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Master's Thesis

Re-Enchanting the World. Curatorial Approaches to Magical Realism

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Abstract English:

This thesis investigates Magical Realism beyond its genre characteristics as an epistemological mode. It examines how the conceptual and aesthetic principles of this literary and artistic genre can be translated into contemporary exhibition practice. Tracing its historical foundations alongside its recent resurgence in artistic and popular culture, the study explores how curating can cultivate conditions and encounters that challenge and expand established notions of reality. Through the analysis of selected exhibitions, the research considers how spatial design, narrative construction, and interpretative frameworks can embody magical realist logics. The study situates these practices within broader debates on contemporary curatorial strategies and on Magical Realism as a potential form of resistance, and argues that this approach can open curatorial spaces for alternative horizons of experience and knowledge production. Methodologically, the project combines exhibition analysis with discourse analysis of relevant literature and interviews with cultural practitioners working at this intersection.

Abstract Deutsch:

Diese Arbeit untersucht Magischen Realismus über seine formale Charakteristika hinaus als epistemologische Methode und beleuchtet, wie die konzeptuellen und ästhetischen Prinzipien dieses literarischen und künstlerischen Genres in zeitgenössische Ausstellungspraxis übertragen werden können. Ausgehend von seinen historischen Grundlagen sowie seiner jüngeren Wiederbelebung in Kunst- und Populärkultur wird untersucht, wie kuratorische Strategien Bedingungen und Begegnungen schaffen können, die etablierte Vorstellungen von Realität hinterfragen und erweitern. Anhand der Analyse ausgewählter Ausstellungen wird untersucht, inwiefern räumliche Gestaltung, narrative Strukturierung und interpretative Rahmungen magisch-realistische Logiken verkörpern können. Die Arbeit verortet diese Praktiken innerhalb aktueller Debatten zu zeitgenössischen kuratorischen Strategien sowie zum Magischen Realismus als potenzieller Form des Widerstands und argumentiert, dass dieser Ansatz kuratorische Räume für alternative Erfahrungs- und Wissenshorizonte eröffnen kann. Methodisch verbindet das Projekt Ausstellungsanalysen mit einer Diskursanalyse einschlägiger Fachliteratur sowie Interviews mit Kulturschaffenden, die an dieser Schnittstelle tätig sind.

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1 Introduction: Beyond the Visible

„Realism can no longer express or account for the absurd reality of the world we live in - a world which has the capability of destroying itself at any moment.“¹

The resurgence of interest in magic, spirituality, and alternative ways of knowledge has recently entered mainstream culture. From fine arts to fashion, medical practices to consumer culture, we are surrounded by symbols, rituals, and narratives that draw on mystical or spiritual traditions. Contemporary art practice is similarly returning to magical elements and epistemologies on a large scale. Within this context, this thesis engages with Magical Realism in order to contextualize these trends and reflect on them in their historical complexity. With a main focus on fine arts, Magical Realism will be considered in literature, another of its most widely influential forms. Historically, these two fields have been closely intertwined, continuously shaping and informing one another. Viewing Magical Realism as a category that transcends genre will not be understood as an obstacle, but as a productive space of possibility. This ability to move between genres, realities, and epistemologies becomes the starting point for thinking about Magical Realism not only as a style, but as a way of understanding and relating to the world. Tracing its political roots, empowering quality and resistive force, Magical Realism will be reflected here as an epistemological mode - as a way of knowledge production, that allows multiple realities to coexist without hierarchy. From this perspective, curatorial approaches will be explored, to find ways to translate these methods into exhibition practice. Further situated in contemporary discourse, the thesis asks how curatorial practice might strengthen the visitor's agency and scrutiny. If Magical Realism invites us to perceive the world as layered, then a curatorial practice informed by it might also remind audiences of their own capacity to act within it.

Structurally, the thesis is divided into three parts. The first section examines Magical Realism within the field of fine arts. Starting from its emergence in the early twentieth century, the chapter traces the development of Magical Realism from its historical origins to contemporary artistic practices. In consideration of its ambiguous position within art history, stemming from its lack of clearly structured definitions, the analysis focuses on identifying recurring aesthetic, conceptual, and epistemological characteristics that can serve as points of reference. By outlining key features of early magic realist works, the chapter then considers how contemporary artistic practices engage with, transform, or depart from these canonical formulations. The subsequent chapter enters the realms of literature. Since this analysis is conducted from an art-historical perspective, central theorists of the literary field are consulted here, whose work offers constructive insights to navigate this vast field. In order to expand the fine arts magical

¹ Wendy B. FARIS, *Ordinary Enchantments. Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Nashville 2004, p. 88.

realist horizon, this chapter seeks to collect narrative strategies, formal devices, and modes of world-making characteristics of the literary genre. These methodologies are examined not for their content alone, but also for their potential transferability to other cultural practices. Together with the findings from art history and contemporary fine arts, this chapter establishes a conceptual foundation for further exploration of Magical Realism beyond disciplinary boundaries. Chapter 1.3 situates these findings within a contemporary context, against the backdrop of current social, ecological, and cultural challenges. This chapter aims to position Magical Realism within ongoing critical discourse, reflecting on its renewed relevance in contemporary cultural production. These discourse-analytical approaches are extended in the final chapter of the first section, through the qualitative exhibition analysis of the exhibition *Geister* at Kunstmuseum Basel, which will serve as a case study. This section seeks to link the theoretical discourses to curatorial practice. Utilizing the strategy *Narrative - Strukturen - Widersprüche* (narratives - structures - contradictions), the analysis examines narrative and spatial strategies employed within the exhibition, while reading them in the framework of their structural conditions and power relations.²

The second part of the thesis turns explicitly toward curatorial approaches to Magical Realism. By bringing theory and praxis together, this section develops and reflects upon a set of scientific, philosophical, and scholarly concepts through which Magical Realism may be articulated in curatorial practice. These notions are underscored by concrete artistic and curatorial projects, that serve as influential examples. Rather than proposing a singular model, this concluding section explores multiple strategies and propositions that contribute to an expanded curatorial discourse surrounding Magical Realism in contemporary exhibition-making.

1.1 Visual Genealogies: The Emergence of Magical Realism in the Fine Arts

The term Magical Realism was originally coined by the German art historian Franz Roh in 1925, in his book *Nach Expressionismus. Magischer Realismus. Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (After-Expressionism. Magical Realism. Problems of the newest European painting).³ Roh's study originated from a turn in contemporary painting, which he perceived in the beginning of the 20th century. After years of the domination of expressionist aesthetics, he described a movement in painting that returned to a more realistic and figurative style. However, Roh emphasized from the outset of his writings, that this transition was not concise, but had multiple and diverse manifestations, that were subject to change in the future.⁴ Consequently, he frequently referred to this emerging genre as *Neue Malerei* (New Painting). This

² schnittpunkt. ausstellungstheorie und praxis, *Narrative - Strukturen - Widersprüche*. Ausstellungen einer kritischen Lektüre unterziehen, in: Luise REITSTÄTTER, Carla-Marinka SCHORR (Eds.), *Methoden der Ausstellungsanalyse*, Bielefeld 2025, p. 279-287.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German to English are by the author.

⁴ Franz ROH, *Nach-Expressionismus. Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei*, Leipzig 1925, p. 3.

already indicates the difficulties involved in formulating a precise definition of Magical Realism, which will be discussed in more detail shortly.

Roh's description of the genre was substantially focused on the depiction of objects. He argued, that after the transcendence of mimetic representation through movements such as Cubism and especially Expressionism, these depicted objects were becoming increasingly detailed and realistic. While the represented world appeared familiar and objects remained recognizable, upon closer inspection this world revealed an evocation of great wonder. Although the objects were identifiable up until the smallest detail, they retained an air of mystery.⁵ According to Roh, this phenomenon stemmed from the rediscovery of a fundamental artistic practice that had long been neglected, notably the radical questioning of the very existence of the object world itself. Through this thorough examination artists were able to uncover a deeper layer of reality, which Roh called the *Magie des Seins* (Magic of Being). Crucially, this approach enabled artists to rethink the given status quo, and in turn opened up a space for new world views and visions. Roh emphasized this point and its superiority over mere objectivity, arguing that objectivity alone would fail to radiate this magic, this uncanny feeling that was inherent in the seeming sobriety of the genre's best paintings.⁶ In this sense, Magical Realism was the depiction of the inner world on the basis of the existing outer world. After a period of strict mimesis in the 19th century, and the subsequent opening of the borders of painting through the expression of the artist's interiority, this new painting continued to rely on the emotional state, but articulated it through familiar looking objects. Thus, these artists created an object world that was highly similar to the „real“ one, but remained self-referential.⁷ Despite Roh's initially very open introduction to the genre, that emphasized its incompleteness and possibility for change, he subsequently composed a chart of binary distinctions between Magical Realism and Expressionism, to summarize the key characteristics of the genre. Beyond the detailed and representative depiction of objects, Roh highlighted the sobriety of the paintings, as well as their quiet and cool atmospheric quality. Furthermore, he noted an equal focus across all objects in the composition, wherein the background possessed the same clarity and visibility as the foreground. The surfaces of these works tended toward smoothness, characterized by thin layers of paint, and the absence of visible brushstrokes. Roh further articulated that the rhythmic quality of Expressionism turned into a static, strict, and sober object depiction. Examples of his observations can be found amongst others in paintings by Christian Schad, Georg Schrimpf, or Jeanne Mammen.

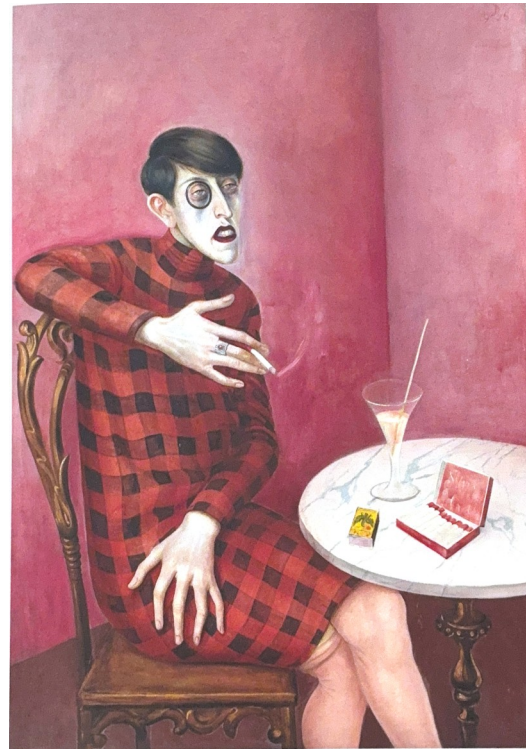
Otto Dix's portrait *Bildnis der Journalistin Sylvia von Harden* (image of the journalist Sylvia von Harden), painted with oil and tempera on wood in 1926, not only exemplifies many of Roh's listed qualities, but also points to the changing gender dynamics of the Weimar Republic, that

⁵ Franz ROH, *Nach-Expressionismus. Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei*, Leipzig 1925, p. 23-25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

shaped a new image of women, prominently known as *Die Neue Frau* (the new woman). The composition (Fig. 1) situates von Harden in the corner of a bar, set against a backdrop of muted, muffled pink walls that establish a shabby and slightly claustrophobic atmosphere. She is clad in a black and red plaid turtleneck dress, while her hair is styled in the quintessential „Bubikopf“, a short bob that became a hallmark of 1920s modernity, and further emphasizes the androgynous look of the character. Von Harden's facial expression conveys a disquieting ambiguity, oscillating between fatigue, boredom, and a defiant sassiness, while her vividly red painted lips are parted to reveal her teeth. Furthermore, Dix employed a distorted spatial logic. The subject's anatomical proportions are undeniably exaggerated. Von Harden's right arm is resting on the chair and appears diminutive in perspective, while her hands are rendered disproportionately large. Her legs are crossed beneath a small marble coffee table, where one of her fleshy pink stockings is slightly crumpled up, exposing the slightest sliver of skin. On the table in front of her, an open cigarette pack inscribed with her name lies centrally alongside a box of matchsticks and a conical glass containing her drink. Easily accessible to exchange her current cigarette with the following one, these objects additionally serve as signifiers of her profession and lifestyle, situating her within the intellectual, tobacco-laden milieu of the location. The journalist's complexion appears dull, in an almost grayish tone, that suggests the physical toll of heavy smoking, but also the grime of working in this profession in such a politically turbulent time. This pallor, combined with the monocle on her right eye, an accessoire traditionally associated with male characters, completes the portrait's subversive nature. Otto Dix is known as a painter who worked on depictions that embody the oftentimes cold and harsh reality of their time. His perception plays with an initially realistic impression that is disrupted upon closer inspection.



(Fig. 1) Otto Dix, *Bildnis der Journalistin Sylvia von Harden*, 1926, oil and tempera on wood, 89 x 121 cm.

Situated in the context of the turn of the century, this microscopic examination of objects related to a heightened interest in the occult in Central Europe, as well as to influential writings by artists like Giorgio de Chirico, or scholars like Sigmund Freud, whose theories about the uncanny were broadly discussed. Magical Realism reached its peak in the Weimar Republic between 1919 and 1933. After Germany's defeat in World War I, a great social and economic crisis followed. The German population faced a severe economical situation that led to excep-

tionally high inflation, and a rise of nationalism, which in turn caused increasing conflicts between right-wing and left-wing groups. Given this social context, the reversion towards a more realistic visual language appears as a comprehensible consequence. In this case, one that was able to express and portray the bitterness and coldness that came hand in hand with this situation, as well as with the accelerating technological development.⁸

In 1920 Expressionism was considered dead, but the following styles and artistic tendencies weren't particularly concise. Since no artist groups formed around Magical Realism and no theories were written, the only glue connecting these styles together was their defiance to Expressionism, as well as their new depiction of the object world.⁹ Coinciding with Franz Roh's publication of his seminal text on Magical Realism, the German museum director Gustav Hartlaub introduced the parallel term *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). Like Roh, Hartlaub based his definition of this genre on the defiance of Expressionism, which was replaced by a new materialistic social order and worldview.¹⁰ In doing so, he further differentiated the style by dividing it into two distinct subcategories. In the *right wing*, he identified tendencies leaning toward classicism and conservatism, characterized by an aspiration for timelessness and the most realistic depiction of reality - an approach that, ironically, seemed to result in highly idealized imagery. Conversely, he attributed a more critical and provocative stance to the *left wing*, designating this subcategory as *Verism*. The Verists, who generally aligned with the political left, were very socially conscious and sought to expose the socio-political tensions and cold reality of the post-war period within their work. A number of them were actively involved in political movements. Prominent representatives of the Verists include George Grosz, Otto Dix, and Georg Scholz, among others. With the rise of the Nazi regime in the 1930s, the more classical aesthetic was endorsed by the political party, while they systematically condemned and confiscated works by the Verists. Artists such as Otto Dix or Rudolf Schlichter, who were particularly outspoken in their criticism, faced repression and, in some cases, forced emigration.¹¹ The appeal of magical realist artwork to fascist political leaders is a phenomenon, that was also visible in countries like Italy around the same time. Hartlaub developed the term New Objectivity while working on an exhibition project about this new style. The first attempt to stage the show in 1923 failed. However, two years later, the exhibition was able to take place at the Städtischen Kunsthalle Mannheim in Germany. The exhibition featured both strands of the genre and presented works by exclusively male artists. According to Manfred Fath, the style had already lost some of its political urgency around this time, which led to a preference of its conservative strain. Even after a broad discussion about the term New Objectivity and a

⁸ Danijela KOSTADINOVIĆ, „Unexpected Alternation of Reality”: Magical Realism in Painting and Literature, in: Facta Universitatis Series Visual Arts and Music, 4, 2019, p. 39.

⁹ Irene GUENTHER, Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic, in: Lois PARKINSON ZAMORA, Wendy B. FARIS (Eds.), Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community, Durham/London 1995, p. 34.

¹⁰ Hans-Jürgen BUDERER, Einleitung, in: Manfred FATH (Ed.), Neue Sachlichkeit: Bilder auf der Suche nach der Wirklichkeit, München 1994, p. 7.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 8.

widely negative resonance to it, it entered into the art-historical canon and dominated in the art world over the term Magical Realism, which only reappeared in the 1960s.

The exhibition from 1925 reveals a striking inequality in the perception and inclusion of female and non-male individuals in the genre of New Objectivity, a disparity reflective of broader art-historical inequities that persisted up until the late 20th century. Art academies had only begun to admit women hesitantly during the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. This shift, however, was primarily driven by socio-political necessity than a genuine recognition of women's artistic capabilities. The Weimar constitution of 1919 granted women equal legal status to men, which resulted in a shift in gender perceptions, as mentioned in the description of Dix's portrait of Sylvia von Harden. Nonetheless, this important step towards equality existed mostly on paper, imposing double expectations on women, who were expected to maintain their traditional roles as mothers and wives, while simultaneously participating in the public sphere as workers and consumers.¹² Furthermore, institutional access to art academies remained severely restricted. Only a select few universities admitted female students, often confining them to segregated women's classes with abbreviated study periods and significantly higher admission fees.¹³

The exhibition *Die Neue Sachlichkeit. Ein Jahrhundert Jubiläum* at the Kunsthalle Mannheim (November 2024 - March 2025) sought to redress this historical imbalance by integrating works by pivotal female artists active during the period, including Kate Diehn-Bitt, Lotte Laserstein, Jeanne Mammen, or Anita Rée.¹⁴ This curatorial intervention presented a more accurate perspective on the genre, while simultaneously demonstrating its diversity. Many works by female artists transcended the rigid categorical boundaries established by Franz Roh.

