



Abstract

This paper examines Jatun Risba and Franco G. Livera's four-act art film series *A Tree Doesn't Fall Far From the Mountain* (2022–2023) and its associated transdisciplinary Live Art screening events, *Poetics of Relation*, to explore how performance-based methodologies can reshape the aesthetics, formats and materiality of film production and representation. As the project's author, co-director and performer, Risba investigates how immersive, unpredictable and tactile encounters with more-than-human entanglements during the filmmaking process – undertaken without scripts, production crews or budgets – can generate instinctive, ad hoc configurations of subjectivity that re-enchant both the creative work and the world it engages. This approach offers a potent, transformative remedy to the limited foresight characteristic of the current Anthropocene (Capitalocene) era.

Filmed across different seasons within the same natural reserve, the films capture the biosphere's circular rhythms and transformations. This approach underscores the significance of embodied, place-based knowledge and highlights the interdependence between human and nonhuman agents as they navigate the ever-changing tapestry of life. By integrating Édouard Glissant's concept of Relation, the project fosters emergent, rhizomatic communities that embrace multiplicity and opacity, challenging dominant narratives and enabling novel modes of cocreation and coexistence.

Contributing to discourses on new materialism, eco-aesthetics and relational art, the author argues that performative, collaborative approaches can cultivate ecological awareness and foster more inclusive, participatory and decentralised forms of art production, community engagement and collective world-making.

Keywords: vital materiality, new materialism, posthumanism, performative filmmaking, more-than-human ecologies, relational art

Jatun Risba (they) is a migrant transdisciplinary artist from Slovenia whose work engages ecofeminist and posthumanist discourses through performance and intermedia art. Their practice cultivates interspecies reciprocity by awakening sensory awareness via Buddhist practices and experimental uses of technology. They hold a BA (Hons) from NABA, Milan, and a Postgraduate Certificate in Art & Science from Central Saint Martins – UAL. Risba's work has been presented internationally across Europe, as well as in South Korea, Singapore, Iran and the United States. Their texts have appeared in numerous online and print publications, including *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* and *Body, Space & Technology Journal*.

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Vital Materiality in the Art Film Series *A Tree Doesn't Fall Far From the Mountain*

Jatun Risba

A Tree Doesn't Fall Far From the Mountain is a series of four experimental feature-length art films produced between 2022 and 2023 by artists Jatun Risba (SI) and Franco G. Livera (IT). The filming location for all the films was Lijak Natural Park near Nova Gorica, Slovenia – a landscape shaped by an intermittent karst spring that feeds Lijak Creek, which remains dry for much of the year yet can release sudden torrents after heavy rainfall. The site lies close to the Soča Valley, a mountainous region that served as the Isonzo Front during World War I, where an estimated 1.7 million soldiers lost their lives.

Livera's grandfather was among the Italian soldiers sent to this front and was one of the few who returned alive. This personal history opens a cross-temporal vortex into which the authors deliberately immersed themselves, confronting and transforming the traces of transgenerational, war-related trauma inscribed in this politically contested terrain – a region that hosted the first cross-border European Capital of Culture, GO! 2025 Nova Gorica–Gorizia.

The shooting of the first film began in spring 2022, in a world still affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, after an initial visit to the site. With no intention of starting a film project – without a screenplay, budget or crew – it emerged instead as an instinctive creative drive in response to a subtle pulsation, a quiet yet tangible solicitation dripping directly from the land. At least, this is how I retrospectively interpret the beginnings of an ambitious, time and energy-consuming project that had no rationale or agenda for coming into being.

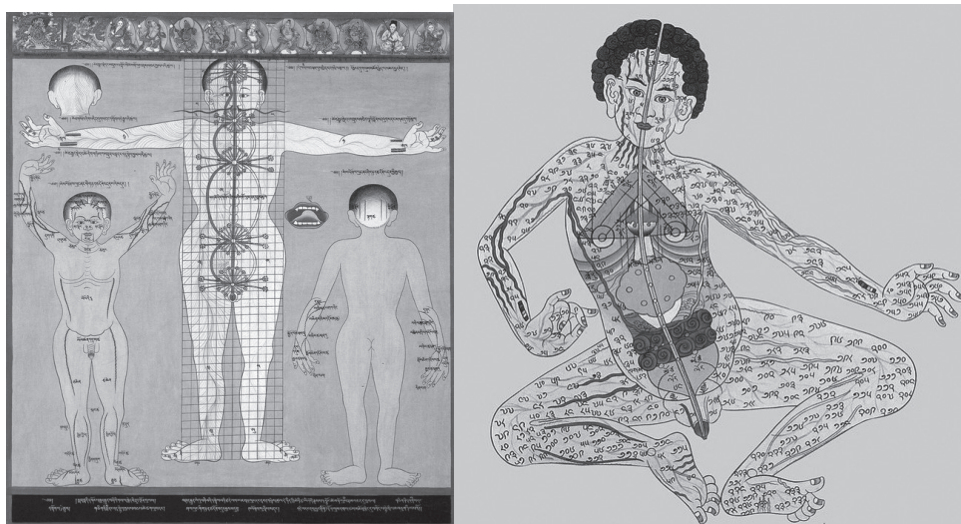
Rather than following a fixed plan, the project unfolded as both a process-based exploration of the karst landscape and its subterranean processes and as a practice of rewilding. In contrast to the regimented, militarised training imposed on soldiers, our daily preparation for filming unfolded as exercises in listening and haptic attunement – practised through proximity, vulnerability and wonder. It was an exposé of the harsh, yet at times enchanted condition of moving through an untamed terrain that we did not seek to control but rather to embrace and correspond with fully.



