BURNING

Symposium reader
Edited by Hanna Grześkiewicz
and Yasemin Keskintepe

With contributions by:
Areej Ashhab
Chris Cameron
AM Kanngieser
Brandon LaBelle
Ariel William Orah Pisitakun
suzan meryem rosita
Yuri Tuma
Mia Yu

SILENCE

Burning
Silence

Hanna
Grześkiewicz
and Yasemin
Keskintepe
(ed.)

FREE
RADICALS

Burning Silence

11–12 April 2026
Spore Initiative, Berlin

As part of Free Radicals

@burningsilence.art
@freeradicals.space
freeradicals.space

Editors Hanna Grześkiewicz
Yasemin Keskintepe
Copy-editor Linsey Rendell
Production Alexandra Střelcová
Graphic design Jolana Sýkorová
Cover visual Studio Lekko
Printed Lemon Design

Contributors Areej Ashhab
Chris Cameron
AM Kanngieser
Brandon LaBelle
Ariel William Orah
Pisitakun
suzan meryem rosita
Yuri Tuma
Mia Yu

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Co-funded by the European Union

Contents

Introduction

By Hanna Grześkiewicz and Yasemin Keskintepe

Fire is anything but silent. Think of wildfires that have become all too common, burning through landscapes with devastating force. Think of political responses that ignite over social media, burning through digital networks in endless circulation until they exhaust the capacity to respond. The media ecology itself, a relentless hum that mirrors a world heating, not only in temperature but in political climate.

Burning is also an affective intensity. The rage that builds up when voices are repressed. The suppressed scream. The collective emotion, be it pain, joy, or anger, that waits for the moment it can spill into the streets among a mass of bodies and voices. The silence of anticipation.

Our conversations regarding sonic ecology started from this place. Drawing on the concepts of acoustic justice and sonic agency proposed by Brandon LaBelle, we began building up a framework for exploring the importance of sound and listening in the context of ecological devastation and social movements.

Thinking through the threshold between environmental devastation and its causes, different forms of burning kept resurfacing in our conversations. The fires of imperial wars, (settler-)colonial occupations, genocide, ecocide, mineral extraction, oil refineries, nuclear power. All of these contributors to the ecological disaster start with a burn. From this place, we began exploring different notions of burning and humanity's increasingly broken relationship with fire. Fire as something to be scared of, something destructive: the decimation of lifeworlds through rising temperatures driven by petrocapitalist political economies; the fire of rising militarism; the slow burn of radioactive contamination that renders landscapes uninhabitable for generations. And yet, fire is also essential. For warmth, food preparation, and as an essential element of a healthy ecosystem.

We live in a pyrocene, a term widely used by Stephen Pyne and T. J. Demos. Our world literally revolves around a fire.

As we started to explore this complexity, the brokenness of our relationship with fire drew us to the silencing of much traditional knowledge, in which fire is held in reverence as a life force that needs to be understood. Here, burning also refers to controlled and regenerative fire practices rooted in local knowledge systems, where it cultivates soil and sustains cyclical, reciprocal relations with the land.

Silence holds a similar complexity to burning. It is read often as silencing: the violence of erasure and systemic suppression of voices affected by ecological destruction; the evasion of environmental justice and

accountability. However, silence can act as a form of refusal—an active withdrawal from dominant regimes of speech, a tactical interruption that recalibrates political agency.

Thus, burning also carries an affective weight—the visceral heat of anger, grief, and longing for justice—as manifested in protest flames, ceremonial burns, and collective uprisings. These fires resound as refusal, as bodies gathering, as voices demanding to be heard.

The contributions in this volume speak to these complexities of both burning and silence. An interview with Brandon LaBelle, in which he draws out a difference between 'listening to' and 'listening out for', offers an epistemological framework that expands what counts as agency and voice, towards invisibility, destituent practices, and fugitivity, offering us grounding for the exploration of silence as both erasure and refusal.

suzan meryem rosita kalayci's essay, Genocide is a Verb: On History and the Present Tense, draws on these notions of listening and silence by pausing at the crucial moment between seeing and doing. Her exploration of the effect of time and history on the power of the word genocide sets the ground for AM Kanngieser's The Silence of What is Burned, in which they trace their personal relationship with bushfires back in time, exploring how lived experiences mediate relationship with fire. Foregrounding Indigenous knowledges and examining the consequences of transplanted fire management systems leading to an unprecedented immensity of these burns in Australia, Kanngieser addresses the violence of colonial land practices that sever reciprocal relationships with fire. This resonates with Areej Ashhab's Between the Eye that Watches and the Hands that Feed, which contrasts the subterranean, communal, and transformative knowledges embedded in Palestinian lime kilns with the elevated, isolated architecture of Israeli colonial surveillance and control through fire observation towers.

Pisitakun's comic, BURNING FROM THE GROUND, depicts traditional Thai agricultural practices that involve land burns, while leaving space for the reader to write in their own dialogue—playing with the duality of silence, as something that both gives space and is a form of silencing.

Ariel William Orah, Chris Cameron, and Mia Yu all explore large-scale industrial projects that displace and destroy local populations. Ariel William Orah's reflection, Subdued Residue: Listening After Geneva (1967), presented from his artistic standpoint, brings us to a geopolitical level in which international conventions are put in relation with effects on the lives of individuals around palm oil extraction in Indonesia. Mia Yu's essay, The Pain and the Pit, frames five moments of listening to Asia's largest open-pit mine in Fushun, China. Tracing its colonial histories from Japanese extraction to socialist industrialisation, Yu develops the concept of geomyth—reimagining the extractive landscape as a repository for future ecological narratives. The Silence of the Towns is an investigative piece through the pueblitos surrounding Microsoft's data centres in Querétaro, Mexico. In it, Chris Cameron documents the quietness of dispossession—the literal silence of emptied towns—and the intimidation tactics used to suppress community resistance, revealing how digital infrastructure displaces populations while draining their water sources.

The reader concludes with Yuri Tuma's speculative short story, the third of his roaming The Silent Academy chapters, titled The Lovelessness Regime Training Camp. This chapter brings us to a dystopic moment in which the world's feeling is reduced to One Emotion—Anger—and children are trained to feel only this. Sound, as a force that can awaken a spectrum of emotions, is seen as a threat to the stability of the Loveless Regime.

The different contexts, practices, and approaches of the contributions offer multiple entry points to Burning Silence. Together, they show how fire and silence are present across different registers—ecological, political, affective—we just have to pull on the right thread to reveal their depth. And that resistance is not always the loud, fiery path ahead of us. Sometimes it is present in a moment of stillness.

This reader complements the symposium taking place 11–12 April 2026 at Spore Initiative in Berlin, where artists, researchers, and activists gather for listening sessions, sound performances, conversations, and screenings. What you hold here is part of a larger, plurivocal exploration—one that extends beyond these pages into sonic practices, embodied encounters, and ongoing struggles for environmental and social justice. It is not exhaustive but generative, an invitation to continue listening across the threshold between burning and silence, attuning to what may ignite in the disquiet.

References

T.J. Demos, 'The Agency of Fire: Burning Aesthetics', e-flux journal, Issue 98 (March 2019), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/98/256882/the-agency-of-fire-burning-aesthetics

Brandon LaBelle, Acoustic Justice: Listening, Performativity, and the Work of Reorientation (New York & London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021)

Brandon LaBelle, Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance (London: Goldsmiths / MIT Press, 2018)

Stephen Pyne, The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire, and What Happens Next (Berkley: University of California Press, 2021)

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to all the artists who have contributed to the symposium, to all the writers who have contributed to the reader, to Spore Initiative for hosting the symposium, to Studio Lekko for designing the digital visual identity, and to Haenke for coordinating the Free Radicals project and inviting us to be part of it.

Hanna Grześkiewicz is a curator, researcher and artist whose work explores the intersections of sound, social movements, feminist thought, and border politics. She works across participatory and public discourse formats, performance, sound installations, writing, and radio work. As an organiser, she supports internationalist solidarity-building between feminist activists, and is currently the Programme Director at filia.die frauenstiftung.

Yasemin Keskintepe is a curator and researcher exploring the politics and poetics of digital media across art and exhibition practices. Her work attends to how technologies mediate relations between bodies, environments, and infrastructures, tracing the material ecologies and affective intensities that shape contemporary life. She is interested in artistic practices that intervene in networked systems, making visible both their extractive logics and their potential for collective reimagining. Currently, she is a PhD candidate at the University of Potsdam and researcher at Humboldt University's The Technical Image.

Brandon LaBelle is an artist, writer, theorist, and artistic director of The Listening Biennial. His work focuses on questions of agency, community, pirate culture, and poetics, which results in a range of collaborative and extra-institutional initiatives, including Communities in Movement (2019–23), Oficina de Autonomia (2017–), The Living School (2014–16), The Imaginary Republic (2014–19), Dirty Ear Forum (2013–22). In 1995, he founded Errant Bodies Press, an independent publishing project supporting work in sound art and studies, performance and poetics, artistic research and contemporary political thought.

His publications include: Poetics of Listening (2025), Dreamtime X (2022), Acoustic Justice (2021), The Other Citizen (2020), Sonic Agency (2018), Lexicon of the Mouth (2014), Diary of an Imaginary Egyptian (2012), Acoustic Territories (2010), and Background Noise (2006).

Burning Silence: An Email Conversation with Brandon LaBelle

Yasemin Keskintepe YK
Hanna Grześkiewicz HG
Brandon LaBelle BL

YK & HG In Burning Silence, a point of departure is the question of how to inhabit silences when the world is burning. We're thinking of burning not only as wildfire, petrochemical flares, or militarised explosions, but also as the affective heat of anger, grief, and longing for justice, and even as controlled burns that regenerate soil and lifeworlds. Silence, in this frame, is not just absence; it can be erasure, but also refusal and a threshold for listening to other forms of life.

From your perspective, working on sound and listening as ethical and political practices, how do you hear this coupling of "burning" and "silence"? What kinds of listening practices does it invite or demand?

BL These are challenging questions, which capture important aspects of our current experiences and realities. I'm also thinking about the ways in which conversations about Gaza have been silenced, and continue to remain polemic in so many ways, even untouchable. While we are inundated with reports, it seems that at the centre of so much information is a glaring absence, a sort of incapacity to address the blatantly obvious. This is certainly part of a concerted attempt to undermine opposition to Israel's genocidal policies. I share these initial perspectives to think about the relation between burning and silence, between a world aflame and the lack of political will on the part of governments, particularly in Europe. While there is a profound readiness to defend Ukraine, the inability to mobilise against the horrors of Gaza is extremely shocking (though I do recognise these are very different situations with their own particular histories, political realities, etc). As you suggest, such a coupling of burning and silence does prompt the deployment of (not only) listening strategies, or ways of accounting. Listening is a position, a gesture, that appeals and makes possible the humanisation of each other; it is an essential step taken if we are to avoid the ongoingness of violence and the annihilation of people and worlds. In states of war—in the midst of this burning—it signals a desire to put out the flames. Here, listening is a labour, a work, which I imagine is taking place on some level—in the meetings, the diplomatic sessions, the debates—but which is easily overwhelmed by the heat of the situation; which is only done in ways that pay lip service to the international community; or which is performed so as to simply know what the enemy is thinking. In this sense, it's important to recognise that when we speak of listening, this often assumes that it will lead to change. It could be necessary to appreciate how listening does not automatically lead to compassionate action or the changing of policies; there may be listening going on without there being

fundamental changes occurring. Perhaps it's better to speak of the will to listen, as the will to stay with the conversation, to remain open to the possibility of shifting one's own views, and which can help direct us towards a commitment to each other, to nurturing compassion and the willingness to transform conflict from violence to repair. I understand the will to listen along these lines, in which listening forms the basis for political will, for an ethical obligation, done with vigilance and the desire to protect life.

YK & HG In the curatorial framework, silence appears in two very different registers. On the one hand, it's the violence of erasure and systemic suppression. On the other, silence is refusal: a tactical withdrawal from dominant regimes of speech, a way of interrupting the expected flows of speech.

In your work, you often describe listening as a way to encounter those who are not recognised. How do you distinguish between a silence that is imposed and a silence that is chosen? And what can listening do to keep that distinction alive, so that silence, in situations where it is actually a symptom of harm, is not romanticised or simplified?

BL I think what you highlight is the necessity to cultivate critical forms of listening. While we are often aware of how impactful our languages and voices are, and how important it is to care for what we say and how we say it, we are not so much thinking of listening in this way. It's important to also bring such self-awareness, such critical reflection, such sensitivity to our listening as well: how am I listening and what does my listening do? Where do I place my listening, and how is my listening placed by others? Listening may equally be a language, an ethics, a politics, and an embodied power. Being able to distinguish between different forms of silence seems particularly dependent on a listening criticality, or what I also tend to think of as a poetics of listening: to understand listening as world-attending and world-making. And which carries responsibility as well as imagination. Working with or contending with silence, to my ear, suggests such a form of auditory knowledge; to not only acknowledge and engage listening's influence, but further, how this is part of a larger epistemological concern or proposition. How do we gain insight, or inheard, as to the power, effects, and potentiality of the auditory, especially as it seems to be so crucial to our cultural, political, and social lives, not to mention health and well-being? Perhaps all of this remains at the level of tacit knowledge, a sort of inherent or implied form of knowing, which does have its place within a broader set of practices. Yet, at the same time, I'm curious how to nurture and facilitate an auditory knowledge, a listening understanding, an acoustic work. All of which can contribute to engaging more fully and with greater nuance in these issues and questions you raise.

YK & HG Another tension we address is between the urgency to "break the silence" in the face of violence and the need to preserve spaces of opacity, of not speaking, of keeping something back.

In Acoustic Justice[1], you write about the notion of being 'present in the negative', a listening that is attentive to the missing or absent. There is an implicit challenge to dominant notions of presence as visibility, legibility, and clear articulation. How might this challenge help rethink what counts as a "voice" in both environmental and social justice discourses? What forms of murmuring, interference, distortion, or even silence might be needed to recognise claims to justice?

BL I've always approached the topics of sound and listening as frameworks that help us rethink what we know as voice, as agency, or articulated action. In my book Sonic Agency[2], I elaborate on different sonic modalities in which agency and even action shift, moving from notions of visibility, speaking up, and constituent power towards invisibility, listening, and destituent practices or fugitivity as potent positions that are equally dynamic, impactful, and generative. Sound is positioned as an epistemological and ontological means for thinking agency otherwise, and as a way to expand our sense for what political action looks like—to inspire other approaches or strategies, other ways of resisting, and to recover a sense of meaning from conditions of misrecognition or marginalisation. As invisibility, as an itinerant, weak figure, sound generates a whole set of other coordinates within the field of the political, giving way to different practices, ways of organising, that find in sound a material partner—calling us into a more complex ethics (an ethics "beyond the face"), a form of "unlikely publics". This is elaborated in Acoustic Justice: by shifting from sound as a particular or distinct figure or object, and towards acoustics as the conditions that enable sounds to occur. What kinds of acoustic practices enable particular sounds to be heard? How do we gain support by way of acoustic matters that provide a sense of participation? Acoustic justice is a frame for asking these questions, which again shifts our understanding of agency from content to context, from self-expression to environmental matters, from articulated action to the conditions that support (or hinder) such articulations. There is a performativity to acoustics that deeply impacts which voices are heard and where, how voices are hosted or shut out, what kinds of rhythms or social synchronisations are enabled, or how individuals and communities craft their own acoustic worlds. These ideas may follow from your questions, as to how sound, listening or an auditory knowledge, an acoustic work helps in rethinking what counts as voice in ways that also help in hearing differently, in shifting our listening so as to realise that voices appear or sound in multiple ways (even silently). I work at these ideas as a way to give entry to a whole range of people and languages and ways of living that are unseen or unheard because of the specific limitations of certain dominant orders or tonalities. Sound for me is that vehicle or kin that multiplies, that spills, that interferes, that excites and animates—while sound is certainly weaponised in the service of all types of systems of control, I tend to hear it as that which creates possibility.

YK & HG At the end of your recent article[3], Poetics of Listening, you write that witnessing is never solely about finding truth, but rather about rebuilding subjectivities and the stories that carry communities. You propose: 'to be a witness to oneself and others is to not only face the present or past, it is to listen out for the hidden and erased, the silenced

1 | Brandon LaBelle, Acoustic Justice: Listening, Performativity, and the Work of Reorientation (New York & London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021)

2 | Brandon LaBelle, Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance (London: Goldsmiths / MIT Press, 2018)

3 | Brandon LaBelle, 'Poetics of Listening: From Archives of Silence to Negative Methodology', Witnessing, Issue 1 (December 2025), https://doi.org/10.26238/witnessing.2025.01.02

and missing, as guides towards another form of survival'.

This phrasing—listening out for—suggests a different temporal and spatial orientation than listening to. It seems to involve a kind of anticipatory attentiveness, a vigilance oriented towards what may emerge from silence rather than what is already sounding. When thinking to the current context of Iran, where internet blackouts cause moments when the unfolding events are rendered unwitnessable, cut off from circuits of listening, those of us at a distance find ourselves in a position of such listening out for—desperately waiting for signals to resume, for VPNs to circumvent censorship, for fragments of sounds or images to leak through enforced silence. In this sense, the internet blackout produces a particular kind of negative space, where entire periods of resistance, violence, and survival are blocked from the possibility of real-time witnessing.

How do you understand the practice of listening out for in conditions of such technologically enforced silence? What does it mean to witness when the infrastructure that carries sound, voice, or evidence has been deliberately severed?

