



mesh

multidisciplinary
environmental studies
in the humanities

Photo by Tanya Gaudam

MESH Leaf III.2

Project Reports from the
Environmental Humanities
July 2025

Weaving a Patchwork of Life: The Art of Engaging and Repairing in a Multispecies World

The Patchwork of Life was part of the *Multispecies Storytelling Pop-up Exhibition* on October 19, 2024 in Cologne, Germany. The exhibition featured the works of participants in the Autumn Academy for Planetary Wellbeing organized by MESH, EUniWell, and BRIDGES.

CARMEN ARMENTEROS PUCHADES¹, MARS BRIONES¹, SASKIA CASTAÑEDA FALCÓN², ANNA ISHCHENKO³, LIBERO LENZI PARI⁴, AND LEONIE WINKLER⁵

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO FRANZ KRAUSE¹

¹ MESH, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Cologne; ² Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Cologne; ³ Department of Languages, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Linnaeus University; ⁴ Department of Biology, University of Florence; ⁵ Faculty of Language and Culture, University of Nantes

Imagining the Patchwork

Raising questions about actions of care, destruction, and renewal in a multispecies world, *The Patchwork of Life* was a participatory art installation by a group of early-career researchers. The idea of “patchwork” came up during our group’s first brainstorming session. As we recalled the ideas and discussions in the lectures of the autumn academy, we were struck by Sandra Díaz’s (2022) reference to “the fabric of life”—a metaphor for the material, dynamic interconnectedness and interdependency among organisms and their environments. To translate this concept into a work that would be exhibited, it was important for us to explore beyond two-dimensional representation. Part of the brainstorming entailed reflecting upon and

discussing conceptions of “world” through assumptions underpinning terms like “landscape” and “environment,” as well as von Uexküll and Sebeok’s “*Umwelt*” or *world-around-you* (Cobley, 2009), and “*Mitwelt*” or *world-with-you* (Knudsen, 2020). Agreeing that our work should aspire to evoke the three-dimensionality of the lifeworld and the complexity of situated lifeways, we wanted to highlight three key characteristics: physicality, processuality, and participation by the audience.

Guided by these creative principles, we decided to use a canvas on which to paint images and the Latin names of particular animal and plant species. Representing these species on a canvas would allude to their being tied together in — as well as forming the ties of — a fabric. We chose animals and plants that are still

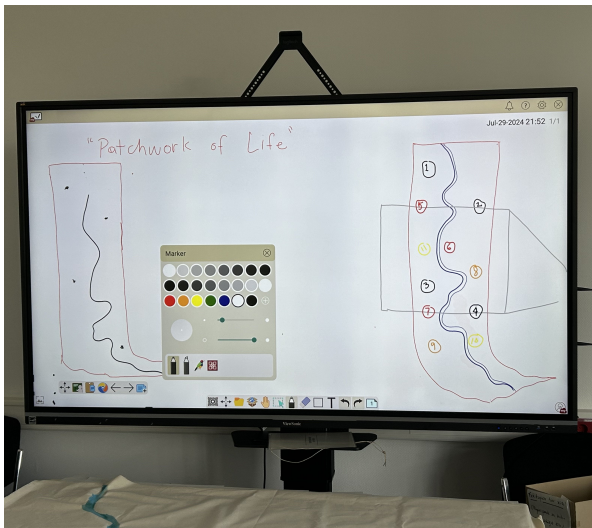


Figure 1. A sketch showing how we planned to design and install the work

living or once lived in the city of Cologne and its region. According to their extinction status (IUCN, 2025), species were painted in white over black (extinct), red (critically endangered), orange (endangered), and yellow (vulnerable) backgrounds. To enable the processual and participatory qualities of the work in the exhibition, we decided to completely cut figures of extinct species off the canvas and partially rip off those of endangered ones; the audience would then be invited to try to sew these sagging and fully detached pieces back onto the canvas.

Moreover, we imagined the canvas to cascade from the ceiling and to allow its extra length to lay on the floor, while leaving some distance from the wall instead of being pinned onto it. This is because the canvas would serve another material function — not only as painted surface but also as filmic screen. We planned to project onto it a video recording of scenes from Cologne that we would gather during the week of the autumn academy. The vignettes would render glimpses of multispecies interactions in the city in order to spark off reflections on the vital as well as fatal energies that drive these interactions.

Working on the Patchwork

Driven by the idea of physicality, we decided to use a canvas because of its plain-weave pattern which we could easily rip despite its toughness, hence conveying fragility and durability. Painting on canvas has historically been a way of representing life, a sort of simulacrum of the world. It was the “outside the box” or, in this case, “outside the frame” approach that allowed us to create a more holistic display, incorporating several juxtaposed layers of the environ-

ment, the city, its non-humans and ourselves.

As a unifying image and concept, we opted for painting the length of the Rhine River where our October academy field trips would take place. We saw rivers as a powerful metaphor for threads that weave the earth together, connecting its different ecosystems. Water adds yet another layer to the fabric of life, serving both as an active life solvent and an essential element for sustaining life.



Figure 2. Painting the Rhine River on the canvas

The team began by sketching the desired outcome on notebooks and on the digital board in the meeting room. In order to start painting, we laid the 4-meter-long canvas across some tables. One of us created a color palette by mixing the different paints in coffee cups, and proceeded to trace the shape of the Rhine with water. The rest of the team then dipped their brushes in paint and stained the trail of water. The active flow of these liquids led colors to bleed into each other, while the water’s superficial tension on the canvas prevented the shape from totally spilling out. Nonetheless, when spills did occur, they were not considered a mistake but rather an inevitable part of the process and, most of all, of water’s agency.

