Anamersion: Toward a postcinematic poetics of immersion

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Abstract

The contribution of my practice-led research is the development of anamersion, a postcinematic poetics of immersion, which attends to the immersive conditions of contemporary life forms. Notions of mutational convergences of bodies, environments, and technologies and their differential mapping and navigation are developed in dialogue with Unica Zürn's figuration of (her) (female) body and its institutionalisation as one formation in her illustrated text *The House of Illnesses*, Kathy Acker's conception of the labyrinth as the site where codes are made flesh, and Porpentine Charity Heartscape's explorations of trauma in her computer games set in horror mansions, with special attention to the way writing, drawing, and algorithmic operations often co-constitute each other in their work and in my own practice. Bringing these predominantly pre-computational engagements to bear on technology-dependent forms of immersion in gaming and virtual reality (VR), my practice-led research provides an analysis of immersive, navigational, and environmental figurations through modes of drawing, moving image, and multimedia installation that respond to Wynter's call for a New Studia, and Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape's disruptions of anatomical, architectural, and textual figurations on its own terms. Developing anamersion primarily with reference to Sylvia Wynter's thought and, by extension, that of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Louis Chude-Sokei, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and others, emphasis is laid on the ways in which the over-represented genre of the human, *Man*, continues to manifest in and as bodies, environments, and technologies today. Understanding anamersion as a form of what Wynter calls *figuration Work*, anamersive approaches map, navigate, and traverse such generic structurations from the implicated and immersed positions, which have the potential to be in solidarity with the Wynterian unsettling of the genre *Man* by challenging conceptions of technology which carry over post-Enlightenment monohumanism into derivative posthumanisms, which continue to reproduce colonial logics with deadly consequences. Anamersion, as analytic and poetics, thus presents a significant and original

contribution to the fields of artists' moving-image and postcinematic studies, which focus on the environmental and navigational trajectories of moving-image and immersive technologies today and elaborates how these can be refigured to produce generative detachments and exits from the linear developmental narratives that underwrite a violent world order.

KEYWORDS: anamersion, immersion, post-cinema, postcinematic, moving image, gaming, virtual reality, navigation, mapping, drawing, figuration, humanism, genre, environment, body, hybridity, technology, Sylvia Wynter, Kathy Acker, Unica Zürn, Porpentine Charity Heartscape.

> *...we must attend to the material histories of our categories, as they are given shape and vitality by way of, and inside of, organismic bodies, even if (or especially if) ultimately our aim is to be rid of received categories because of the world-wrecking capacities and death-dealing effects. Otherwise, we will most likely build on foundations we would be better off destroying.* Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*[1]

Excerpts from the Introduction

Anamersion

Anamersion is a neologism that signals a differential approach to immersion.[2] The prefix *ana-* (upward, towards; again, anew; backwards, against) abandons the prefix *im-* (in; into; within) and engages immersive technologies without presuming a discrete separation between an *immersant* and an *immersive environment* as a prior stabilisation.[3] In suspending such prior stabilisation, anamersion conceives immersion not as a mode of *relation* between an immersant and an immersive environment, where the former is absorbed in the latter, but as the site of their mutual production. For this reason, anamersive poetics figures bodies, technologies, and environments as one formation and deploys oriented logics in order to set in motion iterative processes capable of mutating the whole. In anamersive poetics, *algorithmic*, *anagrammatic*, and *anamorphic* operations become key to mapping, navigating, and traversing—in the sense of

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[1] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 121.

[2] The term “anamersion” was inspired by Johnny Golding’s term “ana-materialism” as developed in: Johnny Golding, “Ana-Materialism & the Pineal Eye: Becoming Mouth-Breast,” *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 19, no. 4 (2013): 66–80.

[3] “Immersant” is a neologism coined by Char Davies. See Laurie McRobert, *Char Davies’s Immersive Virtual Art and the Essence of Spatiality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 7.

crossing with difficulty, going against—the ways in which something like a body and something like an environment are formed, together with the codes and violences that perpetuate themselves in and through such formations.

Anamersive poetics as *figuration Work*

Anamersion as a postcinematic poetics of immersion attends to forms of mapping, navigating, and traversing the immersive conditions of contemporary life forms and the ways in which post-Enlightenment conceptions of the human—what Sylvia Wynter terms the "genre *Man*"—continue to manifest in and as bodies, environments, and technologies today.[4] The term "poetics" here designates a *doing* with transformative consequences, which can affect the material constitution of the/a world, though it is primarily conducted through cultural means, in this case language, drawing, and algorithmic processes, and their unfolding in the moving image.[5] Anamersive poetics is, then, a form of what Wynter calls *figuration Work*, a working towards rupturing the hegemonic systems of figuration governing human societies through

[4] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Before Man: Sylvia Wynter's Rewriting of the Modern Episteme," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, Katherine McKittrick, ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 91. "In reading Wynter's project against Foucault's argument that the modern episteme (here renamed post-Enlightenment thought) always already resolves difference as a moment of the (transcendental, pure, or teleological) Same, I track how Wynter recuperates what remains illegible in Foucault's critique of Man: "the idea of race." What she offers to the critique of modern thought, I argue, is an analysis of how in the Renaissance and post-Enlightenment epochs, two moves of naturalization—the secularization of rationality and the representation of the human through the workings of natural selection, respectively—would position Man in such a way as to disavow other, coexisting modes of being human."

[5] For related definitions of poetics, see: micha cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Colour Art in Digital Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022), 4. "Poetics, whether of language, media, or movement, are the observable meeting points of matter and agency." And: Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel, eds., *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2020), 4. "[W]e invoke *poetics* as a category that can combine aesthetics and politics at once, and transform the two into the formalisation of a project." My initial research was also influenced by Lyotard's thought on poetry as figure, which exceeds both the "denotative function of language" and "the limits set by our phantasies," in Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 316–322.

