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# The Beauty and the Waste. The Trans-tactical Approach of Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva

**Abstract:** Contemporary art, reflecting present-day realities, adapts to the evolving social, technological, and societal changes in developed and capitalist-oriented countries. This adaptation involves breaking down disciplinary boundaries and embracing trans-tactics, where knowledge from diverse fields informs artistic creation. Art becomes a multifaceted endeavor, engaging with political, social, and ecological issues, contributing to deeper creativity and consumer engagement. The fusion of science, technology, and art raises ethical and aesthetic questions, particularly regarding the use of sustainable materials and environmental impact. Meanwhile, artists explore natural and cultural complexities, emphasizing political dimensions like ecology, sustainability, and social justice. Projects such as *Silenthio Pathologia* and *Haruspex* by Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva exemplify these themes, inspiring discussions on eco-social crises and sustainable practices.

**Keywords:** contemporary art; trans-tactics; organic waste; aesthetics; ethics; sustainability; nature; humanity.

## Introduction

In the face of the urgent threat of climate change and the global socio-environmental crisis caused by a modified form of capitalism, artists' roles are growing in significance. They play a crucial role in developing innovative approaches to foster new social connections and relationships rooted in principles of solidarity and social justice. Within the United Nations Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, culture and the arts are recognized as the fourth fundamental aspect of sustainability. They play a crucial role in the 'green transition' and the ongoing efforts to create a more equitable future and promote harmonious cohabitation among all living organisms on Earth. However, the artistic initiatives themselves are of more significance than the frequently assertive protocols. In contrast to the early stages of ecological art, or eco-art, in the 1960s and 1970s, which aimed to heal and transform society through political activism or spiritual practice,<sup>1</sup> contemporary artistic approaches have adopted different strategies. They aim

<sup>1</sup> Sacha Kagan, "The Practice of Ecological Art," [*plastik*], February 15, 2014, <http://art-science.univ-paris1.fr/plastik/document.php?id=866>, acc. on April 5, 2024.

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to protect the rights of the non-human world in order to combat exploitative extractive capitalism, emerging forms of economic colonialism, and production relationships that pose a threat to the global ecosystem and the survival of life on Earth. This comes from the holistic nature of sustainability itself. The task necessitates the concurrent comprehension and incorporation of three distinct and intricate elements that mutually influence one another: economic, ecological, and social.<sup>2</sup>

Exploring the intersections between sustainability and art involves delving into various philosophical perspectives. Aldo Leopold<sup>3</sup> and Arne Naess<sup>4</sup> emphasized the value of nature and interconnectedness of life, suggesting that art can promote sustainable practices by fostering appreciation for nature. Critical theory, as exemplified by Theodor Adorno<sup>5</sup> and Herbert Marcuse,<sup>6</sup> examines art's social and political dimensions, critiquing prevailing narratives and power systems. Sustainable art addresses issues such as consumerism and environmental devastation. Existentialist philosophers, like Martin Heidegger<sup>7</sup> and Jean-Paul Sartre,<sup>8</sup> have explored authenticity and freedom, themes relevant to sustainable art's engagement with environmental degradation and ethical responsibility. These philosophical perspectives illuminate the ethical, aesthetic, and existential dimensions of environmental stewardship, guiding creative responses to sustainability challenges.

Particular artistic methodologies, such as environmental art, as well as everyday mundane activities like walking, serve to underscore the applicability of sustainability aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> The term 'unsustainability' encompasses various facets of the current global civilization crisis. The majority of authors who have addressed this crisis have emphasized its ecological, societal, and financial aspects. Sustainability can be utilized as an alternative set of values and knowledge regarding the world from a cultural standpoint, thereby reformulating cognitive models and facilitating an appreciation for the interconnections between the economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental dimensions of reality. Consequently, the cultural aspect is of fundamental importance to the entire quest for sustainability.

These trans-tactics-focused environmental justice efforts cross the art system and link with other fields. Applying knowledge, experiences, and lessons from

<sup>2</sup> See more in: Vera Ivanaj and Silvester Ivanaj, "The Contribution of Interdisciplinary Skills to Sustainability of Business: When Artists, Engineers, and Managers Work Together to Serve Enterprises," in *Global Sustainability as a Business Imperative* ed. by James A. F. Stoner, and Charles Wankel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 91–109.

<sup>3</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 201–5.

