

Portals to Symbiofutures. A Mask-Wearer and Mask-Maker Dialogue on Becoming *Other*

Georgiana Vlahbei

Plastic Art Performance collective, National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania
ORCID: 0009-0005-1419-0188

Georgiana Vlahbei (GCV) is an intermedia creator and researcher with a background in ethnology, cultural anthropology, and folklore studies. Her research engages with heritage-making processes, ritual expressions in traditional societies and contemporary creations, and the dynamics of customs with a focus on mask heritage. She is also co-founder, visual creator, and maker with the Plastic Art Performance collective.

Correspondence: georgianavlahbeimtr@gmail.com

Alina Tofan

Plastic Art Performance collective, National University of Arts Bucharest

Alina Tofan is a multidisciplinary artist working across acting, performance art, visual arts, and a PhD candidate at the National University of Arts Bucharest. Her practice explores performance as ritual and rebellion, positioning the body as a site of resistance, memory, and ecological entanglement. She investigates more-than-human perspectives through ecoperformance.

Correspondence: alinaa_tofan@yahoo.com

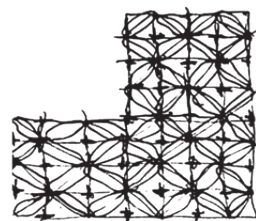
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ABSTRACT

Using a double-voiced narration as self-ethnography, the paper draws on our individual practices across the fields of performance, craft, and ethnology, as well as on territories where they overlap: on one side, mask-making, and on the other, mask-wearing. We reflect on how masks (face-masks and mask-costumes) have found their way into our work as the duo behind "Plastic Art Performance collective," an (eco)art group that emerged in 2020 within the Bucharest performance art scene which works to connect body practices to ecological consciousness. We explore, on the one hand, performative processes of *becoming Other*: the means of transformation that masks have enabled in our practice and what happens to the body as it undergoes these masked transformations. We consider the relationship between performativity and agency and reflect on the processes and methods of embodiment we have experimented with and their relationship to masking. On the other hand, we delve into the raw matter of the mask-making process: resources, materials, and circularity. This piece offers insight into a particular use of masks as both narrative devices and political objects that signal larger-scale issues such as overconsumption, waste, pollution, deforestation, and abusive human interventions in the ecosphere. In doing so, we ask what happens to masks as they become vehicles not only for becoming *another* body, but also tools for larger social transformations.

KEYWORDS

Performance art; environmental art; shapeshifting embodiment; symbiofuture; more-than-human.



Much like their traditional or ritual counterparts, contemporary mask creations that form part of art productions today, particularly in contemporary performance art, are expressively rooted in and emerge from their local ecologies. Responding to the globally accelerated polycrisis and the intensification of local economic, social, cultural, and environmental concerns, masks are now being reclaimed in new performative contexts by heterogeneous groups across multiple cultural contexts,¹ as political objects signalling social inequalities and, for our purpose here, the deepening of the human-nature divide. Drawing on multiple disciplines, these new works and the renewed presence of mask engage with different lineages, philosophies, and ontologies: multispecies studies, indigenous knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), posthumanism, new materialism, neo-animism, and the anthropology of ritual and liminality. They revisit folklore texts, engage with ancestrality and the study of mythology, borrow from ecological principles, including movements such as deep ecology, and draw on developments in neuroscience and cognitive sciences. Other works are deeply embedded in critical theory, feminism, activism, and struggles for social justice.

This reclaiming in contemporary performance and visual arts, whether niche or mainstream, is, nevertheless, not a reclaiming of masks as relics of a “ritual past,” but of masks as mobile technologies of transformation. Masks redistribute agency between different bodies carrying different memories and cultural lineages, and costumes, objects, camera and audiences, making the inner workings of identity, history, and specifically power more visible. Contemporary manifestations range from dance performance, choreography, multi-media installations, exhibitions and live art to protest, drag, queer nightlife, digital creations and environmental works. Among these contemporary uses of masks, the ones drawing from ecology and other-than-human ontologies are enacted by individual artists, companies, collectives, and networks of creators operating internationally to articulate aspirations towards environmental regeneration through speculative futures that imagine greater coexistence with the more-than-human world. At the same time, these works (video, performance, installations and various experiments across media) remember, reference, reactivate, and propose a continuation of the role of masks as communal world-shifters.

In this paper, we focus on one such performative context, in which masks emerge from and around a collective within the local art scene in Bucharest. We are the Plastic Art Performance collective, active under the Macaia Association since early 2020. Our work engages with various forms of artistic expressions as vehicles for fostering ecological consciousness. In this piece, we reflect on the way masks have gradually found their way into our works in the past six years, from the raw and messy processes of making to the ideas and worldviews behind the masks.

