



## Hybrid

Revue des arts et médiations humaines

11 | 2024

Les arts, la littérature et les médias sociaux face aux cadres médiatiques de l'empathie

---

# Humanity in the face of collapse: selective empathy and tentacular empathy in visual arts and theatre

Elsa Ayache and Solange Ayache

Translator: Katharine Throssell

---



### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/4054>

DOI: [10.4000/hybrid.4054](https://doi.org/10.4000/hybrid.4054)

ISSN: 2276-3538

### This article is a translation of:

L'humain face à l'effondrement dans les arts plastiques et les arts de la scène - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/3959> [fr]

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Vincennes

### Electronic reference

Elsa Ayache and Solange Ayache, "Humanity in the face of collapse: selective empathy and tentacular empathy in visual arts and theatre", *Hybrid* [Online], 11 | 2024, Online since 15 April 2024, connection on 16 April 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/4054> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/hybrid.4054>

---

This text was automatically generated on April 16, 2024.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-SA 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

---

# Humanity in the face of collapse: selective empathy and tentacular empathy in visual arts and theatre

Elsa Ayache and Solange Ayache

Translation : Katharine Throssell

---

- 1 SEA<sup>1</sup> – In *Staying With the Trouble* (2016), Donna Haraway highlights new ways of living, creating, and thinking together that are tentacular and organic—in a word “sympoietic.”<sup>2</sup> In a context of unprecedented human and environmental issues, Haraway’s work engages in dialogue with that of Bruno Latour, Lynn Margulis, Anna Tsing, Isabelle Stengers, Vinciane Despret, or indeed Ursula Le Guin. She draws on “string figures” as “risky co-makings” (Haraway, 2016, p. 13-14) to illustrate these new hybrid forms of tentative but necessary collaboration, not only between individuals but also with companion species. In the current context of tentacular global crises endangering all living things—humans, animals, plants—we must “make-with” and indeed “become-with,” as Haraway suggests. The modalities of these original associations, built on situated interconnections “when there are only more and more openings and no bottom lines” (Haraway, 2016, p. 115), appear to us to be essential. They are fundamental to the approach that underlies the experimental work presented here.
- 2 In this article, we take the risk of interlacing two voices—that of the analyst and that of the artist—which alternate and intertwine in posing the question of the place, forms, and effects of empathy as a catalyst for artistic creation. Beyond the selections that result from the mediatization of certain events rather than others, we suggest a reflection on “tentacular empathy,” based on an unfolding of emotions and a proliferation of realizations by a ricocheting or branching off of affect.
- 3 Through a presentation of Elsa Ayache’s work on megafires in visual arts and a study of Sarah Kane’s debut play, *Blasted* (1995), which was recently staged at the *Comédie-Française* in Paris for the first time, the texts, images, and analysis that follow invite the reader-viewer into a cognitive and sensory experience of shared vulnerability.

Combining experimentation and critique, this article invites the reader-viewer to make original associations, as words and pictures echo each other and possibly reverberate with their own perceptions and conceptions, much like Haraway's "art science worldings as sympoietic practices for living on a damaged planet" (Haraway, 2016, p. 67).

## Artistic mediums and stages of empathy

He raised the camera. No reaction. This was the instant when things could go either way, towards friendliness or hostility. He looked at them. They looked at him. [...] They were disappearing into the forest. What to do now?  
(McBurney, 2016, p. 17-18)

Figure 1



Elsa Ayache, *Untitled*. Series: "Californian fires," ink on paper, burned, 24 x 16 cm, 2021. Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 4 SA – In recent years, contemporary theater has explored the link between human crises and environmental crises. An increasing number of works explore our responsibility and the consequences of our actions, while reflecting on the room for maneuver still available to us in the face of an ever more uncertain future. The question of empathy, although rarely addressed directly, is a key element in these creations raising awareness in viewers about the challenges of our era, which may be more or less covered in the media. This is the case of Simon McBurney's 2015 play *The Encounter*,

about the destruction of the Amazon rainforest and the threat to the indigenous Mayorunas tribe. In this work, the playwright turns the audience into a listener rather than a viewer in order to elicit empathy in response to the eco-genocide that is today ravaging Brazil and endangering the whole planet.

- 5 With *Blasted*, Sarah Kane developed a hybrid work based on a more subtle empathy for the world, in order to denounce the illusion of distance, and shatter the western markers of false security. This work was a major moment in *in-yer-face* theatre in England, and although Kane never explicitly focused on environmental themes, her writing was founded in the mobilization of a compassion that links us to our environment in the broadest sense. She thus takes the opposite approach to the sporadic, fragmented, and dissociated empathy that newspapers typically use when they cover information, via the selection, zapping, and juxtaposition of stories.
- 6 Here we aim to combine the author's statements, press reviews, and production notes, in order to contrast Sarah Kane's intentions and observations with the indignation that *Blasted* provoked, in order to explore the place of emotional skills in the creation and reception of her work. Using a theoretical framework at the intersection of several disciplines (theatre studies, moral philosophy, psychoanalysis) and schools of thought (trauma studies, ethics of care), we will specify the role empathy plays in the poetic approach and ethical position of Kane, whose first play paradoxically marked the inception of New Brutalism<sup>3</sup> in British theatre, and thus in return earned the antipathy of the media.
- 7 EA – My artistic approach is rooted in a representation of reality that draws on photographs documenting the Californian megafires disaster, to explore data from it. The creative gesture stands as a form of resistance and counter-power to the use of shocking images which assume a univocal message and reading. The series of works presented in this article is articulated around extracts from American newspapers or news sites such as *The New York Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *SFGATE*, *AirNow* or *CALFIRE*. All deal with accident, loss of control, but also serve to further delve into the notion of fragility. These megafires, which consume all before them with radical force, are the burning proof of the intrinsic fragility of our natural and urban environments, but also of the way we provoke that fragility.

Figure 2



AirNow (one-stop resource for daily measures of air quality). Screenshot, Berkeley, November 16, 2018. Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission. Source: <https://www.airnow.gov/?city=Berkeley&state=CA&country=USA>

- 8 This work has its roots in my own physical and frightening personal experience of the Californian megafires. In 2018, when the Camp Fire completely destroyed the town of Paradise, I was living in Berkeley, and breathing in its ash and toxic fumes. The human and material losses, as well as the damage to biodiversity, appeared to me as gripping as the out of control climate phenomena that provoked them. In our mental space, the exceptional nature of the event (its scale, intensity, and speed) led to photographic testimonies, simultaneously encountering images of the impossible.

