

Anna Zilahi

Portfolio 2025

Urtica

(2024 – 2025)

“Nettle is a versatile weed that enters human consciousness early, often as something to avoid because it stings. Its Latin name (*urtica*) reflects this burning sensation, yet its healing properties far outweigh its offenses. Nettle cleanses the blood, and even its sting serves as a remedy for rheumatism. This dual nature—painful yet beneficial—captures the ambivalence of our relationship with nature. Since the Enlightenment, we have sought to escape our vulnerability to the natural world and suppress experiences that remind us of it. In the face of ecological crisis, however, we must embrace a new perspective—one that recognizes openness and connection as inherently intertwined with pain. True understanding and enrichment come only by dissolving the boundaries of our civilization.”
(Anna Zilahi)

Anna Zilahi’s solo exhibition at Liget Gallery centers on the stinging nettle (*Urtica*), a plant that encapsulates humanity’s ambiguous relationship with nature: it is both a troublesome weed and a potent medicinal herb. Since the emergence of private property, humans have sought to dominate their natural surroundings; since the advent of agriculture, they have exploited and commercialized them. Yet, our survival remains fundamentally tied to the natural world. The Enlightenment ideals that established rigid dichotomies—such as nature versus culture and body versus mind—now appear increasingly inadequate.

To challenge these binaries, Zilahi draws on Jacques Derrida’s concept of the *pharmakon*, a term that signifies both remedy and poison. The nettle embodies this duality: its sting causes pain, yet its properties can heal. This paradox mirrors the complexities of our relationship with nature itself. In her work, Zilahi approaches the nettle as a non-human entity with mythical, material, and active dimensions. Her ritualistic, almost collaborative engagement with the plant opens up new possibilities for connection and understanding. The exhibition includes new objects, photographs, and the video work *Urtica* (2022), which collectively examine the shifting dynamics and oscillation of the human-nature relationship and the concept of the *pharmakon* through an ecofeminist lens.

Curator: Veronika Molnár

Curatorial Assistant: Ágnes Keszegh



Urtica exhibition view, Liget Gallery, Budapest, photo: Barnabás Neogrády-Kiss



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Pear Tree on the Inner Island

Soundwalk with Bori, Kokó and Aunt Mari

(oral history sound piece, 35', booklet 2023)

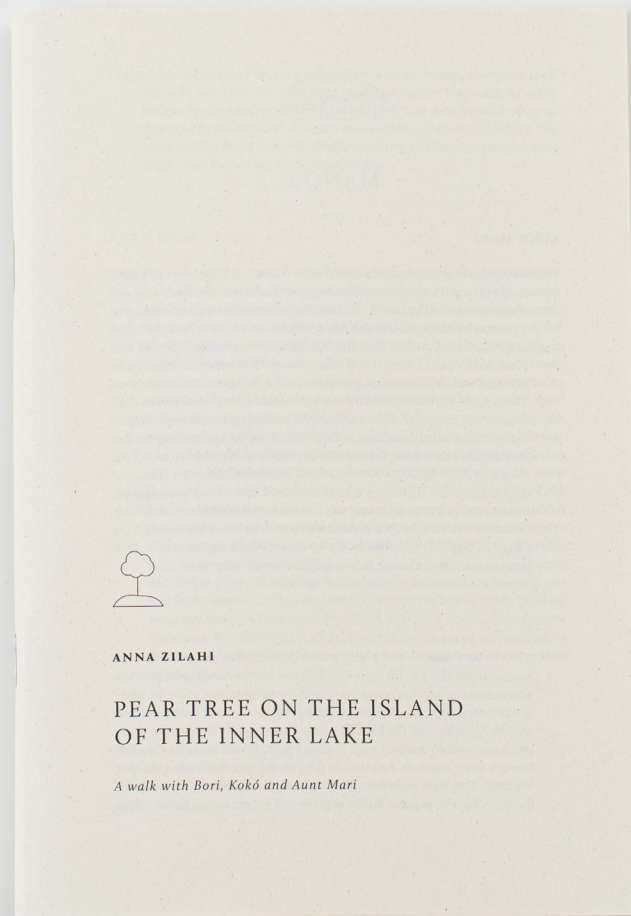
The representation of a landscape, which is mainly based on tourism, mostly covers the services it offers to its visitors. In Tihany, the Benedictine Abbey, the magnificent view of Lake Balaton and the lavender fields are among the typical attractions depicted. This kind of pictorial reduction of a village also has the effect of obscuring the community behind the scenes, the daily lives and perspectives of the people who actually live there, and the ecosystem that provides a background for the tourists recharging.