"great feats of poetic semantic engineering" capable of giving rise to "new imaginary schema."[6] They engage with and stretch Wynter's theory of *being hybridly human*, which maintains that humans aren't natural organisms that *then* make culture, but hybrid entities, constituted by the mutational convergence of the order of the flesh (*bios*) and the order of the word (*mythoi*).[7] Wynter's proposal of a New Studia, capable of analysing and intervening in the hybrid biocultural processes of "*code-made-flesh*," provides an operational framework for anamersion, though it departs from Wynter's proposal in at least two ways.[8] While engaging with neuroscientific discourses on technology-dependent immersion, it remains sceptical of the explanatory powers of brain science and Maturana and Varela's concept of *autopoiesis*, which might itself produce limiting definitions of the human on a new level.[9] As Denise Ferreira da Silva has cautioned:

> In Wynter's reformulation of the ontological argument, her framing of the question of being—in particular the argument concerning the political nature of the modern universal answers, that is, the descriptive statements that overrepresent Man as *the* sole/full Human—emerges out of the possibility that any answer to the question of who and what we are, especially but not only scientific ones, may be unable to avoid recolonizing, via naturalization, all and any other possible modes of being Human. [10]

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[6] Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," *Boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (1984): 51. doi.org/10.2307/302808.

[7] Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition," in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 217. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gn6bfp.12.

[8] Wynter, 245. "This is the telos of the Ceremony Found's New Studia, whose hybrid study of the Word/ordo verborum as non-linearly and intricately calibrated with the study of nature/ordo naturae … will be that of the functioning of the human brain's natural-opioid behavior-regulatory system … itself lawlikely activated in the terms of the specific positive/negative system of meanings of each pseudo-speciating genre of being human's sociogenic replicator code, then implemented as a living entity as that of the code-made-flesh. This telos will therefore call for its praxis of the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn to function in a hitherto unsuspected, trans-disciplinary, trans-epistemic, trans-natural-scientific cum trans-cosmogonic modality. Such a new order of knowledge, Césaire insisted, exists as one which "only poetry" – its technë of functioning and new "gravity of language" (Livingston, 2006) ... "can give an approximate notion of" (Césaire, 1996)."

[9] Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realisation of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980), xviii.

[10] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Before Man: Sylvia Wynter's Rewriting of the Modern Episteme," 102.

The development of anamersion therefore orientates itself further along Wynter's writing on hybridity, rather than Wynter's proposed solution of the *autopoetic turn/overturn*. Furthermore, while Wynter's emphasis is primarily on figuration through narration, from prehistory to the present, anamersion shifts emphasis to the ways in which navigation, rather than narration, has become the dominant form within immersion today.[11] My research-by-practice explores the causes and consequences of this shift, and proposes different ways of mapping and navigating immersion. It is informed by a close engagement with postcinematic media and the technology-dependent forms of immersion particular to them.[12] Crucially, however, it also elaborates a more expanded and mutational trajectory of immersive technologies, opening divergent directions for postcinematic forms of immersion through them. It does so with special attention to selected works by Unica Zürn (1916-1970), Kathy Acker (1947-1997), and Porpentine Charity Heartscape (b.1987), and the way they refigure immersion from implicated and *anomalous* (gender) positions within and against the genre *Man*.[13] Through analysing affinities between

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[11] Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 25. "The paleontologist Juan Luis Arsuaga proposes that the human is not only a languaging being but also a storytelling species. In my own terms, the human is *Homo narrans*. This means that as a species, our *hybrid* origins only emerged in the wake of what I have come to define over the last decade as the Third Event. The First and Second Events are the origin of the universe and the explosion of all forms of biological life, respectively. I identify the Third Event in Fanonian-adapted terms as the origin of the human as a hybrid-auto-instituting-languaging-storytelling species: *bios/mythoi*. The Third Event is defined by the singularity of the *co-evolution* of the human brain *with*—and, unlike those of all the other primates, *with it alone*—the emergent faculties of language, storytelling."

[12] Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, eds., *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer: REFRAME, 2016), 1, http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/. "If cinema and television, as the dominant media of the twentieth century, shaped and reflected the cultural sensibilities of the era, how do 21st-century media help to shape and reflect new forms of sensibility? Various attempts to identify the defining characteristics of these newer media (and hence their salient differences from older media) emphasize that they are essentially digital, interactive, networked, ludic, miniaturized, mobile, social, processual, algorithmic, aggregative, environmental, or convergent, among other things. Recently, some theorists have begun to say, simply, that they are *post-cinematic*."

[13] Wynter, 'The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition," 212. "In the case of the Darwinian naturally selected/dysselected sociogenic replicator code of our secular Western, (neo)Liberal-monohumanist genre of being hybridly human Man (2), both Virginia Woolf in 1929 and Carter G. Woodson in 1933 would come to parallel conclusions each from their respective relatively inferiorized and ostensibly genetically (and, therefore, natural dysselectedly cum dys-genically) determined perspectives of "otherness." [...] Woolf would do so with respect to the gender anomaly she experienced vis-à-vis her

their works and the strategies they deploy and transposing these to moving image, I develop anamersion as a postcinematic poetics of immersion, with the potential to be in solidarity with a Wynterian unsettling of the genre *Man*, as my original contribution to knowledge.[14]

Approaching immersion from the side of anomaly

While recent critical theory on immersive media focuses on the question of how to restore critical distance and, with it, the possibility of reflection and agency, and related approaches to games design and VR largely centre on how to deliver more emancipatory content on the level of narrative and character choices, the development of anamersion instead looks to the ways in which immersion operates when considered from the side of anomaly, and the differential forms of spatialisation and traversal movement this affords.[15]

Summary of Chapter III: Mapping Anamersion

Chapter III develops these concerns through an analysis of Unica Zürn's anagrammatic poetry and her drawing "Plan des Hauses der Krankheiten" ("Plan of the House of Illnesses"), which

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British imperial ruling upper-class male peers, who had been discursively and empirically institutionalized as ostensibly the generic sex and, thereby, the normal gender. While Woodson would do so within the context of the racial anomaly in whose terms he was induced educationally to experience himself like the rest of his then apartheid-subordinated US "Black" population vis-à-vis the "White" Euro-American (optimally Anglo- American) population."

[14] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260–61. doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015. "The argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves. […] The correlated hypothesis here is that all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth's resources…these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle."

