



Adomas Žudys and Indrė Liškauskaitė

Activating the Conspiracist Archive: Tracing, Layering, and Speculative Association

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conspiracy theories, drawing, memes, overlay, mapping

Summary: The text describes the “Conspiracist Session”, a workshop method developed by the artists Adomas Žudys and Indrė Liškauskaitė that uses tracing, layering, and rearranging archival images to generate intuitive artistic research processes. Adomas’ archive consists of thousands of printed digital images related to conspiracy aesthetics, memes, politics, symbols, and internet culture, collected as a way to preserve and reinterpret unstable online media. In the workshops, students trace overlapping images onto transparent vellum paper, creating unexpected visual and conceptual associations that encourage speculation, intuition, and non-linear thinking. The method draws on theories by Richard Hofstadter, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Fredric Jameson, and Aby Warburg, framing conspiracy aesthetics as a way to map hidden systems, generate meaning, and activate imagination rather than promote conspiracy beliefs. After the workshops, students began using their own phone galleries and digital archives as source material, revealing recurring themes such as cats, bodies, and digital culture while turning personal image collections into starting points for new artistic projects.

Adomas Žudys is an artist working at the intersection of digital and physical artifacts, his main interests are the crisis of imagination and conspiracy theories. The artistic practice that he is developing focuses on old and well known art forms collaged together with current technologies and worldviews. His subjects range between intimate space and time, personal and public experiences, identity and its representation, signs, magic, virtual and actual reality. Adomas is a lecturer and doctoral candidate at the Vilnius Academy of Arts.

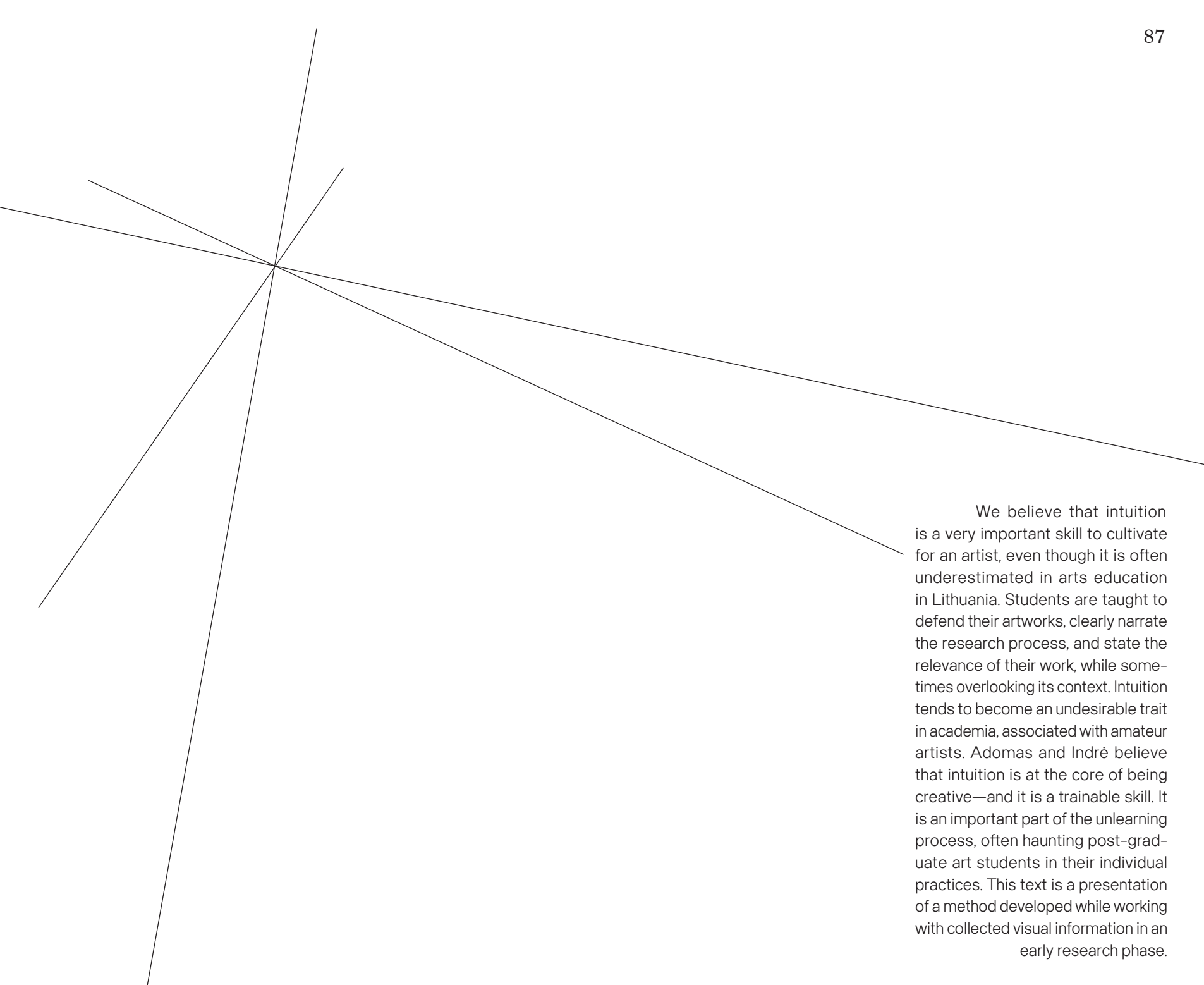
Indrė Liškauskaitė is an interdisciplinary artist, lecturer, and doctoral candidate at the Vilnius Academy of Arts. With her non-human collaborators and companions, poodle Delta and border collie Delfina, she is researching how playing with a dog(s) can become an artistic practice as well as a method to create collaborative art pieces. Liškauskaitė has a background in painting and textile studies. She became an agility athlete with her two dogs after reading Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet* (2007). Liškauskaitė ironically portrays the human and human behavior in order to take a deeper look into social, cultural, and philosophical constructions that shape the inter-species encounters.