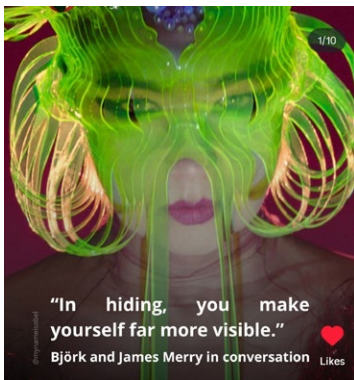
[@alinaa_tofan DMs @___gcv___]

GV: Well, this feels synchronic. As with most things that happen to/with us...

So, where should we start our mask stories?

AT: From the beginning, no? From our collective's name.

GV: True. I remember transcribing one of your insights while you were under that plastic foil: “How does plastic breathe? How does it feel, how does it move?” you asked. I realize now that even then, our very first project secretly conveyed and foresaw all our future masking practices...



Instagram post featuring an article based on an interview-discussion between Björk and artist mask-maker James Merry. Original photograph by Warren Du Preez & Nick Thornton Jones. Screenshot taken in August 2026 from Instagram account @mynameisobelpage.

But let's provide some context. Our first endeavour that brought us together and kicked off this collective was called *Plastic— affective memory and waste* and it was our attempt to tackle the insufferable ubiquity, complex materiality, and social lives of plastics in our modern society. Instead of placing the blame on a material that had been supporting our modern endeavours for so long, from advances in medicine and space exploration to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and into our own bloodstream, we proposed to investigate performatively the inner world of this "scapegoat." *What does it feel like to be the most hated material on the planet, the source of constant threats to our ocean life and of our planet suffocating?*

AT: We started from my own memories from the 90's, soaked in plastic objects that marked my childhood, then youth, and my entire generations'. Then we collected other people's memories of plastic objects...

But for the video-performance, *Asphyxia*, I had this large, three-by-three-metre sheet of semi-transparent plastic foil that I would wrap myself in, at times getting completely sucked in behind the texture and letting myself be engulfed by it, breathing through it...

GV: It may sound odd, being empathetic towards inanimate matter...

AT: A non-living entity made up of buried, decomposed remains of ancient plants, animals, and microscopic organisms that lived millions of years ago, nevertheless. Let's not forget...

GV: Ultimately, I think the questions that sprang up in those moments, like "What is it like to be x?" are central to the theme of masking, and to any kind of identity transformation, for that matter: knowing through wondering what it is like for something else to exist or experience the reality of being itself. You know I always have to quote Prof. Vervaeke.² His framework for different ways of knowing³ is one of my guidelines. Within it, there's this *participatory knowing*, the kind of knowing that can happen exclusively when you become part of something or participate in something else's ways of being. It involves being in a deep, transformative relationship with that thing, participating fully in something that is wider than oneself. Masks enable this relationship so beautifully, and I think that's a much-needed antidote to our current late-stage capitalist, neo-liberal, and neo-colonizing Western divided society...

AT: ...where identity is centred on the individual.

But that's exactly what a performative mask-costume does: it suspends this individuality, proposing a fluid identity instead, one loaded with symbols, which becomes archetypal. The perception of time changes, allowing you as a performer to experience a continuous present, a fluid time, which I call, in my practice, *shapeshifting reality*.

GV: Let's get into that. I've been curious about what actually triggers this shape-shifting. Does the *shifter* appear in any way before the mask? Is it/she/he/they built through stages of preparation and protocols, or does the mask-object simply draw in or call inside the *shifted* meant to come forward, through its raw materiality alone? How much of it is mimesis and, if so, of what kind? Could you describe how this transformation takes place for you, in you, as a performer?

AT: In a few words, *shapeshifting reality* is my body entering a state of becoming, where it is not simply representing another being, but allowing itself to be transformed by it. In this space, the boundaries between human and non-human, self and other, begin to dissolve.





Stills from *Asphyxia*, a short video eperformance.
Performer: Alina Tofan. Cinematography: Alexandru Claudiu Maxim. Bucharest, Romania, 2020.



Images from photo-performative exercises for the Plastic.
Intimate. Collective photo series. Performer: Alina Tofan.
Photography: GCV. Braşov, Romania, 2020.





So, what I do in my performative process is try to establish a connection with the mask: I'll draw on a *butoh*⁴ exercise, which I adapt to the mask-costume that encompasses me. In *butoh*, the body is often viewed as an empty vessel/empty space or as a corpse haunted by a human or non-human force. Thus, during the *butoh* exercise, the mask appears to me, and I allow my body to capture and embody it. Through the form my body takes and the specific type of movement that emerges, I allow myself to be moved by the mask rather than setting out to move it myself.