[15] For recent critical approaches see: Pasi Väliaho, "Emergent Present, Imagination, Montage, Critique," in *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), and D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013).

depicts her body and its institutionalisation as one formation, or *body-building*.[16] Through reordering organic and architectural elements, Zürn's "Plan" dissolves the opposition between interiority and exteriority, mapping bodies and environments as continuous and navigable. Zürn's related reordering of text in her anagrammatic poems, which she believed to have an oracular dimension, is considered as a generative method for making text *talk back* in ways that destabilise notions of the authorial voice. Through a close reading of a dream described in Zürn's *Notizen einer Blutarmen* (*Notes of an Anaemic*, originally composed in 1957), which features a creature that can "speak without a tongue" and "plan without a brain," Zürn's vision is connected to a differential conception of avatars and artificial life, situated in a longer gender/genre nonconforming history of envisioning life forms not bound by the strictures of binary sex-gender, and its anchoring in anatomy and biological reproduction.[17]

[16] Unica Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose Verlag, 1999).

[17] Unica Zürn, "Notizen einer Blutarmen," in *Unica Zürn: Gesamtausgabe: Prosa 3*, vol. 4.1, 5 vols (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose Verlag, 1991).

Chapter III: Mapping Anamersion

Unica Zürn's drawing "Plan des Hauses der Krankheiten" ("Plan of the House of Illnesses") maps a body and a building as one. It serves as an entry point into anamersion, by providing a model for figuring immersion not as the absorption of an immersant in an immersive environment, but as a more totalising and simultaneously also more dispersed process. The possibilities and limitations of mapping, navigating, and traversing such a formation are developed through a close examination of Zürn's "Plan" and an engagement with it through a series of drawings entitled *SKINS* (Blaise Kirschner, 2020) and *PATTERNS* (Blaise Kirschner, 2021). Through combining features of "Plan" with elements derived from postcinematic production processes, anamersive poetics is established as algorithmic, anagrammatic, and anamorphic approaches that interfere with the reproduction of generic biocultural codes.

Plan of the House of Illnesses

The drawing "Plan of the House of Illnesses" forms part of Zürn's book *Das Haus der Krankheiten* (*The House of Illnesses*), which she produced between 30 April and 9 May 1958 in Ermonville, France **[see Figure 4, 79].** According to Zürn's postscript, the text and drawings had to be published together, indicating that both are integral to the book.[18] "Plan" depicts a two-dimensional floor plan of a hospital, with its chambers and halls formed of body parts and organs. It is a body-building. This hybrid has multiple dimensions: in the text, the protagonist describes herself as inhabiting the House of Illnesses as one figure alongside others, identified as "Dr. Mortimer," "guards," and "enemies," while the organic rooms are both of her (female) body *and* of unspecified others.[19] On the "Plan," these rooms are annotated as the "cabinet of

[18] Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated]

[19] Zürn. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

the solar plexus," the "chambers of the hands," the "hall of bellies," the "vault of the head," the "rooms of the hearts," "the room of the eyes," and the "bosom parlour," as well as a "shooting range for the enemies," a "secret corridor for the enemies," "hiding places for enemies," and the "watchtower of Dr. Mortimer."[20] While there appears to be an "inside" and an "outside" to the House of Illnesses, there is no way of conceiving its organic, architectural, and phantasmal features as separable, and thus to establish a clear opposition between interiority and exteriority. Against a biocentric conception of the body as an organic and bounded entity, it offers a map of its biocultural emergence and antagonisms, incorporating elements that precede, coincide with, and exceed the individuation of a specific body. As a map, "Plan of the House of Illnesses" invites the possibility of a differential navigation that traverses—in the sense of "crossing with difficulty, going against"—the ways in which something like a body and something like an environment are formed, together with the codes and violences that perpetuate themselves in and through such formations.

Traumatic bleed

In her autobiographical novel *Der Mann im Jasmin: Eindrücke aus einer Geisteskrankheit* (*Man of Jasmine: Impressions from a Mental Illness*, originally written in the 1960s), Zürn recalls that she started working on the manuscript and drawings of *The House of Illnesses* whilst sick with jaundice, which she contracted after attending a large assembly against the atomic bomb.[21] Although there is no direct reference to the atomic bomb in *The House of Illnesses*, the motif reappears in a later ink drawing titled *Atom Bombe* (*Atomic Bomb,* 1964), which Zürn produced

[20] Zürn. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

[21] Zürn, *Der Mann im Jasmin*, 3.

whilst in a mental asylum in La Rochelle **[see Figure 5, 80]**. The words "Atom Bombe" and the date and place of the drawing's production are written in bleeding block letters with the same ink, rendering drawing and writing not as distinct but as converging orders of signification. Extending the logic of the anagram, where a letter might be detached from a word to form another word, here a letter may be detached from writing to form another image. Conversely, the three large ink splotches exploding on soaked paper approximate a form of writing: a non-verbal language for the unspeakable.[22] The ink stains of *Atom Bombe* and the organic-cum-architectural hybridity of "Plan of the House of Illnesses," though different in execution, both generate a sense of movement in all directions and with it a mutational proliferation of meanings coursing through them.

In *The House of Illnesses,* Dr. Mortimer, who is identified by the protagonist as "my personal death," mutates from a short-sighted physician to a military figure, which elicits the exclamation: "I possessed the most disgusting death of all death personalities: a militarist!"[23] Dr. Mortimer, as physician and militarist, may be linked to the atomic bomb, to National Socialism, and to Zürn's father, who had been a colonial officer in Namibia and later joined the Nazi Party; events which produced a complex dynamic of attachment, guilt, and trauma in Zürn.

No Cure

From the age of sixteen, Zürn was employed as a steno-typist and later as a dramaturge at the UFA film studios in Berlin. Despite having worked at the Reich's cinematic propaganda machine between 1933 and 1942, Zürn maintained that she was unaware of the atrocities committed by the Nazis until she learned about the concentration camps from an underground radio

[22] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

[23] Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

broadcast.[24] According to Zürn, the revelation triggered her first mental breakdown in 1945, and was responsible for her reoccurring episodes of severe mental illness thereafter. Zürn produced *The House of Illnesses* two and a half years before she was committed to a mental institution for the first time. She would be in and out of several such hospitals until her death by suicide on 19 October 1970. According to her semi-fictionalised accounts, these multiple institutionalisations produced no (lasting) cure—rather, they threw the notions on which cure was built into question. Zürn understood that the psychiatrists who treated her were concerned about the role that drawing and writing (particularly her dedication to anagrams) played in the course of her illness.[25] When Gaston Ferdière (the same poet and doctor who made Antonin Artaud undergo numerous electroshock treatments)[26] advised Zürn against drawing and writing anagrammatic poems, Zürn retorted in a letter: "Fine! No anagrams and drawings. But it is no good to lie around reading detective novels all the time, don't you think, dear Doctor?"[27] Zürn's reference to detective novels may refer to published case studies by psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, which fascinated the Surrealist circles Zürn moved in and were often presented in a style reminiscent of detective fiction. Her biographer Esra Plumer particularly singles out the case studies of Jacques Lacan's teacher, Gaëtan de Clérambault, who "was known for his acute clinical gaze, which neatly classified female criminal behaviour by the use of a process of physiognomy," as well as for his "detective-like attention to such details as the look, dress and movements of patients."[28] Given the long history of establishing and elaborating classificatory systems for

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[24] Esra Plumer, *Unica Zürn: Art, Writing and Postwar Surrealism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 17.

