

# STRATA

## A Performance-Based Film Project on Deep Time in the Body and the Geologic

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### Abstract

This article introduces a poem excerpted from the text of STRATA, VestAndPage's fifth performance-based film project, which deals with the notion of deep time, the formation of layers in human history, memory, and the geological. The lyrics exemplify how VestAndPage resume through poetic words their thought process, the information gathered during their artistic research that led to the making of the film, and the felt emotions and perceived sensations while performing inside the Swabian Jura caves system, the location in which they chose to produce the film. The authors highlight topics that serve as the framework for their co-creative processes, such as transcendental imagination and queer ecology, in discussing their experience of making the film.

### Keywords

performance, deep time, geologic, filmmaking, therianthropes

*In the flickering light of a torch,  
Stalactites and stalagmites  
Lash the space, curl, vibrate, blossom.  
One centimetre a century.  
One thin, another three times thicker.  
Pinnacles of feelings:  
Courage, shame, pleasure, fear  
Inside the subterranean void  
Created by nature.*

*They can resemble the hook of a scythe,  
Spears on display in subsurface armoury,  
Swords suspended from the ceiling,  
Gnarled, carved canes of shepherds,  
Letters of lost alphabets  
Pressing down and pulling up  
To seal the base of the underlying  
And overlying rock, to stand, to hang.*

*Their poetry and prose tune Deep Time,  
Layers of the mind of a holy fool.  
The steamy, hasty flow of the universe:  
Mosaics of phrases, material forms of ideas  
Revealing unattainable artistic gesture,  
Even if only to express the splendid boredom  
Or the missing parts of an ancient cosmic dream—  
Aeons of time spread away like the dust  
From the pages of centuries-old history books.  
Birthplace of time, therianthropes, divinities.  
Humanity – headless, faceless self-reflection.  
Subsurface poetry and prose are different  
From the lyrical shifting of clouds  
Blown by the wind.  
Me (the guest), the eternal troglodite, say:  
No wind blows here.  
Pink eyeless troglobites (the dwellers),  
The belemnites and ammonites, speak:  
Ephemerality is different here  
On our fossilized sponge riffs' skeletons.*

*Stalactites and stalagmites,  
Clustered and sleepy as they appear,  
Show as stratocumuli gazing upwards, downwards.  
A verticality,  
With the flat base held firmly by the rocks above, below,  
They give rise to a theory of terrestrial elements  
In silent meditation,  
A spectral perspective on time.  
Their intimate gift isn't  
Being the motionless witnesses of the time  
But being their mirror,  
Containing what time does not reveal.  
Pinch-black, an empty passage  
Of ever-dripping water, drops.  
Drops. Drops, ...*



*If I think long enough about what I see inside a cave,  
I begin to assume that I will understand everything one day.  
But the underland's corridors and tunnels yell at me  
That there is nothing to understand.  
Listen to the stolen echoes.  
Untell the story,  
In the scars of the rocks, like your skin,  
They spill.  
There is only a here, a before, and a now.  
Perhaps, an after that corresponds  
To nature's generous, cruel creativity,  
A complementary determination  
To the universe in motion,  
Joyful odes to celebrate  
The transience of life on Earth.*

*If I shelter in a cave for some time,  
I end up distinguishing the (anthropomorphic) shadows of things,  
The echoes of form.  
When emerging from it,  
The first thing I observe  
Is the configuration of the stuff of reality  
Lit up by the light of the sun.  
I stare at the sun reasoning about  
When will I go back inside?  
Is the outside just the dreamscape  
That I dreamt while inside?  
If I linger at the portal,  
I realise that I am disposed  
On the threshold of the worlds.  
The liminal is my sanctuary.  
Here, I get extinct  
In the eloquence of silence  
And begin talking to you  
In a hundred silent ways.*

**Figure 1**

*One/Many (Blind Latex Creature)*



*Note.* Performance by Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Location: Schiller Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.

Figure 2

*Pietas*



*Note.* Performance by Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage). Location: the eye of the Kleine Grotte (Small Grotto). Film still, 2021.

The poem is a text excerpt from STRATA, our fifth performance-based film project, which deals with the notion of deep time, the formation of layers in human history, memory, the geological, and nature at last. These topics and concepts served as the framework for our co-creative processes to produce the film.

