

***Other Legends.* Anna Baumgart**

curator: Dominik Czechowski

Documentation submitted for the competition
for the curatorial project for the exhibition
in the Polish Pavilion at the
59th International Art Exhibition in Venice in 2022

**KONCEPCJA WYSTAWY W PAWILONIE POLSKIM
NA 59 MIĘDZYNARODOWEJ WYSTAWIE SZTUKI W WENECJI W 2022 ROKU
(wersja w jęz. angielskim/in English)**

Other Legends (working title) is an installation by Anna Baumgart transforming the interior of the Polish Pavilion in Venice into a *quasi*-cinema space in which visitors to the Biennale (a film audience) bear witness to the transformation of one of the deeply rooted Slavonic myths into a universal imaginary. Anna Baumgart is a Polish post-conceptual multimedia artist and filmmaker. In her works, she uses feminist perspective as a tool to examine and critique the contemporary society's power structures, gender roles and privileged historical narratives.

The project will premiere *The Lake*, Baumgart's new short film, and juxtapose it with a 1950s woodcut by artist Stefania Dretler-Flin titled *Legend of Wanda* as a direct link to the post-war period Poland. Referencing aquatic symbolism – the movement, fluidity, power of transformation, mortal and life-giving forces of water – and recalling a tragic event in the history of Polish scouting, Baumgart proposes to recover (liberate) and transform a national myth into a modern fairy tale, where it is possible to constantly reimagine life. The artist draws upon the vision of a progressive though little-known play by Stanisław Wyspiański entitled *Legenda* (1904), placing the dramatist's revolutionary approach to history, female subjectivity and national identity in the context of the posthumanist concept of blue humanities, and inside the contemporary discourses around the consequences of climate change and the alternative ethics of coexistence between people and the organic world.

The starting point for both the exhibition and the film is one of the largest disasters on Polish inland waters: the sinking of two fishing boats with passengers on Lake Gardno (Pomeranian Voivodeship) in July 1948, during a cruise across the lake towards Rowy, a small village on the Baltic coast. Four adult women and 21 girl scouts died in the lake. They were from Łódź, all members of the 15th Girl Scout Team called the 'Little Fifteen'. The night before the tragedy the girls staged a play *About Wanda, who did not want a German* for the local population, performing different versions of this national legend. Their dream was to see the sea for the first time, hence the idea for the trip across the lake. Nobody knows what really happened on the day of the tragic event – few witnesses' testimonies are incomplete, or contradictory. Was it an accident, a group murder, or a collective suicide of the teenagers? A negligence of the adults, or the girls' unknowing desire to die?

Baumgart's film is a story weaved from reality and dream, historical facts and the legend of Wanda as a figure overcoming the death-life-death cycle. Using a historical fact, the artist transforms it in a film scenario, proposing a continuation to the tragic event – a passage out of death into (new) life. For the young women, the sea (the Baltic Sea) was both a dream and a synonym of freedom. "Water connects the human scale to other scales of life, both unfathomable and imperceptible. We are all bodies of water, in the constitutional, the genealogical, and the geographical sense. [...] Not only does water connect us, gestate us, sustain us more than this, water disturbs the very categories that ground the domains of social, political, philosophical, and environmental thought", writes feminist scholar and environmental humanities thinker Astrida Neimanis in her essay „Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water”¹. In her film, Baumgart creates a fictional transfiguration of the women into grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*), a large population of which inhabits the Baltic Sea. "Of bodies changed to other forms I tell" (trans. A.D. Melville), declares Ovid in the first sentence of his *Metamorphoses*, which could be one of the many points of reference for the human-animal transformation. Girl scouts

¹ Astrida Neimanis, „Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water”, in: „Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice, red. Henreiette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, Fanny Söderbäck, Palgrave Macmillan”, New York 2012.

turned into seals head towards the longed-for 'great water' – the sea of freedom and possibilities – traversing corporeal and metaphorical boundaries and social structures which assign them too narrow binding roles in the post-war socio-political and economic reality. Firstly, the water, a state of undefined hybridity, then the subsequent phase of transformation (seals), preceded by the symbolic-factual death (the sinking of the boat). All these phases lead to the birth of new subjective agents – multidimensionally nomadic. "It is the subversion of set conventions and the consciousness-raising that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling" suggests Rosi Braidotti². The transgression into marine mammals (an act of secular animalism of sorts) is hereby a sign of critical self-awareness that seeks liberation from fossilised ways of thinking and behaving rooted in the philosophical and social tradition.