Mystical, Philosophical and Scientific Reflections on the Work's *Modus Operandi*

The centrality of water and its drifting quality in the work can be read as an expression of the *oceanic self*, regulated by and attuned to the pulsatile movements of the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) – the liquid matrix, very similar to seawater; that envelops and nourishes the central nervous system. While neuroscience acknowledges CSF as crucial for brain development, signalling and waste clearance, physician–researcher Mauro Zappaterra advances a more radical proposition: that CSF is the vessel of consciousness itself.

Informed by ancient systems of knowledge, this perspective reframes CSF as more than a physiological substrate: it becomes a living interface between body and mind, a fluid medium of awareness. Yogic and tantric practices, such as pranayama (yogic breathing), kundalini/tummo (inner-fire techniques) and phowa (the transfer of consciousness at death), map a subtle anatomy of the body, in which channels (*nāḍīs* in Sanskrit; *rtsa* in Tibetan), winds (*prāṇa/rlung*) and drops (*bindu/thigle*) circulate. Through these circuits, inner fluids and energies are said to regulate perception, vitality, heat and states of consciousness.



Such esoteric traditions conceptualise consciousness as circulation – flowing through networks of energy and fluids rather than being confined to neural tissue. This perspective resonates with contemporary understandings of endogenous psychoactive substances: unlike exogenous compounds introduced through ingestion or injection, endogenous molecules such as DMT, endorphins and cannabinoids are synthesised within the body and modulate perception and consciousness from within. In this light, ancient somatic practices anticipated what Romain Rolland termed the *oceanic feeling*, later theorised by Freud as a state of ego-dissolution and a sensed interconnectedness with the cosmos.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that consciousness may arise not only from neural activity but also from the movements of endogenous psychoactive compounds and physiological fluids throughout the body. Recent studies of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) further imply that the self is not a bounded, isolated entity but a fluid, relational process. Approached in this way, consciousness is not merely housed in the brain but circulates, modulates and may even emerge from within its liquid milieu.

Drawing on my more than a decade-long exploration of human consciousness and subtle anatomy, these ideas and practices found their way into the series, permeating both its material and conceptual debris. The unpredictability of what awaited at the location – insects, rain, slippery surfaces, cold weather – foregrounded the vital materiality of moving through and with the wilderness more than any premeditated creative impetus. These atmospheric conditions decisively shaped the artistic process, framing the film through notions of horizontality between different subjectivities. Thus, the film's dramaturgy unfolded through porous exchanges between human bodily fluids (sweat, urine, saliva, blood), external waters and nonhuman actors responding to the ever-shifting rhythms and forces of the ecosystem.

How to Listen to the Multiplicity of Voices that Do Not Express through Language?

The decision to forego verbal communication enabled the development of posthuman narratives and pluralistic storytelling techniques, shaped by a multitude of encounters with other-than-human entities and influences. Verbal language was used only in the trailers, where it serves to contextualise the anarchic, multispecies fabulation of the series – and even then, it is mediated through the language and tempo of poetry.



Watch the Act 1 (spring) trailer:

<https://vimeo.com/jatunrisba/act1ashholder>

The spring act, *Ash Holder*, draws inspiration from a tale connected to the site about a Roma family fleeing persecution along the riverbank, tragically losing their children along the way. Forced to survive on their own, they grew up feral. This legend informed the qualia of my soma, leading me to explore how a mythos of political persecution, exile and abandonment affects my behaviour and interaction with the place. The persona the camera follows or captures is an opaque entity whose personhood remains vague and shape-shifting. Who is this being? How did they arrive in this land? What is their story? By excluding linguistic communication from the film, the human other becomes a mirror-like surface onto which the audience can easily project whatever they want or need to. The fact that they possess a female body enhances their porosity. It increases the number of meanings they are able to convey and evoke, both historically and transcontextually.