After three years of preparations, sudden delays, and waiting due to the pandemic, we started filming in spring 2021 in the prehistoric caves of the UNESCO World Heritage Site “Caves and Ice Age Art in the Swabian Jura.” These subsurface environments located in Baden-Württemberg, southwest Germany, were used by Ice Age humans for shelter about 43,000 to 33,000 years ago. They are sites where some of the oldest known figurative artworks and musical instruments have been found: handcrafted flutes, small ivory figurines representing a waterbird, a horse and a mammoth, the Venus of Hohle Fels, and the therianthrope figurine of the Löwenmensch (Lionhuman) of Hohlenstein-Stadel.

## As It Began

We conceived STRATA as an experiment where science meets performance art, theatre, dance, visual art, and music through international collaborations and interdisciplinary processes. We brought together performers, multidisciplinary artists and specialists from archaeology, geology, speleology, art history, philosophy, and time psychology. We investigated notions of time and the human body as a site that exists in continuity with the geological.

When we started filming, the lockdown and COVID-19 regulations were still in force, making the production more complex than expected, but it could not have been otherwise.

From April to September 2021, we performed for the camera inside the Swabian Jura cave system. Entrusting our ecological intelligence, we question if we are truly capable of comprehending such a system in all its complexity through performance-making. To connect with nature is just to imagine ourselves as part of it, wandering and temporarily dwelling in it? In the interplay between the natural and human-made worlds, our actions constantly impact the natural environment in some way.

We chose to perform and film in those sites to understand if the transient immediacy of performance-making allows us to become part of those underground landscapes for a fleeting moment in the chasm of deep time. We sought to develop a holistic understanding of the interrelation between nature-human-time through our performance practice-based research. We were also aware that performing in places somehow incompatible with contemporary humans, we could not avoid anthropomorphizing the cave's natural structures with our presence and art actions.

Our visceral way of performing in response to the environment means we cannot foresee a performance before we perform it. The emotional structure of the film's content is based on our memories and experiences during production. We use the camera intuitively, and it must be an essentially practical device, like a mnemonic prosthesis, which aids memory.

We perform in real-time: the camera captures our actions, and in editing, we process them into moving images. We never perform the same action twice.

## Poetic Texts for Spoken Words

In a poetic stream of consciousness, the film spoken text is left to background voices. We seek to create a meditative atmosphere to tap into spiritual realities and convey an immersive, transcendental experience through cinematic language. This will allow the viewer to become absorbed in the film's images and sounds (Schrader, 2018).

It took almost a year to write the spoken text for the film, which the lyrics here are part of. We reflected on the experience we had inside the caves. We rewound and rethought our performances to capture the essence of our actions in response to the cave's geological conformations.



The text for the film is usually written after the performance journey has ended. We re-shape in the form of a poetic, philosophical chronicle or log book the notes, the cues, and the fragmented thoughts we sketched down during the days spent filming. Thus, the poem here is an example of how we enucleate through poetic words our thought process. It includes poetic back-ups of scientific and conceptual information gathered during the artistic research that led to the making of the film. It also attempts to return the emotions felt and perceived sensations while performing inside the caves.

For us, writing a film text is like retracing a dream within a dream while dreaming. In the editing process, we incorporated these words into the moving images to express what those places made us feel while hosting us. Texts, spoken words, and actions should integrate into each other to structure the moving images as a unity. We view them as organic matter under the imprint of a scenic invention that blends well with natural sites, almost alien, worthy of any words.

Examining universal human experiences through the prism of extreme environments, our performance-based filmmaking process eventually aims to convey a sensation of pure, irreducible sweetness that transcends philosophical concepts and social concerns.

**Figure 3**

*Rocks/Venuses*



*Note.* Performance by Fenia Kotsopoulou and Verena Stenke (VestAndPage). Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.

**Figure 4**

*Voice/Rock/Body/Time*



*Note.* Voice performance by Susanne Weins. Location: Gustav-Jakob Cave. Photo: daz disley, 2021.

