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## SO REMEMBER THE LIQUID GROUND

Agnieszka Brzeżańska

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curated by eastcontemporary  
with accompanying text by Gabi Scardi

### Introduction

What can we learn from water?

The notion of fluidity and liquidness has been explored in cultural, social and political theory over the last decade. “So remember the liquid ground” writes Luce Irigaray in the *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*<sup>1</sup>. For Irigaray, the eponymous ‘liquid ground’ means water, which, however, is understood as something more than just the liquid substance. Water is a site of possibilities and a force of differentiation. A powerful medium animating and connecting all watery bodies, human and non-human, from the depths of oceans to our homes and gestating bodies within our bodies.

‘From watery womb to watery world: we are bodies of water’<sup>2</sup> – both embodied, with all cultural implications, and comprising water, mostly in the context of biology and ecology. Water is not just something out there, a resource or commodity. It is our own materiality. Through hydrological cycles and movements, water connects all bodies across different times and spaces, and such flow might be seen as a logic of connection or communication, which extends beyond the human into a more expansive sense of ‘we’. A sense, which indeed permeates the work of Agnieszka Brzeżańska (born 1972, Gdańsk), a Polish visual artist, herbalist and water enthusiast.

Immersed in the mystical and otherworldly dimension, the exhibition ‘So remember the liquid ground’ presents a series of Brzeżańska’s ceramics, textile works and paintings mostly inspired by the water’s historical, social, cultural, and ecological significance. Here, the concept of water becomes life’s matter and matrix, mother and medium. An endless reservoir of symbols, myths and metaphors. This unique universe is built by Brzeżańska through the use of different registers of knowledge, from Slavic mythologies and philosophy to systems of cognition marginalized by modern science, such as alchemy, parapsychology, esotericism, native knowledge or matriarchal traditions.

Aquatic ecosystems, and above all the figure of the river, constitutes an important element in Brzeżańska’s work. A notion clearly present in the emblematic 25 meters long *The Vistula Textile*, made by immersing the cotton fabric in the river, which deposited its organic matter onto it, creating a natural background for Brzeżańska’s abstract painting. The work was made during *Flow / Przepływ*, an annual water-based artistic residency on a raft organized by the artist, who encourages her guests to immerse themselves into this unique watery experiment of being together and living within nature.

The fluid configuration of the *Mind Playing with Thoughts* and the organic shapes of vases and other ceramics recalling feminine body parts, often associated with the expulsion of bodily liquids, might remind us about some ancient Slavic myths or a holistic way of thinking about the structure of the

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world in its matriarchal dimension. Unlike the self-centered consciousness of the civilized man, the world of nature is oriented towards a sense of balance and collectivity. This way of thinking was common within the Slavs and their traditions mostly identified with a deep relationship with nature, agrarian culture and egalitarianism. The presented works somehow emanate these ancient truths encouraging at the same time the humans' return to the foreknowledge, the latent nature and the archetypal structure of the subconscious.

Through her artistic practice Agnieszka Brzeżańska evokes the past from which she draws different sunken memories and images rooted in a collective memory. The linear treatment of time, made up of separate events, is challenged in favor of the depths of the subconscious, where the past and the present interpenetrate each other, creating an inextricable watery substance. The symbolic power of water is distinguished by a strong and varied repertoire of emotional and sensual associations too. Indeed, we might particularly experience them, while listening to the sound sculpture *Singing with the mountain meadow* or immersing our body with its all senses into the smoke of the burning incenses prepared by Brzeżańska itself.

As suggested by the authors of *Thinking with Water*<sup>3</sup>, it is the water that constantly registers our common past in its molecular archive. The past becomes present through memory of water. The exhibition "So remember the liquid ground" by Agnieszka Brzeżańska draws attention to these mnemonic properties of water perceived as a matrix of multi-generational memory. It is an attempt to summon us to the forgotten integrity of man and nature, which is not lost, but only hidden.

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*Agnieszka Faferek and Julia Korzycka*

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<sup>1</sup> Irigaray, L. (1991), *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans G.C. Gill, Columbia University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Neimanis, A. (2017), *Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>3</sup> Chen C., MacLeod J. and Neimanis A. (2013) *Thinking with Water*, McGill-Queen's University Press.