BL As we can see, the shutting down of channels of communication aimed at limiting access as well as accountability, cutting off circuits of listening and the chance to bear witness, all speak towards the urgencies of acoustic justice, or show the degree to which an auditory knowledge underpins the practice of freedom. The ability to tell, to hear, to witness, to give narrative—not to mention to keep in touch with loved ones scattered across the Iranian diaspora, for example—reminds us how political processes are greatly shaped not only by forms of listening but also by narrative agency. The question of listening out for (in supplement to listening to) does call for a vigilance, a commitment, a politics, a poetics; but it does so in ways that also shift where the responsibility lies. Perhaps too often, forms of justice work are seen as dependent upon the capacity of the marginalised to gain political force, to speak up, to fight for greater representation, therefore placing the burden of responsibility on the oppressed. Listening out for, as Gideon Calder also highlights, turns the responsibility towards those in power, to highlight how important it is that those in power (generally within a democratic model), or those with privilege and capacity, do the work of listening, specifically in ways that recognise to some degree those who are clearly absent, that have no voice, that cannot make it into the space of appearance. This is a listening that, for myself, also suggests a shift in how we think about "ethics": to follow listening in its ability to hear beyond the heard, to bring attention to the missing, a "negative listening" that attends to the erased. Listening can do such work, which is so essential to not only challenge systems of oppression and the silences that can be imposed, but also to wield a form of narrative agency—clearly expressed in the important work of Saidiya Hartman, as one example, but also in projects such as Ambient Gaza or Khamoosh. Listening, witnessing, narrating are all tensed by dominant power—this is precisely what politics is, on some fundamental level: the degree to which listening is enabled, or the degree to which a form of acoustic work, an acoustic care is integrated and performed. Acoustic violence is therefore not only how sounds may be weaponised, but how listening may be limited, corralled, blocked. Auditory isolation, or acoustic blockading, can injure and violate on multiple levels. Here, we can think about how individuals and communities work against such violences to fight for the right to listen.

YK & HG The art world and social media are saturated with calls to listen better, listen more deeply, and be in community with one another. In many ways, we are told that even a small gesture can achieve great shifts, and, on the other hand, that nothing really works in the face of the overbearing capitalist system. What limits do you recognise in what sound and listening are able to achieve? Where do you put your own energy?

BL I do understand your concern, and I think it's important to recognise that listening does not solve all our problems. At the same time, it's interesting to recognise how vital listening is, and here we must highlight listening as never only about sound or the ear. Listening is clearly more; it is perhaps all the senses at once, it is our felt sense, our way of giving or experiencing attention; it marks the possibility of compassion, empathy, and ways of caring across human and non-human worlds, and it clearly facilitates transforming conflict, holding space for acknowledging and living with difference, for working at peace, reconciliation, repair. It is our means of connecting with ourselves as well as with the sacred, wielding forms of refusal against systems that aim to injure, that work by way of a logic of separation and enclosure. If listening does all this, I'm not sure it's important to dwell on whether listening is being over-emphasised. Perhaps there is a real reason for this, and for myself, I'm following listening as a path: a path of continuous learning. At the same time, going back to the topic of the importance of building greater critical understanding as to listening's influence, and the ethical, political responsibility it carries—maybe that is what is currently being worked on, through all the emerging and dynamic conversations, research, initiatives, and actions where listening is involved and brought in as a figure, a knowledge, a practice. I'd say: let's keep going, let's keep the conversation and listening going, let's keep the doors open, because, as Ailton Krenak states[4], it is by way of listening that we can return to a 'cosmic sense of life'. And that feels like something to fight for.

4 | Ailton Krenak, Life Is Not Useful (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023)

suzan meryem rosita gardens, reads, and writes in Oxford. A longer version of this essay forms part of her forthcoming collection Reading Silences: Essays on Memory, Women, and War in Twentieth-Century Turkey (De Gruyter, Berlin).

Genocide is a Verb: On History and the Present Tense

By suzan meryem rosita

Oxford, Sunday 6 July 2025

Early this morning, I found a note I had jotted down a few years ago, dated 19 September 2023. Azerbaijan had just launched another violent assault against Armenian civilians living in the autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh. ‘Yet even as I write, bombs may be falling still, or falling again: or a temporary lull may have been ordered, or a ceasefire may be in effect.’ The line is from Adrienne Rich’s essay on sexual violence and Vietnam, published more than fifty years ago.

The radio is on in the background, and a panel is discussing Kneecap and Bob Vylan’s Glastonbury performances from just a week earlier—Saturday 28 June 2025. Two terms keep repeating throughout the programme: hate crime and genocide.

Genocide. I keep turning the word over. It always seems to arrive too late. By the time it reaches us, by the time it becomes part of our soundwaves, our background ambience, countless lives have already gone. It is a word for what we could not save. And yet its scale leaves us no refuge in ignorance.

Listening to the radio programme, I think of Raimond Gaita’s essay on the Stolen Generations—Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families in Australia—in which he writes: ‘Those who claim genocide do not do so to be provocative; they do so because it names what was done to them and to their families’.

What does the word genocide do, I wonder—not only for those who seek justice, but for those of us trying to see in the first place? Is their suffering not real if we do not use that word? Does it become more real to us when it falls within a category defined by international law—named as the ultimate crime, as though the word alone might suffice, even when no action follows? Because it is always too late when we say it. Genocide, by definition, belongs to the past tense—lives already lost, already destroyed.

***

Gitta Sereny once said something I’ve never forgotten. Her words come back to me this morning, as the radio keeps playing in the background. The programme has moved on—from Gaza to border control. The shift feels almost seamless, as if violence, too, could be scheduled between segments.

Then the newsreader's voice: 'Pop the boats—a look at new tactics by French police to stop boats crossing the Channel ahead of President Macron's UK state visit'.

It is a bizarre broadcast—playing both the English and French national anthems, speculating on Macron's fascination with the British royals. And then, almost as an aside, it mentions the 73 people who died crossing the English Channel in small boats in 2024—death reduced to a passing note between gossip about royals and the sound of a marching band. A grotesque lightness in tone, as if loss itself had been scripted for entertainment.

That was what Gitta Sereny had spoken about in her 2001 Amnesty Lecture here in Oxford. And it frightens me—how little seems to have changed, how little her words mattered. She was a historian, like me. She warned that in our efforts to keep out so-called "bogus asylum seekers", we are effectively saying: We would rather you returned to the horrors that await you—whether political persecution or abject poverty—than that you came and lived beside us.

In his introduction to her talk, Jonathan Glover recalled visiting South Africa during apartheid. What stayed with him, he said, was not how people spoke about politics, but how cruelty surfaced in passing. 'We do a lot of amputations here,' a woman in a hospital told him, almost casually. Why? 'It's the trains. The Whites Only coaches have seats. The Non-Whites Only coaches are overcrowded. People travel on the outside. They fall. They lose limbs.'

Glover paused. 'It really hit me,' he said, 'that I was in a society where one group was effectively saying to another: We'd rather you lost your limbs than sat beside us.'

It begins there. With sorting. With deciding who sits inside and who must cling to the outside. With drawing lines—on train carriages, on borders, on passports.

When I was a child, we lived for a time in a small Bavarian village near the Austrian border. My sister and I attended the local Gymnasium—an excellent school, in fact, the reason my parents had moved there. One day, my father—not my mother, and I should say, not my German mother—was asked to come in and meet the headmaster.

It was not a meeting about our progress. The headmaster explained quite openly that he had simply been curious to meet, as he put it, the Turkish man whose daughters were attending the school. My father told me later that the phrasing was almost polite, almost friendly. But it lingered.

Years afterwards, when we were living in Turkey, he spoke about it again. What would have worn him down, he said, were not open hostilities but the small remarks, the ones that sounded harmless. They would have made him an angry man if he had remained. Turkey was not better, he added—but there he could talk about books without first having to explain how he had learned to read.

The signs are rarely dramatic at first. I have a passport, and you don't. I move freely through this space—this bathroom, this pond, this country—and you cannot.

Genocide happens when the social fabric—as we come to know it, and through which we come to know each other—has become unstitched. When it is torn.

And I am struggling. Struggling with how easy it is to turn away. With how quickly we move on. With how often language is used not to illuminate, but to obscure.

I think about the word deadline. I use it often. I look it up: a line drawn around a Confederate prison. Cross it, and you'd be shot. Orwell warned us that the passive voice hides the shooter. The concrete melts into the abstract. Violence becomes a euphemism—casualty, a chance occurrence, in the Oxford English Dictionary sense of the word. The unnaming—the making unspeakable—can happen not only through silence, but through abstraction. I keep a list of these words—how they slip from policy into the press, from the press into our conversations, from there into the academy. Words are worlds.

The words we use. The words we don't. The comfort of euphemism. The way a life is rendered background noise. Radio static.

The radio has already moved on. The previous item is history now.

***

A question keeps returning. It is mine.

What kind of work does history do in shaping how we understand violence—in the form of war, of genocide, of silence? And what kind of historian does that work make of us?

***

Oxford, Tuesday 15 July 2025 (my birthday)

I often tell my students here at Oxford: the only real difference between victim and perpetrator is choice. Language can obscure that difference—but it can also reveal it.

They're gone now—it's the long summer vacation—and I'm sitting in a small study room in my college, Pembroke, overlooking the empty lawn. The History Faculty is moving into the new Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities. A move that not just we—some of us within the Faculty—but our students protested against.

In our open letter[1], we wrote: 'We write to express our opposition to the University of Oxford's decision to accept

1 | https://medium.com/@oxfordhumanitiescentreletter/open-letter-no-to-the-stephen-a-schwarzman-centre-for-the-humanities-f9ba87077b97

£150 million from Stephen A. Schwarzman, co-founder and Chairman of Blackstone, to build the Stephen A. Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities. The Schwarzman Centre will be built with the proceeds of the exploitation and disenfranchisement of vulnerable people across the world.'

Now, five years on, we have packed our boxes and are preparing to move into the new building. Office-less, I write either from our little narrowboat or from my college, alternating between them. Today is a college day—with internet, not radio. The news does not drift in; I have to search for it.

I begin researching our unsuccessful protest and whatever else I can find about Schwarzman.

What I find are a few well-researched essays[2] written by—I recognise the voice immediately—one of our former undergraduate students. They've long since left, as most do after three years, unless they stay for a postgraduate degree.

I also find that one of the companies in Schwarzman's Blackstone portfolio was the defence contractor Cobham[3], along with Ultra Electronics. Both supply key technologies used in F-35 fighter jets, which are operational in the Israel Defense Forces, now in Gaza. The timing is striking: Oxford accepted the donation just as Cobham was being acquired.

Every frame in history is a site of decision. A moment when a different choice might have been made.

2 | One of the essays: https://cherwell.org/2019/09/18/billionaires-oxford-donation-sparks-protest/
3 | https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5dcecf97ed915d071d307887/cobham-advent-international-cma-report-redacted.pdf

Online, I also stumble over an article titled: I'm a Genocide Scholar. I Know It When I See It. Omer Bartov, writing in The Times. Something in that headline gives me pause. How could it not? I'm a Genocide Scholar. I Know It When I See It. What does it mean to see it?

Seeing is never innocent. Historians, like witnesses, never see from nowhere; we inherit the perspectives our worlds permit.

The headline also carries the weight of exhaustion—of having seen too much, of knowing what the aftermath looks like, and the realisation that now it's probably too late. As historians, we are in the terrible business of writing when it is all over.

The historian always speaks in the past tense: after the loss, after the fact, after the failure to prevent.

We are trained to write after the fact.

But every frame in history was once open. Every catastrophe was once a series of smaller decisions—of lines drawn, categories imposed, words chosen. What if the work of history is not only to explain what was, but to recognise the moment before it becomes past tense? To dwell in possibility, as Emily Dickinson once wrote.

I think of an image that I show my students.

From Syria, where I lived in my twenties. It appears in the video work Double Shooting by the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué. The piece incorporates YouTube footage from 2011, early in the Syrian revolution: a protester films a soldier aiming his weapon—just before he is shot. There is a moment—a single frame—when we see the soldier decide. The camera catches his face. He looks straight into the lens. At us. For the briefest second, we are both witness and implicated in the decision to take a life.

It is a verb in the continuous present—aiming, deciding, killing—that cannot be undone.

To take out. That's a phrase I heard on the radio this morning, just before I left for Pembroke. Tossed around like hate crime or genocide—dropped into headlines and panel shows as if a life could be cleanly erased, like a smudge on paper.

No human life deserves to be wasted. Not even in the news.

The Palestinian poet Samīḥ al-Qāsim once wrote, in a poem titled, How I Became an Article: 'They killed me once and wore my face many times'. The headline endures; the person does not.

***

So I've begun to wonder—what would it mean to write differently? Nonviolently? How do we bind up the wounds of war? How do we describe violence not with abstraction, but with attention? Meet brutality with tenderness? Not by building monuments, either in stone or in words—who still wants war monuments?—but by finding a language that shelters. That listens. That cares. That shows the otherwise, again and again.

***

Oxford, Sunday 28 July 2025

I think about that moment often. About the instant in which something has not yet happened, but could. About what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay calls the potential not-to-do—the moment when an action has not yet hardened into history, when the thread has not yet been spun.

I remember a weaving course I took a couple of weeks ago in Devon—an early birthday present to myself. Every loose thread mattered. I spent hours threading and unthreading the loom until the tension was right. One missed strand and the pattern warped; the whole fabric had to be undone and started over. Repair was slow. Attention was everything.

Nothing could be hurried without damage.

Starting over—or recovery—is not failure, but care. History, I have come to believe, asks maybe something similar of us.

We were trained to describe what happened, not what

might still have been otherwise. Distance was our method. The past tense, our safety. But history does not begin in the past tense. It begins earlier, in hesitation, in attention, in the fragile interval before a decision closes. My oldest friend Anne, who runs a gender and diversity consultancy[4] in Munich, once said to me: 'You are not responsible for your first thought—but you are responsible for your first reaction, and your first action'.

I hear that now as a description of time—not the long span of history, but a narrow one: the space between seeing and doing. Machines can gather facts faster than we can. They can organise and summarise. But they cannot hesitate before a human decision. They cannot occupy the moment in which something could still be otherwise.

History matters here. Not because it delivers final judgements, but because it trains a particular kind of attention—one that resists the ease with which a life becomes a headline, a category, a past event.

Genocide is a word we use after the fact, a name given when the decision is already over.

But the work of history begins earlier.

It begins in the present tense.

4 | https://www.genderiq.de

Burning Silence

AM Kanngieser is a political geographer, sound artist, and educator. Their practice engages listening and attunement to approach how people collectively determine conditions of liberation and care in the face of ecocide and environmental change. Amer is a co-founder of artistic project Oceanic Refractions and collaborates with Oceania-based decolonial storytellers, artists, and grassroots activists. Their writing has appeared in diverse publications including South Atlantic Quarterly, WIRES Climate Change, The Contemporary Pacific, and Critical Legal Thinking. Their work has been exhibited at museums, festivals, and galleries worldwide, among them La Biennale di Venezia, Transmediale x CTM, Arts Centre Melbourne, the Natural History Museum London, Coventry Biennale, and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Their radio works have been commissioned by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, ABC Radio, BBC, and Deutschlandradio. Amer runs workshops and masterclasses on listening, ethics and anti-colonialism, bioacoustics and climate crisis, audio storytelling, radio production (software and hardware), consensus decision-making, and social organising. They have facilitated these for Sonic Acts Festival, Live Art Development Agency, The Centre for Deep Listening, and Fiji National Gallery, among many others. Amer holds a Visiting Professorship in Geography at Royal Holloway University of London.

The Silence of What is Burned

By AM Kanngieser

Preface

Before I begin this text, I want to offer some important framing for those who might not have encountered wildfires before.

I grew up in the bush, on Garigal, Cannalgal, and Kay-ye-my Country; I now live on the sovereign and unceded lands of the Woiwurrung people in so-called Australia. Here, wildfires—or bushfires—are integral to the natural life cycles of ecosystems. Most plants tolerate, and even require, fire to survive. Animal species, too, require fire—fire creates a mosaic landscape of differential foliage, with burnt and unburnt vegetation for foraging and shelter. This burning is profoundly interdependent. In central Arnhem Land, the Karrkanj (firebird), or Brown Falcon, accompanies Rembarrnga and Dalabon rangers during cool season burn-offs, carrying smouldering sticks in their talons from one fire to spark another, flushing out prey from the undergrowth. Sophisticated land management practices held by First Nations communities have ensured that these cycles of death and rebirth remained in balance for tens of thousands of years.

From the late 1700s, European colonisers instigated frontier wars through genocide and ecocide, decimating the bush for agriculture and industry. Colonisers did not understand these ecosystemic cycles. Land management was adopted from environments that did not make sense to transplant. For 200 years, First Nations' approaches were declared too expensive or complex by governments to replace widespread emergency action and fuel-reduction policies. Following sustained campaigns for self-determination and land reparations by First Nations communities in the 1970s, including the instantiation of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, a resurgence of formal, structured cultural burning began throughout the 1980s and 1990s in Queensland and northern Australia. In the top end, the Western Arnhem Land Fire Agreement re-established burning in 2006. In 2014, Banbai rangers in New South Wales were successful in advocating for burning, and following increased, high-intensity bushfires (including the devastating 2019-2020 season), there was renewed, focused effort to integrate traditional knowledge systems in each state. In 2019, Forest Fire Management Victoria and Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation brought back the practice, and in 2021, the Narungga and Nukunu First Nations people restarted burning in South Australia. In 2024, Firesticks Alliance and Gugu Badhun Traditional Owners in north Queensland reintegrated cultural fire practices into modern land management.

While these practices afford more sustainable and holistic approaches, it is an unfair expectation to burden them with managing the wider, extreme climatic crisis we are experiencing. Billions of dollars are spent annually on bushfire recovery, and there is the immeasurable cost of lives and land lost. State and corporate extraction of coal, gas, and minerals from deep in the earth contribute to rapid global warming, habitat destruction, and contamination. Racist neo-liberal organisations proclaim a commitment to green capitalism (greenwashing), while profiteering from crisis after crisis. The violence of these organisations shows how little they understand that empires always fall, especially as the world burns.

And so, here we are.