Such a nomad – a powerful symbol of emancipatory transformation beloved by the girl scouts – is the figure of the mythical Wanda who chooses to die in the depths of water. Baumgart, following Wyspiański's departure from strictly national mysticism and folklore in his original approach to history, re-orientates the legend towards the future. Wyspiański's drama draws from Greek tragedy, it is composed of songs, dialogues, monologues, images woven from mythological references, and the writer is guided by his imagination, sensitivity and intuition in reaching meanings. Both real and fantastic characters appear in the text. Spectrality and communication with ancestors enable healing and rebirth, believes Nobel laureate Toni Morrison. Literary scholar Monika Rudaś-Grodzka writes in her essay on *Legenda*: "[Wyspiański] creates a new history of the Polish nation and proposes interference in the past, believing that due to his poetic power, and especially imagination, he can reach out to people and events in the past that might be seen and described as alternative ones."³

Deriving from a specific local myth embedded in ideas about the origins of the collective identity of a particular community, *Other Legends* in the Polish Pavilion turn out to be highly contemporary herstories, crossing the borders of national states (pavilions), or ascertained identity storylines. At the same time, Baumgart's installation points toward a utopian – based on social justice and species equality – potential of such national myths to create new emancipatory narratives. By addressing the pressing problems of the changes taking place in the contemporary world – e.g. climate emergency with the resulting extinction of species, and the ensuing migration of human and non-human bodies – the artist's film exorcises the binary opposition: the division into the human and animal world, nature and culture. In her essay, Neimanis invokes the concept of hypersea – water, non-human genealogy, relational "webs of physical intimacy and fluid exchange", coexistence based on reciprocity with others and with our environment. Situated in the context of Venice, which, as a result of the Capitalocene and the climate changes, may share the fate of the legendary Atlantis, Baumgart's exhibition acquires an additional, poignant meaning. It advocates for the creation of an interspecies community, the unification of human and non-human forces, it calls for decolonising (of) the mind (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o), moving towards a non-anthropocentric ecology and coexistence based on caring, respect and interdependence.

² Rosi Braidotti, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject", in: "Comparative Critical Studies" 11.2–3 (2014), Edinburgh University Press, p. 182.

³ Monika Rudaś-Grodzka, „Wanda”, w: *Czterdzieści i cztery figury literackie. Nowy kanon*. Warszawa, 2016.

**SCENARIUSZ WYSTAWY W PAWILONIE POLSKIM
NA 59 MIĘDZYNARODOWEJ WYSTAWIE SZTUKI W WENECJI W 2022 ROKU
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Other Legends (working title) will be a new installation for the Polish Pavilion by Anna Baumgart encompassing a large-scale single-channel film projection and a period graphic work by artist Stefania Dretler-Flin (1909-1994). The latter's woodcut caught Baumgart's attention during her own research into the iconography of Wanda, the daughter of Krakus, legendary founder of Kraków. The film and the woodcut will be situated on the opposite sides of the Pavilion's interior, enabling a dialogical exchange between the two works of art, each in a medium characteristic for its era. The way the exhibition space will be arranged will allow for additional contextualisation of historical events mentioned in the film by recalling the atmosphere and character of the cinema interior from the post-war years in Poland (in Łódź, where the girl scouts came from, the most famous cinema was called 'Polonia' – this is also the Italian name of the Polish Pavilion in Venice).

Upon entering the space, we encounter a 500 cm wide curtain, a dark-deep-red coloured weighty artefact suspended from the ceiling and arranged in the way the heavy draperies in the bygone era picture houses were. The curtain will be placed 200 cm from the front door frame. The curtain will be a self-contained material object, a sculpture with an expressive texture and character releasing (allowing) the magic of cinema to happen, ushering the audience in from 'reality' and introducing them the world of fiction, utopias, new ideas – a cinematic experience.

We proceed leftward into the Pavilion's space. It is dimly lit, with little sunlight coming from the outside. The glass covered skylights atop the roof will be obscured. On the left side of the elongated interior space will be a pillar – a free-standing wall 200 cm away inward from the structural wall of the building, measuring 150 x 300 cm. The woodcut by Dretler-Flin (28 x 23.5 cm when unframed) will be hung on the pillar. Entitled *A Legend of Wanda*, the graphic work comes from the book *Legends of Kraków* (1950), now in the collection of the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, from where it will be borrowed for the purposes of the exhibition in Venice. The artwork will be gently lit in compliance with standards and regulations in museums. Behind the pillar, on the structural wall of the building, an enlarged text (a graphic object) will be placed, contextualising the figure of Wanda, the function that the legend has played in creation of the founding national myth, as well as a brief information about Dretler-Flin and the idea of including her work in Anna Baumgart's installation.

