



## ©ovid's metamorphoses: game pieces in the age of pandemics

As you may recall, in order to make the most of the long period of isolation during the Covid 19 lockdown between 2020 and 2022, many artists and musicians in particular, in addition to singing out of their windows and improvising concerts on the roofs of their homes, embarked on remote creative projects facilitated by the web and social networks.

Unable to organise whole seasons of concerts and tours, many artists have concentrated on recording in improvised home studios, telematic concerts in direct communication with musicians in different places, and a whole series of creative 'networking' operations that in recent years have begun to see the light of day in the form of albums, videos, novels, diaries and other 'distant' editions. On closer inspection, what we have witnessed during the months of forced lockdown is a kind of revival of the multi-handed collaborations, both literary and visual, that have been very common since the 1920s in the Surrealist milieu, when artists such as André Breton, Marcel Duhamel or Yannick Németh, André Breton, Marcel Duhamel and Yves Tanguy (as well as temporary celebrities such as Henry Miller and Frida Kahlo) spent long convivial evenings in Paris practising a pastime known as 'cadavre exquis' (excellent corpse), which was in fact based on a children's game that existed under different names in many countries and cultures. In short, this non-competitive amusement consists of creating a collective image or text while ignoring or knowing very little about the contribution of the other participants. For example, a sentence is added to a text of which only the last word is known, or a drawing is continued on a specially folded sheet of paper of which only a few details are visible. The result is usually amusing, bizarre and 'surreal', like the phrase 'the excellent corpse will drink the new wine', which gave the game its name. There are also variations on this childhood pastime, such as 'wireless telephone' (known as 'Chinese whispers' in some English speaking countries, 'Arabic telephone' in France, etc.), which consists of a large number of participants standing in a line or circle and whispering a few words into their neighbour's ear. The combination

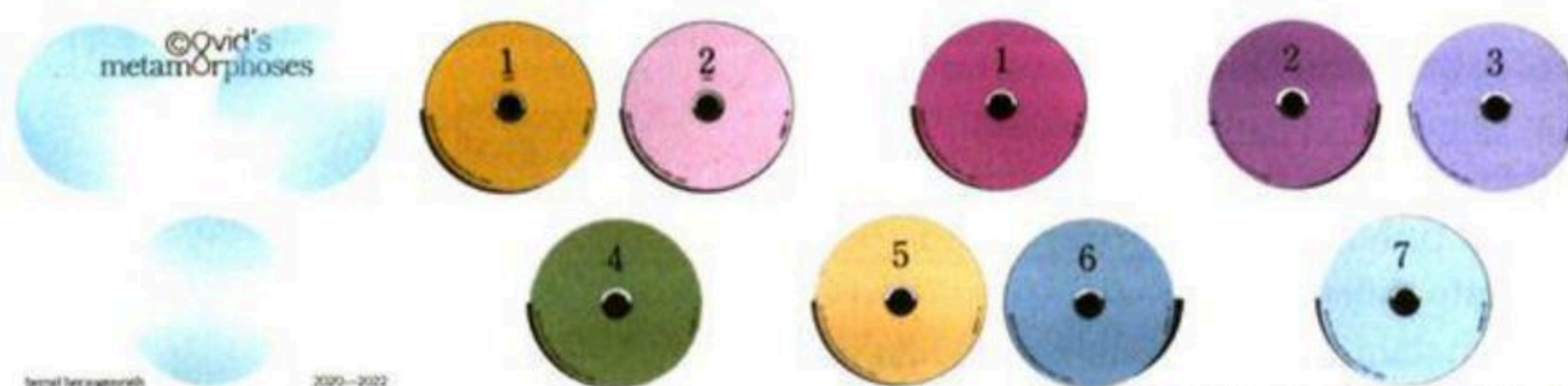
of misinterpretations leads to hilarious and surprising results when the last player's sentence is compared with the source text. Lockdown has encouraged the repetition of precisely these outdated games in new computerised versions that can be played remotely.