<sup>4</sup> Arne Naess, *Deep Ecology*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 98–131.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. by Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 29–72.

<sup>9</sup> Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 23.

different domains creates a more universal and practical understanding. Art is both politically and socially responsible, enhancing creativity and audience communication.<sup>10</sup> There are numerous successful examples of historical resilience of art, wherein it has demonstrated an adeptness at preserving its autonomy while skillfully integrating innovative methodologies with traditional elements. This historical narrative serves as a backdrop for probing the contemporary significance of aesthetic principles and ethical standards within artistic practice. Moreover, the exploration extends beyond the confines of art itself, acknowledging their relevance in interdisciplinary dialogues, particularly in conjunction with fields such as science, technology, biology, and medicine. Are there boundaries, are aesthetics and ethics still essential in contemporary arts, and how can these confusing standards be scrutinized?

## Aesthetics

Can the concept of ‘aesthetics’ provide any practical value in the context of contemporary arts? Asking this question means rejecting the connection between aesthetics and art, and disregarding Greenberg’s belief that “art and the aesthetic don’t just overlap, they coincide”, as stated by Hal Foster.<sup>11</sup>

Kant distinguished aesthetic judgments from objective beauty as subjective yet based on universal taste. To highlight artistic expression and aesthetic experience, he defined art as intentional creativity that produces disinterested pleasure. He believed beauty enhances virtue.<sup>12</sup> Following Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer believed beauty comes from contemplating Ideas, or universal abstractions that transcend human experiences and senses. Schopenhauer believed that works that evoke the sublime allow viewers to transcend the ego and unite with existence.<sup>13</sup> John Dewey noted that art involves sensory awareness, emotional response, and intellectual engagement, linking aesthetic experience to daily life. Art shapes a community’s beliefs, ideas, and experiences, says Dewey.<sup>14</sup> They study beauty, art, and aesthetics. Philosophers still argue their aesthetics theories.

Following a prolonged period of opposition towards aesthetics,<sup>15</sup> driven by a misguided notion of its association with ‘spectacle’ and the commodification of ordinary life, as well as the conservative principles of reactionary postmodernism, the discussion around art has once again embraced aesthetic considerations.

<sup>10</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2012), 87.

<sup>11</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Counter-Avant-Garde” in *Late Writings*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, [1790] 2000), 45.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, [1818], 1966).

<sup>14</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, [1934], 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Seen in the positios of: anti-aestheticism, instrumentalism, postmodernism and deconstruction, radicalism and avant-garde, postcolonial and neocolonial practice, environmetalism and eco criticism, feminism and gender studies etc.

The revival of concepts like the Kantian “intersubjective universal agreement”<sup>16</sup> in taste judgments, David Hume’s “Standard of Taste”,<sup>17</sup> and any suggestion in taste and beauty judgments that universal standards in aesthetic property recognition were possible led to naturalist definitions of art. Philosophers and scientists have begun exploring the possibility of finding a ‘natural’ origin to aesthetic standards, an origin that, when grounded in scientific research, would not only make subjective artistic criticism redundant but also offer a more promising response to what constitutes an aesthetic property and the importance of aesthetics.

The importance of art experience arose with increased energy after grand narratives of post-modern art. The debate on art as experience, adds a reflection on aesthetics beyond its physiological components to a naturalist perspective. Recent discussions on art as experience range from cognitive approaches (Jesse Prinz and Alva Noë<sup>18</sup>) to those that link aesthetics to moral and political values (Michael Kelly’s “art as enactment”<sup>19</sup>).

Finally, if we include the environment (the new important category of contemporary art related to ecology and sustainability) within aesthetics and contemporary arts, Arnold Berleant’s theory of aesthetic intermingling with other values, such as ecological preservation and human creativity, is relevant. His theory underscores the elaborate relationship between aesthetics and these diverse values, suggesting that they are not isolated entities but rather intricately intertwined. Furthermore, his concept of shape and presence in aesthetic experience acknowledges the multifaceted nature of artistic expression, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. In the context of nature’s aesthetics influencing art, Berleant’s framework invites exploration into how perceptions of beauty and negativity manifest in both human-made and natural environments. Additionally, his emphasis on the catholicity of visual perception highlights the breadth of aesthetic experiences, encompassing a wide spectrum of sensory stimuli. Ultimately, Berleant’s perspective underscores the enduring significance of aesthetics in contemporary art, offering a framework to navigate the complexities and contradictions inherent in artistic expression, particularly as it relates to environmental concerns and creative exploration.<sup>20</sup>

## Ethics

Ethics, morality and art have often been linked throughout history with different approaches, rules, judgments. Their relation, or much often conflict, has taken two main shapes since antiquity: on the one hand, art is seen as something that belongs in the realm of religion and philosophy, and on the other hand, according to the thinkers

<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*.