Lotte Laserstein was among the first women students admitted to Berlin's Akademische Hochschule für die Bildenden Künste (Academy of Fine Arts). In her painting *Selbstportrait*



(Fig. 2): Lotte Laserstein, *Selbstportrait mit Katze*, 1928, Oil on canvas, 61 x 51 cm.

¹² Kristin SCHROEDER, A New Objectivity: Fashionable Surfaces in Lotte Laserstein's New Woman Pictures, in: *The Art Bulletin*, December 2019, p. 95-96.

¹³ Jutta HÜLSEWIG-JOHNEN, Henrike MUND (Eds.), *Einfühlung und Abstraktion. Die Moderne der Frauen in Deutschland*, Köln 2015, p. 14-15.

¹⁴ Inge HEROLD, Johan HOLTEN (Eds.), *Die Neue Sachlichkeit - Ein Jahrhundertjubiläum*, Berlin/München 2024.

mit Katze (Self-Portrait with cat) from 1928, she depicts herself seated in front of an easel, holding a paint brush in her left hand (Fig. 2). Large windows behind her frame a view of the surrounding area, with a jar of big paintbrushes positioned before them. Dressed in white overalls, she holds a cat on her lap with her right arm. With one eyebrow slightly raised, Laserstein gazes back at the viewer, confidently aware of the art historical trajectory she inscribes herself into by choosing this motive. This is one of many examples that shows Lotte Laserstein's remarkable ability to employ an intimate mode of identification with her subjects, while still depicting them in a manner consistent with the fashionable themes of New Objectivity prevalent at the time. What immediately comes to the forefront, is the surface quality of the paintings, which diverge significantly from the qualities formulated by Franz Roh.¹⁵

The origins of both terms Magical Realism and New Objectivity can be traced back to Germany, nevertheless similar tendencies can be found internationally. The German iteration was especially influenced by the Italian school of metaphysical painting. This movement, originally called *pittura metafisica*, first appeared in 1917, when Giorgio de Chirico developed the concept of art reaching „beyond physical reality.“¹⁶ De Chirico remains an important reference point, cited as a profound influence on both Magical Realism as well as Surrealism. Within this context, Surrealism in France is also considered as a significant parallel development, alongside movements such as Nouveau Réalisme, or Constructivism in Russia. Especially Surrealism has been frequently mixed with the genre of Magical Realism, considering that they do have many aspects in common. However, there remains a difference between these categories. In its essence, Surrealism signifies something beyond realism, beyond the real and rational, while privileging the dream logic and the subconscious. In contrast, Magical Realism incorporates elements that are surreal in their quality, but rigorously anchors them within the fabric of the mundane, everyday world.¹⁷ Thus, while Surrealism often operates in a different realm, Magical Realism searches for the magical in the perceivable world.

The mystical and the magical have always existed throughout (art-) history. There's a long story of alternative subcultures in fine arts, music and activism. In the past few years, there have been a series of large-scale institutional exhibitions, that have increased the genres visibility and the interest for it sustainably. Notable examples include the Venice-Biennial by Cecilia Alemani *The Milk of Dreams* (2022), *Magic Realism: Art in Weimar Germany 1919-33* at Tate Modern in London (2018), or *Extra Ordinary: Magic, Mystery and Imagination in American Realism* at the Georgia Museum of Art in the USA (2019). Most recent exhibitions have notably focused on the historic roots of the genre. Nevertheless, the minority of cohesive exhibitions

¹⁵ Kristin SCHROEDER, A New Objectivity: Fashionable Surfaces in Lotte Laserstein's New Woman Pictures, in: *The Art Bulletin*, December 2019, p. 97-98.

¹⁶ Danijela KOSTADINOVIĆ, „Unexpected Alternation of Reality“: Magical Realism in Painting and Literature, in: *Facta Universitatis Series Visual Arts and Music*, 4, 2019, p. 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39-40.

dedicated to the contemporary in big institutions does not imply a lack of contemporary engagement. On the contrary, there appears to be a growing number of artists working with strategies that resonate with Magical Realism. By examining three contemporary artistic positions, this thesis traces how these historical foundations have evolved and been reinterpreted in current practice. Furthermore, the comparative analysis aids to identify the recurring motives that define magical realist work across different eras.

The Italian artist Chiara Fumai (1978-2017) is known for her performative and multi-media works, in which she frequently employed occult, spiritualist, and magical strategies. Several of her projects, including *The Moral Exhibition House* for dOCUMENTA (13), have become firmly embedded in the art-historical canon. In this context, particular attention will be given to her site-specific multi-media project *I Did Not Say or Mean „Warning“* at Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice in 2013. The work consists of a video installation presented in the palazzo's communal spaces and a live performance by the artist, which will be the main focus for this reference. In the performance, Fumai assumed the role of a museum guide, leading visitors through the Foundation's collection of Baroque and Rococo artworks. She provided art-historical backgrounds, that followed a very affirmative educative approach, while situating the works securely within established canonical narratives.¹⁸ However, when addressing the female figures depicted in the paintings, she faltered, exposing the scarcity of biographical details available about them. At this moment, a shift happened in the performance: Fumai appeared to become „possessed“, marked by a shift in her tone, growing physicality and narrative position, which moved from third- to first-person speech. During these sequences, she employed sign language and her countenance displayed greater anger and aggression. Her facial expressions were intensifying with anger and urgency as she channeled the voices of these marginalized and forgotten women, silently screaming the words she was signing.¹⁹ After this interruption, Fumai resumed her role as the neutral guide and continued on to the next painting, where this sequence was triggered again. Through this cyclical structure, the performance destabilized the authority of the museum narrative. By invoking tropes of haunting and possession, the artist collapsed linear temporalities, allowing suppressed voices from the past to intrude upon the present. In doing so, she not only critiqued the historical silencing of women as subjects within art-historical discourse, but also challenged the institutions complacency in it, disrupting traditionally legitimated forms of knowledge. Her recourse to occult and spiritualist practices and modes of knowledge also operated as a deliberate disrupti-

¹⁸ Carmen Mörsch defines the *affirmative discourse* as a form of art education that often takes the form of lectures or expert-led tours. This approach traditionally is the most commonly used. It views art as a specialized field and must therefore be explained to the audience. For further reference see: Carmen MÖRSCH, Am Kreuzungspunkt von vier Diskursen: Die documenta 12 Vermittlung zwischen Affirmation, Reproduktion, Dekonstruktion und Transformation, in: Carmen MÖRSCH, Forschungsteam documenta 12 Vermittlung (Eds.), Kunstvermittlung 2, Zwischen kritischer Praxis und Dienstleistung auf der documenta 12, Zürich/Berlin 2009, p. 9-33.

¹⁹ Vanessa PARENT, Gestural Disruptions: Conjuring Resonance in Chiara Fumai's *I Did Not Say Or Mean „Warning“*, in: Public Art Dialogue, 13, 1, 2023, p. 55-56.

on of the archive.²⁰ Fumai urged the audience to refuse the official documentation as the sole guarantor of truth, and gestured toward alternative forms of knowledge. By adopting oral histories and embodied memory, she questioned who is permitted to speak and whose experiences are preserved. Through this trope of spirits and haunting, she broke with linear time, making the histories and stories that haunt our present visible. The use of sign language and selective muteness pointed to the struggle of locating oneself within the continuum of patriarchal history and its concordant linguistic apparatus. Towards the end of the performance, Fumai's proposition became clear: emancipation necessitates a conscious rupture with inherited forms of complicity. By pointing to the mechanisms through which institutional narratives are naturalized and internalized, Fumai staged an act of resistance that refused passive alignment with dominant cultural structures.

Adding to the performative strategies examined in the work of Chiara Fumai, the exhibition *Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* by the artist Zadie Xa will be referenced as a second contemporary example. First presented at Remail Modern in Canada in 2020, the exhibition subsequently travelled to Leeds Art Gallery in England in 2021. Xa constructed an immersive environment that explored interspecies-relationships, drawing from fields like ecology, science fiction, and folklore. The project was loosely based on the Korean shamanic tale of Princess Bari, who, despite her parents abandonment at birth, travels to the underworld in search of a cure for her dying parents. The exhibition was made up of multiple media, including sculpture and painting, but also theatrical lighting, text, and an audio soundscape with narration. Upon entering, visitors encountered a large painted map populated by five characters referred to as guides, which evoked both East Asian folding screens and medieval cartographies. This cartographic gesture situated her narrative not in a merely aesthetic framework, but in a layered and specifically located environment. The accompanying audio narrative followed five personal accounts, told from the perspective of the guides, which were a Conch, an Orca, a Seagull, a Cabbage, and a Fox. Notably, all five voices were narrated by a single narrator, invoking the image of a shapeshifter, which is a prevalent figure in Korean shamanism, as in similar traditional mythologies. Magical Realism could operate here through the normalization of plural ontologies: animals, plants, and marine beings speak without explanation, their worlds rendered contiguous with the viewer's own. The spatial structure of the installation reinforced this further. A concentric arrangement of sculptural elements drew visitors toward a central space in which five hand-crafted costumes were suspended, each representing one guide. The garments bear symbols and images that depict the unique environment of each guide. Additionally, the narration of the audio frequently addressed the audience in the second person. This rhetorical strategy does more than facilitate audience engagement. It moreover dissolves distance and produces a space for responsibility

²⁰ Vanessa PARENT, *Gestural Disruptions: Conjuring Resonance in Chiara Fumai's I Did Not Say Or Mean „Warning“*, in: *Public Art Dialogue*, 13, 1, 2023, p. 57.

and immediacy. The narrative talked about environmental destruction caused by humankind's reckless behavior across sea, air, and land, while simultaneously envisioning other modes of coexistence. Furthermore, it emphasized a call to action, urging people to take healing actions before it's too late. As Alice Bucknell outlined in her review of the exhibition, Xa also resonated with literary works by writers like adrienne maree brown and Donna J. Haraway, drawing on the deep connection of these two genres.²¹ Haraway's thoughts about the *Chtulucene* as an alternative to the Anthropocene, shifting away from human exceptionalism toward multi-species entanglement, will be further discussed in the third section of this thesis. In this framework, *Moon Poetics* shows how Magical Realism can operate as an epistemological mode in contemporary art. It does not merely insert magical elements into reality, but reconfigures the conditions under which reality is perceived.

Returning to the medium of painting as a concluding reference, Ernst Yohji Jaeger's



(Fig. 3): Ernst Yohji Jaeger, *To Keep the Secret of the Sun*, 2025, Oil on canvas, 82 x 72 cm.

work *To Keep the Secret of the Sun* will be examined here. The composition's focal point is a figure curled in a fetal position, clutching a glowing mass against their chest - an element visually and semantically linked to the sun in the work's title. This figure is crouched on a wooden parquet floor, underneath a table covered in a white tablecloth, only visible as a fragment. Surrounding this space are indications of a social gathering: a standing figure viewed from behind, shoes underneath the table, and a seated person on the side, only visible by their hand holding a wine glass. These peripheral elements establish a scene of social interaction, that stands in stark, estranged contrast to the profound vulnerability and emotional intensity of the seemingly nude figure concealed below. This sensitive de-

piction opens a horizon of references and contexts, including the search for solace, stillness, care, or the search for reason within a competitive and harsh social order. Despite the physical proximity to others, the figure remains radically isolated, either actively hiding, failing to fit in, or having been cast out. A subtle shimmer emanates from the clutched mass, evoking a sense

²¹ Bucknell, Alice: Zadie Xa's Ecological Allegory (12.08.2021), URL: <https://www.frieze.com/article-zadie-xa-moon-poetics-2021-review> (last accessed on 22.02.2026).

of the magical that resides within the potential for empathy and mutual recognition. In this regard, Jaeger's work resonates deeply with the traditions of Magical Realism. While depicted with meticulous detail, the painting deviates from earlier iterations of the genre through an atmospheric blurriness. The scenery retains clarity, yet the visible brushstrokes and a muted color palette imbue the image with a distinct affective resonance. Through this visual strategy, Jaeger offers a raw and honest look on contemporary society, while creating a moment of stillness that draws attention to what is usually overlooked by the social gaze.

Having traced the development of Magical Realism from its early formulations to contemporary practices, it becomes evident that certain strategies have persisted, while others have shifted or been reinterpreted. The first two examples discussed above were deliberately chosen for their departure from the medium of painting, demonstrating Magical Realism's capacity to transcend genres and disciplinary boundaries. Its core principles can be extracted and activated across a variety of artistic practices. This analysis aligns less with the more conservative strand of the movement and instead follows the tendency that Gustav Hartlaub classified as the Verist position. It is this socio-political awareness that resonates most strongly with the understanding of Magical Realism developed in this thesis and its potential translation into curatorial practice. The contemporary works examined here can thus be situated within this lineage. While each example initially assimilates an accessible or seemingly stable reality - Fumai in the role of the neutral museum guide, Xa's clearly structured installation environment, and Jaeger's deceptively mundane domestic interior - this apparent sobriety is gradually unsettled. Further parallels can be found in the artists' dismissal of a linear timeframe and their disruption of traditional ways of knowledge production. These works don't approach the viewer through an authoritative voice that teaches fixed historical truths, but within an open framework that demands attentiveness and reflection. They resist a singular perspective, leaving room for multiple readings. Furthermore they invite viewers to navigate between perspectives and to reconsider their own position within the structures presented.

1.2 Magical Realism in Literature: Literary Strategies and Origins

After the publication of Franz Roh's book in 1925 it was translated into multiple languages in the following years and became widely popular in the literary genre. In their foundational book *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris state:

„In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation.“²²

They emphasize further that the mode of magical realism is highly suited to explore and transgress boundaries and can facilitate the fusion or the coexistence of different worlds.²³ With this possibility alternative systems or structures can be imagined that could destabilize or challenge existing norms and oftentimes constraining structures that feel impossible to refuse and transgress. Before these specific narrative structures will be explored in more detail, it is crucial to consider the historical conditions under which the term Magical Realism was attributed to writers across the South American continent. As Liam Connell has poignantly observed, it is often difficult to distinguish the formal characteristics attributed to Magical Realism from those of early-twentieth-century Modernism. This logic can be traced through a myriad of examples, in which European and North American critics sought to categorize their own production as *modern* in opposition to what authors and artists on other continents were labeled as *magical*, or *primitive*.²⁴ Since this thesis is not set in the realm of literary discourse and a detailed analysis of this matter would go beyond its scope, Magical Realism will be understood strictly in terms of its formal characteristics, while taking into account that these can be subject to different genre classifications across cultural contexts. By adopting this formalist approach, the analysis aims to avoid the reproduction of the colonial hierarchies embedded in the term's historical deployment, while still engaging with the productive aesthetic strategies that magical realist methodologies offer for curatorial practice.

To examine these recurring narrative strategies, this section draws on Wendy B. Faris' analysis of magical realist textual poetics.²⁵ In her analysis, Faris introduced the term „defocalization“ to describe the destabilized narrative voice found in many magical realist texts. As a pervasive technique this approach challenges the norms of realistic representation, which mirrors the fundamental contradiction in the genre's title. Through the use of this perspective, a space can be created, in which the realistic and the magical can coexist. She calls this the „ineffable in-between“. This space has in itself a visionary power, drawing again on its potential of the transgression of boundaries and the coexistence of different worlds.

In her discussion of textual poetics in Magical Realism, Faris identifies the frequent use of realistic details as a primary narrative strategy through which texts move beyond the limits of the „real“. In scenes where magical or seemingly impossible events occur, writers frequently employ dense, concrete and very precise details in their description. This accumulation of realis-

²² Lois PARKINSON, Wendy B. FARIS (Eds.), *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, Durham/London 1995, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁴ Liam CONNELL, *Discarding Magic Realism: Modernism, Anthropology, and Critical Practice*, in: *Ariel*, 29, 2, 1998, p. 95-96.

²⁵ Wendy B. FARIS, *Ordinary Enchantments. Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Nashville 2004.

tic elements aids the reader to visualize and clearly follow the phenomena, while simultaneously embedding them into the wondrous nature of a recognizable world. The wondrous and the everyday are thus not positioned as opposites, but interwoven without contradiction. This strategy strongly resonates with the visual arts, where precise examination of objects is also the basis of questioning the wonder that is embodied by them. Closely related to this technique is what Faris describes as the unmarked transition from ordinary to extraordinary events. Magical realist narratives often introduce miraculous or uncanny occurrences without signals of surprise or rupture. In this context, Faris references André Breton's aspiration to locate the „point of mind at which life and death, the real and imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.“²⁶ Magical realist texts operate within precisely such a space of suspended opposition, which is further articulated through the „two-way-street phenomenon“. Faris describes this dynamic as an imaginary spectrum ranging from the improbable to the impossible. Narrative events and objects circulate along this spectrum, blurring distinctions even further. Particularly in its middle range, this spectrum produces ambiguity, making it difficult to determine whether a given event belongs to rational explanation or the realm of the magical. The exploration along this framework encourages diverse kinds of play with narrative techniques that destabilize temporal and perspectival certainties. Additionally, Faris notes the frequent use of the future perfect tense, to dislocate events from linear progression. This produces a temporal layering that detaches the reader from the concrete time of linear progress. Similarly, second-person narration draws readers into the narrative space by being directly addressed. Shifts between third- and first-person narration, as well as variations in active and passive constructions, further complicate agency and perspective, contributing to a sense of fluidity. Another tool of magical realist writing is the use of what Faris calls „bridging“ functions. These make it possible to circumvent clear demarcations between characters, temporalities, or even states of being. Pronominal shifts, for instance, can subtly dissolve distinctions between individual voices, genders, or between the living and the dead. On a micro-textual level, bridging may occur when a metaphor is imagined to be literal, inviting the reader to participate in a form of „verbal magic“. This could happen by the writer providing the visualization of the saying without using the actual words, thus making the reader utter it themselves, which again relates to André Breton and his claim that „what is will be, by virtue of language alone.“²⁷ By literalizing metaphors embedded within dominant ideologies, magical realist texts may also expose and destabilize their underlying assumptions. Finally, Faris highlights the method of mirroring, of repetition as a narrative principle. Through doubling, reflected characters, recurring motifs (words, dreams, stories, actions), or literal mirrors and reflective surfaces, magical realist narratives produce shifting references between worlds.²⁸ Such repetitions may again evoke the fee-

²⁶ Wendy B. FARIS, *Ordinary Enchantments. Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Nashville 2004, p. 94.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 127-132.

ling of the uncanny, particularly when they suggest involuntary recurrence or temporal looping. This could also imply a revision of linear time. Mirroring strategies can encourage readers to question their assumptions about agency, identity, and historical progression, while raising questions about whether we control history or it controls us, about activity and passivity, history and myth, to undercut the very notions of origin and difference.

