

**Shaping the ephemeral in and out of the field: methodological in-
betweens as tools for disentanglement**

VOLUME 14 | No 2 | 2025
[http://dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.
2-186](http://dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-186)

Abstract

This article addresses dialogical practice between anthropology and art and how it afforded connection of elements of different scales: seemingly distant and disconnected processes and bodies with the multiple, interdependent ways climate crisis manifests in a small valley in the Mediterranean Alps. It discusses how methods and disciplines the author sought to keep separate ended up coming into dialogue that, while in the field, helped in a situation of overwhelm, when back from the field – contributed to making sense of things and, later, helped return to text.

Keywords

Ethnography; Methods; Dialogical; Visual Art Practice; Interconnectedness

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Acknowledgements

Author is grateful for the constructive feedback provided by both reviewers that helped the article take its current shape.

The fieldwork for this research project was conducted with the support from the European Regional Development Fund.

The exhibition was supported by the Lithuanian Council for Culture.

The writing of this publication was supported by a fellowship during 2024-2025 at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg *inherit.heritage in transformation* at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

Fieldwork, method, climate and limits

My ethnographic fieldwork took place at the site of a recent disaster in the valley of Roya in France, just off the border with Italy. A doctoral student in anthropology, I arrived the summer following the event of 2nd of October 2020, when an unprecedented storm (Carrega and Michelot 2021) ravaged the valley's infrastructure. Most of the rubble – tree trunks, shells of vehicles, lumps of asphalt and concrete transported by the tight grip of a raging mixture of water and gravel – had been cleared away and driven out of the valley before I arrived. I was familiar with the landscape from my earlier travels aboard a train on a railway line that traverses the valley. I remembered lush green near the riverbed beneath the railroad, colorful houses, and the river Roya, vibrant turquoise to electric blue-green, depending on the time of day and cloud cover. Through those earlier travels, I had never left the train, making the experience of the valley somewhat surreal. The contrast made my heart sink.

The stories that the inhabitants of the villages of the valley shared with me during interviews and those that emerged in daily exchanges guided me through the damage. A ghostly asphalt road leading into nothingness, abruptly ending before a tunnel, the interior of a hotel displayed through seams ripped open, and half of a house hanging on the edge off the cliff attested to my interlocutors' recollections, summoning my gaze. Daily, alongside the villagers, I observed heavy machinery at work on the bed of river Roya. Bulldozers displaced boulders from within the riverbed onto the shores. Rather than serving as a reminder of the storm, rock was transformed into reconstruction material. As storm waters had ripped them off entirely, patches of road leading North of the valley needed to be built anew.

With winter approaching, the sun ducked deeper behind the mountains, and darkness began to weigh on me. I listened to stories and their variations, confusing and conflicting, tensions that are part and parcel of life in a small place on the Franco-Italian border, and grief: grief that followed the storm, grief related to the shift of the border in 1947¹, grief of and for the people on the move stuck in Ventimiglia², refused and unwanted, moving alongside and through the valley. The sight of dry waterways south of the valley engulfed me in solastalgia. Overlap of political, historical, geological, social, and species boundaries, as well as stories – those told and those inscribed in stone – span beyond scales and frames of time I could fathom. I arrived open to whatever thematic

¹ In 1947 the Treaty of Paris was signed. According to the treaty, the communes of Tenda and Briga were transferred to France, and other adjustments were made to the border. One fieldwork participant shared that this shift had been radical for their family history. Their Italian grandmother forbade them from speaking languages other than French "for their own sake" (cited from an informal interview, September 2021).

² Franco-Italian border across the Alps is heavily policed by the French border police in pursuit of persons who enter the country illegally. As I've witnessed multiple times, the presumption regarding one's legal or illegal status is often based on skin color alone. A detailed account of racially targeted policing higher in the Alps, in the Briançon border zone (Haute-Alpes), and the methods of "chase" for the people on the move has been written by Sarah Bachelier (2020). The situation on the border in Mediterranean Alps is much the same. People on the move captured in the mountains are taken to a temporary detention facility in Menton and released back to Italy without the possibility of requesting asylum in the territory of France. It can take several attempts over an indefinite time for a person to cross the border.

lines emerged around and beyond the initial questions I had. I was, however, unprepared to witness and absorb the amount of grief, fear, and pain that people shared with me. I felt like an intruder and a voyeur, uncertain how to respond. I felt as if the quantity of data and emotions had submerged me in, metaphorically speaking, noise, making it challenging to determine the signal. Adding to the load, I was sexually harassed on several occasions, once during an interview I was conducting. Since this experience, I have often felt unsafe and anxious. My mental health deteriorated, making it hard to be present and receptive.