We agreed to divide the rest of the tasks among ourselves, realizing that each of us had unique talents and abilities in painting the figures, lettering, cutting through and ripping the canvas to a desired shape, and researching the species’ scientific names and other important information. Each task was itself a meditative act of remembering, recognizing, and mourning over the suffering and loss of the species. The animals were depicted in partly naturalistic and partly sketchy manner, and painted in white lines to create a contrast with the colored background. Cutting and ripping the fabric were destructive and experimental acts. Ripping had to be done deliberately, but at the

same time, the process turned out to be open-ended as there was no complete control over what pieces would rip apart and to what extent. As in painting the river, this experimental and aleatory element connects to the unforeseen harms that actions of partial damage can have for the whole.

Presenting a Work-in-Process

On the day of the exhibition, after we set up the installation, we and the other groups had the opportunity to briefly share about our works. This offered the audience insights into the curatorial impulse of the works as well as some cues for how to engage with them. After our group shared a few words, we played the audio-visual material, which allowed those in the audience who had participated in the academy to recall scenes from that week. The vignettes opened with a scene of canal water reflecting tree branches, clouds, and a bright blue sky — an imagery that would be enhanced by the ripples caused by Eurasian coots paddling into the frame. Also appearing differently than through the smooth surface of a laptop or TV screen, the vignettes were textured by the folds of the hanging canvas so that moving images — of trees, fronds, houses, a bicycle rider, beams of sunlight, rain at Aachener Weiher, pinned butterflies at Bonn's Museum Koenig, grazing sheep, superimposed parrot and human faces, and the wounded landscape of Hambach — were distorted. Parts of the projected video also overlapped in interesting ways on the painted figures of plants and animals and the Rhine River, which ran in the middle of the canvas.

The projected vignettes, moreover, were made to splay out of the suspended canvas such that one would feel like viewing a triptych, with the two side panels being the portions of the projection that landed on the wall. As parts of the moving images fell through the holes of the canvas, they would also land on the wall where they appeared stretched. The coincidental superimpositions gestured toward the complex ties and tangled to-and-fros between virtual images and painted figures, documented scenes and imagined scenarios, presence and representation, medium and subject. At the same time, the distortions caused by the fabric folds constantly called attention to the materiality of the conditions that made the visual representation possible, frustrating any experience of passive looking. Our installation's soundscape — bird calls, the whirring of vehicles, music and laughter during the cultural night, whispers and echoes at the museum, and utterances like "abattoir" or "full of these feces" during the excursion — would later



Figure 3. Sewing *Puffinus mauretanicus* back onto the canvas



Figure 4. Our group's art installation with a vignette of trees along Clarenbachstraße in Cologne

be woven into the soundscape of the exhibition space where the other groups also played audio-visual materials. These meaning-making entwinements of the material and metaphorical evoke the co-constitutive nature of "multi-

species relationality," which, "tuned to the temporal and semiotic registers makes evident a lively world in which being is always becoming, becoming is always becoming-with" (van Dooren, Kirksey, & Münster, 2016, p. 2).

The audience was then invited to take part in actions of repairing and restitution by trying to "sew species back to life" and patching the ripped-off pieces on the holes of the canvas using needles and yarn. But the process of sewing and repairing turned out to be more difficult than expected, as more effort had to be made, for instance, in sewing through the heavy fabric and being cautious with using the long, thick needles. An important message emerged from the learning-by-doing act of patching: the ripped pieces, especially the black figures representing extinct species, could no longer fully fill the holes on the canvas. Traces of tearing also remained visible.

This performative metaphor highlighted the impossibility and dilemmas of bringing extinct species back to life. It also underlined the irreparable loss that comes when species vanish from this planet. *The Patchwork of Life* dwelled on the praxis, ethics, and aesthetics surrounding such questions of multispecies living and dying, vulnerability and conviviality.

References

Cobley, Paul. (2009). "Introduction," in Paul Cobley, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*. Routledge, 3–12.

Díaz, Sandra. (2022). "A Fabric of Life View of the World," *Science* 375 (6586), 1204, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abp8336>.

International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, "IUCN Red List of Threatened Species," <https://iucn.org/resources/conservation-tool/iucn-red-list-threatened-species>, accessed April 14, 2025.

Knudsen, Nicolai Krejberg. (2020). "Heidegger and the Genesis of Social Ontology: Mitwelt, Mitsein, and the Problem of Other People," *European Journal of Philosophy* 28 no. 3, 723–739.

Van Dooren, Thom, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster. (2016). "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1, 1–23, doi:10.1215/22011919-3527731.

With support and funding from



Contact

Email: info-mesh@uni-koeln.de
 Phone: +49(0)221 470 1293
 Instagram: [mesh_research_hub](https://www.instagram.com/mesh_research_hub)
 Bluesky: [mesh-research-hub.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/mesh-research-hub.bsky.social)
 LinkedIn: [MESH](https://www.linkedin.com/company/mesh)
 YouTube: [MESHunikoeln](https://www.youtube.com/MESHunikoeln)
 Address: Weyertal 59 (Back building,
 3. + 4. floors) 50937 Cologne



www.mesh.uni-koeln.de

mesh
 multidisciplinary
 environmental studies
 in the humanities