The turn toward the literary field thus proves highly productive for a broader understanding of Magical Realism. A close reading of both its visual and literary manifestations, leads to a deeper understanding of its structural and epistemological dimensions. Across these different forms, many parallels can be recognized. At the core of both forms lies the parallel existence of the magical and the real, coexisting without contradiction or hierarchy. Further correspondences can be identified in spatial and narrative disruptions, the dissolution of linear temporal frameworks, and the destabilization of fixed subject positions. Both visual and literary practices frequently challenge singular perspectives and instead utilize methods that address the audience directly. In addition, the study of literary strategies provides valuable tools to reflect on further possibilities, like thinking across binaries. As Wendy B. Faris writes:

„And so, once again, we see that while magical realism is a radical contestation of realism, it is also ultimately an extension of it, but a much revised extension.“²⁹

1.3 Contemporary Urgency: Magic as Resistance

The following chapter situates the resurgent interest in Magical Realism within its broader contemporary cultural and political context. Over the past decade, magical motifs, symbols and storylines have moved from marginal or subcultural positions into mainstream (pop-)cultural discourse. What was once associated with either ancient cultures or alternative, political movements, now circulates widely within popular culture, digital media, fashion and consumer markets. This shift is driven by a convergence of factors. In increasingly secularized societies traditional religious frameworks have lost normative authority, while alternative spiritual practices have gained visibility. Simultaneously, the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, severely marked by uncertainty, social isolation, and a heightened reliance on and escape into digital communication, has intensified experiences of precarity and insecurity. Additionally, economic instability, ecological crises, political polarization, and a resurged conflict between generations contributed to a broader sense of insecurity. In such contexts, magical and mythic imaginaries do not simply offer escapism, but can be understood as responses to epistemic insecurity. The renewed fascination of the magical today has also become widely popular among younger generations. Social Media has been used to widely spread „witchy“ aesthetics, astrology, crystals, and tarot practices to the masses. Next to Instagram it is most notably

²⁹ Wendy B. FARIS, *Ordinary Enchantments. Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Nashville 2004 p. 125.

TikTok where most discourse on this topic is collected. Under labels such as „WitchTok“, spiritual practices are reframed through its popular short-form videos, in which symbolism, ritual, and self-marketing converge. At the same time, these tendencies are increasingly absorbed into neoliberal consumer culture. Tarot decks, crystals, incense, and contemporary witchcraft manuals have become ubiquitous commodities, readily available in bookstores, fashion retailers, and museum shops alike. This system has turned witchcraft into a lifestyle or a brand and has produced a notion of witchcraft and mysticism that is achieved through purchase.³⁰ The acceleration logic of digital platforms further risks a one-dimensional look on this complex discourse. Often reduced to consumable fragments, spiritual traditions risk the detachment of their genealogies and critical dimensions.

Furthermore, the political contours of the contemporary moment bear a striking resemblance to the historical conditions that informed the emergence of Magical Realism in the 1920s. A century ago, society was fractured by the traumatic aftermath of World War I, marked by economic collapse, and destabilized by rising nationalistic tendencies, which often appear alongside a rise of conservative values. Today, we find ourselves navigating a similarly volatile landscape as we are confronted with a comparable nationalistic resurgence, the deepening of global economic inequalities, a struggle with navigating manipulated and biased media, and the normalization of authoritarian rhetoric. Crucially, the mechanisms of suppression have evolved, but remain structurally similar. Contemporary discourse faces tightening restrictions in the freedom of expression, particularly regarding the atrocities of modern warfare and the genocidal policies enacted by dominant geopolitical powers. In the art world, this pressure is additionally compounded by the diffusion of artificial intelligence and its production logics, which threaten to homogenize creative output by valuing quantity over quality. Yet, as history thankfully demonstrates, crisis often precipitates resistance. Facing these issues, we are witnessing a renewed mobilization of voices across diverse backgrounds. Artists, scholars, and activists are increasingly stepping forward to expose these dynamics, demanding structural change. In some ways, aspects of magical realist methodology may serve as tools for navigating a world where the real has become increasingly unbearable, offering strategies for solidarity that refuse the distracting and suppressive logics imposed by powerful actors, who are themselves defined increasingly by their financial capital.

Central to this analysis is Silvia Federici's work *Re-enchanting the world. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, from which this thesis borrows its title. Federici herself referred to the sociologist and political economist Max Weber, who gave a lecture in 1917 titled *Science as Vocation*. In this talk he stated that, above all, the fate of our times was characterized by the disenchantment of the world. Concerning the vanishing of the religious and the sacred from

³⁰ Apoorvaa JOSHI, Ethel BROOKS, Whose Craft?: Contentions on Open and Closed Practice in Contemporary Witchcraft(s), in: Soma CHAUDHURI, Jane WARD (Eds.), *The Witch Studies Reader*, Durham 2025, p. 467-468.

society, Weber saw this disenchantment in relation to the intellectualization and rationalization of the modern forms of social organization. Federici continues this assessment by addressing our limited capacity to recognize any other logic than that of capitalist development today.³¹ As an alternative, she is re-introducing the commons from a feminist perspective, to allow us to reconnect our relationships with our bodies, with nature, and with each other. The commons have been widely discussed in a variety of different contexts over the past decades. Examples like ruangrupa's implementation of the concept *lumbung* in the framework of documenta fifteen, have shown their productive power in art contexts and will be subject to discussion at a later point.³² However, due to their opposition to capitalist agendas, they are facing fundamental problems in their implementation. Federici discusses the commons as a different organizational method of society. Rather than orbiting around the principle of a state, or in neoliberal terms, the market, she envisions a society, in which people have equal access to the wealth they produce. Instead of envisioning something completely new, she emphasizes how much we could learn from indigenous communities, that are still organized this way. The connection to nature and to the production of resources also strengthens a sense of responsibility for that created wealth. In that way, the commons stand opposed to the destruction of communal land regimes, as well as to the strategized division between people, that remain the fundament for capitalist development. Resisting the competition that is enforced upon us in capitalism, the commons create practices of collaboration and cooperation.³³ A central argument in her analysis of globalization is that the attack on our basic means of reproduction has been one of the pillars of capitalist restructuring. The destruction and commercialization of nature, as well as the exploitation of human labour, have thus been deeply related to patriarchal and imperialist conquests. Federici argues that this attack consisted of two essential processes. The first of which was the constitution of reproduction work as women's labor and as a separate social sphere, which resulted in it becoming invisible as work and naturalizing its exploitation. The second process was the institutionalization of the state's control over women's sexuality and reproductive capacity through the criminalization of abortion, and the introduction of a system of surveillance and punishment. All of this led to an increasing differentiation between the sexes, as well as the subordination of women to men. This story is fundamentally linked to the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th century, which have led to the execution of hundreds of thousands of women. In this framework Federici is expanding on the argument that colonialism, racism, and misogyny are fundamental values of capitalism, without which this system could not be kept alive.³⁴ By calling for a re-enchantment of the world, she is emphasizing the possibility of recovering the power of collectivity to decide our fate on this earth. This already leads to a different understanding of magic, departing from images of

³¹ Silvia FEDERICI, *Re-enchanting the world. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Oakland 2019, p. 188.

³² Stephan KUSS, *Curatorial Commons. Über das Kuratorische als gemeinschaftsbasierte Praxis*, Masterarbeit, Universität für angewandte Kunst, 2022, p. 17-25.

³³ Silvia FEDERICI, *Re-enchanting the world. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Oakland 2019, p. 85-96.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

sorcery and illusion. Federici describes her notion of magic as the „knowledge of feeling of the creativity and interconnectedness of everything in nature and human relations“, to „recognize the existence of forces, of powers that are not visible and yet are transformative.“³⁵ Recalling the roots of Magical Realism in fine arts, it becomes apparent, that there are many more ways of thinking about magic, than conjuring up a bunny out of a hat. Magic can be seen as something ubiquitous, that many societies have unlearned how to see, working against our increasing disembodiment. In a conversation with Federici, the theorist and activist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui emphasizes the urban-agricultural space as a prime site of recommonization and re-enchantment, because it has the capacity to change our perception.³⁶ In that sense, reproduction does not only concern our material needs, but also the reproduction of our collective memory and the cultural symbols that give meaning to our life. The native activist Paula Gunn Allen reminds us to be aware of the history of our planet, since „the root of oppression is loss of memory“.³⁷

It is within this specific theoretical framework that I position my own inquiry. Coming from an art-historical background trained in a predominantly Eurocentric, canonical perspective, I am acutely aware of the limitations and blind spots inherent in my disciplinary formation. This thesis represents an active, ongoing journey to unlearn these inherited structures and to engage with alternative, anti-colonial, and feminist epistemologies that have historically been marginalized. I acknowledge this background as a necessary tension that informs my critical approach. Within this framework, the term *magic* is understood as a contested concept, in recognition of its appropriation by dominant powers to enforce capitalist rationality and misogyny. Nevertheless, it is repositioned as a strategic resource for re-establishing collectivity and affirming the ontological interconnectedness that capitalist systems aim to fragment.

Ultimately, this thesis posits that Magical Realism, when decoupled from its imperialist origins and reimagined through the lens of re-enchantment, offers a vital methodology for alternative modes of world-making. It provides aesthetic and ethical strategies to imagine space-times that are inhabitable, resistant to capital, and open to the ghosts of what has been silenced. By articulating these alternative modes, Magical Realism becomes a practice of refusal, a way to insist that the world is a site of continuous, collective negotiation.

³⁵ Cecilia ALEMANI (Ed.), *Biennale arte 2022: the milk of dreams = il latte dei sogni*, Venice 2022, p. 324.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

³⁷ Silvia FEDERICI, *Re-enchanting the world. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Oakland 2019, p. 6.

1.4 Case Study: *Geister*, Kunstmuseum Basel

Grounded in this theoretical framework, the following chapter transitions from theory to practice, initiating a qualitative analysis of exhibition practice to establish the empirical foundation for the curatorial approaches formulated in Chapter Three. The exhibition *Geister. Dem Übernatürlichen auf der Spur* (Ghosts. On the Trail of the Supernatural) at Kunstmuseum Basel was on view from September 2025 until March 2026, for a duration of almost six months. Emphasizing the omnipresence of ghosts, the exhibition highlighted their depiction across a range of cultural fields, including popular culture, film, theatre, literature, and the visual arts. Consulting the accompanying publication or the museum's online materials revealed that the exhibition primarily focused on representations of ghosts from the nineteenth century onward within a „Western culture“.³⁸ For the conceptual development of the project, curator Eva Reifert collaborated with advisors Susan Owens, curator and author of the book *The Ghost: A Cultural History*, and Andreas Fischer, Research Associate at the Institute for Borderline Areas of Psychology and Mental Health in Freiburg. The assistant curators were Jasper Warzecha and Marion Keller. Structurally, the exhibition followed a rather traditional format. It was organized along a chronological timeline and distributed across nine thematically grouped rooms, setting a clear path and direction. The following analysis examines how the exhibition's spatial design, object selection, and narrative framing shaped the visitor's encounter with the supernatural, and how these strategies relate to broader questions of magical realist perception and knowledge production.

Already on the way to the museum's massive extension, that was completed in 2016, visitors encountered the first introduction to the exhibition's ghostly theme. A life-sized marble sculpture by Katharina Fritsch greeted visitors in the corridor. The work depicts a figure draped in what resembles the stereotypical costume of a ghost, complete with a pool of blood at its feet. The human shape beneath the drapery remains clearly visible, evoking the familiar image of a sheet thrown over a body. The uncanny atmosphere was further enhanced through a light installation by Philippe Parreno, who installed elongated, flickering lamps along the path leading toward the exhibition entrance. Although the effect could have been intensified, for instance through the placement of several lamps rather than a single one, the intervention nevertheless functioned as an intriguing introduction that raised expectations for what followed. The flickering lamps re-appeared along the stairway that led to the exhibition. As visitors ascended the stairs, faintly spoken voices became audible, gradually guiding toward the entrance. Before entering room number One, the exhibition welcomed the audience with a video installation produced by the company art/beats, which specializes in audiovisual content for art institutions. The video montage assembled scenes from well-known ghost films, creating an immediate sense of recognition and familiarity as an introduction to the topic. Placed ne-

³⁸ Eva REIFERT (Ed.), *Geister Ghosts. Dem Übernatürlichen auf der Spur Visualizing the Supernatural*, Basel 2025, p. 69.

arby was an aluminium sculpture from Thomas Schütte's work series *Grosse Geister* (big ghosts), which was somewhat overshadowed by the surrounding display, lacking room to breathe.

Upon entering the first room, visitors were met with an illusion. In a darkened room the nineteenth-century stage technique known as „Pepper's Ghost“ was staged, in which a transparent yet reflective surface, combined with carefully directed lighting, creates the impression of an apparition (Fig. 4). As an introductory theme, the room addressed the visual appearance of ghosts and their long-standing theatrical staging. References were made to familiar ghostly attributes like the white bedsheet, flickering lights, mist, sudden drops in temperature, or unexpected gusts of wind. The accompanying wall text suggested that ghosts may be understood not only as illusions, but also as manifestations of the past, as potential indicators of unresolved histories, or forms of repression. In addition to that, works by Angela Deane introduced a more humorous dimension. Deane worked with found photographs, and overpainted the depicted human figures with simplified ghost shapes that closely resemble the familiar imagery of popular culture. Suspended between cuteness and a subtle sense of unease, these ghostly figures appeared within otherwise ordinary family snapshots or holiday scenes. Hovering somewhere between playful, light-hearted approaches and quiet thought stimuli, these works encapsulated a central tension that reappeared throughout the exhibition. The first section concluded with another marble sculpture of a human figure covered by a bedsheet, this time depicting a small girl, alongside a neon sign bearing the question „*Where are the dead?*“ The installation introduced one of the exhibition's central themes, which was the intimate connection between ghost imagery and broader reflections on death and absence. With its black walls and dim lighting the exhibition setting of the first room differentiated strongly from traditional viewing habits, and created a nearly immersive, and definitely mysterious introduction.



(Fig. 4): Installation view, Room One, *Geister*. Dem Übernatürlichen auf der Spur, Kunstmuseum Basel, 2025.

After passing the threshold to the second room through a thick black curtain, the exhibition setting shifted back to a familiar and classical art museum setting. The gallery was painted in a pale blue color with a subtle grey undertone, accentuated by a continuous row of framed

paintings arranged along the walls. With a focus on literature, the works depicted ghostly apparitions or scenes drawn from ghost stories dating from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century. The selection drew on a number of popular European ghost stories, including references to authors such as William Shakespeare and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as well as biblical narratives. As a physical object, a fourth edition of *A Christmas Carol* was displayed in a vitrine. With this work, Charles Dickens introduced one of the most widely recognized ghosts in popular culture. As mentioned earlier, the exhibition's particular focus on the Western art-historical canon and cultural backdrop was not explicitly addressed within the exhibition space itself. In a room that brought together literary and visual works by exclusively male authors and artists, a contextualization of this perspective would have been particularly valuable. Explicitly acknowledging this curatorial framing would have countered the implicit assumption that the Eurocentric perspective is the default. It could have prevented the exhibition from positioning itself within a tradition that views Central Europe as the center of the world without feeling compelled to articulate how its own viewpoint is situated.



(Fig. 5): Installation view, Room Three, *Geister. Dem Übernatürlichen auf der Spur*, Kunstmuseum Basel, 2025.

