

Research Title

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Soft Practices: Material Memory, Fragility and Speculative Futures

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The conference brings together international researchers, artists and practitioners working across memory studies, trauma, heritage, health-sector research and creative practice.

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Soft Practices: Material Memory, Fragility and Speculative Futures
Sarah King

This presentation traces an evolving practice-led enquiry into how artistic processes can engage with fragile forms of memory in conditions of erasure, ecological precarity and transformation. Beginning with *The Lost Object* (2021–24), which examined abjection, preservation and intimate acts of repair, the research has moved toward a speculative methodology centred on “soft practices”: forms of care, ritual, and tenderness that work with what is vulnerable, overlooked or at risk of disappearing. The recent installation *Vessels for an Uncertain Future*, created for the Memory Site Artefact exhibition *Traces, Ruptures, Returns*, embodies this shift. Constructed from beach-gathered textiles, discarded industrial materials, latex and medical tubing, the vessels function as carriers of material memory - objects that hold traces of tide, weathering, labour and ecological loss.

Drawing on Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” the project reimagines the vessel as a feminist tool for survival, radically opposed to heroic narratives of domination. The positioning of the vessels according to speculative sea-level rise projections transforms the installation into a poetic instrument of climate witnessing, asking what is submerged, what persists, and what must be carried forward. The work engages with theoretical frameworks from psychoanalysis (Kristeva, Freud), feminist and affect theory (Ahmed), ecological anthropology (Ingold) and material philosophy (Barad), situating memory as an embodied, relational and unstable phenomenon.

By exploring the entanglement of material trace, ecological grief and speculative hope, the presentation examines how artistic practice can participate in remembering and creating simultaneously - holding what is at risk of being forgotten while imagining forms of survival grounded in care, softness and relationality. The project proposes that in times of uncertainty, acts of carrying, tending and attending may constitute powerful modes of resistance and future-making.

Soft Practices: Material Memory, Fragility and Speculative Futures

I want to begin with an act rather than a definition, the act of carrying. Carrying something fragile. Carrying something damaged. Carrying something that cannot be repaired, but still demands care.

My recent research has evolved through a sequence of practice-based projects that examine fragility, memory, and the politics of care. These projects have consistently asked how artistic practice might engage with what is vulnerable, overlooked, or at risk of being forgotten, and how acts of material attention can become a form of resistance. I want to begin with *The Lost Object*, a project that ran from 2021–24, because it sets the stage for what follows and helps explain the trajectory towards new work - *Vessels for an Uncertain Future*.

What I want to emphasise at the outset is that this is not a linear progression from one resolved project to the next, but an unfolding enquiry, one shaped by moments where certain methods began to feel insufficient. The shift I will trace today is less about changing subject matter, and more about changing *how* I work with vulnerability, loss, and memory as conditions that cannot always be repaired or resolved.

The Lost Object was a practice-led investigation into abjection, preservation, and intimacy. It worked through forensic material arrangements, fragile fragments assembled into sculptural constellations that were both evidence and offering. These fragments were drawn from specific sites and carried their histories with them: broken things, overlooked materials, vulnerable traces. By arranging them carefully, by binding and repairing them, I sought to resist the erasures that accompany trauma and forgetting. This was not only about the material fragments themselves but also about the acts of attention, patience, and ritualised handling that accompanied their transformation.

At this stage in my practice, repair still felt like a viable and meaningful response. Stitching and binding became ways of staying with damaged material rather than discarding it. These gestures were deliberately slow and repetitive, resisting speed and efficiency, and foregrounding care as a form of labour rather than a symbolic gesture.

Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror* (1984), writes that abjection is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.” (1984) In that earlier project, abjection was not something to be cast aside but something to work with materially, to acknowledge fragility, to witness it, and to offer repair. The work was site-based because each fragment was bound to its place of origin, carrying an index of its past. And it was also about intimacy, how handling and reassembling broken matter creates new relations of care. This approach carried with it an ethics: to stay with the discomfort of damaged matter, to work slowly with what unsettles, and to create conditions in which it might be held rather than erased.