Figure 3



Elsa Ayache, *Untitled 11*. Series: "Californian fires," acrylic on paper, 21 x 27,8 cm, 2020.  
Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 9 The burnt drawings and paintings reflect the spectacle of a collapse in the planet's equilibrium, in a cascading series of uncontrolled extinctions. In this context, my artistic practice intertwines two timeframes: on the one hand, an accelerated time of warnings about a current environmental disaster; and on the other hand, a suspended time targeting at human thoughtlessness. Indeed, the act of drawing takes on the emotional and cataclysmic charge of the images. The drawing works through them slowly, pushing them to their irreducible core meaning by the inclusion or omission of certain details. Pared back to essential shapes, the composition is balanced through areas left empty, as though it were also marked by the catastrophic phenomenon. Chromatic information is no longer necessary, but the line, with its trembling and its ruptures, is.
- 10 In this process, I did not immediately understand that the loss of control was the foundation of my pictural and graphic gesture. I knew this gesture was insecure, small, worried, and possibly traitorous. Indeed, these characteristics were already being used to convert the gaze of what we cannot understand into an artistic process. But the conditions in which I practice primarily reveal mechanisms enabling me to regularly escape from my own work. The use of a video projector is one of these. Evacuating the pressure of copying onto paper, a projector has the advantage of not allowing me to see all of what is produced. The image projected in light directly onto the surface itself allows me to barely identify what I am tracing; the overall markers are blurred, and hues and values are barely discernable. These blind points enable two things: firstly, that the medium not be subject to the image; and secondly, it allows me to be immersed in the climate event, in what it shows and suspends, through an active painting. Any

eruption of the unexpected into the act of drawing or painting can therefore be formally seized on to shatter all evidence, including the reference image. This uncertain dynamic means I have to be continually clutching at straws. This intentional situation of incomplete mastery reflects the risk of unexpected events specific to creation, as well as the risk inherent in the fires.

- 11 In a movement ranging from the spectacular to the intimate, and from the collective to the individual, drawing the megafires opens up a space of authorization and acceptance which implies an intuitive perception of its own vulnerability. On one hand, it expresses the extreme spectacle of a wildfire as it becomes uncontrollable. And on the other, it plunges into the unknown depths of personal fragility. In *Puissance de la douceur*, Anne Dufourmantelle (2013) explains that “awareness of the vulnerability of the other cannot do without the subject’s recognition of their own fragility” (p. 25). The act of drawing is a key aspect of the relationship between oneself and the world. Depicting disaster thus means recognizing it in oneself, to find oneself in the Other. Depicting that which is consumed, means looking—perhaps together—at what stands out, what is striking, it means facing up to it, sharing the unthinkable or the stupefaction. Moreover, drawing is not fun; it is not a cathartic process. Nor is it an act of complacency, to create pretty shapes or find what has been lost. Drawing is painful. It involves making oneself vulnerable in the artistic process as a necessary condition of creation. It is being at the point of disaster, for moments on end, and yet managing to draw, nonetheless.
- 12 The poetic texts that follow and accompany the pictorial production were created as part of literary workshops directed by Laure Limongi, and then by François Bon in 2020 and 2021. Included in this article as images, although they are neither illustrations nor commentaries, these texts create sensory resonances in the interactions they evoke between nature and humanity in the heart of this disaster.

## Intimacy in crisis and emotional contagion

Figure 4



Eloise Mignon and David Woods in *Blasted* by Sarah Kane; directed by Anne-Louise Sarks, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne, 2018.

Photograph: © Pia Johnson. Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 13 SA – *Blasted* was created in January 1995 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London, directed by James MacDonald. Sarah Kane was 23 years old. It was met with outrage from critics.
- 14 Structurally the play is divided into two parts and made up of five scenes. The first scene depicts the toxic relationship between Ian, a journalist for the tabloid press, aged 45, and his ex-girlfriend Cate, a young woman who agrees to keep him company but whom he humiliates and abuses both psychologically and sexually. In Act 2, the incursion of an anonymous soldier into their luxury hotel bedroom holds a mirror to that violence and heightens it. The bedroom has been destroyed by a bomb explosion and has become a war zone. The soldier in turn subjects Ian to abuse, before mutilating his eyes. Then Cate returns with a baby in her arms, while Ian, now blind, goes through different maniacal gestures in a series of brief vignettes; the soldier has shot himself in the head. Outside a war is raging; the town is invaded and seems to be a bloodbath. Cate buries the baby, who died of starvation, and who Ian eventually eats. The play ends with the return of the young woman who left to find food. She sits by Ian, whose head is the only part of him visible above the floorboards, and feeds him. Ian speaks the last words of the play, “Thank you” (Kane, 2001, p. 61).
- 15 Sarah Kane’s theatre thus constructs a “subject-world” that allows us to “consider the scene as a site where the political and the public ricochet into the intimate” (Angel-Perez, 2015, paragraph 8). The narrative shift in *Blasted*, is indeed rooted in a sensitive understanding of interpersonal relations, and the complexity of human emotions, which are shown to be the very source of the atrocities that occur in the world. Sarah Kane took stock of this during the writing of this play, as she was confronted with the media focus on the war then raging in the Balkans that had been affecting her for two years. This longer-term emotion she experienced was combined with a sudden burst of empathy during an event she related in an interview with Dan Rebellato in 1998. Discussing the origins of her play, she told him how she had been overwhelmed by the



“absolutely terrible” vision on the television news of an elderly woman in Srebrenica weeping, looking directly into the camera, entreating the United Nations to help, even though clearly no one was going to intervene. This episode led Kane to question the meaning of her work, and to alter its trajectory. Torn between a sudden feeling of the “ridiculous” nature of the play given current events (“what’s the point of carrying on?”) and the desire to nevertheless continue exploring the power plays between her characters, Kane decided to combine rather than eliminate. Asking herself “what could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what’s happening in Bosnia?” she suddenly realized, “one is the seed and the other is the tree. [...] [T]he seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peace-time civilisation” (Kane interviewed by Rebellato, 1998, 20:10-21:38).

- 16 For Sarah Kane, the domestic sphere is a portal onto the origins of the crises that erupt in wartime. The abuse of the Other in intimate spaces not only causes a gaping wound in the subject’s personal history but contains within it the extraordinary violence of the barbaric acts that play out on the geopolitical stage. The media coverage of the conflict thus shifted the course of her writing at a point where, in the face of international inaction, Kane made unexpected empathic and logical connections. These deepened her understanding of the world and allowed her to adopt a broader, more committed perspective that justified her writing choices. Because the genuine impetus for the horror on a global scale is to be found in the intimate, her approach here was not to choose but to connect, and to reveal through connection. Kane sought to shed light on what was already being played out in silence between individuals, in the prelude to major collective tragedies.