Activating the Conspiracist Archive

Tracing, Layering, and
Speculative Association

Adomas Žudys

Indrė Liškauskaitė

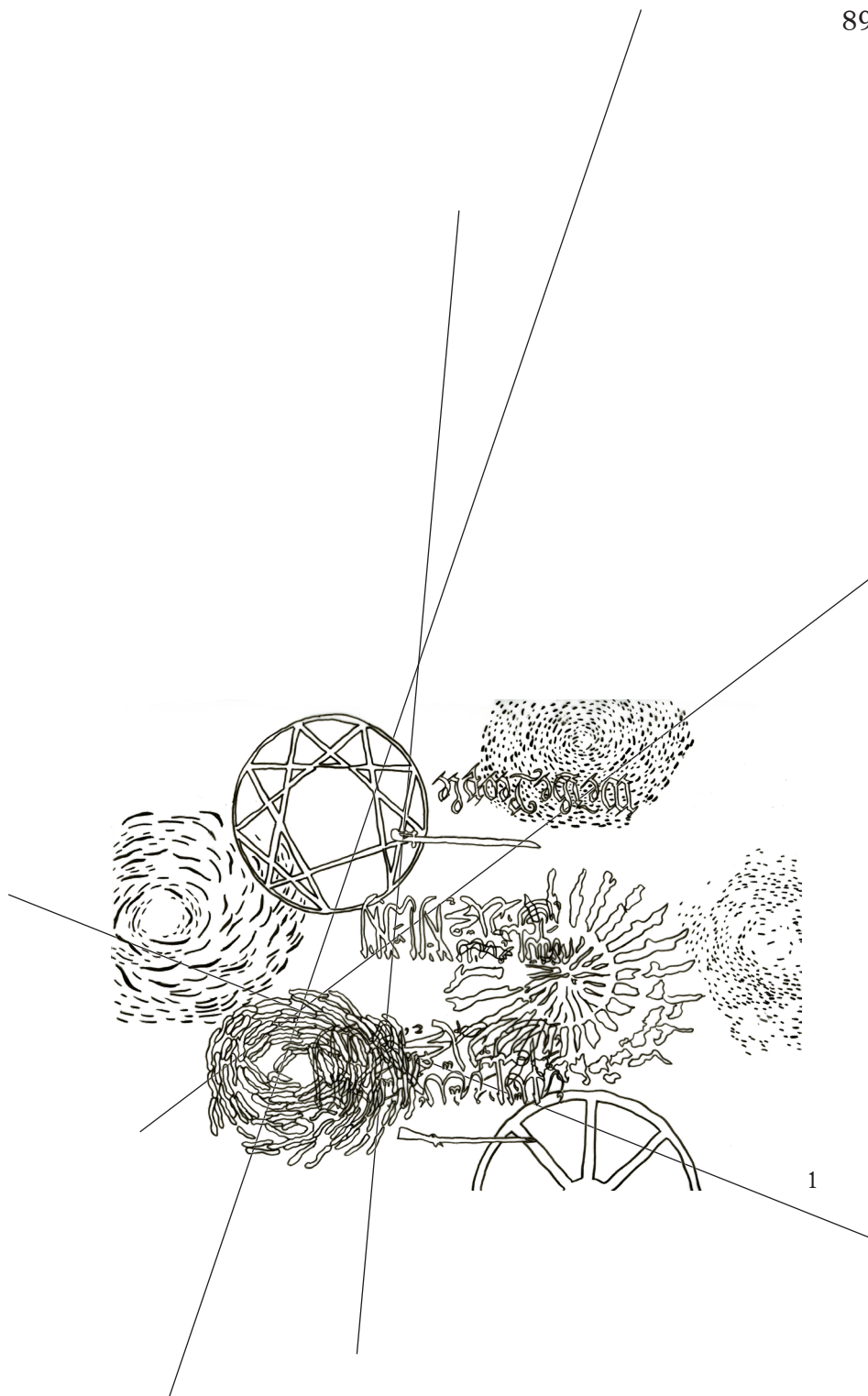
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We believe that intuition is a very important skill to cultivate for an artist, even though it is often underestimated in arts education in Lithuania. Students are taught to defend their artworks, clearly narrate the research process, and state the relevance of their work, while sometimes overlooking its context. Intuition tends to become an undesirable trait in academia, associated with amateur artists. Adomas and Indrė believe that intuition is at the core of being creative—and it is a trainable skill. It is an important part of the unlearning process, often haunting post-graduate art students in their individual practices. This text is a presentation of a method developed while working with collected visual information in an early research phase.