By staging the recognizable within the inaccessible, we create a compelling visual experience. About our films, David C. James wrote that the result is a heightened reality: both entirely surreal and as familiar as a dream. “These transient human feelings may be as ephemeral as a mote of dust, but everyday kindness is as important as the most epic of landscapes” (James, 2013). For us, even in the extreme depths of particular natural environments like caves and grottos, altruism, partnership, and love still possess unique importance.

### **The Route To Performing (Deep) Time 1**

Performance art is a time-based practice and ephemeral. What remains after a performance is accomplished are a few relics and leftovers, or just the memory of it. As performance artists, often engaging in durational and site-specific performances, we were intrigued by exploring the concept of deep time to understand if we were capable to return it by performing.

Deep time is a profoundly different time scale in evolutionary processes than that with which we deal in our daily lives. John McPhee introduced the term “deep time” (1981, p. 20) to the modern philosophical concept of geological time developed in the eighteenth century by Scottish geologist James Hutton (1726-1797), regarded as the father of modern geology. Observing sequences of formations from rocks cut across and intruding on each other, Hutton recognized an ancient Earth with “no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end” in these unconformities (Baxter, 2004, p. 231). Earth’s landscapes are shaped

through long-lasting cyclical counterforces: erosion, deposition, consolidation and uplift. For Hutton, over long time scales, nothing is constant: “We are as lost in time as in Copernicus’ space” (Baxter, 2004, p. 231). Hutton’s concept of time was refined in the mid-twentieth century when it became possible to date rocks accurately using radioisotope decay.

**Figure 5**

*Rock/Body Entanglement*



*Note.* Performance by Marcel Sparmann. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: Fenia Kotsopoulou, 2021.



Figure 6

*Rock/Body*



Note. Performance by Fenia Kotsopoulou, Marcel Sparmann, and Sara Simeoni. Location: Gustav-Jakob Cave. Photo: daz disley, 2021.

STRATA poses an imaginary journey that questions the structure of time and how human beings relate to geological phenomena. To realize the film, we considered a transcendental time perspective. Many scholars have used this notion to describe different aspects of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy and the concept of transcendental imagination (2019). This concept is already present in different ways in Kant (1998, 2000), Heidegger (2008) and Merleau-Ponty (1968).

From the transcendental perspective, time means crossing the limits of earthly life, from mental travel to eternity. Paul Ricoeur discusses transcendental imagination to describe the ways in which the creative and interpretive faculties of the mind shape our experiences of time and narrative. In his essay, "Imagination in Discourse and Action," he writes, "By mapping out actions in this way, the storyteller produces the same reference as the poet who, in Aristotle's terms, imitates reality in his mythical reinvention. The story is a heuristic process of redescription in which the heuristic function stems from the narrative structure and redescription has the action itself for referent" (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 125).

We have resorted to the transcendental imagination as inspired by the fact that the findings in the caves of the Swabian Jura, specifically the figurines, have led to the hypothesis that they are means of explaining the world, thus that the caves are not places



of illusions, inhabited by shadows of forms of the things that make up the world, as Plato (2007) imagined. Instead, they are the places where the first anatomically modern humans developed the concepts of image and reality, where humans became, operating as artists that sculpt and paint what they perceive as energy and vibration of what animates the visual matrix of reality (Demuth, 2022).

These ideas have been highlighted by several prehistorians and archaeologists we interviewed. These include Nicholas Conard, whose team found the Venus of Hohle Fels figurine, considered to be the most ancient and undisputed sculptural example of artistic depiction of a human being, in 2008; Kurt Wehrberger, former co-director of the Museum Ulm and curator of its Archaeological Collection, which hosts the zoomorphic Lionhuman figurine; and Stefanie Kölbl, director of the Prehistoric Museum of Blaubeuren, where the Venus of Hohle Fels and the waterbird are displayed.

We interviewed them and other archaeologists, including Guido Bataille, Johannes Wiedmann, Rudolf Walter, cultural scientist Barbara Spreer, and art historian and philosopher Bernhard Stumpfhaus, during the preliminary stage of our research and the preparatory phase of the film to shed light on our questions. Can the divide between nature and culture be overcome by viewing the human body as an expression of geological matter? Is the human body also a site of exposure and response to changes in Earth's systems and dynamics? Can art make visible the sediments in humankind's depths, the history of our planet, society, the individual and collective psyche? Could the encounter between art and science shift the anthropocentric thinking driven by capitalist imperatives into a post-anthropocentric view, to soothe the wounds of our bleeding, hemorrhaging reality?