Kristeva’s writing helped me understand why these materials felt so charged. Abjection is not simply about disgust; it is about proximity, about what comes too close to the self and destabilises boundaries. Working materially with abjection required me to remain close to discomfort, rather than distancing myself from it, and to treat fragility as something that demanded care rather than removal.

The uncanny is a threshold space, a fragile balance between what is known and what is unknowable. In my practice, I traverse this space through acts of gathering, caring, and repairing. The found object, the washed-up fabric, the forgotten fragment, each carries an imprint of time, a resonance of what was and what remains. This is the work of conjuring: calling forth material memory and inviting the unseen to reveal itself.

Freud speaks of the uncanny as that which is both familiar and strange, a doubling that unsettles. A lock of hair, once a marker of childhood, is now severed, transformed into a keepsake. A bandage, once an instrument of healing, now discarded, stained with past wounds. These are materials of intimate estrangement, carriers of the abject. By bringing such fragments into dialogue within an installation, the uncanny becomes not only a psychoanalytic category but a material condition: objects caught between recognition and estrangement, tenderness and disturbance.

It was here that I began to feel the limits of repair. While these acts of care could hold individual loss, they struggled to respond to broader forms of ecological and cultural erasure. This sense of insufficiency, of repair not being enough became a productive tension that pushed the work in a new direction.

This concern with fragility and abjection now develops in my current research project, *Soft Practices: Enchanted Vulnerabilities through Ritual, Fragility, and the Esoteric Body*. Where *The Lost Object* was about preservation, *Soft Practices* turns towards speculation: away from what is lost, towards what might be carried forward. I am interested in how soft approaches - care, repair, ritual, enchantment might create forms of resistance and survival in times of crisis.

I began to question whether repair which often implies restoration or return was the right methodology for working with irreversible loss. This led me toward practices that could hold uncertainty without resolving it: carrying, tending, and attending. These practices are often culturally coded as feminine or secondary, yet they are fundamental to survival. Here, softness is a method.

“The first cultural device was probably a recipient... a container for carrying things.”

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986)

Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986) has been a crucial conceptual anchor for this phase of my research. In this essay, Le Guin challenges the dominant cultural narrative that imagines human progress as driven by conquest, heroism, and the weapon. She proposes instead that the earliest and most important human technology was not the spear, but the container: the bag, the basket, the vessel, a tool designed not to dominate, but to gather, hold, and carry.

What Le Guin offers is not simply an alternative origin story, but a radical reframing of value. The carrier bag privileges sustenance over spectacle, maintenance over mastery, and collectivity over individual triumph. In the context of ecological crisis, this feels especially urgent. The heroic narrative, the idea that we can extract, overcome, or engineer our way out of precarity has

repeatedly failed. Le Guin's proposition suggests that survival may instead depend on practices of holding, tending, and adapting to vulnerability.

For my own practice, this reframing has been transformative. The vessel becomes both a material form and a narrative device, a way of thinking through how memory, care, and responsibility circulate. These vessels do not promise resolution or protection from loss. Rather, they acknowledge fragility as a condition of living, asking what we are willing to carry, and for whom.

Importantly, Le Guin's carrier bag is also a feminist methodology. It resists linear progress and singular authorship, favouring accumulation, multiplicity, and relational meaning. This aligns closely with practice-led research, where knowledge emerges through making, through repetition, and through attention to material behaviour rather than through the imposition of fixed outcomes. In this sense, the vessels are not illustrations of theory, but active participants in thinking, soft tools for holding uncertainty, memory, and speculative futures.

Vessels for an Uncertain Future emerges directly from this shift. The work is composed of suspended and wall-mounted forms made from textiles gathered from beaches along the south west coast of the UK, combined with discarded materials from local industries, latex, medical tubing, and organic matter. These are precarious, stitched and bound forms. They evoke reliquaries, survival rigs, and ritual carriers.