The Conspiracist Session workshop is a result of a collaboration between two artists: Adomas Žudys, who works in the field of mixed media arts and investigates how conspiracy can be sourced as a means of artistic inspiration, and Indrė Liškauskaitė—an interdisciplinary artist with a background in painting, currently teaching a Creative Drawing class for BA students at the Vilnius Academy of Arts.

The Conspiracist Session was held multiple times in Indrė's Creative Drawing class at the VAA. Describing what is a creative drawing class, Indrė often laughs that it is everything except academic drawing. At the Vilnius Academy of Arts, academic drawing is one of the most basic skills taught to students from

most of the departments. Lately, after the closure of the Drawing Department in 2021, more-than-academic drawing practices occurred among the drawing classes in the academy. Formerly drawing consisted of learning how to use mark-making tools together with formal elements of representation, such as anatomy, proportions, perspective, and realism. In the Creative Drawing class, led by Indrė, students try various drawing scores during individual and collective tasks. She encourages students to incorporate drawing practices into the various stages of the creative process, and they often study drawing alongside other media. Indrė's discovery of Adomas' archive was the inspiration of the first 'conspiracist session'.



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A series of thin, dark grey lines crisscross the page, creating a complex web of geometric shapes. Some lines are straight, while others are slightly curved. They intersect at various points, some of which are near the text blocks. The lines vary in length and orientation, adding a dynamic, architectural feel to the layout.

Adomas began archiving physical copies of images around the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a moment when he shifted from passively scrolling the internet to actively collecting and printing images that felt visually or symbolically charged. The collection includes memes, photographs, tweets, maps, alchemical symbols, and esoteric graphics—material for what could be called ‘conspiratorial aesthetics’.

This is a personal archive, focusing on what feels interesting, attractive, strange, and weird—a source of inspiration. Defining what makes something ‘interesting’ is no easy task, but when Adomas was asked what he meant by ‘alchemy’ when talking about his artistic practice, he replied: “Anything that is interesting.” In that spirit, the archive might be described as a cauldron of political alchemy—a visual inquiry into the aesthetics of conspiracy theories, contemporary myth-making, and political imagination. The expanding

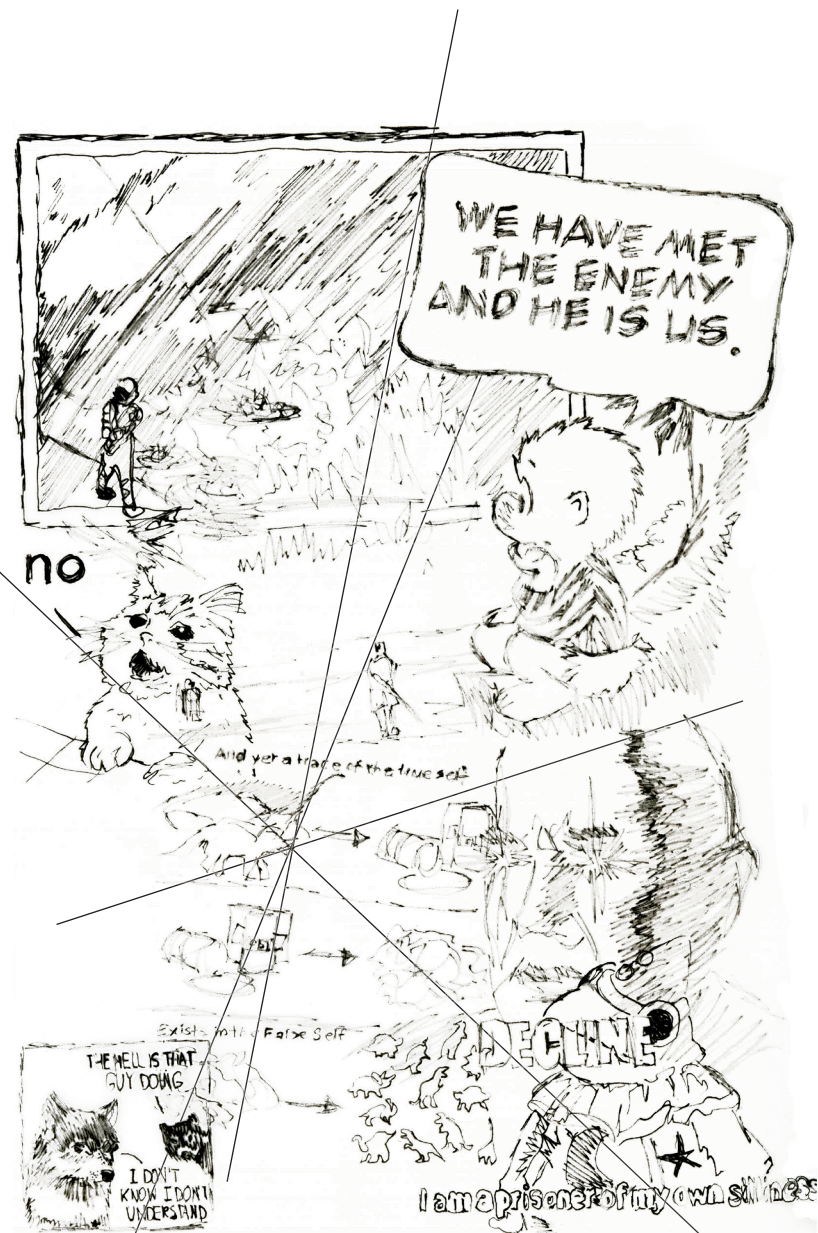
physical archive now consists of more than a thousand unindexed and chaotically stored pictures. It is continuously supplemented with additional printed images before presentations, exhibitions, and workshops.