2026

Early January. I stood on a beach in Wadawurrung Country, watching the smoke unfolding and spreading, the brown-tinged plumes bisecting the highlands. As the wind picked up, it revealed the sun, a steady orb of iridescent red. Under the clouds, I saw my friend brace themselves knee deep in water as they cast a fishing line over and over into the surf. Beneath their feet lay millions of round cat's eye shells. The white curve of the shells tinted the water a pale aquamarine. Fixed on the horizon, we marvelled distractedly at the shells crunching as they tumbled with the inflow and outflow of the waves. A rhythmic whump-whump-whump drowned out their clatter. Behind us, emergency helicopters crested, flying towards the hills. My friend walked quickly onto the shore to their phone. Two of their friends had been camping where the fires were. They had fled and driven to the nearest large town. We met them there, and they told us how they'd panicked, shoving everything into the car, tent poles buckling, biscuits scattered, things left behind. They didn't want to get trapped when the roads closed. I told them about another friend who had recently been evacuated from wildfires, and then days later, evacuated from floods. Fires and floods at the same time, only 42 kilometres apart, if you drew a straight line between them.

The next morning, we couldn't see the city, because everything was shrouded in smoke. Ash greyed out the trees. It stank. But it was very quiet.

A loved one from overseas sent me a message. It simply said: the flying foxes. The heatwave that accompanied the fires reached temperatures up to 50 degrees Celsius. It mainly killed mothers and pups, I read. I went for a walk on a 45-degree day. I only saw five people out; two were food delivery drivers, one a postal worker. The emptiness felt foreboding. I found a carcass in the dirt, dehydrated. I didn't know what species it was, but I could see that it had wings. Over the radio came the usual words of consolation. The prime

minister, gammon-faced, visited stricken communities standing on scorched ground. In wobbling voices, they said that they couldn't afford insurance but were grateful that people were organising funding drives. Money was pledged.

What was not said was why. "Extreme weather events" and "record breaking temperatures", as if from nowhere—glitches, accidents, acts of god. A lowered tone, downcast eyes, and more papers signed locking in fossil fuel exports. Chains of extraction and ecocide. All the while acting as though there is no cause and effect. Today I read that this bushfire season has already burnt over 400,000 hectares of land, around four times the size of Hong Kong. I look at the live fire map. The fires continue.

2025

January, Booderee. I never knew that bushfires could erase whole cities. Big cities, concrete cities, brand-name cities. Cities made of brick and steel and stone. Did you know that, before it happened? I didn't know that winter could blaze like summer, but as we all watched Los Angeles burn from the pyres on the other side of the Pacific, we learned.

From far away, I thought of the people who couldn't get out as the flames tore through the streets. People who also, perhaps, did not realise that cities could burn. People whose houses were just gone, iron stakes left standing crooked and alone. I read that celebrities contracted teams of private firefighters, paid $2,000 USD an hour to protect only their homes. Incarcerated firefighters—paid $1 an hour—fought alongside them. Faces blackened, clothes blackened, backs bent under water hoses. Running towards the inferno, indistinguishable from one another in the haze.

As fires raged, the same people hired security guards to protect their possessions from those who had lost everything. They donated clothes and looked good for charity.

The part said less loudly was that, of those 17 people who perished in the Eaton fire (over half of those who passed), most were Black and most were women. They had an average age of 77, and at least one-third had impaired mobility. As it turned out, the death toll was actually 400 people because of polluted air and inaccessible healthcare. Then, there were those dispossessed. Disaster capitalism—meaning land already razed and stolen to make way for new builds—priced out those who lived there before. Insurance loopholes and legal titles and media cycles. Over 70 percent of people forced to leave, I read, have still been unable to return. Always the same people, disproportionately affected.

After the fires, the incarcerated firefighters went back to prison. Unsurprisingly, no celebrity lives were lost.

2020

Mid-January. In Naarm, our night is fractured by wailing sirens. Hazardous smoke sets off alarms throughout the city from hundreds of kilometres away. We watch old growth forests that have never burned disappear. 24 million hectares of land. 33 direct deaths. They said over 3 billion animals, but how would we even know the real numbers?

I learned that fires generate their own weather systems. Pyroconvective events in which thunderstorms gather, creating lightning that sparks more fires. Rain doesn't help because water evaporates. There were at least 45 fire-generated thunderstorms that season alone. Until 2018, only 60 pyroconvective events had ever been recorded in Australia. They are no longer rare. We hear the thunderclaps. I dream of combustion: updrafts of air howling as loud as freight trains, jet engines, in a continuous roar. A firefighter described it as the sound of the end of the world.

I wake with a start, convinced that the creaking of a metal roof expanding is, in fact, a backyard set alight.

More than 72,000 flying foxes died in eight separate extreme heat events that year.

When the smoke finally ended, we kept the masks on.

2009

Saturday 7 February, Naarm. One of the worst bushfires in Australian history. 173 human fatalities, over 450,000 hectares burned. Above us, the sky is blood-red. Fire behaviour experts said that the amount of energy released during the firestorm in one area alone was equivalent to the energy released by 1,500 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs.

1,500 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs.

1994

The closest I ever got to a bushfire was as a child.

I lived on a small island on the lands of the Garigal, Cannalgal, and Kay-ye-my clans. There were only around 1,000 inhabitants. There were no cars on the island, no paved roads, no streetlights or shops. There was nothing but bush, houses, a community hall, and a fire truck.

Across the water, less than 500 metres away, was a national park; a bushland of eucalypts and grass trees. Because it was so close, every person on the island had to learn how to fight fires, because when the fires came, there was nowhere to go. We lived at the top

of the island. There were fewer houses up there. My father explained to my brother and I that if a fire started anywhere below our house, we would not be able to leave. Fire travels upwards, he told us. We would have to hide in a small, brick alcove that he built into the earth for this purpose.

That January, the land circling the island burned. Sound travels easily over water. My brother and I could hear the crackling popping crashing of trees from our bedroom. When we swam in the bay, the salt tasted like smoke.

The ridges of the national park blazed constantly. At night, the island was pitch-black but for bright embers falling around us. The birds stopped calling. Sirens keened and undulated without pause, and the air was heavy and grey. We walked back and forth, back and forth, in our thick-soled boots, stamping out the branches and leaves that drifted across the water onto the island, each spark carrying in it the potential for death. We did not sleep. I could not eat. Everything was covered in ash.

When the sirens finally stopped, my brother and I continued to echo their ghostly cry to each other, some kind of liturgy, perhaps, to our own fear.

Areej Ashhab is an artist and researcher whose work addresses material heritage loss and land politics. Her practice spans material experimentation, writing, and film, and often unfolds collectively through walks, workshops, and shared meals. Areej is the co-founder of Al-Block, a walking collective documenting lost narratives of the Palestinian landscape, and Al-Wah'at, a translocal collective countering colonial narratives around arid lands and futures. In her project A Hand of Fire and Stone, she traced abandoned lime pits in Palestine, built a lime kiln in Bethlehem, and activated this lost architecture through fire and song; following the elemental cycle of lime from stone, to paste, and back to stone.

Between the Eye that Watches and the Hands that Feed

By Areej Ashhab

Fire in Palestine has long served as a catalyst of elemental regeneration and transformation, and is central to Palestinian agricultural, food, and material practices such as lime production, pottery, and charcoal making. These practices—weaving knowledge of soil, vegetation, and climate—have sustained rural communities across generations. In today's settler-colonial landscape, however, tracing the movement and occurrence of fire reveals the colonial reordering of the land. Under Zionist colonial governance, fire has been redefined as a weapon, catastrophe, or pollutant. The "hands that feed" its flames are regulated by the "eye that watches"—surveilled through spatial planning, restrictive legislation, and military force.

This redefinition is not incidental; it is structural to a colonial apparatus designed to control both the terrain and the people who inhabit it. Rooted in a Zionist ideology, this apparatus has long portrayed the Indigenous Palestinian as both passive absence—silence, darkness, desert—and excessive presence—heat, unruliness, fire itself[1]. Such framings generate a specific logic of governance: what cannot be fully known or controlled must be contained; what is deemed unruly must be eliminated. Yet fire—like the Palestinian—exceeds the artificial boundaries and enclosure of the colony. Its relational presence escapes the panoptic gaze, remaining a subterranean heat that resurfaces and returns.

Land as furnace

The lime pit (latton or kabbara in local Palestinian) exemplifies this relational presence. A circular structure dug into bedrock, it transforms limestone into lime through an extended period of burning, providing material for construction, soap making, and daily life. Its operation relied on intimate knowledge of local winds, quality stones, vegetation, and fuel sources—especially Sarcopoterium (natesh), a fibrous perennial thistle harvested carefully to allow regrowth. The site selection of the pit, timing of firing, and labour distribution followed communal logic, coordinated through songs, alternating shifts, shared meals, and bodily measures of fuel loads (kubbash)[2]. The process, lasting months from preparation to processing, created temporal and spatial rhythms that extended across the landscape, weaving human and land activity into a collective sonic ecology.

1 | Menakhem Perry, 'The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict as a Metaphor in Recent Israeli Fiction, in Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, ed. Jennifer Baise, vol. 94 (Gale Cengage, 2000), accessed 28 February 2026, https://www.enotes.com/topics/israeli-literature/criticism/arab-characters-israeli-literature/menakhem-perry
2 | Areej Ashhab, 'A Lesson in Elemental Return: (Re)Building a Lime Kiln in Palestine,' The Funambulist, 13 February 2025, accessed 28 February 2026, https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/return/a-lesson-in-elemental-return-rebuilding-a-lime-kiln-in-palestine

Similarly, in lands known as al-harayiq (literally “fires”), controlled burning transforms dense bushland (wa’ar) into cultivable terrain. Thistles and bushes are collected and burned, their ash returning to the earth as fertiliser and enabling regeneration.[3] Such practices, alongside grazing and foraging, demonstrate a relational understanding of land cycles: fire is tended before it becomes wildfire, sustaining rather than threatening life.

This intimacy has been directly targeted since the British Mandate. Lands at village peripheries—where lime pits and grazing commonly occurred—were reclassified as forest reserves. Laws criminalised the collection of thistles and firewood, imposed licensing systems, and promoted industrial oil as a substitute fuel.[4] Fire was bureaucratised; and practices of communal stewardship were reframed as reckless wasting of nature.

Land as garment

Following the 1948 Nakba—which involved the destruction and ethnic cleansing of over 400 Palestinian towns and villages—Israel initiated extensive afforestation projects across these sites. These forests served a triple purpose: physically occupying space to prevent the return of displaced Palestinians, camouflaging the ruins of demolished villages to derange collective memory, and altering the local landscape to mirror the Zionist imaginary of the European forest.[5]

However, these monocultures—composed primarily of Aleppo pine (Pinus halepensis)—soon proved to be a fragile and volatile garment. Unlike the local oak and carob, these resin-rich pines create thick, acidic carpets of needles that decompose slowly.[6] This accumulation produces a highly flammable ground cover, rendering the landscape prone to frequent and intense wildfires. To protect this artificial layer, forest observation towers were implanted as early as 1957, equipped with radios and drones to monitor smoke continuously. This embodied a panoptic logic that treated both land and its inhabitants as risks to be controlled.[7]

This architecture of surveillance was reinforced through the legal system; Israel expanded British Mandate reserve laws to “protect” these planted forests from perceived agents of destruction—specifically Palestinian herders and fire. The 1950 Black Goat Act, for instance, outlawed the raising of black goats,

3 | Shukri Arraf, ‘Al-Wa’ar,’ in Dictionary of Palestinian Names Sources (Mi’ilya: The Centre for Rural Studies, n.d.)
4 | ‘Control of Lime Burning in Forest Reserves, Vol. I,’ 1 September 1944-31 March 1946, Israel State Archives, Chief Secretary’s Office, File 000nt1k (Physical ID: M-4308/7)
5 | Irus Braverman, Settling Nature: The Conservation Regime in Palestine-Israel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 149
6 | Alon Rothschild, From “Improving Landscape” to Conserving Landscape: The Need to Stop Afforestation in Sensitive Natural Ecosystems in Israel and Conserve Israel’s Natural Landscapes (The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), 2019)
7 | Joseph Weitz, Shlomo Levenson, and Isaac Arnon, Forests and Afforestation in Israel (Jerusalem: Massada Press, 1974), 418–419

long central to Palestinian rural life. Goats were cast as “destroyers of trees”, blamed for deforestation and desertification, and rendering grazing a criminal act.[8]

In this colonial reordering of land, surveillance replaced collective engagement: the colonial eye observes from above, whereas the lime pit required collective hands to feed flames and orchestrate cycles of labour and sound. The lime pit and the observation tower thus epitomise two irreconcilable modes of inhabiting land. Where the pit is subterranean, communal, and transformative, the tower is elevated, isolated, and static.

Fire as return

This inversion signals a profound epistemic shift: Indigenous stewardship is recast as danger, and the landscape is reduced to an object of management. In the Zionist literary imagination—most notably in A.B. Yehoshua’s Facing the Forests—this ideology is embodied by the “mute Arab” who sets the forest ablaze to reveal the ruins of his village.[9] He is the personification of the paradox: a passive absence—silenced and relegated to the periphery—yet an excessive presence harbouring the latent capacity to unsettle the colonial garment. Here, settler anxiety is literalised; fire becomes a metaphor for the Indigenous knowledge, agency, and presence that cannot be fully eradicated.[10] Across Palestine—and most evidently in Israel’s genocide in Gaza—the excessive reliance on towers, drones, and aerial surveillance reveals a deeper settler anxiety over a subterranean Indigenous heat that remains illegible to the panoptic eye.

The colonial apparatus—legal, architectural, and technological—emerges from a fundamental separation from land. It treats the terrain as an external surface to be secured and measured, fuelling dichotomies between humans and non-humans, nature and culture, the regulated and the wild. This logic reinforces juxtapositions: the failure of one juxtaposition only gives rise to innumerable others in its place. Each intervention produces its own vulnerability; when one fails, it is replaced by another, perpetuating control while disregarding relational ecologies.[11] Following the catastrophic 2010 Mount Carmel wildfire, for instance, the state was pressured to reconsider grazing, as it reduced combustible material around trees. The 2018 repeal of the Black Goat Act subsequently reintroduced goats as a “fire prevention strategy”—a sanitised framework flattening the pre-existing Indigenous knowledge systems. By then, however, goat populations had largely diminished, and traditional practices of land management had been severely disrupted.[12]

8 | Rachel Gottesman et al., Land. Milk. Honey: Animal Stories in Imagined Landscapes (Zürich: Park Books, 2021), 232–257
9 | Abraham B. Yehoshua, Facing the Forests, trans. Miriam Arad (Tel-Aviv: Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, 1970 [1968])
10 | Sherena Razek, ‘Fire as Elemental Intifada in Colonized Palestine,’ Journal of Palestine Studies 53, no. 3 (July 2024): 94–107, accessed 29 October 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919x.2024.2422287
11 | Braverman, Settling Nature, 151
12 | Gottesman et al., Land. Milk. Honey, 232–257

As researcher Sherena Razek highlights, colonial regimes and their modes of extraction are directly responsible for the current state of fire as weapon, catastrophe, and pollution. Yet life-sustaining practices and situated knowledge persist among Indigenous stewards of the land, grounded in modes of attention that register and respond to its rhythms and transformations.[13] When these stewards are made absent, wildfires moving through resin-heavy pine monocultures expose the fragility of the artificial order. In recurring wildfires—such as in the 2021 Jerusalem forest fires, which consumed more than 2,000 hectares—the flames perform an elemental return. As the pines turned to ash, the stone terraces and ruins of Palestinian villages surfaced from beneath the forest floor, unsettling the Zionist veil of permanence.[14] Fire, moving through wind and matter rather than regulatory grids, acts as a force of revelation. It strips away the garment of the landscape to reveal the furnace of the land.

Smoke of 2021 wildfire seen from Beit Hanina, Jerusalem. Photo by Areej Ashhab.

13 | Razek, 'Fire as Elemental Intifada'
14 | Al-Haq, 'Jerusalem Wildfires Expose the Ruins of Palestinian Villages and Agricultural Terraces,' Al-Haq: Defending Human Rights in Palestine, 20 August 2021, https://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/19171.html

Aftermath of 2021 wildfire near Jerusalem. Photo by Areej Ashhab.

Inspecting a lime pit in Kufr Malek. Photo by Raghad Saqfalhait.

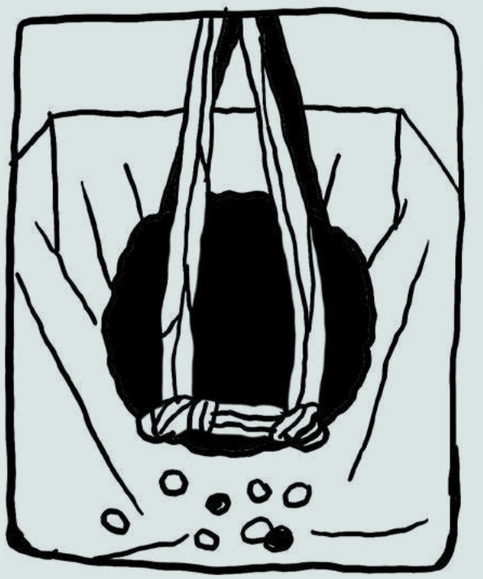
Lime Kiln in Battir. Photo by Areej Ashhab.