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Text by Gabi Scardi

Agnieszka Brzeżańska is an artist who possesses a deep sense of environmental and cultural awareness. What attracts her is the supposed binary oppositions of what we conceive of as culture and nature.

By means of fluid, often personal trajectories, she crosses the most diverse fields of reality and knowledge. She appropriates different disciplinary fields, she goes through them in a way that is anything but linear, thus removing them from the ordinary patterns of cognition. With the intention of projecting a more sustainable future, her gaze ventures against the stream, back to the time when the vision of the universe was less fragmented and anthropoid events were seen as a continuum of combined human agency and forces of nature. It is from this context that Brzeżańska's work emerges and is directed towards the primordial, alchemy, esotericism, archaic forms of religion, and shamanic thought, especially female.

Her work continually evolves, identifying contiguities and establishing connections between phenomena ostensibly unrelated to each other. She creates narratives where various elements come together to connect and disconnect again - the conceptual with the intuitive, the discursive with the material, the archetypal with the contingent; the past, the present and the future mix and merge in a myriad of new combinations. In the artist's eyes, subject-object relationships are also part of the fabric of experience in which everything is linked, and the human self is always closely intertwined with the larger ecological system. It is precisely this reference plane of contact and convergence that the artist immerses herself in, and from where her work stems and develops.

Just think of her works in terracotta: amphorae with supple female forms, which evoke the images of a mother goddess and can serve as either water containers - a source of life - or as burial urns. In some cases, the movement of shapes is accentuated by a mottling of marine colours that invests the surface. Or take the risers resting on supports that resemble female breasts in incensers, made using a technique dating back to ancient Japan and intended to hold incense and herbs for burning. It is a clear reference to the artist's experience of having lived and studied in Japan. These works, inspired by old artifacts, not only connect, like the vases, to the primary creation of human industry, but are able to evoke the principle, the most ancestral ritual practices, the sacred and mysterious beginnings of the evolution of humanity. They also imply a relationship between the dimension of making, even popular, and the mythological and archetypal forms of the feminine.

These works, incensers in primis, also call our attention to the necessity and need to care for oneself. Brzeżańska is interested in the plant world and appreciates the healing value of medicinal herbs which she knows well and cultivates. Choosing to create a tool in which to collect these herbs is also a way to allude to the possibility of actively relating to existence; to reiterate the importance of one's autonomy, agency, and subjectivity.

On the other hand, for the artist, the functionality of these objects remains a significant trait. They contribute to giving form, consistency and meaning to everyday life, and to organizing it.

This is also the case when looking at a small ceramic sculpture titled *Elf*. It represents a female figure, an alien or a hybrid between a sea creature and a human being: thighs wide open with bent knees, her epidermis mottled with a watery green and her raised arms which become multiple and fluid like algae. *Elf* was conceived of as a support for tablets, but it is a result of a mental short-circuit that touches upon different references: the attraction for the aquatic world, the immersion in the digital present, and the perception of a female humanity placed between worlds and endowed with metamorphic powers.

The idea of this figure that presents itself in its might, free and assertive, capable of overwhelming the essentialised female image, typical of an androcentric culture, had already been manifested in a large-scale work, *The Source*. It is a sculpture-fountain developed for a public space, representing a woman on a rock rising from the water.

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A similar sense of an eruptive energy emanates also from a small sound sculpture *Singing with the mountain meadow*, in which the only rock is accompanied by the singing of a female voice of great vitality. The work has an ambiguously organic character: the form is sinuous, made up of solids, voids, fluidity and interstices, almost as if it were a synthesis between organic and mineral, with a psychological connotation. In other words, it is a yet another way of representing the fluid continuity of reality. On the other hand, these works are characterized by a sort of immediacy that is expressed through their marked tactility: it is the power contained in the concrete making of hands, which, as indicated in *Elf*, is accompanied by that of the mind and technology. All this, however, is expressed without a trace of seriousness or gravity. Brzeżańska's work is laced with irony and humour; just think of her *Sneaky Fingers*: long, sinuous, feminine, glazed fingers in shiny ceramic evoke the ability to examine objects, to manipulate them. The long fingers seem to channel a magical energy, an ability that is as much spiritual as it is cerebral. It is clear that Brzeżańska is confronting herself not only with the body, but with the psyche. Brzeżańska's humour, like her constant diversion and deflection, is an expression of alternative approach, a critical strategy that is not comprehended through utterance but through intuition and deeds.