Consequently, the process of embodiment operates both psychologically and concretely, biologically, through the contractions, tension, and effort my body expends to incorporate the mask. The movement reflected externally becomes the only possible option in this context. The resonance is unique to each individual's performative process. This process often begins with the idea that decelerating movement, action, and reaction can allow the body to merge with the landscape, dissolve into it, and expand the boundaries of performative perception and sensoriality. My methodology is one of *embodiment*; rather than simply aiming to "become" something, I engage both corporeally and imaginatively with the energy of the mask itself.

While traditional theatre speaks of *catharsis* as the ultimate form of emotion and transformation, the practice I propose finds its power elsewhere. Here, a body that is relaxed yet grounded in reality, with sharpened senses and fully engaged in performativity, becomes the vessel through which a state of trance is achieved. During this bodily manifestation, the self-awareness burdened by social constructs fades away. The body becomes a conduit for a message that emerges at the intersection of the self, the realities of others, the environment, and the immediate context.

I begin with breathing, active meditation, and stripping the body of preconceived information, using physical and mindfulness exercises to heighten presence and sensitivity. This mirrors a specific exercise in *butoh* dance, where one sustains a "physical mask," a specific facial expression, for an extended period. Through this prolonged engagement, the mask is incorporated; it is no longer perceived as something external, but as an integral part of the self. This same integration occurs throughout the entire creative process: that foreign body ceases to exist; it is merely an energy acting upon you. Each mask brings with it a particular kind of movement and energy. This act of becoming the mask can be seen as an act of complete empathy, of dissolving the individual self into a composite self.

GV: How does this relate to "embodying" masks in classical physical theatre?

AT: If you look at Jacques Lecoq's⁵ vision, for instance, the mask highlights the character's physical and psychological traits while incorporating the performer's personality. In classical theatrical technique, the actor "plays" the mask, activating it through acquired technical skills. In my creative process, however, the performer becomes a medium of *resonance*. In performance art, as I practice it, the mask is not merely an aesthetic object to be worn on the face; it represents a space of becoming, a site of shifting identity. The performer's will becomes an agency shaped by the mask. While for Lecoq the mask allows the performer to reflect on the life around them, in performance art, the mask shifts, borrows from, and feeds upon the performer's own identity.

What happens when the mask expands into a costume, into a liminal space that overlaps with topography, becoming a "time without time?" In its deepest sense, I believe the mask is an instrument of disidentification. When it extends to the level of costume and space, it ceases to be a tool for characterization and becomes a state of existence. This transforms the stage from a geographical location into a metaphysical *topos*, and the performer into an inhabitant of "timeless time," a liminal space where the body becomes the mediator of the creative act.

In my work, the mask represents an ecological and political membrane. When working with a mask-costume, I use *resonance* as a performative methodology, integrating various practices and working techniques (*Qi-gong*,⁶ *Taiji*,⁷ and *butoh*, active meditation, real-time composition, and emptying the body of information). The performative imagination is constantly at work, reconfiguring reality. In working with the body, in the attempt at embodiment, to incorporate the proposed working concepts, anything is possible. The performative reality of the body between worlds represents a realm of exploration in which reality can change with every thought. I act and construct performative reality through a process of active listening, to which I respond. The present body, trained within a specific physical and psychological temporality, makes active listening possible. This active listening dissolves the subject-object duality between myself and the mask. I can say that the mask becomes an external sense, an outside eye, located outside the body, which allows the material to be moved.

In performance art, the artist decides what to make visible to the audience and what to conceal. During the performance, the body becomes a source of information, with every gesture being legitimised and interpreted within the conceptual framework of the work.

Talking about mimesis, the transition from *mimesis* to *metaxis*⁸ leads me, as a performer, into a personal process of performative possession of the mask. In *butoh*, for instance, the face is the mask itself and represents liminality. The face, most often marked by an expression of the self-caught between worlds, is sometimes, though not necessarily, painted white, dissolving individual identity into a shared condition of collective historical trauma and suffering. Through *butoh*, artists seek to reclaim a non-human, or, more precisely, pre-human connection, allowing the body to shed the boundaries of the individual self and enter a more primordial state of becoming.

GV: I love how this minimal yet complex gesture in *butoh*, of smearing one's face with bare, often white paint can convey so much representational power. It reminds me of an attempt I had made a long time ago to reconstitute the material components through which a ritual group had sustained its use of masks across generations. I'd been trying to piece together almost 60 years of intermittent performance of *Julamila*, a masked ritual⁹ from my Aromanian community, through the dynamics of its masked characters. And guess who had been the only constant actants across generations all along? The *thieves*, the only characters who had never worn any masks, but instead smeared their faces with black pitch or ash. Other masks—the bride, groom, captain, elders, all shifted, transformed and were eventually replaced by their modern plastic Halloween counterparts. But the enduring characters were the smeared ones. Suggestion rather than depiction has always seemed to me to be the most refined form of masking.

