

Małgorzata Dawidek

Diagnoses *and* Reconstructions

VAN RIJ GALLERY

Diagnoses *and* Reconstructions

Artist represented by

VAN RIJ GALLERY

WERSJA POLSKA

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Małgorzata Dawidek

Diagnoses *and* Reconstructions

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 1, Positions A, B, C, D, E
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#1A



#1B



#1C



#1D



#1E

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 2, Positions A, C, D, E, F
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#2A



#2C



#2D



#2E



#2F

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 3, Positions B, C, D, E, F,
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#3B



#3C



#3D



#3E



#3F

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 4, Positions A, B, C, F, G
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#4A



#4B



#4C



#4F



#4G

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 5, Positions A, B, D
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#5A



#5B



#5D

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 6, Positions A, B, C
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#6A



#6B



#6C

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 7, Positions A, B, C
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#7A



#7B



#7C

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 8, Positions A, B, C, D, E
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#8A



#8B



#8C

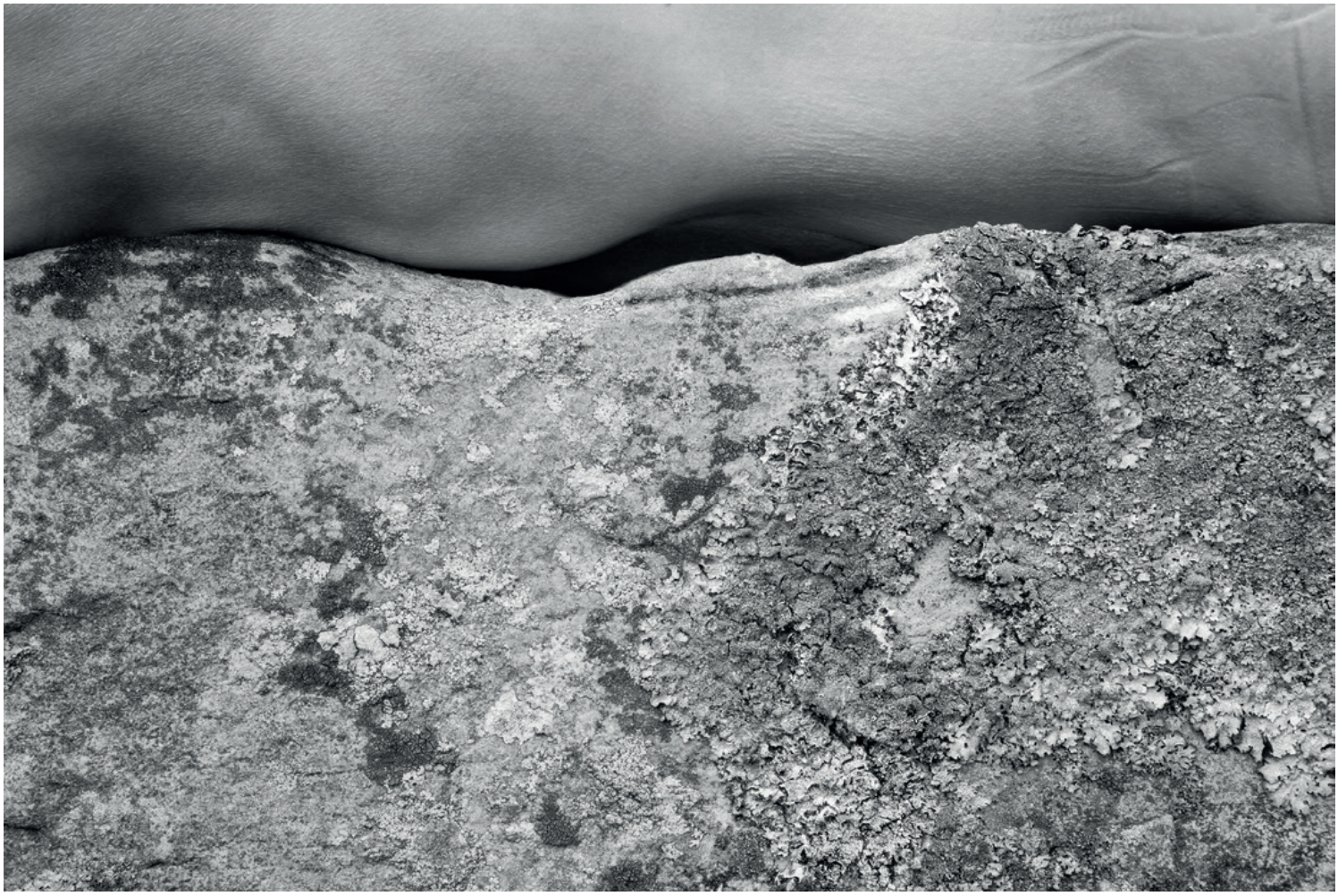


#8D

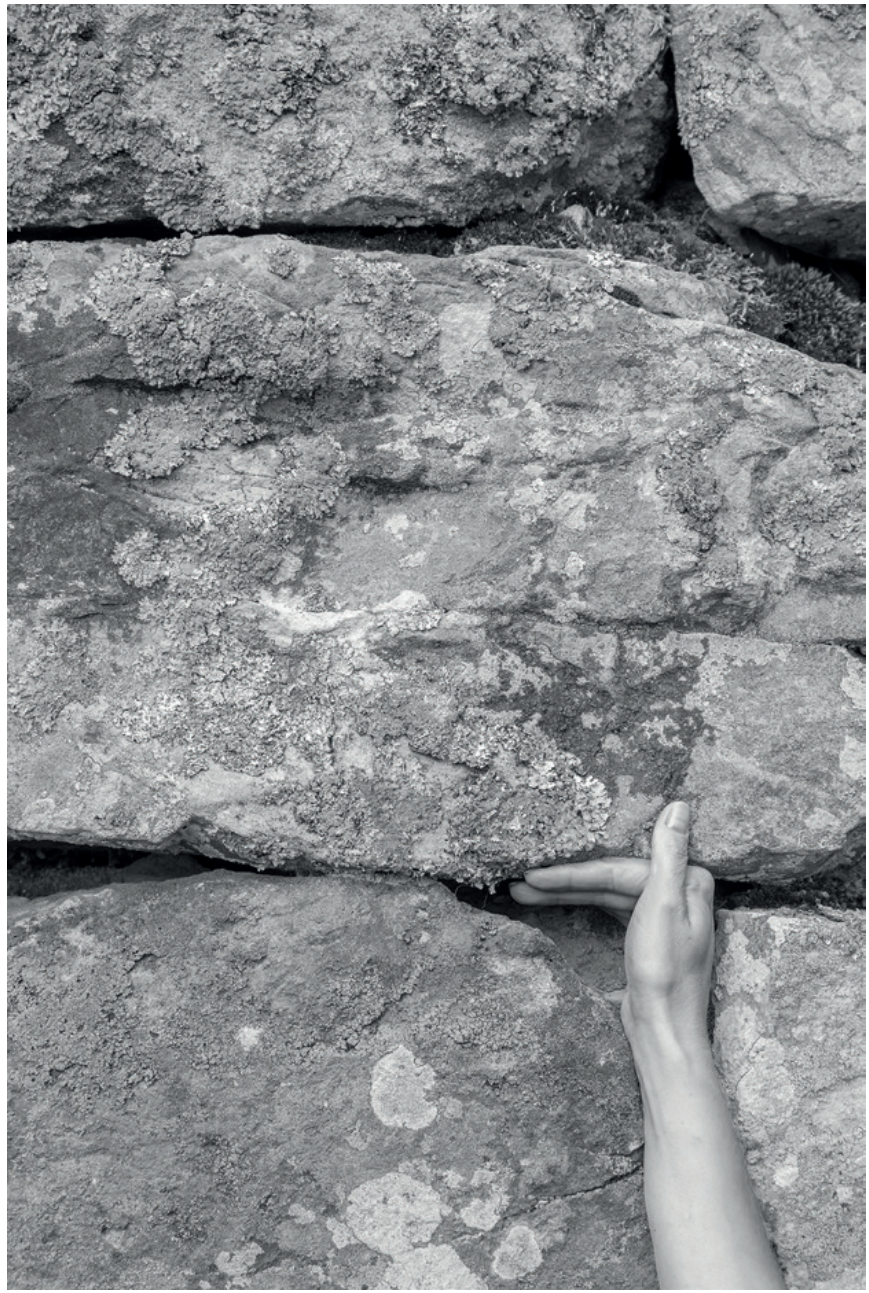


#8E

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 9, Positions A, D, E
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#9A



#9D



#9E

Diagnoses and Reconstructions, 2018-2025
Performative–photographic series
Location 10, Positions A, B, C
Black-and-white photography
Giclée fine art print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 308 gsm
32.5 × 48.5 cm (each)
Edition limited to 5 copies



#10A

#10B

#10C

Magdalena Ujma
Alphabet of Nature

"...the stone takes in warmth and letters, and returns them as words"
— STANISŁAW KALINA JAGLARZ

RECOGNITION

Connection with nature, the search for partnership, and the possibility of being together — this is what Małgorzata Dawidek's works are about, including those from the *Diagnoses and Reconstructions* series. The awareness of the equality of all beings plays a fundamental role in her practice: those that, until quite recently, were divided into living and non-living nature. The artist dismantles the cultural barrier separating what is human from what comes from nature. She seeks ways to express the state of being part of the great community of life, encompassing all companion species — not only animal or plant, but also the geological. She is aided in this by the concepts of affirmative ethics, which she deploys following their author, Rosi Braidotti. Dawidek's practice is rooted in *self-soothing*. This term denotes her original theory-practice, which assumes the understanding of oneself as both a whole and a part of the vast universe of life. At the same time, the artist does not conceal her own individual, singular position, and is aware of the limitations of her body. A sense of her own finitude and fragility, and empathy for the fate of beings of various kinds, permeate her work, in which the theoretical foundation is as important as the creative process — resulting in her own unique, individual model of practice. This model was developed by Dawidek on the basis of her life, including health-related issues, and artistic experiences.