Housed in the STRATA Knowledge Archive, a section of the film STRATA website, these conversations raise awareness of our geological past. They discuss progress through cultural exchange and cooperation. They analyze social systems' growing complexity and their evolutionary consequences. They share the necessity of a more holistic approach to life to recover harmonious coexistence between humans and nature (VestAndPage, 2023).

Eventually, they inspired us to imagine a film under a poetic gaze, one wherein performing within nature, as part of nature rather than apart from nature, is a way to experience the world anew, with heightened, empathetic sensitivity to beauty and emotion. A method of looking at human existence is to capture its deeper meanings and cultivate a greater sense of connection, the essence of things rather than simply their surface appearance.

Archaeologist and prehistorian Nicholas Conard, the founding director of the Institute of Archaeological Sciences at the University of Tübingen and director of the department for early prehistory and quaternary ecology, stressed the fact that the therianthropic images—mixed human-animal depictions—all come about at the same time, which suggests that in the early stage of human culture, thresholds are opening into a symbolic world. The transformation from human to animal, from material to spiritual, is a fundamental aspect of the Ice Age people's lives. It is perhaps the first proof of religion intimately entwining humans with nature. These depictions of fantastic beings that do not exist in the real world but only in the world of ideas demonstrate some quite sophisticated aspects of Homo

sapiens' life. They may represent their interconnectedness with the natural world—its mysteries and creative force.

Equally fascinating are Stefanie Kölbl's and Kurt Wehrberger's considerations. Highlighting that culture beyond a formal administrative language is what animates us and makes us a society, they also assume that our Ice Age ancestors were upheld together through art, attempting to portray what made a side in themselves vibrate, perhaps to show where they belong or want to go.

This cultural leap happened 40,000 years ago with figurative artworks that are the oldest we know. These artworks accentuate a human perception of nature, which is missing in today's society. Also, from the footprints found in French caves, we know that children, women, and men were together there. Life was a joint, shared process. This discovery opened up a completely different perspective on prehistory, shaking up also our understanding of gender roles and how society evolved.

Also in prehistoric times, storytelling, making music, or even performing was crucial at the end of the day. Using creative activities, the community devised rituals and celebrations to consolidate bonds and move forward. Additionally, from the findings in the Swabian Jura Caves, it is conceivable that the Homo sapiens were driven to externalize through symbols what they felt inside, the visions they had. There are signs and symbols that tell the story of the intangible, but perceivable, just like concepts of other spaces that are liminal or beyond the real.

**Figure 7**

*On Scars and Myths: A Conversation*



*Note. Kurt Wehrberger with the Lionhuman ivory figurine. Museum Ulm (DE). Interview still, 2021.*

## The Route To Performing (Deep) Time 2

By combining performance art and filmmaking, we question our perceptive processing of reality. In so doing, we rely on our experiences and how we organize and store information in our memory and bodies. It is a process that presents gaps, paradoxes, and ambiguities, but leaves room for the imagination. In that respect, the conversations undertaken with those eminent archaeologists and prehistorians have helped us understand how to approach deep time performatively.

To perform the idea of deep time, we were faced with the difficulty of our human brain grasping a concept of time based on the entire geologic history of our planet, spanning over billions of years, or, as in Hutton, a time without a beginning or an end. We wondered if we could imagine deep time as a poetic, imaginary dimension. A time of imagination, “not the kind of time we normally experience. But in a sense, just as real as what we call real-time” (Hawking, 1996).

Yet how could we, through performance, hope to retrace the vestiges of a distant past we cannot hold? We attempted to imagine a nonlinear time that contained real-time fragments. We imagined a mythic dimension of time, where performing inside it involved embodying imaginary characters inspired by the therianthrope figurines found in the Swabian Jura caves.

Figure 8

*Seven Rock Bladelet Cuts/The Lionhuman and the Shaman*



Note. Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage) and Nicola Fornoni. Location: Hohlenstein-Stadel Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.

