

秋風

KUKANIA

5.09 - COCKTAILS
9.11.
2025

ARSENAL
GALLERY
POWER STATION

ELEKTRYCZNA STREET

(ENTRANCE FROM ŚWIĘTOJAŃSKA

STREET), BIAŁYSTOK

free admission

ARTISTS:
KATERYNA KLINYK
MOOR HASAN

INSIDE JOB
(WŁA SŁUGIŃSKA
& MICHAŁ KNYCHAUS)

KRZYSZTOF GIL

DANA KAVELINA

DOMINIKA OLSZOWY

MARINA MENDRECKI

& KATALIN KORTMANN JARAY

ŁUKASZ RADZISZEWSKI

JOANNA RAJKOWSKA

SANA SHAHMURADOVA ŁANSKA

DOMINIKA GRAPP

CURATOR:

KATARZYNA
RÓŻNIAK-SZABELSKA

MEDIA PARTNERS:

SZUM

mat

GAZETA wyborcza

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municipal cultural institution

Marshes have long served as places of refuge. People sought shelter there to escape state violence, serfdom, military conscription, and systemic exclusion. Michał Pospiszyl, who coined the term *escape ecologies*, writes that Eastern Europe, with its peat bogs, marshes, and swamps, offered an ideal sanctuary for fugitives and refugees, beyond the reach of the weak Polish nobility. Thanks to their inaccessible terrain and rich ecosystems, wetlands and dense forests enabled the formation of free, coexistence-based communities. A historian living in the Białowieża Forest argues that mud itself resisted modern imperial and nationalist efforts to impose order on the socio-natural landscape.

In a setting that evokes these places, we present the work of artists seeking spaces to confront and process trauma. The participating artists delve into the dark layers of the subconscious, dreams, and ancient beliefs, constructing their own mythologies. For them, mud becomes a metaphor for both the hardships they endure and the simmering, organic hope that persists. Their works reveal the potential of this kind of escapism as a way of engaging with intergenerational trauma, as well as with historical and contemporary experiences of war, patriarchy, and discrimination.

Today, as the last remaining marshes are colonised by technologies that monitor the flow of water and the passage of people, the exhibition becomes a symbolic attempt to reclaim a space of regeneration, care, and transformation.

The project is inspired by the work of historian Michał Pospiszyl, an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Pospiszyl has been a fellow of the National Science Centre, the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, the Institute for Advanced Study at the Central European University in Budapest, and a visiting scholar at New York University. He is currently working on a book about escape ecologies in Enlightenment-era Eastern Europe. He has already published on this topic in *Environmental History* (2023), with further articles forthcoming in the *Journal of Modern History* and *Environmental Humanities*.



Ministry of Culture and National Heritage
Republic of Poland

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Inside Job (Ula Lucińska i Michał Knychaus)

The installations (*Paradise Rot*) by the Inside Job duo refer, among other things, to Slavic legends about will-o'-the-wisps, which were said to show some people the way, while deliberately leading others to their doom. Also known as marsh lights, they took the form of small glowing balls and floated above swamps and peat bogs. The site-specific installation filling the space of the former power plant combines these stories with forms inspired by human infrastructure. Between the calyxes of fantastical plants, hanging heavily over ponds filled with black sludge, cables wind their way through the interiors of the objects. They seem to “persist”, sucking up the remaining water from their surroundings. The intertwining of organic and synthetic forms evokes infrastructures of control and landscape ordering, such as historical wetland drainage projects. Often presented as a fight against barbarism, in fact they were not only a war against wetlands and unregulated rivers, but also a way of disciplining the people living in the forests and swamps who were hiding from oppression.

Ula Lucińska and Michał Knychaus spin visions of untamed, “dark” and more than human agency of the landscape. Their cocoon-like objects (*Behind the Mouth Gate*), hanging from the ceiling on a long rhizomatous structure, are inspired by carnivorous plants. Delicate and withdrawn, they can suddenly become aggressive and expansive. The marshy landscapes referred to in the exhibition have long been associated with spaces of encounter with the supernatural. The abstract, transparent, flowing forms (*Windsailors*) floating above the heads of visitors bring to mind ghosts, specters, membranous, organic traces of the past. Like plants at the mercy of the wind, unable to control their own movement, these objects remain in a state of unstable suspension. In this respect, they resemble people traversing the Białowieża Forest for several years.

Noor Hasan

I remember that between two parts of the forest there were swamps and a small river. One of the swamps was particularly large and very difficult to cross. My feet kept getting stuck in the mud, but I felt safe in the forest. I knew it was there so that I could hide, and that it was trying to help me as much as it could. I was fleeing Iraq, where I could be in danger, to a better, safer place.