The photographs from the *Diagnoses and Reconstructions* series were created during Dawidek's stay in the northern part of England, in the village of Highgreen in Northumberland county. This area, protected as part of a National Park, is the most remote and least populated region in the United Kingdom. Yet studying the wonders of nature was not Dawidek's priority. These lands bear strong traces of human activity. In the 19th and 20th centuries, they were a centre of the Industrial Revolution. In Northumberland and the vicinity, the mining industry flourished: coal mines operated there, accompanied by their supporting infrastructure. And, as befitted the era of industrial capitalism, nature was treated as a treasure-trove of resources to be exploited without restraint, with no regard for environmental devastation.

Invited to Highgreen, Dawidek delved into its history. She studied, for example, maps from the collections of the National Library of Scotland. She examined the area's topography, the layout of adits and mine shafts, transport routes and buildings. She was interested in the vegetation and geological structure of the land — not only from the past but also as it exists today. There are livestock farms operating there, but the primary host is nature itself. Today, the land is being resettled by it — by flora that is lush, yet scarred. Seemingly growing freely, yet synanthropic, living in proximity to humans. There are gently rolling hills, but their slopes are disturbed; old roads lie hidden in the grass, adits and mine shafts are carved into the ground. The ruins of former buildings remain. While in Highgreen, Dawidek encountered a *second nature* — the mutilated body of the earth.

In environmental studies, the term *second nature* refers to areas transformed by human activity, often irreversibly. Even if humans cease to manage these lands and give free rein to nature, it cannot return to its original state. In fact, *second nature* is the present state of nature in its entirety. There are no longer any virgin lands — everything on Earth has already experienced human interference. Microplastics have been found in permafrost and in the deepest reaches of the oceans.

There is no longer a wilderness. The "wild" is the one who is not civilised, who lives outside of culture, who does not follow its norms. Yet, we must remember that there is no such thing as a strict nature–culture divide; "pure" wildness has never existed. Instead, there is a gradation — a gradual transition from one quality to another, an overlap. Dawidek operates precisely within this zone, in the culture–nature or nature–culture continuum.

HEALING

To describe her artistic practice, Dawidek coined the term *bodygraphy*, which can be translated as "body writing" or "body mapping." In her approach, the body is an autonomous entity: it holds its own knowledge and memory, and it interacts with its surroundings. This is why, in the photographs she presents, we never see the subject's head, nor do we meet the gaze of the person captured. A head, too, can be understood as part of a body rather than as the home of identity or the power of thought. The body itself carries its own history — stories that are not meant so much to be understood as to be felt and resonated with. Dawidek adds that the body also has its own narrative. Yet in the photographs from Highgreen, she expands this notion, transgressing the individuality of her own organism. She treats the local ecosystem as a single body — a wounded one, its tissues in pain, undergoing an intense process of self-healing and self-repair.

The *Diagnoses and Reconstructions* series emerged from her wanderings through these landscapes. When the artist appears in the photographs, she neither poses nor seeks to draw attention to her presence — nature reigns supreme. On her walks, she encounters the lushness of greenery and landforms. She takes photographs while roaming the terrain, engaging in spontaneous micro-performances. She observes herself during these treks, allowing herself to resonate with particular places, to respond in an improvised way. She watches as nature reclaims spaces once taken from it. She becomes so familiar with the area that, in the images, she is already a part of it — positioned at its heart, like a tree or a clump of grass. Her being inside, her merging with the landscape, can be read not only as an expression of solidarity with the environment, but — more deeply — as being together with it: standing, persisting, growing, swaying in the wind. It is a search for kinship at the most elemental, more-than-human level. After all, we are all adrift in the same vessel; we all live on Earth, in the cosmos; we are all made of the same elements; we are all bundles of energy. Dawidek seeks to grow, creep, unfurl, and endure in a symbiotic way — just like plants, soil, rocks do. To simply be.

The photographs are black and white. Nature appears up close, with no distant vistas in sight. This compositional choice appeals to the sense of touch. Viewers standing in front of the images may feel as though they are there themselves — amid a tuft of swaying grass or tangled branches. *Diagnoses and Reconstructions* do not, therefore, depict landscapes, as that would imply a division between a viewer and an image; a distance between the two. Here, however, everything is near; one can almost feel the breeze against the skin. Such closeness means we see everything in fragments. Dawidek's body appears in pieces, as does the photographs' equal co-actor, the partner — nature — seen up close, in the shallow space of the frame.

What these works reveal at first glance is the body merging with a tree, the riverbank, the grasses — or perhaps the reverse — the tree, the grasses, the earthen slope taking on her body. Dawidek does not position herself in a relationship of power over her surroundings; she avoids dominating them. Yet the photographs do not create the illusion of entering that world. They are black and white, which may carry symbolic significance, though in this case such symbolism is hard to pin down. Rather, the removal of colour signals a certain convention — distancing the work from offering the illusion of "pretty views" of nature. Dawidek distances herself from aestheticisation; she even disrupts it. She opts for simplicity which has the added advantage of allowing viewers to furnish the images in their own way, filling them with their own colours.

In a way, as viewers, we feel slightly uncomfortable, because we are witnessing something not meant to be looked at, but rather to be co-experienced. Dawidek's positioning — nestling into a small dip, a branch, or an embankment, as if she wished to be absorbed by nature, slipping her hand into a hollow or her legs into a tree trunk — may also evoke childhood games, driven by curiosity, like playing hide-and-seek.

There is something of a childlike enthusiasm in these images. At the same time, they convey a deeply adult sense of empathy, entirely free of sentimentality or indulgence. What one can see in the photographs is a desire to offer real help, to support, to hold up and protect wounded nature. The artist's body thus functions — at least for a moment — as a kind of prosthesis, a bandage, or a compress, depending on the need.

The photographs also carry a conceptual edge. (After all, Dawidek has studied in Poznań under Jarosław Kozłowski, a leading figure of the Polish variant of conceptualism, known as *sztuka pojęciowa*.) Thus, they may evoke attempts to dissect the concepts of "body" and "landscape", or to frame them within linguistic structures or analyses of the "landscape of the body" topos. Despite their "stylised" appearance as analytical works, which emphasise simplicity of composition and rendered in black and white, the artist's approach is different. She creates her own visual language not in order to dissect images and concepts, and examine them under a microscope. No. Her goal is precisely the opposite: to connect rather than divide, to blur rather than delineate boundaries.

CONNECTION

Dawidek situates her practice within contemporary humanities and philosophy. To complement her observations and self-interpretations, we can also turn to other sources. After all, the human–nonhuman relationship, including animals, plants, and so-called inanimate nature, has a long-standing presence in culture. Numerous stories recount human's connections with trees and closeness to animals. One immediately thinks of Greek myths, with their archaic Earth goddess Gaia, with deities representing primal principles like Demeter and Themis, or Artemis, ruler of wild nature. Their worshippers knew that the body of the earth was simultaneously the body of the goddess. Among them are also the tree nymphs, the dryads. And there is Daphne, fleeing the aggressive Apollo, who in trying to protect herself from his advances prays to her father and is transformed into a laurel tree. Ovid describes the scene as follows: *a heavy numbness seized her limbs, thin bark closed over her breast, her hair turned into leaves, her arms into branches, her feet so swift a moment ago stuck fast in slow-growing roots, her face was lost in the canopy…*[1] In the 20th century, the artist Ana Mendieta interprets these goddess motifs in her own way. Drawing on the ideas of Afro-Cuban Santería, she merges her own silhouette with the earth in the *Silueta* series, turning it into a visual metaphor. She becomes a Cuban-American Persephone — embodying the cycle of life in nature — searching for her mother Demeter, from whom she has been separated — just as the subject has been separated from the object, and humans from their natural environment.