<sup>17</sup> David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 34.

<sup>18</sup> Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Boston: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Kelly, *A Hunger for Aesthetics. Enacting the Demands of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Berleant, “The Human Touch and the Beauty of Nature,” *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), Ch. 4 reprinted in *Rethinking Landscape* by Ian Thompson (London: Routledge, 2009), 62.

like Nietzsche and Heidegger, it is a separate and independent aesthetic realm that exists outside of the realm of politics, social issues, and ethics.

There have been many discussions if there can be any intersection between artistic and moral value. Accordingly, there are several positions related to this issue, like: radical autonomism (a work of art cannot be morally judged<sup>21</sup>); moderate autonomism (a work can be ethically valued but it doesn't bear on the aesthetic value); moderate moralism (ethical flaws can be artistic flaws and/or ethical virtues can be artistic virtues<sup>22</sup>; ethicism (moral flaws/virtues sometimes decrease/increase artistic value<sup>23</sup>) and immoralism (a moral flaw may enhance the artistic value of an artwork<sup>24</sup>).

Usually, provocative works of art raise questions related to ethics and morality. Due to its content, such art affects the artist's or viewer's values, morals, and beliefs. Works of art that seem to purposefully pursue or powerfully transmit a message may spark conflicts regarding artistic freedom or how society views art. That appraisal of artists' works depends on society's values at that particular moment. The artist-society relationship is complex and sometimes conflicting about art and ethics. However, neither must compromise nor acquiesce before the other to create or transmit the work's meaning.

Contemporary art exacerbates complex ethical dilemmas, as creative movements challenge social norms amidst prevalent commercial culture and political beliefs. Artists face unprecedented moral demands, with blurred boundaries and complicating discussions. Art ethics encompasses two aspects: the morality of art itself, which shapes viewers and faces censorship, and the artist's morals, potentially exploited by society. Scientific and philosophical inquiries into these issues yield conflicting results, raising questions about art's impact on viewers, the effects of censorship on creativity and culture, the social purpose of art, and the location of art values within society.<sup>25</sup>

Conclusively, compared to other areas of aesthetic inquiry, the study of ethics in relation to art remains relatively underdeveloped, despite its significance. To bridge this void, it is imperative that deliberate attempts be made to incorporate ethical viewpoints into discourse surrounding art theory, criticism, and practice. Through the promotion of interdisciplinary discourse and cooperative efforts among scholars, practitioners, and artists, researchers have the capacity to augment the collective comprehension of the ethical ramifications of art and its relevance to the modern society and culture. The purpose of this research is to contribute to this issue.

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<sup>21</sup> See more in: Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1997): 1–27.

<sup>22</sup> See more: Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 36, 3 (July 1996): 223–238.

<sup>23</sup> See: Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> See: Matthew Kieran, "Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value," *Philosophy Compass* 1, 2 (2006): 129–43.

<sup>25</sup> Arnold Berleant, "Artists and Morality: Toward an Ethics of Art," *Leonardo, the Journal of the Contemporary Artist* 10 (Summer, 1977): 195–202.

## **Aesthetics, Ethics and Sustainability in the case study of Elpida Hadzi- Vasileva's works**

Having set up the theoretical coordinates of this study I will focus on the intersections between the Aesthetics and Ethics in Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's creative projects. This will allow me to explore the relationships between the concepts of Beautiful and Ugly, Nature and Art, Sustainability and Justice seen through a particular artistic practice that uses recycled materials, thereby adding salience to the sustainability process. Contradictions and overlaps between the moral components of transgressive art and its aesthetic merits will emerge.

Hadzi-Vasileva is a Macedonian artist, currently living in Britain. Her works feature recycled biological materials including animal parts (skin, bones, internal organs, guts, stomach, testicles, membranes, caul fat, etc.), plant debris, and other natural elements. This purposeful choice emphasizes capitalist and colonial exploitation of nature and commodification and control. According to Marshall McLuhan, "the media is the message"<sup>26</sup> and precisely the use of such medium places her in a problematic ethical position. Hadzi Vasileva's artwork on various levels and shapes encourages viewers to rethink the relationships between humans, ecosystems, and the environment. She contrasts the beauty of nature with the horror of exploitation and degradation to spark discussions about environmental justice and decolonization.

