lives cancelled out by contemporary necropolitics, but also those parts of the self that everyone––and every community––has to leave behind in order to transform itself. Every administrative gesture, every therapy, every correct pronoun becomes an act that converts bereavement into a fertile terrain, "the ruins from which the fragments of other lives can sprout."[13] This perspective on transformation also makes it possible to give a critical reading of the idea of "nature"—all too often used to justify violence, exclusion, and hierarchy. "I am neither more nor less natural than the mountain. Not even the mountain can make any claim to purity," writes Joukhadar, arguing that the Alpine snows are today inexorably mixed with high concentrations of microplastics.

Alongside Joukhadar's voice, the dialogue between the

13 Brunori and Musso, "Per una risignificazione condivisa dello spazio."

psychoanalyst Alice Kentridge and Gaia Fugazza on the work *Mother of Millions* addresses the idea of nature as established order, critiquing the consolidated representations of bodies and also discussing care and the potential to imagine non-normative genealogies. Looking at Fugazza's sculpture, which inscribes in itself fragments of different bodies—child feet, adult muscles, a chest non dually gendered, a set of creatures in formation held aloft by the arms—Kentridge returns to the metaphors of the "good breast" and the "bad breast" and analyzes how psychoanalytic language tends to transform relational metaphors into corporeal prescriptions: that which is born as a symbolic figure of care becomes norm, constraint, expectation of the female body. Fugazza confirms how the public gaze often tries to reinsert conventional anatomies or genitals into sculptures, imposing a gender on the figure, and as a consequence an already known symbolic order. The title of the chapter, *Mothering is Something We All Can Do*, is taken from their conversation: a statement that deconstructs the idea of maternity as biological destiny or standard role, transforming it into a shareable action, within a political practice.

Taking Objects for Walks is the title of the fifth chapter, which focuses on how to imagine forms of planning that are capable of challenging the extractive and speculative logics that have long molded both urban and mountain spaces.

In his essay, Simone Ferracina proposes a re-think of construction beyond the modern paradigms of

transparency, control, and performance. His is an exhortation to experience opacity as an ecological quality, which means accepting the unexpected, wandering, the possibility that materials and architectural structures and forms do not solely perform functions but can also give rise to new imaginaries. Exaptation—creative re-use that deviates from the original function—becomes a strategy for removing architecture from the logic of extraction, opening up to degrowth and cooperation as design principles.

These principles emerge in the Studio Ossidiana project entitled *Massi Erratici* (Erratic Boulders), developed as an entry for the competition orchestrated by the Italian Ministry of Culture on sustainable architecture. The modular elements designed by the duo met the requirement––an urgent one for the museum during a two-year period in which it was operating away from its usual premises––to rethink the entrance as a welcoming place, an environment in which to pause, converse, read, or play chess; a space in which the editorial team of the magazine found a physical and symbolic home. The project intertwines the work done together with Frantoio Sociale, which arose out of a workshop held in the complex used for the depositing and sorting of construction material, with a group of students from the Politecnico delle Arti in Bergamo. The image of the mountain of aggregate, a crushing machine, and a group of people seated on benches made from construction-site planks precisely captures the meaning of the work: taking what is discarded, surplus to requirements, in order to investigate its potential. Here, the offcuts become precious

materials, and circularity is not a slogan but an operating principle. Imagining worlds means not just designing new spaces, but recognizing the many ways in which human beings and other elements of the world are reciprocally constituted. It also means recognizing that there is more than one way to describe the “environment,” and more than one term to define human, non-human, living or inert.

Throughout the book, there is a shared focus on the concept of nature and on the functions—political, symbolic, normative—that we assign to this historical category. It is more or less evident that what we call nature is often the name that we give to our ideas of order, which is paradoxical if we think of that wild, extreme dimension towards which the inner needs of human beings often romantically tend. It thus emerges, indirectly, that terms such as “nature” and “natural” are classificatory gestures which generate separations: between human and non-human, living and non-living, legitimate bodies and deviant bodies, countryside to be protected and territories to be sacrificed (based, though, on ever-changing whims). We call “nature” what we have decided to place in front of us, and with this term we also define those who are allowed into and those who are excluded from our socio-political community. Nature is, then, a normative construct, a category that does not describe the world but which shapes its outlines.