Figure 5

One late afternoon, my partner and I were arguing with our eldest son over an unfortunate oversight. Charlie remains static, mute, standing with his long arms, each of his hands pressing the upper phalanges of his fingers against his thumbs. Speechless, he leaves the room. His seven-year-old brother, Samuel, who witnessed the scene, has tears in his eyes. Withdrawing very suddenly, he says, "I feel the same pain as Charlie".

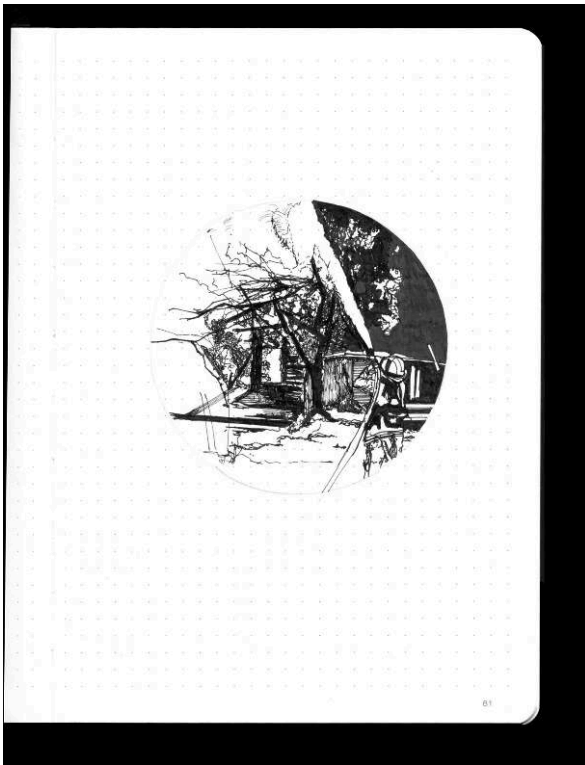
The space emptied of children.  
The space filled with them.  
Silent, sudden,  
a contagion of heavy emotions,  
left disarmed, shaken, shattered.

Elsa Ayache, *Excerpt 1 from Collection 3, Series: "Californian fires,"* printed text, variable dimensions, 2023.

Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 17 Well before her conscious standpoint developed, however, the object of the play initially emerged from an emotional contagion. Opening a window onto a conflict that was destroying lives several thousand kilometers away, the television screen brought down barriers and became a mirror in which the emotion of the viewer reflected, and combined with, that of the victim, the stranger. Interviewed elsewhere about this same old woman in Srebrenica, Kane also said, "she was just crying her eyes out. [...] I just sat there crying watching it; and it wasn't even so much a sense of helplessness as just seeing such extreme pain. And I don't think it was conscious, but I think I started to want to write about that pain" (Kane quoted in Saunders, 2009, p. 50). That is how, having witnessed this distress of the Other, Kane felt she needed to use it as dramatic material.

Figure 6



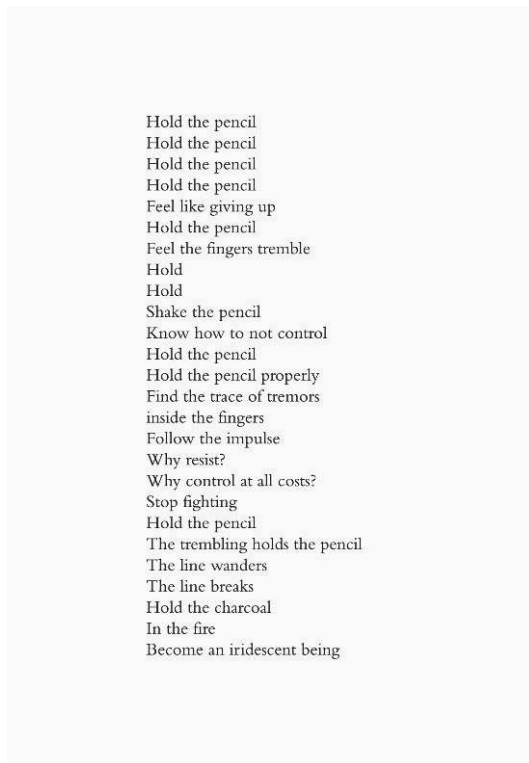
Elsa Ayache, *Untitled*, ink on paper, sketchbook, 14,5 x 20,5 cm, 2018-2021.  
Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 18 The sympoietic nature of *Blasted* above all results from what Kane herself recognized as “a direct response to material as it began to happen” (Kane interviewed by Rebellato, 1998, 20:04-20:09). Kane “makes-with” and her piece “becomes-with” the Other and the world, to use Haraway’s terms. She uses her “response-ability” by taking risks in a way that resembles how Hannah Arendt and Virginia Woolf understood “the high stakes of training the mind and imagination to go visiting, to venture off the beaten path,” according to Haraway:

[They] meet unexpected, non-natal kin, and to strike up conversations, to pose and respond to interesting questions, to propose together something unanticipated, to take up the unasked-for obligations of having met. This is what I have called cultivating response-ability. (Haraway, 2016, p. 130)<sup>4</sup>

- 19 Like Woolf and Arendt, Sarah Kane explores our kinship with strangers, visiting the unknown landscapes of places that are ultimately not so unfamiliar. *Blasted* takes on the urgency of demands stemming from an unexpected encounter that stretches the fringes of our feeling of belonging.

Figure 7



Elsa Ayache, *Excerpt 2 from Collection 3*, Series: "Californian fires," printed text, variable dimensions, 2023.

Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 20 From this point on, the goal is to find a dramatic form that in turn allows the public to experience this tentacular empathy based on the connections that Kane identifies in the private tragedies that are not even considered newsworthy in local papers, and the atrocities that make the front page of the international press. She asks, "how do I say that what's happening in this country between two people in a room could lead to that or is emotionally linked to that?" (Kane interviewed by Rebellato, 1998, 21:50-22:04). Indeed, given the logical connection between the trauma experienced in the intimacy of interpersonal relationships and in national or civilizational collapse, and the similar emotional damage in both cases, the link between the two is at once causal and generic.