The woodcut depicts a "pale drowned woman" fished out from the depths of the Vistula. The Romantic era made her a national Polish icon of the struggle with the German invader. In Dretler-Flin's image, a young girl is mourned by a group of women standing against the backdrop of a wild-flower meadow. The artist simplifies the drawing and uses black and white in a well-adjusted way. Wanda's horizontally positioned body refers to the motif of the dead Christ supported by his mother or angels (*pietà*), well known in Christian iconography. The artist combines this theme with the aesthetics indicating that the myth is rooted in the primeval (pagan) 'Uncanny Slavdom' (Maria Janion), that is pre-Latin, indigenous. Wanda in the woodcut is not only a heroine, an image of a national myth, she is also an ordinary girl, Ophelia the 'princess' (pre-Christian rituals during Pentecost) whose death reveals complicated, ambivalent meanings of water. Dretler-Flin could be the mother of one of the girls from the 'Little Fifteen', and Wanda could be one of the drowned girl scouts.

The woodcut is in dialogue with Baumgart's visual essay *The Lake* (2022, approx. 30 minutes, looped). The film will be projected onto a ceiling suspended screen, situated on the oppositional right side wall of the Pavilion. The screen (680 x 382 x 30 cm) will be placed at a distance of 200 cm from the back wall. The films' sound will be audible from everywhere inside the gallery, the AV system will be installed in the central part of the interior, where straight long benches will be placed at an appropriate distance

from the screen. The relative sombreness of the Pavilion's interior will emphasize the aesthetics of functionality and rationality of solutions and the simplicity of materials used in the film, an approach characteristic during the post-war 1940s and -50s economic austerity. The artist's installation will also refer in its formal paradigm to the simplicity of means of expression and focus on narration (the content/politics of the message will be prioritised, rather than its aesthetics).

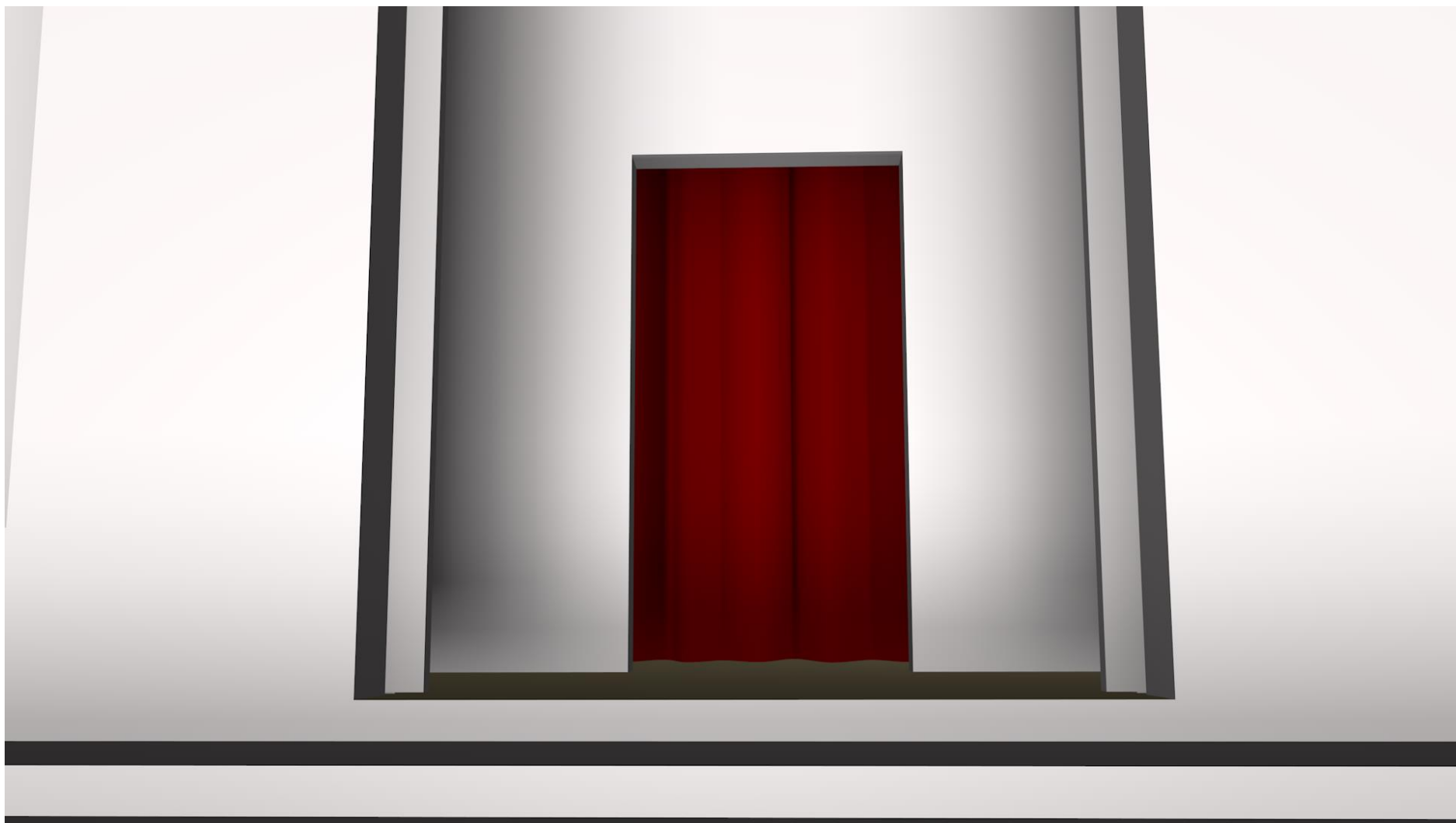
The film will revolve around the tragic accident on Lake Gardno and will propose a fictional (almost surreal) ending to that event – an imaginary alternative about what could/might (have) happen(d). Utilising the visual methodology developed by Lars von Trier for his film *Dogville* and employed by Baumgart previously in her award-winning piece *Fresh Cherries*, the artist will shoot some of the scenes at the Lviv Theatre of Opera and Ballet, formerly the Grand Theatre, where at the beginning of 1905, the premiere of Stanisław Wyspiański's *Legend*, directed by Ludwik Solski, took place. The play described the inner transformation of Wanda, who, having become aware of her subjectivity, turns into a ethereal being, symbolised in the final scenes of the drama by her descent into the Vistula River.