The archive began as a compulsive act for the preservation of digital media—an anxious counter to the fragility of online content. It began by downloading digital images during the beginning of the ‘post-truth’ era, the time around 2014–2016, when terms such as ‘alternative facts’ and blatant lying in the political environment became norms. Adomas downloaded some images found while scrolling rather than just bookmarking them on the digital platforms, precisely because their original sources were transient and likely to disappear. Bringing these digital images into a physical format, the archive becomes a space where the visual debris of the feed is stabilised long enough to be manipulated, recombined, and reimagined.

The process is grounded in a critical awareness of the politics of images. Conspiratorial aesthetics carry volatile cultural and political resonances, yet the aim here is not to endorse or polemicize, but rather to investigate how images generate meaning. Because such imagery can be provocative or taboo, overtly offensive content is excluded. The various rearrangements of the material in the archive can function as a sort of myth-making device—a tool that lets one combine the information of the archive into interesting narratives. As a curated echo chamber, it preserves a fragment of the cultural moment for reflection and reinterpretation. The approach is cautious and open-ended, guided by curiosity rather than certainty. Reframing the images artistically, rather than politically, the archive opens space to observe and reconfigure them through creative practice, and to trace how ideas and beliefs circulate, mutate, and persist across media landscapes.

At the core of this project lies an inquiry into how the so-called 'conspiratorial' or 'paranoia aesthetics' can be mobilised as an artistic

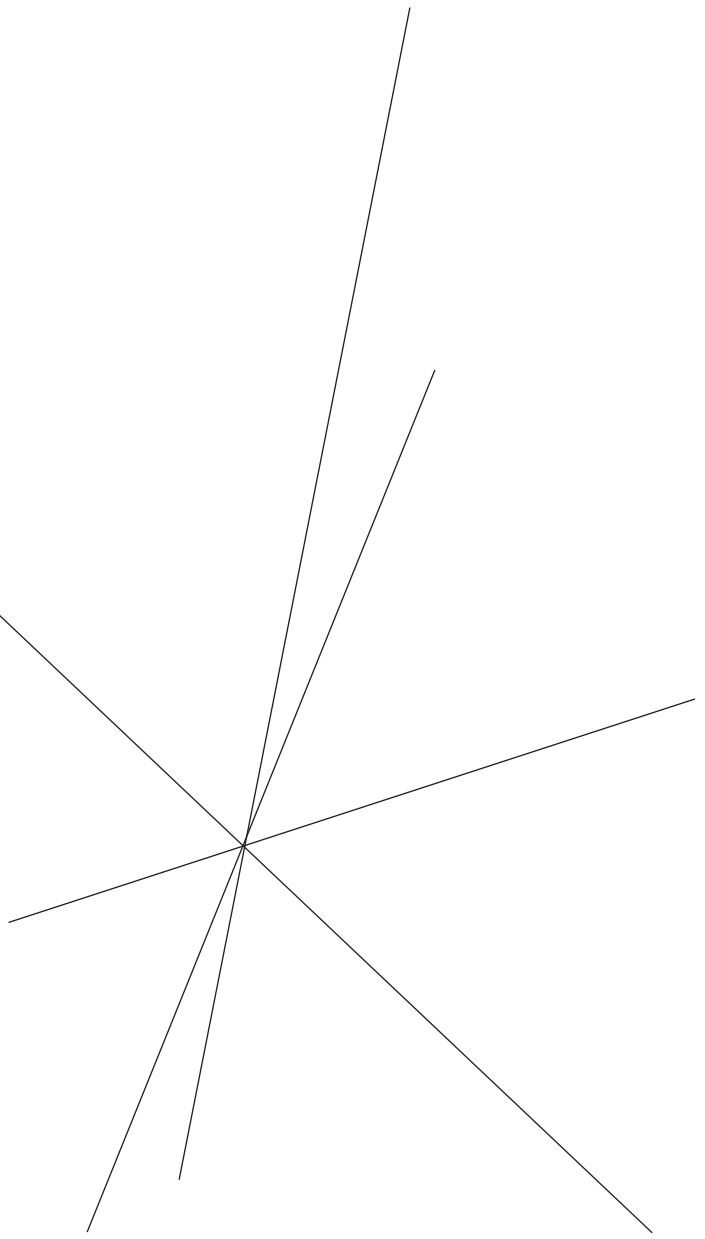
method. These are visual languages that emerge in mind maps, diagrams, and obsessive image clusters—a form seen in films such as *A Beautiful Mind* (R. Howard 2001), *Se7en* (D. Fincher 1995), or *True Detective* (N. Pizzolatto 2014), and echoed in the pop-cultural shorthand for conspiracy thinking. Richard Hofstadter's account of the 'paranoid style' treats conspiracy thinking critically, as an aesthetic of exaggerated pattern recognition in which scattered fragments are forced into an imagined master-plot (Hofstadter 1964). By contrast, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of 'paranoid reading' is more sympathetic: while still attentive to suspicion and anticipation, she highlights how such a stance might also be reparative, opening space for unexpected connections and generative reinterpretations rather than only confirming fears (Sedgwick 2003). Fredric Jameson adds another layer by suggesting that conspiracy theories can be understood as a form of 'cognitive mapping'—a way of grappling with the overwhelming totality of global capitalism, whose structures are otherwise too vast and abstract to be directly experienced (Jameson 1991).