I came to the field with an intention to keep what I saw as my two distinct practices – that of an anthropologist and that of an artist – separate. I wanted my artistic practice to remain a place in which I could find comfort in an overwhelming social situation. I know myself enough to be aware that an unfamiliar situation in which I feel unsafe will result in an overwhelm and as happened, will be followed by an episode of depression. My art practice was supposed to be my safety net³. I had planned to collect interviews, take notes, participate as much as possible in events and exchanges, and contribute to various efforts of restoration and activism while in the field, hence overall a very classic approach to ethnography. As expected, over several months, the initial research questions I had arrived with proved less relevant than those the field showed as pertinent. I started looking into historical and present entanglements between humans and nonhumans and how these resulted in the disaster that had consequently unfolded. While dialogue in those directions was a good way to engage with humans, the field invited me to attend to and attune with nonhumans present. The practice as observation fell short of opening to modes of engagement beyond the human. Throughout my time in the field, I was documenting the landscape via photography, but was uncertain how and if I'd read this material as data. I did it somewhat mechanically – as a thing I do, a routine part of my practice.

When collecting sounds, documenting the clouds and the mist, and writing poetry, I still thought of this as a process separate from my ethnographic practice. In hindsight, I also needed the separation. I started heading towards the mountain tops to work on cloud portraits: there was more air and more space for the eye to rest. Sometimes, the mountaintops would wear a thick cover of cloud or fog undulating under the weight of the sky, creating an uncertain horizon in which sharp edges dissolved. For a while, clouds and fog became my escape, until an interview with a beekeeper, who said that many bees die due to “white day”, smog-related fog that impacts visibility⁴. The ephemeral

³ Around the time I was in the field; several art-based initiatives took place, at least one aimed at helping reflect the experience of the storm. As far as I have observed, there were a couple of cases of strong emotional responses, and observing them, I thought that the people experiencing might have benefited from someone trained in art (as) therapy to intervene. As a performer and an educator in performance art, I have seen how artistic and body practices can allow for an emotional release and evoke painful experiences. I regarded then and now that I had come to a place where many people might be profoundly vulnerable; even at the time of writing this footnote, 2.5 years later, conversing seems to have been the least harmful way to approach the participants in the field.

⁴ I have not found literature to substantiate this claim. One entomologist I approached, a specialist in hymenopterans (ants, bees, wasps etc.), noted that this claim might have been related to the broad discussion regarding the possible causes of the Colony collapse disorder. A detailed study regarding it was issued in 2008-2009 by AFSSA, Agence

landscape of fog and cloud that had until then provided me with some respite from work with disaster narratives and the uncertainty of my role turned out to be yet another manifestation of intense changes in climate.

Timothy Morton has defined climate crisis as a hyperobject (2013). The scales across which the hyperobject of climate crisis operates “overwhelms human cognitive abilities” (Boulton 2016); it is distributed geographically and temporally and cannot be experienced as a whole. Nor can the cause-effect be traced linearly – both because of unfathomable scales and due to the quality Morton defines as viscosity, meaning its inherent nature of being sticky and mutable upon interaction. I thought of the storm that hit the valley as just one of the myriad of events that resulted from the climate crisis. The storm had been a long time in the making: centuries of deforestation, large-scale herding practices on the slopes, and construction within the floodplain had all contributed to the fragilization (Durville et al. 2013 in Carrega and Michelot 2021) of the terrain and thus the consequences of the storm. Expanding from a distant past, continuing towards the future, even if our measure was this relatively small valley, the temporal scale of the anthropogenization processes and spatial scale of the distribution of the storm’s effects are complex to define. To some of the inhabitants I interviewed, with reparation work continuing without a clear deadline, the storm was yet ongoing.