The scholars we interviewed gave us the decisive impulse to tackle time's complexity in the film. We did not choose the linear approach of the Judeo-Christian eschatological tradition nor the circularity present in ancient cultures, where time cyclically devours everything. Instead, we sought an alternative to the philosophical concepts of Newton and Einstein, which contextualize the being in an absolute or relative dimension of time contained in a multidimensional space, and of Heidegger, which imagined that the being exists and moves in space contained in a multi-temporal dimension. Even the idea of the infinite present could not correspond to the experience of entry, transit, and exit that occurs when continually entering a cave, performing in it, and then coming back out, constantly shifting from the outside to the inside.

For instance, in the more difficult caves to access, and due to the low temperatures of the water and the mud, we were able to complete only a small number of performances, often performing only one at a time. After two hours inside the cave, the body begins to show clear signs of fatigue and possible hypothermia, especially when performing half-naked. That was how it was in Schiller Cave when we performed the Angel of History in its mud funnel and immersed ourselves in the icy waters of the Wimsener Cave and when we tested our physical limits of resistance to the cold by going upriver through the Falkensteiner Cave subterranean creek to dive in it and perform the story of the wanderer angel.

**Figure 9**

*The Plunge. Castaway through Time/Wanderer Angel*



*Note.* Performance by Fenia Kotsopoulou. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: daz disley, 2021.



Figure 10

*The Rescue. Castaway through Time/Wanderer Angel*



Note. Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage) Location: Humility Passage (Falkensteiner Cave). Photo: daz disley, 2021.

During the film production, we soon realized that our performative actions were somehow wedging into one another. They were clustering on top of each other, but opening in opposite yet connected trajectories and directions, forming a spiral-like pattern. They were like growing strata of space-time and movement, captured by the video camera, and that could still be layered and edited in different orders depending on our artistic choice.

The concept of spiral time implies that action patterns tend to repeat themselves, but not exactly in the same way as the cycles of life, death, and rebirth in some spiritual and mystical traditions. Action patterns evolve and change as they repeat, creating a spiral or a process of growth and transformation, moving outward and upward, expanding and evolving, like David Bohm's (1980) idea of a dynamic interplay of order and chaos to which Timothy Morton (2013) also refers concerning larger societal and cultural patterns, nature, and time, assuming a new level of human awareness transcending the limitations of the modern rational mind for a more intuitive understanding of consciousness, time, and space.

Discussing the notion of the spiral, philosopher and psychologist Jean Gebser sees the poet "participating in the timeless memory of the world" (1985, p. 327). His stance led us to consider that the caves that sheltered our Ice Age ancestors are not simulacra of origin, but places of sharing, shells of the inner world, metaphors for our insides, spaces where a transcendent reality exists, and thoughts enter a process of becoming form.

We ventured inside them audaciously but respectfully, always silently, in order not to disturb the eloquent silence inside the caves, which seems to preserve the secrets of

everything, as the concluding stanza of the poem tries to convey. By means of artistic generative encounters, performing through labyrinths of rocks, mud, and gelid water, we sought to understand the force of geological and time. Have we learned to embody their cadence and rhythm? Can we interlace a dialogue with the caves' breathtaking calmness and stirring stillness? Moreover, do we have the right to step inside these immaculate spaces and perform?

**Figure 11**

*The Secret Heart of the Geological Clock*



*Note.* Performance by Nicola Fornoni. Location: Wimsener Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.



**Figure 12**

*Inside and forth*



*Note.* Performance by Sara Simeoni. Location: Gustav-Jakob Cave. Photo: daz disley, 2021.

**Figure 13**

*The Walk. Castaway through Time/Wanderer Angel*



*Note.* Performance by Sara Simeoni. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Photo: daz disley, 2021.

**Figure 14**

*The Rescue 2. Castaway through Time/Wanderer Angel*



*Note.* Performance by Andrea Pagnes (VestAndPage). Location: “White Giant” flowstone (Falkensteiner Cave). Photo: daz disley, 2021.

### **It Is About Ecological Thinking**

STRATA's opening moves are that art-making processes can function as harbingers of possible changes, that ecological thinking is essential to understanding human existence, and that plurality, nonbinary, inclusiveness, and diversity are fundamental prerequisites for social development. In the making of the film, grounding in ecology has been a research tool to understand the interaction of concrete entities by performing in underground landscapes shaped by cold, muddy waters, and wet, slippery rocks; the *oikos*, or “house” in the root meaning of ecology being the bodily self.