Since 2021, a humanitarian crisis has been unfolding on the Polish-Belarusian border, which runs through the marshes of the Białowieża Forest. Brutal, illegal pushbacks are putting

the lives of migrants from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia at risk. The drawing documents a night in the fall of 2021, when Noor Alhussin Ammar Hasan, then 15, along with her mother and siblings, extremely exhausted and losing consciousness, tried once again to cross the border. The family had just been turned back and was only a hundred meters from the border fence. They had only a tent without a frame, which resembles a stone in the drawing. After repeated attempts to call for help—from private individuals, organizations, and the emergency services—Hasan feared she would lose her mother or one of her siblings. Her younger sister was nine years old at the time. The artist survived the night and managed to bring help. She says that the moon she drew at the time gave her hope.

Joanna Rajkowska and Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman Joanna Rajkowska and Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman

Joanna Rajkowska and Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman combine biographical and historical threads into a story in which the private fates of their families intertwine with collective traumas. In Slavic beliefs, the Night Heron was the guide of dead souls. In Rajkowska and Sniderman's work, it accompanies Jewish refugees hiding in the swamps. Dzidek, Rajkowska's father, is still a boy in the first scenes of the film, who escaped with his mother from a transport carrying Warsaw Jews to Auschwitz. The subsequent sequences form a multigenerational narrative, returning to the landscape of swamps and wetlands. In one of its storylines, the once-persecuted Dzidek appears as a hunter. The transformation from victim to perpetrator becomes a way of coping with unresolved trauma—a mechanism that is painfully recognizable in the context of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. In the final scene, hybrid human-animal creatures perform a mysterious ritual to the sounds of the anathema once imposed on Spinoza by the Jewish community. This ghostly echo of ancient beliefs reminds us of the recurring violence and attempts to work through inherited historical traumas across species.

Sana Shahmuradova Tanska

Sana Shahmuradova Tanska's painting stems from the memory of the water and underwater landscape of her homeland, which preserves the experiences of past generations. The artist explores her own origins, treating trauma as a tool for communication and a way to connect with her ancestors. As she emphasizes, as a result of the constant retraumatization of Ukrainian society, intergenerational differences are beginning to blur, and a

shared fate lasts longer than a single lifetime. Time does not flow linearly here, but goes in circles—since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the traumas of the past have returned. In Tanska’s paintings, bodies from different times, united in physical pain, symbolize intergenerational trauma. The painter refers to the aquatic landscape, imagining taking a breath and diving as a strategy for escape and seeking refuge. Her visions may refer both to the history of the Volhynia marshes, which saved people from starvation, and to the catacombs of Odessa, where she comes from. The artist’s practice combines historical knowledge and personal experience with an intuitive creative process based on the belief that consciousness and unconsciousness coexist as one system. Intuition, as Tanska believes, allows us to grasp invisible processes, often leading to the same discoveries as long, rational searches.

Krzysztof Gil

Krzysztof Gil’s work refers to the historical and contemporary experiences of the Roma minority, combining personal memories and experiences from the artist’s family history with documentation of past persecutions. In the 17th century, laws legalizing the killing of Roma were in force in what is now Germany and the Netherlands. Chronicles of the hunts in those areas record human victims alongside animals. One such record reads: “A beautiful stag, five does, three large boars, nine smaller boars, two Gypsies, one Gypsy woman, and one Gypsy child were shot.” Until the 19th century, such hunts were organized by the nobility, the military, and the police. The artist sees a parallel between these practices and the tragic events in his own family history. His great-grandfather was murdered because of his ethnic origin in the 1950s, and the perpetrators went unpunished. Growing up in a Roma settlement in Nowy Targ, the artist observed the continuity of history and the power of anti-Roma stereotypes. Although the daily life of his community was no different from that in other parts of the city, outsiders entered his neighborhood with fear. Seeking a way to express his experience, the artist came across medieval engravings depicting mythical human races in the form of terrifying human-animal hybrids. In his work, the fantastical hybrid becomes a metaphor for “the Other.” In the presented painting, a magical creature flees from danger in a forest landscape.