Figure 8

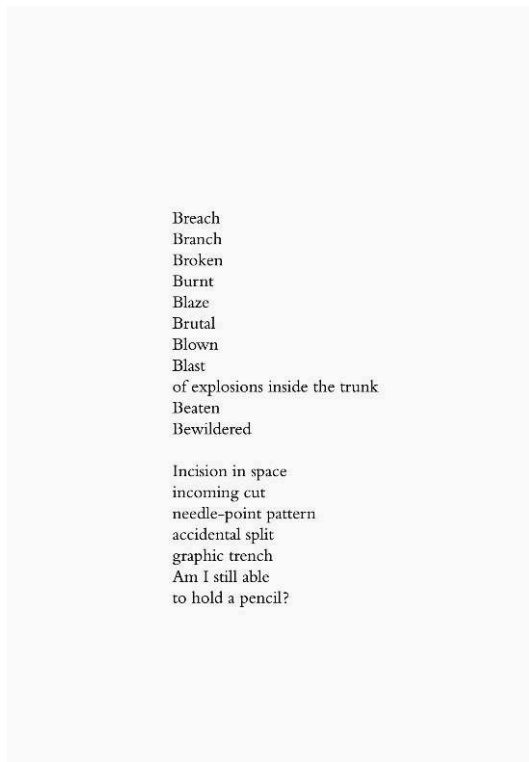


Elsa Ayache, *Untitled*, ink on paper, sketchbook, 14,5 x 20,5 cm, 2018-2021.  
Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 21 Paradoxically, by destroying both the form and the set in Act 2, Sarah Kane allows us to tangibly perceive this organic convergence. She explains that “The form and content attempt to be one—the form is the meaning.” The social, psychological, and sexual tension of the first part of the play are “a premonition of the disaster to come.” With the intrusion of the unexpected—the Soldier, the bomb—the sudden dislocation of the structure of the room provides “a direct parallel to the truth of the war it portrays,” such that she preserves only the unity of the place which “suggests a paper-thin wall between the safety and civilisation of peacetime Britain and the chaotic violence of civil war. A wall that can be torn down at any time, without warning” (Kane quoted in Langridge and Stephenson, 1997, p. 130-131).
- 22 Thus, Kane revives theatrical realism by implementing a poetics of the arbitrary. Because “what happens in war is that suddenly, violently, without any warning whatsoever, people’s lives are completely ripped to pieces,” she explains that she “literally just picked a moment in the play, [and] thought: ‘I’ll plant a bomb, just blow the whole fucking thing up.’” (Kane quoted in Rebellato, 1998, 23:04-23:19). Equally, the implosion of the set, which collapses onto itself, reflects Cate’s fits of hysterics and fainting, which in turn reflect the crisis of moral awareness of western civilization that is blind to the chaos it bears within itself. The distinctions between the political and the private, between here and there, are no longer relevant. The intrusions are not merely parallel, they are “related”—Haraway talks of “kin.” Being aware of one of these dimensions implies being sensitive to the others: empathy is not selective.
- 23 In this respect, Sarah Kane’s position coincided with the theories of care developing around the same time, which see the relation to the Other as the foundation of the

construction of a human being. This intricacy may also be understood in Haraway's terms, when she talks about the Navajo people's weaving in terms of "cosmological performance." She evokes the ties created between vulnerable companion species, shared "through patterns of care and response-ability," imposed by "blasted places of excess death and threatened ongoingness" (Haraway, 2016, p. 89). From integration to integrity, Kane's risk-taking in introducing radical discontinuity in the narrative of her play thus serves to blow a hole in the dramatic and theatrical space, and then to create bonds in porous places. In so doing, she generates a sense of irrationality and shifts the notion of theatrical unity from the formal level to the ethical level, condemning our cognitive dissonances based on the emotional disjunctions they stem from. Because for her, *Blasted* is "not only about social breakdown—it's about the breakdown of human nature itself" (Kane interviewed by Bragg and Boycott, 06:51-06:58), her writing is indeed founded on an understanding of the world that is more ethical than it is sociological, or even moral, as it involves the individual subject in their power to feel and to act.

Figure 9



Elsa Ayache, *Excerpt 3 from Collection 3*, Series: "Californian fires," printed text, variable dimensions, 2023.

Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

## Uncomfortable confrontations: from blindness to mirroring

- 24 Far from media sensationalism, Kane's goal is to pinpoint the endogenous and deterritorialised nature of the violence in human relations, from humiliation in a

relationship to ethnic cleansing. Indeed, Sarah Kane wrote in the specific context of British insularity and English nationalism which gave her fellow citizens the illusory feeling of being protected from and not concerned by the violence in Eastern Europe. When asked about the region where she was born, she condemned its particularly “blind” mindset about Britain’s relationship with its European neighbors, and the belief that certain things just could not happen in Essex—even though there is no less abuse and corruption there than elsewhere. She added that “just because there hasn’t been a civil war in England for a very long time doesn’t mean that what is happening in Bosnia doesn’t affect us” (Kane quoted in Bayley, 1995). *Blasted* therefore “asks uncomfortable questions about British identity, and in bringing a foreign war straight into a Leeds hotel room also asks questions about British engagement with a broader Europe” (Saunders, 2002, p. 51). These questions, which became increasingly salient in the run-up to Brexit, led Kane to propose a play that literally *de-compartmentalized* the limits of the geopolitical space, and which *disturbed* because of that. Revisiting the mechanisms that underlie the head-in-the-sand policy of the media in relation to the atrocities occurring at an international level, she denounced the journalists’ decision to “get angry” not about the “the corpse of Yugoslavia [...] rotting on our doorstep” but about “the cultural event that drew attention to it” (Langridge & Stephenson, 1997, p. 131). Kane was indignant that “they celebrate the end of the Cold War then rapidly turn to sex scandals (which sells more papers),” rejecting any connection to what was happening in the Balkans and refusing to see the extent of “the social sickness we’re suffering from,” for fear of being “swallowed up” by it (Kane quoted in Langridge and Stephenson, 1997, p. 131).

- 25 In the play, Ian (who is himself a journalist) incarnates this insularity and denial, holding a mirror to the journalists attending the première. As he explains to the Soldier, Ian claims to be a local correspondent who only writes for the tabloid press and does not cover international affairs. Ian laughs as he dictates his next column over the phone, in a perfectly detached manner, recounting the atrocious murder of a young woman from Leeds. This was a genuine news story that Kane found in the *Sun* tabloid newspaper (Saunders, 2004, p. 94). Ian is misogynist, racist, and xenophobic, and ultimately has his eyes sucked out, a symbolic castration that deprives him of his tool of work. Ironically, his blindness echoed that of the numerous theatre critics who found themselves caught in this mirror effect, and condemned Kane’s play for its indecency. Indeed, in seeing merely a “disgusting feast of filth” (Tinker, 1995) or “naïve tosh” (Billington, 1995), they illustrate and confirm what the playwright is denouncing, reacting with a knee-jerk defense mechanism that prevents them from appreciating its relevance and validity.
- 26 The playwright David Greig pointed out the dissonance in the media coverage of the war by foreign correspondents, whose reports offer no excuses to journalists like Michael Billington. He reminds them of the horrendous accounts of one of their colleagues, “[a]nyone who read Maggie O’Kane’s *Guardian* reports from Bosnia knows that such atrocities as Kane describes so powerfully, actually do happen, are happening, under the noses of the same papers which have spewed out their loathing for a mere writer” (Greig, 1995). But his vision of *Blasted* as a “harrowing, difficult and ultimately truthful exploration of abuse,” is also a response to the violent crimes occurring simultaneously in England. For example, the media devoted far less attention to the rape and murder of a 15-year-old girl the day after the play premiered, than they did to

attacking Kane, who simply had “done nothing more than represent the abuse she sees in the world around her” (Greig, 1995).