According to Morton (2013), one of the qualities that define the hyperobject, is intersubjectivity: it is experienced through intermediaries. As such, the storm could be considered one of the intermediaries of the climate crisis. Some of the research participants perceived the storm as well as other changes (in air temperatures, seasonality, water levels, insect invasions etc.) they witnessed in their daily farming practices as precisely that. Climate change defined what practices – therefore, what relationships – could continue and what had to be revisited and undergo a change. Many changes, however, are slow, the cause-effect connection seems far removed, and identifying the intermediaries is more complex. Not to mention that whereas some interlocutors saw the storm as part of the global climate crisis, strongly connected to the histories of colonialism, extraction, and intercontinental flows of capital and production, others maintained the view that the storm was, in essence, a singular enraged river conjunct the failures of what they identified as ecological policies⁵.

Upon my return from the field, when I started my analysis and write-up, I came under the impression that my attempt at translating the totality of the ethnographic fieldwork experience to text flattened the reality I had been immersed in. When qualified and treated as *pieces of data*, many things, or research elements, lost their processual aspects.

Francaise de Securite Sanitaire des Aliments (Toma, B. et al. 2009).

⁵ One of the participants of the research, a retired gardener and shepherd, shared the following thoughts regarding the limitations imposed by the “écologues” (ecologists, environmentalists, sometimes also used with derogatory notions) on tree management around the river: “No, you cannot touch a tree in the river, you cannot do anything, you have to leave it all as is, even if the trees will block the river, the valley... Have you seen the river earlier? [The locals] used to collect the wood all the time, every year, for heating in winter. But [environmentalists] didn’t allow that, those idiots. And this is how the valley was blocked and this is why [the storm resulted in] so much damage.” (Cited from an interview conducted in August 2021.)

Beyond data, I wanted to convey *experience*. I thought of the relationships established in the process of exchange with humans; with non-humans, the processes of observing or imagining. In many cases, they were expanding beyond a mere encounter, discovery, sighting, signalling – eventually connecting into a web of interrelated narratives – many of which are extralingual. Therefore it seemed to me that they could only be conveyed in extralingual forms if to be represented justly. The sensorial, perceptual, and uncertain play an important role in how I go along making sense of experiences and relationships in my life and my practices. *Writing* about affects and the sensorial, I felt could not do what the material had the potential to do⁶.

In this context, I asked myself how – methodologically and otherwise – I am to work with that which I brought back from the field to give justice to the complexity, bringing forth the nonhuman, non-linear, and extra- or non-lingual. While I was struggling, feeling I had no tools to write up with, I was also working on the exhibition. Based primarily on the materials I had recorded from the field, the video, photography, sounds, and text I produced were about the ephemeral, the unspoken. Only during the late production phase of the exhibition did I start seeing how my art practice helped me *read* the field, as I will try to demonstrate in this article.

The in-between practice: anthropology and art

This planet as we know it has been shaped by enmeshment and collaboration of different species across kingdoms that co-constitute the environments they live in while being in their own turn (trans)formed by those environments. Life is possible by the entanglement of all things, entanglement defined by Karen Barad as interdependency, wherein each life of each being emerges within and out of “entangled intra-relating” (2007: ix). With an awareness of this as well as the complexity of the causes, developments, and consequences of climate crisis; researchers, activists and artists have called for inter-, trans-, multi-disciplinary, and cross-cultural approaches to address “issues concerning the linked nature of human and biophysical systems, coupled with an increasing understanding of system complexity” (Stock and Burton 2011). From this, various practices emerged: interdisciplinary ones aimed at helping to reconnect the disconnected (Pretty 2011), meshwork-responsive research practices (Klenk 2018), those that embed the most minute of the elements in complex disciplinary contexts (Brevik et al. 2015, Teuber et al. 2022), as well as integrated research practices (Stock and Burton 2011). Artists responded to this call by incorporating trans-disciplinary approaches to

⁶ My thinking/feeling that I cannot translate affect or the affective into text/words connects to the definition of affect in Spinoza’s sense, as read by Deleuze and Guattari, “Affects are becomings” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 256 in Uhlmann 2020: 167), the body is defined via its affects, and by the possibilities to compose various kinds or relationships between affects and other bodies (ibid.) Affects, in this sense, are “immediately meaningful” (p. 170), part of pre-conscious cognitive processes that are in continuum with the conscious ones (p.173).