Likewise, poets capture the essence of connection — of the thought with the thinking, of the represented with the representing — by ensnaring it in their own metaphors and verbal images. Consider the poems of Stanisław Kalina Jaglarz. He regards his works as a form of meditation, allowing nature to be embodied within oneself. For this poet, skin — so thin, it is almost absent — becomes a membrane, a means of linking the inner with the outer, the self with the non-self. The human and the individual find companionship in the forms of animals, plants, and stones. He perceives the unity of life in the world, writing: *through the shoulder flows the twitch of a root and the memory of a seed;* and concluding: *now in the barks, journeys that don't even end in a crown / unless the wind picks up the skin and frees the sorrow*.

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Returning to Dawidek's exhibition and her photographs from the *Diagnoses and Reconstructions* series, we see that the path she follows is simple, yet demanding. It is a path toward transforming the human relationship with the world, toward rethinking our position within it. All it takes is a small step. And by becoming aware of on's own limitations, one can create a community in fragility, impermanence — within life itself.

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book I: 525-552; Daphne becomes the laurel bough.

Luiza Nader

Body Against Body In Relation to the Earth... to the Rock... to the Tree... "Diagnoses and Reconstructions" by Małgorzata Dawidek

"The disconnect from the body of the Earth really has to do with the disconnect from our own bodies. The two are together. And the exploitation of the Earth as if it was something separate from us has a lot to do with patriarchal domination. I mean, we talk about Mother Earth. Look at what we are doing to the Mother. It's a Mother hatred almost. It speaks to a blindness and a passivity which itself is a marker of societal and collective trauma."

— GÁBOR MÁTÉ[1]

Consisting of forty black-and-white photographs, Małgorzata Dawidek's *Diagnoses and Reconstructions* (*Diagnozy i Rekonstrukcje*) was created in 2018 and 2025 during an artist residences with Visual Arts in Rural Communities in Highgreen Valley, Tarset, Northumberland, in the United Kingdom. The photographs depict the artist's micro-performances, in which she engages with plants, stones, rock formations, the earth, the atmosphere, the specific site, and the entire landscape of Highgreen Valley — elements of which bear, albeit not immediately visible, the destructive traces of the past.
A coal mine in this area operated between the mid-19th century and 1920. The extraction of this raw material left scars and ruptures on land now used for agriculture, farmed by owners committed to improving the state of the environment and supporting wildlife.[2]

The artist has lived with a long-term illness and that means functioning in a state of chronic crisis, which underpins the modus operandi of her work: Affective Artistic Practice (AAP). As Dawidek writes:

> AAP results from my research on corporeality as an intellectual-material, transformative, intersectional, and interactive being. It arose from my conviction that illness, although it may influence the structure of one's biography, does not create a break within it; and that critique and creativity, which are fundamentally the domains of emancipatory feminist theory and practice, can provide new tools for analysing the relationship between art and illness. The AAP project focuses on recognising the needs and modes of functioning of the (ill) body in artistic practice. I seek answers to questions about the forms and possibilities of experiencing pain, anxiety, isolation, and trauma (the transformation of negativity), which could allow the expansion of the categories of artistic creation.[3]

1. Gábor Maté, in *The Wisdom of Trauma*, documentary film, USA, directed by Maurizio Benazzo and Zaya Benazzo, 2021.

2. Małgorzata Dawidek-Gryglicka, *Bodygraphy: The (ill) Body Narratives*, Appendix to Chapter III: *Illness Narratives*, Part XIII: *Nature. Diagnoses and Reconstructions*, Manuscript, University College London Library, 2022.

3. Małgorzata Dawidek-Gryglicka, *Obrazy samokojenia. Wstęp do Afektywnej Praktyki Artystycznej*, in: *Obecność lęku*, ed. Mateusz Falkowski (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 2024), pp. 92–93.

In her theory and practice, the artist therefore treats extreme experiences and their sufferance, as well as their continual transgression, as foundational. In petrifactive liminal situations elicited by broadly understood illness and the accompanying pain, she is interested in developing techniques of creation that build relationships and participate in processes of reconstructing subjective agency. In this regard, she aligns herself with many thinkers, particularly Rosi Braidotti whose affirmative ethics pertain not to the elimination of negativity (as that is impossible in lived experience) but to the transformation of what is negative into positive and affirmative values.[4] Within the AAP modus, Dawidek has created works such as *(Self)Soothing Project* (2016–), *Holding Pattern* (2019), *Book of Hours* (2019) and the *Body Texts* series (2016). All of these works also bring up the issue of "bodygraphy" which the artist understands as individual and collective expressions of the body concerning memory and culture, manifested in texts, gestures, behaviours, sounds, and actions, in interaction with both private and public spheres.[5]

In *Diagnoses and Reconstructions*, Dawidek, employing non-invasive, subtle actions, creates a deep interweaving of human and non-human beings: her own body, the soil, plants, the wounded landscape, the sky, the air, and atmosphere. She envelops the abandoned, scorched tree hollow with her hands, she touches it, examining its shape and texture, shielding and protecting it. She mirrors the tree's radical curvature with her body ("standing on her head"), wraps herself around its trunk, inserting her hand — and in another photograph, her leg — into the crevices that mark and rupture the thick branches. She hides within the tree, behind the tree, she is with the tree. The artist engages similarly with rocks, the soil, and the landscape. Interacting "body against body" in relation to the soil, the rock and the tree, she senses their texture, temperature and scent, appreciates their weight and volume, discerns their age, and engages with the lives of non-human beings marked by the brutal activities of humans. Dawidek focuses on crevices, tears, gaps, ruptures, holes and absences; on the trauma present in the environment. What connects the artist and the Highgreen landscape is a condition of long-term crisis. At the same time both the empowered body and the landscape persist together — not so much in spite of the pain or because of it, but rather alongside it, with the engrams of trauma and the traces left behind by harmful exploitation. The artist explores the manifold condition of crisis — rooted deeply in the body, in the soil, in blades of grass, leaves and bark of trees. At the same time, she points to the process of enduring and transcending negativity. This process is, on the one hand, anchored in "diagnoses" — the search for answers to the question about what has occurred here (in the environment, in plants, in the earth, in the body, in subjectivity)? On the other hand, it involves a continuous labour, both physical and symbolic, leading to the "(re)construction" — of thinking and imagining, soothing and protecting, filling, repeating, patching, building upon, adjusting, connecting and supporting.

ZOEPOLIS

Diagnoses and Reconstructions concern biological, mineral, and geological beings, as well as the entire post-mining environment which, despite suffering destruction, goes through a regeneration. As I have already mentioned, the breathtaking landscape bears scars caused by extractive activities, gaps in the earth, crevices in rocks and cracks in trees. However, the artist's work does not focus on the trauma present in the landscape, but on processes of growth, development, and the life force flowing through all *companion species* within a maximally expanded field. *Companion species* is a category introduced by Donna Haraway as: "a bigger and more heterogeneous category than companion animal, and not just because one must include such organic beings as rice, bees, tulips, and intestinal flora, all of whom make life for humans what it is — and vice versa."[6] Among the many proposals in environmental

4. Rosi Braidotti, *Affirmation, Pain and Empowerment*, *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 14, no. 3 (2008), pp. 7–36, 139.

5. Małgorzata Dawidek-Gryglicka, *Obrazy samokojenia. Wstęp do Afektywnej Praktyki Artystycznej*, op. cit., p. 75.

6. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant*

humanities, philosopher Monika Bakke added mineral beings to the category of *companion species*, while sociologist Monika Rosińska and design historian Agata Szydłowska proposed the concept of *zoepolis*. This concept encompasses "all living organisms (plants, animals, fungi, bacteria, etc.) and opposes the celebration of boundaries between species and individuals. The emphasis here is on trans-species cohabitation, that is, the relationships which — following the path outlined by Donna Haraway — precede the existence of the individual partners."[7]

In *Diagnoses and Reconstructions*, Dawidek, using her own body, relates to *zoepolis*. On a visual level, the black-and-white photographs render the artist as one among Highgreen's many *companion species* (within the expanded field). The way she establishes a relationship with the entire landscape and its individual elements is by creating situations of connection between the human, female body and the soil, rock or tree — through moments of touch, contact, and union that engage the entire surface of the body. Dawidek points to the porosity of her own body while simultaneously forming, together with organic, mineral, and geological beings, a (temporary) *third body*.[8] She creates a community of beings, connected by flows of generative force — *zoe*. The concept of *zoe* is one of the key terms in Dawidek's practice. She remains close to Rosi Braidotti's vitalist concept of life, where life/*zoe* "that I inhabit is not mine, it does not bear my name — it is a generative force of becoming, of individuation and differentiation."[9] In *Diagnoses and Reconstructions*, the artist points to this generative, prehuman power. She reveals the potency of continuous transformation: the process of becoming, a swift current of the life-giving force, a force independent of humans which endures and flows ceaselessly, permeating all material and immaterial beings.