The transition into Room Three was noticeably more neutral. Visitors entered a predominantly white gallery, with one wall painted in a deep burgundy-brown tone. The display in this room was considerably more elaborate than in the previous section. Accentuated by two large-scale photographic wallpapers, a collection of examples of so-called „ghost photography“ was presented (Fig. 5). Conceptually, this room's narrative was situated in the broader context of the profound social transformations and

technological advancements that took place in Europe and the United States during the nineteenth century. The emergence of photography was closely tied to a growing scientific approach to understanding the world. At the same time it coincided with the widespread dissemination of beliefs in the existence of the supernatural or a parallel ghostly realm. Until the 1930s, ghost photography drew heavily on the human hope for an afterlife, particularly in a historical period marked by disease, social insecurity, and war. Many of these photographs depicted faint, white, and often blurred shapes appearing behind the portrayed subjects. From the outset, however, such images were highly controversial. Displayed alongside the photographs were contemporary magazines and publications, which revealed that accusations of deception and manipulation had accompanied these images from the start. In respon-

se, numerous investigations and experiments were conducted, often by members of spiritualist circles that experienced a significant rise in popularity during this period. As a precursor to later spiritist practices, the exhibition presented a group of so-called *Klecksographien* by Justinus Kerner. In these works, Kerner explored the creative potential of coincidence. The images originated from ink stains that were folded and mirrored on paper. The resulting shapes were subsequently developed into strange hybrid creatures through the addition of lines or collage elements, making these works emblematic of the very conversations regarding investigation, chance, and the nature of the supernatural that defined this era. Another thematic focus of this room was the notion of the human as a medium. This was illustrated through a range of visual materials, including paintings, spiritualist drawings produced during séances, and additional photographic documentation. These works were complemented by written sources such as personal accounts, medical writings, and records of experimental sessions. Several of the photographs also depicted the use of *ectoplasm*, a mysterious substance that frequently appeared in spiritualist séances and became a recurring motif in ghost photography of the period. Overall, the display evoked feelings of factual accuracy, marked by vitrines with documentary material, writings, and journal clippings, framing these ethereal phenomena through a sober, classical lens of fact.

The adjacent room expanded upon the themes introduced in Room Three. With the spread of electricity and the emergence of new communication technologies such as telegraphy, the telephone, and radio, the idea of an invisible connection between humans and the spirit world no longer seemed entirely implausible. The introductory wall text referred to séances involving human mediums, spontaneous automatic drawings produced in trance states, and further elaborated on the theme of the human medium. The room brought together a range of objects that have not traditionally been categorized as art. Alongside mediumistic drawings, works by representatives of Art Brut, such as Madge Gill and Marie Bouttier, were presented. These were complemented by magically connotated objects including a Ouija board from the 1920s, a slate tablet, and a spirit trumpet, all devices commonly used in séances around the turn of the twentieth century. The assembled works displayed vegetative and ornamental patterns, as seen in the drawings of Wilhelmine Assmann; fantastical creatures and hybrid beings, as in the works of Marie Bouttier; and symmetrical, almost architectural compositions by Augustin Lesage. A marble sculpture by George Henry Paulin, *Das Medium und ihr Geistführer* (The Medium and Her Spirit Guide), revealed a notable absence in the exhibition's communication of this thematic focus. The sculpture depicts a seated, nude female figure who appears to be undergoing an intense, almost sensuous experience. Her arms are stretched behind her while her torso arches forward in a pronounced curve. Behind her stands an equally nude male figure, partially covered by a hooded cloak. With his mouth open, he places his hands firmly on the woman's upper arms. Created around 1927, the work strongly reinforces a motif of control and surrender between the male spirit guide and the

female medium, one that carries unmistakably sexual overtones. This dynamic ultimately points to a deficiency in the curatorial framing of this section of the exhibition.

Particularly given how prominently the theme of the human medium appeared throughout the spaces, objects, photographs, and texts in these two rooms, it remains striking that no reference was made to the women's movement, which at the time was closely intertwined with spiritualist practices. The clear predominance of female mediums, which was also observable in the exhibition itself, remained entirely unaddressed. The phenomenon of ectoplasm, a central material within the history of spiritualism, is equally significant in this context and would have benefited from an explanation. Ectoplasm is commonly defined as a viscous, seemingly animate substance that was believed to emerge from the body of the medium during séances. It was described as appearing in vaporous or solid form and was often characterized by a milky-white coloration. These accounts emerged within a historical moment in which the female body was subject to intense scrutiny and medical control. Female genitalia in particular became the object of increasing scientific and medical „investigation“, and it was not uncommon for women to undergo invasive procedures, including the removal of reproductive organs, in attempts to „cure“ so-called disorders such as hysteria or nymphomania. Women constituted the majority of spiritualist mediums, a circumstance that can be linked both to gendered stereotypes that associated women with nature and emotional receptivity, and to the inherently eroticized and sexualized dimensions embedded in the phenomenon itself. Reports frequently described ectoplasm as emerging from the mouth, ears, or the vagina. Such manifestations were meticulously documented by male doctors and investigators, who often conducted intimate examinations of female mediums in the name of preventing fraud. The existence of ectoplasm was, of course, highly contested. In many documented investigations it was later revealed to consist of mundane materials such as chewed paper soaked in egg white, cheesecloth, or toilet paper. The intense fascination with this phenomenon must therefore also be understood in relation to a broader culture of male voyeurism directed toward the female body. At the same time, however, spiritualist practice could hold emancipatory potential for the women involved. Through their performances as mediums, some were able to transgress rigid social boundaries, financial independence, and even attain public recognition. For further discussion of these dynamics, see for instance *Bawdy Technologies and the Birth of Ectoplasm* by L. Anne Delgado.³⁹ This perspective opens an important horizon regarding questions of female agency and self-determination, one that arguably deserved a place within an exhibition otherwise framed in such a historical and ostensibly objective manner.

Room Five was situated in an open space at the top of the staircases that led to the entrance of the exhibition. This section addressed the growing interest of psychology in phenomena

³⁹ Delgado, Anne L.: *Bawdy Technologies and the Birth of Ectoplasm* (9.1.2011), URL: <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive/1998-2013/2011/09/01/bawdy-technologies-and-birth-ectoplasm> (last accessed on 22.02.2026).

related to the supernatural, reflecting a broader attempt to understand the inexplicable dimensions of the unconscious. The theme was introduced through a shattered knife once owned by Carl Gustav Jung. Jung had reportedly attended séances conducted by his cousin for several years. During one such period, a knife in his living room suddenly shattered without any apparent reasonable cause. He interpreted the incident as potentially connected to the mediumistic abilities attributed to his cousin and preserved the fragments. Subsequently, Jung engaged more systematically with such phenomena in his early dissertation on the psychology and pathology of so-called occult phenomena. This object was presented alongside a sculptural work titled *Poltergeist* by Rachel Whiteread, and an audio recording of the poem *One Need Not Be a Chamber – to Be Haunted* by Emily Dickinson. The recording was accompanied by the poem's opening verses written on the wall in ornate handwriting. Dickinson's suggestion that the mind itself may be more frightening than any haunted house was compellingly juxtaposed with Whiteread's installation. The sculpture depicts a small wooden shed colored in white and partially deconstructed. Without a door and with splintered wooden slats protruding outward, the structure appears as though it had just survived a violent disruption. Nearby, a deconstructed chair held together with string by Urs Fischer reinforced the ambiguity between the haunted house and the haunted mind. Positioned as a transitional moment toward the exhibition's modern and contemporary section, this constellation was complemented with photographic works by Thomas Demand. Adjacent to these works, Anna and Bernhard Johannes Blume's staged photographs engaged with supernatural imagery satirically, continuing the trajectory established by Angela Deane's ghosts in the first room. The display concluded with a work by Marcel Duchamp, showing a printed candy wrapper bearing the inscription *A Guest + A Host = A Ghost*. The unconventional spatial preconditions required a strategic adaption in the installation, which seemed to have functioned simultaneously as a transitional zone conceptually. Due to the limited wall space, the curatorial selection shifted toward sculptural works, with few hanging pieces positioned in the background. This shift resulted in a more physically engaged and embodied viewing experience, inviting visitors to navigate the space through multiple vantage points and angles. The juxtaposition of the works by Whiteread and Dickinson marked a highlight of the exhibition, generating a resonant dialogue where sculpture and poetry mutually informed and enriched one another.

The transition into Room Six continued this shift toward modern and contemporary artistic positions. In contrast to the clearly structured and didactic display strategies that characterized the preceding rooms, the spatial and visual organization in this section became increasingly layered, demanding a more reflective and active stance from the viewer to piece together the narrative. A dense accumulation of objects, images, and sculptural elements disrupted established sightlines, and produced a fragmented viewing experience (Fig. 6). The room was anchored by a deep blue wall facing the entrance, echoed by a freestanding partition that extended into the space and partially obstructed the viewer's perspective. This interruption was

further intensified by a suspended work positioned centrally within the room, that thematized transparency and ephemerality, while physically blocking a comprehensive overview. These strategies may be read as an attempt to evoke the elusive and unstable nature of the ghostly, emphasizing themes of fragmentation and movement. However, this curatorial disruption also



(Fig. 6): Installation view, Room Six, *Geister. Dem Übernatürlichen auf der Spur*, Kunstmuseum Basel, 2025.

exposes the inherent challenges of such an approach. While the selected works all engaged with themes of mediation, perception, or the spectral, their juxtaposition did not fully articulate the conceptual connections suggested by the exhibition text. Instead, the arrangement produced a sense of accumulation rather than a clearly structured argument. This tension seemed particularly striking given the exhibition's commitment to chronological clarity and thematic coherence until this point. At

first glance, the legibility previously maintained seemed to be deliberately undermined. The viewer was confronted with a display that might have been intended to mirror the indeterminacy of the ghostly, granting them the agency to navigate through the array of physical elements.

The works themselves were connected primarily by their reference to ghost depictions or earlier forms of spiritist and mediumistic art, spanning a range of media. Beside the recessed wall a small plinth was placed, holding a glass cube with Tony Oursler's sculpture *Fantasmio*, which also functioned as the exhibition's sujet: a floating sheet with digital, melancholic eyes. The entrance wall featured small sculptural works and drawings by Paul Klee, which were positioned alongside further canonical art-historical figures such as René Magritte and Meret Oppenheim on the left wall. Behind the partition, photographs by Mike Kelley, in which he staged himself as a spiritualist medium with ectoplasm, were juxtaposed with a sculpture by Erwin Wurm depicting yet another figure covered with a sheet, this time anchored to the floor by blue sandals. This constellation was complemented by a significant work by Susan MacWilliam. Her silent film *The Last Person* from 1998 addresses the trial of the Scottish medium Helen Duncan (1898-1956), the last person convicted under the British Witchcraft Act of 1735. In it, the artist assumes the role of the medium, visualizing the materialization phenomena of ectoplasm as recorded in the trial transcripts.

The shift instigated in the previous room and fully articulated in this one raises compelling questions as to why the framework seems to fracture when bridging historical and contemporary positions. The transition appears so abrupt that it challenges the assumption of a seamless narrative, suggesting that this dissonance was a deliberate curatorial choice. This rupture served as a pivotal moment where the exhibition's own methodology began to differ, revealing the limits of a purely historical approach when faced with the ontological instability of its subject.

After having traced the history of the depiction of ghosts and their role as a symbol of hope and connection between life and death, the section of Room Seven turned towards their symbolic dimension. This collection of works drew reference to trauma, to the aftermath and the ghostly presence that stays behind in people and in places after injustice or violence happened. As stated in the exhibition text, these silent ghosts often stay invisible until we confront them, which in turn forces us to take a stance toward how we want to remember and act in the future. The work *Kleines Glasportal* (Small Glass Portal) by Heidi Bucher shows the cast of a representative portal from the psychiatric hospital Bellevue in Switzerland, referencing topics of mental health, as well as underlying notions of female pain. Glenn Ligon's work *Untitled (I'm Turning into a Specter Before Your Very Eyes and I'm Going To Haunt You)*, features a vertical wooden plate with the title phrase written repeatedly. The piece is marked by ongoing overlays that coalesce toward its lower part. The increasingly illegible text alludes to the still-pervasive racism in the United States and beyond, alongside subsidiary themes that reference the artist's queer identity. Alongside these works, an installation by the artist Claudia Casarino titled *Desvestidos* (Undressed) was presented. It consists of several garments made of sheer fabric whose illumination cast shadows onto the wall that appeared almost more concrete than the material itself. By invoking themes of structural and gender-based violence, the piece opens a broad horizon that spans societal misogyny and domestic abuse. Additionally, a further neon inscription by the artist Vittoria Santoro, read *To Repel Ghosts*. A video installation by the artist Willie Doherty, titled *Ghost Story*, served as a bridge to the adjoining room and addresses the traces and residues of the past embedded in places. Doherty's video engages with the enduring individual and collective traumas of the Northern Ireland conflict (1968–1998) and demonstrates how that experience remains palpable in the landscape and in the memory of its people. The constellation held a lot of affective impact, glimpsing at a variety of important issues.

The penultimate gallery juxtaposed an installation by Cornelia Parker with a photographic series by Corinna May Botz. Titled *Haunted Houses*, the photographs present documentary-like images of buildings and sites reputed to be haunted. These fragmentary interior shots are complemented by an audio installation that recorded testimonies from individuals recounting personal encounters with spirits. Opposite them the work *PsychoBarn (Cut-Up)* was placed, in

which Parker reconstructed the house from Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Psycho* as one of the most unsettling haunted houses of the collective unconscious. After the installation was shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2016 and in the courtyard of the Royal Academy in London in 2018, the artist presented this setting in a cut-up form. By disassembling it into its constituent parts, the presentation intensified the reading of the set and the construction of meaning.

Within this context, it seems particularly disappointing that the museum did not seize the opportunity to reflect upon its own institutional position and placement. Throughout the exhibition, the narrative voice of the institution remained unclear, and no space was created for a critical dialogue. Given the profound significance of ghosts in contemporary critical curatorial discourse, as figures that expose the repressed histories and structural violences of the institution itself, this silence represents a significant missed potential. By overlooking the ghost's potential capable of *haunting* the museum's own authority, the exhibition forfeited the chance to transform the gallery into a site of radical self-reflection and democratic contestation.

Room Nine displayed, or rather did not display, a work by Ryan Gander entitled *Looking for Something That Has Already Found You (The Invisible Push)*. The installation consists of hidden wind machines that circulate air throughout the space. The lighting remained the same from the object placement of the preceding exhibition, hinting at what had come before in this specific room. Poetic and subtle at the same time, this installation succeeded in creating a moment of pause and contemplation. Whether this pause stemmed from a certain confusion in the visitor, the presence of the airflow, the reflection on what had just been seen, or the ambiguity between presence and absence, it undeniably created a reflective instant at the end of this exhibition.

Fundamental motifs of Magical Realism can be discerned clearly throughout this exhibition tour, particularly in the way ghosts embody the coexistence of the real and the unreal, the past and the present, as well as the connection to the deceased. The curatorial choice to apply a classical, chronological framework to such an inherently ambiguous subject created a striking tension. Its claim to objectivity carried the risk of remaining on the surface, functioning more as a popular blockbuster attraction than a critical intervention. This orientation was reflected in the strategy chosen for the public program and marketing. As communicated in the material available online, mainly guided tours were offered. They additionally utilized channels like Spotify, where a playlist was published, a radio-feature, and a photo challenge inviting visitors to capture the supernatural and post it on social media. Consequently, the claim was less about exchange and dialogue and more about providing information. In the museum shops, the ghost motif was maxed out to infinity. From books and stationery to games, tarot cards, Ouija boards, clothing, lamps, mouse pads, and crystal-shaped soaps, the commercial offer

was extensive. The accompanying publication, notably designed as a magazine rather than a bound book, cleverly mirrored the theme of ephemerality. Filled with a diverse mix of articles, poems, comics, and essays, it embraced the humorous dimension of the exhibition and ultimately embodied the central tension identified at the outset: hovering between playful, light-hearted engagement and quiet, layered impulses for deeper reflection.

Ultimately, the exhibition *Geister* succeeded in assembling a diverse array of works, offering a comprehensive survey of the depiction of ghosts from the nineteenth century to the present from a Eurocentric viewpoint. The curatorial vision oscillated between analytical rigor and playful engagement, generating moments of genuine uncanny tension. However, the exhibition's adherence to a strictly chronological and didactic framework ultimately circumscribed the radical potential inherent in its subject matter. Despite this structural limitation, the exhibition strongly deployed repetition, a key characteristic of magical realist methodology. By situating artworks addressing identical themes across disparate contexts and temporal registers, the curator initiated a productive process of recursive comparison, forcing the viewer to confront the variations in meaning that arise from the shifting historical frames. Furthermore, the exhibition facilitated compelling juxtapositions that transgressed traditional genre boundaries, and the integration of less established art forms and movements that were presented in a non-hierarchical manner. However, it notably struggled to reconcile the didactic clarity of the 19th-century archive with the fluid, affective resonance of contemporary practice. Its reliance on an ostensibly objective, historical narrative proved dissonant with the ontological instability of its theme. By failing to explicitly address its own biases the exhibition missed the opportunity to fully realize the magical realist potential of its subject. It ultimately presented ghosts as objects of study rather than as agents capable of disrupting the museum's authority. In the magical realist sense developed in this thesis, the *ghost* should not just be displayed, but it must be allowed to haunt the institution itself.

2 Curatorial Approaches to Magical Realism

Exhibition practice today finds itself navigating a myriad of challenges. Institutions are struggling under the weight of neoliberal market logics, the independent scene fights for basic financing, mediation workers continue to battle for job security, and curators are increasingly overwhelmed by the pressure to accommodate the conflicting wishes of involved parties. In this context, the debate regarding the political relevance of art has become increasingly urgent and, frankly, quite shocking. After decades of critical engagement with vital issues such as inclusion and exclusion, processes of decolonization, the questioning of institutional authority, and the role of the archive, it is astonishing that the question of whether art is or must be political still finds fertile ground. One wonders when art has ever been apolitical. Moreover,

these debates are not confined to small regional initiatives, but are taking place within the most established and prestigious circles of the art world.

