

-- Call for multimodal paper proposals & project statements --

I feel vague

I feel vague about words

when they recede far

behind the tongue

~ Béatrice Machet, The Wave – The Tongue

Apophatic art practice and research: contemporary threshold practices in a time of flattening

Project/Editorial team:

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This call for multimodal proposals is intended for artists, art educators, curators, and researchers interested in exploring the significance of *apophatic studies* for (their) art practice and research. We invite both paper proposals and project statements for completed or in-progress works that examine art research and artistic research projects through the lens of apophatic thought. Please find the full submission details below

In a time of increasing reduction of complex, nuanced, ambiguous human experiences and expressions into data points, categories, and optimized outputs, demonstrated by AI development and algorithmic flattening, we consider this an urgent call to artists and art researchers. Like no other, they know how to mediate liminal, precarious spaces that may counter the aesthetic harm we're witnessing in the news, in our home and work environments, and in schools. Artistic practice has unique capabilities for preventing the erasure of ineffable human experiences from our everyday lives—those profound, unsayable dimensions of meaning, embodied knowledge, and consciousness that resist codification. This call for proposals and project statements invites artists, art(istic) researchers, art scholars, art educators, and all who engage with the ineffable through creative practice to respond to these crises by journeying through their practice, consciously engaging with apophatic thought.

Apophatic studies recognize that some realities exceed description and can only be approached through indirection, negation, and silence. Apophatic studies highlight the

unsayable, ineffable dimensions of our experiences, those which come before words. The crossover between apophatic studies and the arts has been extensively explored in fields like theology and comparative literature (Franke, 2007; 2013), the emerging field of ecopoetics (Azambuja, 2025, 2023) and some of the insights have been brought into conversation with artistic research and arts-led research (Visse, 2024, 2025; Woodring, 2025; Bresler, 2019, 2006), as well as in approaches to radical experimentation (Travis et al., 2024) and reflexivity (Travis, 2023; Visse, 2025). Apophatic approaches have shaped artistic practices for centuries, yet contemporary art, including writing and criticism, rarely invokes apophatic thought as a lens. Even when artists engage with negation, detour, absence, or ineffability—hallmarks of apophatic thinking—these strategies are typically framed through other conceptual terms. Thus, as a field, apophatic studies are generally unexplored by contemporary artists, art educators, and artistic researchers, even as they offer several powerful insights and approaches relevant to art practice and research.

For example, understanding apophysis gives philosophical grounding for what artists *don't* show or say, and may enhance their understanding and use of the power of artistic strategies such as absence, silence, and incompleteness as generative rather than merely lacking. Apophatic studies reveal diverse practices for engaging with the unrepresentable—from Japanese aesthetics of suggestion to Islamic aniconism, from abstract expressionism to the dematerialization of conceptual art. Furthermore, apophatic thinking can be viewed as an approach to creative critique, relevant to every artist and art researcher. For art educators, apophatic thought suggests teaching that values not-knowing, ambiguity, and the cultivation of comfort with mystery—countering tendencies toward total explanation or resolution of artistic knowledge as a static phenomenon. Apophatic thinking challenges assumptions about art's mimetic or expressive functions, opening space for work that gestures toward what exceeds representation entirely, including the spiritual. New materialist, posthuman, postcolonial, feminist, and indigenous perspectives address similar challenges in making sense of the world through non-dominant/subaltern lenses and in addressing representation, yet there is little discussion of apophatic thought in art practices that engage with these fields.

This transdisciplinary project aims to create a space for connecting insights from apophatic studies within art practice and research, approaching “art” broadly, including poetry. It examines the promise of apophatic studies to develop concrete artistic methodologies and techniques, while simultaneously learning about and further developing their philosophical underpinnings. For example, we consider French symbolist poetry as inaugurating a modern age of art in an apophatic key (e.g. Mallarmé, Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan) (Franke, 2007, pp. 80-138). Twentieth-century poets such as Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan were masters in bringing out the apophatic recesses and impasses inherent in the French and German languages throughout the full gamut of their registers (Franke, 2007, pp. 80-138). Their genealogical lines of descent can be traced back through Mallarmé and French symbolist poetry to Dante's paradisiacal ineffability (Franke 2026). In a similar way, we invite art researchers and practitioners to think about new artistic approaches to erasure, veiling, darkness, emptiness, and duration that exhausts attention, as well as scale that overwhelms perception—all ways of provoking the art practice and research itself to enact its own limitations.

Exploring this crossover with apophatic studies provides artists, whether practitioners, researchers, or educators, with a vocabulary and conceptual framework for creations that

resist closure, embrace failure, or point beyond themselves—validating aesthetic and poetic strategies that dominant discourses of clarity, certainty, and communication, increasingly present in our world, are at risk of marginalizing.

Multimodal publication and exhibition

This project aims to create a multimodal, curated publication and exhibition featuring about 15 artists, scholars, art educators, and art researchers, capturing silences, hesitations, and ineffable moments through various artistic media, narratives, and encounters with the unsayable. The output we envision includes a book publication, a Research Catalogue exposition (<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/>), and - if feasible - an exposition at the William Franke Center for Apophatic Thought and Culture, founded in 2025 at the *Château de la Frogerie* (Loire region, France: <https://chateaufrogerie.fr/>) in collaboration with former students, now professors carrying forward the torch of apophatic thought. The output layers different forms of practice and (un)knowing through multimedia capacities and articles employing apophatic rhetorical and artistic strategies of paradox, negation, and indirect pointing.

We are inviting project proposals and statements focusing **on areas** such as: Philosophical reflections on apophatic thought and the arts, Visual art and apophatic thought, Performance art and apophatic thought, Media/Time-based art and apophatic thought, Literary art and apophatic thought, Applied art and apophatic thought, Architecture and apophatic thought, Hybrid art practices (e.g., bioart, land art, conceptual art), Cultural art practices (e.g., calligraphy, weaving, ceramics).

We are currently preparing the multimodal, curated publication and exhibition. The publication presents the outcomes of art practice and/or research through apophatic thought, and we are open to receiving proposals for papers and/or project statements on one of the areas listed above. The proposal should include information on an art or scholarly project you're currently working on or would like to begin, along with relevant documentation.

Please send us via apophaticart@gmail.com a 500-word paper abstract or project statement, including title, name and (if any) affiliation, along with relevant media via hyperlinks to project sites or virtual storage (Dropbox, Drive, etc.) by March 30th.

Through your participation, you will become part of a small learning community and will be invited to join various gatherings throughout the project to foster exchange and mutual learning. Additionally, it is our intention to secure funding to hold in-person gatherings with all contributors at key points within the process—halfway through the project and once the project has been completed. Based on the submissions, we will develop either a special issue, special volume, or book project, combined with an exhibition.

Timeline

Current-March 30, 2026	: inviting contributions
March 30, 2026	: Submission of abstract 500 words, possible images/hyperlinks and a title
May 1, 2026	: Editorial team will notify authors about decision on/feedback on their abstract

March-May, 2026	: editorial team develops a book or issue proposal
May-July 2026	: online gatherings with all contributors
September 1, 2026	: First draft chapters due to editors who will share with peers (internal review)
October or November 2026	: (pending on funding): in-person gathering to discuss draft chapters (otherwise online)
January 30, 2027	: Reviewed chapters returned to authors
February 1, 2027	: Final drafts due to editors
April 1, 2027	: Completion Full manuscript
April-June 2027	: Proofs
Summer 2027	: Publication and online exhibition, and pending funding in-person festival to celebrate the project.

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