RADICAL EMPATHY, COM-PASSION

The artist pushes her hands into the crevices of rocks, embraces a tree, protects an abandoned tree hollow, fills a gap in the soil with her hand, and hides within a tree. She touches, supports, repeats, fills and protects. She never dominates, never violates. She supports. Her body functions as a subtle prosthesis for the entire *zoepolis* in whose existence she participates. The relationship, I would argue, is reciprocal. The wounded form and enchanting scent of the tree, the soothing rustle and sight of plants, the rough texture of the rock — all affect deeply the female body resonating with them. The artist and the surrounding *companion species* attune to each other, immersed in co-existence, com-passion and empathy.

In relation to human beings, empathy is understood, for example, by Jill Bennett, as "a dynamic oscillation, 'a constant tension of going to and from, as Nikos Papastergiadis has put it, 'of going closer to be able to see, but also never forgetting where you are coming from…'."[10] Anna Łebkowska agrees with Bennett's position, understanding empathy as "a tension between otherness and the striving for closeness [where — ed. note] relationships usually involve […] the paradox of co-feeling and being alongside, a conscious muffling of one's own expression while also refraining from overly intrusive intervention in another's autonomy."[11] In *Diagnoses and Reconstructions*, Dawidek introduces a form of radical empathy directed toward a redefined subjectivity — embracing the entire environment, the vast *zoepolis*, all *companion species*. Alongside empathy, she also invokes a related value — compassion, understood, according to Gabor and Daniel Maté, as the capacity to be moved by another's suffering, combined with the willingness to help. Yet we cannot help another being unless we first see and understand their pain.[12] Compassion, linked to understanding and

Otherness (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), p. 15.

7. Monika Rosińska and Agata Szydłowska, *Projektowanie dla roślin i zwierząt*, https://nn6t.pl/2017/10/01/projektowanie-dla-roslin-i-zwierzat/ (accessed June 10, 2025).

8. Term used by Małgorzata Dawidek-Gryglicka in an online conversation with Katarzyna Rij and Magdalena Ujma, February 18, 2025.

9. Rosi Braidotti, *Affirmation, Pain and Empowerment*, op. cit., p. 22. Cited in Małgorzata Dawidek, *Obrazy samokojenia. Wstęp do Afektywnej Praktyki Artystycznej*, op. cit., p. 96.

10. Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 10.

11. Anna Łebkowska, *Empatia. O literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), p. 33.

12. Daniel and Gabor Maté, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness & Healing in a Toxic Culture*, New York: Avery 2022, pp. 383-389.

to questions directed toward the other — both *how?* (it hurts) and *why?* (it hurts) — and to the work of artistic diagnoses and reconstructions, in Dawidek's case opens up not only toward human beings but toward the entire non-human environment recovering from injury.

In *Diagnoses and Reconstructions*, Małgorzata Dawidek attentively observes, listens, touches, searches, and recognises, but also cares, supports, shares compassion using her own body to perform multiple actions of reparative significance. Step by step, gesture by gesture, carefully and slowly, she cultivates radical empathy: she builds "channels that connect us with others"[13] — here, with the *zoepolis*, with *companion species*, with broadly conceived non-human beings. She opens spaces of mutual flows of the life-giving force, of affirmative interdependence, and of co-existence. In an endless process of learning from the landscape, she seeks access and understanding of beings other than human. In all this, she herself — happens. She endures… becomes… and transforms… body against body[14] in relation to the earth… to the rock… to the tree…[15]

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13. Theodor Lipps defined *Einfühlung* ("empathy") in relation to humans; Frans de Waal extended the theory of empathy to the sphere of animals: Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*, London: Souvenir Press, 2010, pp. 102–108.

14. The expression "body against body" is borrowed from Luce Irigaray's essay *Body against body: In Relation to the Mother* (see: Irigay, L.1993. *Sexes and Genealogies,* trans. Gillian C Gill. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). I do not elaborate in the text on the relationship between the human body and the body of the earth, but I believe it certainly deserves reflection, of course from a post-anthropocentric perspective.

15. As I learned from Małgorzata Dawidek, in June 2025 the artist returned to the exact same place, Highgreen Valley. Her revisiting will no doubt result in another chapter of *Diagnoses and Reconstructions*.

Małgorzata Dawidek in Conversation with Katarzyna Rij

The Possibility of a Self Portrait

The human body plays a key role in your artistic practice. Do you treat it more as a tool of expression, a carrier of text, or as a story in itself?

I see the body as a story that unfolds exactly through all the features and tools you have just mentioned. As an intellectual-material entity, the body generates emotions in a natural way. It serves as a vessel for memory, texts and meanings, encompassing both personal and collective experiences, joys and pleasures, pain, anxiety and trauma. Still, it is also the "site" through which all these sensations are conveyed. It is, thus, simultaneously their source and subject. An impulse and a transmitter of affects that shape our responses, including those related to socio-political situations, such as forms of resistance. In my practice, I focus on the human body, which I confront with its surroundings. By this, I mean interactions with other bodies — people, nature and architecture. I analyse modes of bodily functioning, the individuality and singularity of everyday engagement, and personal language. I believe that these very elements, situated within the broader context of collective histories of diasporas, communities or nations, constitute an identity that is processual; it is a story of bodily conditions, power relations, race, and gender. In working with the body, I have coined the term *bodygraphy*, which refers to the narrative dimension of corporeality. Bodygraphy denotes the understanding of the body as a text in process, acknowledging both its subjective features and behaviours acquired through socialisation, cultural and social influences, and collective memory. This tangle can manifest itself in all aspects of communication — language, writing, sound, and gesture. For example, the way I speak, sit, laugh or adjust my glasses is like my fingerprints. At the same time, my accent or a learned response to a specific situation — let's say to a social ritual which is familiar to me — provides additional context for the bodily story. They reveal the scope and capacities of my corporeality, highlighting its complex character.

While working with the body, I often turn towards my own corporeality. I draw on the body as a medium that enables me to communicate and build an intimate relationship with the audience, especially in direct contact during interactive performances. I also treat the body as the navigator of my artistic activities — on one hand, it determines the rhythm and the scale of my work, that is, the purely logistical aspects; on the other hand, as my main case study and subject of observation, it draws the trajectory of my research practice. I deeply trust in the wise choices of my body which intuitively yet aptly responds to the needs of my extremely delicate constitution, creating a space for my artistic activities, of which it is an inseparable part.

Your works explore the iconography of vulnerability and bodily diversity. How do you approach historical representations of women's bodies in art? Do your activities carry a critical dimension in relation to predominant narratives?

In my practice, I focus on several aspects. When engaging in a dialogue with historical representations of women's bodies, I primarily study their self-representations. In other words, I trace how the female body has been historically depicted and understood by women artists themselves. I am interested in both textual and visual forms of self-representation. For example, I analyse the images of the earliest known

female illuminators, such as Claricia, a German miniaturist active at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who included her self-portrait in the psalter she was transcribing; I also conduct research into mediaeval manuscripts and study the writings of some of the first women authors — *The Gertrude Psalter* (1078-1086) by Gertrude of Poland (c. 1025-1108), *The Lais and Fables* by Marie de France (1160-1215) of the late twelfth century, the earliest feminist writings of Christine de Pizan (1364-1431) – *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* (1405), *The Revelations* (c. 1340-1373) of Saint Birgitta of Sweden (1304-1373) and *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c. 1440) attributed to the English mystic Margary Kempe (1373-1438). Such religious, mystical, and courtly texts are filled with emotionality and sensuality. They are corporeal and affective. The same is true of the imagery. The miniature self-portrait of Claricia, created over 800 years ago, is one of my favourite mediaeval images. At the time she painted it, Claricia was a young artist, probably a student at the Abbey of St. Ulrich and Afra in Augsburg, where, together with other women-scribes, she copied psalters. In the miniature she created, Claricia depicted herself as a girl wearing a secular dress, swinging from an arc of the letter Q— the initial that opens *Psalm 51*. This psalm is a lament, a plea for mercy and for cleansing from sin. Meanwhile, Claricia, who signed her portrait with her own name recorded in capital letters above her outstretched arms, swings between the verses of the psalm with a slight smile. Her figure is, on one hand, materially inscribed into the text as the tail of the letter Q— her body, or rather its image, becomes the text itself — and on the other hand, it flits between the signs. She is free and dynamic. The image emanates joy, which I see in both the very act of creation, in effortless, intelligent artistic decisions, and in the breaking away from the convention of presenting the female body as static and modest, restrained in its poses and gestures in accordance with mediaeval social orders. For centuries, to strengthen their agency, women worked out their own ways of functioning within a world shaped by men. Creative work was one of the few areas of freedom they could cultivate and celebrate within the monasteries.