Nora Sternfeld's conception of the *radically democratic museum* offers a crucial framework for understanding these tensions. In her book of the same title, she traces the structural shifts toward neoliberal institutions, arguing that the increasing economization of the museum leads to a simultaneous erosion of democracy. Under the dual pressure of cost-effectiveness and the pressure to prove their legitimacy, museums risk losing their qualitative depth and in-between spaces, reducing complex cultural factors to mere numbers and statistics. To conceive of an institution as radically democratic, Sternfeld emphasizes the necessity of confronting the inherent conflictuality of such a space for assembly and debate.⁴⁰ She enforces a genuine repoliticization: a recognition of the open-ended nature of politics and the necessity for the representation of conflict-ridden negotiations of power relations.⁴¹ The radically democratic museum is a practice that fosters dissent and brings to light what the dominant consensus tends to obscure, aiming to give a voice to those silenced within the existing hegemony. It is within this radical democratic discourse, structured by Sternfeld's insights, that the curatorial approaches to magical-realist knowledge production developed in this chapter are located. In this sense, Magical Realism is seen as a productive epistemological perspective, that correlates with Sternfeld's call for a repoliticization, in light of its capacity to sustain contradictory truths and refuse a single, hegemonic narrative enabling the conflictual space necessary for democratic dissent.

To approach Magical Realism from a curatorial perspective, the genre will be reflected on as an epistemological mode. This shift allows an engagement with Magical Realism beyond its aesthetic qualities as a critical framework for knowledge production that has, in its connection to fine arts and literature, been deeply defined by its socio-political awareness. These three approaches are based upon core principles of the genre as explored in the previous chapters, and translates them into three distinct, yet thoroughly interconnected curatorial approaches. *Relational Ontologies: Curating Coexisting Realities* foregrounds ontological simultaneity and multi-perspectival coexistence, *Fluid Temporalities: Disrupting Linear Timelines* challenges the logics of chronological time in exhibition design, and *The Politics of Memory: Interrogating the Archive* questions the institutional mechanisms of knowledge production and preservation.

Each of these approaches embodies a particular characteristic of magical realist methodologies, seeking concrete connections to curatorial praxis by grounding them in examples of artworks, exhibitions, and spatial imaginaries. While each approach focuses on a specific aspect of the genre, they are intrinsically linked, constantly informing and complementing one

⁴⁰ Nora STERNFELD, *Das Radikaldemokratische Museum*, Berlin/Boston 2018, p. 15-21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

another to form a cohesive methodology. For instance, one cannot effectively disrupt linear time without simultaneously challenging the archive that codifies it, nor can one truly live multiple realities without dismantling the singular timeline that enforces a single version of history. Together, they offer a comprehensive framework for curatorial practice that is firmly rooted in the radical democratic discourse outlined by Sternfeld, providing tools to navigate the complexities of the contemporary political and cultural landscape.

2.1 Relational Ontologies: Curating Coexisting Realities

The first curatorial approach proposed in this thesis grounds on the magical realist capacity for multiple realities to coexist at the same time. Drawing on Donna J. Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* and her conceptualization of the *Chthulucene*, this approach foregrounds the necessity of multi-species and multi-layered perspectival frameworks. Haraway's argument responds to the manifestation of the logics of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, epochs that characterize the significant impact of the human on Earth's geology, ecosystems, and societies. These dynamics are observable across contemporary political, media, and cultural spheres. Within the art world, this manifests visibly through the increasing dependence on private and corporate funding, which frequently entails implicit or explicit demands regarding representational content and institutional priorities. The logic of the Capitalocene, in Haraway's formulation, privileges those with economic power while marginalizing alternative epistemologies and ontologies.

Against this backdrop, Haraway proposes the *Chthulucene* as an alternative, a „timeplace (for) learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth.“⁴² *Staying with the trouble*, in Haraway's sense, is not passive endurance but active engagement. It is the capacity to become capable, to make kin, to stir up potent responses to devastating events. She sees *Staying with the Trouble* as a required learning to be truly present, to bring about change now, rather than later, when it might be too late.⁴³ This requires a shift from anthropocentric worldviews toward relational ontologies that recognize the agency of non-human entities. For curatorial practice, this translates into an ethical commitment to multi-species and multi-voiced representation that refuses hierarchical ordering. Crucially, also her use of the word responsibility, turning it into *response-ability* emphasizes this. By simple rewritings like this Haraway encourages a highly empowering language. This *response-ability* should also be in mind in the curatorial process. It embodies the power of imagining differently, of countering the state of overwhelm caused by the sheer quantity of pressing problems humanity is currently facing. It further emphasizes the power of the human, once they are in close

⁴² Donna J. HARAWAY, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham 2016, p. 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p 1.

interdependence with others of their kind, as well as with their environment around them. The literal title of the book summarizes this beautifully. *Staying with the trouble* doesn't sound easy, it understands that it will be a long state of resistance and fighting. However, it also has the power to change the world into a better place.

As mentioned in Chapter 1.1, Haraway's approach can be seen as a clear reference in the exhibition example by Zadie Xa. Xa created a state of plurality, letting multiple different species speak without any kind of hierarchy. Although different species communicate through modes distinct from human language, Xa emphasized their subject position and translated their agency into forms accessible to human audiences. This translation strategy facilitates the sharing of reality, making it legible to publics less accustomed to such ontological pluralism. Creating spaces like this is particularly relevant within magical realist curatorial practice, as it generates alternative realities that depart from dominant anthropocentric world views. Such methodologies can broaden narrowed horizons and enable the imagination and creation of new modes of cohabitation on the planet. Multiple realities in this sense reference the voices of different people from diverse continents, ages, genders, classes etc., as well as different species and entities.

In order to let multiple realities and perspectives co-exist, curatorial practice must first ensure the conditions for their development. Thus, the deployment of the notion of the commons as a structural component of curatorial praxis informed by magical realism, will be emphasized here. The implementation of commons-based approaches varies greatly according to structural conditions like institutional requirements, financial support, and time management. Institutional settings may facilitate the hiring of external experts, advisors or co-curators, but may operate with stricter guidelines and timelines. Independent curators, conversely, may retain greater agency regarding structural components, but often lack the resources necessary to fully implement their ideas. Regardless of the structural conditions, a commons based approach will present valuable in most settings.

Stephan Kuss conducted a comprehensive analysis of the commons in relation to curatorial practice, identifying several key qualities. On a structural level, this framework can create a divergent understanding of power relations. Typically, the curatorial remains subject to inherent power structures. Yet, when thinking them in conjunction, the organizational logic of the commons can decentralize the curatorial subject and redistribute agency across all parties involved in the curatorial situation.⁴⁴ Kuss argues, that curatorial commons possess the capacity to subvert inherent power relations and achieve a decentralization of the curatorial subject. He grounds these claims in four strategic frameworks: *Thinking oneself in Relationships* („Sich

⁴⁴ Stephan KUSS, Curatorial Commons. Über das Kuratorische als gemeinschaftsbasierte Praxis, Masterarbeit, Universität für angewandte Kunst, 2022, p. 64.

in Beziehung denken"), *Taking Time* („Sich Zeit nehmen"), *Opening and Appropriating Spaces* („Räume öffnen und aneignen"), and *Learning and Unlearning from Each Other* („Voneinander lernen und verlernen").

The principle of *Thinking oneself in Relationships*, is founded on the understanding that the communal and solidaric potential of the curatorial situation can only unfold through the coming together of individuals, who collaboratively and equitably address questions of jointly managed and utilized resources. The potential of curatorial commons thus emerges not from individual singularities, but from the combination of their relational networks. Furthermore, this collaboration is inherently processual and oriented toward long-term horizons, with authority distributed equally among participants.

The framework of *Allocating Time* is intrinsically connected to this approach and fundamentally departs from prevailing market and production logics. The collaborative and processual practices of curatorial commons sustainably query conventional understandings of temporality and efficiency. This assumption rests on the conviction that through sustained, processual engagement, not only the quality of work will be enhanced, but new relational formations emerge, that contribute to transforming our shared future.

Central to these processes is the third principle *Opening and Appropriating Spaces*. The capitalization and neoliberalization of society have rendered space an increasingly valuable and scarce commodity, prompting the development of commoning practices as a counter-reaction. This entails not merely the simple sharing of physical space, but also the cultivation of practices of sharing aimed at preserving and sustaining that space collectively.

The fourth and final principle in Kuss's analysis is *Learning and Unlearning from Each Other*. This is grounded in the fundamental premise that knowledge is always a cumulative resource, expanding and growing through the connections individuals forge and the experiences they mutually share. Collaborative knowledge structures thereby empower society to interrogate existing hegemonies and circumvent neoliberal forms of knowledge dispossession.⁴⁵

Kuss concludes by identifying two critical considerations that must remain central to this discourse and have to be acknowledged by all practitioners operating within these frameworks. Analogous to debates surrounding institutionalized works of institutional critique, one must ask whether the institutionalization of curatorial commons would neutralize their radical transformative capacity. In that sense, the question arises as to what extent it is genuinely possible to construct alternatives beyond market logics while remaining simultaneously embedded within it. Additionally, Kuss identifies another critical and potential danger regarding the risk of neoliberal co-optation. The risk exists that through the adoption of horizontal strategies and communization, these practices may be assimilated by neoliberal capitalism and ultimately subjected to privatization and their appropriation.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Stephan KUSS, *Curatorial Commons. Über das Kuratorische als gemeinschaftsbasierte Praxis*, Masterarbeit, Universität für angewandte Kunst, 2022, p. 76-91.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 99-100.

Whilst acknowledging these threats, the commons still formulate an emancipatory potential and are therefore seen as an important tool for approaching magical realist principles in curatorial practice. It is crucial to recognize that while the ultimate goal must be the transformation of the system itself, meaningful change cannot begin from a position of total detachment, without the backing of a substantial revolutionary movement. Until such a force is present, we must start by actively dismantling existing structures from within and demonstrating viable alternatives. Without this practical engagement, the system will never evolve. In this sense, the fear of neoliberal appropriation shouldn't stand in the way of creating alternative ways of working and living. In the spirit of *Staying with the Trouble*, this constitutes one way of alternative practice, that embodies the potential of creating different realities and ways of knowledge production. Should it turn out to fail, the next approach needs to be activated. Theorizing the curatorial commons aids in comprehending the emancipatory potential and the pressing need for collective thinking and praxis. Many technological advancements, originally envisioned as communicative forms of connection and sharing, have instead become devices that further distract and disengage people from one another and their environments. In this sense, magical realist practices should aim to extend beyond exhibiting practice alone. One strategy on how to approach this can be the public program.

2.1.2 Magical Realism. Imagining Natural Dis/order, WIELS

To address the role of the public program in this context, the exhibition *Magical Realism. Imagining Natural Dis/order* serves as a pivotal case study. Staged at the contemporary art centre WIELS in Brussels from May to September 2025, the project was curated by Sofia Dati, Helena Kritis and Dirk Snauwaert. The analysis presented here relies on direct correspondence and an interview with curator Sofia Dati, who shared the curatorial intent in the conception of the show. This exhibition functions as a key reference point for this thesis, as it utilized many of the proposed strategies collected here, and will thus be referenced multiple times throughout the subsequent thesis.

The curatorial aim of the show was not to assemble a collection of magical realist artworks, but to use magical realism as a prism through which to look at the natural world. The genre served as a framework to bring together new ways of relating to natural environments. Sofia Dati writes: „Magical Realism reflects on the role of imagination in the process of crafting alternative space-times, ones that would be inhabitable and unsubjected to ever-growing capital and networked technoscience.“ Thus, the curators sought to create a symbiosis where the coexistence of a plurality of cosmovisions led to a blurring between intangible worlds and verifiable facts.⁴⁷ In this sense, the exhibition presented a relevant example of leveraging existing imaginations to enable a critical re-thinking of what is presented as normative reality.

⁴⁷ Sofia DATI, A Prologue to *Magical Realism: Imagining Natural Dis/order*, in: Mercatorfonds, WIELS (Ed.), *Magical Realism. Imagining Natural Dis/order*, Brussels 2025, p. 11.

The structural composition and narrative of this exhibition will be subject to a thorough analysis in the following chapter, concerning notions of time and narrative. Especially relevant to the approach *Relational Ontologies*, is the way the curators conceived the public program. When asked about the significance of the public program, Dati emphasized that it was an integral component of the exhibition's conception. Closely referencing the exhibition's focus on living environments and our relationship to them, the curators deemed it crucial to propose moments of actual physical gathering and exchange. They prioritized the collective dimension, fostering an exchange with the public to open up new angles and questions, responding to this body of work based on conversational thinking. Furthermore, the curators collaborated with *Argos Centre for Audiovisual Art* in Brussels, to demonstrate that they are part of multiple conversations and embed themselves in the ecosystem they live in. The public program was constituted of diverse elements that ranged from traditional formats to immersive community engagements. Guided tours were conducted by curators and artists themselves to provide different viewpoints and reach various target audiences. A series of talks with artists and scholars expanded upon the themes instigated by the exhibition. Beyond these discursive events, the program incorporated lectures and performances to further explore the exhibition's core topics. In collaboration with Argos, talks with Brussel-based collectives, film-screenings, and a reading group were organized. A part of these initiatives were day events that included performances, film screenings, conversations, music, and food, creating space for connection and conversation to last longer than traditional formats with a short duration. Essentially, there was a deliberate engagement with the particular environment and ecosystem surrounding WIELS, extending into the city of Brussels itself. Collectives and communities were invited to share their work and organize activities in this context. For instance, the transdisciplinary artistic group *Nature Contract Lab* was invited to create a site-responsive artistic walk.

The public program for this exhibition, as outlined here, was a thoroughly researched and strategically deployed element of the exhibition. There was a clear effort to situate the institution within its local environment while simultaneously looking beyond its immediate borders. Through strategies like these, of local embedding, collaborative dialogue, and material connection to the physical environment, the curators laid the groundwork for addressing the audience as active agents with the capacity for integration and agency. Significantly, the curators did not limit themselves to the local, but included multiple perspectives and worked to juxtapose Brussels-based positions with international voices from diverse temporal and geographical backgrounds.⁴⁸ This alignment of local specificity with global plurality exemplifies the curatorial potential of *relational ontologies*, where the exhibition becomes a node in a wider network of resistance and re-imagination.

⁴⁸ Interview with Sofia Dati on March 06, 2026.

Theoretically, this aligns with what Beatrice von Bismarck conceptualizes as *the curatorial condition*. She defines the curatorial as „a field of cultural activity and knowledge that relates to the becoming-public of art and culture as a domain of practice and meaning with its own structures, conditions, rules and procedures.“ One part that constitutes the curatorial condition is what she terms „curatoriality“, which shifts the emphasis toward the interplay of factors constituting the curatorial process, rather than foregrounding its partial or fragmented definitions. Through this focus on the relational fabric of the curatorial situation, greater attention can be directed toward the possibilities for action it affords. In recent years, exhibitions have increasingly been understood as cultural products in their own right. They vary considerably in their realization regarding temporality, media, and form, and are not necessarily unified by their presentation of material objects. Nevertheless, they are invariably shaped by the presence of a public, by narratives and discourses, and by processes of value attribution. Building on this, von Bismarck concludes that the exhibition format possesses an inherent potential for action. She draws a comparison to performative art, underscoring how exhibitions have the capacity to transform viewer relations, generate new connections, and compel participants to reflect upon how meaning is itself processed and produced. Furthermore, von Bismarck identifies several pathways for departing from established forms of knowledge, which she terms decontextualization, repetition, subjectivization, and collectivization. Through these four parameters, the political dimension of the curatorial becomes manifest. Von Bismarck emphasizes that the broader societal context is inherently situated within the field of art, such that all its conflicts, debates, and imbalances remain open to redefinition as new links can be forged from them.⁴⁹

Within the specific curatorial framework of *relational ontologies*, the parameters of subjectivization and collectivization emerge as particularly interdependent. Both von Bismarck's theoretical propositions and the practical case study outlined previously converge on the imperative to use this potential of the curatorial process. This alignment becomes critically urgent against the backdrop of the shrinking of public space and the increasing commodification and capitalization of the mainstream art sector. Consequently, the responsibility of artistic and cultural communities to actively counteract this fragmentation must be brought to the fore, positioning the curatorial act not merely as a mode of display, but as a vital mechanism for combining relational networks.

Relational Ontologies: Curating Coexisting Realities is thus informed by the ontological shift of the *Chthulucene*, enforcing a worldview that transcends anthropocentric, capitalist, and neoliberal paradigms. It mandates a curatorial praxis rooted in community, exchange, and relationality, prioritizing the sharing of perspectives across a vast spectrum of human and non-human voices. Employing notions of the commons, the curatorial process is founded on distributed authorship and collective agency. Additionally, the public program is elevated and treated

⁴⁹ Beatrice VON BISMARCK, *The Curatorial Condition*, London/Berlin 2022, p. 8 - 21.

as a substantial part of the curatorial process. The act of coming together and exchange is the very mechanism through which the magic of magical realism is enacted. By transforming the exhibition into a site of active, physical gathering and conversational thinking, the program does not merely explain the themes but materializes the coexistence of realities in real-time. Central to this approach is the cultivation of *response-ability*, an active, ethical commitment to non-human life and the environment that demands a heightened awareness of our interdependence. By navigating between varied perspectives and encouraging a critical reconsideration of one's own position, this framework enforces the understanding of the exhibition as a dynamic site of collective becoming. These strategies should aid in the creation of space, resisting the fragmentation of the public sphere and forging new pathways for collective survival and imagination.