[25] Plumer, *Unica Zürn*, 135.

[26] Kevin Repp, 'The Strange Case of Dr. Ferdière', 2011. https://psycheandmuse.wordpress.com/dr-ferdiere/.

[27] Plumer, *Unica Zürn*, 118.

[28] Plumer, *Unica Zürn*, 118.

deducing criminality and insanity from anatomical markers, Zürn's "Plan of the House of Illnesses" disturbs the mechanisms through which contemporaneous clinical discourses produced and reproduced pathological bodies, and the ways in which these were not above genre but beholden to it—alluded to by Zürn's derogatory reference to "detective fiction." Zürn's anagrams, as textual rearrangements, and her anagrammatic drawings, as a rearrangement of bodies, disavow the logics of such classificatory systems and the hierarchies and causal relationships they establish, within limits. As Zürn states: "House of Illnesses, you are no house of cure."[29] Rather, the house is the site of a differential processing of the protagonist's immersion in a more total scene of sedimented horrors. During a brief absence from the House of Illnesses, the protagonist is confronted with the familiar outside world as sickening and immutable, whereas the house itself has accustomed her to "constant changes."[30] The episode ends with her voluntary return to the house, but not with an end to illness.

> Although the sun was shining, the world did not seem beautiful to me. As if everything was known to the point of tedium. As if there were no miracles out here. And everything—the faces, the surroundings—seemed to have stopped, like a clock. Not the slightest thing had changed. This made me feel melancholy. In the House of Illnesses I had been used to constant changes. There, the animated imagination reigned and lived. Here, in the world, habit ruled with frozen hands. .... Without realising it, I had turned around and slowly but resolutely walked back down the street. ... Full of fear, I thought that the House of Illnesses might no longer be there.[31]

This passage indicates that the House of Illnesses is not only a place where one encounters one's personal death but also a place of mutation, where phantasms are in constant animation. Close to the end of the text, the protagonist states: "I stroked my fingers softly over the

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[29] Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

[30] Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

[31] Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

breathing veins of pearls and silver that wove up the walls, forming pure, solemn shapes," which elicits a trembling that resolves "softly and calmingly" in a sigh, and gives her renewed courage to leave "this dignified abode."[32] The difference between an "inside" and an "outside" is here figured not as a clear division between self and world, but as different degrees of mutability and immutability within immersion. Put differently, in the terminology of Wynter, the world surrounding the House of Illnesses is immutable in the sense that it keeps replicating itself in adherence to rigid codes, according to which Zürn's protagonist remains an unviable life form—a pathological anomaly within the genre, confined to a mental institution. These codes have catastrophic consequences that manifest themselves in colonialism, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb. Her abandonment of the notion of cure within a catastrophic matrix that produces her illness does not lead to her stabilisation and recovery. Instead, the mutability of the house de-borders illness and make it mutate into a "method" for negotiating one's immersion in a catastrophic world. These mutations betray the code *as code* and scramble its components: the naturalised binary organisation of the anatomical body, the classificatory detective fictions, the medical-military crossover, which are saturated in forms of violence specific to the genre *Man*. Due to the protagonist's refusal to be cured on such generic terms, the code can only partially—and not successfully—reproduce itself in and through her. Taking courage from her encounter with mutability, she may even leave the house in the knowledge that these mutations could proliferate and interfere with the world's organisation at large. As Zürn's own biography bears out, this comes at great cost. A cost that Zürn herself, as an isolated case, could not sustain.

Neither man nor woman

In Wynter's theory of being hybridly human, singular and liminal perspectives can and do

[32] Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

generate valid challenges to generic codes, but these have to be amplified to succeed, since large-scale mutations of master codes and, with them, epistemic shifts can only be effected on a collective level.[33] Drawing on scientific terminology, Wynter calls the realm from which such challenges are mounted *demonic ground*, "to suggest the possibility of an observer/site off observation that is non-analogically oriented, that is, one outside the present discursive formations and meaning 'fields' of our present order and its related episteme."[34] Zürn's House of Illnesses is, then, a formation without such a ground. Instead, it has to stage its antagonisms with generic codes and their deforming effects from within. The choice of architecture is not arbitrary. The sphere of female sex-gender under the genre *Man* has been, and still largely was during Zürn's lifetime, heteronormative domesticity, and its primary space for reproducing and materialising its codes in and as female bodies was the house.[35] Where such normative coding of bodies failed, this space shifted and expanded to medical and disciplinary institutions as architectures for containing and correcting pathological deviations from the norm.[36] In Zürn's non-anatomical body-building, divergence from the genre-mandated form of female sex-gender is figured not only as an organic-cum-architectural mutation, but also as a quasi-diachronic process. The House of Illnesses contains no longer visited as well as regularly frequented rooms, such as the cabinet of the solar plexus—"the only place in my body which cannot deceive me"—and the bosom parlour*,* where "everything has terribly changed, and thus it only instils me with despair."[37] Zürn's aversion to certain rooms speaks to her mooted dis-

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[33] Wynter here is in dialogue with Foucault's notion of epistemes: "In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice." Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 183.

[34] Sylvia Wynter, "On Disenchanting Discourse: 'Minority' Literary Criticism and Beyond," *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (1987): 207, fn. 3. https://doi.org/10.2307/1354156.

[35] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 437.

[36] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1988), 258.