For this reason, in my own work, I return to these historical, often overlooked self-representations of female corporeality which, in my view, are fundamental in the process of transgressing visual and socialisation canons. These artists teach me the courage in making key creative decisions, building artistic strategies while engaging with crucial issues and developing modes of representation that go beyond what is considered well-established and socially accepted. My field of research and artistic practice centres on the representation of the so-called non-normative body, often vulnerable or ill, situated in opposition to the dominant narratives of beauty, health, and physical ability. My work is therefore more polemical and deconstructive than purely critical. I do not fight against the canons, but challenge the dominant and one-dimensional approach to how a woman's body is perceived, to transgress and expand it, considering diverse ways of experiencing, understanding, and representing corporeality and its agency. My photographs, performances, and drawings explore the body overloaded in the personal sphere — for example, emotionally suspended. I work with various groups of people, including persons living with chronic illnesses. I explore the diversity of bodily conditions and approaches to them. At the heart of my practice are questions about how to depict these experiences while avoiding clichés, myths and emotional blackmail; how to move beyond stereotypical representations of illness which — by reproducing cultural templates — art often places in medical, religious, battlefield, therapeutic, or romantic contexts (without, of course, diminishing the significance of these frameworks). Therefore, the categories of vulnerability, as well as soothing, consolation, frailty, and finally joy, which is rarely associated with health crises, have become particularly close to me. In Polish, the term *bezbronność* (vulnerability) rarely appears in everyday communication. And yet vulnerability can mark the relationship of the body — or more broadly, the subject — with its surroundings, its place within a network of social relations: dependencies, power dynamics, precarity, pressures of subordination, as well as the degree of ability, capacity and agency.

How is the concept of the body perceived in the United Kingdom, where you have been based for years, compared to the perception and depiction of the body by Polish artists?

I am not a fan of direct comparisons. I think that understanding various approaches usually requires contextualising the issue under

examination. However, I observe that in a holistic perspective, the ways of representing corporeality in Poland and in England are pretty similar, reflecting global, social, cultural and political changes that lie at the core of contemporary debates. In both countries, certain approaches broadly understood come to the forefront of corporeal representations: ecocentrism as an opposition to anthropocentrism (though this is a debatable issue), questions of race, class, and gender, decolonisation, women's art, queer art, and art created by artists with disabilities. Yet, upon closer inspection, one can notice differences in the intensity and visibility of these representations, as well as in their nuanced treatment depending on the specificity of place or history. In the United Kingdom, historical collections are systematically reviewed to acknowledge the presence of previously overlooked self-representations of women's bodies. For example, in the past two years, Tate Britain has radically rearranged its permanent display to include works by women artists dating back to the sixteenth century. On entering the Gallery, one immediately sees the scale of this phenomenon, namely, the abundance of paintings by women which had remained hidden in storage for decades. In May 2024 the Gallery also opened a temporary exhibition curated by Tabitha Barber and Tim Batchelor — *Now You See Us: Women Artists in Britain 1520–1920*. It traced in detail four centuries of changes in women's art, featuring (self)portraits by artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Angelica Kauffman, Julia Margaret Cameron and Gwen John. Slightly earlier, the Gallery also exhibited the monumental *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990* — a show collectively put together by five curators, exploring two decades of connections between women's art and feminist movements across the UK. Corporeality was presented there at the intersection of documentation of everyday life, sexuality, race, class and social inequalities, bringing to light the crucial issue of the private–political entanglement. This is only one among many examples of a radical shift in perspective, recognition and response to gaps in knowledge.

Moreover, contemporary British art, more so than Polish art, focuses on critiquing colonial narratives. It is a very intense reckoning, incorporating into the artistic discourse the history of representations of bodies that would not have fitted within Eurocentric, white frameworks of art history 30–40 years ago. At the exhibition *Women in Revolt!*, the documentation of the activities of members of the British Black Arts Movement — a radical political-artistic movement initiated in 1980 — played a crucial role. The works of these artists did not depict the female body in a uniform manner or aesthetic, but rather in the context of experiences of racism and discrimination. The BBAM also leads me to the work of another member of this movement, Keith Piper. In 2020, facing criticism and following the recommendations of its ethics committee, Tate Britain closed a former restaurant, decorated entirely with a mural featuring racially sensitive content. The mural had been created in 1926 by Rex Whistler (1905–1944). It's entitled *The Expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats*. The committee deemed the mural offensive due to its insulting portrayals of Black and Chinese people whom Whistler depicted in a stereotypical, objectifying, and degrading manner. Keith Piper defended the mural, emphasising the importance of studying historical artefacts in order to understand history better. He was commissioned by Tate Britain to create a piece in response to Whistler's mural. Piper's 20-minute video, presented in the reopened restaurant in 2022, stages a fictional interrogation of Whistler by an equally fictional academic, Professor Shepherd. It reveals the circumstances of the mural's creation and its entanglement within the social and artistic conditions prevailing a century ago, which influenced the oppressive and dehumanising ways of representing non-white bodies. This visual, critical working through traumas of colonial archives alongside the portrayal of Black diasporas and a focus on issues of cultural identity are central motifs in the practice of contemporary British artists such as Lubaina Himid, Ingrid Pollard, Claudette Johnson, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. To this thematic circle, I should also add the concept of post-race explored by the British-Nigerian sculptor Yinka Shonibare.

In Poland, there is a growing trend of critical revision of ethnographic collections, which fetishised and "exoticised" the artefacts gathered by white travellers and photographers. Additionally, alongside the presence of Polish-Jewish artists, the traditions of Polish-Roma art are currently becoming more visible. Much attention is also paid to rural experiences related to the body, folklore and family archives. In terms of the discourse on enslavement, in relation to the experiences of Poles themselves, or of those living within the shifting borders of the Polish state (since these two issues have not always historically

coincided), in the visual arts, it is less often linked to Poland's long history of feudalism or foreign partitions. Instead, as in many other Central and Eastern European countries' discussions on decolonisation and post-colonialism, in Poland, they tend to focus on reclaiming heritage and reviewing archives of art created during the period of censorship and oppression of the Communist regime, and confronting Western cultural supremacy. I am also artistically involved in this process, which makes this approach especially significant to me. I watch it taking many forms — from romanticising and mythologising art from the period of the People's Republic of Poland, to a more confrontational and revisionist angle. Speaking about representations of the female body in this context, what immediately stands out for me are the works of fascinating artists who were either unrecognised in their time or remained hidden in the shadows of art history — such as Hanna Orzechowska and her magnificent body drawings resembling landscapes; Wanda Czełkowska whose sculptural anatomical fragments refer stylistically to the Etruscan art and anthropomorphic forms; and Alina Ślesińska who in her pieces combined openwork corporeality with classical literary themes and outdoor settings. For many years, I also researched the archives of Barbara Kozłowska, a sculptor and performer active in Wrocław from the 1970s, who worked with text and used it as a medium to represent various states of the body and its memory. I have reconstructed her monumental sculptural project, which had remained unrealised at the time. It was based on a copy of a sketch I discovered during my research in the Social Life Documentation Department of the Ossoliński Archive in Wrocław. To complete this project, I collaborated with the artist's widower, Zbigniew Makarewicz, the Art Transparent Foundation, and RRArchitekci. This large-scale installation, located in Popowicki Park in Wrocław, requires an interactive approach from viewers, engaging their bodies and all their senses in a deeply immersive way.

The recognition and acknowledgement by art history and criticism of overlooked representations of bodies is, however, at its weakest when it comes to the creative work produced by artists with disabilities. The situation is somewhat better in the United Kingdom, thanks to organisations such as Shape Arts, Disability Arts Online, and Unlimited. They pursue an open, inclusive policy and — in accordance with their memoranda — develop strategies for visibility, advocacy, and the presence of artists with disabilities within the art field and in prominent galleries and museums, providing grants, organising exhibitions, forming partnerships with major cultural institutions, as well as offering consultations, courses, mentoring and research. The problem, though, is far more complex and encompasses many areas related to accessibility. To illustrate this aspect, I would like to mention only two issues that often get confused. It is not just about making culture accessible for people with disabilities as an audience — that is, the physical presence of bodies, participation in cultural events, the democratisation of institutional spaces, and access through architectural modifications, such as ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, or personal assistants — which is an absolutely crucial matter and an inalienable right to participate in cultural life and education. It is *also* about the visibility of the work of artists with diverse bodily conditions within the history of art, their presence at exhibitions, collections, catalogues, education, and art criticism. Currently, the work of artists with disabilities exists as an alternative circuit and is not included within art history. It remains largely unexplored, unrecognised, undocumented and invisible. Nominated for this year's Turner Prize, Nnena Kalu is the exception that proves the rule. A second example is the widespread perception of the art created by artists with disabilities solely in therapeutic categories. Yet, these practitioners work professionally, regardless of whether their educational background is formal or informal. The lack of reflection on and recognition of this fact is a form of ableism.