Baumgart will reconstruct fragments of that historical performance on the contemporaneous stage at the Lviv theatre and will visualise a possible scenario for the evening preceding the tragedy in the summer of 1948. She'll invite a number of female and male actors and will borrow from the aesthetics of Federico Fellini, who emphasised artificiality and make-believe mimicry in his films shot in the studio (e.g. 'waves' of the artificial sea made of plastic in *And the Ship Sails On* or in *Fellini's Casanova*). Baumgart will also draw, inter alia, from the notion and legacy of Grotowski's 'poor theatre' and Brecht's epic (dialectical) theatre (whose aim was to influence a socially engaged attitude in the audience, which was to lead to a revolutionary change in reality). The artist will create a re-enactment based on archival documents and historical facts, but focused on the reinterpretation of history, unmasking the processes of its production and social consequences resulting from the construction of stagnant thought patterns. In the scout camp right by the lake, feverish preparations for a bonfire gathering were taking place. The girls from the Little Fifteen invited the inhabitants of Gardna Wielka as a public for the play they had been rehearsing for. The participants of the bonfire event later recalled how one of the girls acting as Wanda said: "I'm approaching you, my sister water, I'm entering you, my eternity." Baumgart's film will occur across two time periods, in 1948 and nowadays; the age of young women (actors) and their appearance will not change. This shift of temporalities, but not of place/personas, will emphasise the topicality of the issues raised for contemporary women.