Can the human body become an expression of geological matter and a site of exposure in response to changes in time and Earth dynamics? Can performance-based filmmaking move beyond the nature/culture divide?

In *Ecology without Nature* (2007), Timothy Morton criticizes authoritarian politics. He calls for a new way of thinking about our relationship to the environment, advocating for a philosophy of symbiosis rather than dominance. Morton (2016) suggests we must embrace nature's dark and unpredictable aspects rather than controlling or taming them. This radical rethinking of ecology encourages us to think in more creative and more nuanced ways about our relationship with the natural world. Reflecting on the importance of interconnectedness, coexistence, inherence, and relationality in ecological thinking paves



the way to move beyond a dualistic view of humans and nature as separate entities, for we are deeply intertwined with the environment and dependent on its health and well-being.

Morton proposes that biology and ecology deconstruct notions of authenticity and that life exists as a fluid mesh of interrelations and interdependences that blurs traditional scientific boundaries, like species, living and nonliving, human and nonhuman, and even between an organism and its environment. According to Morton (2010), it is the idea of a queer ecology that emphasizes a perspective on life that transcends dualism and distinctive boundaries. Queer ecology shifts paradigms away from binary, heteronormative ways of understanding nature, instead recognizing that unique relationships exist between life forms at different scales.

With its many gaps, crevasses, occupied territories, and yet-unknown grounds, STRATA is a composite labyrinth. In a psychogeographic and performative process of embodied memory activation, we have performed to physically explore layers of sites in the depths of the earth—caves guarding under their surface enigmatic traces of our becoming. Does the subsurface hold the key to trespassing the binary and linear toward spiralling complexity and trust in change? How can we unbury deposits in the depths of the human being, in the earth and human history, and in society and the psyche?

In queer ecology, growing complexity is an evolutionary consequence, and plurality, non-binary, and social inclusion are necessary prerequisites to understanding life. The film offers artistic and academic perspectives on crucial social issues of the present to open up a contemporary discourse on the past. Remembering historical facts and imagining possible worlds, we aim to raise awareness of our geological and cultural past to draft a possible postcolonial future.

We critically confronted romantically distorted images of nature and naturalness to dismantle consolidated narratives and aesthetics, such as Wilhelm Hauff's (1826) novel *Lichtenstein* and the Nazi research program "SS Ancestral Heritage," which complicated geology's detachment from the region's factual historiography.