But coming back: is the world more or less permeable while wearing the mask? Is the flow of the inner process aided or interrupted by masking? Is the mask a mediator or a disruptor?

AT: What I find most compelling is how masks, whether they are made from natural or synthetic materials, act upon the physical senses, grounding or even suppressing them in order to awaken other dimensions: the energetic and the political, mediating past and future through the body. A vital aspect of this process is the suspension of self-consciousness in which the mask dissolves the mundane concern with one's appearance. Yet, as this self-directed attention fades, the focus on the body's expressive qualities is profoundly amplified. The face is traditionally the primary conveyor of performative information. When it is replaced by a mask, a new performative logic emerges: the entire energy of the body must work in unison to animate the mask, to feel its presence in every fibre. The body no longer merely carries the mask; it becomes the resonant force that brings it to life.



GV: And what happens once you “come back” to yourself?

AT: Once the mask is shed, the body is never entirely the same again. It carries the residue of other ways of being, of forms that were once foreign but have now taken up residence within it. The performer can no longer be certain where their own body ends and where these other presences begin, nor whether the body they return to can still be called entirely their own.

GV: Let’s move forward with our own history. After *Plastic* came *Yagoria*.¹⁰

AT: Yes. 2022. In *Yagoria*, we reimagined the figure of Baba Yaga,¹¹ fragmented into three women of varying ages and forms. Adorned with masks of branches, ferns, and lichen-covered wood, they stood as embodiments of a deep symbiosis with the forest. However, this old connection was severed by the encroachment of plastic, a suffocating human intervention. As their faces were swallowed by synthetic waste and their silence was broken by the abrasive sound of chainsaws, they became witnesses to the slow dissolution of a world they were losing in real time. It turned out to be a sort of eco-political ritual.

GV: What did wearing a vegetal mask and those props feel like? Did it influence movement, body posture, or gestures? Did it bring the body into another type of relationship with the earth?

AT: Wearing a vegetal mask on your face and body, you learn to smell and breathe differently. Every mask-costume possesses an inherent form, whether natural or otherwise. As a performer, you surrender your body to that form and embody it. Fundamentally, my focus lies more on the shape and energy than on the materials themselves. However, it is preferable to use breathable materials that do not stifle the performer. The scent of decay or fresh sap forces you to inhabit the biological presence of nature rather than a narrative one.

What is remarkable about these vegetal mask-costumes is how their materiality shifts one’s center of gravity. Verticality is often replaced by other bodily forms found in nature, which possess a different kind of weight, one that roots you to the ground. You may find yourself contorted like a root, your arms moving with the fluid continuity of tendrils, or engaging in the micro-movements of breathing, akin to “plant muscle.” The perception of temperature and light is heightened by the natural masks, intensifying this primal force of nature. This observation raises a fundamental question: are we truly creating within the parameters of contemporary conceptual art, or are we, in fact, returning to an ancestral intelligence through the mask? I am particularly interested in the symbiosis between performer and mask, through which symbolic and physical expression takes shape, challenging the distinction between “human” and “nature.”

What was it like for you, designing and creating those costumes?

GV: The experiential process of building those vegetal masks was obviously highly sensory. The imprints of mud under my nails, the tickling moss, the smell of bark, the shapes of the ferns, the geometry of the acorns, the texture of the mushrooms, the fragility of the willow branches—all became imprinted on my skin during those days of work. I remember cleaning myself after hours of work, and my fingers still smelling of herbs when I went to bed. Not the type of scent you could scrub off... but I loved being surrounded by all those smells all the time. My small attic had become wild.

One thing I didn’t notice at the time was that these types of materials also imposed a kind of body posture, a particular way of working with them. I had to work very fast to assemble them because of the ephemerality of some of the greenery that would wilt within hours. Some pieces of mask or costume I had to redo every morning or on the spot, during or between shoots for the videoperformance. So, working with these living materials, fragile





Images taken during filming for Yagoria videoperformance.
Performers: Aigül Cheosep, Maria Mora, Alina Tofan. Photography: GCV.
Cinematography: Gabriel Durlan.
Snagov Forest, Romania. 2022.





Images taken during filming for Yagoria videoperformance.
Performer: Alina Tofan. Photography: GCV.
Ulmet Sandstone concretions, Buzău, Romania, 2022.



Image from a live performance of Yagoria. Performer: Alina Tofan.
Photography: GCV. Văcărești Natural Park, Bucharest, Romania, 2022.