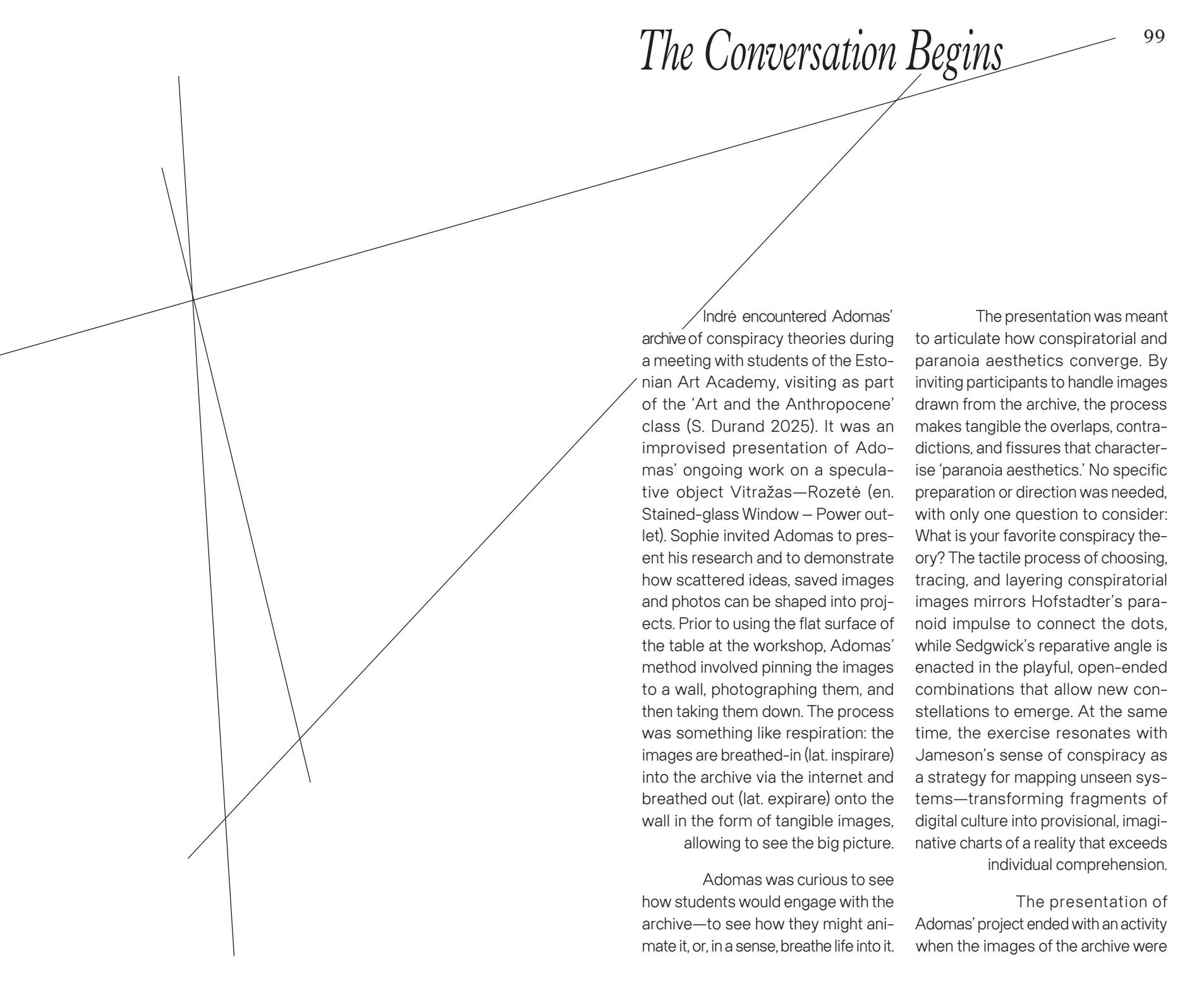


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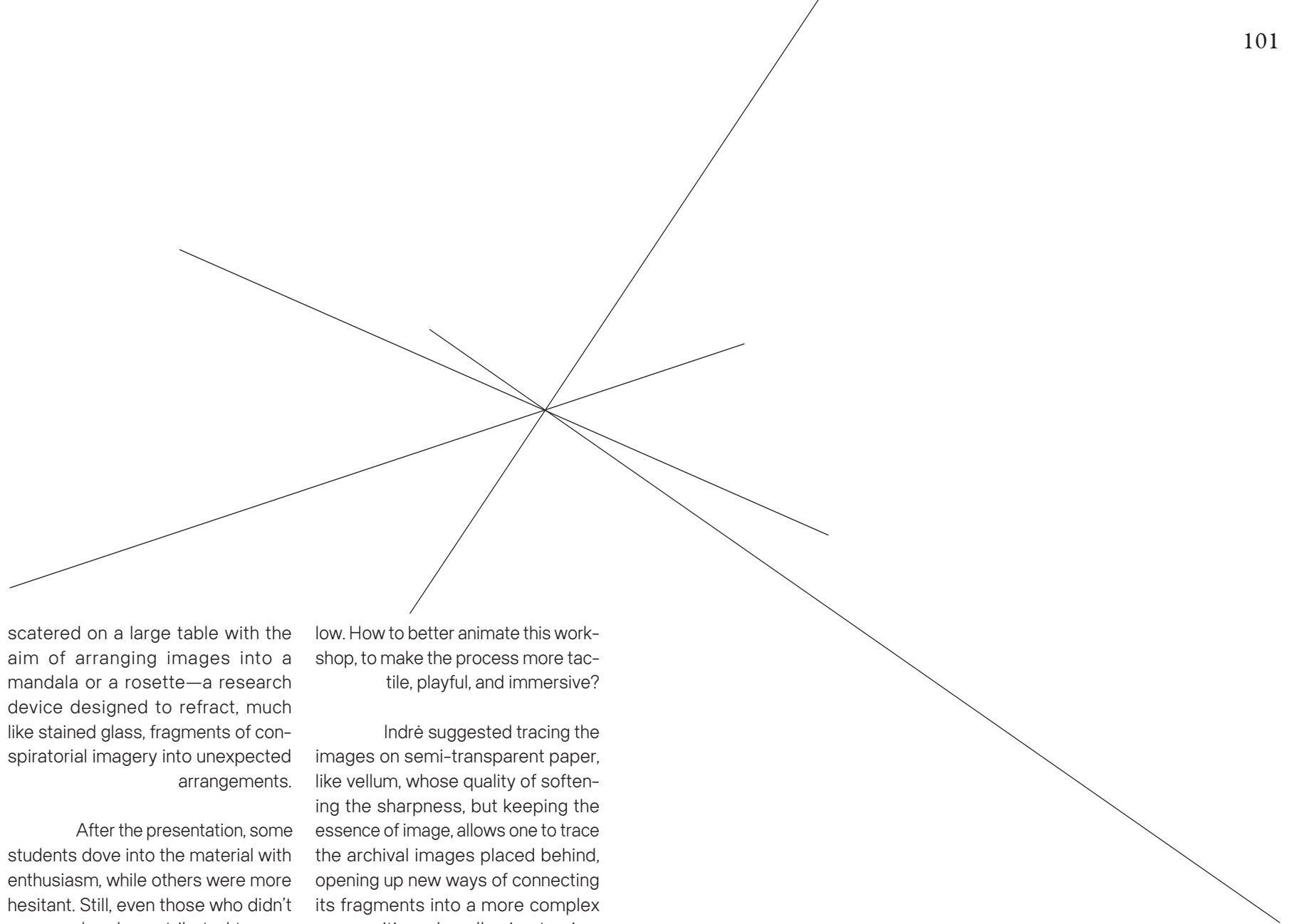
A series of thin, dark lines crisscross the page, creating a complex web of geometric shapes. Some lines are vertical, some are horizontal, and others are diagonal, intersecting at various points. These lines appear to be part of a larger design or perhaps represent the 'conversations' mentioned in the text.

Indrė encountered Adomas' archive of conspiracy theories during a meeting with students of the Estonian Art Academy, visiting as part of the 'Art and the Anthropocene' class (S. Durand 2025). It was an improvised presentation of Adomas' ongoing work on a speculative object Vitražas—Rozetė (en. Stained-glass Window – Power outlet). Sophie invited Adomas to present his research and to demonstrate how scattered ideas, saved images and photos can be shaped into projects. Prior to using the flat surface of the table at the workshop, Adomas' method involved pinning the images to a wall, photographing them, and then taking them down. The process was something like respiration: the images are breathed-in (lat. *inspirare*) into the archive via the internet and breathed out (lat. *expirare*) onto the wall in the form of tangible images, allowing to see the big picture.

Adomas was curious to see how students would engage with the archive—to see how they might animate it, or, in a sense, breathe life into it.

The presentation was meant to articulate how conspiratorial and paranoia aesthetics converge. By inviting participants to handle images drawn from the archive, the process makes tangible the overlaps, contradictions, and fissures that characterise 'paranoia aesthetics.' No specific preparation or direction was needed, with only one question to consider: What is your favorite conspiracy theory? The tactile process of choosing, tracing, and layering conspiratorial images mirrors Hofstadter's paranoid impulse to connect the dots, while Sedgwick's reparative angle is enacted in the playful, open-ended combinations that allow new constellations to emerge. At the same time, the exercise resonates with Jameson's sense of conspiracy as a strategy for mapping unseen systems—transforming fragments of digital culture into provisional, imaginative charts of a reality that exceeds individual comprehension.

The presentation of Adomas' project ended with an activity when the images of the archive were



scattered on a large table with the aim of arranging images into a mandala or a rosette—a research device designed to refract, much like stained glass, fragments of conspiratorial imagery into unexpected arrangements.