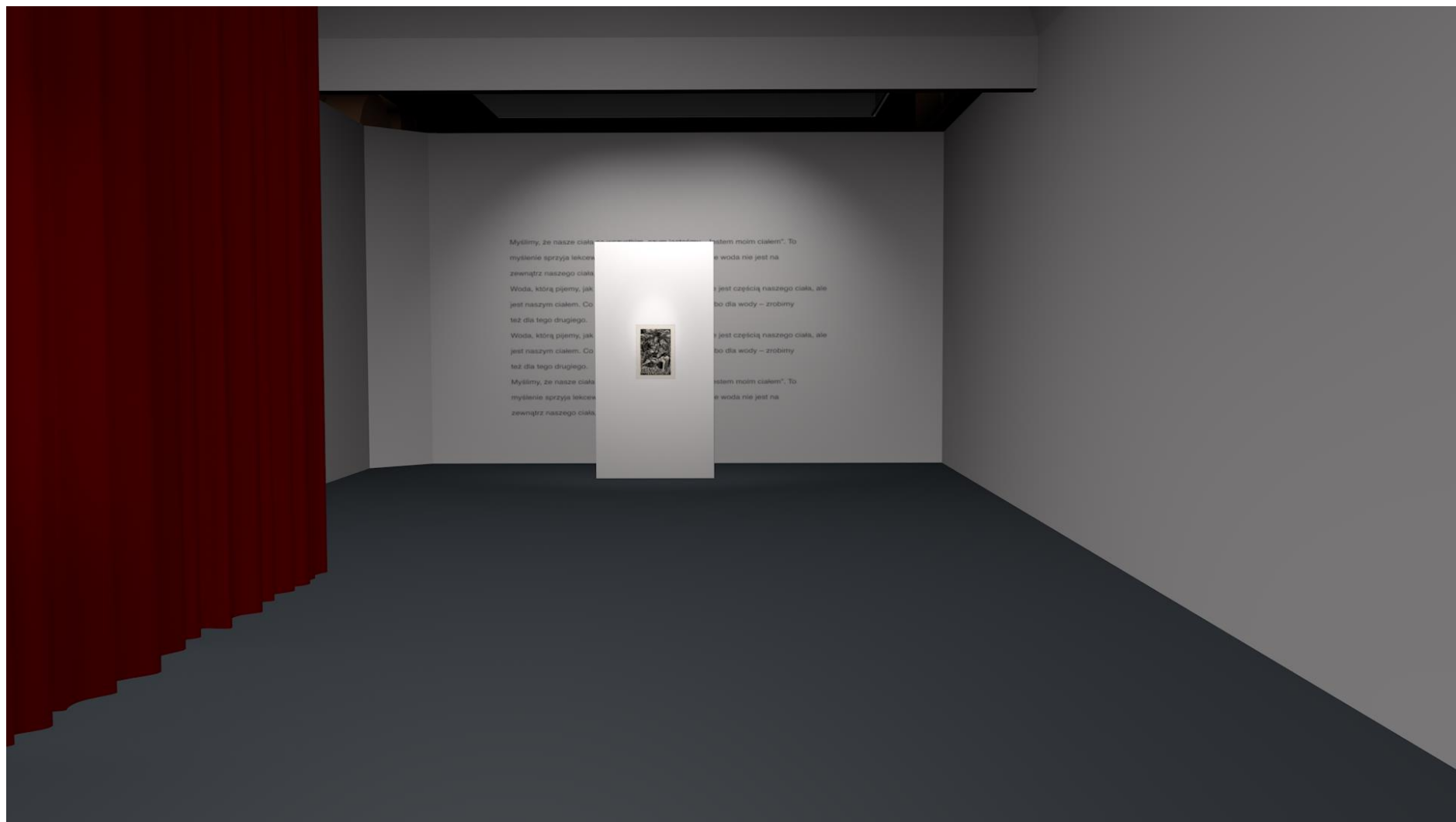
In her film Baumgart will also share her own artistic takes on water and the metamorphosis into grey seals by using affective editing techniques and special effects. She will employ the technique of bricolage in the film – a method of 'structuring' movies by combining not only generic content but diverse strategies of expression as well - which, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss is the process that leads to the creation of mythical thought. Scenes on the stage of the theatre in Lviv, scenes shot by Lake Gardno, scenes of nature, the view of a dark forest – new material will be intertwined with archival materials, found footage (fauna and flora), or photographs creating a rich cinematic texture in which national mythology and historical trauma, visionary interpretation and speculative possibilities of interspecies solidarity, intersect.

Coming back out into the daylight after the film screening, the viewer surrounded from all sides by the living and breathing water (*Água viva*) – both by the organs of his own *body of water* and the surrounding aquatics of Venice – will experience their surroundings intellectually, sensually, materially and metaphysically as a collection of connected beings, relationships, interdependencies, and stories; the constant porosity and the exchange of moist bodies and fluids that need and feed each other. Perhaps such a viewer will reject the idea of the uniqueness of the human species or the one-dimensional treatment of a historical paradigm.









Myślimy, że nasze ciała
myślenie sprzyja lekcewa
zewnątrz naszego ciała
Woda, którą pijemy, jak
jest naszym ciałem. Co
też dla tego drugiego.
Woda, którą pijemy, jak
jest naszym ciałem. Co
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Myślimy, że nasze ciała
myślenie sprzyja lekcewa
zewnątrz naszego ciała



"Jestem moim ciałem". To
woda nie jest na
jest częścią naszego ciała, ale
to dla wody – zrobimy
jest częścią naszego ciała, ale
to dla wody – zrobimy
"Jestem moim ciałem". To
woda nie jest na