2.2 Fluid Temporalities: Disrupting Linear Timelines

The second curatorial approach of this thesis is based on another foundational element of magical realist praxis, that simultaneously challenges the hegemonic narratives of the Capitalocene. Magical Realism understands that time, progress, and humanity itself are not constructed along a linear timeline, but are fluid and pluralistic dimensions. Traditional accounts of art and history have notoriously been constructed along a singular timeline written predominantly by a specific demographic. These largely white and cis-male authorities were capable of projecting their version of reality as the sole truth for a long time. In contrast, the principles of Magical Realism question this perspective, whilst acknowledging and venerating the non-linearity of time. This can take many forms, whether through the coexistence of the living and the dead, the adherence to the cyclical rhythms of nature, or the integration of ancient memory. This chapter explores how these ontological shifts can manifest in curatorial practices.

Central to this translation is the concept of *defocalization*, as discussed in chapter 1.2. This technique was previously discussed in magical realist literature, where it was frequently used to question the norms of realistic representation. Its ability to destabilize the narrative voice is particularly relevant in the museum context. Words will always be our introduction to an exhibition visit, whether through titles, digital material previously seen online, or wall texts. Written discourse typically frames the visitor's first encounter with the exhibition's thematic scope. This is compounded by the auditory landscape: the spoken exchanges between staff and guides, or the ambient „white noise“ of visitor conversation. Few institutional exhibitions lack wall texts, and none are devoid of spoken discourse, thus, the narrative voice is always present. By engaging with the potential for a destabilized narrative voice, curators can deploy a powerful tool to interrogate the authority of the institution itself.

A pertinent case study illustrating this strategy is the exhibition: *Punk: Its Traces in Contemporary Art*, staged in 2015 at the Centro de Arte 2 de Mayo in Madrid. In her analysis of the show, curator Emma Brasó highlights two works by the parafictional artist Claire Fontaine that exemplify this disruption. Fontaine presented four framed, signed, yet blank cheques issued by each of the artist's commercial galleries, alongside a brick wrapped in the cover of Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle* (1967). While the framed works were displayed in separate rooms, the physical presence of the brick implicitly suggested the possibility of shattering the frames to claim the cheques, which functioned as a gesture of institutional critique embedded within the display. Crucially, the wall labels accompanying these works contained deliberate contradictions: one identified Fontaine as a collective founded in Paris in 2004, while another described the artist as an individual born in Barcelona in 1958. This inconsistency generated a moment of rupture, or at least, confusion. While not all viewers may have registered the discrepancy, those who encountered this ambiguity were compelled to adopt a more active, investigative stance. It presented an impulse to delve deeper into the given material, to look and read more attentively, in order to get to the bottom of this incongruity. Such a simple yet potent strategy effectively encourages the audience to question the apparent neutrality and veracity of the museum institution, while hinting at the constructed nature of biographical and historical data.⁵⁰

The principle of *defocalization* can be further expanded when combined with other narrative strategies to foster empathy for alternative perspectives. One of the most profound capacities of art is its ability to facilitate the experience of realities distinct from one's own - a skill that feels increasingly essential in an era that values the individual more than the community. Curatorially, this could be achieved through the deliberate construction of polyphonic narratives that do not merely represent different human subjectivities but extend to a broader horizon. In connection to previously explored examples, this would expand to the perspectives of non-human entities, such as animals, flora, water, light, or elemental forces.

To construct such scenarios, curators might employ specific literary devices and adapt them for spatial experience. These include the detailed description of extraordinary events to allow disparate worlds to coexist and to broaden the horizon of what seems possible. Furthermore, experimentation with pronominal shifts (moving between first, second, and third person), the manipulation of active and passive voice, and the strategic use of repetition can prove highly productive for playing with perceptions of reality and the „truth“. For instance, repetition could be utilized to re-contextualize a historical event. In the context of a contemporary art museum, a visitor might first encounter a standard and seemingly neutral and analytical presentation of an event consistent with eurocentric dominant ideologies and complemented with documentary photos and wall texts that present a facade of neutrality. By employing the motif of repeti-

⁵⁰ Emma BRASÓ, Exhibiting Parafictional Artists: Curatorial Approaches to Fiction and Authorship, in: *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, 10,1,2021, p. 62.

tion, curators could create additional spatial nodes that recount the same event through divergent lenses, explicitly incorporating non-hegemonic narratives and marginalized voices. This strategy is particularly vital when addressing the fact that history was written by the victors. By juxtaposing the dominant narrative with alternative accounts, the exhibition would not simply offer a different opinion, but reveal the constructed nature of the „truth“ itself, inviting the visitor to navigate the friction between competing realities and recognize the plurality of historical experience. It is precisely this claim to objective neutrality that requires interrogation. This is a very complex undertaking, as it navigates the delicate terrain of factual evidence. However, as Donna J. Haraway had already explored in her work *Situated Knowledges: The Science question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* from 1988, all knowledge is inherently „situated“ and partial. There is no „view from nowhere“. ⁵¹ Therefore, this curatorial approach does not seek to negate scientific or historical rigor, but rather to enforce a delicate and reflective stance toward it.

Fundamentally, the deployment of *defocalization* in this curatorial framework serves to construct productive ambiguity. As museums and cultural institutions increasingly face immense pressure to deliver definitive narratives, provide answers to pressing issues, and seamless educational outcomes, there is a need to resist the demand for total clarity. Rather than viewing ambiguity as a deficit, we must reconceptualize it as a vital space for dissent, conflict, and the coexistence of multiple perspectives. Mutually, we would learn to welcome the friction that arises when singular truths are disrupted. Museum exhibitions should be empowered to be more than sites of transmission, that deliver answers to a passive audience, but as sites of inquiry and curiosity that actively provoke discourse. By refusing to present a singular „truth“, the curator invites the visitor to engage in the labor of meaning-making, acknowledging that knowledge is always partial, contested, and situated. Ultimately, the goal is to sustain the tension between competing realities, thereby creating a dynamic environment where the question remains as important as the answer.

Traditionally, exhibition design has been heavily reliant on chronological frameworks. While such structures are undeniably very effective and logical for specific historical trajectories, this approach also argues that they are neither the sole, nor always the optimal method for organizing curatorial narratives. Similarly, organizing exhibitions along narrative lines or by genre, while logically coherent, can inadvertently constrain curatorial agency. By restricting the selection to works produced within the same timeframe or sharing similar motifs, the potential for productive juxtaposition, where artworks from disparate contexts engage in a dynamic dialogue, is constrained. This seems especially relevant now, with regard to a certain

⁵¹ Donna J. HARAWAY, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: *Feminist Studies*, 14, 3, 1988, p. 575-599.

atemporality visible in online realms. Artworks from all kinds of contexts and backgrounds are consumed in a state of constant motion, swiping from one post to the next. This entails not only issues with respect to complex contents that risk being overlooked in favor of easily recognizable and quickly consumable fragments, but also a loss of complexity.⁵² A critical curating praxis can provide exactly this complexity, that is being increasingly lost in digital media consumption. In addition to the creation of actual physical space, the juxtaposition of diverse works allows them to „speak“ to one another across time and medium, acknowledging changing viewing behaviors and audiences, and adapting them instead of ignoring them, or subordinating to them. Limiting this scope to temporal proximity can potentially suppress the emergence of unforeseen meanings and connections.

This perspective resonates with the „relational approach“ proposed by cultural studies scholar Ella Shohat. Shohat advocates for a fundamental redefinition of art practice, urging a shift from viewing history as *synchronic* (fixed in time), to *dialogic* (an ongoing conversation). By reconciling history as multifocal and non-linear, this approach seeks to transgress rigid boundaries of nationhood, periodization, and gender-based hierarchies. In practice, a relational curatorial strategy presents multiplicity as an ongoing dialogue, allowing a multitude of voices to resonate simultaneously. This involves valuing all cultural production on equal footing with canonical fine art, and deliberately looking beyond the mainstream canon of established artists. Crucially, this framework positions the viewer not as a passive recipient, but as an active participant in the construction of meaning. This approach mostly pertains to group exhibitions that focus on contemporary art and is only rarely used for exhibitions that highlight artists from the past. However, as Maura Reilly notes, such exhibitions often face criticism and misunderstanding. Audiences that are accustomed to the security of chronological narratives and recognizable names, may feel disoriented by shows featuring many unfamiliar artists combined with non-linear structures.⁵³

As a paradigmatic example of this methodology, Reilly references the exhibition *Carambolages*, which was organized by Jean-Hubert Martin for the Grand Palais in Paris in 2016. The show presented a selection of 184 objects selected through an ahistorical, non-chronological, and anti-categorical lens. The objects were both artworks and artifacts and were chosen „for their formal similarities or poetic affinities“. As Martin arranged the works, each piece was positioned to depend visually or conceptually on its predecessor while simultaneously „announcing“ its successor, creating a continuous, flowing sequence. The exhibition stripped away traditional wall labels, relegating contextual information to a downloadable smartphone guide. Thereby they forced the viewer to be an active participant in the construction of meaning, relying on their immediate visual and intuitive engagement.

⁵² See: FAKEWHALE, The Ontology of flow: The Aesthetics Of Permanent Discontinuity (12 April 2026), URL: <https://log.fakewhale.xyz/the-ontology-of-flow-the-aesthetics-of-permanent-discontinuity/>, (last accessed on: 23 April 2026).

⁵³ Maura REILLY, Curatorial Activism. Towards an Ethics of Curating, London 2021, p. 29-32.

By presenting a multitude of seemingly disconnected objects, from ancient artifacts to contemporary masterpieces, without hierarchical distinction, Martin aimed to dismantle the traditional art-historical canon, transgressing the borders of genre, era, or culture. The exhibition highlighted the continuity of human creativity that transcends the big „-isms“ used to categorize artistic styles. *Carambolages* issued a critique of the canon itself by demonstrating that the power of an exhibition lies not in its adherence to history, but in its capacity to forge new, unexpected relationships across time and culture.⁵⁴

Building on the previous discussion of *Magical Realism. Imagining Natural Dis/order*, this section re-engages with the exhibition to specifically explore its narrative framework. The exhibition's narrative was constructed along four characters that embodied „the strangeness attributed to the infiltration of magical occurrences within the narration of realistic, earthly matters.“⁵⁵ The Wild, The Witch, The Shape-Shifter, and The Time Traveller each represented a distinct facet of magical realist thought. „The Wild“ was invoked to represent the untamed potential of life in a contemporary era accelerated by extraction, pollution, and exhaustion. As an entity thriving on disorder and chaos, „The Wild“ served as a relational force that transcended fixed boundaries and governable territories. „The Witch“ entered the narrative as a symbol of the patriarchal impulse to eradicate magic from the societal worldview. Deeply entwined with feminist history and the violence of patriarchy, the witch underscored the multiplicity of reality, opening portals that created space for regeneration, transformation, and resistance. Finally, the figures of „The Time Traveller“ and „The Shape-Shifter“ embodied the negation of linear timelines and static identities, guiding the visitor along trajectories that deliberately deviated from conventional notions of progress and development.

Sofia Dati further elucidated that these characters were designed to operate within a framework of porosity, as they were, to a certain extent, interchangeable. The curatorial team initially planned the exhibition based on parameters of thematic juxtaposition and spatial necessity, but made a strategic decision to abandon genre-based organizational strategies. They actively refused to adhere to a rigid classification system, fearing that such an approach would reproduce the hierarchical dichotomy between the „magical“ and the „scientific“. Instead, through this structural porosity, the exhibition sought to underscore a fundamental thesis: that our known reality is constituted by diverse epistemologies and relationships toward our environments, and that new insights emerge precisely when these distinct modes of knowing are brought into convergence.

This commitment to porous, non-hierarchical structures finds a striking parallel in the curatorial strategies discussed previously, particularly in *the relational approach* exemplified by the

⁵⁴ Maura REILLY, *Curatorial Activism. Towards an Ethics of Curating*, London 2021, p. 32-33.

⁵⁵ Sofia DATI, A Prologue to *Magical Realism: Imagining Natural Dis/order*, in: Mercatorfonds, WIELS (Ed.), *Magical Realism. Imagining Natural Dis/order*, Brussels 2025, p. 11

exhibition *Carambolages*. Just as *Magical Realism* utilized interchangeable characters to dissolve the boundary between the magical and the scientific, *Carambolages* employed an ahistorical selection to dissolve hierarchical categorization between works. Both cases demonstrate that when curators relinquish the safety of chronological or genre-based taxonomies, they create a space where unexpected affinities can emerge. Where *Magical Realism* used narrative allegory, *Carambolages* used visual and poetic resonance, demonstrating that the disruption of linearity can be achieved through both storytelling and spatial arrangement.

Expanding upon the porous, narrative-driven structures discussed in the *Magical Realism* exhibition, another theoretical framework will be explored here, providing further impulses that can prove relevant for the production of curatorial narratives: David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan's theory of „Fictioning“. In their collective analysis, they trace the concept of fictioning, or mythopoesis, which broadly names the world-making character of certain practices or presentations, through a wide study of philosophical, theoretical, literary, and artistic practices. They propose mythopoesis as a mode of addressing a people who are perceptive to those new and different worlds. This approach aligns closely with the magical realist conception of time by calling forth „future-images“ of people and worlds, that are manifested within the present, in order to summon new times and relations from within. Drawing on Félix Guattari, they frame fiction as a resource in the production of different kinds of subjectivity, where Guattari's concept of „fabulous images“ functions as „points of subjectification.“⁵⁶ Similar to the previously discussed principles of Magical Realism, Burrows and O'Sullivan position mythopoesis as involved in the disruption of the dominant fiction of the self. Crucially, fictioning does not promise another world or an escape from the currently established one. Instead it helps to establish diverse conditions for the production of a different mode of being.⁵⁷ Translated into curatorial practice, this condition also emphasizes exhibitions as spaces of narrative production, in which visitors are addressed as participants within unfolding, speculative worlds.

In a subsequent article, Simon O'Sullivan focuses on fictioning as an art-practice, a distinction that can prove equally productive for thinking about curatorial practice. The foundation of his argument rests on the distinction between art as a practice, rather than as the production of a commodity.⁵⁸ This practice results from a „spatio-temporal density“, that produces a different space-time altogether and is achieved through processes of spatial and temporal layering. O'Sullivan conceives of spatial fictioning as the production of untimely images that speak back to their producer. This aligns with Beatrice von Bismarck's notion of *curatoriality*, where the focus shifts to the staging of encounters, and where the interplay of all components of the exhibition itself generates something unforeseen, an „objectness“ that exceeds the curator's

⁵⁶ David BURROWS, Simon O'SULLIVAN, *Fictioning. The myth-functions of contemporary art and philosophy*, Edinburgh 2019, p.15-16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 16-18.

⁵⁸ O'Sullivan, Simon: *Art-Practice as Fictioning (or, myth-science)* (4.03.2015), URL: <https://www.simonosullivan.net/articles/art-practice-as-fictioning-or-myth-science.pdf>, p. 6 (last accessed on 12.04.2026).

original intention. The images, objects, texts, and visitors in dialogue produce meanings and affective resonances that can never be fully anticipated, effectively allowing the exhibition to speak back and challenge the curator's initial framework. The temporal layering (or fictioning) treats time itself as a material. Moving beyond the presentation of artworks as isolated commodities in a linear historical narrative, temporal fictioning operates through the recurrence of motifs, the nesting of fictions within fictions, and the splicing of fragments drawn from disparate temporal registers. Past, present, and future coexist within the exhibition space, creating what O'Sullivan calls an „aesthetic ecology.“⁵⁹ In this sense, *aesthetic ecology* resonates with the *relational approach* sketched above, as with the quality of *disrupting linear timelines* itself. Speculative fabulations can prove to be relevant additions to more traditional notions of exhibition practice. This approach further aligns with Magical Realism's capacity to combine the real with the fictional as entangled modes of knowing. By refusing the dominant codes of art-historical knowledge production, such curatorial strategies can generate „points of collapse“, where hegemonic narratives fracture, enabling new subjectivities and collective imaginaries to emerge.⁶⁰ In this sense, fictioning can become a method for reclaiming the unconscious dimensions of cultural memory, and empowering transformative change through curatorial world-making.

The devices employed in magical realist writing thus constitute a theoretical and practical toolkit for reimagining the narration and conceptual architecture of exhibition settings. Following this logic, a curatorial practice informed by these principles demands considerate attention to questions of perspective, binary thinking, notions of time and linearity, as well as the embedded power structures within traditional forms of knowledge. The imperative to remain open and to revise one's position when it proves untenable, lies at the very foundation of this approach. This toolkit should be understood not merely as a resource for textual production, but as impulses for experimental world-making in the conception of the exhibition itself. Essentially, this methodology resonates with a broader, interdisciplinary scholarship that has long advocated for juxtaposition, porosity, and non-hierarchical assembly in contemporary exhibitions. They have demonstrated that the power of the exhibition lies precisely in its capacity to collapse boundaries. By drawing on these diverse intellectual lineages, the magical realist framework offers a potent synthesis, since it provides strategies that can prove useful to operationalize the ethical imperatives proposed by these scholars. Ultimately, it invites us to embrace the productive ambiguity of the curatorial situation, where the friction between competing realities generates new forms of knowledge. In doing so, we do not simply display objects, but stage a reflective space where the „truth“ is a continuous, collective process of becoming.