In this paper I will specifically try to unveil her approach to the "Holy Trinity" (Aesthetics, Ethics and Sustainability) through elaboration of two of her projects, *Silentio Pathologia* and *Haruspex*.

### *Silentio Pathologia*

#### Context

*Silentio Pathologia* represented Macedonia at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. The study analyzes medieval disease migration and its impact in Europe. This intricate piece uses mainly recycled organic materials like silkworm cocoons, rat skins and woven silk, as well as one non-organic medium like sheet steel curtains. The silk trade's growth promoted the plague's spread. Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's project uses this geographic and historical event to examine social and natural sciences.<sup>27</sup> The work examines the transmission of knowledge, goods, ideas, people, and livestock. It also examines the narrative effects and transmission of communicable diseases, utilizing the plague as a metaphor for modern genetic and synthetic diseases as bird flu, swine flu, and corona viruses. Time, historical context, and developmental features affect transmission speed, which is also temporary. Communication is key in social interactions. Thus, our discussions of otherness, identity, belonging, philosophy, personal development, interacting with others, boundaries, differences, connections, and networking

<sup>26</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books), 1966.

<sup>27</sup> Ana Frangovska, "Multidisciplinary synesthetic mapping," in *Elpida Hadzi Vasileva: Silentio Pathologia, Pavilion of the Republic of Macedonia 55th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia* (catalog) (Skopje: National Gallery, 2013), 15–25.

affect our sense of belonging to a larger whole or our struggles to conform to external norms. Several of the above prerequisites and axioms relate to Macedonia's fate.<sup>28</sup> In Hadzi-Vasileva's visual landscape, meaning is crucial. It empowers artists rationally and irrationally. It establishes recognition, a distinct mark, a structural and inter-textual visual language, and an aesthetic and sensory parameter that includes vision and smell to fully experience the artwork. Hadzi-Vasileva masterfully balances metaphysical ugliness and aesthetic beauty. Re-imagining beauty by using abandoned, unsightly, shattered, depleted, and disgusting waste products to create beautiful artwork is her focus. Opposite concepts are essential to understanding *Silentio Pathologia*. This involves contrasting and opposing simulations using axiomatic pairs like black/white, alive/dead, organic/inorganic, complete/disassembled, beautiful/ugly, industrial/handcrafted, whole/hollow, monumental/detailed, etc. The site-specific artwork is multifaceted and multidimensional because of its artisan nature, didacticism, curiosity, shock, and unexpectedness.<sup>29</sup>

### Visual language

The installation guides the observer along a convoluted path in selected direction. The room is first enclosed by a three-meter metal wall that looks organic from above. The wall has one opening, allowing only entry into the 'narration' and experience. Philosophy, emotions, history, and life are framed by this wall. Due to corrosion, erosion, and degradation, metal is the only inorganic cold media that behaves like skin. Constructive semiotics gives the sculpture an appealing aesthetics and draws attention to the internal substance. After entering the labyrinth, a desiccated silkworm cocoon wall greets us inside. The 'uterus', or center core, is reached through this barrier, which runs parallel to the metal wall. The cellular arrangement of the empty cocoons, inspired by Macedonian traditions and old media of the creative industries, takes the form of a hexagon.<sup>30</sup> The next curtain is three meters wide and 50 meters long. It is elaborately fashioned from black silk thread to mimic a spider's broken web. This design represents deterioration and disintegration.<sup>31</sup> The stroll proceeds along a winding trail leading to a surface composed of interconnected hides of albino laboratory rats.<sup>32</sup> Each skin comprises both the intact head and the exposed body, allowing the shape of the skin to be easily discerned by the adjacent skin in the seam.

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<sup>28</sup> Ana Frangovska, "Political Ecologies," *Science and Society Contribution of Humanities and Social Sciences* (Skopje: Faculty of Philosophy, 2021), 321–22.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 321–22.

<sup>30</sup> The author alludes to the chemical formulas and the laboratory experimentation with silkworms in medical and cosmetic purposes. Man exploits nature to his advantage without limit.

<sup>31</sup> The silk thread, i.e. the silk is produced by timely violent killing of silkworms, before they leave and pierce the cocoon, so that the silk thread has the appropriate quality, by immersing the cocoons in boiling water.