Karina Mendreczky and Katalin Kortman Járay

The inspiration for this landscape-like site-specific installation was Hany Istók, a child found in the Hanság marshes in 1749, who features in many Hungarian legends. The few surviving records indicate that the naked boy, who could not speak, was perfectly at home in the aquatic world around the lake. He could swim like a fish and ate only grass, raw fish, and frogs. Fishermen took him to Kapuvár Castle, where the “wild” eight-year-old boy was dressed and baptized. Attempts were made to teach him to speak, but without success. The circumstances of the boy’s later disappearance remain as mysterious as his origins. According to the most popular version of the story, Hany Istók escaped his cruel “guardians” by jumping into the water and returning to the world from which he came. Over time, more fantastic descriptions appeared, in which he became a fish-man, a frog-boy, an amphibious child, a half-animal with a body covered in scales. The legend can be read as a story of a return to nature, in which Hanság becomes a new paradise. By shedding his clothes, the hero regains his lost identity. Karina Mendreczky and Katalin Kortman Járay fill the space with sculptures of plants and hybrid human-plant figures. Responding to the contemporary climate catastrophe, the artists create a fantastical setting that questions the division between the civilized and the barbaric.

Kateryna Aliinyk

Kateryna Aliinyk’s painting stems from the experience of losing her hometown of Luhansk, occupied by Russia in 2014, and from the impossibility of returning to the landscapes of her childhood. In her paintings, the artist preserves the memory of abandoned landscapes stretched between beauty and horror. Dense forests, tangled branches and roots intertwine with images of wounds and war debris. Aliinyk’s work depicts both the tragedies of war and the daily activities of her family members who remained in Luhansk out of attachment to the land. A recurring motif is their care for the garden, tended with the artist’s return home in mind. Aliinyk paints landscapes marked by the violence of war. The seemingly reborn nature hides traces of crime. The earth, though covered with greenery, remembers blood, explosions and death. The artist observes how the processes of war change the soil and plants, turning them into carriers of memory. Aliinyk’s art is an attempt to get closer to the occupied land—through her painting, the artist works through loss, recording the tension between life and catastrophe in the landscape.

Dana Kavelina

Dana Kavelina's film uses surreal images to tell the story of an elderly man forcibly conscripted into the Ukrainian army. It opens with a poetic text based on coded messages, which in reality served as warnings against mobilization brigades. "Olives" refer to soldiers in green uniforms, "black olives" to the police, and "clouds" to patrols traversing the city. In the first part of the film, the "clouds" take the protagonist away from the street. In the second part, a drone takes over the supervision of the man transported to the front, welcoming him with singing against the backdrop of a starry sky. The landscape, which the character enters to the sounds of the song *Taki pejzaż* (*Such a Landscape*) performed by Ewa Demarczyk, provides shelter and camouflage. In the third part, the earth itself deserts. The soil leaving its place is followed by bones and disabled plants, unable to bloom in bomb craters. In the finale, we see a crater and a stone circling around it. In the background, we hear the song *Hulyet, hulyet, beyze vintn* (*Howl, Howl, Raging Wind*), written during World War I and sung again during the Holocaust—like an echo of catastrophes repeating themselves over and over again.

Dominika Trapp

Dominika Trapp's paintings use the metaphor of a trap. While working on the project, the artist researched traditional, historical Hungarian animal traps. She sees setting them as a moment of dramatic takeover of the landscape by humans—a gesture in which the environment is subordinated to human intention. The artist develops this reflection by interpreting the entire contemporary infrastructure as an extension of the trap mechanism. Not limited to a momentary act, but extending into a long-term process of shaping landscapes. Trapp's works reveal the dynamics of these relationships, in which the seemingly safe space of everyday life is transformed into a network of mechanisms of control and violence. The artist attempts to capture both the moment of arming the trap, marked by a conscious act of human violence, and the moment of disarming, which seems to be carried out by other, non-human forces. She thus suggests the existence of alternative dimensions in which the disarmed trap opens up the possibility of imagining relationships with the landscape that go beyond the imposed structures.

Łukasz Radziszewski

As a child, Łukasz Radziszewski was fascinated by military matters. In his latest works, the artist redraws the "little wars" – drawings he created as a boy. Although he himself has never had to fear war, he refers to the collective memory of his community in Podlasie. Wars were recorded in it, he says, as fleeting acts of violence from which people managed to protect themselves thanks to their closeness to nature. One of the redrawn scenes depicts a battle between a heavily armed army and mosquitoes. In the context of the exhibition, it may refer to moments when the marshes became allies of subordinate groups and local communities, stopping more than one army and imperial ambitions of those in power. Radziszewski's works are made of paper pulp, for which he uses his childhood drawings. He weaves marsh rosemary twigs, collected from the marshes in the vicinity of his home village, into this material. In this way, he points to the longevity of the landscape that has surrounded him throughout his life, in relation to which human history remains merely a brief episode.