Photograph taken during a pop-up performance. Performer: Alina Tofan. Photography: GCV. Ostrov Island, Călărași, Romania, 2022.

and delicate, within such a short period of time, required a calm posture and very steady yet flexible arms, with gentle touches and careful handling despite the fast pace required for the work. I remember it being my first time attempting to work with an all-natural glue. I didn't want to use harmful or non-degradable options. I had tried to stick the moss patches together onto their bases and join them together to create those longer pieces hanging from your costume. It probably cost me two white nights of despair as they kept stubbornly coming unstuck, until I finally decided to sew them on the costume. It was a lot of trial, but most of all, a lot of error.

Some of the inner processes that emerged during those nights were leading me to different places, though. I began pondering a lot the very idea of patching together "fragments" of nature in the service of these masks and costumes, and how I was decontextualizing the various plants from their native environments and then recontextualizing them as performative agents meant to speak about their world to our audiences. It strongly resembled museum work: how we deracinate objects from their networks of meaning and reintegrate them into strange, unfamiliar places to make them subjects to our human-centric philosophies and to narrate *our* views of the world. Was I really honouring them? What was I giving back? Was this relation reciprocal in any way? I was realising then and there something quite awful: that I was replicating the same gesture of power enacted by centuries of extraction—taking simply because something was available, taking because I could. And that there was always going to be a violence embedded in this imbalance of power. Then there was the issue of how all of these different living elements would fit together into a mask: how would they even share the same space? Would moss and mushrooms ever communicate in this way? Are the different types of foliage sensitive to one another? Does it make sense to actually place them together like this? Who am I to decide such an assemblage? It was my first rough realization that I was not at all creating together with nature, but rather creating from her. It took some courage to admit this, and I still have those masks in my workshop to this day. They look as fresh as ever, probably to keep reminding me of this first attempt...

AT: But what about *Holobionts*?¹²

GV: Even though there were no masks involved *per se*, the experiment in this project involved a lot of mask-like transformations. This time, the costumes were grown from various seedlings, including radishes, tomatoes, and pumpkins, into "sprouting skins." On an eclipse day, I planted them in a DIY hydroponic installation, together with my mother—a genuine green thumb. We watched them grow in thin layers of gauze into micro-plants, gently and diligently spraying them twice a day, until they were enough to cover large parts of the performers' bodies. Is the skin the end of the individual? We set out to find out.

The living, sprouting mini-bodies on the surface of the performers' skin were intended to make them more conscious of the never-ending exchange between human bodies and other living bodies. How do these tiny bodies inform human movement? I got really excited going through this process of watching these small creatures (mainly radishes because they were the fastest to sprout) with their moist, green, tingly presence, configure movements between species as part of the chimeric dance assemblages created by you and the team.

With *Yagoria* and with *Holobionts*, we drew from some of our favourite references: Baba Yaga, of course, read as forest protectress, but also masked characters connected to Spring Carnivals in European pre-Christian cultures and beyond, characterized by their entirely vegetal appearance,¹³ which I had witnessed during fieldwork in a village in Central Romania. Seeing the tall green creature slowly emerge in the forest as the young human was gradually engulfed by leaves and branches carefully placed on him by his fellow lads, and seeing him disappear under the cylindrical bark headpiece, were profoundly inspiring for the crafting



holobionts / symbiont costumes concept



Conceptual frame: SYMBIOGENESIS = growing

- the skin as a host for other species from each other (the body)
- inter-connectedness of all living beings wearing
- the mega-corpus (the body of nature) weaving
- moving together / from / along with another form of life
- germination: sprouting within us one from the other
- growing from the body, absorbed back into the environment

- becoming symbiont -

holobionts / symbiont costumes process / III

Phase II: Testing sprout-material on body & movement



wool + gauze / wool / gauze

of the *Yagoria* entities. But we must admit we took liberties: the “Green Man” became the “Green Women” in two ways: first, as a means to re-establish the woman-nature connection and to honour women’s legacies of tending to the earth; second, in order to pluralize, because living matter always expresses itself in multiples...

AT: ...never from just one atomic self-contained unit.

GV: And I would add here that even though our masks do not come from a codified, traditional context, at least one of their roles ends up being similar: protection. We never intended to mimic ritual gestures or to use mask-wearing as a substitute for customary mumming, but rather as a response to today’s disconnection from nature, or, more precisely, from the “symbiotic real”¹⁴ to use one of our favourite references. Our masks are political in a very feral way, as tingly, coarse, biodegradable reminders of our collective need to rekindle a connection that has been lost not metaphorically or poetically, but organically, with the larger living, growing, interconnected world.

How would you describe our other masked/ costumed experiments that bring back folk stories and characters as cautionary tales? What kinds of affordances did they bring?