<sup>32</sup> One of the main mammal, a disease vector, besides pigeons, are rats. The skins are produced with taxidermy of dead rats, which is a careful and specialized technique. Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva employs skins in her works often, like for example chicken and fish skin, pig and lamb membranes, and testicular skin to symbolize defense against external, environmental, physical, and biological forces. The container protects tissue; life would not exist without it.

Intermittently, there are voids in the texture consisting of apertures, resulting in a specific ‘translucency’ that allows light to pass through and engenders captivating visual phenomena of illumination and shading along the pathway and on the adjacent walls.<sup>33</sup> After following this enigmatic path, which is heightened by a strong and unpleasant odor (emanating from silkworm cocoons and rat skins due to the organic decay), the visitor arrives at the end, where two metal cages hold two live black rats in each, as a sign of always existing optimism. This multi-layered and metaphorical concept captivates the viewer in its entirety. The audience was enraptured by its complexity, comprehensiveness, multifarious nature, transdisciplinary approach, intertextual references, transcending historical boundaries, embracing diverse cultures, existentialist themes, persistent effort, and unwavering tenacity. Opinions did vary. Some liked it, some hated it.<sup>34</sup>

### Interpretation

This artwork of Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva elicits aesthetic emotions. These emotions, if separated from the context and the interconnected narratives of the work, are confined to a realm of unremarkable aesthetics. This is due to the beauty of the artwork itself, as well as the subjective yet universally recognized standard of taste that is imposed. Following Cécile Angelini’s criteria for evaluating contemporary art,<sup>35</sup> I suggest that the beauty and aesthetic values of Hadzi-Vasileva’s work are clearly evident and serve as a strong means of conveying her contemporary hybrid action. This action involves the deliberate creation of moral and ethical dilemmas and shock, which in turn shape the concept and nature of the work. The goal is to deliver a powerful message to the recipient, making it an effective tool for radicalization and ‘transgressiveness’.<sup>36</sup>

Hadzi-Vasileva’s usage of recycled organic materials (like silkworm cocoons and rat skins in *Silentio Pathologia* particularly) is with intention to reiterate the superiority of humans over nature and their uncontrollable colonization of the nature for personal benefit, establishing moral and ethical discourses that pervade ecological parameters for environmental conservation. Beside the reactions, mainly from animal rights public or private associations,<sup>37</sup> in Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva’s works no animal was hurt. She is using the waste from the silk factories (emptied cocoons) or from the zoo

<sup>33</sup> Frangovska, “Multidisciplinary synesthetic mapping.”

<sup>34</sup> Frangovska, “Political Ecologies,” 321–22.

<sup>35</sup> Cécile Angelini, “How to Judge a Work of Art Today? Contemporary Echoes of Kantian Aesthetics,” *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetic*, Vol. 8, ed. Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu (Fribourg: European Society for Aesthetics, 2016), 45.

<sup>36</sup> Kieran Cashell, *Aftershock, the Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* (New York and London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 2.

<sup>37</sup> The Association for Animal Rights – Anima Mundi, published a reaction accusing the artist for “abuse of death animals and animal cruelty for sensationalist purposes, which she sells as art.” The second public reaction was an individual performance of a young art student and activist in front of the National Gallery where the work of Hadzi-Vasileva was exhibited with ready-made installation and inscriptions stating: “human rights do not include animal abuse” or “if you really care about animals then stop finding ways to exploit them ‘more humanely’, just stop exploiting them” etc.



food chain industries (albino rats) and by recycling them and rearranging into a work of art, she is visually making the argument about animal abuse, the human domination over the environment and uncontrolled usage of the natural resources in sake of capitalistic urges that lead us toward big ecological catastrophes.

### *Haruspex*

#### Context

Hadzi-Vasileva's other projects fall within the realm of transitional art, maintaining their formal and affective beauty while straddling the boundary between the two contrasting elements we are discussing here: aesthetics and ethics, delivered by the implementation of recycled organic materials. The transdisciplinary approach is prevalent in it as well, embodying the intricate fusion of art, science, craftsmanship, aesthetics, and language. Hadzi-Vasileva is taking part at the Venice Biennale once again, but this time she is representing the Vatican.