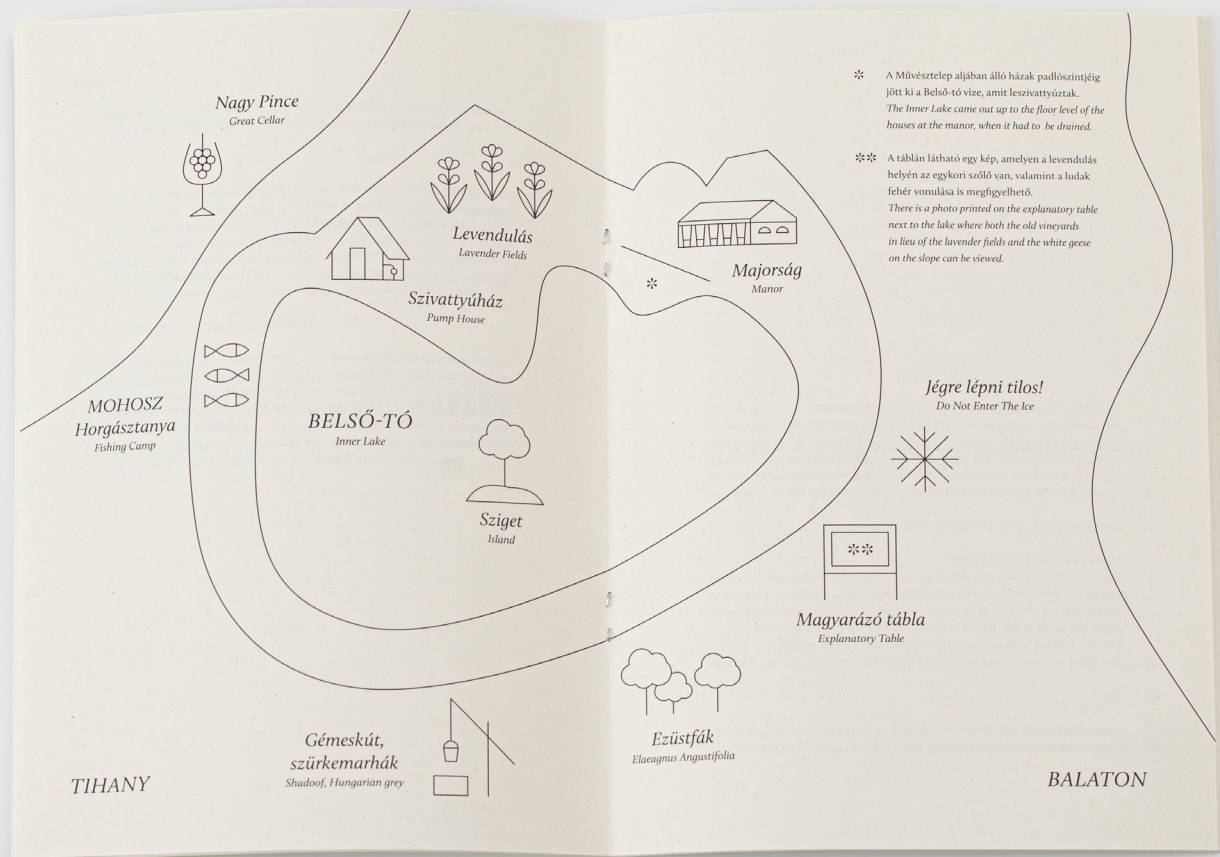
For instance, who would believe that a pear tree once stood on top of a small island in the middle of the Inner Lake, which emerges in times of drought or was it an apple tree? How did a bench end up in the middle of the lake during the Russian occupation, and where did the fish come from when it used to be a popular fishing lake? Who put the oleaster trees surrounding the promenade on the shore and are there females among the grey cattles? Why don't the lavender-clad hillsides produce wine anymore? Through questions like these, the walk gives an insight into the past and present of the fishing village, its social and ecological transformations. Bori, Kokó and Aunt Mari lead us into the landscapes of local memory.