These materials are not neutral. They arrive already marked by use, labour, extraction, and environmental exposure. Here, Tim Ingold's writing in *The Life of Lines* (2015) has been particularly influential. When Ingold writes that "to carry is not simply to transport; it is to move in company with, to bear along in a relation of care," (2015) he reframes carrying as a relational, embodied, and often exhausting act. Carrying, in this sense, becomes a gesture of responsibility, a way of staying with what is fragile while still moving forward.

Here we can see a historical water carrier. Across cultures, vessels for carrying water have been among the most necessary and symbolically resonant objects. Ceramic jars, gourds, animal skins, brass containers, industrial canisters, each of these has been a technology of survival, but also a carrier of cultural meaning.

In many societies, the labour of carrying water is gendered, associated with women's work, with rituals of care, and with community endurance. Thinking through Le Guin, I began to understand the vessel as both object and narrative, one that centres sustenance, relational survival, and the quiet persistence required to endure.

The positioning of the vessels follows the trajectory of sea-level rise projections over the next fifty years. They do not mark exact measurements but instead trace a speculative line of absence and precarity. In doing so, they function as poetic instruments of climate witnessing. They ask: what will be submerged, what can be sustained, and what must be carried forward?

Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space* (1994), reminds us that containers are not empty: they hold memory and reverie. "The house, the drawer, the casket," he writes, "each shelters daydreams, each contains the essence of intimacy." (1994) My vessels attempt to contain not

only materials, but also grief, memory, and speculative hope. Speculation here is not prediction, but orientation, a way of positioning care in relation to uncertain futures.

This brings me back to methodology. My approach is rooted in embodied enquiry, working with fragile, mutable, ritualised forms to see how softness can become a mode of resistance. Karen Barad's agential realism (2007) is instructive here: matter is not passive, but an active participant in the world's becoming. The materials gathered from beaches carry histories of tides, weathering, and pollution. The industrial fabrics are marked by systems of production and waste. In their entanglement with latex and tubing, new relations emerge. The materials themselves act; they are part of the work's agency.

Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) reminds us that care is not simply a feeling, but a labour, a way of tending to the fragility of things. The hand-stitching, the binding of fabric, the precarious suspension of these vessels make visible the work of holding things together in the face of uncertainty.

Site, too, is multiple here: the literal beaches where materials were gathered; the speculative coastline of the future; and the spectral site of memory and absence, where what was once solid ground becomes precarious or disappears altogether.

Looking ahead, this research is now moving towards a more explicitly socially engaged mode of practice. While the current work centres on material memory and speculative futures within the gallery, the logic of the vessel invites expansion beyond that space. If carrying is a relational act, then it becomes important to ask: who carries, what is carried, and how these acts are shared.

Future iterations of this project will involve working with coastal communities who are already living with the realities of erosion, flooding, and environmental uncertainty. Rather than producing finished objects in advance, the vessels would function as prompts or frameworks for collective making, storytelling, and reflection. Participants might contribute materials, memories, or narratives connected to place, acts of gathering that mirror the logic of the carrier bag itself.

This shift is not about instrumentalising community engagement, but about extending the ethics already present in the work. Care, softness, and attentiveness become shared practices rather than private gestures. The vessel, in this context, becomes less an art object and more a holding structure, a space where ecological grief, local knowledge, and speculative hope can coexist.

Importantly, this socially engaged direction continues to resist heroic models of intervention. It does not seek to solve or represent climate crisis, but to create conditions for listening, carrying, and remembering together. In doing so, the project argues that acts of care, however small, slow, or provisional can constitute meaningful forms of resistance and future-making in times of uncertainty.

As Le Guin insists, stories are not only about heroes and weapons. They are also about the bags that hold seeds, food, water, and meaning. In the same way, these vessels are both objects and narratives. They tell a story of ecological fragility, feminist care, and speculative survival.

In sitting with this work, I begin to consider:

What do we choose to carry into uncertain futures?

What fragile, overlooked, or sacred things will we gather?

And how might softness itself become a form of resistance?

These questions do not seek fixed answers. They open a space for reflection for imagining futures sustained not by force, but by acts of holding, carrying, and care.