Doing and making things happen is an imperative for her, and from there comes her idea for an artistic, radical residency that the artist organizes annually: a period of a frugal communal life on a raft that runs along the Vistula river, immersing the participants in a deep and intimate connection with the environment.

*The Vistula Fabric* is a piece of work which originated during one of these fluvial expeditions in 2018: a canvas that stretches for over twenty-four meters, streaked with blue, green and brown. It is a fruit of the fertile capacity of water and its current combined with the medium of a raft, which allows the cloth to be submerged and to come in contact with the vegetative compound of algae and microorganisms. After resisting the tearing of the current *The Vistula Fabric* carries with it the memories and traces of water, of time, of movement, painted by the nature.

As traces are the abstract forms of her paintings and tapestries. Forms sometimes sinuous, ecstatic, dancing, sometimes diaphanous in their almost monochromaticity, and volatile as thoughts, light as ghosts: *Mind Playing with Thoughts*; sometimes, as in the jacquard *Water Spirits (Fauna)*, they are vibrant with energy realized through vivid colors; always mental and physical at the same time.

Thus, Brzeżańska's work manifests itself at every step as an active, affirmative way of thinking about the world, its possibilities, trajectories, and in its variegated multiplicity. Her works also contemplate and envision humanity as part of a more complex whole, in perpetual becoming. They articulate a desire to escape the logic of fragmentation and the hierarchy of forms of knowledge; with the awareness that among the most precious antidotes to a uniforming normalization is an exploration of the permeable boundaries between human and non-human things, and the physicality of being and doing.

*Gabi Scardi*

## BIOGRAPHY

### AGNIESZKA BRZEZANSKA

Agnieszka Brzeżańska's work explores elusive links between various natural forces and life forms on Earth, which she perceives as Gaia, a living organism. She is an author of paintings, drawings, films, photographs and ceramics. Since 2016, together with artist Ewa Ciepielewska, she has been organizing a mobile artistic residency on water under the title FLOW/PRZEPEŁYW.

Agnieszka Brzeżańska studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk (1992–1995) and later in Warsaw (1995–1997), as well as at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music (1998–2001). Received scholarships from the DAAD (Berlin, 2008–2009), the Collegium Helveticum (Zurich/ETH, 2004), the Büchsenhausen (Innsbruck, 2005), and the Japanese government (1998–2001, Tokyo).

Her works have been presented in numerous solo exhibitions, such as "World National Park" at Królikarnia The National Museum, (Warsaw 2019/2020), "Matrix-Sratrix," Kasia Michalski (Warsaw, 2016), "Ma Terra," Vera Munro (Hamburg, 2015–2016), "This All Occurs Quickly, With Ease, Grace and Joy," Marlborough Contemporary (London, 2015), "Ziemia rodzinna/Ma Terra," Contemporary Museum Wrocław (Wrocław, 2014), "Kobayashi Maru," Nanzuka (Tokyo, 2014), "A Painting Cycle," Nomas Foundation (Rome, 2012), "Back to the Garden," Galerie Kamm (Berlin, 2012), "Cosmic Equation," Kunsthau Baselland (Basel, 2010), "Galactic Resonance," Hotel (London, 2010), "Playlist," DAAD Galerie (Berlin, 2010), as well as group exhibitions, including "Emma Kunz Cosmos," Aargauer Kunsthau, (Aarau 2021), "Biennale Gherdeina," (Ortisei 2020), "The Penumbra Age. Art in the Time of Planetary Change," Museum of Modern Art, (Warsaw 2020), "Volcano Extravaganza," (Stromboli 2019), "Cosmological Arrows," Bonniers Konsthall (Stockholm, 2019), "Paint, Also Known As Blood. Women, Affect, and Desire in Contemporary Painting," Museum of Modern Art (Warsaw, 2019), "Celebration," Kyoto Art Center, (Kyoto 2019), "Pangea United," Muzeum Sztuki (Łódź, 2019), "How to Talk With Birds, Trees, Fish, Shells, Snakes, Bulls and Lions," Hamburger Bahnhof (Berlin, 2018), "Goddesses," BWA Warszawa (Warsaw, 2018). In 2018, she participated in the 10th edition of the Berlin Biennale. Later that year, she received the main prize from the ING Polish Art Foundation during the Warsaw Gallery Weekend.