knowledge production within their respective practices, experimenting with integrating diverse methods, exploring and developing work that increasingly challenges more traditional artistic forms, etc.⁷

Engaged alongside participant observation and other methods, art forms – film, photography⁸, dance and performance, drawing, writing – and artistic methods have been part of the anthropological toolbox for a while. Used for a variety of reasons, they afford engagement of the sensual and shift of perception (Concha-Holmes 2015) – not only of the place and/or others within it, but also of self within that place, with others. They are likewise helpful in bridging nowness with past, facilitating the work of remembering and locating the personal within the broader social, economic, and political context (Irving 2007). Some choose them as more open/receptive and thus enhancing the multivocality within the field (Busta et al. 2023), others turn to creative and artistic practices as “more attuned to the complexities of representing ethnographic research materials and fieldwork experience” (Culhane 2017: 7). Artistic methods can be helpful in tapping into embodied knowledge, finding creative forms of collaboration with interlocutors, and other reasons.

In the 1990s, there emerged a trend that was defined as an ethnographic turn in arts, or instead, art institutions and artists were sympathizing with anthropology as a contextual “science of *alterity*; <...> [taking] *culture* as its object, <...> *interdisciplinary* as well as self-critical” (Foster 1995: 305, italics in the original). Hal Foster (1995) notes that this resulted in a relatively flat approach to social engagement with the site and communities, “which tend to be constructed as readymade for representation” (ibid.: 306). Foster writes how this quasi-anthropological paradigm in contemporary art practice became a sort of aesthetic genre. Revisiting the ethnographic turn in arts in the special issue of *Critical Arts*, Kris Rutten et al. (2013) connect the ethnographic turn in arts with the sensory turn in anthropology and raise critical questions to artists working ethnographically based on critique expressed by Foster and others. The ultimate question being who represents whom and who has the voice to represent the other.

Schneider and Wright (2020) note that the affinities between the disciplines of anthropology and art are fruitful to explore, and a growing body of work proves that projects bridging ethnographic and artistic practices produce knowledge that opens for new understandings emerging from the collisions and collaborations. Regardless, recalling intense doctoral seminar discussions on the matter of applying artistic and creative methods in anthropological work, some remain critical – artists and

⁷ One example is the bio-art scene, see Berger et al. 2023.

⁸ Photography has had a place in social anthropology research since the 1840s; however, for a long time, it was used for illustrative purposes. A thorough overview of shifts in the relationship between photography and anthropology, how anthropologists made sense of photographic medium, and how that has transformed over time, has been done by Elizabeth Edwards (2012, 2015). Just recently (19 Nov. 2024), in an Anthropology lecture series at the University of Bayreuth, prof. Dr. Gerd Spittler expressed his disappointment that the reviewers of his most recent book “Leben mit wenigen Dingen: Der Umgang der Kel Ewey Tuareg mit ihren Requisiten” (2023), had not discussed the numerous photographs included, but only text. Prof. Dr. Spittler accentuated that pictures contain more information and offer more “space for interpretation” than the text.

anthropologists alike. Alana Jelinek writes that “Anthropologists today use poetry, film, photography, and other forms to convey their data. Sometimes, they produce very interesting art-like creations” (2014: 130), “art-like” being key here, in a way of drawing a line between non-art and art⁹. Anthropologist Jennifer Clark engages in the discussion with Jelinek and notices that naive application of “methods drawn from art practice” result in “instrumentalised, and rather artless, art” (2014). While the definitions of “art-like creation” and “artless art” could be applied to, for example, products that are limited to be a mere display of research results, this is not always the case in practices that I define as dialogical. I draw from Stock and Burton (2011) and the concept of “integrated research,” which they describe as a practice in which “researchers need to maintain the utility of their disciplinary perspectives,” and the level of integration is determined in each project individually.

Aiming to add to the inquiry within both practices of anthropology and art, I define my practice as dialogical; conducive to expanding (disciplinary approaches) to merge (knowledge), and emerging new ways of knowledge-making (Clarke 2014). Much like anthropology and philosophy, as noticed by Latour, I believe art and anthropology have the potential to urge each other “to restart [their] inquiries into collectives” (Latour 2014: 302), well beyond (the) human ones. Additionally, I see my artistic practice not only as a means to produce knowledge but also as a practice to cope with the unease and anxiety brought about by the topics I research.