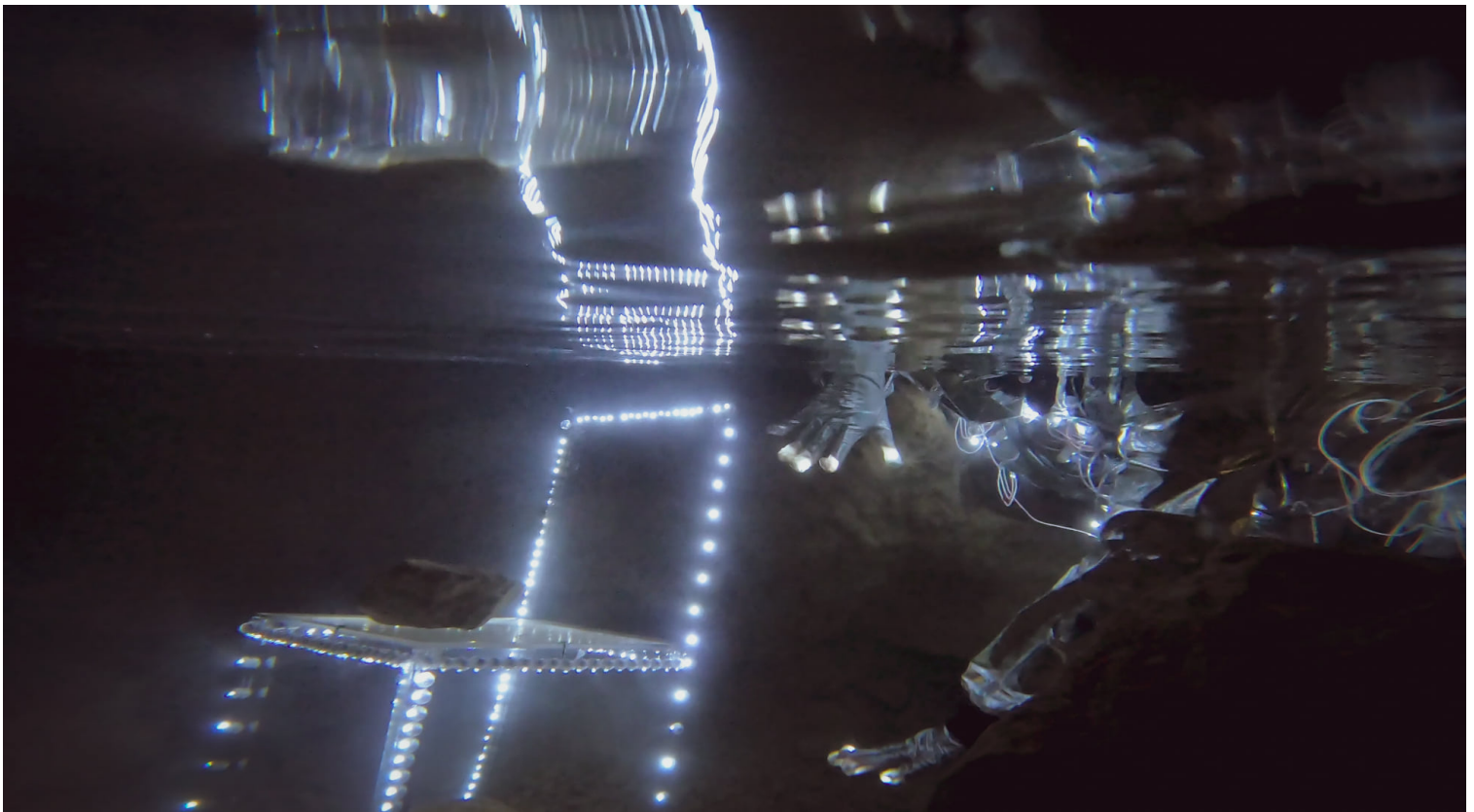
Thus, in both method and outcomes, STRATA also embodies a critical stance concerning German romanticism's misleading imageries, nationalist dogmatic beliefs and codified accounts, presupposing the superiority of the Aryan race and man over nature.

Morton analyzes how poets and philosophers of the Romantic period, particularly Schelling and Hegel in Germany and Coleridge and Wordsworth in England, had insights into ecology long before it became a scientific discipline wishing "for reconciliation of subject and object" (2007, p. 22). However, in learning about the history of the caves of the Swabian Jura, we could not help but encounter once more how German romantic writers and artists often depicted nature as a pristine wilderness, disconnected from human society and untouched by civilization's negative impacts, disregarding nature's practical and material aspects. With an emphasis on individualism, inwardness, the sublime and an idealized view of nature, they were celebrating the grandeur of the natural world while at the same time perpetuating an unrealistic understanding of the relationship between humans and nature: an alienation leading to significant cultural and environmental consequences and social implications (Stone 2014).

In that regard, contributions from Italian performer, filmmaker, and 3D artist Francesca Fini, vertical dancer and performer Marianna Andrigo, transgender non-binary performance artist Giorgia de Santi, and Gabonese interdisciplinary artist Anguezomo Mba Bikoro to STRATA are noteworthy. Focusing on future bionetwork, identity, and diversity, Fini, Andrigo and De Santi have performed examining gender outside of categorization, while relating to the natural environment under the lens of a queer ecology acceptance.

**Figure 15**

*Time to Come/The Cosmo Rabbit*



*Note.* Performance by Francesca Fini. Location: Falkensteiner Cave. Film still, 2021.

**Figure 16**

*Transit/The Woman Waterbird*



*Note.* Performance by Marianna Andriago. Location: Blautopf spring. Film still, 2021.



Figure 17

*Spiralling Time/Ammonite*



Note. Performance by Giorgia de Santi. Location: Schiller Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.