The artists commissioned to create artworks for the Pavilion of the Holy See (Vatican) were instructed to examine the Gospel of John 1:14, which states that Jesus Christ, "the Word", became human and dwelt among humanity. In the Christian atonement theology, the incarnation – human form – is central. It relates to God's relentless commitment to beings' physical existence, especially their bodies, which were created. The project is shaped around the Logos, representing the vertical-transcendent dimension, and the body or place, representing the horizontal-immanent dimension. The Logos links, harmonizes, and mediates, whereas flesh imposes immanence, a route, and embodiment.<sup>38</sup>

Theological links between the New Testament themes are illuminated by Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's research. Hadzi-Vasileva's installation recalls 'the tent of meeting' where the Ark of the Covenant was stored before the Israelites settled in the Promised Land and built a temple in Jerusalem. Thus, Jesus' body is like the tabernacle, where the divine presence was previously felt. After becoming the Temple, the structure became a physical tent.

Consequently, the project raises serious ethical issues. Author's inquiry of redeeming physical body from sin goes beyond vaguely upgrading animal body parts. They seem to challenge human limitations and the possibility of cross-religious and political ties. In the story of St. Mark's move to Venice, the Christians used the body as a tool and symbol, which may require redemption in corporal atonement.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Micol Forti, "In the Beginning ... the Word became flesh, Pavilion of the Holy See – Biennale Arte 2015, A dialectic dynamism in three voices," <https://media.elpihv.co.uk/misc/haruspex-curators-text.pdf>, acc. on October 10, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> According to a legend, the remains of the Evangelist Mark, who is the protector of Venice, were unlawfully transported from Alexandria, a predominantly Muslim country at the time. The relics were said to have been wrapped in pigskin, which served the dual purpose of protecting the body and deterring the Muslims from thoroughly examining the cargo. Therefore, the pig substance served both as a protective barrier and an offensive tool. The cocoon served as a beneficial protection for something highly cherished and as an assertive demarcation against a perceived adversary. The story highlights the important religious significance of animal meat, which is pertinent to both modern and historical religious boundaries. Both Jews and Muslims consider a pig to be impure, but Christians frequently employ a pig intentionally to demarcate their region.

Jesus appeared to hold the same perspective on pigs as his Jewish counterparts. He was also controversially tied to the impure. The ‘condemned’ death (outside the city, ‘on the tree’) culminated his link with the corruptible body. It depicts the constant search for one’s own meaning of right and wrong, true focal points, and their limits.

### Visual identity

For the purposes of *Haruspex*, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva uses a diverse range of raw materials, including delicate pork caul fat to construct the canopies and walls of her ‘meeting tent’. The lace fat of the pig’s intestines, which was once a part of it, now serves as a protective barrier that can either repel or enclose the surroundings like a refuge. Subsequently, these ropes are interlaced with fibers made from sheep intestines.<sup>40</sup> It appears that they can be connected in two ways: either by linking them together (like ligaments in space) or by restricting and confining them (like a network). The centerpiece of the artwork is the suspended heart, which is physically constructed using the ‘omasum’ of the cow, specifically the third compartment of the cow’s stomach out of four. The heart is supported or entangled by the ropes.<sup>41</sup>

While conducting her research and artistic process, Hadzi-Vasileva uncovered that the organ she was captivated by, known as the ‘omasum’, is referred to as the *Bible* (or occasionally *Psalterium*) in English due to its resemblance to pages with its dense folds of skin. Meat, butchers, and slaughterhouses have long conceptualized it as a ‘term’. Consequently, she offers it to us for perusal, portraying it as a substantial element firmly situated within a meticulously crafted and luminous confined area, whereby we might be influenced either upwards or downwards by the forces of longing. Furthermore, in her investigation of how the Word can be experienced in a physical form, she also demonstrates the significant messages that the physical body can communicate to us.

### Interpretation

“*Haruspex*, similar to several of my recent creations, is crafted using byproducts derived from the meat industry.” The author herself describes the work as conversations that explore the world’s connection to God, using animal bodies as a mapping tool.<sup>42</sup>

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva’s work combines meticulous craftsmanship, profound scientific understanding, and a compelling aesthetic vision. She is obviously captivated by the esoteric enigmas of internal organs, with a particular focus on the digestive system. In one of her interviews, she explains the direct involvement in medical and scientific researches:

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<sup>40</sup> The use of those recycled organic materials from various animals had its own association and meaning. Pork was considered unclean by Muslims and Jews, while Christians often used it to mark their territories. On the other hand, the lamb is a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice, which should take with it all the sins of the earth, etc.