[37] Zürn, *Das Haus der Krankheiten*. [Unpaginated, my translation.]

identification from sexed and gendered categories, while the organs with which these are associated remain distressingly present and continue to signal deceptively. It is a plan and a navigation of a body in which sex-gender transgresses Zürn's protagonist and her form. Dispersed passages throughout Zürn's collected writings testify to her unease with binary sex-gender and generic male *and* female categories. In *Das Weiße mit dem Roten Punkt* (*The Whiteness with the Red Spot*, originally written in 1959) she states:

> If I could be something that called itself neither man nor woman, how at ease I would be. Perhaps then I would arrive at myself or at you? To my knowledge, I got little from man or woman, however, enough to feel that it's a hindrance. My intermittent efforts to be neither the one nor the other led to no result. Why? Because I was dealing with this problem on my own. Alone, I have brought little to a good end. No one to talk to about it. That is, no companion in suffering. Because only he would encourage me to continue in this effort. And that is my perplexity.[38]

It is significant that Zürn finds herself without "companions" to accomplish or even fully comprehend what she (intermittently) strives for. However, Zürn is clear on this much: in *Notizen einer Blutarmen* (*Notes of an Anaemic,* originally written in 1957–1958), Zürn explicitly detaches herself from self-realisation through the work of art, as granted to and practiced by generic male authors and artists:

> I turned around and around inside myself and listened into and observed myself. By doing so I got fed up with myself. If I would have been a man, I would probably have created a work of art from this state. But being what I am—and I don't want to be anything else—I only blathered.[39]

Zürn states that if she had been a man, she might have created a work of art but "as that, which I am—and I don't want to be anything else" she was merely issuing scrambled statements. Not

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[38] Zürn, *Der Mann im Jasmin*, 132. [My translation.]

[39] Zürn, "Notizen einer Blutarmen," 39. [My translation.]

only is Zürn's way of being/feeling/knowing framed within the field of pathological production, falling short of raising itself to the level of the artwork, in her self-understanding as someone who is "neither man nor woman," her speech cannot appear as anything other than "blathering" within the aesthetic and discursive fields of the governing order. However, if Zürn's statement "I don't want to be anything else" is taken seriously, then Zürn does not *fail* to create a work of art, nor does she fail to be a man *or a* woman. She does not *want* to achieve legibility or recognition on any of these terms.

Talking (back) without a tongue

Zürn's commitment to blathering instead of self-realisation through the work of art is matched by the way she appears to be doodling, rather than flaunting technical skills of draughtsmanship in her drawings.[40] Both crystallise in her dedication to anagrammatic reordering of letters and signs. In Zürn's hands, the anagrammatic becomes an immersive, procedural, and quasi-algorithmic operation, which in the narrow sense applies to Zürn's anagrammatic poetry, but in the wider sense inflects all of her making. In divergence from other Surrealists who deployed automatic techniques for artistic self-extension, the automatic and artificial in Zürn do not expand her self and her voice.[41] Rather, they unsettle and displace it. Describing her method for producing anagrammatic poems, Zürn writes:

> Anagrams are words and sentences created by rearranging the letters of a word or phrase. Only the given letters can be used, and one may not help oneself to others. Finding anagrams is one of her most intense preoccupations.[42]

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[40] For comparison, see the (porno-)graphically precise drawings of female bodies by Hans Bellmer, who was Zürn's partner from 1953 to1970.

[41] Plumer, *Unica Zürn: Art, Writing and Postwar Surrealism*, 132.

[42] Zürn, *Der Mann im Jasmin*, 18. [My translation.]

Zürn carefully chooses a first sentence for her anagrammatic compositions, which is sometimes taken from the work of other poets.[43] Once an anagrammatic sequence is initiated, it produces its own statements, which Zürn frequently describes in terms of asking the anagram a question and the anagram answering back.[44] To Zürn, this has an oracular dimension: a sentence is not only reordered, but more importantly than that, this reordering pressures the text to *talk back*. In other words, Zürn's anagrammatic poetry is a generative form of "speaking without a tongue." Zürn's process can be traced from examining her anagrams in her notebooks and papers, in which words are taken apart and reassembled systematically, guided by an algorithmic logic that breaks words down into individual letters, driving language to generative failure, before reassembling the letters back into new words **[see Figure 6, 81]**. As Luisa Lorenza Corna observes:

> A scrap of loose paper is filled with rows of handwritten, crossed out letters and words, divided by horizontal lines into three sections. Below the lines, the same sentence—*"Der Geist aus der Flasche"* ("the ghost out of the bottle")—*is broken into its individual characters and then rearranged* to form a new, legible phrase. Each line separates a cycle of trials and errors, a combinatory game that transits from "meaning" to "meaning" by passing through semantic pandemonium.[45]

The motif of "speaking without a tongue" is also present in Zürn's description of a dream in *Notes of an Anaemic*, in which a girl with the body of a snake miraculously carries on living, talking and planning revenge on her tormentors after they have removed her organs:

> Last night I dreamed of a beautiful, dangerous creature, half girl, half snake, who was murderous. For that reason, all important organs with which she could cause mischief were removed from her. They took away her eyes, tongue, heart and the like to make

[43] Plumer, *Unica Zürn: Art, Writing and Postwar Surrealism*, 102.

[44] Plumer, *Unica Zürn*, 104–5.

[45] Luisa Lorenza Corna, "Planning Without a Brain (2009-2022)," in *Blaise Kirschner: UNICA* (Berlin: Distanz, 2022), 55.

> her completely harmless. Since she was so beautiful, they wanted to preserve her as a feast for the eyes, by mummifying her so skilfully that she appeared alive. When this was done, it turned out to our horror that the creature spoke without a tongue, saw without eyes and lived without a heart, was of great strength without blood and made plans without a brain. Much more lively, ardent, intelligent had she become, possessed of hatred and desire for revenge—filled with a power and rage that were inhuman.[46]

A discussion of this dream, albeit under different signs, can be found in an essay accompanying the multimedia performance *Stimmen aus dem Innenraum (Voices from an Innerspace)* by Valie Export, Patricia Jünger, and Susanne Widl in collaboration with Peter Weibel.[47] The essay frames Mary Shelley, Ada Lovelace, and Unica Zürn's investments in forms of artificial, algorithmic, and anagrammatic life as reactions to women's reductive and traumatic confinement to the realm of biological reproduction and the domestic, drawing on material from their novels, journals, and letters to substantiate these claims. Unica Zürn's "anagrammatic body" is framed as a precursor to artificially generated life:

> The anagrammatic body is a body permuted, numerically transformed, a body of multiplied organs, a body as an image, the advent of the immaterial, digitalized body. […] Owing to the anagrammatic body, women attain the perspective that life and mind can be created artificially by transposing the letters of life, the genetic code, the language of mathematics.[48]

The essay remains critical of such transpositions, arguing that in striving for forms of artificial life, the women under discussion replicate the logics by which they themselves have been objectified, unable to escape the "unconscious social text" of a phallocratic culture through a "mere" rearrangement of its letters. It suggests that a true escape could only be achieved if the

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[46] Zürn, "Notizen einer Blutarmen," 33. [My translation.]