A project that, due to the daring singularity of the concept and the number of authors involved, somehow summarises and historicises the generalised impulse towards planetary participation in a virtuous creative network, under certain physical constraints and social conditions, is that of a professor of American literature and culture at Frankfurt's Goethe University, Dr. Bernd Herzogenrath, curator of, among other things, the anthology 'Sonic Thinking' (Bloomsbury 2018) on a philosophical approach to the medium of sound. In the age of pandemics, Dr. Bernd Herzogenrath came up with the idea of revisiting the epic-mythological poem 'The Metamorphoses' by Publius Ovid Naso - appropriately renamed, with an effective pun, '©ovid's Metamorphoses' - in a large multimedia game modelled precisely on the wireless telephone. Assisted by field recording sound artist Lasse-Marc Riek, Herzogenrath involved a host of international authors working in various disciplines, asking 19 sets of 6 participants to metaphorically create 'positive antibodies' to the epidemic, acting as an interface between an initial 'infection' of data and its subsequent reworking. Each set of 6 authors was given 14 days, the length of a quarantine, to complete the cycle, in which, for example, a text read over the phone by artist 0 (i.e. one of the two curators) was transformed into a series of images by artist 1, then visualised in a video by artist 2, to which artist 3 added a

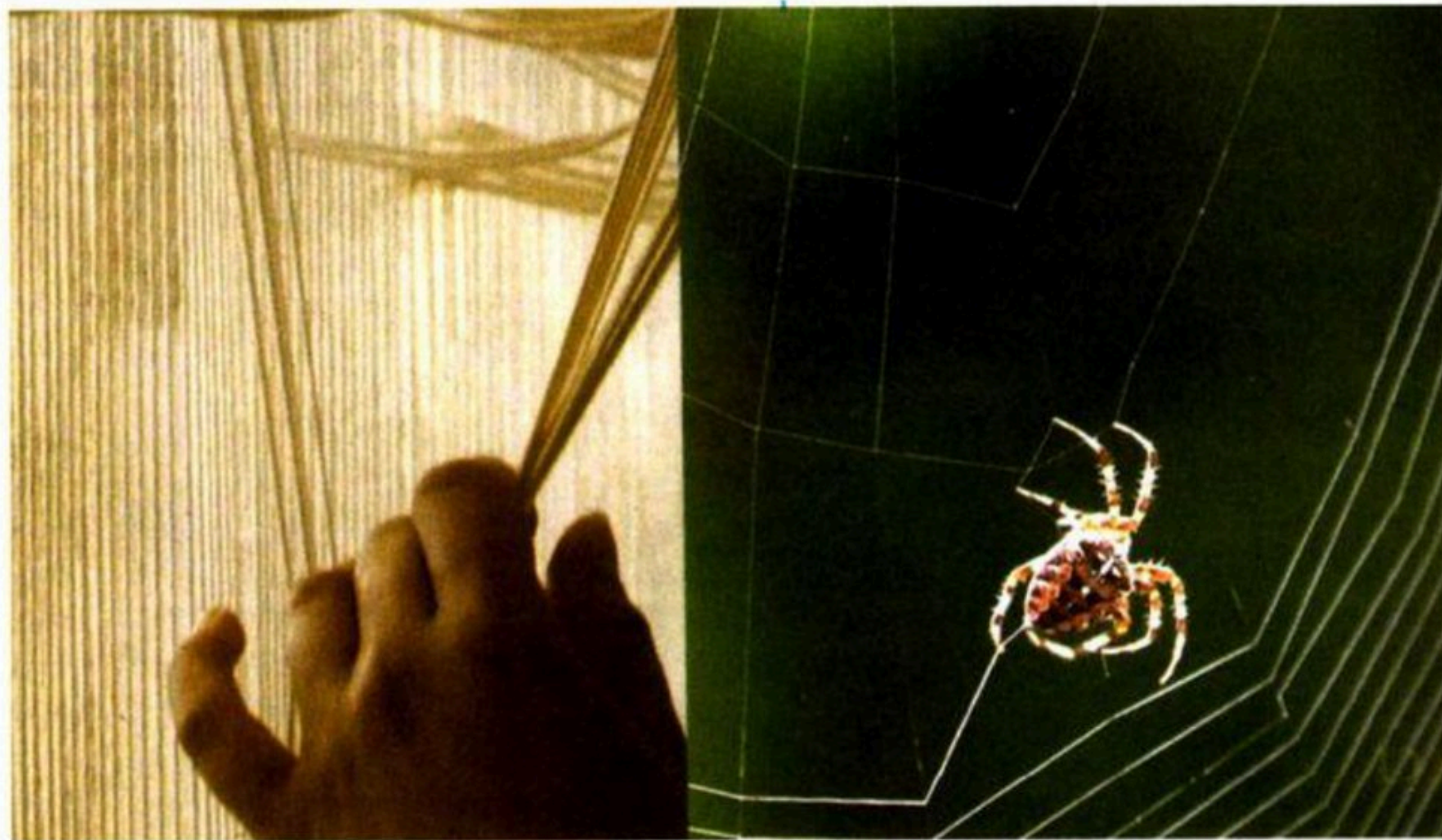
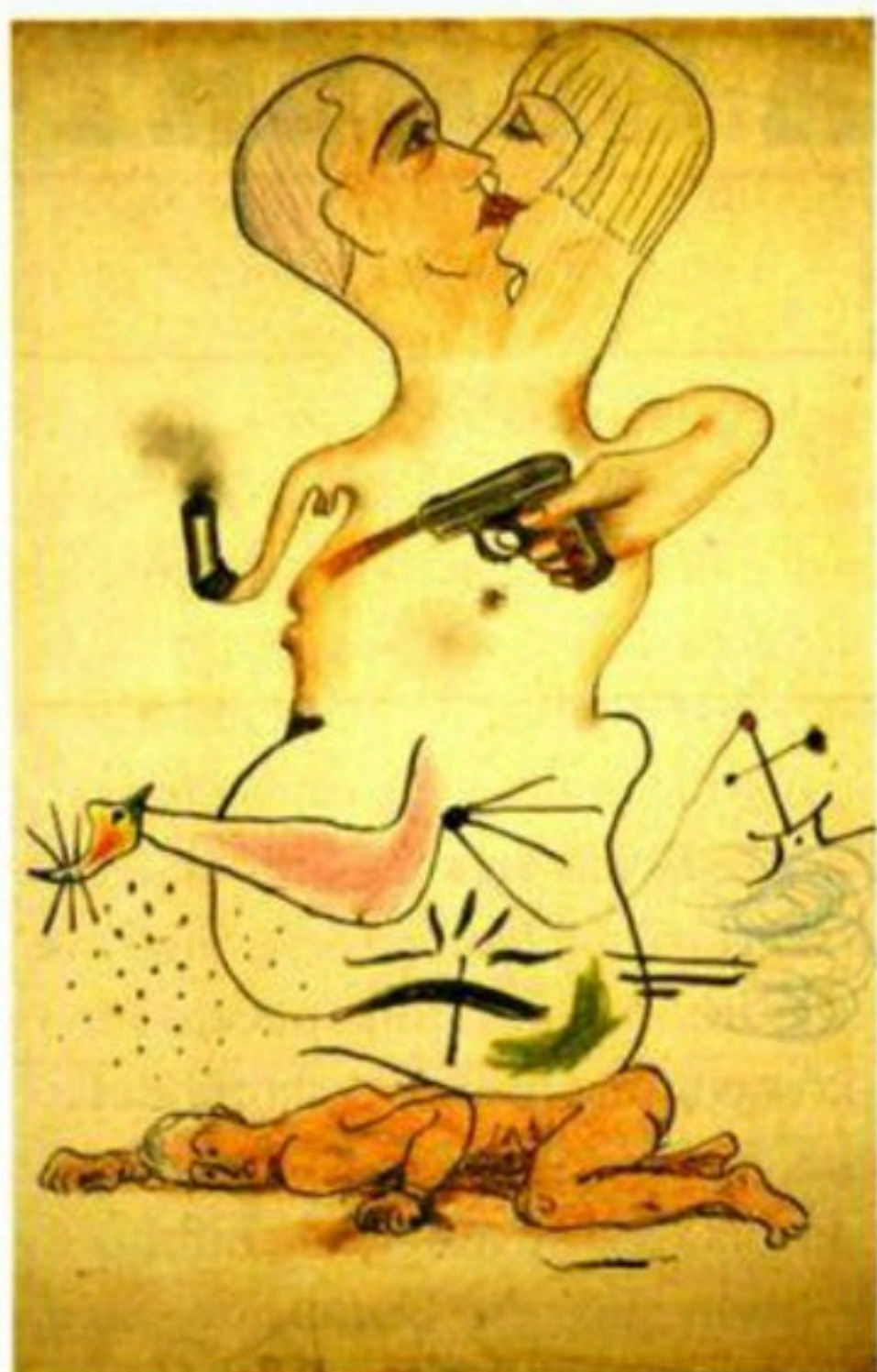