The autumn act *Salamandra, Salamandra, Salamandra*, continued this inquiry into pre- and posthuman sensitivity. In most scenes, the character wears a military shirt or jacket, black leggings, and work boots, yet their history and storyline remain unclear. What are they doing alone in the woods? Are they a lost soldier or a deserter who abandoned society to await the end of the war? At crucial moments, this figure transforms into a numinous presence akin to a dakini. Dakinis are wrathful female spirits or practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism, often regarded as messengers between worlds and forces of transformation. In other sequences, the same figure mutates into insect-like apparitions, revealing the fluidity of the self in relation to its surrounding environment.



Watch the Act 3 (autumn) trailer:

<https://vimeo.com/jatunrisba/act3salamandra>

In the winter act, *Snowdrop*, the human character takes on the role of a sniper with a fragmented, multiple personality. At times, they are rigorously alert and disciplined; at others, they exhibit a childlike presence and behaviour. The character's inner turbulence is expressed through two distinct dance sequences. By day, a contemplative, almost meditative dance unfolds near a natural water reservoir. In contrast, at night, in the film's final scene, a tarantata-like dance erupts. Its wild, compulsive and disoriented movements express a descent into distress and madness – of the character, or of humanity itself? – while drawing on the South Italian tradition of *tarantism*, a self-healing ritual practised in a patriarchal society marked by sexual violence and profound economic and gender inequalities. The two dances operate as somatic strategies through which the suffering human other externalises inner turmoil and transmutes it into embodied transformation.



Watch the Act 4 (winter) trailer:

<https://vimeo.com/jatunrisba/act4snowdrop>

The film that completed the project's seasonal cycle, *Dren: Devil's Tree*, was shot in August 2023. Filming coincided with the most devastating floods in Slovenia in more than a century, turning the work into a pertinent historical document of global climate upheaval. It is the only film to feature a guest performer – the English live artist O. Pen Be. The transgenerational duo, clad in white military camouflage gowns that lent them an ethereal, sorcerer-like presence, responded to the sudden rise of the waters with performative rites intended to pacify the agitated spirits and guardians of the land, invoking their attention and blessing.



Watch the Act 2 (summer) trailer:
<https://vimeo.com/jatunrisba/act2dren>

On the Other Side of the Self: Practising Contiguity

A paradigm shift explored both in the filming process and in the development of the *Poetics of Relation* collaborative screening events – with live music and performances – concerns a move away from the notion of a fixed, autonomous self toward an understanding of subjectivity as fluid and interdependent. In this perspective, the self emerges through processes of relation and contiguity: it arises within the currents of an omnipresent becoming, flowing through and connecting the entire web of life.

During the making of the films in particular, atmospheric and elemental forces – such as temperature, moisture, stones and wind – became visible and influential partners in the creative process. Rather than acting as a neutral background, these forces operated through a condition of contiguity with the filming duo and the recording apparatus. For example, the mechanical eye of the GoPro camera was immersed in the running creek, revealing an underwater, elemental world normally invisible to the human eye. At other times, it was mounted on the head, tracing the precarious, unsteady movements of walking barefoot across a pebble-strewn terrain. In short, such environmental conditions required acknowledgment and dialogue rather than control. The resulting grassroots approach to filmmaking generated an aesthetic and a worldview that evoke something primordial and ancient, allowing the subconscious mind to surface and articulate its spontaneous, organic connections with the surrounding world.

Why is working from such a grounded, unmediated state of humanness meaningful? Moreover, is it meaningful at all? This mode of practice is somehow related to processes of becoming familiar with one's own mind and resonates with meditation practices centred on observing inner movements – thoughts, emotions, sensations – as they arise and pass away without attachment. In such practices, awareness develops through attentive proximity to experience: a form of inner contiguity with what unfolds moment by moment.

The silent inquiry that informed the project asked how such a process of discovery could be transferred from “the cushion” into the external world and used to explore alternative forms of relating to the environments we coexist with and depend upon. In the filming process, the “other” took the form of the environment itself – the biosphere and its nonhuman inhabitants – with whom we entered into relations of cocreation rather than observation from a distance.

In the *Poetics of Relation* events, the “other” was a human collaborator, often someone we had not worked with before. These encounters resembled a kind of blind date. As in many forms of relational exchange, not every meeting resulted in a harmonious outcome. Through this process, we learned that certain conditions are necessary: humility, openness and a genuine interest in experimentation and collaboration. Such attitudes proved essential for enabling encounters in which contiguity could unfold into productive and generative forms of collaboration.