Working on tender transgressions, ancestral healing, transformative justice, and future monuments, Anguezomo realized a performance-for-camera at the historically charged site of the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave, where in 1930 archaeological excavations were financed by the SS. At this site, Mba Bikoro unleashes an urgent discourse about Germany's colonial past and present structures, oppression, patriarchal harm, and white liberalism. Sharing and politically-poetically contextualizing narratives of their ancestral archive, they enact their vision of postcoloniality and queer ecology by remembering through the traces of the ecosystem. In STRATA, their art actions demonstrate that performance-making is a powerful tool to uncover the untold and give justice to the silenced in a way as needed as it should be.

**Figure 18**

*The River of the Ancestors*



*Note.* Ritual performance and floating installation by Anguezomo Mba Bikoro. Location: Wimsener Cave. Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.

Figure 19

*Disentanglement*



*Note.* Ritual performance by Anguezomo Mba Bikoro. Location: Bärenhöhle Cave (The Bears Cave). Photo: Marcel Sparmann, 2021.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The research was conducted in the absence of any conflicts of interest.

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### **Artist Statement**

With our experience in body-based performance art since the early 2000s, we have also dedicated ourselves to exploring how original documentation of performative acts evolves into complex, contextual, non-linear narratives through performance-based filmmaking. Our films are produced on-site as direct and visceral performances, which are never rehearsed or staged and happen in response to often extreme environments such as Antarctica, underground cave systems, Patagonia, Kashmir, and military enclaves. Working alone or with a small team of collaborators, we use minimal, non-invasive equipment. Through a reflexive mode, we search for new images of interior landscapes.

We consider the world our studio. We do not travel to a place to tell a story; we come to a place to find its story. This approach contains the essential discourse of decolonisation: the land holds us; we never own a land. All forms of oppression and abuse on persons, beings, space or objects for art's sake are to be avoided as all are equal partakers in the co-creation.

In our films, we explore locations in between, where the veil between different temporalities, occurrences, and stories is porous. To perform at these thresholds where the visible blends with the invisible, we have developed a psychogeographical method to activate memory. We uncover layers of information and imagery stored in the human body, psyche, spirit, and environment to let the silenced and the untold emerge.

Our work and the STRATA project, in particular, resonate philosophically with the queer and dark ecology



and object-oriented ontology of Timothy Morton and the phenomenology of perception and embodied cognition studies of Merleau-Ponty. Working on performance art's liminal, spectral, and ritual nature in an ongoing "Poetics of Relations", we apply endurance, sublimation, and risk-taking with a poetic bodily approach to art practice and a focus on universal human experiences.

We consider performance-based filmmaking an artistic practice that serves the body's capacity to generate knowledge, convey meanings and shape concepts of intimate archiving. In that, the perceptual functions as a magnifying glass on how we view reality and the spectrum of relationships to address the social nature of representation.

For us, film can delude space-time, open the unconscious as a resourceful vessel, and reveal processes and relations by linking apparently disconnected persons, objects, and happenings.

Our production process involves recollecting different elements or "shards": a series of disconnected filmed, non-staged performance actions, poetic texts produced as stream-of-consciousness writing, foley sounds, and elaborate musical soundscapes. In assembling them, these shards are organically intertwined in the editing process.

Film work reveals the connections between previously scattered fragments by making a new whole. Reduced use of digital effects such as dissolve, reverse, and layering is deployed to reveal perceptions of elemental reality. We also use film as a mnemonic archive for testimonial purposes. We produce conversations and interviews on existential topics with people from the arts, culture, and science.

#### **About the Authors**

Artist duo VestAndPage consists of Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes, transdisciplinary artists and curators of gentle collaborations in the ephemeral and immaterial. They engage with art as a social practice by nurturing temporary artistic communities within artist collectives and acting as the founders and directors of the Venice International Performance Art Week. Through performance-as-research and poetic writing, they explore the intricate nature of creativity and embodied practice, presenting performance art as a crucial methodology in contemporary society. Their work has been showcased internationally in theatres, museums, galleries, and cinemas, encompassing various formats, from month-long performance walks to 24-hour performances. [www.vest-and-page.de](http://www.vest-and-page.de), [www.stratafilm.de](http://www.stratafilm.de)