⁵⁹ O'Sullivan, Simon: Art-Practice as Fictioning (or, myth-science) (4.03.2015), URL: <https://www.simonosullivan.net/articles/art-practice-as-fictioning-or-myth-science.pdf>, p. 5-6.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

2.3 The Politics of Memory: Interrogating the Archive

The final curatorial approach is situated in the context of the incredibly valuable work of many cultural workers and scholars, who have started to rigorously re-evaluate and criticize the status of archival practice in the last decades. In front of the backdrop of all the ambiguities and potentials of Magical Realism, it is necessary to reflect on the politics of history, archiving, and canonization. The difficulty of defining Magical Realism itself exposes the inherent flaws of categorical thinking: there will always be phenomena that refuse to fit into prefabricated drawers. Art history has traditionally been written along a timeline, emphasizing the new, while being simultaneously based on renewal and the circularity of themes, ideas, and symbols. However, the foundational problematics permeating the Eurocentric art-historical canon, including the exclusion of marginalized narratives, has been the subject of critical discourse for several decades. Since the 1970s, scholars from the fields of feminist, postcolonial, and gender studies have brought these dynamics of exclusion and prejudice to the forefront, and in recent years, the dimension of class has increasingly entered these debates. Integral to this critique is the interrogation of the archive itself. Critical engagement with archival practice necessitates interrogating what is archived, from whose perspective, the quality of documentation including questions about what is inherently non-archivable, as well as the accessibility of information. Archives are not neutral repositories, but are inevitably haunted by histories intricately linked to violence and power relations. Consequently, the authority to determine what is remembered has often been held by those in power. Thus, the structures and interests that constitute the framework of archives effectively frame cultural work itself.

Within major institutions, cultural workers are often constrained by rigid frameworks, hierarchical governance, and protracted negotiation processes, thereby slowing institutional change. Conversely, in recent decades, numerous independent cultural practitioners have assumed the issue of the archive, staging interventions, or establishing entirely new archival infrastructures. Forerunners of this movement are undoubtedly queer communities that were historically subjected to significant silencing and oppression. Many queer museums have emerged from individual initiatives and remain subject to precarious financial conditions. These institutions and their associated archives are often constructed through the initiative and unpaid labour of individuals dedicated to the cause. Notable examples include the archive of *Qwien*, an association for queer culture and history in Vienna, which maintains an analog archive collecting donations from individuals and associations, documenting exhibitions, events, and projects across diverse media.⁶¹ Similarly, the *Ca La Dona Archive* in Barcelona, is dedicated to preserving and visibilizing the work and lives of women, lesbians, and trans people

⁶¹ See: <https://www.qwien.at/qwien-sammlung/#archiv>.

throughout history.⁶² Especially relevant in the context of documenting cultural work and discourse, is the *Archiv der Vermittlung* (Archive of Art Education), an initiative that started to collect and document knowledge and practical examples about art education.⁶³ As a last example, the Library of Civil Disobedience will be referenced here, as an example for art practices that actively enforce political action and awareness.⁶⁴ All of these initiatives are confronted with similar challenges regarding their archival work: issues dealing with financing, the navigation of personal biases that might influence the archival process, questions about what is worth archiving, as well as strategies for accessibility. Yet, their very existence constitutes a political act and a refusal to let history be written solely by those in power.

The curatorial approaches informed by Magical Realism formulated here are situated within this context. Many magical principles, like the symbiosis of life with nature and the environment, or non-dualistic world views, have historically threatened the development of capitalism and the subsequent writing of the canon. In this context, the re-appropriation of these principles in cultural production and community building appears particularly relevant. Consequently, a structural examination of the infrastructure within which one operates becomes a necessity.

Following the elaboration on the concept of *Fictioning* in the preceding chapter, the focus turns to a practical example connecting this practice with the notion of the archive. An art project that has itself achieved canonical status due to its impact on discussions surrounding the role of archives in collective memory, historiography, and contemporary art is *The Atlas Group* project by artist Walid Raad. Dating from 1989 to 2004, the project was established as a means to research and document the recent history of Lebanon, specifically focusing on the period between 1975 and 1991, which encompassed the Lebanese Civil War. The Atlas Group archive comprised both found and produced documents, including notebooks, interview transcripts, objects, films, video footage, photographs, and collages. What makes this project essential to this thesis is Raad's deliberate employment of fiction, conflicting information, and ambiguity, as archival strategies. The archive was systematically divided into three categories: Type A (documents produced by the Atlas Group that were attributed to named imaginary individuals or organizations), Type FD (documents produced by the Atlas Group that were attributed to anonymous individuals or organizations), and Type AGP (documents produced and attributed to the Atlas Group).⁶⁵

⁶² See: <https://centredoc.caladona.org/>.

⁶³ The archive is accessible online, see: <https://archivdervermittlung.at/>.

⁶⁴ See: https://www.instagram.com/locd_austria?igsh=emoyaDNqeW0xY2xx, their project about the archive of ephemeral forms of protest can be accessed through this link: <https://www.hinterland.ag/protestarchiv>.

⁶⁵ Nicolas LAMBOURIS, *Fabricating. Facts and fiction in the work of the Atlas Group*, in: *Photographies*, 7, 12, 2014, p. 163-179, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2014.943022>.

A quintessential example of this methodology is the work *Missing Lebanese Wars_Notebook Volume 72*, a document from *Volume 1: The Truth Will be Known When the Last Witness is Dead*. This document is attributed to Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, a prominent fictional figure in the Atlas Archives. He is presented as a historian of the Lebanese wars and left 226 notebooks and 2 short films behind to be donated to the archive. *Volume 72* comprises 21 images documenting a group of historians, representing Marxists, Islamists, Maronite nationalists and socialists, who place bets on horse races. Presented are detailed records of their gambling activities, including photographic newspaper clippings, notations on the race's distance and duration, the top horses finishing time, calculations of averages, as well as the individuals bets and the time discrepancy predicted by the successful bettor. However, the records don't document their bets on the race's victor, but on the exact distance of the winning horse from the finish line as it appears in the photograph published in the following day's newspaper.

Ironically touching on their profession as historians, they are occupied with the inaccuracy of representation and the gap between the event and its documentation. By betting on the *image* of the event rather than the event itself, they highlight the inherent unreliability of the photographic record as a historical source. Through the creation of this fictitious scenario, which notably is presented in a thoroughly detailed manner, Raad opened a profound discussion on historical factual accuracy and the writing of history itself. Furthermore, he was looking for ways to represent historical experience more adequately, reflecting on the intense psychological trauma in violent situations, and the difficulty of processing and transmitting such experiences. The title, *The Truth Will be Known When the Last Witness is Dead*, encapsulates this paradox. History is always written in retrospect, rendering it susceptible to the framing of dominant narratives and the divide into periods of success or decline. Raad thus initiated an intricate process of reflection that connects these fictionalized facts to the museum itself as a keeper of historical objects and arbiter of value.⁶⁶

Regardless of the medium, Raad processes all of his work digitally and rarely exhibits material without some form of public presentation. During performances, the artist presented himself as a representative of the foundation, introducing the work of the imaginary authors of the materials in the archive that he created. Following the lecture, a question-and-answer section was staged, wherein audience queries were planted to steer the conversation. These were also meant to aid in unveiling the project's fictional dimension, in case anyone hadn't deciphered the ruse. With reference to Rancière's famous assertion that „the real had to be fictionalized in order to be thought“, fiction functioned as the means and never the end of Raad's work.⁶⁷ In a context where official records were destroyed, censored, or manipulated by warring factions, Raad's „fake“ archive revealed the emotional and psychological truth of the war more accurately than any factual document could. The project can be seen as an investigation

⁶⁶ Nicolas LAMBOURIS, *Fabricating. Facts and fiction in the work of the Atlas Group*, in: *Photographies*, 7, 12, 2014, p. 163-179, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2014.943022>, p. 173-177.

⁶⁷ Alan GILBERT, *Walid Raad's Spectral Archive, Part I: Historiography as Process*, in: *e-flux Journal*, 69, 2016, URL: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60594/walid-raad-s-spectral-archive-part-i-historiography-as-process> (last accessed on: April 19 2026).

into the mechanisms of how memory is produced, constituting any archive as a compendium of present knowledge. It demonstrates that when the „real“ archive is insufficient, fiction becomes the only viable method of preservation.

Building on Raad's exploration of fiction as a tool for engaging with history, Claire Bishop extends this inquiry into the temporal dimension, arguing that museums must similarly navigate multiple, overlapping timeframes to activate their political potential in the present. Her text *Radical Museology, or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?*, though published over a decade ago, retains its urgency regarding the political agency of museums. With her concept of „dialectical contemporaneity“, Bishop introduces an approach to curating that seeks to navigate multiple temporalities within a political horizon. She asks *why* certain temporalities appear in particular works of art at specific historical moments, instead of always working with all temporalities in each object. Her analysis is motivated by a desire to „understand our present condition and how to change it.“⁶⁸

Bishop presents three case studies of museums that utilized their permanent collections and approached them with contemporary questions to transcend categorization. In the face of budgetary limitations, she argues, that a museum's collection can be an underestimated tool to break the stasis of „presentism“⁶⁹ by forcing us to think in several tenses simultaneously, namely the past perfect (what was) and the future anterior (what will have been). In engaging with a collection, curators deal with objects that were considered culturally significant in the past, alongside more recent acquisitions anticipated to be important in the future. Bishop applauds these curators, who have clearly positioned themselves and their institutions, approaching the permanent collection from a contemporary viewpoint that acknowledges its historical baggage.⁷⁰

One case study is particularly relevant in the context of this thesis, regarding its application of the magical realist principle of repetition. Specifically, she talks about the MSUM (Moderna Galerija) in Ljubljana. Bishop observes that the museum's entire display was organized around thematic categories relating to overlapping temporalities. This created a sense of timelessness, in which contemporary art became infused with multiplicity and geared towards the imagination of a future in which social equality prevails. The institution publicly positioned itself as committed to taking „the side of traditions that have historically proven to have emancipatory social potential.“ Facing budget cuts, they began staging repetitions, emphasizing re-reading as a fundamental feature of contemporary art and repetition as the very mechanism that constructs history. This dynamic re-reading pulled into the foreground what had been sidelined, repressed, or discarded by dominant classes, using culture as a primary means for

⁶⁸ Claire BISHOP, *Radical museology, or, what's 'contemporary' in museums of contemporary art?*, London 2013, p. 23.

⁶⁹ As „presentism“ Bishop describes the condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24-27.

visualizing alternatives.⁷¹ By repeating the exhibition, the museum did not merely recycle content, but it performed a ritual of remembrance, acknowledging that history is not a finished product, but an ongoing negotiation. This aligns closely with the magical realist capacity to collapse time, allowing the past to speak directly to the present, and the future to intervene in the now.

Central to this framework is the necessity of positioning, a principle that resonates across all three curatorial approaches. Aligning with Oliver Marcharts theory, these approaches reflect on the curatorial function as the organization of the public sphere, a domain that emerges only through the eruption of debate among participants. Here, curatorial practice is linked directly to the organization of conflict or antagonism. Like political praxis, it aims at the impossible, challenging the boundaries of what the hegemonic order deems as such. Essentially, for an exhibition to become a public sphere, it must adopt a distinct stance and position. Marchart argues for an antagonistic position coupled with collective praxis, creating the space for solidarity among those who oppose the dominant hegemonic structure.⁷²

The curatorial approaches outlined in this chapter share a common aim: to disrupt the authority of the singular, official narrative. Just as the genre of Magical Realism itself has evolved to challenge linear temporality and classification, our approach to the archive must shift to a more dynamic interactivity. By treating the archive as a living, contested site of memory, curators can foster environments where marginalized voices, suppressed histories, and speculative futures occupy the same discursive plane. In doing so, they do not merely add missing pieces to the puzzle, but they fundamentally reconfigure the puzzle itself, inviting the visitor to participate in the labor of rewriting history. This shift from transmission to co-production aligns with the broader ethical imperative of contemporary curatorial practice, which is to acknowledge the situatedness of all knowledge, to welcome dissent, and to recognize that the most transformative exhibitions are those that leave the archive open, unfinished, and haunted by the ghosts of what was left unsaid.

⁷¹ Claire BISHOP, *Radical museology, or, what's 'contemporary' in museums of contemporary art?*, London 2013, p. 49-56.

⁷² Oliver MARCHART, *The Curatorial Function - Organizing the Ex/position*, in: Marianne EIGENHEER (Ed.), *Curating Critique*, Frankfurt 2007, p. 164-169.

3 Conclusio

In acknowledgement of the inherent ambiguity of the genre's title, as well as the fluid and critical dimensions that characterize Magical Realism as a category, this thesis looked beyond the borders of the genre. By examining its origin and evolution, this work moved past a purely aesthetic definition, to interrogate Magical Realism as a critical mode of knowledge production. This approach allowed for the recognition of recurring motives, providing a comprehensive insight into the similarities and differences through the years, with an additional focus on the social and political conditions of our contemporary moment. While the early 20th century grappled with the aftermath of industrialization and war, the contemporary moment is defined by the severe consequences of late-stage capitalism, neoliberal market logics, and the slow erasure of uncontrolled democratic public spaces. Given neoliberalism's attempt to appropriate magical practices and ideologies, a practice that has already succeeded in many other cases, it felt crucial to highlight the genre's socio-political awareness and subversive power. In this context, the *magic* of Magical Realism was highlighted as a powerful tool to criticize rigid hierarchical structures and unjust power mechanisms. It fundamentally wanted to question notions of truth and reality that are enforced upon society by a powerful elite, that has successfully created a myriad of diversions and fights between people. I would argue, that in a magical realist perspective truth and reality are always seen as contested spaces that need multiple perspectives, and are understood as situated and subjective. Only in their combination can they propose moments of genuinity. Faced with significant setbacks in women's rights all over the planet, with rising racism and xenophobia, this thesis wanted to clearly embed the popular interest in these magical aesthetics in its historical context. The consumable „witchy“ aesthetic that is so fashionable in pop-culture at the moment risks losing its contextual background, which is deeply linked to patriarchal and capitalist mechanisms with the goal of controlling women. In this way the difference between expression and repression needs to be understood, which I see as deeply connected to this regression in our society's world views. Magical realist epistemologies offer a way to resist the homogenizing forces of the *Capitalocene* and the demand for total clarity, proposing instead a space for ambiguity, dissent, imagination, and the coexistence of multiple truths. This power is inherently linked to the enforcement of *response-ability* as an active ethical commitment that counters the mechanisms of distraction and separation that dominate our public and cultural spheres.

This thesis tried to use the logic of Magical Realism to imagine alternative systems or structures in a curatorial context. By identifying magical realist motives and principles, key aspects of the genre could be transferred into curatorial discourse and practice, with the goal to enforce agency, curiosity, and to refuse the neoliberal agendas that seem to be taking over every aspect of our lives. Deeply founded in the genre's origins in painting in the early 20th century, the former artist's questioning of the very existence of the object world itself to uncover a de-

eper layer of understanding reality, was transferred to question highly accepted notions of reality. By isolating some of the genre's formal mechanisms, such as the coexistence of multiple realities, the fluidity of time, and the destabilization of the authoritative narrative voice, three interdependent curatorial frameworks emerged. These approaches are united by a shared imperative: to underscore the need for multi-species living, to reconnect us with each other and our environment, and to embrace ambiguity. They collectively demand a rigorous questioning of power structures, also in relation to money, history, and time itself. As has been shown, these perspectives are deeply embedded within contemporary curatorial discourse. These overlaps have been explored thoroughly and expanded through magical realist perspectives. Through discussing various examples in close detail, a practical dimension was added to this theoretical guideline. The thesis navigated through a variety of settings, including high-budgeted institutional exhibitions, as well as small scale projects, in consideration to the different starting points and possibilities. The strength of this framework lies in its ability to operationalize the productive ambiguity of Magical Realism, which adds the crucial capacity to sustain contradictory truths to the referenced curatorial discourses. These approaches want to enforce curiosity and creativity by making the friction between competing realities visible. By implementing these strategies, curators could counteract the fragmentation of the public sphere, challenge the rigid societal conventions, and the commodification of culture, which has happened to Magical Realism just as to many other similar topics.

Ultimately, this thesis posits that Magical Realism, when reimagined as an epistemological mode, offers a vital methodology for the contemporary curator. It provides aesthetic and ethical tools that aid in the imagination of alternative space-times - ones that are inhabitable, resistant to capital, and open to the ghosts of what has been silenced in the past. Following the logic of a processual practice, I see this thesis also as part of a journey that will follow these approaches, develop them further, and challenge their actual applicability in practice. Thus, when coupling Magical Realism with curating, a form of world-making can emerge. This practice constitutes a refusal to accept the given reality as the only possible one, representing an active commitment to the ongoing, unfinished negotiation of power, memory, and hope.

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6 Appendix

Interview with Sofia Dati, 06. March 2026

(Introduction and explanation of the topic)

SD:

It's a very interesting scope. And it was actually a big question for us how much to link this exhibiton and its framework to the actual historical groundings of magical realism. Because once you start opening that up, it's such a can of worms. And it was kind of leading us towards directons that were not exactly the ones we wanted to go towards. Because then you queston like, okay, so we should include also some historical works by the Italian magical realists, and then also the German ones, from whom the Italians had borrowed. And then how do you bring in the literary genre within that? Also considering the ways in which - and this also came through very prominently from several conversations that we had with some of the artists that we invited in the exhibition, where the way that magical realism was imprinted onto a whole tradition of literature in South America, was not always done in the most consensual way, and kind of had this tendency of equating the magical to this kind of anthropological otherness. And there is actually an essay that helped me a lot to understand this tension, which I could find again, I can't remember now the name of this article.