Adriano Favole, here in conversation with Greta Martina, recalls that in various regions of Oceania there is no equivalent term for nature. The absence of this term does

not indicate any linguistic absence, but merely another way of structuring experience as a *continuum* of relationships between human beings, environments, ancestors and other living things. Oceanic cultures have the concept of the uncultivated. The uncultivated is not chaos. Indeed, cultivated and uncultivated are not opposing categories, but poles continually redefined by the way in which people delineate, lose and regain portions of territory.

A similar picture emerges from the research of the anthropologist Emanuela Borgnino in the Pacific islands and in Japan, as discussed at the end of this chapter with Ilaria Gadenz. The conversation concentrates on what the scholar defines as the "social life of stones." In many Polynesian and Micronesian communities, stones—as well as other mineral elements—are considered to be endowed with sensitivity and the capacity to act. Borgnino describes how they travel between islands, are transported on canoes, appear in and disappear from local stories, come to rest in the landscape for a number of generations and, in this process, make human beings act. Their mineral time, far more stretched-out than its human equivalent, is a dimension with which people negotiate meanings, obligations, and forms of care. It is an awareness that we could define as ecological, and of which many native peoples have been custodians since time immemorial. Contemporary scientific language expresses the insight whereby mountains, rivers, stones, and human beings are made of the same stuff, but just with the sub-atomic particles arranged differently. "The only difference," explains Borgnino, "is that the cultures which I

engage with talk to me about genealogical, rather than sub-atomic, bonds."

The echo of the cosmologies described by Borgnino resonates in the introduction to the final chapter in the book, *Sympathetic Magic*, the content of which arose out of the desire to open up the discourse to take in those forms of ancient, ritual knowledge associated with the Other and with the Elsewhere, which succeed in combining geographies near and far, and ancient eras with our modern day. The chapter is concerned with fragments of discourses that throughout history have been silenced on the altar of the presumed predominance of a measurable, rational knowledge, historically male, white and powerful, which are here set against forms of more-than-human coexistence, whereby plants, animals, watercourses, fungi, stones, spirits and human beings are all subjectivities on an equal footing, capable of acting and relating to each other in the world. This approach is embodied by Gabriel Chaile, who adopts as the living root of his work the style known as La Candelaria, one of the most complex formal systems on the South American continent. Indeed, Tucumán ceramics were not simple decorative containers: they were bodies, hybrid entities in which animal, anthropomorphic, and fantastical forms—birds, frogs, and human-animal amalgams—all coalesced. As Benjamin Alberti states in his analysis,[14] Candelaria vases do not imitate bodies so much as extend them, make them grow. They were not designed on the

14 See Benjamin Alberti "'Designing Body–Pots in the Formative La Candelaria Culture, Northwest Argentina", in *Making and Growing: Anthropological Studies of Organisms and Artefacts*, ed. Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 2014), 107-122.

basis of a human plan, but came about thanks to the ancestors who inhabited the material. Observing these ancient artefacts, Chaile acquired a deep and personal knowledge of his own role and of his being a descendant of that culture.

This moment of recognition has proved central to his practice, because it unleashed his approach to the reappropriation of his Indigenous roots and to his own story. For Chaile, the image becomes a creative act that not only evokes a tradition, but reconstructs and brings up to date our way of understanding history and community, a process that the anthropologist Wolfgang Wulf would define as a continuous recreating of the world through the power of the imagination. It is a process that Chaile himself describes as a “genealogy of form” whereby these objects do not exist only to be observed, but to be experienced and participated in. Chaile’s sculpture-ovens engage in ritual on the occasion of the *Bread Baking Ceremony*, serving as catalysts for an ephemeral *communitas*, the strength of which lies precisely in its momentary and convivial nature: the cooking of food, the shared expectation, the gathering around a source of heat––elements that become an integral part of the work.

As Alice Labor observes in her essay, many contemporary artistic practices attempt to create opportunities for collective *re-enchantment* through the shared rediscovery of the edible. The notion of re-enchantment makes reference to the studies of Silvia Federici, which demonstrated how capitalist modernity has produced a

systematic disenchantment, separating body, territory, and situated forms of knowledge, as we even divest ourselves of the needs, desires, and abilities that constitute one of the main sources of our resistance to exploitation.[15]