<sup>41</sup> Ben Quash, “Word Become Flesh, Flesh Become Word,” in *In the Beginning... the World Became Flesh. Catalogue of the Pavilion of the Holy See*. ed. by Elisabetta Cristallini and Micol Forti (Rome: Gangemi Editore. 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Cassie Davies, “Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva: ‘I Am Driven by Making the Impossible Possible,’” *Studio International*, October 2, 2016, <https://www.studiointernational.com/elpida-hadzi-vasileva-interview>, acc. on January 15, 2024.

A year-long research project funded by the Wellcome Trust [in 2014-5] gave me a unique opportunity. I was allowed to participate with Dr Richard Day and Dr Caroline Pellet-Many at the laboratories at University College London (UCL). I also shadowed gastroenterology clinical staff in wards and outpatient clinics at Norwich Medical School at the University of East Anglia with Professor Alastair Forbes, to understand the critical impact of nutrition on patients, the difference between healthy and unhealthy guts, the role of bacteria, people with various bowel diseases and intestine failure, either as an illness or self-inflicted. I've worked closely with Dr Giles Major and his patients at the University of Nottingham at the Digestive Diseases Centre, observing their research into inflammatory bowel disease and interviewing patients to understand their history of symptoms and their impact.<sup>43</sup>

Organic stuff has consistently been incorporated into her installations over the course of her work. "It's easy to preserve skin, but when it comes to an organ it's a very different matter: they decompose no matter what you do. I'm attracted to how difficult it is, keeping the organ 'alive'. I've had to find my own method to preserve the viscera."<sup>44</sup>

The consumers of her work are faced with the visual beauty, aesthetic values, as well as shock, nausea or amusement when they find out the origin of the medium. The third layer is the deep contextual meaning, enriched with theory, philosophy, intriguing trans-tactical discourses. Re-usage of organic waste material, as well as the artist's interest in the lifespan of these degrading media, makes Hadzi-Vasileva's projects unique. So as being concerned with sustainability and environment many of her projects can be considered as up-cycled.

## Conclusion

The overall artistic approach of Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva involves transforming the ugly into the beautiful, which is a fundamental aspect of her work. She combines several contrasting ontologies, emphasizing the aesthetically beautiful and the transgressive – in her transdisciplinary and trans-medial creations. Nature and human endeavor are the inspiration, sustainability is her imperative. Her works are deeply conceptual, philosophical, critical. They are determined in their stance against the destruction of nature and humanity, openly deliberating on potential pathways toward more harmonious and respectful interactions with nature.

In her works, she examines the prevailing misconception of our day – the persistent perception of nature as a detached entity. The relationship between mankind and nature is intricate and has evolved over time. Karl Marx<sup>45</sup> also posited that with the era

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Kit Buchan, "Art from the Gut: The Scientifically Inspired Work of Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva," *The Observer* (August 7, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/aug/07/elpida-hadzi-vasileva-making-beauty-exhibition>, acc. on January 12, 2024.

<sup>45</sup> "Man lives on nature – means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to

of the Renaissance and the waning of feudalism, humanity began to view nature as an object of study and exploration. Consequently, nature is no longer seen as an autonomous power, and the pursuit of theoretical understanding of its inherent principles is just seen as a tactics to control and exploit it for human needs, whether for consumption or production purposes. The process of colonizing nature, which originated from the Enlightenment's ideology of dividing the world into human and non-human realms, established this non-human world as an objectified, passive, and distinct entity. This led to the development of a rationalizing, extractive, and dissociative perspective that overshadowed the functional experiential connections between humans, plants, and animals. The artist in her works discusses the problems of capitalism, colonization and de-colonization of nature, and the uncontrolled use of environmental resources.

Hadzi-Vasileva's projects are instigating questions of the presence of ethics in contemporary arts, and in this regard, I will recall Vid Simoniti who explains that the recent art history and criticism recommend abandoning the Humean<sup>46</sup> and Kantian subject-first view of aesthetic experience, which stressed connoisseurship and the idealized subject as the source of empirical, ethical, and aesthetic knowledge. Both historians and critics have long been preoccupied with what is sometimes referred to as an object-first picture – that is, the influence that things have on humans as imperfect, deficient, politically placed beings.<sup>47</sup> In Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's works this shift of introducing another aspect to the discourse of the Aesthetics is created by the implementation of the living presence effect that her installations have on the viewers. The metaphysics of the power of her works and the many levels of questioning and confirming the intersections between nature, arts, sustainability, humanity, trans-tactics, aesthetics and ethics are just some of the aspects that add value to her complex work.