Dominika Olszowy

Dominika Olszowy creates scenographic installations with noticeable references to folk theatre. She is fascinated by objects that are ugly, "as if they were a little sick." Her sculptural material—made of concrete, muslin diapers, or sand—visually resembles mud. For the artist, it becomes a medium through which she materializes scenes from her subconscious. Sometimes, the surface of her works surprises with scattered confetti—the muddy mass then turns into an image of ambivalence, a symbol of both difficult experiences and the hope that always smoulders within them. The rooms filled with the artist's installations are characterized by a dense atmosphere in which disgust, humor, and the mourning that accompanies her private life intertwine. Death is a recurring theme. Olszowy is inspired, among other things, by Proto-Slavic household spirits, the souls of deceased loved ones who inhabited the nooks and crannies of homes. In her practice, she focuses on intimacy, seeking ways to work with personal trauma and nightmares. Olszowy declares her lack of faith in the direct agency of art. Perhaps, however, working with one's own trauma has greater agency and could be a strategy for preventing further tragedies born of inherited pain.

Recently, wetlands in Eastern Europe have drawn considerable attention. We have heard about the marshes that, in the spring of 2022, stalled the Russian advance on Kyiv, and about the swamps of the Białowieża Forest, which in the autumn of 2021 formed one of the safest migration routes into the European Union. Yet the role wetlands have played in the lives of the people who inhabited these regions is much broader; this is borne out by numerous diaries and memoirs, especially those from the Second World War. One such testimony was written by Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, a chemist and pharmacist by training, and later the author of many works on the Holocaust. After the camp's liberation, through a series of twists of fate, Levi did not return to Italy immediately but instead spent several months wandering across Eastern Europe. He served in the support units of the Red Army: first in Katowice and Cracow, then in Lviv and Ternopil, and finally, for eight weeks, in Belarusian Polesia. It was there that he learned about the partisan movement in the Polesian swamps, which he later recounted in his 1980s novel *Se non ora, quando?* (*If Not Now, When?*).

The novel, though fictional, draws on real events. By the middle of 1943, tens of thousands of partisans were active in the region, including many Jews, forming one of the strongest resistance movements in this part of Europe. Their actions tied down as many as 600,000 soldiers and forced the evacuation from Belarus of 10,000 ethnic Germans, whom the SS was unable to protect. Having succeeded in exterminating most of the local Jewish population, the Nazis left escape into the swamps or joining the swamp partisans as the only chance of survival. It is hardly surprising, then, that Polesia, a region stretching from the Bug River, across the Pripyat marshes, all the way to Chernobyl, appears in Levi's fictional world as the "republic of marshes."

The islands scattered across the East European wetlands offered protection from more than just the Holocaust. A few years before the war, when Ukraine was struck by the Great Famine, the only areas where hunger was less severe were the marshes of eastern Volhynia, territories where Soviet authority had very limited control. Throughout the interwar period, the inhabitants of these lands deliberately used

natural boundaries such as the wetlands and floodplains to shield themselves from Moscow's interventions. "Meanwhile, farmers," historian Kate Brown writes in her book *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*, "who didn't want to give up their livestock and crops to the tax collectors found it easy to hide them in the forest or swamp." These areas functioned as escape ecologies: spaces of opacity and abundance that allowed for greater autonomy by limiting the reach of external centres of power.

When we speak of Polesia during the Second World War or Volhynia in the interwar period, we are describing a world that already had not only railways and the combustion engine, but also radio, machine guns, and airplanes, tools that enabled surveillance of even the most inaccessible areas. Yet despite repeated attempts to assert control over these territories, the power of the Third Reich in Polesia and of the Soviet Union in Volhynia remained fairly limited. It is not hard to imagine that before such technological advances were deployed, the space in which social life could develop beyond the reach of the state must have been considerably greater.

Because historical sources were written by representatives of states and centred on them, from ancient Uruk through Han-dynasty China, Elizabethan England, Frederick's Prussia, and Soviet Russia, spaces of escape either failed to appear in the archival record altogether or were cast in a negative light, portrayed as primitive and wild. This was the case, for example, with the floodplains of the Euphrates, which from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century provided refuge for groups of Arab nomads (primarily the Khaza'il), as described in Faisal Husain's 2014 article (*In the Bellies of the Marshes*). In the mid-eighteenth century, the Ottoman governor of Iraq referred to the Khaza'il as "mud savages," while 'Uthman al-Bassri, writing at the same time, likened a dam then built on the Euphrates to the biblical walls intended to separate civilisation from the threatening barbarians Gog and Magog.