Poetics of Relation: Rhizomatic Encounters and Emergent Co-presence

The screenings of the art film series *A Tree Doesn't Fall Far From the Mountain* were conceived within an interdisciplinary format, entitled *Poetics of Relation*. This approach enacts research-creation as a process of emergent encounter between human, nonhuman and more-than-human agents. Rooted in Édouard Glissant's understanding of Relation as a rhizomatic, non-hierarchical and opaque mode of being-with, these events generated in situ communities through a multidirectional interplay of moving image, improvised music, vocalisations, spoken word, bodily presence, performative scores and environmental agency.

Echoing the early history of cinema – when silent films were accompanied by live music and collective sensory immersion – the screenings reactivate a performative, relational *dispositif* in which meaning arises from co-presence rather than representation alone. Through the interweaving of different artistic languages and forms of expression, the format cultivates openness and curiosity toward alterity. It allows unpredictability and improvisation to be experienced not as external threats, but as intrinsic to a shared, interdependent and creatively vibrant field of becoming. Within this field, experimentation is encouraged, failure is held, and new forms of being and creating together can begin to take shape.

The first iteration of this format revealed significant challenges, not in terms of artistic quality, but in the emergence of intense relational frictions stemming from unrehearsed collaboration within newly assembled constellations of participants. These encounters functioned as a diagnostic field, immediately exposing the high levels of

emotional toxicity that permeate contemporary life, shaped by systemic precarity, psychological exhaustion, addiction and widespread mental health struggles. What initially appeared as “failure” thus became a crucial epistemic moment: a manifestation of unresolved collective wounds surfacing through the very conditions of openness, co-presence and fragility that the format sought to cultivate. Rather than indicating a flaw in the project’s conceptual orientation, these frictions confirmed its relevance, demonstrating that the format touches precisely those layers of relational trauma and affective disconnection that are often repressed, aestheticised or rendered invisible within institutionalised cultural spaces.

Relational and dialogic modalities, grounded in reciprocity, non-hierarchical exchange and mutual exposure, remain unevenly distributed and insufficiently practised within contemporary societies. Consequently, they are not easily accommodated by dominant artistic infrastructures, ideological frameworks and institutional logics that privilege authorship, control, techno-determined predictability and extractive modes of value production. Such environments tend to marginalise processes that rely on indeterminacy, shared vulnerability and collective attunement.

Engaging in a poetics of relation, therefore, requires cultivating humility, embracing not-knowing and suspending mastery – dispositions that many contemporary subjects, including artists, find challenging to inhabit in contexts defined by competition, acceleration and relentless self-optimisation. Nevertheless, it is precisely for this reason that the continuation of open-ended, processual and co-creative formats becomes politically and ethically urgent. They offer rare spaces in which alternative modes of togetherness, care and interdependence can be rehearsed, sustained and creatively reimaged.

From the Commonwealth of Hydrojustice and Vibrant Matter to the Unity of Breath

To conclude, the art film series *A Tree Doesn’t Fall Far From the Mountain* and its live screening format *Poetics of Relation* unfold as an exploration of post-anthropocentric imaginaries and narrative forms, tracing how they arise from the interdependence of all beings and their attunement to the cyclical movements of inner and outer waters. At the heart of the work stands Lijak itself, whose roaring – or at times absent – flows function as the series’ true protagonist, mirroring the subtle circulations of bodily fluids and breath that regulate perception, affect and existence. The fluid aesthetics of the project are shaped by this karstic spring, offering a visual and performative articulation of hydrojustice, a concept developed by Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos to propose a post-anthropocentric understanding of justice grounded in the subjectivity of water.

Within this framework, water is not conceived as a passive resource but as the elemental medium of entangled life, dissolving anthropocentric hierarchies and enabling materially situated, reciprocal relations with the more-than-human world. This aqueous ontology resonates with Jane Bennett's (*Vibrant Matter; Influx & Efflux*) notion of vibrant matter, in which all bodies – organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman – participate in continuous processes of influx and efflux, animation and transformation.

Together, these perspectives foreground the series' commitment to conceiving artistic practice not as a sovereign, human-centred act shaped by colonial, extractivist and capitalist legacies, but as a dynamic circulation of material agencies, affects and forces, revealing how human and nonhuman beings are codependent and continuously shaping one another.

Finally, the experimental and interdisciplinary format of the project reclaims the grace, synaesthetic interactions and sensuous intelligence of a body entangled with the land and attuned to the seasonal rhythms and atmospheres of the wild. It renders perceptible a fluid, relational self, continuously formed by exchanges of breath, moisture, sound and movement – both carried by and permeated through the currents of the biosphere and the fragile, emergent assemblages of human togetherness. In this sense, the work articulates an ethics and aesthetics of co-breathing: a practice of becoming-with that unfolds through vulnerability, resonance and the shared material conditions of planetary life.

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