AT: In these cases, the performative costume becomes an instrument of resistance. Politically, the mask serves as a silent alarm amid the multiple crises we face. It can be considered a site of protest through live storytelling. For instance, in our *Eco-Goat* performances and public interventions, the mask-costume no longer serves as protection. Instead, it becomes a mirror reflecting human extractive practices and the systemic oppression of both women and nature.

The *Eco-Goat* series addresses this deep societal wound from ecological and feminist perspectives. In 2025, I conceived this performance in response to the growing rates of femicide in Romania, reconfiguring a cultural archetype through a contemporary human rights lens, confronting cycles of violence, and reclaiming the figure of the Goat as protector, witness, and a force of resurrection. The goat was present not as folklore or as an exotic object, but as a woman-mask, a borderline being, a mytho-ecology of trauma, and a silent witness to femicide.

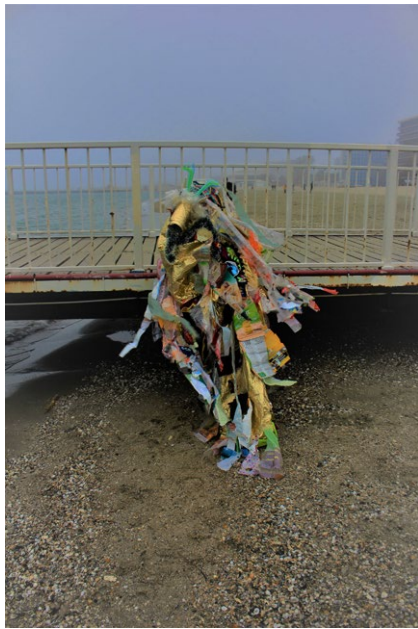
GV: On the other hand, *Dochia*,¹⁵ as she has appeared to me, is a human-size pile of textiles compulsively stacked one on top of the other, warning us about cluttering, about stagnation, about all the things we no longer need but cannot leave behind and so drag along with. Ecopoet Theis Ørntoft¹⁶ put it beautifully in his “hyperAbject.”¹⁷ After all, she can only turn into stone after getting rid of all her jackets. Her mask-costume, made up of fast-fashion polyesters, extends to the entire landscape she traverses, metaphorical and literal, which she colonizes through these non-degradable jackets she leaves behind in piles. As these piles keep accumulating, they become mountains of textile waste for which one half of the globe becomes responsible ...

AT: How about your process there?

GV: Patching together *Dochia*’s mask and jackets was actually one of the easiest crafting jobs, especially because I love working with discarded items and giving them new lives. We put out an open call among friends and our close community for unwanted, old pieces of clothing, which I then assembled by cutting and patching. Of course, I started with my own pile and then yours. They came together very quickly, since I stopped at nine, trying to stay close to the number referenced in most folk collections.¹⁸ The real challenge, though, was actually moving through the mountains of donated textiles piling up in my living room, and then transporting and installing them in the museum gallery for the live event.

The mask-costume was intended to become this giant pile of stacked polyesters that you would try to drag around the space, with the mountains becoming an extension of your





Eco-Goat public intervention performance.
 Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume: Alina Tofan and GCV.
 Photography: GCV. Constanța, Romania, 2020.

Eco-Goat public intervention performance.
 Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume: Ecaterina Colasiz.
 Photography: Diana Elena Păun.
 Obor Market, Bucharest, Romania, 2021.



Eco-Goat public intervention performance. Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume: Ecaterina Colasiz. Photography: Diana Elena Păun.
 Obor Market, Bucharest, Romania, 2021.



Eco-Goat live performance. Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume: GCV.
Photography: Driss Barahmoun. Morocco, 2024.



Eco-Goat live performance. Performer: Alina Tofan.
Photography: Mihaela Lungu. Bucharest, Romania, 2025.

body. It had to make movement hard and heavy, pulling the body down, almost crushing it under their weight. But working with masks and mask-costumes, one quickly realizes that they have their own ways of behaving. In my mind, they were always moving in certain ways, always trying to accentuate some type of movement for you. But once activated in performance, you always surprise me, you always come up with movements I never thought the costumes would be able to sustain. My work is only partially done in this sense, because when a costume comes alive, the ways in which it manifests go beyond what I intended. It becomes *your* skin and it expresses its own agency.

AT: So, is the mask a “future fossil”?

GV: I like how that sounds. Though what our masks channel is not fossilized remains of a certain age and worldview, but living potencies meant to produce meaning in today’s world. And of course with us, most, if not all of them, are feminine archetypes, alluding to the exploitation of women and land extractivism as two sides of the same coin. Yaga and Dochia, are matriarchal figures embedded in the land: for Yaga, the forest acts as an extension of herself—it is not just a home, she is the forest, in a very literal way. And for Dochia, it could hardly be more literal as she becomes rock in the end. They become one with their queendoms. And so, they invite us to connect and wonder at the natural, symbiotic world in all its vegetal, mineral, animal, and queer forms.