Soft Practices: Material Memory, Fragility and Speculative Futures

Sarah King



Twins, 2020, fabric assemblage. Sarah King



Balance, 2020, fabric assemblage. Sarah King



Signature of intimacy, human hair and mirror. Sarah King



Veiled sight, 2024.
Leather, silk, metal, concrete.
Sarah King

The image shows four handmade, fragile objects arranged on a light-colored wooden plank surface. Each object is connected to clear plastic tubes. The objects are made of various materials: a brown paper-like material on the top left, a dark fabric or paper on the top center, a yellowish paper on the top right, and a light-colored, torn paper or fabric on the bottom center. The tubes are connected to the objects in different ways, some with small white connectors or ties. The lighting is bright, casting long, soft shadows of the objects and tubes onto the wooden surface.

Soft Practices: Enchanted Vulnerabilities through Ritual, Fragility, and the Esoteric Body

“The first cultural device was probably a recipient... a container for carrying things.”

“Before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home.”

Ursula K. Le Guin. The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,

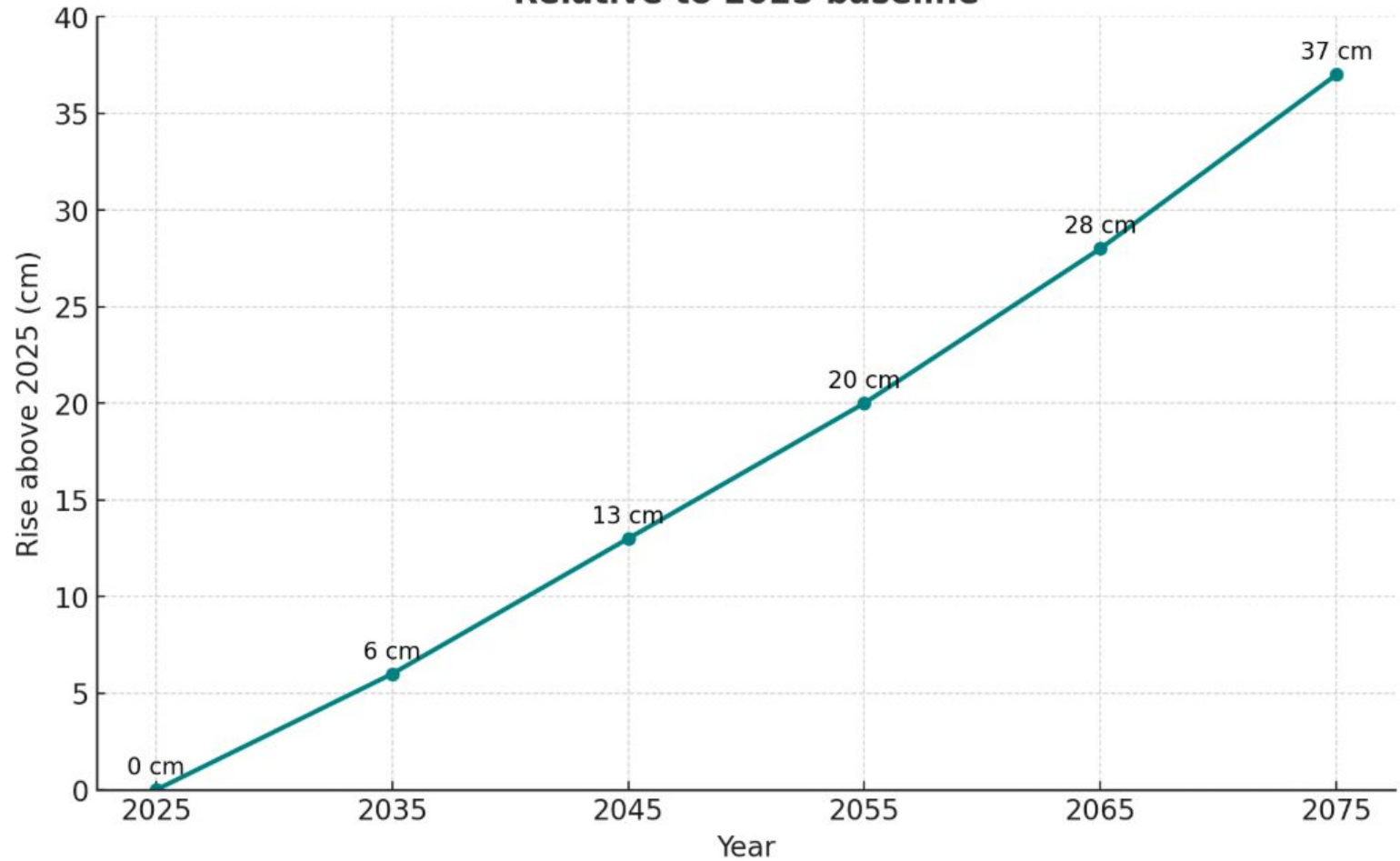


Vessels for an Uncertain Future, 2025



A leather waterskin from the Judean desert, dating back to 132–135 CE

Projected Sea Level Rise - South West UK Relative to 2025 baseline





Vessels for an Uncertain Future, 2025





Vessels for an Uncertain Future, 2025





Vessels for an Uncertain Future, 2025





What do we choose to carry into uncertain futures?

What fragile, overlooked, or sacred things will we gather?

How might softness become a form of resistance?

Le Guin, U. K. (1986) 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', *Dancing at the Edge of the World*. New York: Grove Press.

Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
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Ingold, T. (2015) *The Life of Lines*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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Ahmed, S. (2014) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.