Figure 10



Elsa Ayache, *Excerpt 4 from Collection 3*, Series: “Californian fires,” printed text, variable dimensions, 2023.

Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist’s permission.

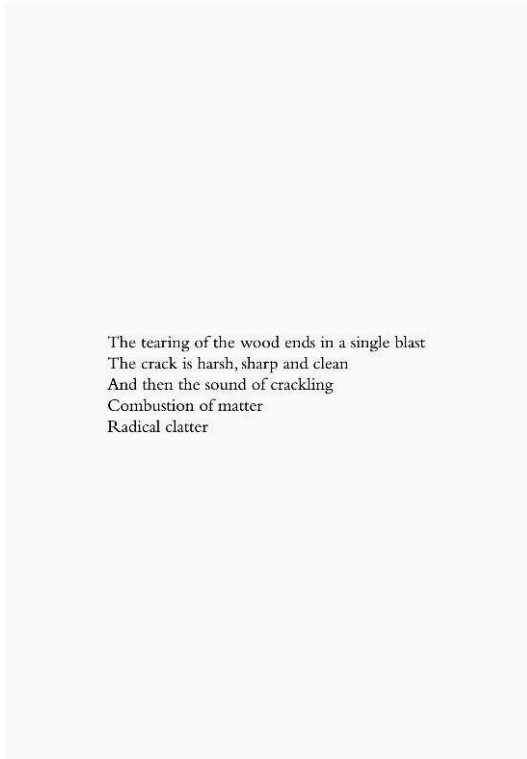
- 27 The hostile reactions to the play therefore encourage us to understand it in light of Kane’s authorial decisions, which she made according to her own emotions as a spectator, as much as in light of the affect she fosters in her spectator-commentators. Faced with the violence unleashed on the stage of the small Royal Court Upstairs, the numerous tirades of dislike and fascination that *Blasted* gave rise to illustrate the movement of abjection that Julia Kristeva describes in *Power of Horror*. Using psychoanalytic tools, Kristeva lifts the veil on the fact that critics, who claim to respond to what is *thinkable*, in fact react in a *sensitive* (or insensitive) way. She explains:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds onto it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1)



28 Through the theatrical experience she creates, Sarah Kane invites us to move beyond both apathy and the “hysteria” that surrounded the reception of *Blasted* and which expressed this movement of abjection that the critics later recognized themselves.<sup>5</sup>

29 Figure 11



Elsa Ayache, *Excerpt 5 from Collection 3*, Series: “Californian fires,” printed text, variable dimensions, 2023.

Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist’s permission.

30 Kane’s position resonates with Martha Nussbaum’s work on the importance of empathy in international relations. The philosopher defends cosmopolitanism, the idea that we are all citizens of the world whose moral responsibility transcends borders and incites compassion, and from there, international cooperation. Reinforced in the wake of September 11, in the context of unequal reactions provoked by the distress of innocent civilians in the war in Afghanistan, her position stems from regret that our collective imaginaries are too often limited to national crises and “when disaster befalls human beings in other places,” it does not “elicit a tremendous outpouring of grief and compassion” (Nussbaum, 2002, p. x). Her gaze sheds light on the enlargement of the perspective presented in *Blasted*, as she affirms:

Compassion begins with the local. But if our moral natures and our emotional natures are to live in any sort of harmony, we must find devices through which to extend our strong emotions—and our ability to imagine the situation of others—to the world of human life as a whole. (Nussbaum, 2002, p. xiii)

31 In a letter of support, Martin Crimp and other playwrights emphasized the way in which Kane studied this extension of our empathic skill through her writing of an extreme rapprochement that, combining “pitiless observation with compassionate humanity,” sought to “range beyond personal experience and bring the wars that rage at such a convenient distance from this island right into its heart” (Crimp *et al.*, 1995).

By confronting us with the reality of our relation to the world and to others, the key issue of her plays lies in this reconnection to our emotions, even to the point of discomfort. In an interview conducted shortly after Kane's death, Nils Tabert, her German translator, noted the feeling of being "very uncomfortable towards the world" in her work, and his belief that "that was one of the things [Kane] was working for—that we have to get back to our feelings—even if this is very risky" (Tabert quoted in Saunders, 2002, p. 118).

- 32 It was while reading Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, where the author compares the rejected lover to a prisoner in a concentration camp, that Kane fully became aware that this understanding has to happen on the emotional and not the intellectual level. Seeing a psychotically "extreme situation" in this "romantic disaster," Barthes makes a parallel with the events at Dachau, even as he notes the indecency of the comparison. He nevertheless emphasizes the same "panic," as these are "situations without remainder, without return: I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever" (Barthes, 1978, p. 49)

Figure 12



David Woods and Eloise Mignon in *Blasted* by Sarah Kane; directed by Anne-Louise Sarkis, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne, 2018.

Photograph: © Pia Johnson. Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 33 These comments, which weave scandalous and unprecedented kinship ties between heterogenous circumstances, shed light on the driving themes in Kane's work. Although initially aghast at his audacity, she explained how Barthes influenced the writing of her third play, *Cleansed*, stressing the "loss of self," disorientation, and a "kind of madness" resulting from these disasters: "If you put people in a situation in which they lose themselves and what you're writing about is an emotion in which people lose themselves then you can make that connection between the two" (Kane quoted in Saunders, 2002, p. 93)

Figure 13



Elsa Ayache, *Untitled*, series II, painting, ink and crayon on paper, 41 x 29,7 cm, 2020.

Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 34 Far from the gratuitous provocation of which she was accused, it is her hyper-permeability to the world that brought Kane to raise the question of the porosity between humanity and barbarity, and to work on the friability of the borders between victim and perpetrator. Expressing the inexpressible, staging the obscene, confronting the abject; faced with this theatre that is intentionally “experiential” and not speculative (Kane quoted by Sierz, 2000, p. 92), the viewer’s experience is visceral and offers no escape.

## Creating (from) collapse: art as risk-taking

Figure 14



Fayssal Bazzi in *Blasted* by Sarah Kane; directed by Anne-Louise Sarks, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne, 2018.