The aim of the exhibition titled “migluotie” (Lithuanian, the English version of the title being “opalescent”), to which I refer further in this text, has not been to apply artistic methods to represent or communicate the results of the fieldwork. Tim Ingold suggested not to equate ethnography – a description of life lived by people, with anthropology – a critical and comparative “inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the world” (Ingold 2017, also see 2014, 2021). I find this definition of anthropology suitable to define the approach with which this process of making took place – as an inquiry into the possibilities.

The exhibition emerged from things that were circulating but not articulated, my emotional reactions to what I observed, and various things that were ephemeral, subtle, and unworded, someplace in the realm of perceptions. A state out of which or within

⁹ Alana Jelinek defines art as a “knowledge-forming discipline,” which, just as any discipline, has “knowledge sets, methodologies, assumptions and language” specific to it (p.144) and needs its edges to be “police[d]” (p.123). Jelinek seeks to define the endogenous value of art as opposed to its value being defined by (art) market as/and “the prism of neoliberalism” (p.148). Jelinek notes that their aim of defining and policing the boundary of art as a discipline is “to examine and celebrate what art is and how it is distinct from other types of practices, praxes, disciplines, actions” (p.150). Having clear boundaries, the art world “will be better able to resist totalizing discourses, including neoliberalism” (p.151). I am, however, not convinced that dialogical or integrated practices harm the discipline of art (nor any other). Importantly, I think a clear distinction that Jelinek draws between art practice and creativity and its application (“Art practice is not simply the enactment of creativity and it has no monopoly on creativity or on creative uses of material or methodology” (p.142) might be a response to the tension: application of creative methods does not result in the production of a piece of art.

which I worked – reverie – and the work of making, conceptualizing, and installing allowed to connect the dots I was otherwise struggling to connect. Within the field, the weight of a rock, the smell of water, the texture of an olive, the sounds of machinery shuffling stone, the light disappearing beyond the mountain, and the feelings these things evoked within me were certain. Facing a page waiting for a black line of text to grow into a paragraph felt the opposite. Delving back into the photos and sounds collected, revisiting and editing videos of clouds brought distant things closer revealing their interconnection. With and through them, when things finally came together in the exhibition space, I could return to those strings of letters on a page.

Connecting the elements: entanglements, borders and reverie

My artistic practice draws strongly on the sensory, where I am primarily attuned to sound: sound for me is a source of much understanding of and orientation in the world. Elsewhere (Pupkevičiūtė 2022) I have focused on how the aural field conveys entanglements that people I talked with failed to recognize, as well as the dominance of sound of technologies in a site most people would define as natural. During the act of listening, things emerge or become apparent beyond their visual presence. As significant a source of information is the absence of certain sounds as well as the clash between what is invisible but audible and vice-versa. Streams that have etched their paths across the rocks, now dry, emit a sound no more. Sounds of traffic and road construction work penetrate the side canyons while only slopes overgrown with forest are in sight. While exploring the fieldsite, detachment between the visual and aural often resulted in a mental state of reverie. Anthropologist of war and psychodynamic therapist Ivana Maček defines reverie as a state of mind that is free and in a flow, without a specific focus and aim (2023: 25). The state of reverie allows for an overlap of “the unconscious of the anthropologist and the unconscious or non-explicit of the field” (ibid.), helping gain clarity to the complexity of things. Maček used this technique to work with the material from the fieldwork she conducted during the siege of Sarajevo. While our research fields are far apart, reverie as practice is helpful in my work. The context of climate disaster elicits substantial unease and reverie provides the possibility to shape space for the two-fold motion of stepping away while remaining within.

Not only misalignments of the visible and audible worlds but also thick, nearly tangible cloud formations offered space for reverie. Over February and March 2022, I was chasing clouds. At a particular moment in the afternoon, they would descend atop the mountains south of the village where I lived. Clouds would linger, moving in slow motion, a flock of sheep on a foggy early morning. Cloudy, foggy days were windless, thus the clouds would stay seated on the mountains, seemingly motionless. There was a tangible division between the world outside, and within the cloud, and here, the sensibility of my skin took better measure than my eyes. Through the skin, within the cloud, I experienced its not-entirely ephemeral nature: droplets of water in high concentration in the air would moisten my cheeks, soaking my hair, and rest on glasses and camera lenses. The high moisture would alter the sound of the surrounding world. A thick cover of water droplets

would soften the edges of the world, letting only those of the closest cliffs protrude.