When we activate these mask-costumes, as they are being performed, they are meant to bring these forces at play into the world. So, I think of them as technologies that I wish would act upon this divided society in ecological collapse. But I cannot speak of their efficacy—that is something for witnesses to assess. I can only speak of my and our intention.





Photographs taken during photo-performance practice of Dochia, Oracle of Textile Waste.
Performer: Alina Tofan. Costume and photography: GCV. Bucharest, Romania, 2025.



Dochia, Oracle of Textile Waste during live performance. Performer: Alina Tofan.
Costume: GCV. Sibiu, Romania, 2026. Alina Tofan personal archive.

NOTES

1. The larger contexts of this reappearance can constitute a distinct chapter. We name only some of the places where it occurs: digital and activist culture, pop music and fashion, Latin American, African and African-diasporic (sub)culture forms, and new material practices among Indigenous and First Nations. A few examples are particularly illustrative. The singer/ artist Björk is one obvious case, and her long collaboration with artist James Merry is particularly rich. Their masks move between concert performance, music video, fashion, digital fabrication, and museum exhibition. For *The Guerrilla Girls*, an anonymous feminist activist and artist group whose members wear gorilla masks during public performances, protests and lectures, masks become tools for critiquing systemic sexism and racism in the art world. Another example is Nigerian-British artist Zina Saro-Wiwa, who explores masquerade, performance, food, oil extraction, and the ecology of Niger Delta, placing embodied cultural practice within contemporary systems of extraction, postcolonial governance, environmental damage, Christianization, global media and diasporic spectatorship.

2. John Vervaeke is a cognitive scientist, award-winning educator, professor of psychology, cognitive science, and Buddhist psychology at the University of Toronto. He is known for his many academic contributions in the field, but also for his 50-part YouTube lecture series, *Awakening from the Meaning Crisis*.

3. The framework is known as “4P/3R Metatheory of Cognition,” and the ways of knowing referred to are propositional, procedural, perspectival and participatory. The theoretical framework can be found here: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/220387969_Relevance_Realization_and_the_Emerging_Framework_in_Cognitive_Science.

4. Avant-garde Japanese dance-theatre practice shaped by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno that explores the body through slow, transformative, and often surreal movement. The practice emerged in Japan in the late 1950s, growing as a radical response to conventional dance forms and to the social and psychic upheavals of post-war Japan. It challenged conventional ideas of beauty, dance, and identity. *Butoh* often uses imagery, improvisation, and deep attention to inner sensation. Its practice often asks the dancer to let the body become something other than itself: an animal, a plant, an aging person, wind, soil, grief, or a remembered place. Performers may use white body paint or extreme slowness, but these are possible aesthetic choices, not rules that define every *butoh* work. Today, *butoh* has many international lineages and interpretations, while remaining closely connected to its Japanese historical and artistic origins.

5. French stage actor and movement trainer. He was best known for his teaching methods in physical theatre, movement, and mime which he taught at the school he founded in Paris, known as *École internationale de théâtre Jacques Lecoq*.

6. A traditional Chinese practice rooted in ancient Chinese medicine, philosophy, and martial arts that combines gentle movement, breathing, and focused awareness. Its name

indicates the main goal of the practice: “to work with vital energy” or “to cultivate life force.”

7. A traditional Chinese movement practice that draws on Chinese philosophical ideas of harmony, including the complementary forces of yin and yang. It combines slow, flowing sequences with breath and attention. The practice originated as a martial art, often known as *Tai Chi Chuan* or “supreme ultimate boxing.” Over centuries, it developed into a widely practised method for cultivating balance, coordination, and calm.

8. A philosophical and theatrical term that describes the state of being in-between two different worlds or realities at the same time, from the ancient Greek word *μεταξύ*, meaning “middle” or “between.”

9. *Julamila* or *Julamina* of the Plisot community of Aromanians in Romania (originally from Pleasa, or Plasë in Albanian, Korçë County, in Albania), is an Epiphany masquerade involving a mock wedding in which an all-male ritual group visits households to announce the Baptism of Christ. The masked characters include the newlyweds, the leader of the group, the old woman, the old man, the doctor, and several thieves who would “steal” provisions from each household they visit to use for the final banquet. The ritual is a living tradition even today in northeastern Bucharest, particularly in Voluntari city—Pipera neighbourhood, as well as in the town of Palazu Mare, near Constanța city.