Photograph: © Pia Johnson. Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 35 Sarah Kane's vision is therefore systemic, and the horror that permeates *Blasted* seeks to redress a lack of seeing, hearing, feeling, and thus understanding. Her play, "not only asks [viewers] to empathize" but is "challenging an audience to deconstruct the values of their society as represented on stage" (Prichard quoted in Benedict, 1997, p. 18). Her theatre is traumatic, resonating with the cruelty of Artaud in the nakedness of the truth that is spoken in a raw, even vulgar, language, as well as through symbolic or metaphorical acts—such as the moment the Soldier urinates on the bed.

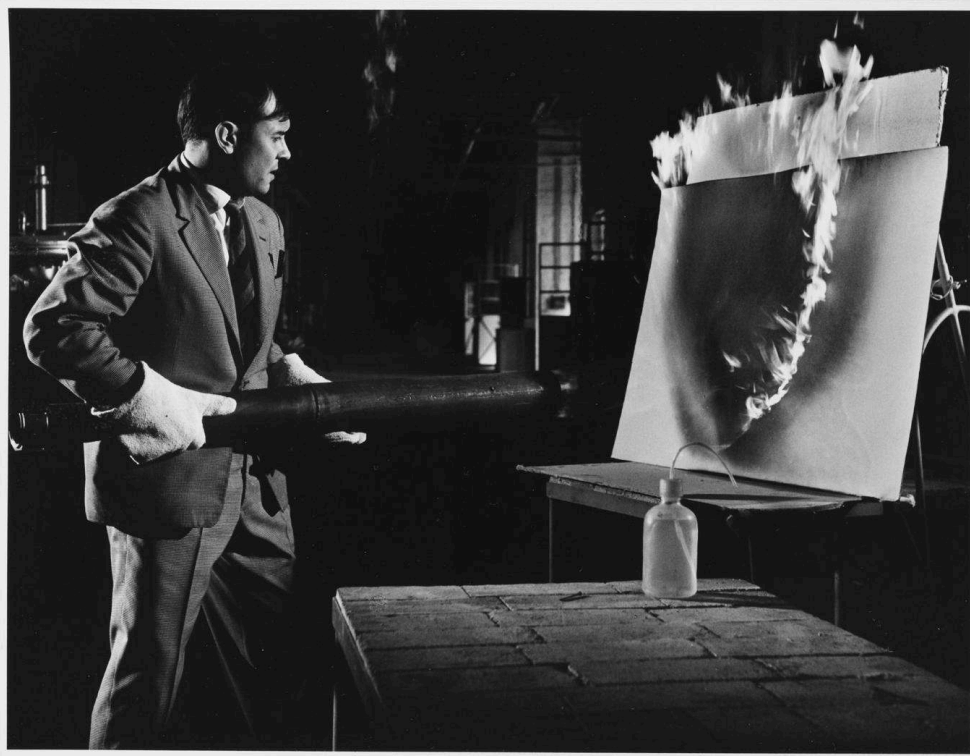
Figure 15



Elsa Ayache, *Untitled*. Series: Californian fires, acrylic on paper, 21 x 27,8 cm, 2021.  
Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 36 For Sarah Kane's agent, Mel Kenyon, this poetics of excess through the fragmentation of the "well-made play" was not only a reflection of its object—barbarity creating chaos—but also an ethical standpoint. Sarah Kane "found existing forms quite constraining or restraining because those big structures offer a kind of security and comfort which I think she felt was dishonest" (Kenyon quoted in Saunders, 2002, p. 40). At the same time, this recourse to an imagery of excess constitutes a jubilatory challenge to conventions, liberating creativity and vitality through a propensity for destruction that Kane describes when she admits being tempted by the idea "that you have a nice little box set in a studio theatre somewhere and you blow it up [...]. It was such a joy for me to be able to do that" (Kane quoted in Rebellato, 23:20-23:41)

Figure 16



Yves Klein painting with fire at the Gaz de France testing center, La Plaine Saint-Denis, 1961.

Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

Photograph: © Succession Yves Klein c/o ADAGP, Paris – Collaboration Harry Shunk and János Kender.

## Figure 17

Make fire. Embrace life.

During the period when Yves Klein sold zones of "immaterial pictorial sensitivity" previously "exposed" and potentially "perceptible" at the Iris Clert gallery between 1961 and 1962, he created fire paintings. On one hand, the artist commercialized the essence of painting, while on the other, he explored the flammability as a pictorial process. The vanished, the disappearing, the void were all integral to his approach, imbued with conviction and gravity.

While watching a documentary from the RTS archives, "Yves Klein in Lausanne (1964)", I discovered that he "projected industrial incandescent gases onto Swedish asbestos cardboard". Given what we know about the danger of asbestos today, these are elegant words. The images are slow, from another time. I observe, suspended.

In another sequence, Yves Klein bravely arrives at the Gaz de France test center in Saint-Denis, materials in hand, a bow tie around his neck, appearing determined to set this whole thing on fire, with panache. Later, an assistant firefighter stands by his side, ready to control the artistic situation and the fiery medium that could potentially become uncontrollable. At strategically chosen moments, water is dripped from above onto the charred surface, creating smoky drips and burns. Blackened areas with blurred edges intermingle with crisp white spaces.

The photograph captured by Harry Shunk and János Kender is a passionate testimony to an artistic gesture executed with determination and vital energy.

Efforts to precisely align the giant Bunsen burner continue  
Fury, flow, fire, flames  
Fantastic force of creation

Painting as a burning drive  
High-temperature paint

In this image, Klein displays a convincing act that I sometimes lack. His gesture possesses the power to rekindle mine.

Resistance  
Endurance  
The fervor of both being and paint propelled to a state of incandescence  
Heart wrapped in work

Yves Klein died of a heart attack that same year, aged 34. "Art is health", he had replied to Georges Mathieu during his Anthropometries performance in March 1960.

Art is fire, which is health, which is art, which is fire. White fire from the tube. A continuous blast of flames. They flare up on the surface, gradually scorching its center, in brown circles. It looks like a colossal spray-painting.

And then a small, intimate catastrophe. Later in the documentary, Rotraut Uecker, Yves Klein's wife, sensitively evokes her husband's torment when he learned that the director of the Gaz de France center who let him experiment with his fire paintings, believing in the meeting of art and science, had been fired.

Elsa Ayache, *Excerpt 6 from Collection 3, Series: "Californian fires,"* printed text, variable dimensions, 2023.

Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 37 The versatile set design by the director Simon Delétang for the French production of *Blasted*, under the title *Anéantis*, at the Comédie-Française in November 2021 pushed the limits of otherness still further. The design suggested a connection between a human event—here the break-out of war, with the explosion of a bomb that reduces the room to dust—and a natural disaster—the eruption of Vesuvius in 79CE, burying the town of Pompei under volcanic projectiles.