You often return to the theme of boundary experiences — illness, isolation, suffering. Is art a form of therapy for you, or rather a way of intellectually working through these states?

Let me start by saying that, in my vocabulary, I deliberately avoid the term *suffering*, which in European culture is deeply rooted in religious and Romantic thought. Similarly, I move away from a strictly therapeutic understanding of art, especially when it addresses the problematisation of bodily conditions. I treat the narrative of suffering and therapeutic approaches with due respect, yet in my own artistic practice, I try to de-psychologise them and not identify them solely

with the representation of an ill body, or with disability, isolation, or pain, in order to avoid valuation and martyrology. I believe that liminal and boundary experiences emerge at the intersection of various categories. For example, persons living with long-term health conditions or disabilities (states that are often mistakenly conflated) have, for centuries, existed outside the majority "normative" experience in civic, cultural, legal, social, educational and other spheres. They were, and often still are, intentionally shifted into unifying categories — medical or religious. In practice, this has meant depriving them of the right to joy, sexuality, pleasure, independence or romantic relationships, as well as civil rights, access to education and active participation in social life, because for centuries the image of illness or disability did not fit normative models of social functioning. The notion of suffering as something ennobling or redemptive is one of the most persistent myths which have also shaped the history of art, especially religious art. The suffering body of Christ, just like the body of a dying artist-genius, is a reference difficult to overlook in narratives *about* illness. In my work, however, I endeavour to explore the more complex and intersectional nature of bodily conditions. I focus on the experience of a body existing at the threshold of endurance and exclusion — working *through* issues and strategies of perseverance in chronic emotional and physical crises, and understanding illness as a form of everyday engagement, often connected with hacking the reality, encompassing both creativity, critical impasse and vulnerability, and, finally, the functioning of a body in relation to its surroundings, architecture, and nature. These processes often take the form of formative solutions developed by the body through chronic experiences, but they are also connected with immense compensatory labour carried out by persons who independently create ways of functioning in a world designed by and for mostly healthy, non-disabled, white men.

For example, I have been working for almost a decade on the *SelfSoothing Project* (2016-), collaborating with persons living with long-term haematological conditions. It involves individual workshops based on movement research in order to share coping methods, including dealing with chronic pain. With many years of experience living with various manifestations of pain, these individuals independently elaborate and develop personal strategies for using their domestic environment, allowing them to respond naturally to bodily crises lasting from a few minutes to several months, and recurring over the years in various situations, outside hospital settings. My series includes photographs documenting gestures and bodily positions of the project's participants, as well as my own reconstructions of the methods I developed and those I learned from others.

At this point, I would like to draw attention to an aspect that is of particular importance to me. When speaking about art in the context of endurance or survival strategies during crises — which, in the case of chronic conditions, is a permanent experience — I refer to the concept of *affirmative ethics* proposed by the Italian-Dutch posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti. Affirmative ethics arises from a sense of responsibility for and towards the other. What drew my particular attention in Braidotti's concept is the place given to individual pain and trauma, and the ways in which new forms of resistance to negativity can be created from these experiences. She recognises the profound significance of collective ways of experiencing trauma — for example, through memory and practice of compassion, which can shift the weight of individual pain from the private sphere to the public, creating a communal transformative experience that neutralises negativity. Encountering the other does not eliminate pain, because the aim is not to silence or deny it. Affirmative ethics focuses instead on finding ways of experiencing pain that would allow this necessary experience to be processed through forming a network of relations, building empathy, and fostering shared responsibility. So, when working, I think of practising such a perspective towards the liminal and boundary experience, because I am more interested in life than in death. This is why I see profound value in collective work, as in the case of the *(Self)Soothing Project*, and in the human–nature relationship, combining a conceptual approach with the materiality of the body and its environment.

What does Affective Artistic Practice mean to you? How do you understand it? How does it influence your art and the way you work and communicate with your audiences?

Affective Artistic Practice is my open-ended project situated at the intersection of affirmative ethics and creative working methods. I build

its main objectives around developing a new perspective on models of practising art by artists who live day-to-day with "non-normative" bodily conditions. Therefore, AAP applies to both the work of a body and working with a body, in the context of individual creative processes as well as in collaboration with other artists, volunteers, curators, researchers or art institutions. It aims to foster shared responsibility and the culture of communal care.

The very concept of affect in relation to art seems fundamental to me. Following Braidotti, I understand affect as an intense force that migrates between bodies and acts upon them. It is a bodily knowledge that cannot be seen but can be felt, and which evokes reactions. An affect is a flow, an influence, and being influenced. Deleuze and Guattari, to whom Braidotti refers, also situated affect within creative processes and in the ways that artwork can impact its audience. Thus, I became interested in both — the context of motives of creation and modes of experiencing art, as well as in relation to the individual bodily experiences of an artist — for example, the intensity of pain, fatigue, weakness or breathing frequency — which can fundamentally determine the pace, scale, form or regularity of creative work, and consequently also affect the quality and trajectory of artists' functioning within the art sector.

In other words, AAP focuses on recognising the needs and modes of functioning of bodies affected by various life circumstances during artistic practice, collaboration with art institutions, and discourse concerning safety, working conditions and artists' well-being. It seeks answers to critical questions about the forms and possibilities of transforming physical and psychological experiences — such as pain, anxiety, isolation or trauma (a process that Braidotti would describe as the transformation of negativity) — in ways that could expand the categories of art-making and activity for artists living with long-term conditions, both in practice and in art history. Is it possible to change the dominant narrative on creation in a state of long-term bodily crisis? Could it be positioned outside the categories of therapy, inspiration, mission, martyrdom, romanticisation or heroisation of the work of artists living with long-term health conditions? Is it possible to make such a change in art institutional practices, so that they recognise and accommodate bodily diversity, creating supportive policies that respect individual needs during collaboration? How might such a logic shift contribute to the emancipation of artists whose position is precarious or marginalised due to bodily conditions? Are the art world and academia ready for such a proposal?

I have developed many AAP tools and methods that I apply to my own practice, rhythms and creative techniques, and to collaboration with other artists and institutions. On the micro level, these methods are linked to my responsiveness to my own body's needs — for example, taking breaks during work, maintaining an appropriate ambient temperature or working at specific hours. On the macro level, I engage in interactions – for instance, I create a glossary to support my communication with others, especially institutions, as I have noticed a significant gap in the availability of tools that they could use to speak *about* diverse bodily conditions, particularly in the context of collaboration with artists. On a daily basis, I also work with an Access Rider. It is a simple and confidential document in which, prior to starting a collaboration with an art institution, I explain my access needs. This allows us to jointly consider the most suitable conditions the institution can provide for my practice.

AAP is therefore not a therapeutic or overly optimistic project, nor is it about eliminating negative categories, denying illness, or serving as an antithesis to pain. On the contrary, it is both a reflection on and a practice of individual and collective strategies to develop tools that support me, as an artist, in creating work and navigating the art field. Chronic bodily conditions exclude a significant number of persons from the art world, which remains highly competitive and dominated by a privileged group — usually white, non-disabled, and fully available practitioners. The reality of active participation and visibility in the art world is highly demanding, even for many non-disabled artists. Working in the art sector requires constant alertness, a relentless pace, and the continual demonstration and proof of one's talent, diligence, and value. Artists operate under pressure to be creative, productive, successful, competitive, present and visible, all of which often entails profound self-exploitation. Additionally, the precarious nature of artistic work generates a persistent sense of threat, a state of permanent economic instability, continuous job-seeking, repeated funding application submissions, a life governed by deadlines and grants

and the constant blurring of boundaries between work and life. For an artist living with a long-term health condition, this challenge is even more exhausting and often accompanied by experiences of rejection and loss due to operating outside of categories of "normativity" and the broad spectrum of opportunities designed primarily for fully-committed and non-disabled practitioners. It also requires enormous compensatory effort in response to uncompromising, exclusionary institutional policies that produce asymmetrical power relations. Yet, living with illness or disability is just one of many possible existential experiences. Within professional life, it demands the development of long-term, systemic strategies based on flexibility and (self-)regulation of creative practice, enabling the artist to make an active contribution to the cultural field. That is why institutions play such a crucial role in this relationship – they can participate in shaping models of communal solidarity that support non-exploitative forms of collaboration with artists, and take action aimed at strengthening their visibility in the art field, without moving the full responsibility solely onto the creators themselves. AAP is precisely about mapping and fostering such positive experiences.

Tell us about your work: its rhythm, creative process. Do you work in cycles? And which media do you use for your artistic expression?

The rhythms of my work are dictated to a large extent by the rhythms of my body. I work regularly, usually around eight hours a day, with breaks. However, there are periods when I cannot work at all, or when my body allows me only about twenty minutes of daily activity. I follow a routine and a day structure centred around getting up early. I have found that my most effective sessions tend to be in the morning, whether I work in bed, in the studio, during residencies, field research, study stays, or on-site projects. These issues may seem technical, but they profoundly shape and determine my practice.