10. *Yagoria* was a dance project that involved a team of dancers, performers and cinematographers in which we developed choreographic languages rooted in performance art at the intersection with ecological concerns. There were several live acts in venues across Bucharest, as well as a video-performance that became our manifesto against illegal deforestation and abusive interventions in natural habitats, which has since toured internationally.

11. Baba Yaga is a complex figure in Slavic folklore, often portrayed as an old woman who lives in a hut standing on chicken legs, surrounded by a fence made of human bones with skulls atop the posts, and who can act as either a dangerous witch or a crucial helper who provides gifts, knowledge, or access to the hero or heroine. Her defining characteristic is this ambiguity: she is neither simply a villain nor simply a benefactor, but a threshold guardian. Encounters with Baba Yaga can be read as rites of passage: the protagonist must cross a boundary, survive her tests, and undergo transformation. In terms of her role in folktales, she is portrayed / can function as either a donor or an antagonist. From the feminist perspective adopted in the present work, Baba Yaga can be understood as a figure of power, autonomy, and refusal of domestic norms, an archetype of female knowledge outside patriarchal control. For further interpretations and analyses see Propp (1958), Ivanits (1989), Warner (1994), Forrester, Goscilo, and Skoro (2013), and Kwaschik (2023).

12. A cultural project developed by the collective in 2024, involving a team of invited artists from international *butoh* and from classical and experimental music scenes. The key concept, *holobiont*, draws from biology and was first



introduced by German biologist Adolf Meyer-Abich, and later popularized and redefined by American biologist Lynn Margulis in her 1991 seminal book—*Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis*. In our practice, the concept is translated into eco-poetic and performative expressions of the assemblages of species/symbionts that we often mistake for biological units. A *holobiont* is any host organism, such as an animal, plant, fungus, or even human, together with all the other forms of life that co-constitute it. For example, the human body hosts a variety of microbiota.

13. The ritual referred to here is practiced in Transylvania, specifically in rural areas of Cluj County. Known locally under names as *Păpălugăre*, *Băbăluță*, *Păpărugă*, *Mătăhulă*, *Dodoloaie*, and others, it is similar to rituals in other parts of Europe associated with the “Green Man” held in some villages on St George’s Day; in others on Pentecost, and elsewhere in connection with the “milk measuring” at sheepfolds. It has been interpreted (Neagota and Benga 2009) as a complex customary manifestation: a spring ceremony intended to ensure fertility, exhibiting carnivalesque features, but also functioning as an initiation rite. As in the case mentioned here, the ritual involves a group consisting exclusively of young men of marriageable age, following a set of ritual actions over the course of a few days, during which one or more of them are chosen to become the central green figure. At a pre-arranged spot in the woods, the vegetal costume is carefully constructed on top of their body until they are completely unrecognizable. This is followed by a procession/carolling from household to household in the village, sometimes the hosts throwing water at the Green Man and receiving a twig from the costume in return, as well as an oration delivered by the young men to the families, and often culminating in a final moment connected to a body of water. For more ethnographic accounts and in-depth analyses see Neagota and Benga (2009), Neagota (2010a, 2010b), Benga (2018).

14. The term belongs to Timothy Morton, a British philosopher, literary theorist, and professor at Rice University known for developing the ecological concepts of “hyperobjects” and “dark ecology,” as well as for his contributions to object-oriented ontology (OOO). The “symbiotic real” is a philosophical concept that Morton proposes as an alternative to “nature,” a notion which he argues reinforces the illusory separation of humans from the living entangled world they belong to.

15. “Dochia, the oracle of textile waste” was a project (2024-2025) intended as a manifesto against the fast-fashion industry. Drawing from the mythical persona of Baba Dochia, figure in Romanian folk culture, we reimagined a contemporary Dochia who would warn against the overconsumption and abandonment of textiles that pollute the environment and contribute to many labour inequalities in many parts of the world. The project resulted in several live acts, a video performance, and an oracle deck.

16. Danish poet and novelist often described as an ecopoet. His work links the environmental crisis to consumer capitalism, masculinity, alienation, desire, and the uneasy entanglement of human and more-than-human worlds.

17. The term was coined by Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Jens Bjerring in a 2020 paper, and stands as a synthesis of Timothy Morton’s concept of *hyperobjects* and Julia Kristeva’s theory of *abjection*.

18. According to several accounts published by Romanian ethnologists and folklorists (Vulcănescu, Pamfile, Florea Marian, Ghinoiu, Olteanu, Olinescu, among others), the legend goes like this: she begins her early ascent into the mountains, thinking that the bad weather is finally over. She starts with nine (sometimes twelve) woollen or sheepskin coats and takes them off one by one as the days get warmer. Upon reaching the top, March’s capricious weather suddenly shifts, and storms and blizzards turn her and her sheep to stone.



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