Wetlands were not only places of refuge but also rich ecological niches. Their inhabitants often enjoyed a much more varied diet of fish, crayfish, birds, nuts, blackberries and mushrooms, than farmers who settled on drained land devoted largely to monocultural crops, where grain was the staple food. This was precisely the role played by the floodplains of the Euphrates, the marshes of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Fenlands of eastern England, the Dismal Swamp of North Carolina and Virginia, and the floodplains of

the Mississippi, where, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, communities of escaped enslaved people took root. It is no coincidence that the expansion of state control over these areas went hand in hand with land drainage. Dry ground is far more legible to administrators: it can be easily divided and classified, making it simpler to assess and collect taxes. It also rendered local populations more dependent on landowners storing grain reserves for times of natural disaster (and willing, or unwilling, to share them), on markets and fluctuating prices, and on the modern state, which consistently cast peasants in the role of petitioners. In this sense, the emancipation promised by drainage projects, rather than liberating, left the people of the reclaimed lands even more subordinated to the market, the state, or the manor, transforming the citizens of swamp republics into dependents.

Over the past 250 years, 85 percent of Poland's wetlands have been drained, and more than 90 percent of its rivers have been regulated to some extent. It is therefore difficult to imagine that as recently as the nineteenth century, the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were covered by a dense network of free-flowing streams, floodplains, and swamps. Each such space could become a seedbed of social and economic autonomy, on the one hand shielding people from the gaze of authority amid thickets, forests, and water, and on the other providing, through wet woodlands and high waters, the resources necessary for survival.

Before these marshes became the granary of Ukrainian peasants surviving the Great Famine or a refuge for Jews fleeing the Holocaust, they had for centuries sustained multi-ethnic communities made up of Roma, Tatars, Dutch settlers, Poleshuks, Germans, Jewish deserters, peasants escaping serfdom, and criminals evading punishment. The scale of this phenomenon can be gauged from the many resolutions passed by local assemblies (for example, in northern Mazovia), in which the Polish nobility described the swamps and forests as "dens of rogues" (as in the *Instructio terrae Łomzensis* of 1659), shelters for fugitives and bandits. One such place in Polesia was described by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski in his travel memoirs from the 1840s. The novelist wrote of a settlement "hidden among forests and swamps," which served as a refuge for Jews escaping conscription, called New Jerusalem, a name that reflected the utopian character of the project taking shape there. To Kraszewski, New Jerusalem was troubling: a dirty place inhabited by passive, lazy, and

indolent people. Yet the local Jew, who in the writer's words "wallowed in mud and tarred himself with abandon," was not exactly poor. He worked little, since the surrounding nature provided him with everything in abundance.

A kind of symbiosis between subordinated groups and the marshes, or more broadly, the opaque environments of thickets, forests, and wastelands, recurs in a vast number of sources on Eastern Europe from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The natural wealth of the region's swamps and forests was a recurring theme in the writings of the French encyclopaedists; it appeared in Voltaire, Giacomo Casanova, and Johann Heinrich Müntz, and resurfaced in a series of nineteenth-century texts. As with Kraszewski, descriptions of abundance were often set against observations of chaos, laziness, and waste. Müntz, who travelled through the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 1770s, wrote of Polesia: "In the forests there is an enormous number of bee swarms on trees, in hives, and in hollows deliberately carved into the trunks of large trees. The inhabitants know bees well, and so on. They derive considerable income from this (...). Fine flax, most of which is sent to Lithuania through the agency of Jews" (Müntz 1783, plate 122). "These [Polesian] marshes are a hidden treasure that later centuries will exploit, but improvements should begin at once, considering that goods can be transported by a new canal from the Muchaviec, as well as along the Pripyat toward the Dnieper" (Müntz 1783, plate 125). His other notes mention forests full of wild animals, mushrooms, and fruit; rivers and wetlands rich in crayfish, fish, and birds; and steppes with wild asparagus, high-quality flax, and cotton. The notion of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a land of great but untapped wealth also appeared in the entry on Polish geography in the eighteenth-century Great French Encyclopaedia. Condemning such wastefulness, Frederick the Great wrote to Voltaire in 1775: "Whoever drains marshes, improves the quality of the soil, and cultivates wastelands wrests the country back from barbarism."

It is hardly surprising that this monarch declared open war on chaotic nature and undisciplined populations first in Prussia and, after the 1772 partition, in Poland as well. Prussia was, in fact, the first state to deploy not only engineers and labourers but also soldiers to regulate rivers and floodplains. This moment can be seen as the beginning of a militarised relationship with nature, one that in the decades to come would increasingly shape government policies in Europe and beyond. The reasons for this militarisation in

eighteenth-century Prussia are clearly explained by historian David Blackbourn in his book *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany*. Soldiers were brought in to support the workers because these projects provoked conflicts that could not be resolved without military intervention. During the regulation of the Oder (1748–1752), for example, local inhabitants stole materials, obstructed the work, and in extreme cases, such as before the flood of 1754, were suspected of sabotaging the embankments already in place. There were, of course, many reasons for such resistance. Regulating the river often meant dismantling mills and weirs used by peasants for fishing, which impeded boat traffic. Contemporary newspapers reported protests by fishermen and millers. In many cases, the works involved not only embanking the old river but also cutting an entirely new channel, which could run straight through inhabited areas, resulting in widespread displacement and destruction.