In terms of the ways, methods, and methodology of my work, I most often begin with a detail — an observation, a reading, sometimes a single letter, an event, an object or an element of a landscape whose history, shape, sound or content resonates deeply within me and stirs my imagination. I want to respond to its presence or tell its story to learn more about the world and about myself. So, to create, I must find a sense of being bound to the story I would like to tell. The entire process that follows, is a search for the optimal narrative form, a nomadic weaving of a story — working with matter, text, photography, installation, drawing, movement and research at the intersections of various disciplines: history, art, literature, sometimes geology, sometimes medicine, at other times language. I greatly enjoy this hypertextual interlacing of theoretical and practical knowledge, as it is vital for me to be able to draw with words what I am working on in the studio or outdoors, to situate it within contexts, and to approach my work linguistically as well. For this reason, writing remains an essential part of my practice.

Studio work is, for me, profoundly meditative. Whether I am drawing, working with a camera or with text, my primary medium is my body. Field projects follow a slightly different pulse, because — beyond my bodily conditions — I also take into account factors such as weather or terrain — the body of nature. Collaborative work, in turn, opens up yet another dimension when the creative process unfurls not only my own corporeality but also the bodily conditions of other persons I encounter.

I like to work slowly — to allow time for reconnaissance, for looking, reading, taking notes, setting up the camera, making mistakes and either correcting them or not; to leave room for chance, for observing the body and its surroundings, for the search for a movement, a gesture, a position. To rest while working. I often work in series. I really value the opportunity to engage in long-term cycles that intertwine with other projects. I have many ongoing works, such as the *(Self)Soothing Project*, which I have run since 2016, and *Holding Patterns*, since 2018. Both address ways of soothing in physical and emotional crises, and involve collaboration with others. Therefore, each encounter, conversation or workshop brings new elements and further approaches to understanding and experiencing the body. My longest project, *Habitats*, has run since 2007. It has a semi-documentary character and traces my own nomadism through my settlements and moves between cities, countries, languages and cultures. I think it will end when I end.

Your work draws on anthropology, literature and humanistic medicine. How does this interdisciplinarity influence your creative process? Does collaborating with scholars and researchers shift your understanding of the boundaries of art, especially considering that you are also an art historian yourself?

I love working across disciplines. I believe the most interesting phenomena in art, science, and technology emerge precisely at the boundaries of disciplines — in the gaps, at the intersections of knowledge from different areas. While working, I see links to my research everywhere, and I naturally explore fields that are often new to me, such as geology, medicine or social sciences. These individual elements cross-pollinate, nourish one another, start to resonate and flourish, profoundly shaping the form, character and context of my work. Does this change my understanding of the boundaries of art? I believe art has no formal, technical or methodological boundaries — only ethical ones.

I am currently working on a photographic and drawing series related to the works of Marie de France (1160–1215), recognised as the first British female author. Very little is known about her, except that she was born in French Brittany during a period influenced by the Norman conquest (1066). After arriving in England, she settled at an unknown court, and her works reached King Henry II, to whom they were dedicated. She translated Aesop's fables into English and wrote in Old French, probably in the Anglo-Norman variant, and her *The Lais* and *The Fables* were a significant influence on the development of later heroic literature and courtly romance.

I first came across Marie during my research into the literature and art of mediaeval female artists, which I have been pursuing for several years. In 2024, I received an artistic residency at Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, located on the south coast of England. While observing the coastline, I became intrigued by how its shape has changed since Marie de France's time. Where did her ship land? Was it here, or perhaps in Cornwall, from where she travelled towards Wales? What landscape did she see as she sailed? What objects did she use? Did she incorporate them in her stories which are often set near the English coast? Attempting to reconstruct both the landscapes of Marie's time and those described in her fables, I collaborated with curators of mediaeval archives and collections at the Hastings Museum, as well as at the museums in Bexhill and Winchelsea. I examined artefacts used by local inhabitants during her times — ceramics, pottery and vessels, household objects, fragments of shoes and clothing, and architectural elements. I walked many miles along the shore, taking aerial photographs of the coastline terrain, which I arranged alongside the earliest, sometimes fantastical Anglo-Saxon maps, such as the twelfth-century map of England from Matthew Paris's manuscript in the British Library Royal Collection. I studied the histories of major Cinque ports, sunken towns and islands.

In one of the mediaeval churches in Hastings, during an incidental conversation with a deacon intrigued by my project, I was taken up to the bell tower, likely built using materials from the dismantled church, the earliest on the site, later rebuilt. While cleaning, he noticed a small ship carved into one of the stones. This simple drawing became a visual guide for my project. Through collaboration with archaeologists, I also came across other graffiti in the church at Winchelsea, markings left by witches and ship drawings carved by relatives of sailors who never returned from their voyages. A few weeks later, I had the opportunity to ask several questions about Dame Marie at a book launch with the novelist Lauren Groff, who had just published a fictional book about her.

Based on these materials, I am now creating visual narratives in which text meets image, photography meets drawing, the body meets landscape, and the present meets history. I mentioned this example to illustrate how interdisciplinarity shapes not only the creative process itself but also the contexts of my works and their narrative form. I believe that building this hypertextual, nomadic method of creation — which extends beyond the traditional studio practice — is also nourished by my art-historical experience. Combining artistic practice with art history is an essential methodological tool for me, with a tangible impact on democratising, opening up and re-examining historical artefacts, thereby creating new interpretations and expanding access to knowledge. At the same time, I feel that despite my thorough archival research, my creative process also nears *serendipity* — happy coincidences and accidental discoveries that extraordinarily enrich each of my projects and my practice.

What role does the theme of ecology, the exploration of the Earth, its regeneration and destruction play in your artistic practice?

The condition of the Earth is inseparable from the condition of the body. They constitute an integral whole. I perceive the power of the connections between these beings, both on an elemental and on an existential level, their simultaneous reciprocity and interdependence. That is why the earth-body relationships – the body of the Earth, landscapes of the body – or reconstructions of past landscapes of the Earth appear in many ways in my work — conceptually, metaphorically, materially and intermedially. I understand ecology as a science, a practice and a form of care and responsibility for both the body and the environment. By engaging with these perspectives, in my projects, I analyse bonds between human beings and their surroundings, but also the structures that either unite or separate these spheres.

For example, over the past decade, my work has focused on devising visual strategies of regeneration for devastated environments, visualising the phenomenon of migration of geo-historical artefacts and searching for connections between the human body and the earth materials. What interests me is whether there are limits to the exploitation of natural resources. What are the consequences of human interference with the environment — ecological, social, but also symbolic? What is the function of art in the renewal, reconstruction, soothing and regeneration of nature? Can it activate empathy? And what is my role as an artist in this process?

In the series *Diagnoses and Reconstructions* (2018 and 2025), I sought to build visual methods of soothing landscapes exploited by the mining industry in northern England. Working for several weeks in Northumberland Park, in the Highgreen Valley, where remnants of nineteenth-century excavations remain, I used my own body to recreate missing parts of the landscape — plants, trees, roots and other elements of nature that had dried up or died as a result of mining activities. I held and supported broken branches on my back, used my arms and legs to reconstruct scorched sections of trees, filled cavities in the ground with my body and repeated the rhythms of still-standing yet lifeless trunks. I was drawn to the idea of working *towards* nature. During micro-performances lasting only a few dozen seconds, I attempted to create a form of encounter between the ailing human body and the ailing body of the Earth, proposing a potential narrative of respite for both beings. I aimed to present the landscape as a palimpsest — a site where memory, pain and potential for renewal intersect. My work primarily involved observing the natural surroundings, listening to the landscape, studying its materiality and developing performative and somatic practices in response to its complex history. The black-and-white photographic series that emerged from this process records these intimate acts.

Working with the body in relation to the environment is, for me, a form of embodied thinking. It provides me with tools for analysing and reflecting on the condition of my own body and the state of nature of which it is a part. It is thus a source of knowledge — both acquired, studied knowledge about humans and nature, anatomical, ecological, biological — as well as tacit knowledge, often haptic and practical, gained through seeking ways of interacting with the environment, adapting my bodily conditions to the rhythms of nature, the intensity of phenomena, wind, rain, sun, the scale of space, the quality of nourishment, the weight, fragility and textures of natural artefacts — branches, grasses, roots, stones, peat, water...

I understand the narratives of nature as processes of decay and reconstruction, both in terms of the matter and the language. I would compare them to a *text* subject to inscription, erasure and subsequent regeneration. Although nature has the potential for self-recovery, this potential is often suppressed by human interventions. This is why in my projects, the motif of recording space, mapping, reconstructing past landscapes of the earth's body, and documenting present ones, appears repeatedly, capturing its changes. I study both the topography of places and the organic topography, treating them as points of notation for experiences and history. I develop forms of both alternative and archival cartography, revealing the mutability of the landscape, its beauty and fractures, scars and traces of transformation.