Prof. Bernd Herzogenrath

soundtrack, and so on, until artist 6 reported the results of the chain back to 0. "Through the interplay of infection and information, chains of information and sources of infection, new meanings are spread in spaces which are defined and determined by all the artists," says the introduction to the project, "with the intention of disrupting the idea behind Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', and defining the Covid 19 epidemic as a possible counterbalance to the myths on which Western culture is based. It was no easy task for Herzogenrath and Riek to involve and coordinate more than 100 participants scattered in every corner of the planet, to ensure that the tight response times were respected, and then to collect the contributions in various media and document them, with as little editing as possible to preserve the extemporaneous character of the experiment, in the multimedia box "©ovid's metamorphoses 2020-2022" (Meakusma 2023, distributed in Italy by Rizosfera. org), a refined object consisting of a 200-page illustrated book



(c)ovid's Metamorphoses box set



sopra a sinistra: Cadavere eccellente surrealista • sopra a destra: fotogramma da (c)ovid's Metamorphoses • in basso: Lasse-Mark Riek

in LP format, 2 DVDs and 7 CDs, for several hours of listening, reading and viewing. The extensive list of authors includes musicians of the calibre of Reinhold Friedl of Zeitkratzer, Lucrecia Dalt, Robin Rimbaud, Thomas Köner, Francisco López, Italians Nicola Di Croce, Sergio Armaroli and Obsolete Capitalism, even the great producer Lee 'Scratch' Perry (who died in 2021), audio-artists and stars such as Brandon LaBelle, Christina Kubisch, Annea Lockwood, visual artists from the Czechoslovakian Zuzana Lazarova to the Norwegian Maria Wang Kvalheim, directors from Bill Morrison (USA) to Xu Xin (China). The useful apparatus of biographies at the end of the volume allows a better overview of the large group. However, it is difficult to summarise the content of such a diverse and articulated experience, which by its very nature leads its authors to consider themselves free from the constraints of song, poetry or other canonical formats.

The dense collection on the sound side is mostly in an undefined area between spoken word, sound art and homemade field recordings; the pages of the book are filled with photographs, collages, paintings, illustrations and even some comics, while the text section is dominated by notes and reflections on the heroes and mythologies of the ancient world that Ovid dealt with in his poem. The DVD features contributions in the style of environmental video art, cut-ups of stock images and pseudo-scientific investigations. Significant is the contribution of the Czechoslovakian filmmaker Hedvika Hlaváčková, who,

in re-examining the myth of Arachne, juxtaposes the hands of a weaver at work with a spider spinning its web, also recalling the reticular nature of the collective enterprise. The unusual operation requires equally peculiar modes of realisation, so that one is led to appreciate, more than the structure and organicity of the contributions, the different forms of interaction between the authors and the ability to hold on to the pandemic theme. Somehow, by promoting the meeting and metamorphosis of different techniques and languages, Herzogenrath has given shape to a complex and multi-layered

version of what is known in music as a 'game piece', i.e. a work created by following certain rules (see the random combinations of sound modules in various compositions by Iannis Xenakis) or centred on instructions laid out on packs of cards (such as Brian Eno's 'Oblique Strategies' or the 600 cards of Einstürzende Neubauten's 'Dave'). All in all, a collective work that can be defined as a "monstre" and a memorable crossroads of interdisciplinary new media art, which will rightly join John Zorn's "Cobra" or Piermario Ciani's "Trax-Xtra" in the list of milestones that define the "network as art".