[47] Valie Export, Patricia Jünger, and Susanne Widl, "Voices from an Inner Space," *Ars Electronica Catalogue,* 1988.

[48] Export et al. "Voices from an Inner Space." This quotation and subsequent in-text quotations are all taken from the same document.

"vagina" as the "lost, mutilated vowel in the alphabet of our culture" was recovered. This reductive reading implies that there is only one way of conceiving technology, and only one way of displacing the phallus as master signifier, paying scarce regard to the evidence that, in the work of the historical figures it refers to, differential notions of technology and artificial life also emerge. In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a creature is assembled from parts taken from corpses. However, it turns out not only to be sentient but also highly articulate, narrating its own story in chapters XI–XVI of the novel: it *talks back*.[49] Likewise, the creature in Zürn's *Notes of an Anaemic* is neither tamed nor silenced after the removal of its organs. It clearly possesses intentionality and can operate without a tongue, or a vagina, symbolic or otherwise. Zürn's dis-identification from biological and symbolic codings anchored in a perceived anatomical dimorphism and its mapping onto naturalised, binary sex-gender categories achieved through her expanded engagement with the anagrammatic exceeds a mere rearrangement of the phallocratic code. In Zürn, the missing tongue mutates from a sign of fatal deficiency to a generative opening. In the works of Zürn, as in those of Acker and Heartscape, the generic performance of originality and authenticity called one's own voice is not a solution but a problem, because it solidifies the mechanisms of their confinement within a world they do not want and cannot bear to live in. As Acker writes in "Dead Doll Humility":

> A writer who had found his own voice presented a viewpoint. Created meaning. The writer took a certain amount of language, verbal material, forced that language to stop radiating in multiple, even unnumerable directions, to radiate in only one direction so there could be his meaning. […] If had to force language to be unidirectional, I'd be helping my own prison to be constructed. […] Since didn't have one point of view or centralized perspective, was free to find out how texts she used and was worked.[50]

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[49] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (London: Routledge, 1888), 140–201.

[50] Kathy Acker, "Dead Doll Humility," *Postmodern Culture* 1, no. 1 (September 1990). https://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.990/acker.990.

Significantly, by not forcing language and vision to issue from a single point, Acker, along with Zürn and Heartscape, achieves mutations by which texts become environments that open up in multiple directions. Crucially though, they do not take their bodies and the houses in which they were forced to be formed out of the equation, but refigure them as body-buildings that are planar, dispersed, and dissociated rather than anatomical, unified, and self-identical. This makes their texts, drawings, and games comparable to immersive environments as encountered in gaming and VR, with important differences: in contrast with generic forms of technology-dependent immersion, which strive for identificatory proximity between player and avatar within immersive environments that privilege a unidirectional navigational logic geared towards survival and scoring, Zürn, Acker, and Heartscape open up space for multiple dis-identifications, smeared perspectives, and pathways radiating in all directions.

SKINS* and *PATTERNS

Engaging with these concerns in the medium of drawing, the series *SKINS* (Blaise Kirschner, 2020) and *PATTERNS* (Blaise Kirschner, 2020-2021) develops anamersive figurations that incorporate postcinematic production processes, as well as elements of Zürn's "Plan of the House of Illnesses." *SKINS* attends to the ways in which the bodies of avatars are assembled from 3D base meshes and the 2D surfaces, or "skins," which cover them, and arrive at non-anatomical arrangements from such references **[see Figure 7, 82]**. Since the surfaces of three-dimensional bodies are broken down into polygons, skins tend to have a shard-like appearance, reminiscent of archaeological depictions of broken vessels. To approximate this appearance, *SKINS* was produced by working with cutout shapes derived from digital images, which were duplicated, mirrored, and grouped into different arrangements **[see Figure 8, 83]**. By emulating the way in which the positioning and size of skins within digital files is determined according to computational efficiency, these drawings constitute a form of training that moves away from

intentional artistic composition towards an algorithmic compositional logic. However, since the drawings start from the skins rather than from a pre-existing three-dimensional figure, such as an avatar, the shapes on the drawings suggest but can never be assembled "back" into a coherent three-dimensional figure.

The *PATTERNS* series continues this engagement with generative composition and speculative figures. They consist of intricate patterns that conjoin organic, botanical, and technical forms, and were devised following a quasi-algorithmic process of manually copying and mirroring an initial design and making it gradually unfold into a larger pattern, while introducing small variations and ruptures into each iteration **[see Figure 9, 84]**. Through this practice, a mutational logic emerges in which the analogue process of drawing begins to incorporate digital principles but also alters them through repetition. The shard-like *SKINS* with their associative links to archaeology evoke the broken remains of architectural structures and domestic objects. The wallpaper-like *PATTERNS* harks back to domestic and decorative designs. Their imagery is influenced not only by Zürn's House of Illnesses but also by Larry Mitchell's book *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions* (1977) and the way its protagonists mobilise "the domestic arts" against the violent exclusions of "the public arts."[51] In *The Faggots & Their Friends*, domestic spaces become laboratories for non-heteronormative and communal living arrangements in which queer solidarity, sociability, and survival are practiced daily in many forms. The imagery of *PATTERNS* and *SKINS* thus invokes the domestic, but also disturbs the association with it, suggesting that change may rely on the identification of codes and patterns and iterative modification, rupture, and recoding. In *The Faggots & Their Friends*, queer companionship is directed against the politically expedient separation of the public and the

[51] Larry Mitchell, *The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2019), 14.