Yet the main source of conflict likely lay elsewhere. One of the major projects of modern governments, first in Europe and, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, across the world, was the strict separation of water from land: transforming rivers into canals and peatlands into dry meadows. From the perspective of the modern state, marshes embodied ecological chaos (a mixture of water and earth) and social opacity. As Rohan D'Souza, author of a study on nineteenth-century British reclamation projects in the river deltas of the Bay of Bengal (*Drowned and Dammed: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India*) argues, the chief rationale for these investments was the drive to eliminate the floodplain as an environment fundamentally incompatible with the logic of the modern state and capitalism. In India, canals were constructed despite repeated disasters and enormous costs, as they were seen as the only effective means of taxing the local population.

Because it is difficult to maintain stable boundaries in floodplains (even today, the border along the unregulated Bug can shift by several kilometres), wetlands around the world long hindered the establishment of private property. Floodplains and marshes were typically managed as commons, with rights to fish, gather fruit, or graze cattle freely. Eighteenth-century inventories and court records show, however, that peasants defended floodplains for more than just these reasons. Floods, such as those of the Nile in ancient Egypt, deposited a wealth of nutrients onto meadows. A living, unregulated, and therefore pulsating river has for centuries been the

simplest and most effective means of enriching the soil.

Echoes of a popular praise of floods as forces that destroyed private property while bringing prosperity can be found in *Powódź (The Flood)* a novel written by Feliks Bernatowicz in the 1830s after his visit to Polesia. The book recounts the stories of two Polesian peasants travelling by boat through the swollen river. Yet the true protagonist of the work seems to be the Pripyat itself, a river whose floods could completely overturn established social hierarchies. It is no surprise, then, that the peasant in the novel eagerly awaited the spring deluge, sitting in his skiff “safe, even cheerful, letting the water carry him wherever it might (...), hauling in floating debris and finding in the general destruction ways to improve his lot.” According to the law described by one of the novel’s peasant characters, “what the water casts up belongs to all,” and in this swamp republic “the one who holds the oar rules, not the one who holds the whip.”

Although Bernatowicz’s work focused on Polesia, it seems to reveal something fundamental about the history of Eastern Europe as a whole. The tension between state and society, between monoculture farming and the richness of the floodplain, or, more broadly, escape ecologies, pulsed like floodwaters. The republic of marshes resembled no known state. It spread wherever the resistance of opaque nature and its inhabitants kept the hand of authority at bay, and it dried up where that resistance weakened. Such ecologies, of course, existed elsewhere too, in Polesia, Volhynia, Lithuania, Kujawy, and the Kurpie region, sheltered by the Bug and Narew rivers. But if, instead of looking at political maps with their naïve claims of statehood over lands that for most of history lay beyond state control, we turn to maps of meandering rivers, wetlands, wastelands, and waterlogged forests, the territories under the authority of external powers, whether state, market, or nobility, appear as little more than islands amid the waters of relative popular independence.

Looking at social history through the lens of environmental history may revolutionise our understanding of the past. When we focus on political history, on maps, edicts, textbooks, or laws produced by centres of power, we see only the image that power created of itself. Yet until the nineteenth century, in most parts of the world, states exercised control only over narrow passages, straits, gates, or checkpoints. The weakness of state authority at the time is reflected in the enduring popularity across Europe of surnames such as Nowak, Newman, and Neumann, names given to newly

settled villagers, landless people, and free migrants, often fugitives who had illegally fled their settlements. When we concentrate on the history of laws and projects, we miss the entire complex world that existed alongside them: a world of human–nature alliances, where contact with authority was sporadic and law, however harsh, often failed to function because there were always places and opportunities to escape.

The awareness of inaccessible nature, and especially of swamps, as allies of subordinated groups, endured in social memory and folk culture at least until the mid-twentieth century. It is reflected in Polesian sayings such as “Aby bałota, czort najdzieśca” (May the waters rise when the tax collector approaches), as well as in ethnographic research carried out in Polesia during the interwar period, for example in the remarkable essays that Józef Obrębski asked Polesian children to write. Although the ethnographer’s questions concerned the memory of serfdom, in the children’s responses the theme underwent striking transformations. First, noble oppression blurred together with the oppression of the state through tax collection, military conscription, or requisitioning resources for war. From the perspective of the Polesian people, there seemed to be no clear boundary between noble, tsarist, or German colonisation. Second, in the children’s accounts (in as many as twenty out of twenty-four), forests and swamps stand out as places of refuge, where one might flee with an entire herd and wait out the oppressor’s temporary intervention. Instead of stories about the omnipotence of states and lords, we hear accounts of weak authority, which appeared only briefly in Polesia’s life and, even then, struggled to enforce its own decisions.