Fig. 1 Edge of a cliff in a thick fog, 2022. Photo by Daina Pupkevičiūtė.

The clouds filled me with awe, releasing from the uncertainty that so strongly contributed to my anxiety in the field, grounding me. Water droplets on my skin connected me intimately to things atop and below the mountain, to the clouds themselves and through them – to the world ocean that had evaporated them. Playing an important role in both cooling and warming of the Earth’s surface and atmosphere, clouds are part of the water cycle of this planet. They reflect incoming solar radiation, simultaneously absorbing terrestrial long-wave radiation. Clouds also play an important role in feedback loops. With the warming climate, the phase change in clouds increases cloud albedo in some regions, disproportionately affecting the Arctic and the Southern Ocean (Storelvmo et al. 2015).

Hence, these nebulous formations offering delight and sense of ease were actually deeply connected to the subject of my research. The body of water, evaporating with increasing intensity, connected to non-human bodies and that of my own; and through it – the bodies of those crossing the Mediterranean Sea, just a couple of dozen kilometers away from the mountain I was standing on. All in all, through fog and cloud, the climate crisis was manifesting itself.



Fig. 2 Video diptych *Debesynas (Cloudscape)*, 2023. Exhibition documentation, photo by Daina Pupkevičiūtė.

Much later, those clouds I had filmed became a diptych – two videos from one sequence in which the clouds move over the top of a mountain. One video is in slow motion; then, the movement is reversed and looped. The other video is mirrored from the center horizontally, redefining the horizon. With several months between the exhibition and this text, I see the video as a result of searching for a form to reflect both the awe and the recognition of the threat. In a way, it exposes how the role and function of things depend on how and what they connect to. Clouds and fog sipping in through the valleys and spilling over the mountains are beyond measure: their scale is unfathomable if seen from the ground, and their shapes shift while they don't even seem to move. Observing those qualities, I could not not think how they resonate with Morton's definition of global warming as a hyperobject.

Thinking of clouds as a manifestation of climate change, I needed to address the connection between things – bodies and water droplets, sea and cloud – even further beyond. It's what informed the design of the exhibition's narrative and moved me to produce a video titled "*Saugus kelias*" ("Safe passage") about (a) meeting with a group of people on the move. The story behind and within the video is simple. One evening, a Persian-speaking friend of mine and I were driving back to the valley after taking part in a rally against a far-right politician visiting a temporary detention facility for people on the move. Driving through Ventimiglia, we thought we would stop and check out the situation under the highway above River Roya, where many people on the move take shelter at night. That evening, we met a group of young men from Afghanistan. They washed their feet in the freezing water of the river and allowed us to join them at the fire. They

explained their plan to walk upwards the river to Roya Valley in order to enter France elsewhere than the infamous passage of the French-Italian border between Ventimiglia and Menton¹⁰. My friend explained to them that Roya is a dead-end, well protected by the border guards who regularly patrol the road – posted at several intersections, the Breil-sur-Roya and Sospel train stations, as well as the mountain trails that lead out of the valley, descending towards the inland. The men were, however, firmly convinced of their route, so we sat by the fire, drawing maps on sand. There are several possibilities to cross the border in those places, but all of them are risky. My friend and I had heard of numerous cases of how things went wrong. After having paid a high fare to be snuck into France in the back of a truck, some people ended up in Turin. Others were rounded up by border guards passing over mountains, walking on the road towards the valley of Roya, or taking the highway to Nice. Those spend the night in a facility edging Menton, are refused to request asylum and spat back to Ventimiglia. To worse fates, some had fallen to their death from Passo della Morte (Passage of Death), conversely a life-saving passage previously taken by Jews fleeing a fascist regime; while others were electrocuted atop the Ventimiglia-Menton train. Numerous, however, have managed to cross the border successfully, that most of those we met taking shelter under this highway hoped to do with the least delay possible¹¹.