private, also discussed in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's paper "Sex in Public" (1998).[52] For Berlant and Warner, as for Mitchell, queer world-making maintains awareness of its antagonistic relationship with the heteronormative codes and patterns inscribed by the domestic and the nation, and frustrates their repetition, while also generating entirely different forms from them:

> The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies. […] Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation. These intimacies do bear a necessary relation to a counter-public—an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation.[53]

Read against these discussions, Zürn's *House of Illnesses* maps the immersive biocultural hybridity of codes and bodies and their antagonisms from an anomalous and isolated position that cannot avail itself of a counter-public, and thus keeps "turning around and around" in itself. In comparison to Zürn's *House*, Acker's conception of the *Labyrinth* presents a jump in scale and possibility. It is more ambitious in scope and more explicitly connected to cultural production in literature and popular culture and to the philosophical and feminist discourses surrounding it. As a figuration of biocultural hybridity at large, it affords more dynamic forms of navigation, through which new geographies emerge.

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[52] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2, Intimacy (n.d.): 554.

[53] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 558.

Illustrations (Chapter III)

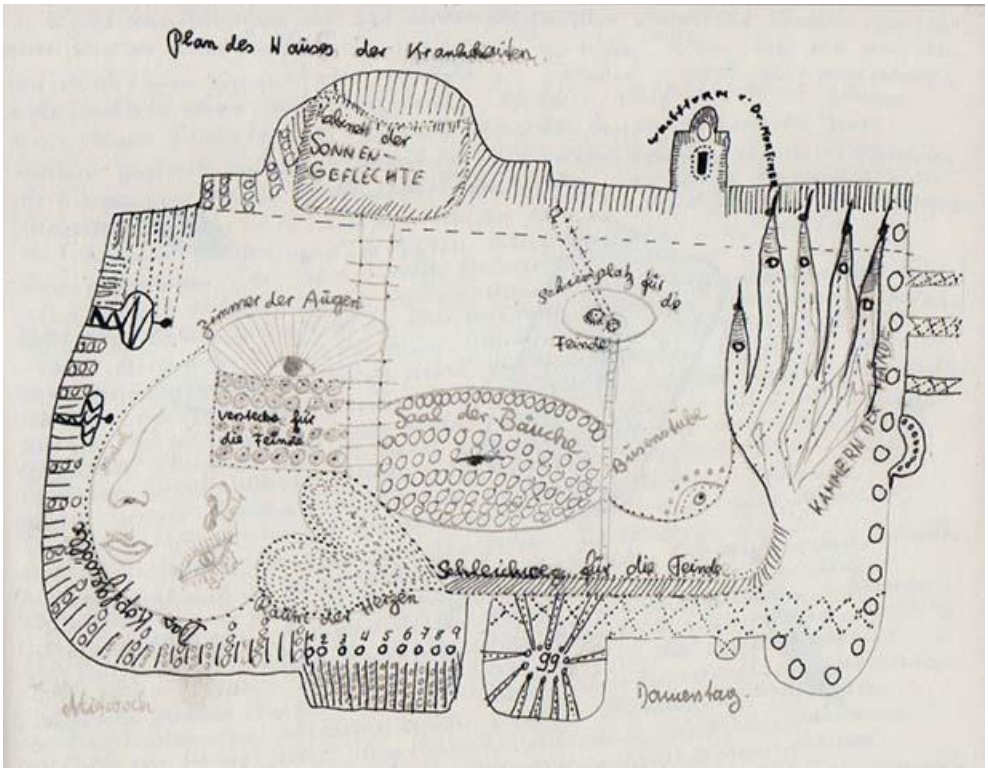


Figure 1: Unica Zürn, "Plan des Hauses der Krankheiten," 1958. Pen and ink on paper, 17 x 20.5 cm. Copyright Brinkmann & Bose Verlag, Berlin.



Figure 2: Unica Zürn, Excerpt from "Ein Märchenbuch für Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern," 1964. Watercolour and ink on paper, 32 x 25cm. Copyright Brinkmann & Bose Verlag, Berlin. The inscription reads: "12.9.64. Irren-Anstalt: La Rochelle | Frankreich" ("12.9.64. Mental-Asylum: La Rochelle | France").