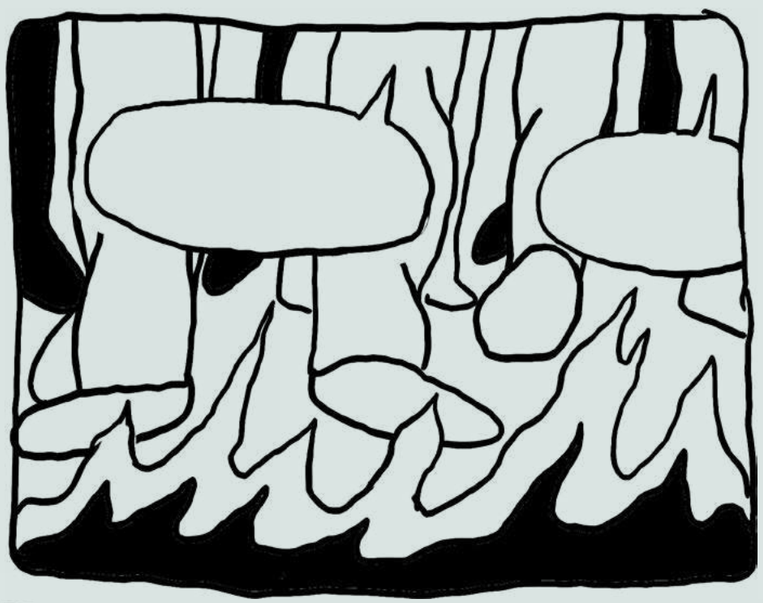
Pisitakun is a Thai visual artist who began making music with an interest in how expression shifts across different media environments. His work draws on historical events, synthetic sounds, and musical instruments. His practice marks a break from many Thai peers during a period shaped by ongoing martial law following the 22 May 2014 military coup. Rather than simply criticising corruption, he questions broader, increasingly universal values. His works explore political speculation and artistic frustrations. He has performed at CTM Festival, Asian Meeting Festival, DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program, Cafe OTO, and SHAPE+ 2022, and co-founded Threesound Expo.

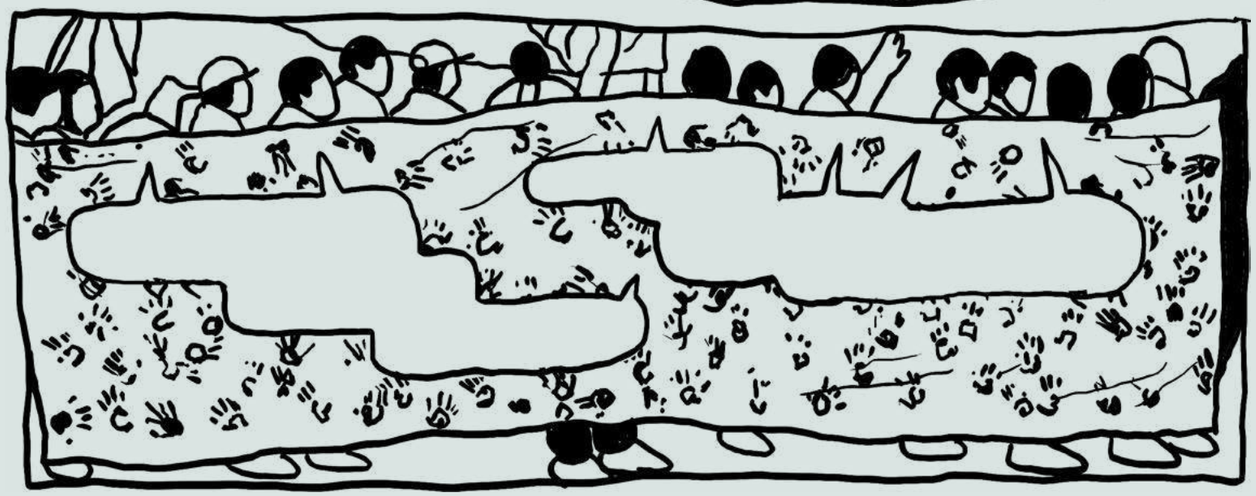
BURNING FROM THE GROUND

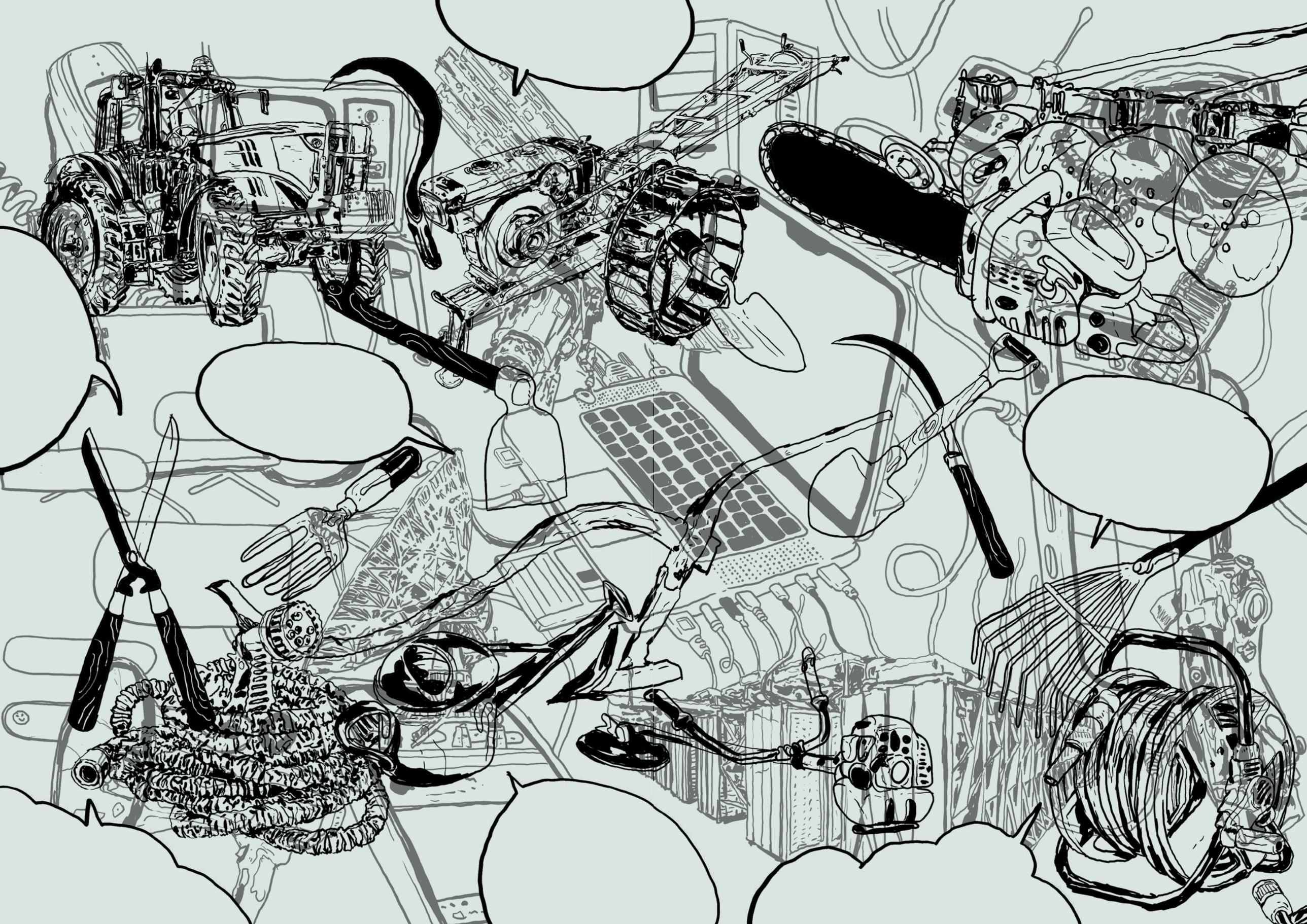
*PLEASE WRITE IN YOUR OWN VOICE!