JA:

Is it Discarding Magic Realism by Liam Connell? I actually wanted to ask you about this too, because you mentioned it in your text about the divide between two contrasting views of the world in literature.

SD:

Yeah, exactly, because it's through him that I actually got to know about this way of speaking of magical realism in the context of South American literature as anthropological realism. I think it was basically this methodology that has allowed to other people and cultures, et cetera, from the perspective of the Western gaze, that is somehow widely known and challenged within the fields of anthropology and ethnography and is also applied to the way that the magical is imprinted onto those literatures, where not all authors self-define themselves as magical realists. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who was considered the main representative of this movement, rejected the label himself.

So that became a main aspect of how we thought about the articulation of the exhibition and of the invitations within that framework. And because basically the point of departure for the exhibition was less magical realism as a genre, as it was the impetus of trying to reflect on our current condition in relation to approaches to the environment and to knowledge production a bit more widely. And so magical realism was more of a prism through which we entered this broader question of ecology and environmental studies and approaches.

And indeed these reflections on the anthropological dimension, let's say, of the magical within magical realism also informed very much how we integrated or how we, not integrated, but how we chose to present these practices that tap into the white fields of the magical, the cosmological, etc.

JA:

I'm actually very excited right now, because you already reacted to my first question without knowing it, because that was exactly what made me so interested in the exhibition that you did. Because most exhibitions I've seen so far, that were labelled as magical realism, were historical exhibitions about this very diffusely defined genre. And it was very clearly conveyed that magical realism wasn't used as the genre for you, but as a strategy or a concept or a tool to tell different stories. And that's exactly what I want to research in this thesis - this inherent potential that you have with thinking about magical realism as a way to see. There seems to still be a big question about what actually

defines the genre, which is why I based it on the actual historical origins in the artistic scene. And the tracing into the contemporary felt equally crucial, since it has evolved so much and is such an open term that carries within it a lot of potential.

SD:

Yeah, I do believe so. And it's funny because while we were doing the research for the exhibition, somehow magical realism started popping up everywhere in my mailbox newsletter, etc, that it somehow also seems to speak to our current condition or somehow speaks to a situation that we find ourselves in that is also informed by catastrophe. There is something extremely catastrophic about our context at large globally.

And I guess that magical realism kind of holds a certain potential poetically, artistically, and also in its translations into social domains, etc. That somehow was tapped into very broadly in the past few years. So maybe it's because I was paying more attention to it because of our project, but I was indeed seeing it coming up in so many exhibition texts or descriptions of artists practices, reading groups that were being organized, you know, all kinds of different manifestations that were thinking through magical realism also in very different ways, which goes to what you were saying where it's such a loose concept.

It's loose and it also is loaded to a certain extent. And for many, it holds this legacy of othering that actually we try to move away from or to challenge and reflect upon critically in some ways. We started working really on the exhibition when I started working in WIELS, which was June 24 for an exhibition and publication that were due to be ready for May 25. So the time was relatively short. And so the conversations with the artists were happening really in parallel with the conceptualization of the exhibition. The conversations with artists really informed the way that the whole concept and trajectory of the exhibition and of the publication came together. And the thing is that the term in itself is very particular, I don't know if so many other genres or artistic or literary categories have travelled in this way, which makes it so fascinating, but also so difficult to grasp because it has been mobilized in contexts that are also so different from each other and in contexts that have found it useful for very different reasons. You know, from Franz Roh in Germany to Bontempelli etc. and, you know, all that gang in Italy. This was a bit of difficulty, like how many boxes are you able to open in a single exhibition? Because indeed in that context, you cannot not address the way that this magical thinking was also instrumentalized and instrumental towards responding to in a supportive way, a fascist context that was then growing in Italy in the 20s and 30s.

And how it came to be adopted by John Carpentier first, but then also by other literary critics to describe something that's speaking to artists and also looking into literary criticism from the context of South America that was critical to the use of magical realism as a category, where it feels like this Western construct that's being imposed and imprinted onto a type of storytelling that would maybe better be termed realism. And that's it, you know, because there's also the correlation with surrealism and why in one context we speak of surrealism when it has to do with unleashing the associative capacities and powers of the dream world and the unconscious and tapping into that in a way that is also backed and grounded by the scientific research of the time in the form of psychoanalysis. But exported into another context, we then speak of magical realism. There were actually many overlaps between the surrealists and the South American writers of magic that we bring together in the category of magical realism. So it's such a can of worms that also opens up a number of different problematics, you know.

So in the context of the exhibition, we chose to acknowledge that, of course, because we are borrowing, you know, an existing category, but also at the same time acknowledging but placing the focus on a specific aspect, which is what you were speaking about before, which is how contemporary artists, art practices, experimentations within the arts are adopting certain of the parameters that have belonged to the other iterations of magical realism, and how that speaks to our larger context today. And how that speaks to an element that was really important for us, which was the question of, or the power of imagination also as a political tool. And how poetics and poetry and imagination and fiction, and you spoke of Donna Haraway and speculative undertakings and speculative fiction, how that plays such an important role in imagining the world as it has not yet been pictured and imagining other alternatives that are not framed by the parameters that we already know. And that's where I do believe, and I think we do believe that art and tapping into imagination has a real role to play in reinventing our societies and reinventing the ways in which we not only produce knowledge, but in which we legitimize certain forms of knowledge production. But we did also take the liberty of playing with the literary form, and this we did in the publication - in the introduction - but also in the exhibition itself, which was in the organization. Within this framework, we didn't want to play into a rigid classification system in how the exhibition was organized. We didn't want to have, on the one hand, artists that are engaging with scientific methodologies and within the realm and the frameworks of the scientific, of science, of modern science, et cetera, and on the other hand, the magical artists. We didn't want to replay something that then

ends up re-proposing and reproducing the hierarchy, the hierarchization between the magical and the scientific, et cetera. So the exhibition was organized on three floors, plus another venue that we collaborated with, Argos Centre for Audiovisual Arts. We chose to organize these four sections through characters that together might or might not come together in a storyline, but that have the role of opening up a set of questions in each section or each floor, rather than thematizing - so here we speak about this thematic and here about this thematic. It was more a way of borrowing from the languages and the tools of fiction writing, in order to open up a set of questions.

In the end, if you think about it, they're all interchangeable. We could have chosen to place the character of the shapeshifter instead of the character of the time traveller. It's all about porosity and how the clear-cut distinctions that have been created, not because they had to be created, not because it was like a natural evolution, but because, you know, certain systems in power decided that this was going to be the right and legitimate way of thinking about the world, and this is going to be, you know, delegitimized and put within the spheres of superstition, of magic, of the unreal, the untrue. So what we try to work towards, or what we try to pay attention to, was how to re-propose forms of porosity, not to say that science is non-valid, or that magic is more or less, but rather that reality as we know it is absolutely co-constituted by different ways of producing knowledge and relationships towards our environments, and what can we learn from all of them when they come together.

So in the spaces we have, for instance, an artist like Daniel Stegman-Mangrané, who presented that this was a set of existing works. The photographs, the feral thoughts, these photographs taken in the Amazon forest, where he collages an eye of a feral dog onto the forest, on the tree, or on the moss on the ground, or on the leaves, etc. That was a work that was made with a thinking that is deeply embedded within the cosmogonies and cosmologies of several indigenous philosophies from the Amazon region that share the basic notion that there is no such thing as an object. Everything is subject and in that way also this gesture of objectification becomes impossible, and you have a very different relationship to extractivism, to woodcutting, to hunting, or animal or plant farming, etc. When you consider that every living being has subjectivity imbued within them in the same capacity as humans. That's an absolute shift from the western paradigm that is really centered on the practice of objectification of everything that is non-human, or in some moments of history, that is not a white person, or that is not a white male person, and this goes on.

And that body of work was placed close by to Anne Veronika Janssens, who was presenting these ripped glass panels. The work is called Structural Colors, and they're actually immersed into a liquid that constitutes these structural colors, and it's like a chemical molecular process that is made in the lab, but that replicates the same molecular composition of animals, like butterflies, or peacocks. Others have these very particular type of colorings that are actually not pigment. It's through their molecular composition, that's what we call structural colors.

And in relation to light, they create these kind of gradients and shadows, etc. So that's a very science-based experiment. And Veronika Janssens has been working on the notions and fabrication, how light functions for a long time, and has collaborated with a biology lab at the University of Ghent to make these works and these experiments.

So in the end, the result is absolutely magical. It's beautiful and it's mesmerizing. It's like looking at nature, like looking at animals, etc.

It's about creating these porosities between different methodologies, approaches, philosophies, cosmogonies that exist together and that we can learn from. And that in this time that is so driven by the perspective of catastrophe, it's also a question of how we can be together and learn from each other in order to constitute and to inhabit a more conscious and relational way of being with our environments, which includes other people. So that was the thinking behind these characters and the organization and how we kind of reinterpreted magical realism, as you were saying, more as a prism or a tool rather than classifying through this exhibition, all of these artists as participating in a common category of art making.

JA:

And I have to say that I really admire how you did that. I connect to so many aspects of what you said and I think that all of these points around anthropocentric world views, and about instituting a certain porosity again, is so crucial nowadays.

SD:

It's really, really nice to hear. I'm very happy also to see that it continues to circulate even after the exhibition is finished. That's also why the publication was such an important part, although the publication doesn't per se reflect or illustrate the exhibition.

So it's more conceived as a kind of extension of the space of the exhibition. All the artists had like, let's say a carte blanche to select the images that they wanted to include to kind of give an idea of where their work was going towards. But since we did the two at the same time, some works, because there was a number of new commissions as well, some works didn't exist yet at the time of the composition of the book, et cetera.

And then also the writers that we invited or the text contributions were also a way of extending and expanding what was going on in the exhibition in as much as we said, it's so broad, it's so vast and you can approach these questions through so many different angles. We couldn't like cover everything in the exhibition. So somehow the publication was also a good pretext to open up some of the avenues that maybe are less crystallized in the space of the exhibition.

Like for instance, what Karen Barad does in her text. I don't know if you, do you have access to the publication?

JA:

Yeah, I have it here and have read the article, yes.

SD:

Oh, super. So the question of how Karen Barad puts together a thinking that is ingrained within the Atlantic at the atomic level and puts it together with the scale of the social and in particular of the question of queerness is something that we didn't per se articulate in the exhibition. But so the publication was also an additional venue actually, where we could kind of continue and open up different avenues from those of the exhibition.

JA:

Did you only talk about the characters in the catalogue, or were they also visualized in the exhibition space somehow?

SD:

Yeah. So basically the characters were our organizing principle. Each floor of the exhibition had a text at the entrance that was centered on one character. The first floor was the wild. The second floor was the witch. The third floor was the time traveller and the other venue, Argos, was the shapeshifter.

But as I said before, the characters came after. We first planned the exhibition and where each artist or artwork would be placed, more according actually to a certain extent to like the intuition that interesting conversations could happen between certain works rather than because they address the same thematics or anything like that. It actually also gave space to a certain extent the spatial needs of the works and also to our navigation as bodies within the space, as audiences.

And so the characters came after. Basically, I do believe that they could have been arranged in a different way. The shapeshifter could have been on the first floor. The witch could have been in Argos. So they were imagined and the text kind of go in this direction as companions.

JA:

I had another question about the public program, because I saw that you had a lot of events and initiatives like reading groups etc. How important was it for you in the exhibition itself. And how did you experience it? How was it received from the audience?

SD:

It was really important. The public program was really not thought as an afterthought of the exhibition, but it was really an integral part. Because if we're speaking about living environments, about relationships with our environments, etc., it was really important for us to also be able to propose moments of actual gathering, of exchange. And also, with the publication that allows for us to open up new, let's say, angles of the questions, the public program was also that.

And within the frame of such an exhibition, it was also very important for us to put forth the collective dimension as well, since this is really a work based on conversational thinking. And so the public program was a way for that. So on the one hand, there were artist talks and and tours with artists. And that's, of course, important to have the voices of the artists unfolding what's at stake in their work. That's more like what we usually do. But then there was also lectures and other invitations, for instance, with Malcolm Ferdinand, who was a really important figure for us in thinking about ecology and a decolonial perspective. I don't know if you've read a bit of his work, but I really recommend it. He's such a sharp thinker. And he's also very driven by practice. So he's participating in different groups and in activism. So it's groups like Association, you know, he's really on the ground. So it was really important to open up these perspectives.

There were performances as well by Gaël Chouin, so an artist of the exhibition, but also, for instance, a carte blanche to a collective from Brussels to respond to the questions opened up in the exhibition with their own program. So it was really because, and this goes beyond only the scope of magical realism, but these bigger exhibition formats that we do cyclically once every three to five years. And this was the third one. It's also momentums or opportunities for us in WIELS to embed ourselves within the ecosystems that we participate in, you know. So that's why the collaboration with Argos and other art centres in Brussels was so important. It's not always so easy to have such collaborations with the usual program. It was really a way also of reinstating our embedding within an ecosystem that we're not, thinking on an island alone, but we're part of many conversations. And so these invitations to collectives and there was part of the program was also made by Argos as a way to, you know, continue this conversation. They organized film screenings and conversations and it's the bookshop that is connected to Argos, Ryle, two persons of the bookshop that organized the reading group.

We were posing a set of questions and it was very rich and important for us to be able to open up these questions to other respondents, other persons or organizations who could share their own ways of responding to the framework that we were proposing. So this is something that's important also within the framework of these type of festival exhibitions that WIELS has been doing since 2017. And in the frame of magical realism, we also brought that much more towards the outside of WIELS. For instance, we had a performative walk by a collective called Natural Contract Lab. It's a sort of performance that happens during a walk along the course of the river Senne, which is a river that has been sanded in the city of Brussels. So it's like the memory of a river that no longer exists. That's a very beautiful initiative and artistic proposal. And we're also very lucky to have a swamp next to WIELS, where there was a lot of activity as well. It's actually a feral environment. So the whole site used to be a big brewery and WIELS is one of the buildings of the brewery. Next to it, there was at a certain point in the early 2000s, renovation works for the whole site. One of the buildings was demolished and they dug in the ground too low. So they pierced these underground water pockets, and that basically became a water pond. And with time and the years and the care also of some people from the neighborhood, it became like a swamp, a pond with animals and frogs and some small fish. It's very particular, but a whole environment has been born there. We also did quite some activities for all ages. Many also for children in the garden, let's say, around the swamp with beekeeping etc. and then we invited the collective Back to Soil Basics who reflect on questions of ecology, environment, permaculture, et cetera, to reflect on this but through the lens of accessibility to audiences that have been made precarious in our Brussels society.

They work a lot with associations or different kinds of groups and communities. So it was really important to involve this dimension as well. And also these many collaborations are a way of just acknowledging that we don't have the expertise of everything, but there are so many aspects that we find important. So we wanted to engage with the Brussels many ecosystems.

JA:

I think that's very beautiful. And it's also something I have been thinking about in the course of this thesis and looking at different examples of approaching these topics, about what narrative standpoint one could or should choose, especially when talking about topics that are inherently very multi-layered and diffuse. I think you did it in a very fascinating and thoughtful way.

SD:

That's so kind of you. Thank you. I really appreciate the way you're wanting to engage also with this project and the many aspects, because yeah, I mean, it's one of these moments where you work a bit less in isolation, because we were many, which just makes it so meaningful. Personally, I believe so.

So it's really nice to see how it resonates also beyond just us who have been involved. So I'm really happy to hear your feedback and how it resonates with your research as well.

JA:

I think you talked a lot about the last question I had already. But I will still ask it, in case you still want to add anything else. My last question was if you approached anything differently in the curating process?

SD:

Well, the usual question that we always receive is like, have you become more ecologically aware in your way of working?

And I think that somehow the reason why this exhibition also happened is because there was already a wish to reflect structurally on our footprints, our impact our methodologies of working, etc. I wouldn't say that after this exhibition, we found the right formula for everything. But to me, what was maybe the most meaningful, but this is a bit my personal perspective, maybe if you ask one of the other curators, it would be different..

But for me, it was really what we just talked about, this collective dimension, because it's one of the few occasions in which, in WIELS, we work really collectively as a curatorial team. We always discuss things and make the program together. So this, to me, was very meaningful within the WIELS team, but also with all these partners and conversation partners that we just spoke about. And I mean, that's really my most favorite methodology. And I think, for me, you do feel it in the exhibition and in the program. So in the exhibition, I think, I do believe that none of the three of us would have made those choices alone because I think you can really feel also that different sensibilities towards different types of practices are coexisting. And this is also made possible by the fact that we're two, three very different personalities and with three very different sensibilities. And I think that really made the difference in this project.

JA:

Thank you. Thank you for talking to me and elaborating a little bit more about this. It really filled my heart.

SD:

I'm so glad to hear it. That's the effect it can have, because I mean, I'm also very happy to continue thinking and speaking about this project, you know, even though the exhibition in itself is finished. And don't hesitate to be in touch if you feel that you need any further material.

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby confirm that I have written the following thesis with the title „Re-enchanting the world. Curatorial Approaches to Magical Realism“ for the /ecm - educating, curating, making program at the Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien, under the supervision of Sen.Sc. Mag.^a Luisa Ziaja and Prof. Dr.ⁱⁿ Mag.^a Nora Sternfeld.

I certify that this master's thesis is my own work and that all sources and materials used have been properly acknowledged. This work has not been submitted for a degree or qualification to any other university or institution.

Wien, May 2026
Julia Aldrian