Listen to the sound piece in Hungarian here:
<https://t.ly/mnN1S>

Participants from Tihany:
Borbála Kántás
István Kovács (Koko)
Aunt Mari (Imréné Malkó)

The "Pear Tree on the Island of Inner Lake" soundwalk is organised by Anna Zilahi and the PAD Foundation with the support of the Veszprém-Balaton 2023 European Capital of Culture.





Urtica

(performative video piece, 2022
ongoing artistic research)

Anna Zilahi's ongoing investigations with *Urtica dioica* (Common nettle also known as the Stinging nettle) tells a story of reconnection. It also offers the observation that distancing oneself from painful encounters has become a norm in contemporary human interactions with nature and with one another. The Nettle is a multifaceted weed intrinsically linked to one's childhood imagination. It cannot be touched because it stings and causes a rash. Establishing contact and connection with this plant fosters instant pain. Whereas its botanical Latin name (*urtica*) stems from the burning pain it causes, its many beneficial properties such as improving blood circulation and anti-inflammatory properties are downplayed and often overlooked.

Touching a nettle bears the ambivalence of humans and their relationship to Nature which ever since the Enlightenment we seek to dismiss as a force to be controlled. In the shadow of and heightened realization of the current ecological crisis, Zilahi proposes a different approach: openness, and, the realization that pain is inherent to all sorts of relations. Getting to know the other, enriching ourselves is not possible without dissolving our boundaries.

Urtica is based on Hans Christian Andersen's tale, *The Wild Swans*, where the princess saves her brothers, who are transformed into swans by sewing them an armor shirt made from nettles. She cannot whimper, cry out nor exclaim her pain while completing this task. Ultimately, the nettle cloth liberates the brothers and allows them to return to their human bodies. Liberation is possible through the acceptance of pain.

In this performative video, a nettle dress is created, prompting a reverse transformation: touching the plant reconnects one with their non-humanness and animality – their *swanness*. The play with the white gown symbolizing the swan reflects how we oscillate between our human consciousness and our more visceral selves that makes us part of the natural world.

Urtica was realised within the framework of Umwelt Art & Science Summer Academy 2022 at Kisapáti, Hungary. It was also presented as an exhibition at Koda House, Governors Island, NYC from October 30 – November 12 in the framework of Residency Unlimited.



Videostills from the film *Urtica*
Camera: Gergely Ofner



Videostills from the film *Urtica*
Camera: Gergely Ofner



Videostills from the film *Urtica*
Camera: Gergely Ofner

Missa Echologica

(video, choir piece, 13", 2021)

The echo of Tihany is a sound phenomenon that also has a notable place in cultural history, as it became a well-known natural-cultural treasure through Csokonai Vitéz Mihály's poem addressed to Echo. The echo has faded in recent decades, but it has not entirely disappeared. The change can be linked to simply identifiable causes: elites are systematically acquiring property and building new real estate on the fishing village occupying the peninsula. Through this, they overburden it both infrastructurally and via tourism. This occurs hand-in-hand with the destruction of the ecological environment and the alteration of the sound-environment. These processes also amplify one-another. For instance, if they destroy the trees on the slopes of the mountain or excavate parts of the mountain, there will be nothing that can absorb the noise from the road encircling the village.