An example of this approach is my project *The Other Shore* (2024), carried out in the landscapes of the Tees Valley, devastated by the mining industry. The project had been commissioned by the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art. While working on it, I collaborated with geologist Dr Jens Holtvoeth from the School

of Health and Life Sciences at Teesside University, and with cartography researcher Chris Corbett from the Dorman Museum in Middlesbrough.

The starting point for this project was the collection of the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art. There I came across a self-portrait by Gwen John (1876–1939), a Welsh artist whose work I had already studied before and to whom I felt a particular affinity, also because we both graduated from the same Slade School of Fine Art in London, and both shared the experience of being a migrant artist: she in France, I in England. Her modest pen sketch pointed my work in an important direction; it made me reflect on how I might portray my body in relation to the landscape in ways other than those offered by well-known, traditional approaches. How else could corporeality be depicted, steering away from standard conventions, forms or methods of portraying the body *against* the background of nature, but rather as nature *itself*? What is, or what might a self-portrait become?

I attempted to move away from a self-portrait as an image, broadening its understanding as a trace of life. My narrative, thus, took the form of a self-portrait from within the matter at the cellular level. It became an isotropic landscape, based on the uniformity of microstructures. On the one hand, structures of the soil — minerals and salts from the Permian period, sourced from local Polish and British mines of glauconite and potash; on the other hand, the medicines derived from the elements contained in these minerals – potassium, magnesium, iron and sodium – which in turn have become a key part of my body, shaping my daily functioning. These microscopic images, connecting past and present, corresponded organically on a visual level with another layer of the project — the structures of the Tees Valley terrain. I spent many days roaming alongside the River Tees, examining its banks and courses, photographing its body and environment at both micro- and macro-scales, capturing the movements and reflections of the water. I also registered its meanders from a bird's-eye view using a drone, creating hundreds of aerial photographs and composing them into a coherent image of a larger area, which I could then compare with historical maps to reveal changes in its body. Thus, my project spanned nearly 400 years — from the time when the therapeutic properties of the River Tees' waters were first recognised, through exploitative industrial policies, to the contemporary revitalisation of the devastated landscapes.

The body and nature are one. This common identity is particularly evident in the history of women's culture and art. One could mention, for instance, mythological figures, such as nymphs, primal mothers, the Greek Gaia, or the Bolivian and Peruvian Pachamama, whose bodies symbolised nature, its rhythms, cycles, fertility and capacity for regeneration and creation, but also for destruction. Furthermore, in folk tradition, women have consistently played the role of the guardians of nature, serving as herbalists, whisperers, wise women, healers and experts in medicinal knowledge and the properties of plants – practices that continue to this day in the eastern Polish region where I come from. In contemporary contexts, ecofeminism emphasises the fact that a female body, like nature, is subject to control, exploitation and violence within the patriarchal system, and that both these bodies are treated as "resources to be used".

In this light, ecology — including the ecology of the body and of art — becomes not only a metaphor but also a bridge to reflection and action in support of environmental protection and resistance to exploitative industrial, energy, urban and extractive policies on both micro- and macro-scales. In my work, I focus on reading the palimpsestic narratives of these two overburdened and overstimulated bodies — the human body and the body of the planet — narratives of their ecosystems, exposed both to constant pressure and to climatic inertia. Art has this remarkable and empowering capacity to zoom in on and illuminate the most pressing issues and experiences.

At this point, I would like to draw attention to another aspect of how I understand ecology in art. Namely, I see it as a practice. To be more precise, I understand the creation of art also as a form of ecological practice that has an impact on the climatic future. In other words, the methods, means, and media I choose for my projects matter to me. It would be difficult for me to work with toxic or non-recycled materials. I also take a relatively prudent approach to materials and often create ephemeral or temporary works. They are based on installations, ephemeral texts, performative actions and natural materials such as threads or reused sterile papers from medical procedures. This approach aligns my practice closer to the concept of

sustainable art – art that does not burden the environment. One of such works is the performance *Aporia & Epiphany*, which I have been presenting since 2019. It stems from creating a web of connections among participants by linking them with a thread, which I unravel from my sleeve and pass to the next persons, while whispering fragments of a story into their ear. Upon receiving the thread, participants physically hold it, forming a micro-model of a horizontally networked social structure. In this performance, I always use the same woollen thread, which I wind back into a ball after each action to knit a sleeve for the next event. In a sense, this is a recycling practice: it uses a single piece of material touched by different people at different times and in various parts of Europe; *and*, like any reclaimed material, it carries the memory of these layered, invisible touches. It becomes another palimpsest.

How do you reflect on and evaluate your art and creative practice?

I see my work as a process that unfolds through both the body and language. My approach to art is organic: I create by merging and recording everyday life experiences with critical reflection. Sometimes the narrative grows out of me, as in the performances *Aporia & Epiphany* (2019-present), *Biometry* (2017) or the *Infusive Drawings* (2017-present) series. At other times, I become an extension of the text, as in the *Zone Out* (2022) or *(Self)Soothing Project* series, which embody the narratives of others, or as in work with nature when I bring my body close to the body of the natural world — not in a gesture of control, but of empathy, recording and memory of the places. For me, recording is a form of bodily trace — it is intertwined with the structure of the body which communicates even when silent. For this reason, I also use photographic tools, as photography is for me a form of notation. The classical form of storytelling and the unambiguity of the message are immensely appealing, yet I am far more fascinated with cracks, discontinuities and the spaces between meanings.

My art is seeking a visual form for that which lies at the edge of articulation — for boundary experiences, vulnerability, susceptibility and the diversity of bodily conditions. It is also a gesture of my resistance, an act of *quiet activism* against the exclusions, silences and erasures that have historically removed the presence, creativity, and work of women from the history of art and culture.

I do not judge my art. I listen to it. I accompany it. From it, I learn patience and attentiveness. Often, it is my art that speaks to me first.

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Małgorzata Dawidek, VARC, Highgreen 2025.
Image: Courtesy of the artist's archive.

Małgorzata Dawidek

Małgorzata Dawidek is a Polish visual artist and researcher. She graduated in Painting (2001) and Art Theory and Criticism (2002) from the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań, Poland. She also studied Photography in Milota Havránková's studio at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, Slovakia (2000). She holds PhDs in Art History from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (2009) and in Fine Art Media from UCL Slade School of Fine Art (2024).

Dawidek has developed her multimedia artistic practice from a cross-fertilisation of disciplines, including literature, anthropology, archaeology, and selected aspects of philosophy and humanistic medicine. Based on historical and archival research and studies of nature, she creates drawings, photographs, installations, performances and textual projects. Her work addresses issues of identity and the bodily-emotional condition by analysing the narratives, politics, and imaginaries of the human body, as well as the ethics and aesthetics of representation of vulnerability in order to develop visual forms of soothing, tenderness, care and thriving. The artist also works through her own concepts of *bodygraphy* and *affective artistic practice*, reinterpreting the canons of representation of the body and borderline experiences.

Dawidek's artistic works have been presented in more than one hundred solo and group exhibitions in Poland, Slovakia, Germany, Portugal, England, Scotland, Iran, India, and the United States. She has collaborated with international art and research institutions, including Wrocław Contemporary Museum, Charles University in Prague, the University of Glasgow, and the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art. She has also participated in artistic residencies at The Art House (Wakefield, 2014), Centrala (Birmingham, 2015), VARC (Highgreen, 2018 and 2025), and Hastings Museum and Art Gallery (Hastings, 2024) in the United Kingdom, as well as at Design Museum (Holon, Israel, 2020). As an academic lecturer, Dawidek has taught Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań and Art and Health at UCL Slade School of Fine Art. She is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Pieces of Poetry* (2012) and the monumental monograph *History of Visual Text. Poland after 1967* (2012), awarded by the National Centre for Culture for the best PhD thesis in the field of cultural studies in Poland in 2010.

Dawidek is the recipient of scholarships from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation (2004-2005), the Young Poland Scholarship (2012), the Minister of Culture and National Heritage (2010, 2012, 2020), the British Federation of Women (2017-2019) and the Goethe-Institut (2025). Her work has been awarded the Signature Art Prize, Artellite, Somerset House/London (2020); the Doctoral School Award, University College London (2022); the Hastings Open Art Prize, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery (2022); and the Coherence Foundation Prize, Bydgoszcz (2023).

Dawidek's work is held in public collections including the Museum of Modern Art in Hünfeld/Germany; Aveiro City Museum, Portugal; King's College Hospital Art Collection, London/England; The Art House Wakefield/England; Wrocław Contemporary Museum, Poland; and the Special Collection of the LiBerature Reading Room at the Jagiellonian University Library in Kraków/Poland, among others.

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Van Rij Gallery, Kraków
www.galeria-rij.com
biuro@galeria-rij.com

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