With the borderline running through, people on the move are part of the reality of Roya Valley. They have been driven away from their homes by historical and contemporary issues that drive the climate crisis. These people are simultaneously visible and invisible both in Ventimiglia, under the highway, and in Roya Valley. Some bodies move through the tunnels and trails at night, often noticed by passers by and those actively looking for them. Some are exposed in plain light of day, sometimes spotted to be taken by the *gendarmes*, loaded into vans, and driven away. While police and some inhabitants define these people as “illegal,” in strictly legal terms, it is the state that acts illegally by refusing them their right to ask for asylum. However, there are as well those in the valley and beyond who provide food and shelter for people on the move and seek ways to help them get to places to submit requests for asylum. Relationships that form in these circumstances – between various people assuming various roles in controlling, supporting, aiding, communicating, and other gestures – are thick; they remind me of the thick cloud-fog (but I see that in retrospect). Through this writing, I can reflect upon how I came to produce the work “Safe Passage”. Recorded over a video of electricity cables

¹⁰ The border control here was unilaterally introduced first in 2011. However, it did not last; the control was reintroduced again in 2015 and has not been lifted since. Giacomo Donadio (2021) has thoroughly looked into the irregularity of the border regime on this border segment. The irregularity here is to be thought of not only in terms of disregarding Schengen and EU border regimes and regulations but, more importantly, in terms of human rights, legislation regarding the right to asylum, etc. Gabriele Proglia (2021) has thoroughly researched the historicity of this passage.

¹¹ These lines are the outcomes of brief exchanges I had with border volunteers and people on the move – I’ve encountered when volunteering for one humanitarian organization serving dinner for people on the move in a parking lot next to the highway I write about.

submerged by and disappearing in the stillness of a thick fog— a voice tells the story of a meeting. Like looking into the fog, people and their experiences are obfuscated and flattened in the discourses surrounding migration, reduced to impersonal data sets. Hence, the title of the piece becomes more of a question of whether safe passage is even possible.

For centuries, the Maritime Alps has been a liminal space and one of passage. It was and remains an intersection of trade and transhumance routes, a place of shifting political borders and national and international migrations (Marengo 2021). This mountainous terrain has always been organically conducive to multi-directional flows. However, the border control regime now allows only the flow of certain bodies, delimiting the flow of others and discriminating based on skin color. On many occasions, I've witnessed border guards in the train station checking identity documents, limiting themselves only to people of color. Other than the color of one's skin, border guards on the train are on the lookout for violence inscribed in bodies (Fassin 2011), visible and not – a shrug, a shudder, and a fearful turn of the head are just some of the giveaways. The fog on the mountain trail, such as the one I was chasing, and the dark can provide a partial cover. However, the bodies of people on the move are identified not only visually. By day and night alike, sound gives away that a group of people is moving, one that should not be there, Céline Eschenbrenner (2023) writes. Hence, not only landscapes but also soundscapes of some territories of the mountains are monitored by *gendarmes*. If captured, as in the cases mentioned previously, people on the move are brought back to the frontier and start again. All in all, the safety and relief that people on the move walk towards comes at an extremely high cost.



Fig. 3 Video Saugus kelias (Safe Passage). Exhibition documentation, photo by Daina Pupkevičiūtė.

Departing from bodies entangled historically and politically with the complicated terrain, I thought about human and nonhuman life stories and life cycles that overlap, collide, and co-constitute the valley's landscape. If I were to define these entanglements as texture, they are thick, dense, and sticky. They are also overwhelming when I try to make sense of them as they expand in space through time. In an interview I conducted in preparation for the exhibition, a friend from the field defined the landscape we were embedded in as "a landscape of connections" (Fr. *paysage de lien*). The concept resonated strongly with the landscape that I had begun to see. For that particular person, the connection that emerged as the most important of all was the connection with their mother:

First thing that comes to my mind is the affective connection I have with these landscapes. It's because I discovered them with my mother. When I was a child, my mother always took me on walks. <...>. The older I got, the more I discovered that it's thanks to her that I had wanted to discover the landscapes via walking, although earlier walking was not my thing. It was even more important for me to restart hiking because this is how I remained in touch with her. [On those trails] there were memories I had of her and maybe at that time [after her passing] this allowed me to stay connected to her (semi-structured interview, January 2023).