The mythological explanation of an echo provided a point of departure for the piece, alongside understanding the physical characteristics of sound's diffusion. The poet János Garay elaborated on the tale of Echo, a nymph, from Ovid's widely-read *Metamorphoses* in a 19th century piece he wrote. According to the legend of Tihany, the son of the lake's king fell in love with the princess who was looking after a herd of goats, but she did not reciprocate his feelings. The king of the lake hexed her in response. He turned her into an echo by taking her voice and, thereby, identity, only allowing her to repeat the sounds of her environment. In contrast to the writer's nearly two century old interpretation, the legend of the Tihany echo is not a tale about a selfish and narcissistic girl who deserves to be punished. From a critical perspective, this narrative can rather be read as a tale of patriarchal retribution.

Ecological destruction and patriarchal oppression are rooted in the same logic of power. The two strands converge in a votive antiphon, a responsorial festive choir piece.

Missa Echologica is an ecofeminist prayer, which simultaneously speaks up for a nature exploited by humans and pushed into the background as well as the liberation of the identity-stripped Echo. The O Antiphon is composed of nine verses, all of which are centred on different symbols linked to femininity and the ecosystem of Tihany. Laura Szári, the conductor of Varsányi Szlrének, composed the music. She initially draws on Gregorian melodies, but follows the path of music history that lead to contemporary melodies by the end. At the beginning of the piece, the part repeating the melody of the choir (the echo) is still distinct from the choir, but during the musical piece it fuses with it and by joining this community, it is able to find its own voice.

The minerals, plants, and animals that are at the centre of verses also appear in the performance created with the Varsányi Szlrének choir. These, in-themselves, are crucial components of the ecological circle and they also allow for the sensual grasp of different attributes that are linked to femininity's construction. Bone, mud, algae, reed, goat hoof clams (*Conger ungula caprae*), a golden haired herd of goats, swan, nymphaea, and, lastly, the community of sound all represent the celebration of the plurality and differences of women-images. The piece was written by Anna Zilahi and its music composed by Laura Szári, the conductor of the choir.

Singers: Blanka Bolonyai, Dóra Ferenczy, Bettina Horváth, Dóra Király, Rita Szántó, Laura Szári, Diána Takács, Eszter Tóth, Virág Török, Anna Zilahi.

Video: Gergely Ofner

Sound: Ferenc Juhász

The choir piece can be watched at the link:

4 minutes cut: <https://vimeo.com/552331569>

Whole video work: <https://vimeo.com/544499589>



Videostills from the film
Camera: Gergely Ofner



The River Knows Better (Ophelia Lives) (meditation sound piece and performance, 2019)

The poem meditation titled *The River Knows Better (Ophelia Lives)* draws on a famous anecdote in music history: John Cage intended to experience absolute silence in the anechoic chamber of Harvard University, but even there he heard two sounds, a low- and a high pitched one. The engineer explained to him that these were the sounds of his nervous system and blood circulation. The piece departs from the question of what would have happened, if in the aftermath of this experience, his interest had not turned towards external sounds, but inner ones?

During the meditation, in contrast to the poetically portrayed robotic and accelerated functioning in the poem, the slowed down and relaxed human body turns into a sound source, the individually experienced inner sounds become constituents of the recited poem. The kind of presence necessary for the reception of ephemeral media is not only activated by listening here, meditation as a medium activates all our senses. This is how bodily experiences become part of the happening art piece.

Ophelia's body drifting in the river is a female body, fallen victim of the abuse of power. Meditation's autonomous body experience aims to reclaim one's own body. The synchronised sensation of the addressed and reinvigorated body parts make it possible to experience a body functioning for itself, and thus allowing it to relive lost autonomies. Meditation as a medium works through presence, which enables being in the center effortlessly. Ophelia's lungs gradually fill up with oxygen again as she comes to her senses in the toxic blue river, while the listeners slows down to their own breath and heartbeat.

Contemplation and different modes of immersion are human activities which played a significant role in the evolution of Western culture. These seem to be very foreign dispositions in our accelerated work environments that build upon multitasking. The return to the body thus bears a political meaning, especially if it is rooted in community and not in isolation.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-2020-the-river-knows-better-ophelia-lives/s-HR610>



The River Knows Better, exhibition view, Sonic Thoughts, Studio Gallery, Budapest 2019

xtro realm

(interdisciplinary art project, 2017 – ongoing)

Xtro realm is an art group organizing a series of interconnected art events, launched in October 2017 in Budapest. The project applies an interdisciplinary and transmedial approach to make contemporary post-anthropocentric philosophical and ecological thoughts more accessible for the art scene and a broader audience.