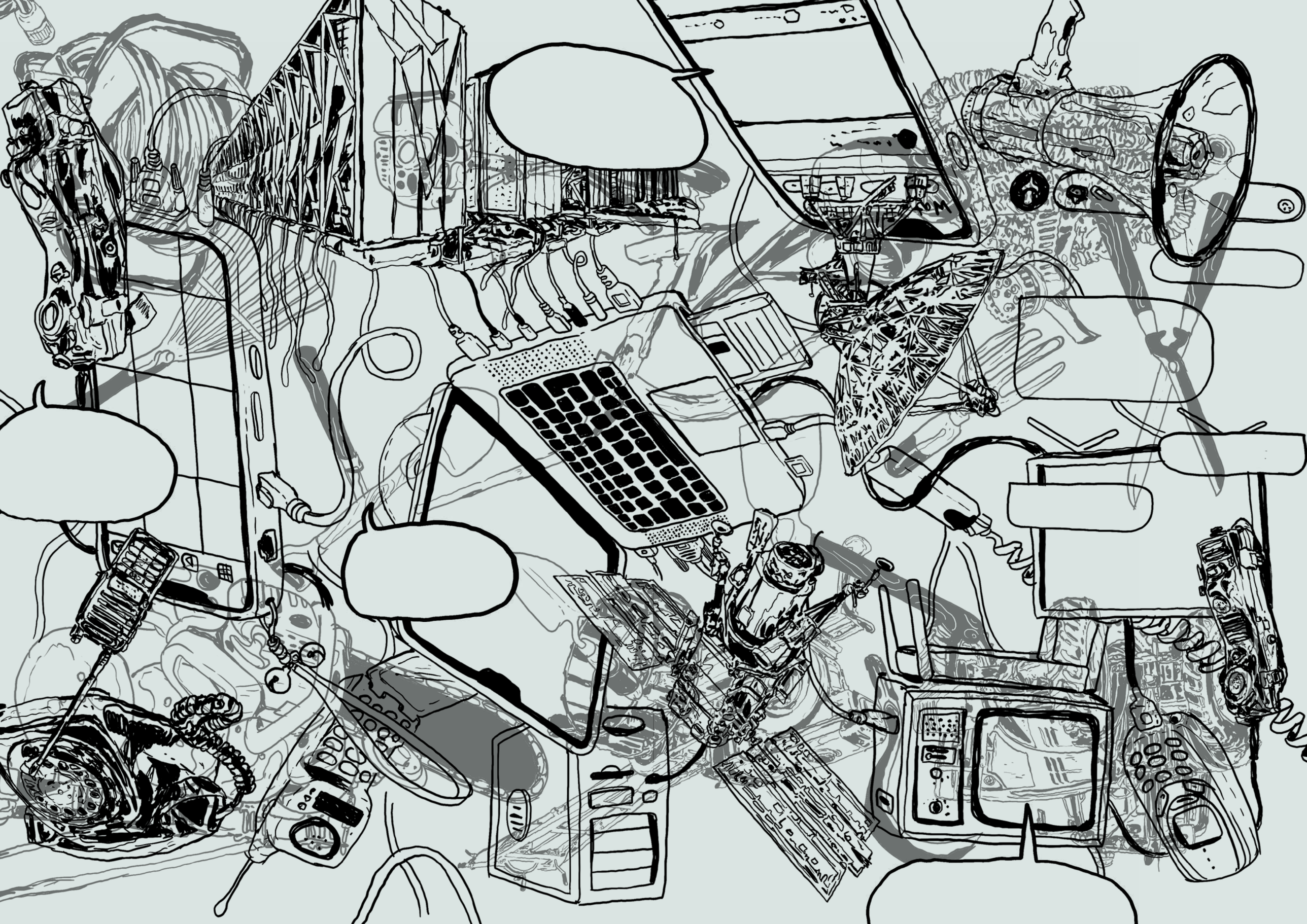
BY PISITAKUN KUANTALAENG

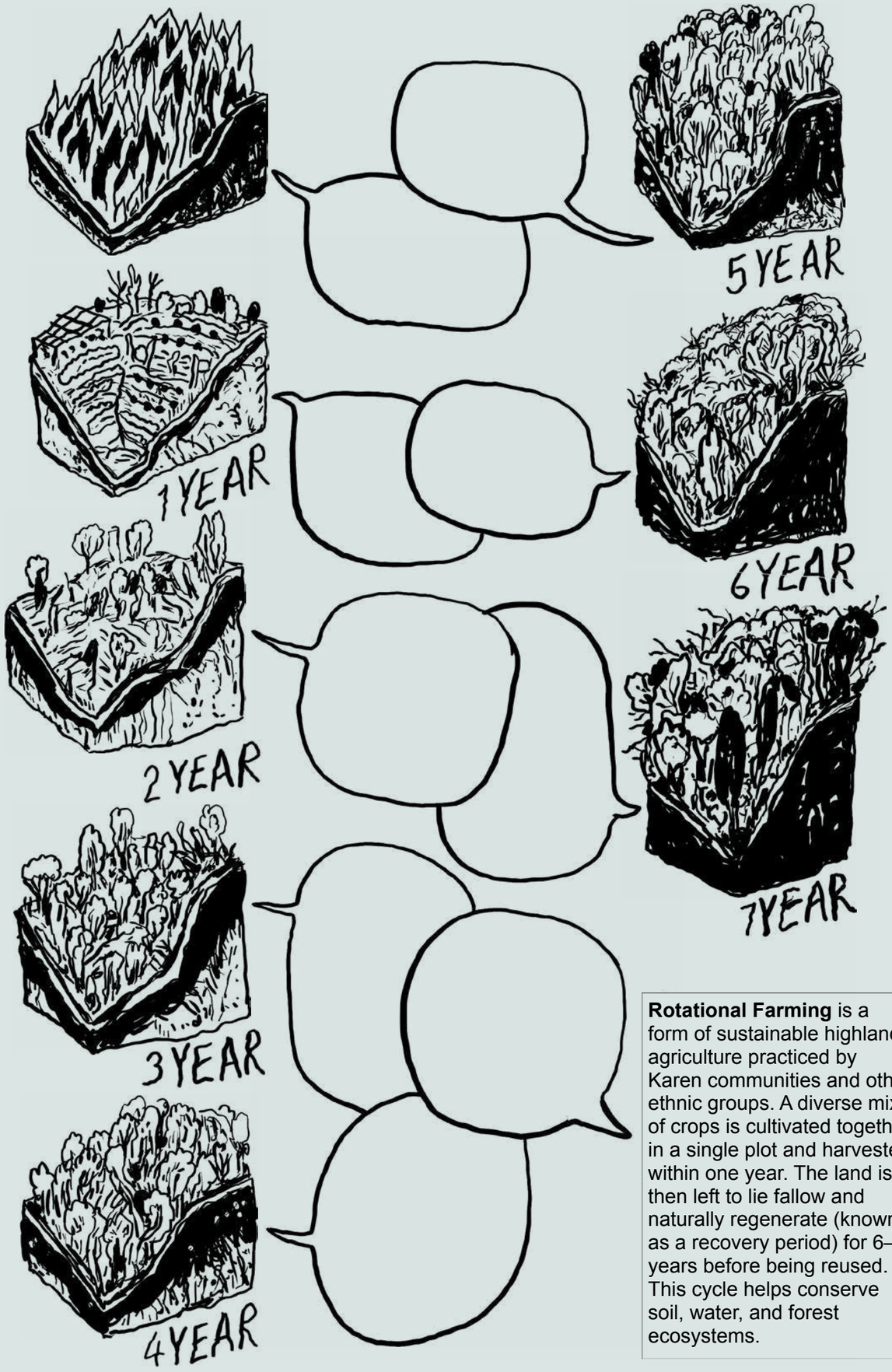




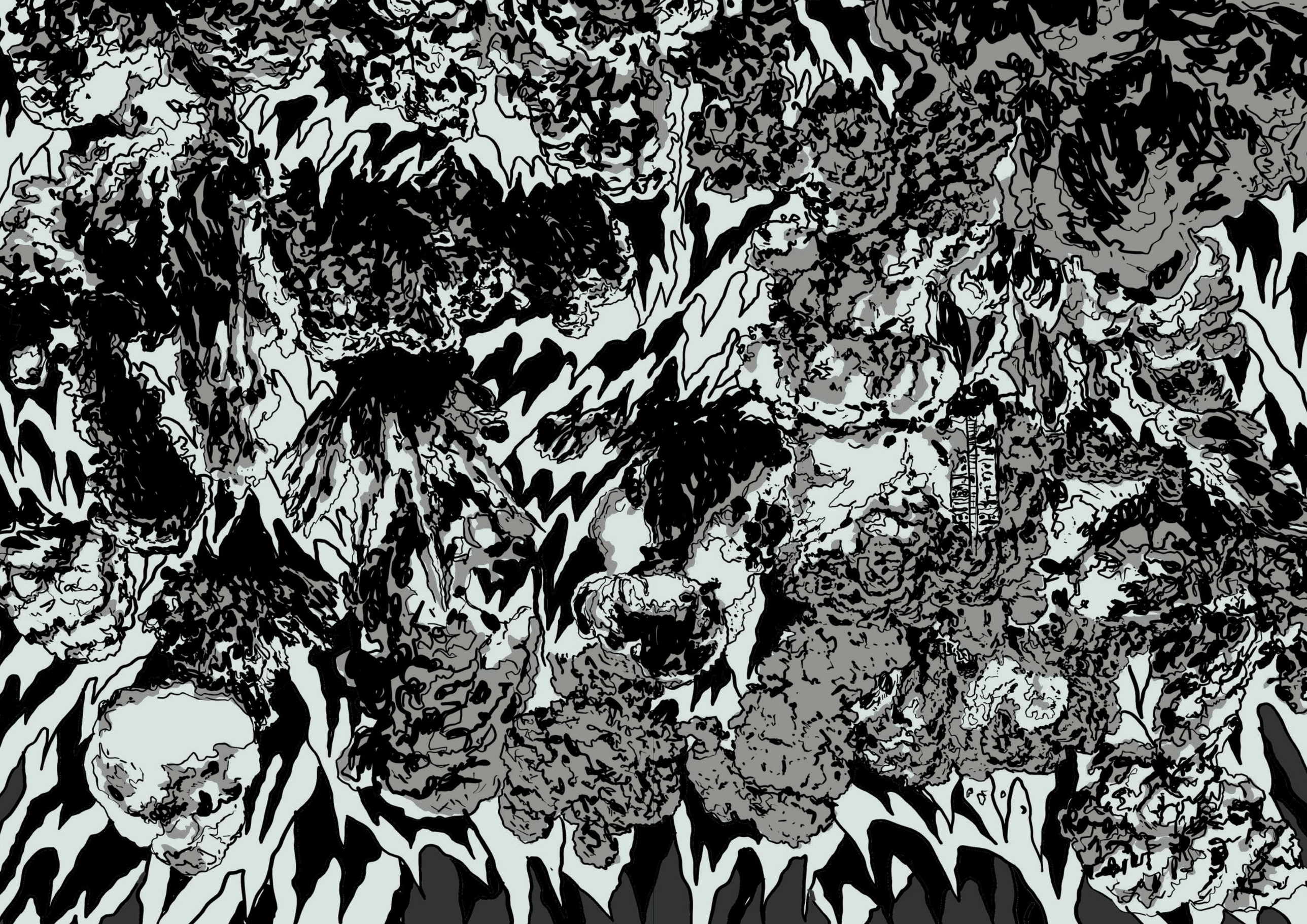


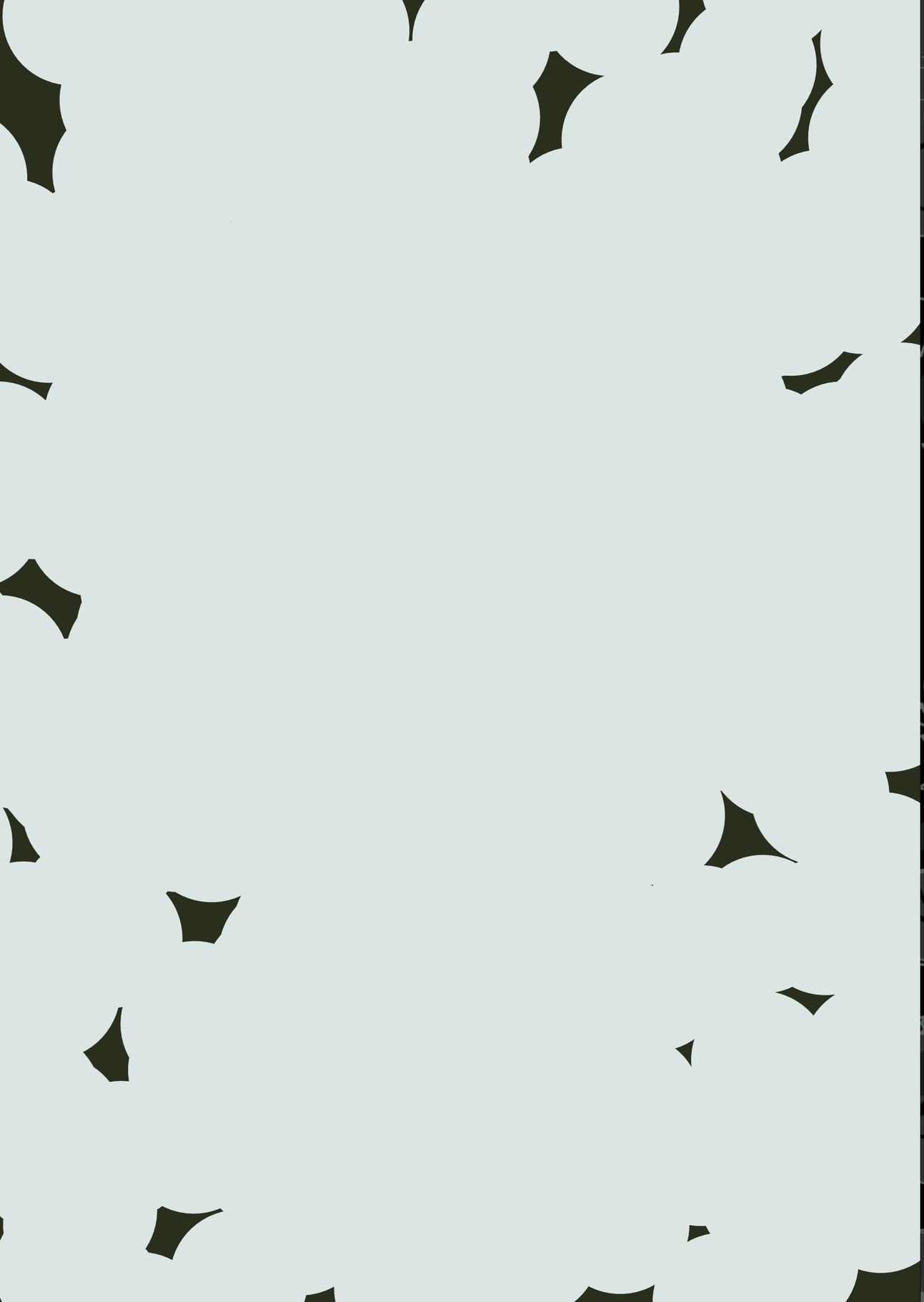






Rotational Farming is a form of sustainable highland agriculture practiced by Karen communities and other ethnic groups. A diverse mix of crops is cultivated together in a single plot and harvested within one year. The land is then left to lie fallow and naturally regenerate (known as a recovery period) for 6–7 years before being reused. This cycle helps conserve soil, water, and forest ecosystems.





Ariel William Orah is an Indonesian artist and community catalyst based in Berlin. His interdisciplinary practice critically engages with systemic structures while addressing the emotional and cultural dimensions of displacement and identity. Working across performance, sound art, and socially engaged projects—with a keen focus on social and climate injustice—he co-founded the collaborative platform and art group sōydivsion, the think-tank initiative Mutating Kinship Lab, and the empathy-driven sound collective L-KW.

Subdued Residue: Listening After Geneva (1967)

A chapter within the artistic research project EXTRA K↔K LANG

Structured through ADSR: Attack, Decay, Sustain, Release

By Ariel William Orah

Prelude: Historical Ground and Urgency

In 1967, in the quiet Swiss conference rooms, Indonesia was presented to the global capital as an open terrain.

Twelve years earlier, in Bandung, political self-determination had been articulated with conviction and collective force. Leaders from Asia and Africa gathered to imagine a postcolonial future beyond imperial domination and Cold War alignment. Bandung carried amplitude. It proposed sovereignty not as dependency but as structural transformation.

By 1967, something had shifted.

In the aftermath of the 1965–1966 mass violence and the consolidation of Suharto's New Order regime, Indonesia entered a decisive economic restructuring. The Foreign Investment Law of 1967 formalised extensive guarantees for multinational capital. The Geneva Investment Conference later that year marked Indonesia's reintroduction to Western corporate actors as a site of resource opportunity.

Political aspiration did not vanish; it was recalibrated.

This history is not distant.

In the past year, severe floods submerged entire neighbourhoods in Indonesia. Landslides displaced communities. Watersheds failed under rainfall that might once have been absorbed by forest cover long since removed. These events were framed as extreme weather. Yet from afar and from memory, they felt structural.

I was born and raised in Bandung, in the Sundanese region of West Java, before moving to Berlin nearly fifteen years ago. My family lineage stretches across Sulawesi, Maluku, Medan, and Padang, and includes Chinese-Indonesian ancestry. Indonesia, for me, is not abstract territory. It is layered geography and lived inheritance.

The recurrence of environmental disaster in my homeland is not only climatic; it is historical. It carries the residue of land reorganised, concessions signed, and development models institutionalised decades earlier.

This project begins from that urgency.

Its structure follows the ADSR envelope from electronic sound synthesis: Attack, Decay, Sustain, Release. In music production, ADSR describes how a sound unfolds over time—how it emerges, diminishes, stabilises, and fades. I adopt this framework not as an ornament but as a method. Political events also have envelopes. They strike with intensity, are reshaped by institutions, persist as systems, and return as consequences long after their initial articulation.

In this sense, this essay listens to history as one listens to a tone: attentive to its onset, its modulation, and the conditions that determine its release.

Attack

Some historical moments strike with amplitude.
The Bandung Conference of 1955 gathered 29 Asian and African nations to articulate sovereignty, non-alignment, and the possibility of structural transformation after colonial rule. It was a moment when political imagination moved collectively rather than hierarchically. Its voice carried across borders.
In a previous artistic research fellowship project, I worked closely with Bandung as a point of resonance. That research examined how anti-colonial aspiration continues to echo within diasporic experience and contemporary sound practice. That phase is complete. Its focus was voice, solidarity, and persistence.
This new project begins elsewhere.
If Bandung marked a peak of audibility, the question now is what absorbed its sound. What systems received it and reshaped its trajectory? What structural adjustments followed the declaration of independence?
Amplitude does not remain untouched. It is shaped by the architectures that contain it.
The movement from Bandung ↔ Geneva marks precisely such a modulation.

Decay

The recalibration of sovereignty did not begin in Geneva. It was prepared.
In the mid-1950s, a generation of Indonesian economists studied at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Indonesia under Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, the father of the current Indonesian president, Prabowo Subianto, and one of the few Indonesian economists at the time with a doctoral degree. As Dutch lecturers departed amid rising tensions over West Irian, Sumitro turned to the Ford Foundation for institutional support. Selected students were sent to the University of California, Berkeley, beginning in 1957.
By the early 1960s, they had returned—Widjojo Nitisastro, Ali Wardhana, Emil Salim, Mohammad Sadli, and Subroto—and began shaping economic policy discourse within academic and military institutions. Technocratic knowledge converged with military authority.
The events of 30 September 1965 and the mass killings that followed fundamentally altered Indonesia's political landscape. Declassified US records show that American officials had detailed knowledge of the killings as they unfolded, and encouraged and facilitated the Indonesian Army's campaign against the left. Washington welcomed Indonesia's shift away from Sukarno's non-aligned politics toward a Western-aligned developmental model.
Suharto's consolidation of power created the conditions for economic restructuring. The Foreign Investment Law of 1967 institutionalised broad guarantees for foreign capital, marking Indonesia's formal re-entry into global capitalist circuits.

Within this alignment, the Indonesian Investment Conference held in Geneva in November 1967, reported by Time magazine as sponsored by Time Inc., functioned as a high-profile promotional platform for the new investment climate. Oil companies, mining corporations, international banks, and financial actors were invited to participate in Indonesia's "reconstruction". Concessions were granted. Contracts signed. Territories reorganised.
Read through a wider Cold War lens, this sequence was not only national but structural. Anti-communist stabilisation repeatedly functioned as a precondition for investor-led development across different regions. In The Jakarta Method, Vincent Bevins argues that Indonesia's 1965–66 annihilation of the left became a reference point for later anti-left violence elsewhere, including parts of Latin America—a transnational logic in which political elimination and economic opening were intertwined.
Bandung amplified sovereignty. Geneva reorganised it through capital.
Decay does not mean disappearance. It means compression. Political declaration narrowed into administrative language. Contracts replaced manifestos. Investment clauses replaced solidarity.
Silence entered the structure itself.
It burns.

Sustain

Extractive systems persist through demand.
Palm oil expansion in Sumatra and Kalimantan responds to global consumption: processed foods, detergents, cosmetics, biofuels. Nickel extraction in Sulawesi and Papua has intensified under the banner of the energy transition. Electric vehicles and renewable infrastructures celebrated in Europe depend on accelerated mineral extraction elsewhere.
Demand circulates quietly. Extraction remains visible.
In 2020, Indonesia banned raw nickel exports in an attempt to assert resource sovereignty through downstream industrialisation. The European Union challenged this policy at the World Trade Organization, revealing a structural tension: who determines the terms under which natural resources circulate—the producing state or the trade regime shaped by historically dominant economies?
This friction echoes older patterns.
In the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company entered the archipelago, driven by European demand for spices in the Maluku Islands. Nutmeg and cloves were reorganised into commodities by distant appetites. Today, palm oil and nickel move within similar circuits. Technologies differ; the asymmetry persists.
Formal independence does not automatically dissolve hierarchical exchange. It often reorganises it.
Power within Indonesia reflects comparable spatial imbalances. While precolonial Javanese kingdoms exerted influence across parts of the archipelago, the modern centralisation of governance in Java was institutionalised under Dutch colonial

rule and carried forward after independence. Infrastructure, capital, and political leadership remain disproportionately concentrated in Java.

As someone from Bandung, a Sundanese region within West Java, shaped by family roots across eastern and western Indonesia, I experience this centralisation as layered and uneven. Java is both a centre and an internally stratified terrain. The imbalance between Java and the outer islands mirrors a longer logic in which peripheral territories function primarily as extraction zones.

Floods in Sumatra, landslides in Java, industrial sediment along Sulawesi's coasts ↔ these are not disconnected events. They are manifestations of long supply–demand circuits and spatial arrangements sedimented over decades.

Western green modernity imagines a sustainable horizon. Extractive territories experience its material underside.

Release

In sound synthesis,
release is not an abrupt end.
It is the fading of a tone
according to parameters
already set at its beginning.
Environmental
catastrophe unfolds similarly.
Floodwaters move
through watersheds
altered decades earlier.
Hillsides collapse where
vegetation was removed
long before the storm
arrived. Coastal ecosystems strain under
sediment generated
upstream by mining
corridors and plantation expansion. What
appears sudden is often
the delayed effect of
structural adjustment.
Disaster does not
erupt from nowhere.
It follows a curve.
Environmental
destruction
accumulates.
It is normalised through
policy, dispersed
across time, and
difficult to attribute
to a single decision.
Its violence
is distributed.
To listen here
is not to romanticise
sound. It is to diagnose structure.
Listening reveals
how pressure
persists beneath
apparent quiet.
The frequency
shifted in 1967. Its
reverberation continues.
What we witness
today is not only
an intensified climate.
It is the release of a system
long in motion.

Root Frequency

The notion of root frequency is not a break in my practice but a way of naming its continuity.

My artistic work has always emerged from the intersection of lived diasporic experience and structural thinking shaped by my background in economics and sustainability. I did not enter art through formal training. I entered it through questions of political economy, uneven development, and environmental imbalance. Sound became the medium through which I could hold these questions materially.

Earlier projects listened to resonance and collapse. They asked how anti-colonial aspirations continue to echo across generations and how landscapes give way under extractive pressure. Those works were concerned with vibration and rupture, with what remains audible and what visibly fails.

This project moves further upstream within the same trajectory. Instead of listening only to resonance or collapse, I am listening for the structural tone beneath them. What development doctrines, trade regimes, and investment laws set the parameters long before disaster appears? What economic assumptions quietly tune territory decades before floods or landslides become visible?

Extraction is not only a material operation; it is a governing frequency. Supply follows demand. Sovereignty is negotiated through legal frameworks. Landscapes are reorganised in anticipation of global consumption.

If disasters are harmonics, then the root frequency lies deeper in the economic architectures that condition them.

Naming this frequency does not mark a new direction. It clarifies the one I have been following.

This is the ground from which EXTRA K↔K LANG unfolds.

Context & Resonance

Subdued Residue: Listening After Geneva (1967) forms part of the artistic research project EXTRA K↔K LANG and extends a line of inquiry that has unfolded across earlier works, including MAJEMUK (2024–2025), developed during my artistic research fellowship at Akademie der Künste Berlin; LONGSOR (2025); and the exhibition Landslide. These projects investigated political resonance, geological instability, and the local manifestations of global crisis. While they approached these themes through sound installation, performance, and socially engaged formats, they shared a sustained concern with how historical forces reverberate materially in the present.

The historical reflections in this essay are informed by research on Indonesia's 1965–1967 restructuring, particularly Bradley R. Simpson's Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.–Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968, as well as archival documentation surrounding the 1967 Geneva investment conference (ETAN). Vincent Bevins' The Jakarta Method provides an additional lens, situating the Indonesian mass killings within a broader Cold War pattern in which anti-communist repression and economic realignment were intertwined across multiple regions.

The political horizon of the Bandung moment draws on Christopher J. Lee's Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives. Conceptually, this work also engages Aníbal Quijano's writing on the coloniality of power, Eduardo Gudynas's analysis of extractivism and neo-extractivism, and Rob Nixon's formulation of slow violence as a way to understand the temporal dispersal of environmental harm. Contemporary sonic thought, including Brandon LaBelle's Acoustic Territories and Salomé Voegelin's Listening to Noise and Silence, informs the methodological framing of listening as spatial, political, and epistemic practice.

For further context:
https://www.arielorah.com/majemuk.html
https://www.arielorah.com/longsor.html
https://soydivision.berlin/landslide/
https://etan.org/news/2014/2timelife.htm

Mia Yu is an artist, art historian, and independent curator working between Paris and Beijing. Her practice is built on long-term field research at large-scale infrastructures and extractive sites, and examines the complex relationships between post-extractive nature, cosmology, and geopolitics in the Asian context. Her works have been exhibited nd screened at the Centre Pompidou, Palais des Beaux-Arts de Paris, Photografiska, the Goethe-Institut, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Times Museum, Kunstverein Hamburg, Harvard University, and Serendipity Arts Festival. Her writings have appeared in Artforum, Oxford Art Review, Art Monthly, and the Afterall Exhibition Histories book series. Mia Yu has taught at the China Art Academy and is currently a visiting researcher at the École normale supérieure in Paris.

The Pain and the Pit: Five Moments of Listening at Asia's Largest Open-Pit Mine

By Mia Yu

1. The Pain by the Great Pit

On a snowy winter day in 2021, I embarked on my first research trip to Fushun—home to Asia's largest open-pit coal mine, known locally as the Great Pit. What greeted me first—before I even caught sight of it—were plumes of smoke rising in the distance, followed by a smell mingling with the scents of carbon and sulfur. As I drew closer, a colossal crater slowly unfolded before my eyes. It was so enormous that no single vantage point allowed me to take in its full scope. Its sloped walls were scored with endless stair-like ruts, and across its expanse, countless excavators still toiled. From afar, they looked like tiny beetles, their giant metal claws heaving high to tear into the earth, load after heavy load of soil cast aside. The crater before me lays bare its magnitude in the most tangible of forms: raw, unyielding, impossible to ignore. I was overwhelmed by the planetary scale of this gargantuan pit—my shock tangled with awe, fascination, grief, and a profound loss for words. As I watched the excavator scalping the earth, a sharp, searing pain welled up from the very depths of my body, a convulsion rippling out from my womb. In that visceral, unshakeable moment, language felt hollow and futile, stripped of all meaning; only that pain grew sharper, more vivid, more present with every breath.