My friend and their mother connected via a shared landscape through time after their mother was no longer physically present. They came to share, among other things, love for the landscape, walking, knowledge of trails and plants, and admiration for specific flowers. Experiences of places and those dwelling within places entangled them into a web of inter-subjectivities that expanded beyond the two humans. A web of inter-subjectivities connects physical and non-physical as the landscape is more than a terrain. It consists of layers of meanings, sentiments, and sensations sensed by various bodies and produced over time.

One of the works I was nurturing for the exhibition was itself a landscape co-constituted by multiple beings, shaped by their relationships. It was a large SCOBY – a symbiotic culture consisting of lactic acid bacteria, acetic acid bacteria, and yeast, used to ferment kombucha. The microbial mat, or a microbial pellicle, floating as an interface between liquid and air, is usually of variable transparency and thickness depending on age and has a soft milky sheen. It is a community of a broad spectrum of yeasts that have various functions in fermentation and cellulose pellicle development and several types of aerobic bacteria, some of which produce microbial cellulose (Villarreal-Soto et al. 2018). The pellicle consists of entangled fibrils – nano and micro – of bacterial cellulose that form a matrix (Dima et al. 2017). The composition of yeast and bacteria in kombucha is changing (St-Pierre 2019), and SCOBY is in the process of constant co-cultivation. Growing the SCOBY, or contributing to its growth, requires – as all relationships do – time, as well as the starter and sweet black tea. From a see-through pellicle, it develops into a thick mass and, if left alone, without taking the liquid off, just constantly filling in that which

has evaporated, results in long strands of yeast extending beneath, towards the bottom of the vessel it floats in.



Fig. 4 Exhibit Maya (SCOBY, *Camelia sinensis*, sugar, water), 2023. Exhibition view, photo by Daina Pupkevičiūtė.

Peering at that bacterial and yeast community floating in the exhibition space, I thought mostly about how human and nonhuman stories entangle, accumulate, and ferment, becoming something more than the sum of parts. In front of the glass container with the SCOBY, I hung a fragment of bone that I had found on the shores of Roya River. It was a *loupe*, a looking glass without a glass within. Gauging by size and judging by form – cut with precision – the bone could have belonged to a bovine, maybe part of a tibia. The elements had worn down the spongy structure within it, attesting to the passage of time. It was my connector to the history of the valley, my link to an 18th-century engraving depicting the royal route to one of the villages, in which, at the bottom, closest to the viewer, three cows, a villager, and a dog are seen (Botton and Gaber 2009). At the same time, it also connected me to a photograph I had seen in another history book, of an ox pulling a plough, a young man and a child behind, on one of the terraces in Breil-sur-Roya (Botton 1996). The text next to it stated how oxen were preferred for work in the fields, but given that they were expensive, they would be bought by a collective of people, all of whom had to get along well enough to agree upon matters of care and employment of the oxen. In the dim light of the exhibition space, the bone fragment hung on a transparent line was swinging when visitors would pass by and move the air. Throughout the exhibition period, it served as a *loupe* to focus the gaze onto exhibition elements – the lulling body of SCOBY, a chair to sit on, a cloud horizon across the room, the mist of the

“Safe Passage” on the far wall of the gallery, and the entry to the corridor that was filled with a composition of recordings of shuffling stones, sand, and cracking sticks, connecting and reconnecting (hi)stories.



Fig. 5 Exhibit Maya (bone fragment), 2023. Exhibition view, photo by Daina Pupkevičiūtė.



Fig. 6 Bone fragment, close up, 2023. Photo by Daina Pupkevičiūtė.

Final notes

In this text, I have discussed the relationship between my practices of anthropology and art as dialogical and the outcome of this dance between the two – an exhibition. I described in detail how and for what reasons I arrived in the field intending to keep my two practices separate and how, in the end, they co-constituted the body of my current work in both fields. The relationship between the two disciplines is complex and possibly not yet sufficiently articulated as it is still in process and might seem, more than anything, undisciplined. However, I am confident that I would not have been able to articulate the connectivities between the clouds, the Mediterranean Sea, the bodies of migrants, and my own body without the process of constructing the visual narrative that preceded the construction of this current text.

Additionally, both the process of collection of visual and sound material, looking away from narratives as told by humans, and immersion into reverie, a concept that I borrow to define the space within which I become creative and attuned to that which is extralingual, have been helpful to ground and restore in an overwhelming fieldwork situation. Later, work on the exhibition allowed me to expand and return to the texts and contexts from within the field.

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