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9th MEMORY, FORGETTING AND CREATING International Interdisciplinary Conference

22-23 January 2026
(online)

THURSDAY, 22 January 2026

12.30 PM – 3.30 PM: Conference OPENING and Session I

Chair: **Wojciech Owczarski** (University of Gdansk, Poland)

Tarang Taswir and **Sara Saeed Alhaj Mohamed Almarar** (Higher Colleges of Technology, The United Arab Emirates)
Adornment and Cultural Memory in Emirati Poetic Documentary

Neha Srivastava (IIMT University Meerut, India)
Emotional Maturity as a Mediating Factor in Memory Regaining: An Interdisciplinary Study of Self-Reconstruction through Remembrance and Forgetting

Joanna Nowicka (Angelus Silesius University of Applied Sciences in Walbrzych, Poland)
Déjà vu in Business

Lisa Camichos (International School of Trieste, Italy)
Regaining History: Genealogical Discovery as an Act of Mnemonic Creation in The Orlando Plan

Gamze Köseoğlu (Independent Researcher) and **Esra Enes** (Tarsus University, Turkey)
Curated Forgetting: Algorithmic Bias and the Politics of Digital Mnemonic Inequality

Nick Treanor (University of Edinburgh, UK)
The Role of Memory in Engineering Disasters

3.30 PM – 4.00 PM: BREAK

4.00 PM – 6.30 PM: Session II

Chair: **Danica Anderson** (The Kolo: Women's Cross-Cultural Collaboration)

Malgorzata Milek-Zwardoń (Independent Researcher)

Lynching Photography as Memory: Trauma, Collective Memory, and the Politics of Documentation

Marzia Dessi (The European Graduate School [EGS] Saas-Fee, Switzerland)

Dreamer Drama: Documenting and Remembering as Teaching Tool in the Theater of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

Danica Anderson (The Kolo: Women's Cross-Cultural Collaboration)

The Circle Remembers: Folk Oral Memory, Embodied Epigenetics, and Cultural Continuity in Healing Transgenerational Trauma

Zachary Chen (Hillsdale College, USA)

“Meministis enim divae:” Memory and Allusive Invocation in the Epics of Vergil, Ovid, and Homer

6.30 PM – 7.30 PM: BREAK

7.30 PM – 10.00 PM: Session III

Chair: **Monica Garoiu** (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA)

Marios Demosthenous (Safer Internet Centre Cyprus, Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth of Cyprus, Republic of Cyprus)