Located in Manchuria (northeast China), Fushun has long emerged as a pivotal hub for fossil fuel extraction. Its complex extractive legacy is deeply intertwined with multiple historical layers: Japanese colonial violence since the early 20th century, socialist industrialisation in the 1950s and 1960s, economic decline in the 1990s, ecological degradation, and, most recently, ecological restoration and energy transition. Between 1905 and 1945, Japanese colonial forces plundered 227 million tonnes of coal from this earth. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Fushun's colonial industrial heritage served as a cornerstone of socialist industrialisation during the First and Second Five-Year Plans. Another 280 million tonnes were extracted during this period. From the 1990s onward, amid the national market-oriented reform drive, Fushun's industrial system experienced a dramatic collapse. Urban development ground to a halt, and the city emerged as a prototypical Rust Belt city among the old industrial bases of northeast China. The 108-year extractive history created a deep pit that stretches 8.2 kilometres long, 2.2 kilometres wide, and plunges to a maximum depth of 420 metres. What was once celebrated as the Mother of China's Heavy Industry now stands as the deepest and largest human-made chasm in Asia.

The sky dimmed, and the Great Pit sank into deep twilight. Yet as a soundscape, it only grew more vivid. I sat on the edge of the pit, closed my eyes, and tried to trace the contours and textures of this vast acoustic field. At the surface of the soundscape were the ceaselessly working excavators. Their engines and drills cut

through the air with a shrill, ferocious edge, like the growl of monstrous beasts. Reverberating through the hollow was the clatter of trains. Along tracks carved into the pit's slopes, trains shuttled back and forth, each locomotive hauling a long line of open-topped dump cars filled with coal waste brought from other mines. The waste is being used to refill the enormous cavity, part of an ongoing state-led ecological restoration. Linked only by hooks with wide gaps, the open cars banged and clanged continuously as they moved. Every now and then, a train let out a long, haunting whistle, drifting high above the din. At the rim of the Great Pit stands an oil refinery. Though the mine had long ceased operation, oil was still being extracted from oil shale in various refineries. Its massive machinery ran in a sharp, taut rhythm. Fossil fuel production and state-led ecological restoration simultaneously moved to their own sonic tempo. Yet beneath the symphony of these noises, I thought I heard a rhythm like breathing, rising from the very bottom of the pit—or perhaps from even deeper within the earth's strata. Far slower, far more profound than human breath, it was as if pulled by some planetary force, surging toward me like a tide. I could not trace its source, yet I sensed it bearing a language—unspoken, unknowable.

I don't know how long I have waited.
After the last snow of this winter,
you arrive in the freezing wind.
Crossing one train track after another,
you descend into this deep pit.
At the tail of the Changbai Mountain,
I reveal my barren womb to you...

2. Murmuration From the Garbage Pile

Since that first painful encounter with the Great Pit, I have returned to it again and again, over three years. Though I always carried a camera and a recording device, I had no fixed script nor precise shooting plan. The Great Pit's planetary scale was simply overwhelming. I held only one clear intuition: I wished to seek out the invisible fissures that can only be heard. The Great Pit had long captivated viewers as a visual spectacle. Yet I hoped that through deep listening, I might bring forth what had been obscured by sight. In this practice of listening, I also sought a language to narrate the unspoken story of the Great Pit.

On a frigid winter day, I returned to the northern slope of the Great Pit with my research partner Li Yong and my cinematographer Liang

Xiaoguang. As decades of coal extraction had triggered severe ground subsidence, the cluster of factories—including the large oil refinery constructed here by the Japanese in 1928—had collapsed, victims of both geological catastrophe and decades of economic decline. In their place, a long, desolate expanse of industrial waste and ruins had gradually taken shape. We parked the car before a large mound of industrial rubble. Liang Xiaoguang told me that he wanted to capture a panoramic view of the Great Pit with a drone. As soon as he left, I felt a quiet sense of relief. The panoramic gaze of the drone has always left me uneasy. Li Yong and I climbed to the top of the five-metre-high mound. From that vantage point, I could clearly see the vast, empty terrain behind the debris. Li Yong told me that not long ago, this had been an oil refinery where thousands of workers once laboured—now entirely erased by the geological disasters wrought by coal mining. And further in front of us lay the sprawling, boundless expanse of the Great Pit.

We examined the debris beneath our feet: crushed walls, dismembered office furniture, scattered sundries, rusted tools... I wandered across the mound and found a work log, its pages handwritten with records of subsidence damage from the 1990s. Meanwhile, Li Yong discovered a photo album stuffed with undeveloped film negatives. At that moment, I heard the drone passing beneath my feet and the cinematographer shouting from a distance: 'Look down! Look down!'. As a highly discerning cinematographer, Liang Xiaoguang must have noticed something through the drone's viewfinder that was invisible from where I stood.

I bowed my head, yet still saw nothing special. But I heard it—the sound of thick paper flapping against one another in the wind, patter, patter... I followed the sound, and amid the rubbish, I saw patches of vivid blue fluttering and swaying in the bitter wind. As we brushed away the overlying rubble, stacks of large portrait photographs emerged. Against sky-blue backdrops stood workers in uniform, gazing solemnly at the camera. When the factory was demolished, its wall of honour for model workers had been buried here along with the ruins. We pulled these faces out of the rubble one by one. No words could describe the shock I felt. The drone circled above us, yet I could scarcely register its presence. I held my recorder deep into the pile of debris to capture the sound. I thought I heard faint, murmuring voices, intertwined with a slow, heavy breath, rising from deep within the earth, only to fade away into the cold air.

On breezy evenings,
echoes and shadows rise
between the strata of the earth.
I roam the mountains and waters of the wasteland
with the vision of a machine-eagle.
My womb was once teeming with alien creatures:
mining coal, extracting oil.
My sweat is paraffin,
my tears are sulfuric acid.

Oh my story-collectors,
when you lower your probe into the void,
I morph into an iron bird, surging toward you.
The broken images lingering between the Earth's strata
can still reveal themselves.
A wave of pain surges from my barren womb.

3. The Slag Heap and the Sacred Mountain

A few days later, I arrived at East Shechang—another slag site adjoining the Great Pit. The term Shechang 舍场 derives from the Japanese word すてば (suteba), literally “a discarded field”. It was a designation imposed by Japanese colonial authorities upon the mining spoil heaps of Fushun. Over the course of a century, the mining wastes accumulated into monumental, artificial mountains, and they continue to burn in slow, silent combustion. Rich in residual carbon and sulfur, the compressed and compacted slags spontaneously regenerate heat; its elusive subterranean thermal energy drifts erratically beneath the surface. Each winter, plumes of smoke rise from the earth as the buried waste smoulders. Sections of the slope are nourished into lush green by geothermal warmth, while others are seared and scorched bare. Unlike other spoil heaps capped with topsoil, East Shechang remains exposed and unmasked. Every day, truckloads of slag are still discharged here, stacking into tiered, terraced mountains. The same residue is also hauled to backfill the Great Pit, merely a few kilometres away.

The day before, heavy snow had fallen, and the temperature plummeted to −30 degrees Celsius. My cheeks and fingertips quickly numbed in the cutting wind; the blood in my brain seemed to congeal. Yet beneath my feet, the spoil—still seething with the thousands of degrees of heat from extraction—billowed thick steam into the frigid air. The entire soundscape rumbled like a downpour: the roar of truckloads of slag cascading down the slopes. Several heavy-duty electric breakers pulverised boulders, each impact bellowing like a wounded beast. I stepped onto a frozen reservoir, constructed to extinguish spontaneously combusting slags. Etched into a large stone beside it were two calligraphic red characters: Tianchi—Heavenly Lake, the iconic crater lake atop Changbai Mountain. In the distance, smokestacks pierced the sky like smouldering volcanoes.

This juxtaposition of a prehistoric-industrial tableau and an ersatz scenic site drew me irresistibly to link Fushun with Changbai Mountain—the renowned mountain range straddling the China–North Korea border. Its main peak, a massive stratovolcano, is crowned by the celebrated crater lake Tianchi, which is held as a sacred site by the Manchu, Korean, and numerous northern ethnic groups across northeast Asia. Fushun lies on the western extension of the Changbai Mountains, roughly 500 kilometres from Tianchi, yet few draw any meaningful connection between the Great Pit and this sacred mountain. Geologically, however, Fushun’s coal seams are intimately bound to the uplift

of the Changbai Mountains approximately 55 million years ago. As Changbai rose, Fushun subsided into a fault basin, filled with primeval forests and peat. Continued subsidence, driven by Changbai Mountain’s tectonic ascent, buried and compressed these organic deposits into Fushun’s colossal coal seams.

A more profound connection exists on a speculative plane: the Great Pit and its black, terraced spoil mountains are not separated from the Changbai Mountain range, but integral components of it. By forging this conceptual bond, I seek to lay bare the stark reality of the Anthropocene: pristine, untouched nature no longer exists. What remains is a humanly modified, wounded world, haunted by its own spectres—landscapes inscribed with the violences of modernity. The question then arises: How might I render the ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene in Fushun tangible through artistic practice?

To me, Fushun’s Great Pit is more than an industrial site: it is a repository of ancestral tales, erased histories, and spatial cosmologies. Once hailed as the Mother of China’s Heavy Industry, it now stands as a maternal body harbouring vivid potential for geo-cosmic mythmaking. In the 1960s, geologist Dorothy Vitaliano formulated the concept of the geomyth: a myth or traditional narrative rooted in premodern observations of actual geological events—floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes. It encodes how early societies interpreted and commemorated the Earth’s deep-time processes. Today, extractive landscapes such as open pits and hydropower dams constitute human-engineered geological events in their own right. China’s large-scale infrastructures in particular reshape the crust and disrupt planetary rhythms. Like Fushun’s Great Pit, mega-extractive sites and infrastructures are generating new geomyths for a future Earth. By aligning the Great Pit with the rich mythic heritage of Changbai Mountain, I attempt to unlock this geomythic potential for ecological futures.

Standing atop the spoil mountain of East Shechang, gazing out at the landscape and listening to the slag pour down the slopes like unrelenting rain, I felt a sharp, burning pain rise again from my womb. Could this pain originate from the very depths of the Earth? Could it be the Earth’s agony projected onto my body? Could this pain be the way human flesh registers the grief and anxiety borne by the planet? Might the violence inflicted upon the Earth ultimately turn inward, coagulating within human bodies? In my earphones, beneath the wailing of machinery, I hear a faint, distant singing.

There is a tale of the mountain I must tell.
A black peacock perches upon the peak;
at dusk and dawn, she cries out.
A gray dragon roams the hillside—
whenever it appears, my chest blazes like fire.
Has this trapezoidal slag mountain
already become part of Changbai Mountain?
Oh my story-collectors,
if you listen to your frozen hearts,
there is a song of the waste mountain
I must sing for you.

4. Mythmaking as Cosmotechnics: The Arrival of Eme Cosmos

Over three years from 2021 to 2024, I wandered through vast open-pit mines, slag mountains, industrial ruins, and coal-mining subsidence zones—all across Fushun and its surrounding areas. As a turbulent chorus of sounds surged repeatedly toward me from the depths of the land, my body continued to awaken to new layers of pain. Such mutual

resonance and cross-reference between terrestrial trauma and bodily pain have driven me to seek a narrative medium—one that might grant this intense connection a more public path of perception. The speculative link between the Great Pit in Fushun and Changbai Mountain eventually led me to search among the mythological legacies of Changbai. Among the ancient legends I encountered, the figure of the Earth Goddess Eme captured my attention: Goddess Eme lies reclined across the earth, formless and boundless—for the earth itself is her body. She bears innumerable wombs, within which humans and all living beings reside. Inspired by this mythic image, I established the core premise of my work: the Great Pit is precisely one of Goddess Eme's many wombs, yet it has been utterly hollowed out by humanity. Only by gathering the stories scattered in the fissures of the earth can her wounds gradually heal, and the pain lodged deep within the human body can be soothed.

Yet I believe the film I intend to create is more than an act of ecological healing—it is also a pathway to imagining ecological futures. Indeed, my field research in Fushun extends beyond fossil fuel extraction; it runs parallel to, and becomes deeply intertwined with, China's shift toward renewable energy. In February 2022, Li Yong and I came to hike Fushun's largest slag mountain for the second time. To our astonishment, the landscape bore no resemblance to how it had appeared one year earlier. A new propaganda billboard slogan stood in the empty field: 'Waste is merely misplaced resource. To turn waste into resource, to transform decay into wonder, is an art'. Vast stretches of native vegetation had been cleared; all the vegetable gardens tended by workers had been erased. Dense arrays of photovoltaic piles covered the ground. From the on-site notice board, we learned that this waste field had been zoned as a photovoltaic industrial park, where eight hundred thousand solar piles would blanket the entire tailings mountain. Four months later, the 14th Five-Year Plan for a Modern Energy System was officially released, setting forth a clear target: coal-mining subsidence zones, tailings mountains, and abandoned mines are identified as land resources for the development of wind power and photovoltaic energy, realising the transformation of 'waste into scenery, waste into electricity'.

In 2023, when we returned to the Great Pit, it was no longer a desolate site of fossil fuel extraction. Instead, it had become a landscape where fossil fuel remnants, remediation efforts and renewable

energy infrastructures intertwined. Backfilling operations were underway on the western side of the pit. Xi Jinping's ecological thought that 'clear waters and green mountains are also invaluable assets' was permanently inscribed in giant red characters on the pit slope. Renewable energy infrastructures—including waste-to-energy plants and pumped-storage hydroelectric stations—had also been rapidly constructed within a year or two. These top-down energy transformation plans were nested within a grand statist vision of an ecological future. Yet, as Anna Tsing's notion of feral futures suggests, we must let go of our obsession with a singular, perfect, controllable future. The future is not a one-way project of human design and domination, but a living network where humans and all other beings co-weave and co-become. Only then can we reach a truly plural eco-future.

Thus, I cannot help but ask: what alternative pathways towards ecological futures might the entanglement of fossil fuel remnants and renewable energy infrastructure reveal to us? And what unspoken ecological imaginaries might it awaken? With this question in mind, I visited the construction site of a pumped-storage hydropower station on the outskirts of Fushun—northeast China's largest new energy infrastructure. A colossal "energy power bank", it comprises upper and lower reservoirs that convert wind and solar energy into hydraulic power for efficient storage and utilisation.

Our vehicle entered a vaulted underground tunnel, its rocky walls still bearing the rough texture of blasting and excavation. Deeper into the earth, the air grew colder, thick with the mingled scents of concrete, dust, and subterranean moisture. I could clearly sense a vast soundscape steadily drawing near from the tunnel's end—a high, piercing, repetitive tone, wrapped in layers of deep, dark reverberation. The end of the tunnel revealed an enormous human-made underground cavern. A fifty-metre-deep geological section lay exposed, its layers of taupe earth and blue-brown rock clearly defined, carrying the untamed primal wildness of the earth. In the depths of the soundscape, the distant drone of drilling rumbled, accompanied by the low resonance of vibrating bedrock. The hydraulic hiss of the slowly moving overhead crane, the deep hum of the concrete pump—raw, yet mechanically ordered. Workers' shouts are stretched thin by the vast space, echoing between the walls with the cold wind blowing through the ventilation ducts. Whenever the machinery paused, only the dripping of groundwater seeping from the crevices remained—the most authentic whisper of the earth, a reminder that this space has not yet been fully tamed. The wildness of geology and the order of industry struggle here, waiting to give birth to the heart of a hydropower station from the abyss. I stood transfixed. Could this be another womb of the goddess Eme being hollowed out?

The mythic landscape and soundscape of the hydropower construction site led me to reflect on energy infrastructure as a cosmo-technical apparatus. Yuk Hui's framework of cosmotechnics invites us to reconsider the unification of cosmic and moral order through technical practices—from cartography and storytelling to geomancy, film, and photography. Hui's conception of the cosmos does not advocate a return to ancient cosmologies; instead, it engages the transformative force of situated knowledges, which begins with listening to, believing in, and invoking the spirits. For me, the Great Pit, the slag mountains, and the hydropower station are precisely sites where cosmotechnics are mythmade, enacted, and mediated. I jotted down four characters in my notebook: Eme Cosmos (额姆宇宙). This is not only the title of a future film, but also a key to entering another world. In this world, what matters is not what we want Eme to say, but what Eme wishes to tell us.

5. Dance in Infrastructural Silence

A year after Li Yong and I visited the construction site, we returned to the pumped-storage hydropower station again. We drove into the same tunnel, where curved strips of light still glided overhead. Yet the swelling, approaching sound field that had once lingered at the tunnel's end was gone. A staff member informed us that the station has been completed on time and is now fully operational. We stepped out as the heavy gate opened. The dark, chaotic abyss of construction had vanished entirely, replaced by a space of pure white and rationality. Its pale floor stretched out; dozens of red banners hung like a crimson canopy, and at its centre stood two circular generator units. What struck me most was not the drastic transformation of the space, but that, dozens of metres underground, I could no longer sense the texture of the Earth.

The staff pressed the start button. A sharp, piercing tone cut through the silence, then quickly settled into a low, steady, monotonous hum, laced with faint hissing, seeping from the metallic texture of the generator casing. He explained, 'When the generator rotates clockwise, electricity is generated. In pumped-storage mode, the unit turns counterclockwise, using electricity to drive the pump and transfer water from the lower reservoir to the upper one for storage.' I understood. This seemingly monotonous sound was the pulse of energy production. It had stripped away the wildness of nature. In extreme stillness, surging water was transformed into electric current, and all rough, powerful physical traces were quietly erased. This silence easily made one forget the immense water flowing deep beneath the surface. Digital technology abstracted nature, energy, networks, and even power itself, making us forget their origins.