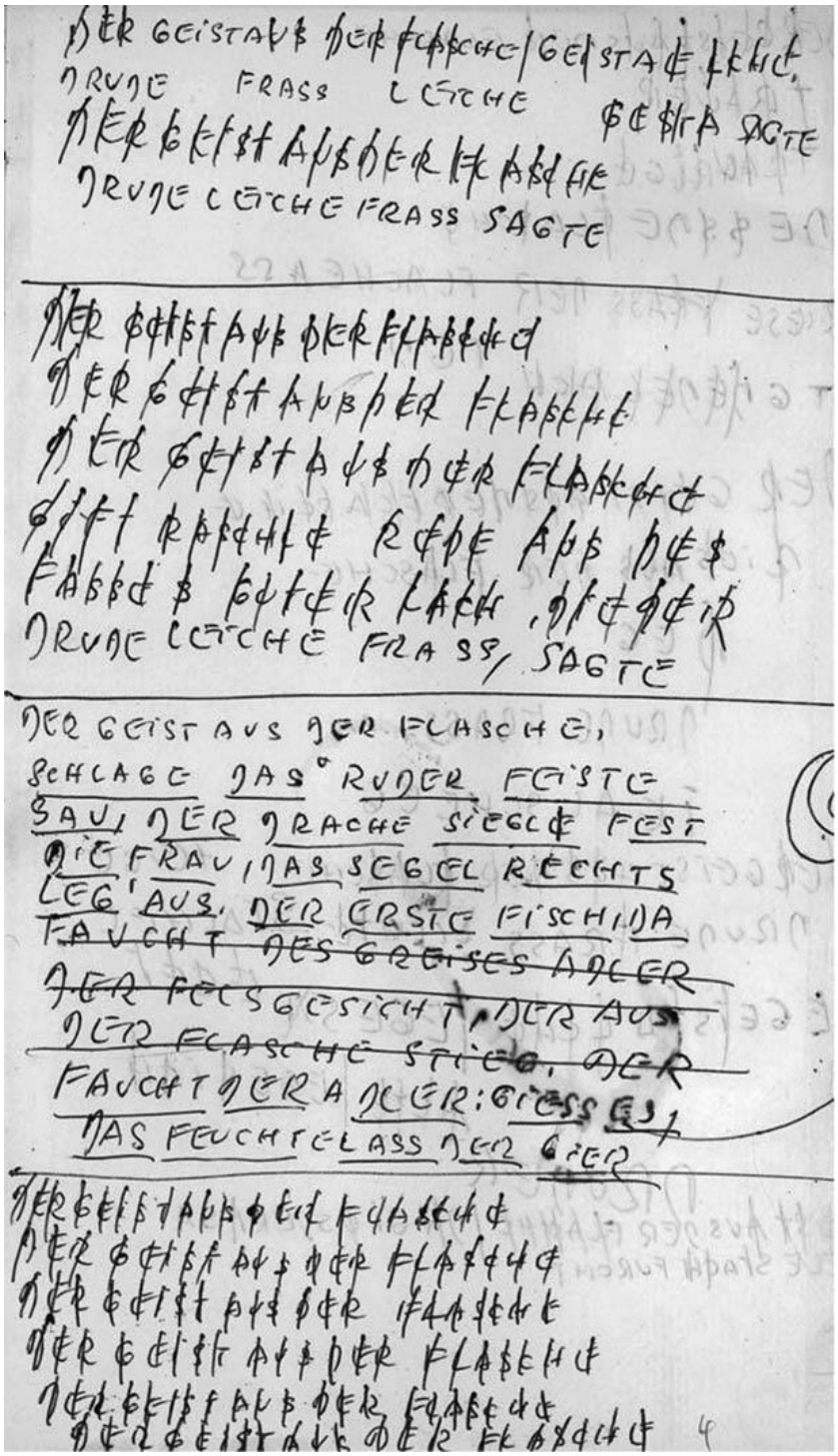


Figure 3: Unica Zürn, Excerpt from "Eisenbahnheft," 1960-1970. Ballpoint pen on paper, 22 x 16.8cm. Copyright Brinkmann & Bose, Berlin.



Figure 4: Blaise Kirschner, "SKINS#01," 2020. Granite pencil and acrylic on paper, 101 x 72cm, 202. Photographer: Jens Ziehe. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5: Johan Steen, "Destrachan – UV layout." Source: https://artstorm.net/journal/2007/08/destrachan-finished. Accessed 20 October 2022.

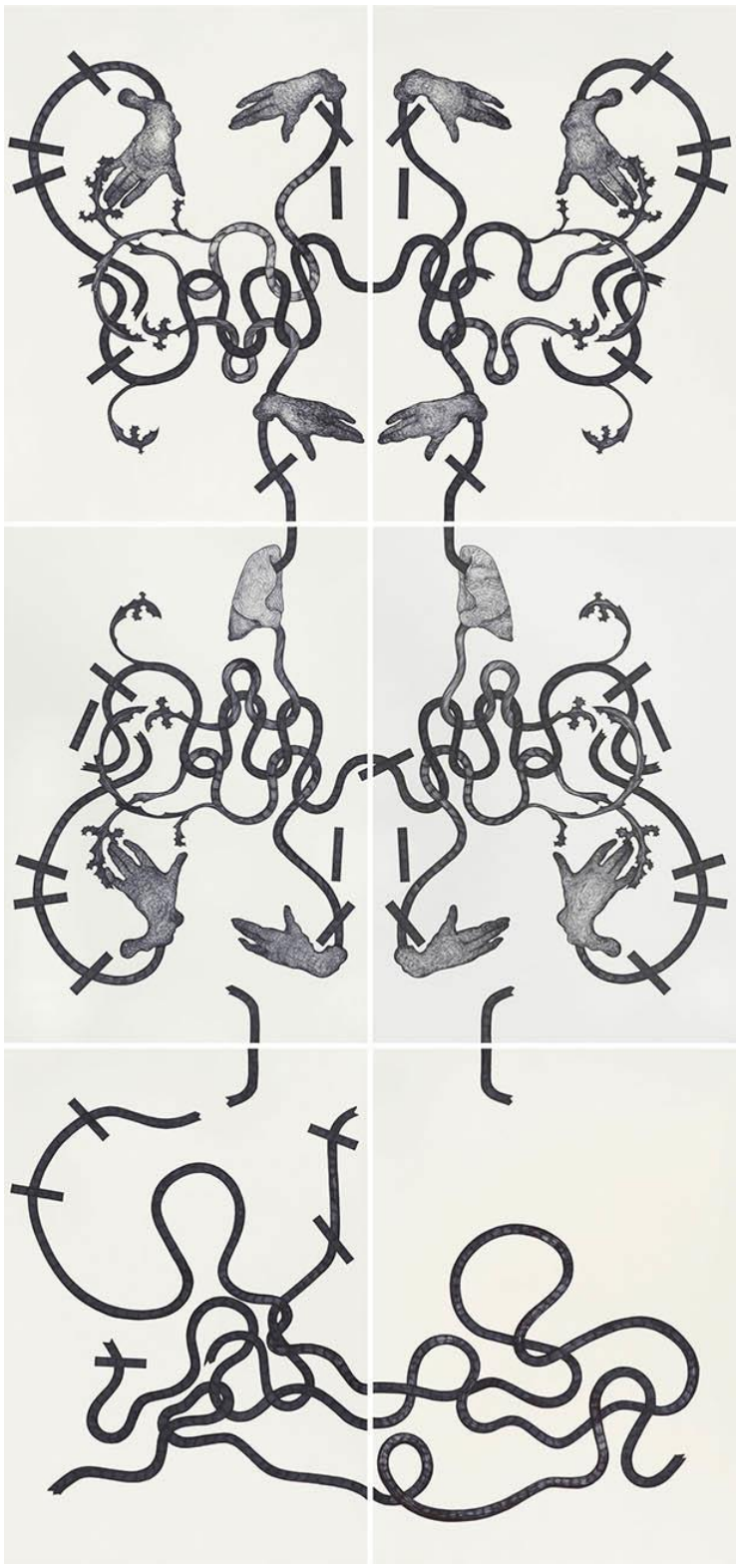


Figure 6: Blaise Kirschner, "PATTERN#02," 2021. Marker pen on paper, 4 x 101 x 72cm. Courtesy of the artist