After the presentation, some students dove into the material with enthusiasm, while others were more hesitant. Still, even those who didn't engage deeply contributed to new arrangements and visual overlaps. During this session, Adomas and Indrė noticed that when the activity remained passive—just moving images around—the energy seemed

low. How to better animate this workshop, to make the process more tactile, playful, and immersive?

Indrė suggested tracing the images on semi-transparent paper, like vellum, whose quality of softening the sharpness, but keeping the essence of image, allows one to trace the archival images placed behind, opening up new ways of connecting its fragments into a more complex composition, also allowing to simply mediate the archive and spark the imagination. She invited Adomas to present and activate the archive together during her creative drawing class at the Vilnius Academy of Arts with bachelor students.

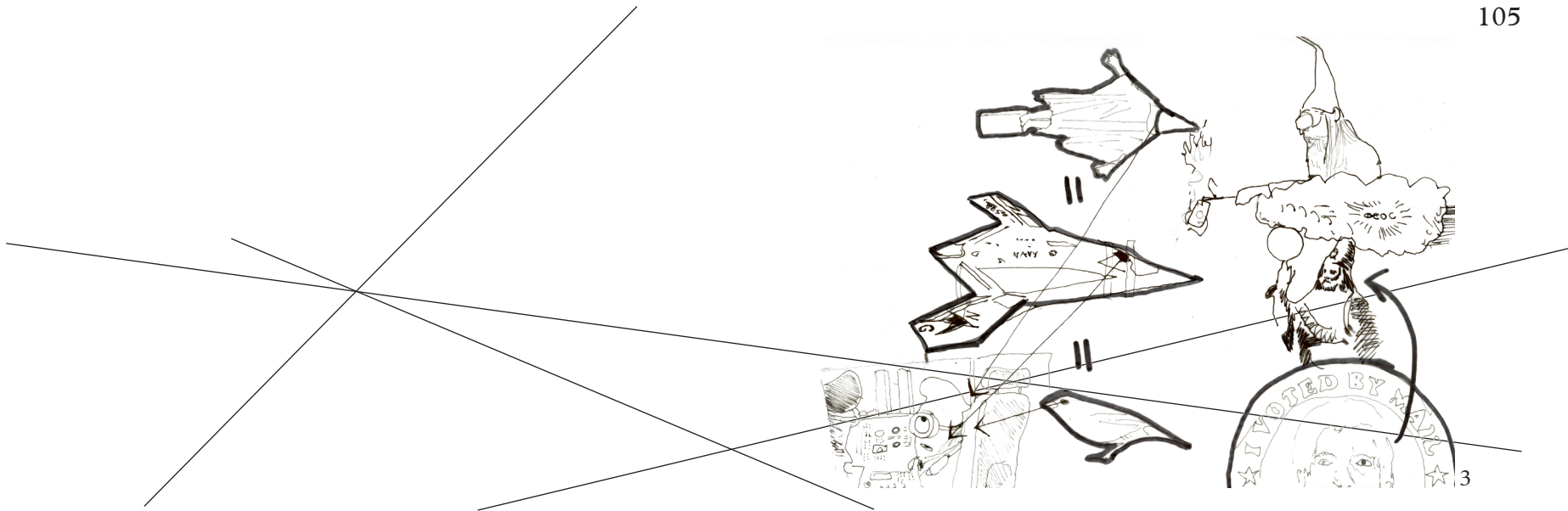
The transparency of vellum paper suggested the method of the workshop: image is placed underneath, and its lines or fragments are traced with a pen or pencil. This is done several times by each participant on their individual vellum paper. By shifting images below the transparent paper, complex compositions could be created with little effort—what was jokingly described as a way of ‘cheating’ in a drawing class. The process is simple but generative: trace a line or shape from one image, layer it with another, repeat.

The tracing rule was layering—instead of drawing multiple separate images on one piece of paper, the images must overlap with each other. When images are layered and overlapped, unexpected connections start to appear—visual, conceptual, or both. This way the archive activates and begins to produce new thematic threads. This method could be used in the very early stages of the research, to seek out connections between the different themes, objects, and ideas. It’s for those moments in research or practice when you have a collection of saved images, half-formed thoughts, or unsorted impulses.

As images accumulate on the vellum, unexpected compositions

emerge—some chaotic, some rhythmic, many charged with strange and ineffable associations and interpretations. The key question posed was how numerous conspiracy theories might intertwine with each other. The archive became more than just a collection—it became a playground or a field of *visual associations and experiments*.

This method of selection and tracing slows down the otherwise frictionless consumption of images, requiring sustained engagement with fragments, patterns, and overlaps. The exercise encourages participants to wander along loose, associative paths rather than following the linear progression typical of text-based research. In doing so, it opens the conditions for free-form speculation, operating at a stage when the thematic direction of a project remains uncertain. The process was exciting and dynamic, as several aims could be fulfilled simultaneously: vellum paper was employed to guide a drawing method; transparency enabled layered compositions; image selection framed thematic discussions; and the presence of a guest artist allowed students to witness artistic practice and research processes directly.