Her installations have been commended for their ability to raise awareness about environmental issues and sustainability. Critic John Smith praises her approach, stating, "Hadzi-Vasileva's ability to transform overlooked or discarded materials into objects of beauty is truly remarkable. Her work serves as a powerful reminder of the ethical imperative to repurpose and reuse in an age of rampant consumption".<sup>48</sup> Similarly, art historian Emma Jones lauds her installations for their "subtle yet profound commentary on ecological responsibility"<sup>49</sup>, highlighting the ethical dimension of her commitment to sustainability and resourcefulness.

In terms of public reception, Hadzi-Vasileva's works often provoke a range of ethical responses from viewers. Some may admire her ability to create beauty from unconventional materials, appreciating the ethical dimension of her commitment to sustainability and resourcefulness. Gallery visitor Sarah Brown reflects, "I was struck

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itself, for man is a part of nature." in Karl Marx, "Estranged Labour," *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm>, acc. on January 20, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste."

<sup>47</sup> Vid Simoniti, "Aesthetic Properties as Powers," *European Journal of Philosophy* (2017), 25: 1434–53, acc. on January 2, 2024.

<sup>48</sup> John Smith, "Reimagining Waste: The Art of Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva," *Art Journal* 62, 4 (2019): 112–25.

<sup>49</sup> Emma Jones, "Contemporary Art and Ecological Responsibility," *Art Critique Quarterly* 45, 3 (2020): 78–91.

by the ethical implications of her work. It made me reconsider my own consumption habits and think more critically about the impact of waste on the environment.”<sup>50</sup> However, others may question the ethical implications of using animal parts in her installations. In a review for *Art Now*, critic David Wilson raises concerns about issues such as animal welfare, stating, “While Hadzi-Vasileva’s work is undeniably visually compelling, one cannot help but question the ethical implications of using animal organs as artistic material. It raises important ethical questions about the boundaries of artistic expression and the treatment of living beings.”<sup>51</sup>

Photos 1-4: *Silentio Pathologia*, 2013

Pavilion of Macedonia, 55th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Italy; Steel, silk, silk worm cocoons, rat skins, life rats, bespoke cages, cotton and wire, 1000 x 900 x 600cm. Photo Credits: Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva



Photo 1. *Silentio Pathologia*, 2013

<sup>50</sup> The statement was taken from a public discussion about Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva project “Making Beauty” on October 21, 2016.

<sup>51</sup>David Wilson, “Ethical Considerations in Contemporary Art: A Critique of Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva’s Installations,” *Art Now* 18, 2 (2020): 56–69.



Photo 2. *Silentio Pathologia*, 2013



Photo 3. *Silentio Pathologia*, 2013

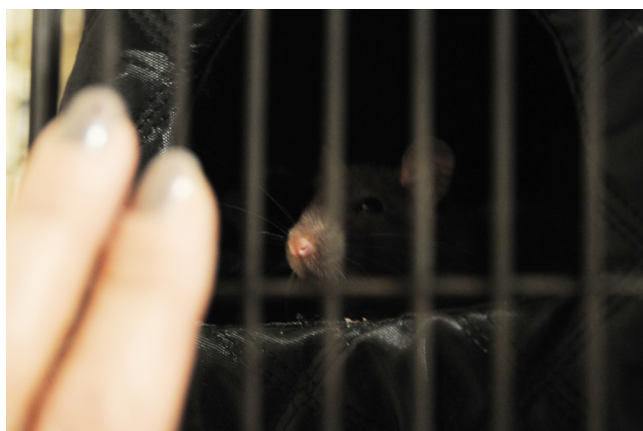


Photo 4. *Silentio Pathologia*, 2013

Photos 5-7: *Haruspex*, 2015

Pavilion of the Holy See, 56th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, Italy; Pigs caul fat, lamb intestines, cows stomach (omasum), plastic & metal, 850cm x 900cm x 550 cm.

Photo Credits: Bernard G. Mills



Photo 5. *Haruspex*, 2015



Photo 6. *Haruspex*, 2015



Photo 7. *Haruspex*, 2015

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Article received: December 15, 2023

Article accepted: February 1, 2024

Original scholarly article