Li Yong and I began to run clockwise with the turbine, our bodies chasing the spinning blades hidden within. Moments later, we were breathless and unsteady. The run was absurd, futile—our flesh could never match the speed of the machine. Yet within this abstract technological space, our bodies unleashed energy and warmth amid the hydroelectric station's cold neutrality. At that moment, the staff shut down the generator. Its hum vanished abruptly. We collapsed to the ground, and silence returned, broken only by our heavy breathing. I couldn't help wondering: could the images and sounds of energy and nature buried beneath this silence be recalled? Might Goddess Eme still have a story to tell?

I lay flat on the ground. A drone hovered silently down from above. My cinematographer Liang Xiaoguang had launched it long before, filming our run. It hung motionless in the air, looking down at me, as if the incarnation of Eme, gazing directly into my eyes. As it descended slowly, its hum grew louder. I felt that familiar pain again—dull, primal, rising from the depth of the womb, just as it had when I first stood at the edge of the Great Pit. I located the pain, taking it as my origin. I contracted and folded my body, curling into the fetal position. Then, with the pain as my centre, I slowly released and stretched my limbs. My body repeated this cycle of curling and unfolding. I imagined my hands and feet tracing endless circles on the ground, their centre: the painful core within me. The drone hovered above, overlooking my entire movement. I stared up at it, letting the pain rise, surge, and ebb away.

Oh my story-collectors,
seeking my legend is
just another way of seeking yourselves?
You have been unyielding for a hundred years.
You have been melancholy for a hundred years.

Lay down that strength.
Lay down that sorrow.
You will not find a future you can foretell.
Trust that the wind still stirs within you,
trust that the four seasons still live in your womb.
Exchange your energy with the formless chaos.
You are becoming light.
You are becoming soft.

After this dance of silence in the hydropower station,
I felt a lightness I had never known before.

6. Speculative Energy

Three months after our visit to the hydropower station, I completed the film Eme Cosmos. Two story-collectors—portrayed by Li Yong and me—traverse the landscapes of energy production and excavate the layered histories of the land. Along the way, the spirit of Goddess Eme manifests in multiple incarnations. Each figure narrates a poetic account of earthly trauma and ecological repair through visual and symbolic metaphor. By weaving Indigenous myths, spatial cosmologies, and historical archives into a cinematic narrative, Eme Cosmos aims to reawaken the healing power inherent in poetic storytelling. Throughout my research and filmmaking practice, I have been guided by a profound, visceral pain rooted in my body. The mutual resonance and cross-reference between terrestrial trauma and bodily suffering form the driving force behind this aesthetic experiment. This process not only underscores the urgency of green, fossil-free energy, but also calls for a shift in planetary consciousness: to recognise the vulnerability of the earth, and our own vulnerability within it, and to imagine a radically inclusive future of co-becoming. With this orientation, I seek to further explore the relational potential between infrastructure and geomyth, and to examine critical mythmaking as an artistic strategy—even as a soft technology for post-extractive care and future imaginaries. Energy is no longer merely a material substance to be extracted, but an ethics of compassion and trans-corporeal resonance, a speculative force that offers a vision of healing through interconnectedness. I hope that, within China's highly politicised and censored context, such speculative energy stands as my personal attempt to cultivate a post-extractive care for my homeland in Manchuria (northeast China).

Note: All poems in this essay are excerpted from Mia Yu's experimental documentary Eme Cosmos.

Chris Cameron is a scientist and researcher, investigating human rights violations related to environmental injustices. Currently, she is investigating the physical and political foundations of digital systems, where they touch land, water, energy, labor, and governance, because these are the points at which power becomes legible and contestable. This approach, using sound as a medium, makes hidden digital infrastructure auditable for listeners to further challenge transparency issues normalized by tech companies. Her background in digital storytelling, sonic investigations, and environmental justice policy, has given her extensive experience translating investigative research into interactive tools and educational resources.

The Silence of the Towns

By Chris Cameron

Introduction to the methodology

This essay is based on the fieldwork and interviews conducted in February 2026 in Mexico City and several pueblitos[1] along a 20-kilometre stretch of highway named[2] el corredor tecnológico-industrial in the state of Querétaro, Mexico. This work is based on methods that engage with qualitative evidence, instead of quantitative data, because I argue[3] that numerical data is not rooted in lived reality. My methodology for sound investigations includes sonic participant observation, testimonial recording, and desk research. Sonic participant observation included standing with a Tascam recorder and observing sounds of the towns, the data center, industrial noise, highways, and nature, including animals, natural water sources, and fields. Testimonial recording included in-person interviews in Spanish and English with my collaborators: a taxi driver and water protector in the towns surrounding the data center in Querétaro, who I will refer to as Mr X, and a journalist focused on the harms of the tech industry in Mexico, who I will refer to as Cielo[4]. Desk research includes the tracking of local news articles, mapping out locations and distances of infrastructure, and investigation into data center-related research.

Introductory notes

In 2022, 72 environmental land defenders were murdered in Mexico[5]—more than half were Indigenous land defenders, and the rest were journalists who were helping document environmental injustices. State violence is upheld by paramilitary organisations[6] who are hired by governments and companies to act as security for industrial projects, ensuring production is not interrupted by community resistance and activism. There are several documented cases of paramilitary interference in the AI supply chain. One example is the disappearance and murders of the employees of Vizsla Silver Corp., connecting the Sinaloan cartel to the Canadian company's mineral mine[7]. State violence and intimidation have yet to be reported in connection with data centers, until now.

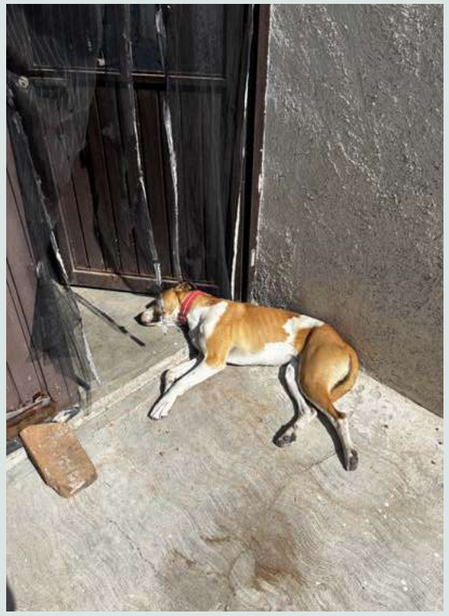
At the time of writing this essay, El Mencho, the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), had just been murdered by the state police with the

1 | Little town, usually less than 2,000 residents.
2 | The name was created by the UN and Microsoft in a formal report analysing the quality of life for the pueblitos around the data centers. In the Microsoft-funded report, they found that the 21 pueblitos in the area had no issues with water and no negative impact from the invasive technology projects.
3 | Numerical data alone cannot convey a lived experience without qualitative and testimonial insights and, without this, quantitative data is usually interpreted under human bias.
4 | Pronounced syeh · loh
5 | Tamara Pearson, 'Indigenous Mexicans risk their lives to defend the environment from organized crime and 'insatiable, predatory' transnational corporations,' The Real News Network, 10 March 2023, https://therealnews.com/indigenous-mexicans-risk-their-lives-to-defend-the-environment-from-organized-crime-and-insatiable-predatory-transnational-corporations
6 | Also referred to as cartels.
7 | Aarón Ibarra and María Verza, 'Canadian mine workers' abduction exposes cracks in Mexico's security strategy,' Los Angeles Times, 16 February 2026, https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2026-02-16/canadian-mine-workers-abduction-exposes-cracks-in-mexicos-security-strategy

US's direct involvement. This caused an uproar from CJNG members who took it out on the public, which involved 250 burning road blockades in 21 states across Mexico[8] and 70 deaths. Currently, the state of Querétaro falls within the territory under the control of the CJNG.

El pueblito silencio

Feeling: hot, stale air, dehydration
Hearing: chimes, the wind, silence
Smelling: sweat, car exhaust



The temperature had climbed to 35 degrees Celsius. It was dry and dusty, and we were sitting in the back of the car, sweating, with the doors open. There were no trees and no shade[9]. We were in the middle of the street in a pueblito called Ajuchitlán, at the base of Colón in Querétaro, Mexico. There were three of us in the back. I was in the middle between two tall British men, who were politely letting me manspread. We stayed in the car while my collaborator, Mr X, was knocking on doors. He told us to give him space while he tracked down some residents who were concerned about what was happening to the water in their town, or the lack thereof. After the Microsoft data center had been built 20 kilometres away, Mr X told us this barrio[10] had reached out, asking for his help. He was the de facto community investigator, the water protector, the one who was trusted by all the pueblitos in the surrounding region.

A day earlier, I had approached Mr X at a conference organized by our mutual collaborators in the state capital. The conference was organized to share current research on the socio-environmental harms of data centers in Querétaro. I told him I knew two British journalists staying in a nearby town who could help document

8 | Los corresponsales y la redacción, 'Tras muerte de "El Mencho", 21 estados con incidentes entre bloqueos, enfrentamientos y operativos,' La Jornada, 22 February 2026, https://www.jornada.com.mx/noticia/2026/02/22/estados/jalisco-enfrentamientos-y-bloqueos-en-caminos-tras-operativo-en-tapalpa
9 | Querétaro is called a semi-desert: trees are sparse in the hot, arid landscape. The pueblitos in this area are characteristically small towns with 1–2 storey buildings made of brick and concrete, there is no tree covering and rarely any shade throughout the day.
10 | Residential zone, like a neighbourhood

evidence for him. Mr X was happy to meet them and share what has been going on behind closed doors.

We watched Mr X as he walked to four houses on the street. Each person opened their door, recognizing him, and after a quick conversation and a glance into the street, they closed the door respectfully, con permiso. There was no one else on the street. It was so quiet we could hear the wind blowing through the empty spaces between buildings. El pueblito silencio, in more ways than one. Mr X returned and told us what he was hearing. The barrio was scared to talk to us. In the past week, they had received threats and intimidation. The government—through extra hands connected to organized crime—had intimidated them into silence. Mr X was shocked by this, as he had spoken to these neighbours the previous week. He seemed disappointed that he couldn't provide us with information. I told him this was enough information. We didn't want to put anyone in danger, and this knowledge implicated the government and industry—in this case, Microsoft—in using violence and intimidation to protect resources. We didn't need more words to confirm this.

Mr X explained that since this town was on a hill, the barrios higher up on the hill weren't receiving any water because the pressure wasn't strong enough to reach them. This wasn't always the case for this barrio. The water pressure had lessened in the past months, most likely due to all the new developments in the area that were connecting to and draining the town's water sources[11]. When a new development taps into a water source, it reduces overall water pressure, making it harder for the water to rise up against gravity and reach the barrio higher up on the hill. From my research, it seemed like this may be connected to one of the data centers built nearby, one that we had just walked by earlier in the day.

An American data center in Mexico

Feeling: nauseous, uncomfortable, overheated
Hearing: machine noise, buzzing, cars on the highway, footsteps
Smelling: pollution, hot tar

Photo by Gavin Shand.

11 | This is also happening in Mexico City—most notoriously occurring with the Mitikah tower development in Coyoacán, which diverted water away from residents for more than a year. Redacción La Coperacha – Ciudad de México, 'Pueblo de Xoco denuncia falta de agua y desplazamiento forzado por Mitikah,' La Coperacha, 6 December 2023, https://lacoperacha.org.mx/pueblo-xoco-denuncia-falta-agua-desplazamiento-forzado-por-mitikah-2023/

I knew it was a bad idea to bring a jacket. Although it was morning in the state of Querétaro, it was already starting to heat up. I was sweating with my hat and sunglasses on, sitting in the back of the cab with two Brits. We were driving to the data center with no plan but to grab sounds and photos. As the car swept past big mossy hills, rugged cliffs, and fields dotted with large cacti, the scenery started to become more industrialized. I could smell the thick air pouring into the backseat from the open driver's side window—a rush of hot air contaminated with the fumes of the surrounding industry. As we passed by, I took note of the industrial parks with heavy securitized metal gates, long one-storey buildings taking up farm-length spaces, construction sites mid-build and some with land still for sale. What I noticed was that all of this land was fenced, gated, and protected, securitized from the outside. No longer land for communal use, this was land prioritized for industry.

On the way up the hill to the Arkansas State University-Querétaro campus (more on this later), we drove past the data center of interest. This was the data center I had been researching for the past two years. Here it was, all this time—it was unmoving, but it felt like something that had been evading me, running from me. The car moved smoothly by the building as I took one 30-second-long video of its entire length, surprised at how big it really was. I could see the cooling system on the other side of the fence—a tall, metal fence bordered by a guarded entrance way. And yes, there was a guard standing in front of the door, alert. The building was reminiscent of a prison; with tall fencing, cameras and security guards, it was keeping something in or someone out.

Although focused on the data center, we were also interested in exploring the Arkansas State University campus. It seemed bizarre to us why there would be an American university in the middle of the Mexican desert. And why Microsoft would invest so much money into building a data center right next to it.

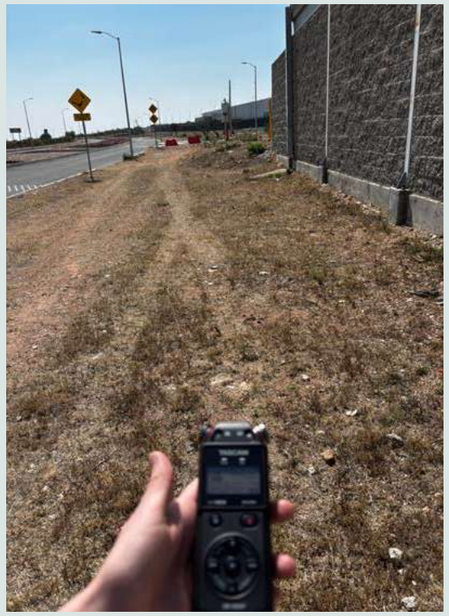
These queries were answered by my journalist collaborator, Cielo, who had recently researched the area with Mr X. She told me about the land owner, Ricardo González, a Spanish businessman who owned land around La Esperanza and Colón. Initially, he donated 35 hectares of

his land to Arkansas State University[12] and invested $100 million with the intention to build a private American university for technology-focused training[13]. The reasoning behind building a tech industry-focused university in the middle of rural Mexico was because of the land expansion it provided. It allowed him to be the proprietor of the university and for the next phase in González's development: leasing the land beside the university to build a data center with his business partner, Ascenty. The data center, Ascenty 2, leased its storage to Microsoft, bringing them in as a partner to build an additional data center, Microsoft QR01, behind it (yes, there are currently two data centers on this plot of land). González also leased his water concessions, which is legal in Mexico, meaning he provided the two data centers with enough water to run continuously in the hot, dry desert, surrounded by pueblitos whose residents were suffering under the water crisis[14].

The car slowed to a stop as we started discussing tactics for recording sounds without the guard noticing. We had arrived at the entrance to the university and attempted to walk through the gated campus entrance. Immediately, we were refused entry for lacking student IDs, furthering our suspicion around why the data center's partner university was highly securitized. We turned around and headed down the driveway towards the data center. I realized that our small talk and footsteps would get in the way of recording the industrial noise and told the British journos to let me go ahead, and they obliged. It was hard to predict if I would get usable sound recordings, as there were no trees to shield the wind; this was open desert. I thought it would be best to shield my Tascam from the wind and also the eyes of the security, so I kept it on the right side of my hip under my jacket.

I started walking and recording. It was so peaceful all around me: no cars driving by, no people on this two-way driveway, all silent except for the deep buzzing of the data center. A 24/7 hum, indicating the servers and the cooling system were alive and well. I got up to the guard's entrance and slowed down my steps, testing out what would happen if he saw me. I looked quickly to the right—he had left his post, what luck! I felt a bit more confident now, letting the Tascam gently out from under my jacket to face the data center full on. Maybe I was too confident. What was that in the corner of my eye, blue lights? Oh my god! It looked like the police, but it was a security car, coming up the other side of the street. Luckily, I had a backpack on, so I could have blended in as a student from the nearby campus. I remained calm and slowly pulled out my phone. I held it to my ear, pretending I was on a phone call while simultaneously taking a video on the other side. This tactic of "me being on the phone" has worked countless times in my life when I felt unsafe. The innocence of walking on a phone call may have made the officer drive right by me, but instead the car slowed to a stop beside my two comrades. They were looking out of place, standing awkwardly in front of the data center about 200 metres behind me. I checked back and saw them smiling and waving goodbye to the car as it continued on. Phew, we were ok.

12 | Bárbara Anderson, 'Querétaro y Arkansas: dos estados, una misma universidad,' Milenio, 12 February 2016, https://www.milenio.com/opinion/barbara-anderson/nada-personal-solo-negocios/queretaro-y-arkansas-dos-estados-una-misma-universidad
13 | Upon researching, I found that the school has only a few focused degrees, all related to AI and technology like Computational and Industrial Engineering, and one I've never seen before: a Business degree in the Global Supply Chain. How sickening.
14 | See: Si hay agua, for more information on water issues in Querétaro.



I kept walking, taking the continuous recording, until I stopped in front of the cooling system, where I could hear the hum buzzing the loudest. I could see the bars on the Tascam moving up and down, recording the oppressive machine noise. The hum was staggering; it was distracting. Noise pollution is becoming more of a reported issue as data centers are built closer to residential areas. I couldn't think about anything else; I could only feel the noise as the waves hit my body. Soundwaves inside a data center can reach over 96 dBA, the decibel level that causes hearing loss. Most data center operators wear protective earplugs, clearly indicating the noise is harmful. Knowing this, why are tech companies allowing data centers to be built beside houses? At this point, I reflected on the sound I couldn't hear, the silent, irritating frequency that was being talked about by researchers: infrasound[15]. Infrasound refers to sound waves that occur at frequencies below human audibility. This vibrational disturbance may have already had an effect[16] on the wildlife. That felt true to me. I couldn't hear birds chirping, and I didn't see any insects wiggling or small rodents running in this bountiful patch of earth. This was the middle of the desert, but it was void of life.