High mobility, the lack of a strict division of labour, and a mode of production not geared toward accumulation hindered not only outside intervention but also the emergence of rigid social and gender hierarchies. Research by Józef Obrębski and Kazimierz Pietkiewicz, as well as photographs from the early twentieth century, show that Polesian women fished, gathered forest produce, and helped graze cattle on much the same terms as men. Older women, in particular, were held in high esteem for their knowledge of herbs, remedies, and the spirits said to haunt local settlements. Most importantly, however, unlike modern states, gripped since the eighteenth century by the idea of demographic growth as the primary source of prosperity, Polesia experienced very low population growth until the second half of the nineteenth century, with

reproduction subject to numerous cultural constraints.

The history of relations between state and society in Eastern Europe, particularly in Polesia, in many ways resembles those described by James C. Scott, the American anthropologist and historian of Southeast Asia, in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed*. In Vietnam, Burma, and southern China, it was mountains rather than floodplains or swamps that limited the reach of state power. Yet, as in Polesia, locals consciously used wild and inaccessible landscapes as a means of resistance. Although the groups studied had to remain relatively small, usually ranging from a few dozen to a few hundred people, in order to evade the state effectively, the territories they inhabited were as vast as the whole of Europe, and by the mid-twentieth century they were home to as many as 100 million people.

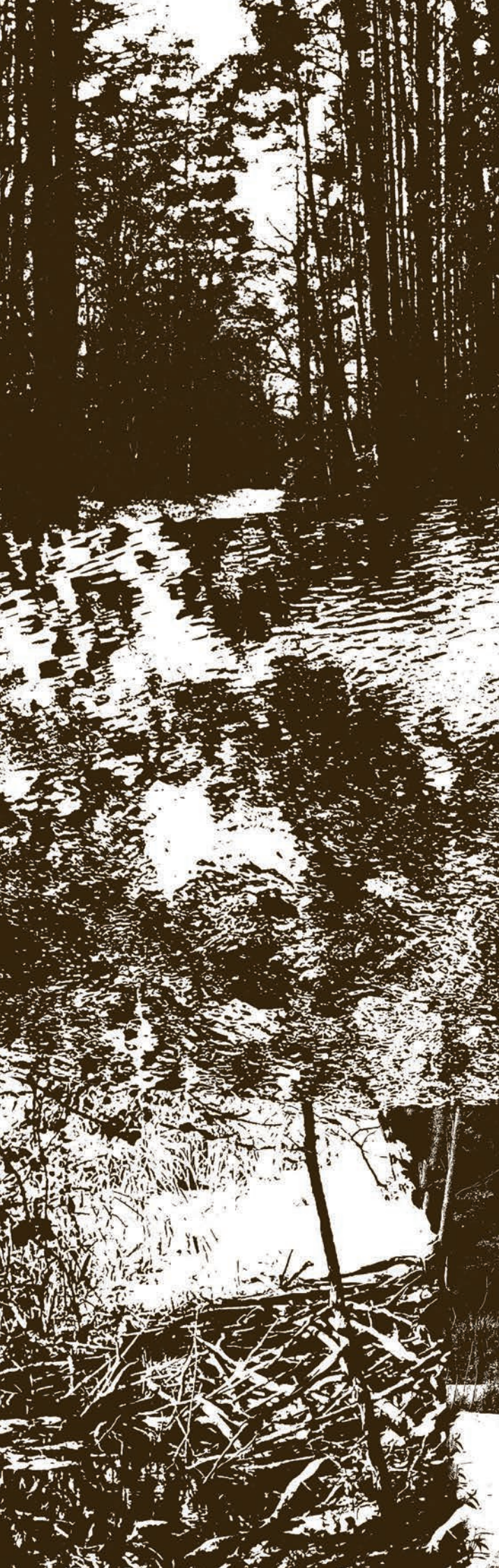
According to Scott, this can be described as the art of evading the state. Beyond concealing settlements, its key elements included mobility and a specific form of agriculture that allowed either a quick escape with belongings when officials appeared, or the safe hiding of those belongings. This is why mountain farming resembled gardens more than plantations. Crop diversity, on the one hand, reduced losses caused by plant pathogens and parasites, which could destroy one species without wiping out others, and on the other hand made the tax collector’s work more difficult. Instead of coming once to seize the harvest of a monoculture, officials had to return several times a year to collect from different crops. For the same reasons, tubers (potatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava) were preferred to grains. Potatoes are harder to transport and can be stored in the ground for long periods rather than in easily seized granaries. In the end, to collect taxes, the official would effectively have to carry out the very labour he sought to tax. Scott sums it up: “Inaccessibility and dispersal are the enemies of appropriation. And for an army on the march, as for a state, appropriation is the key to survival.”