Extended Screen Time and the Erosion of Shared Presence: Stoic Attention and Husserlian Temporality in Parent-Child Relations

Marios Demosthenous (Safer Internet Centre Cyprus, Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth of Cyprus, Republic of Cyprus)

Age-Appropriate Digital Worlds: Memory, Fiction and the Child’s Right to Online Protection

Eza Qamar (University of Glasgow, UK; Aarhus University, Denmark; University of Wroclaw, Poland)

The Crisis of Representation: Challenging State Indoctrination and the Exclusionary Master Narrative in Pakistani Children's Literature

Monica Garoiu (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA)

Memory and the Construction of Individual and Collective Identity in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia. An Algerian Cavalcade*

Ariana Micale (University of Nevada, Reno, USA)

Repression of Memory and Trauma in *The Remains of the Day* and *Hotel World*

FRIDAY, 23 January 2026

12.00 PM – 2.30 PM: Session IV

Chair: **Antonella Cagnolati** (University of Foggia, Italy)

Gaetano Rando (University of Wollongong, Australia)

Migration and Memory between Italy and Australia: The Narrative Writing of Giovanni Andreoni

Antonella Cagnolati and **Carmen Petrucci** (University of Foggia, Italy)

Remembering Darkness: Gemma La Guardia's Memories of Imprisonment in Ravensbrück (1944-1945)

Bushra Juhi Jani (College of Medicine, Al-Nahrain University, Baghdad, Iraq)

From Clinical Detachment to Human Vulnerability: Transformations of Medical Memory in Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*

Martin Gabriel (University of Klagenfurt, Austria)

Sound Memories of Genocide. Noises, Voices, and the Mass Violence against Ottoman Armenians in Jakob Künzler's *In the Land of Blood and Tears* (1921)

Kiyotaka Sueyoshi (University of Szeged, Hungary)

Walt Whitman's *The Prairie-Grass Dividing*: A Poem of the Memory of the Revolutionary Origin of the Nation

2.30 PM – 3.30 PM: BREAK

3.30 PM – 6.00 PM: Session III

Chair: **Sarah King** (Arts University Plymouth, UK)

Agata Sowińska (University of Silesia, Poland)

Gems as Magical Memory Media

Brinda Nair (Christ University, Bangalore, India)

Art, Heritage, and Cultural Memory in Southern Peninsular India

Afra Willems (Saxion University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands)

Apple Pattern: A Collective Reconstruction of an Individual Memory

Sarah King (Arts University Plymouth, UK)

Soft Practices: Material Memory, Fragility and Speculative Futures

Amy Schwartzott (North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, USA)

The Intrinsic Value of Remembering through the Materiality of War as a Tool for Post Conflict Resolution: Mozambique's TAE Project

6.00 PM – 7.00 PM: BREAK

7.00 PM – 10.00 PM: Session VI

Chair: **Paula Teodorescu (Pascaru)** (University of Bucharest, Romania)

Antonina Kizlova (National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute")

The Ukrainian People Republic Independence "For Children of All Ages": Significant Anniversaries of the 4th Universal in "Veselka" Magazine

Daria Banasiewicz (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland)

(Un)Forgetting and Creating a New Identity" About *Kajś. Opowieść o Górnych Śląsku* [Kajś: A Story of Upper Silesia] by Zbigniew Rokita

Paula Teodorescu (Pascaru) (University of Bucharest, Romania)

The Body as a Memory Medium: Trauma, Shame, and Narrative Reconstruction in Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War*

Malika Hammouche (Oran Graduate School of Economics John F. Kennedy, Algeria)

Fractured Attachments and Haunted Memories in a Literary Narrative

Alexandra Comus (Hillsdale College, USA)

Desire and Forgetfulness: Oneness with God as Erotic Participation in *The Cloud of Unknowing*

Katarzyna Szyszkowska (Jagiellonian University, Poland)

Art as Afterlife: Repression, Reconstruction, and the Fragile Boundary of Memory

10.00 PM: Conference CLOSING



InMind Support

Conferences, Seminars and Workshops