Members of the artist group are visual artists Gideon Horváth and Rita Süveges.

<http://xtrorealm.hu>



extrodæsia

(Typotex, Budapest, 2019)

extrodæsia – Encyclopedia Towards a Post-Anthropocentric World is a multidisciplinary bilingual (English-Hungarian) encyclopedia including ecologically themed and new realist and ecological entries with prose poems of six young Hungarian writers and visual artworks that sensually approximate the landscapes of the Anthropocene.

The art book edited by the xtro realm group contains in both Hungarian and English an amalgamation of definitions of ecological and philosophical terms ('flat ontology', 'Amerindian perspectivism') almost indistinguishable from the prose poems ('the animal gaze', 'technoanimism'). The visual work done by Rita Süveges becomes the map of this post-anthropocentric philosophical landscape, and the book design facilitates the understanding of the textual dimension as part of the landscape itself. The poets involved included young contemporary Hungarian poets Kornélia Deres, Ákos Kele Fodor, Márió Nemes Z., Mátyás Sirokai, Kinga Tóth and Anna Zilahi. The authors of the theoretical definitions were Réka Patrícia Bereznai, Máté Bordás, Balázs Keresztes, Lóránt Kiss and Márk Losoncz and the xtro realm artist group (Rita Süveges, Anna Zilahi, Gideon Horváth).



The encyclopedia performs the dialogue of theory, poetry and visual art, which we envision as non-hierarchical components, where theory shapes the understanding of poetry, poetry makes theory sensually accessible and the visual landscape becomes the stage and framework of our understanding. With the radical juxtaposition of these components, we also wanted to represent a non-hierarchical world order.



xtro realm presents

ACLIM! Agency for Climate Imaginary!

(group exhibition, OFF-Biennale Budapest, 2021)

Can we grasp the planetary ecological crisis through local issues? What kind of knowledge can an ecological network researcher, an environmental psychologist and an artist formulate together, which can help us understand our present and our possible future? These are the types of questions posed by the Agency for Climate Imaginary! (ACLIM!), founded by the xtro realm artist group. The Agency houses research-based artistic projects and transdisciplinary theoretical inquiries dealing with the most burning ecological questions.

In the shadow of the climate crisis, the search for subversive local perspectives and alternative visions of the future is increasingly urgent. The question is not only whether we survive, but within what social framework we do so. The economic and political interests responsible for the exploitation of the ecosystem are not only responsible for the destruction of our habitat, but also impose a dominant constraint on the social imaginary that could lead us out of this dead end.

The agents of ACLIM! proclaim that we must leave our fixed patterns of thought behind to liberate our imaginary. However, this also requires a new idea of knowledge, which, in addition to science, includes intuition, emotional intelligence, the totality of bodily experiences, artistic knowledge, or dialogue itself. The stake is the survival of our home.

Participating artists: András Cséfalvay; Gideon Horváth & Kata Dóra Kiss; Tamás Kaszás; Csilla Nagy; Rita Süveges; Ádám Ulbert; Anna Zilahi

Curated by the xtro realm artist group
<http://aclim.hu>

Photos by Dávid Biró

ACCLIM

Klimakommunikation
Agency for Climate
Imagery



MISSION

ACCLIM is a communication agency that specializes in a targeted communication of climate change. We are a team of experts in the field of climate communication. Our mission is to make climate change a topic that is relevant to everyone. We are a team of experts in the field of climate communication. Our mission is to make climate change a topic that is relevant to everyone.

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Research materials of Missa Echologica



Handwritten text on a piece of paper, possibly a letter or a list, with several lines of cursive script.



Handwritten text on a piece of paper, similar to the one above, with several lines of cursive script.



A printed page with a large illustration at the top and several columns of text below it, possibly a newspaper clipping or a magazine article.