Although nauseous and sweating[17], I continued taking videos, photos, and recording sound until the others reached me. They told me, laughing, that the security guard's interrogation was not intense and they didn't even have to explain what they were doing there. I was shocked at the lack of scrutiny by the security personnel. Considering how hard it was to enter the university, it was incredibly easy to walk by the data center.

When I told this to Cielo later, she laughed and was amazed by our luck, as she had never gotten that close due to safety concerns. She reminded me that since we were freelancers, we took on the legal implications of trespassing, not our employers, and being gringos with

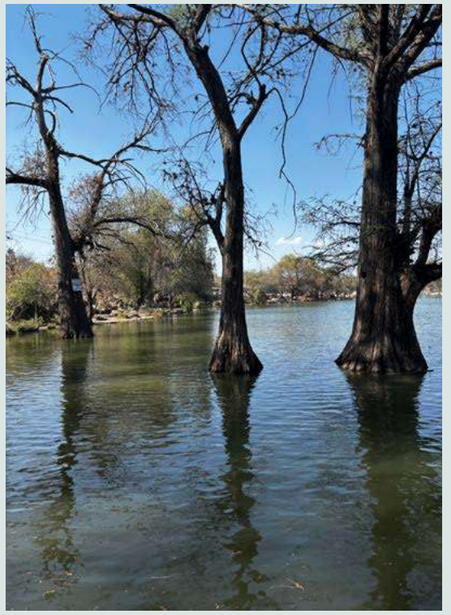
15 | Laure Cailloce, 'Infrasound, sound waves that nothing can stop,' CNRS News, 18 October 2024, https://news.cnrs.fr/articles/infrasound-sound-waves-that-nothing-can-stop
16 | More documentation on infrasound includes cases of data center neighbours complaining of dizziness, headaches, and sleep disturbances leading to stress and cardiovascular problems overall. See: 'Health Issues Caused by Data Center Noise,' Peaceful Peculiar, https://www.peacefulpeculiar.org/uploads/1/5/0/3/150368424/health_issues_46196868514666.pdf
17 | I connected this more to the anticipation of being caught by security than the noise itself.

backpacks, we looked like Arkansas U students, making it easier to blend in. I understood and reflected on that part of the methodology, how I use my positionality and independent status to capture and communicate evidence of environmental harms on behalf of my collaborators. These activities may be more dangerous for them to take on in their home country, and taking on this risk is a significant part of embodied community advocacy work.

Si, hay agua, 'Yes, there is water'

Feeling: cool, calm, relief
Hearing: ducks quacking, water flowing
Smelling: earth, fresh water

We made a stop at a nearby lake; its source is a freshwater spring up in the hills. Mr X turned to me and said, 'si, hay agua', there is water in the area. He pointed up towards the spring, tracing its flow down into the lake beside us. This was evidence proving there are freshwater springs in the area, but they are predominantly being drained by the surrounding industrial projects. This lake was one of the area's last remaining water sources for public use. There was a small opening in a brick wall where the water was spewing from. You could hear the splashing flow of water erupting. There were ducks quacking, and people laughing and talking on paddle boats. It was not drinkable water, but it was water. That area felt fresher and cooler. And people seemed happier—some were calmly sitting beside the cool water and under the shaded canopy of the trees. After seeing this, it was more difficult to comprehend the region's hydric crisis. If there were natural springs nearby, why were there water shortages in the state of Querétaro? Why didn't people have access to water in their homes?



In 2022, Mauricio Kuri, the governor of Querétaro and leader of the tech-authoritarian regime[18], passed a law privatizing all water, putting private companies in charge of managing water distribution[19]. This prioritized industry, which could afford to buy as many water concessions as they wanted, and left communities without water. The impact of the water privatization law caused a social uproar as it occurred during a heavy drought period. This led to the government providing water tanks for residents in areas suffering from extensive water shortages, including all of the pueblitos surrounding the data center. Water trucks, or pipas, would visit these residents to refill their individual tanks, but not without corruption. Cielo told me that residents were extorted by the water truck operators; they would tell them, 'our hose is too short, it won't reach your house', and residents would have to bribe them to get their water allotment. Cielo said some residents hadn't received water for up to a month and were having to ration it during the driest months of the year.

Mr X took us to one of the water storage tanks that was located just outside La Esperanza, the town closest to the Microsoft data center. It was here where the pipas would fill up for the day and drive out to industrial parks and pueblitos to drop water. Luckily, we had arrived at the same time as a water truck. Mr X called out to the water truck operator, 'That water's going to the community right? To La Esperanza?'. He pointed across the highway to the town entrance. The water operator replied, 'I can't hear you, it's too loud,' gesturing at the water filling the truck. 'I don't have time to talk to you.' Mr X kept yelling at him, but the operator stopped answering and ignored him, filling the tank. Mr X later told us many companies pay off the water trucks to come to their industrial parks before driving to any pueblitos, another example of the insidious corruption wrapped up in the water-robbing companies along el corredor tecnológico-industrial.

18 | Kuri is the architect of the data center region in Querétaro; he secured partnerships with Big Tech companies incentivizing them to come to Mexico, including Microsoft, Amazon, Google, ODATA, and Cloud HQ.
19 | Diego Valverde, 'Queretaro Leads Mexico's Data Center Boom, Faces Water Concerns,' Mexico Business News, 1 September 2025, https://mexicobusiness.news/cloudanddata/news/queretaro-leads-mexicos-data-center-boom-faces-water-concerns

Water shortages cause health issues and the spread of disease in many towns, not only due to ingesting contaminated water[20], but also the inability to maintain basic hygiene. Last summer, La Esperanza suffered from a hepatitis outbreak[21], which spread across the community because residents didn't have water to wash their hands. Water is a basic human right. Although it's included in the United Nations Declaration of International Human Rights, this right cannot be upheld and protected in every country unless adopted into national law. At the end of 2024, President Claudia Sheinbaum revealed her national water plan[22]: the project[23] would improve water infrastructure across Mexico and defend the 'right [to] allow every Mexican man and woman to have access to sufficient, quality drinking water'. Two years later, without any infrastructure improvements, this water plan was reformed, giving more decision-making power and control over concessions to the water management company (CONAGUA)[24]. It also eliminated the possibility of free and available domestic water, arguing it would be a financial risk for local governments to take on.

Water instability and its accompanying health risks are scaring many Querétaro residents, who are opting to leave their homes in the pueblitos struggling under hydric stress. When I first spoke to Cielo to map out a plan for this fieldwork, she mentioned this occurrence as a sonic phenomenon. She told me: 'You need to go to the towns surrounding the data center, you need to record the silence in the abandoned streets'. She said that would be the sound that represents what's happening here: the lack of human existence, the forcing out of people in favour of AI and industry, the quietness that comes with dispossession. The silence of the towns.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Maya, my forever collaborator, for accompanying me on this trip, reading through this essay, and corroborating the lived experience with the written.

Thank you to Sam for material support in lending me her Tascam.

The evidence and information in this essay could not be shared without the support of my collaborators in Queétaro and Mexico City. I would especially like to thank my collaborators, Mr X and Cielo, who bravely intervene and speak out about the injustices surrounding the tech industry in Mexico.

20 | The town of Urecho near Colón has one of the highest rates of kidney disease in the area, at a population of 1,600 people.
21 | Paul Mozur, Adam Satariano, and Emiliano Rodríguez Mega, 'From Mexico to Ireland, Fury Mounts Over a Global A.I. Frenzy,' The New York Times, 20 October 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/20/technology/ai-data-center-backlash-mexico-ireland.html
22 | The Agreement for the Human Right to Water and Sustainability https://www.gob.mx/presidencia/prensa/presidenta-claudia-sheinbaum-firma-acuerdo-por-el-derecho-humano-al-agua-y-la-sustentabilidad-se-invertiran-9-mil-mdp-en-tecnificacion-de-riego
23 | A 9 billion MXN peso project equaling just over 444 million Euros.
24 | Marco Lara, 'El nuevo cauce del agua en México: un análisis de las reformas en materia hídrica,' BBVA Research, 17 February 2026, https://www.bbvaresearch.com/publicaciones/mexico-el-nuevo-cauce-del-agua-en-mexico-un-analisis-de-las-reformas-en-materia-hidrica/

Yuri Tuma's practice focuses on contemporary narratives related to sonic and queer ecologies through collective creation, active listening, and sound art. In early 2020, he co-founded the Institute for Postnatural Studies (IPS) in Madrid, a collaborative network of artists and researchers engaged with our current ecological moment. Within IPS, he also actively shapes the direction of Cthulhu Books, an editorial platform showcasing the political potential of imagining new stories for the planet.

The Silent Academy Chapter 3: The Lovelessness Regime Training Camp

By Yuri Tuma

Sun cycle 1721, Saturn Season, Southern Island

Dear Parents and Guardians
of New Recruits,

We welcome your child to the Training Camp of the Lovelessness Regime (LR).

Please accept this letter as an introduction to the journey your offspring will begin in their first cycle of the program. Each cycle, parents are inspired by our unique methodologies and often propose new methods of advancing the Science of becoming Loveless. This is an open channel of communication. Feel free to contribute any ideas to the program, as long as they abide by the Rules of Anger, the Regime's guiding emotion.

Your child's arrival marks the beginning of the Normal Traumatisation Program (NTP), a necessary and honourable step toward complete liberation from affection. Our shared binary lineage has destined them to serve the Regime that rebuilt the Land after the attempted resurrection of the Listeners' New World Order Movement (LNWOM) nearly destroyed the fragile Control Source itself, the Petrotestosteafearleum Core Oil (FCM).

Our facilities rest near the ancient Dick Otomous volcano on the Southern Island. It stands dormant, yet remains volatile in its flammability. Its potential eruption serves as a constant reminder of the sinners who failed to uphold the gift and glory of the One Emotion religion and were cast into the molten lava. You may hear rumours of the creature known as Sissy Hearts, said to sing along the volcanic path, invoking the spirits of the emotional ones. General-Headmaster Ty Rant strictly forbids any approach to the summit, for Sissy's voice carries the dangerous resonance of emotion and emasculation.

Be assured your child is safe within our controlled confinement. Our Professor-Guards (PGs) are skilled lip-readers, and cameras watch every corner and unlit seam of the camp. Surveillance is constant, embedded even in the chips that hold the recruits' minds.

We take pride in being a hyper-religious chapter of the Regime. Daily Worship in the Temple of the Only Emotion, dedicated to our eternal guide, Anger, is mandatory for all recruits. I, Priest Suppress, will initiate them into the sacred art of silencing the heart. Here, they will learn to fill it so completely with fury that the illusion of emotional annulment will sustain them through their useful years.

Donations to the Temple of the Only Emotion ensure that Anger continues to invade your child's heart. You will find the regime's National Killing Bank account information at the bottom of this document.

After each meal, recruits are escorted to the Temple, where they are required to recite the Prayer of Adoration to Anger, one I am sure you know by heart:

My anger resists the love that weakens. Before hating others, I must first hate myself. In this hate, I find the strength to build a world of order and normativity. The only valid emotion towards what is different from me is you, my beloved Anger.

Upon arrival, your child will also be vaccinated to protect them from Radical Pyrosexual Disorder (RPD), which has led many astray from the Traditional Reproduction Mechanism (TRM). This plague, originally spread through the fluids of the invasive bush tomato, is now largely controlled, though traces of its contagion still appear along the volcano's basin.

Upon commencement, all recruits undergo the Screen-Induced Erasure Procedure (S-IEP), which removes unnecessary memories while preserving essential skills such as language, weaponry, and the curated truths of our official history and geography. No artistic knowledge may be retained unless it serves a functional purpose in artisanal or military contexts. Should remnants of personal or intimate memory persist, they must be reported immediately to Sergeant Rage for an over-cleansing intervention. Emotional residues interfere with battalion discipline and may lead to involuntary self-punishment or, in extreme cases, voluntary self-destruction.

Throughout their first training cycle, recruits will participate in our renowned Methodological Modules for New Apprentices (MMNA), including:

Sonic Heat Muscle Imprint (SHMI)

The dual SHMI training will prepare your child to suppress any scream or expression of pain amid extreme noise and heat. They will also learn to raise their voice as a disciplined instrument for silencing those who oppose the LR under pressure. Recruits enter a large enclosed chamber equipped with high-capacity loudspeakers and industrial heaters. Inside, the sounds of protests are remixed into metallic screeches, rages, scrapings, and frantic percussive bursts, emitted at a near-unbearable volume. To align their thresholds of volume and heat endurance, the heaters are activated, marking the moment when the PGs command the collective screaming to begin. They are then unexpectedly instructed to fall into total silence, enduring the sound and heat without any movement, expression, or audible sign of discomfort.

Mirror Training of Shame (MTS)

In the MTS routine, recruits are instructed to stare at their own reflection, but never into the danger zone of

their eyes. They are trained to lower their gaze slowly and scan their body. If their bodies alter in size, humidity, or shape under the gaze, they are punished. These sessions are designed to instil shame toward their physicality. No recruit shall embrace their form with affection; only shame must guide their physical impulses.

However, the camp encourages regulated self- or collective-touching in what we call the Shame Dark Room (SDR), located near the camp's border. These are the only spaces reserved for "unsupervised" use. Each interior is dimly lit by a single candle flame, which measures the duration of allowance. No words or sounds beyond a silent sigh are permitted. If any noise exceeds the prescribed level of quietness, embedded sensors emit a sonic frequency that strikes the heart with sharp, burning pain.

Inactive Listening Burning Walks (ILBW)

During these walks, recruits wear soundproof headphones to prevent the growth of empathy towards the surrounding sonic environment. Empathy is the primary adversary of the Temple of the Only Emotion.

Within the NTP, violence is not only accepted as a valid action but also celebrated as the sole legitimate form of resolution against those who disagree with the Regime. During these sensory-deprivation exercises, your child will train outdoors, using slingshots, sticks, hands, and stones against other animals. Learning to regard living beings that do not look, think, or behave like them as powerless constitutes one of the Regime's foundational principles.

As this exercise advances, recruits learn to ignite and manage controlled burnings across rotating forest zones. The LR takes pride in its strict adherence to the Greenwashing Law of Rotational Forest Violence. For the Regime, fire is the supreme instrument of control; its composition of crackling, sizzling, whooshing, roaring, clinking, and clashing, together with the silence brought forth by the burning woods, is regarded as the anthem of our existence.

We have recently established a team of certified pyro-scientific specialists dedicated to developing fire that is immune to the frequencies of The Silent Academy's sonic and violence-free weaponry. Should your child display promising aptitude, they may be invited to join this esteemed pyro research division.

Blaming Privilege Point Program (BPPP)

Accumulated privilege points may be exchanged for supervised moments of tyranny over imprisoned

members of the Listening Resistance, as well as over plants and animals. Nothing could be more rewarding than blaming others for your pain. This includes you, dear parents.

Ceremony of Fear Adoration (CFA)

As you may know, your child's inaugural cycle in the career of Lovelessness concludes with the Ceremony of Fear Adoration, a rite preserved since the Regime's foundation. During the ceremony, the PGs position the recruits near the eternal flames of our holy petroleum. Recruits are instructed to listen closely to the crackling of the fire as it meets and melts their skin in silence. This is the moment when your child receives the Markings of Fear Adoration that will accompany them for life. Only then are they invited to fill the Machines of Toxicity, shaped like masks, with the sacred oil that burned them.

Foundational Terms of Conduct

During morning rest, recruits are greeted by the Foundational Terms of Conduct (FTC) scorched into the wood of their bed frames.

SUBJUGATION / SUBORDINATION / SUBMISSION / REPRESSION / REJECTION

We recommend that you begin familiarising your child with these terms during their final unsafe moments at home. The more accustomed they are to this vocabulary, the more smoothly they will navigate the training.

Stay assured that the Lovelessness Regime prizes honesty in deception. We teach falsehood openly, for transparency in lying is the highest form of truth. A dozen lies repeated faithfully become reality, and this is how we build order.

We welcome your child into our structure of perfected restraint. Here, they will unlearn the weakness of care and discover the purity of Anger's embrace. Together, we will silence their heart and, in that silence, forge a world of Anger and heat.

With iron peace,
Priest Suppress
on behalf of General-Headmaster Ty Rant
Lovelessness Regime Training Camp,
Southern Island Division

Bank Account information for donations to the Temple of the Only Emotion. Please include your lineage name and title in the transfer reference:

National Killing Bank, Southern Island Chapter
Kill Code: 00000 00001 10011 11101 46XY

Dear Mother,

We did it.
I burned the camp.
We shall rise again.

Resistance in love and listening,

Sissy

Short recap of previous chapters of The Silent Academy

In the wake of the Sonic Wars and the Aural Crisis unleashed by the Lovelessness Regime's black noise weaponry, The Silent Academy emerges as a clandestine sanctuary for survivors. It redefines silence as a pristine soundscape, nurturing post-sonic-war generations through active listening, interspecies empathy, and love-infused practices that defy auditory devastation and colonial oppression.

The Academy's compostable programs immerse apprentices in embodied sonic ecologies: rooting as trees in Embodied Psithurism Practice to attune to rooted vibrations; unleashing primal vocalisations in Critical Vocal Anthropomorphism under moonless skies; forming Healing Hummings circles that escalate to restorative screams; synchronised breathing with ocean rhythms for cetacean bonds; and culminating in Mycellic Telepathy via fungal rituals for dream-state communion and pedagogy.

Chapter 2 of The Silent Academy saga intensifies this vision amid the second Aural War, where a protagonist, deafened to all but birdsong, seeks lost companion Joy in a forbidden forest. Their whistling meditation, evoking hybrid flocks and soul-deep belonging, summons collective resilience and culminates in an encounter with the lyrebird, whose mimicry of destructive machines transmutes fear into defiant songs of hope.

Yuri Tuma, 'The Silent Academy', Ecotones: Investigating Sounds and Territories (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2025)
Yuri Tuma, 'The Silent Academy Chapter 2: The Lyrebird', With a Bird: A Reader on Avian Kinship (Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2025)

FREE
RADICALS