In Polesia, grain cultivation was only one element of a broader economy. The Poleshuk was above all a herder, a beekeeper, a woodcutter, or a hunter. In encounters with authority, as described in Obrębski’s accounts, he could either flee into the groves with his cattle or live off “the natural produce of the forests, marshes, and swamps,” without accumulating anything that could easily be taxed. Security in times of hardship did not depend on granaries but on resources dispersed throughout the landscape. Polesian culture held a strong awareness of its dependence on

the wealth of the local environment, and what long protected the swamps and forests from overexploitation was not only low population growth (far slower than nature's own regeneration) but also a range of cultural safeguards. This helps explain the aura of sanctity attributed to swamp bees: "even the inadvertent killing of a bee," wrote ethnographer Czesław Pietkiewicz, "was considered a crime," while "to take all the honey from a hive (...) was the same (...) as killing a man." Numerous animals (turtles, swallows, cranes) and plants (rowan, maple) were likewise revered: "every tree growing near a cottage, in a yard, or along a street is untouchable; it may not be cut down, for that would be a sin." Exploitation was further restrained by numerous festivals as well as by astronomy, which, much like in today's biodynamic farming, regulated the use of meadows, forests, and household gardens. According to Sławomir Łotysz, author of the recently published *Pińskie błota. Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku* [*The Pinsk Marshes: Nature, Knowledge, and Politics in Polish Polesia until 1945*], although Poleshuk methods of fishing or forest management could at times resemble extractive practices (burning forests for pasture, or using weirs that trapped all plankton), it is no accident that the real destruction of the local environment began only when forests were cut on an industrial scale and when modern states, Tsarist, Polish, and later Soviet, undertook land reclamation.

This text is an expanded version of an essay originally published in *Pismo* magazine, no. 86 (2023)

Translated from Polish by Anna Bergiel

A black and white photograph of a forest path. In the foreground, there is a large, messy pile of sticks and branches. The path leads into a dense forest of tall, thin trees. The lighting is dappled, with sunlight filtering through the canopy.

ACCOMPANYING EVENTS

5.09.2025 (Fri.), 6 p.m.

Opening reception. Programme: performance by Kateryna Aliinyk, DJ set by Mifi77 (Projekt New Hope)

6.09.2025 (Sat.), 12 noon

Guided tour with curator Katarzyna Różniak-Szabelska and Artists

20.09.2025 (Sat.), 12:00 noon

***Escape Ecologies.* Lecture with a guided tour by historian Michał Pospiszyl**

4.10.2025 (Sat.), 12:00 noon

***The Art of Survival.* Guided tour with writer and cultural researcher Anka Wandzel**

18.10.2025 (Sat.), 12:00 noon

***From Hajnówka.* Guided tour by anthropologist and ethnologist Ewa Keczyńska-Moroz**

26.10.2025 (Sun.), 11:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m.

***Talismans.* Natural jewellery-making workshop led by Magdalena Samojlik**

8.11.2025 (Sat.), 12:00 noon

***Bodies on the Earth.* Guided tour with Ukrainian art researcher Kateryna Iakovlenko**

9.09.2025–7.11.2025

(Tue.–Fri.), 10:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m.

ARSENAL PLAYGROUND – workshops for organised groups accompanying the *Kukania* exhibition led by educators from the Arsenał Gallery in Białystok

Registration on the gallery's website

COLLOPHON

exhibition curator:

Katarzyna Różniak-Szabelska

curators of the events programme:

Urszula Dąbrowska, Katarzyna Różniak-Szabelska

production and coordination:

Urszula Dąbrowska

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Karolina Pietrzyk & Tobias Wenig

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Katarzyna Różniak Szabelska, Michał Pospiszyl

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Anna Bergiel

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Mateusz Smorezewski**

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Gabriela Owdziej, Piotr Trypus

education:

**Katarzyna Kida, Justyna Kołodko-Bietkał,
Aleksandra Szczuka**

exhibition supervisors:

**Maja MacKenzie, Krzysztof Kazimierski,
Małgorzata Kopcińska, Tomasz Lelo,
Mateusz Smorezewski, Aleksandra Szczuka**

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**Marlena Małyszewska, Anna Olesiewicz,
Katarzyna Wilimas**