Re-enchantment, then, does not mean returning to magic, but reinstating sensitive alliances, recognizing that the world is inhabited by multiple intelligences and forms of perception, and that the relationship between human and non-human is always reciprocal. Every gesture, every contact, is an interaction: touching implies being touched, to see is to be seen. This perspective is intertwined with those cosmologies that imagine bodies, names, souls, actions as relational entities, immersed in a shared terrain that is granted to us by the experience of the body. The practice of Bianca Bondi can also be located within this horizon, in which, as Borgnino states, the mineral world is part of living genealogies, endowed with agency and capable of acting on human life. In her conversation with Annamaria Ajmone, the artist highlights how allowing the materials to act on their own timescales is an ethical gesture even before it is an aesthetic one: a refusal to dominate. Her works take shape as temporary collaborations between substances, spaces, and presences, being configured as moments of unstable equilibrium in which the artist does not guide, but accompanies, autonomous processes of

15 See Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM Press/Kairos, 2018), 190. "There is, however, another form of impoverishment, less visible yet equally devastating, that the Marxist tradition has largely ignored. This is the loss produced by the long history of capitalist assault on our autonomous powers. I refer here to the complex of needs, desires, and capacities that millions of years of evolutionary development in close relation with nature have sedimented in us, which constitutes one of the main sources of our resistance to exploitation."

transformation. In this sense, her practice comes close to cosmologies in which earth, minerals, and water are not passive elements but participate in the construction of the real. Transformation thus becomes a spiritual act before becoming a formal act: a mode of care vis-à-vis what is invisible, neglected. Bondi talks about a manifestation of sympathetic magic, where the work acts as a connection device, a way of reinstating links between different entities. This use of sympathy—interpreted not as individual empathy but as the ability to let oneself be permeated by the other––derives from the decision to take on other points of view, to take care of something other than one's own self. Her installation, *Graces for Gerosa*, inhabits the church of Santa Maria in Montanis like a new ritual of re-enchantment, based on the coexistence of organic material, light, salts, and plaster, and on the presence of the community that made its realization possible. The seven dancing figures are hollow bodies, inner shells that conserve the tactile memory of the cast: human fossils, vibrating thresholds, containers of energy. The dance that they evoke—a reference to pre-Christian and Etruscan gesturality in which movement functioned as a bridge between earthly and divine—returns to the sacred space not as a transgressive gesture but as a language of reconciliation. What was historically prohibited—the dancing body in the place of worship—here becomes an act of restitution: a suspended choreography that connects different temporalities, addressing subterranean memories. The work also touches upon questions raised by epigenetics: the idea that cultural traumas, silences or prohibitions can leave traces which are

then perpetuated across generations. Through the motionless dance of her figures, Bondi seeks the mode in which a gesture can reappropriate an uninterrupted story and give back to the community—and to its ancestors—a new possibility for presence and transformation.

Out of this comes the centrality of the body itself as the primary instrument of knowledge, often obscured by an abstract rationality that attempts to neutralize uncertainty and ambiguity, darkness, shadow and chaos—resonating with the *dividual* nature of the subjectivity evoked by so many non-Western cosmologies. It is a sensibility that, albeit with other forms, also resurfaces in traditions closer to home. The masquerades in the Alpine arc and in the Prealps are still custodians of this idea of an open body, able to "make itself" between worlds. It is in the *homo selvaticus* that it breaks through into the space of the everyday, bringing disorder, revealing forms of knowledge bound up with the fertility of the fields, evoking other presences, and bringing deep-seated memories back up to the surface. It is precisely in sensory oscillation, in the dizziness of direct experience, in allowing oneself to be permeated by what is excessive, by the other, that the world returns to present itself as a shared possibility and not as a space to be dominated.

Thinking Like a Mountain

I will probably never make it to the Frattini Bivouac, metaphorically or literally.

I'll be happy with the fact that every morning my gaze can clamber, effortlessly, up the Albenza and the Roncola, before sliding all the way along the ridge of the Val Brembana, which envelops like an embrace the first conurbations in the foothills. Depending on the time of day and on the seasons, the mountains are shrouded in ever-changing hues: from pinkish bronze to the bright green that blends with the shadow of the woodlands. The scent of logs burning in fireplaces that fills the air takes me back to the winter afternoons of my childhood, when it toxically inebriated the dark and damp roads of the valley, close to the house of my paternal grandmother. I'll be happy to get close to the herons on the meadows, seeing them rise up with that light, majestic gait of theirs. The green woodpeckers, the common redstarts in my garden, and the song of the falcons with their wings spread above my head. And I'll remind myself to "pay attention to the silence that a blackbird's song can bring into existence."[16]

16 Despret, *Living as a Bird*, 161.