Figure 18



Loïc Corbery and Christian Gonon in *Anéantis* by Sarah Kane; directed by Simon Delétang, Comédie-Française, Paris, 2021.

Photograph: © Christophe Raynaud de Lage. Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 38 While Sarah Kane was indignant that her play was more widely reported on in certain newspapers than the Kobe earthquake that killed several thousand people in Japan that same week (Langridge & Stephenson, 1997, p. 130), Delétang developed the idea of “metaphorically including an episode of history where a civilization was almost instantly wiped out.” To achieve this, he designed a backdrop made of mechanical louvres with two starkly contrasting sides. The first is figurative, painted in fiery tones, inspired by a mural of a Dionysian rite found in Pompei; and the second, used only for the final scene, is the sober presentation of the original title, black letters on a white background. In between, the panels are left half-open at the arrival of the Soldier, to reveal “a wall of floodlights, signifying the explosion and its consequences” (Delétang, 2021).



Figure 19



Christian Gonon and Élise Lhomeau in *Anéantis* by Sarah Kane, directed by Simon Delétang, Comédie-Française, Paris, 2021.

Photograph: © Christophe Raynaud de Lage. Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 39 From Pompeii and Leeds, the dialogue between these remote space-times, evocative of the distance between the British Isles and Bosnia-Herzegovnia, and the false impression of heterogeneity and impermeability, creates an arborescence of emotional resonances. Delétang emphasizes the hidden affinities not only between a domestic (anecdotal) tragedy, and a collective (historical) tragedy, but also between two cataclysms in which human responsibility is diametrically opposite. Much like Barthes' *Lover*, the focus is on the collapse of the subject caught in a personal tragedy, and the collapse of a city, a society, or even a civilization, decimated by a radical event that, in just a few minutes, destroys so many minuscules lives, caught up in an unprecedented catastrophe.
- 40 At the same time, this moment marks the emergence of unexpected forms that are themselves tentacular. Pliny the Younger, witnessing the explosion of Vesuvius, wrote in his *Epistulae* of the threatening approach of the fire, the thick plume of ash, and what is today known as a Plinian eruption:

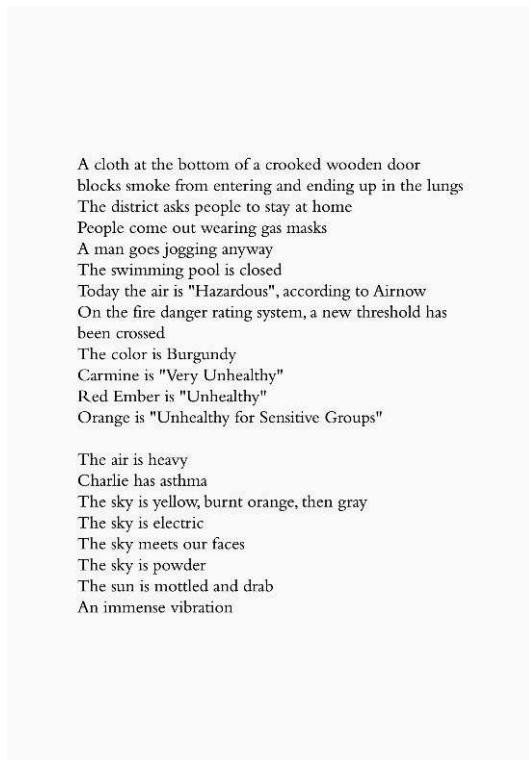
the cloud was rising [...] like an umbrella pine, for it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches. [...] [In places it] looked white, elsewhere blotched and dirty, according to the amount of soil and ashes it carried with it. (Pliny the Younger, 1969, p. 166)

Figure 20



Elsa Ayache, *Untitled*. Series: Californian Fires, ink on paper, burned 21 x 27,8 cm, 2021.  
Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

Figure 21



Elsa Ayache, *Excerpt 7 from Collection 3*, Series: "Californian fires," printed text, variable dimensions, 2023.

Protected by copyright, reproduced with the artist's permission.

- 41 EA – Given the extreme violence against humans, and against the environment, forms of expression take the risk of art. In other words, they open up a space for connections that is both individual and collective, in which conscience and distance can operate.
- 42 SA – By inviting the audience to tangibly experience an unbearable reality in a way that is both indirect and visceral, metaphorical and real, Sarah Kane provides a sensory understanding of the intricate intertwining of our collapses. With *Blasted*, the unpredictable and radical nature of cruelty can be approached through what is ultimately intemporal, rather than local, about the human condition.
- 43 EA – Working from a perspective of collapse means observing and accepting, in the face of catastrophe, that something is completely beyond us. It means conceptualizing doubt and fragility as openings towards the Other, possible vectors of sharing and shared construction. To achieve this, my works do not stem from or tend towards extreme action. The goal is to respond through drawing and working with detail, slowness, and nuance. To respond through the writing in its figurative capacity.
- 44 SA – Gaps, holes, and blind spots (on paper, on the set, in the narrative, in our minds) hold a mirror to those buried emotions that mutually recognize or betray each other in their resistances. When the barriers between our experiences are broken down, they connect to each other, creating an arborescence, a tentacular web of meanings, at the heart of a feeling of discomfort that is both intimate and collective, in the theatre and beyond. The stage, exploded, exposed and porous, enables, or attempts, to foster our sense of being linked to each other. Distance is no longer that which keeps violence at arm's length, but that which allows connections to be made.
- 45 SEA – Words, images, sounds, and gestures are in dialogue, both near and far. Through a combination of theory and practice, the texts and figures presented here perform a reciprocity that can be seen through various expressions, intentions, and attempts. The encounter between disciplines also occurs through the tentacular mobilization of what endangers them, and what unites them to each other and their environment—whether it opens fire, catches fire, burns, scandalizes, or stupefies. Permeability allows voices to resonate with each other, and makes this vulnerability the foundation of an ethical position. From a shared and accepted hyper-sensitivity in the face of crises, our projects in creation, research, and communication, thus experiment with cross-cutting forms and methods open to destabilization. Between the artistic and scientific, these propositions explore the patterns and modalities of collapse and resistance, where hybridity and brokenness both come into play, as an extension of the sympoietic forms that, perhaps, redefine the horizon of the living world itself.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Angel-Perez, É. (2015). "La scène traumatique de Sarah Kane," *Sillages critiques*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.4328>

Barthes, R. (1978). *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments* (translated by Richard Howard). Hill and Wang.

- Bayley, C. (1995, January 23). "A very angry young woman," *Independent*.
- Benedict, D. (1995, 22 January). "Disgusting violence? Actually it's quite a peaceful play," *Independent*.
- Benedict, D. (1997, 22 October). "Essex girl writes play' shock horror," *Independent*.
- Billington, M. (1995, 20 January). "Review of *Blasted*," *Guardian*.
- Bragg, M., Boycott, R. (1995, February). Entretien avec Sarah Kane [audio]. *Start the Week*, BBC Radio 4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p02j8h7j>
- Crimp, M., Godfrey, P., Oakes, M., Motton, G. (1995, 23 January). "Letter to the editor," *Guardian*.
- De Jongh, N. (2001, 4 avril). "A flawed theatrical coup," *London Evening Standard*.
- Delétang, S. (2021, 4 October). Entre ici Sarah Kane. Comédie-Française. <https://www.comedie-francaise.fr/fr/actualites/entre-ici-sarah-kane>
- Dufourmantelle, A. (2013). *Puissance de la douceur*. Payot & Rivages.
- Greig, D. (2003). "Lettre au *Guardian* du 24 janvier 1995" (translation Sarah Hirschmuller and Sinéad Rushe), *OutreScène*, 1(56-57).
- Haraway, D. (2020). *Vivre avec le trouble* (translation Vivien García). Les éditions des mondes à faire.
- Hattenstone, S. (2000, 1<sup>st</sup> July). "A sad hurrah," *Guardian*.
- Kane, S. (1998). *Anéantis* (translation Lucien Marchal). L'Arche.
- Kristeva, J. (1980). *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*. Seuil.
- Langridge, N., Stephenson, H. (1997). *Rage and Reason. Women Playwrights on Playwriting*. Methuen Drama.
- Margulis, L. (1998). *Symbiotic Planet. A New Look at Evolution*. Basic Books.
- McBurney, S. (2016). *The Encounter*. NHB Modern Plays.
- Nussbaum, M. (1996). *For Love of Country. Debating the Limits of Patriotism*. Beacon Press.
- Rebellato, D. (1998, 3 November). "Sarah Kane Interview" [audio]. Site internet de Dan Rebellato. <https://www.danrebellato.co.uk/sarah-kane-interview>
- Saunders, G. (2004). *Love Me or Kill Me. Sarah Kane et le théâtre* (translation Georges Bas). L'Arche.
- Saunders, G. (2009). *About Kane. The Playwright and the Work*. Faber and Faber.
- Sierz, A. (2000). *In-Yer-Face Theatre*. Faber and Faber.
- The Younger Pliny. (1969). *Letters* (translated by Betty Radice). Penguin Classics.
- Tinker, J. (1995, 19 January). "This disgusting feast of filth," *Daily Mail*.

## NOTES

1. The initials SEA indicate that the following text was written by Solange Ayache (SA) and Elsa Ayache (EA).
2. Haraway draws on the symbiosis between micro-organisms and the Gaia hypothesis according to which our planet is not a living organism in itself but rather a self-regulating system between interconnected and interacting organisms (Margulis, 1998). In sympoietic systems, interaction

practices between living things generate complex interdependent life forms without stable edges. These are evolving and changing, and remain connected to the dynamic relations upon which they are founded.

3. New Brutalism and *in-yer-face* are terms used by critiques to refer to the new generation of playwrights that emerged in the early 1990s (the Nasty Nineties) and whose plays unreservedly reveal head-on the extreme obscene violence of the time.

4. In a chapter entitled “A Curious Practice,” on the work of Vinciane Despret, Haraway quotes Hannah Arendt’s *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*: “To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting” (Haraway, 2016, p. 126).

5. The day after the premiere, Sarah Kane commented, “I knew the tabloids wouldn’t like it, but the response has been hysterical and apoplectic” (Benedict, 1995). David Greig (1995) predicted it would be a success “after the hysteria dies down” (p. 57). Indeed, after Kane’s death, Billington himself recognised that “there was a hysteria about the first night, and it was difficult to judge the play coolly and calmly. So I got it wrong, as I keep saying” (Billington quoted in Hattenstone, 2000). De Jongh, who attended the 2001 staging at the Royal Court, noted “How shrill and silly the 1995 hullabaloo and hysteria seemed last night when *Blasted* returned to the Royal Court. It is, and always was, a play with a fine, moral purpose” (De Jongh, 2001).

## ABSTRACTS

In a dialogue between the visual arts and the theatre, this paper brings together a poetic voice and a critical voice to ask how the place, forms, and effects of empathy work as a catalyst in contemporary art and research practices. It draws on some of Elsa Ayache’s visual and textual work on megafires (2020-2023) alongside a study of British playwright Sarah Kane’s first play, *Blasted* (1995), which was recently staged at the Comédie-Française for the first time. Exploring what could be called “tentacular empathy” as an ethical position, the article addresses the necessary development of our emotional skills in order to confront the converging crises that we face both individually and collectively. In this context where life on Earth is at stake, this hybrid contribution aims to provide the reader-viewer with a cognitive and embodied experience of our shared vulnerability, as it engages in the “art science worldings as sympoietic practices for living on a damaged planet” which Donna Haraway describes in her 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble* (p. 67).

## INDEX

**Keywords:** visual arts, theatre studies, contemporary British theatre, political theatre, in-yer-face theatre, Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, tentacular empathy, fragile, vulnerability, megafires, catastrophe, breakdown, ecological crisis, Balkan war, media coverage, Donna Haraway, sympoiesis

## AUTHORS

### ELSA AYACHE

Elsa Ayache is an artist and senior lecturer in visual arts at the Sorbonne School of the Arts (University Paris 1). Previously she taught at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. Her PhD, entitled *Computer processing, a painter's tool and medium in attempting to let go*, compared classical and contemporary pictorial methods and expressions with new computer-based working methods. Her painting practice (in the literal, figurative, and extended senses), combines different languages and mediums. Her current research interests focus on megafires and the representation of the notions of accident, fragility, and losing control, which are at the heart of human-nature interactions.

### SOLANGE AYACHE

Solange Ayache is a Senior Lecturer in English Studies at Sorbonne University and teaches at the National Institute for Teaching and Education in Paris. A member of the research center VALE (Anglophone Voices: Literature and Aesthetics), she looks at how urgent issues about the state of the world, the state of our minds, and the state of our bodies are depicted in theatre and performance poetry. Entitled *In-Yer-Head Theatre: Staging the Mind in Contemporary British Drama*, her PhD (2017) examined dramatic experiments and stage productions exploring mental illnesses and the workings of the human psyche (Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, etc.). Her research focuses on the links between theatre and science from an interdisciplinary approach with strong interests in the medical and environmental humanities (ecotheatre).