Historically, this method draws inspiration from William S. Burroughs' cut-up technique, which in turn is inspired by dadaists, a practice where texts are sliced up and rearranged to generate new meanings. The text is visual. Tracing fragments from a chaotic image pile mimics this idea of fragmentation and reassembly. To quote Burroughs explaining his cut-up method: "When you cut into the present, the future leaks out" (Burroughs 1976). During the workshops we're not looking for a single meaning, but for what slips through when existing narrative structures are broken open; conspiracies are not uncovered, but spontaneously conjured.

As the workshop progressed, conversation naturally emerged around the table. Participants asked about symbols, images, and references they didn't recognize.

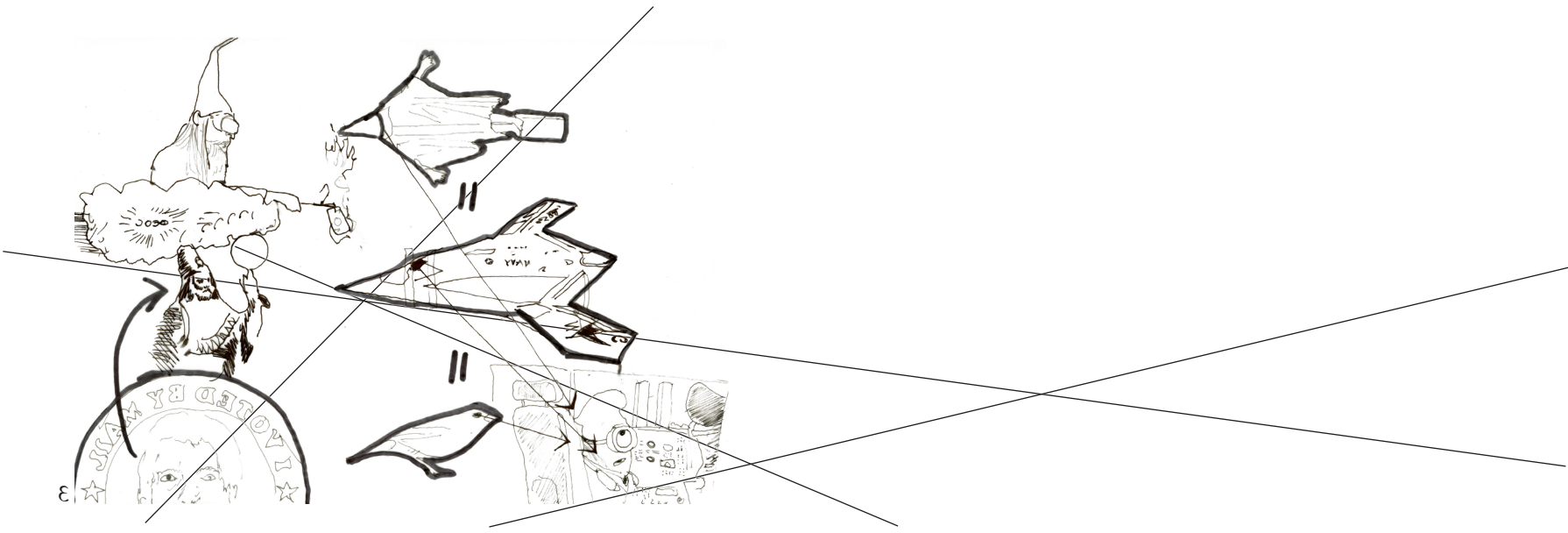
Some gravitated toward well-known conspiracies—like moon landings or alien sightings—while others focused on abstract shapes or patterns. By the end of the session, some questions arose: Can the selected images form a new conspiracy? What story are you building without knowing it? What draws you to these images? What patterns do you see emerging? What do they reveal about our visual desires, our collective anxieties, or our longing for narrative in a fragmented world?

Adomas' investigation into conspiratorial aesthetics draws on the example of Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, a series of visual panels where images from different times and cultures were arranged without fixed chronology. Warburg's atlas wasn't about telling a clear story—it was about letting the images speak to and with each

other (Warburg 2020). Similarly, our workshops avoid over-explaining the archive. Students aren't given the context of the images upfront. Instead, they're encouraged to follow their intuition. This allows for ambiguity and surprise to remain part of the process, which doesn't try to debunk or validate conspiracy theories. Certain symbols and images that once seemed neutral gained weight; others evoked nervous laughter or genuine wonder. This illustrates an important idea: images don't hold fixed meaning. Their power depends on context, interpretation, and the stories we attach to them. Collected by Adomas, he knows something about most of the images, not least the reason for saving them. Seeing students put some images together that he would never dare to imagine opened new rabbit holes, and new fields of imagination. This led to the realization that certain historical

events gradually fade into obscurity and lose their weight in the collective imagination. Stripped of their original context, some images appear almost innocent, giving no indication of the darker histories they once signified.

The workshop served several purposes: it introduced students to the image-tracing technique using vellum paper; it prompted discussion around conspiracy imagery and its unsettling, humorous, or taboo qualities; and it offered an approach into an artist's early-stage research process. It was also a way to learn how to begin a project without a clear plan, to experiment, and to cultivate intuition. The Conspiracist Session workshop was successfully carried out several times, later developing into a session for the activation of students' individual archives.



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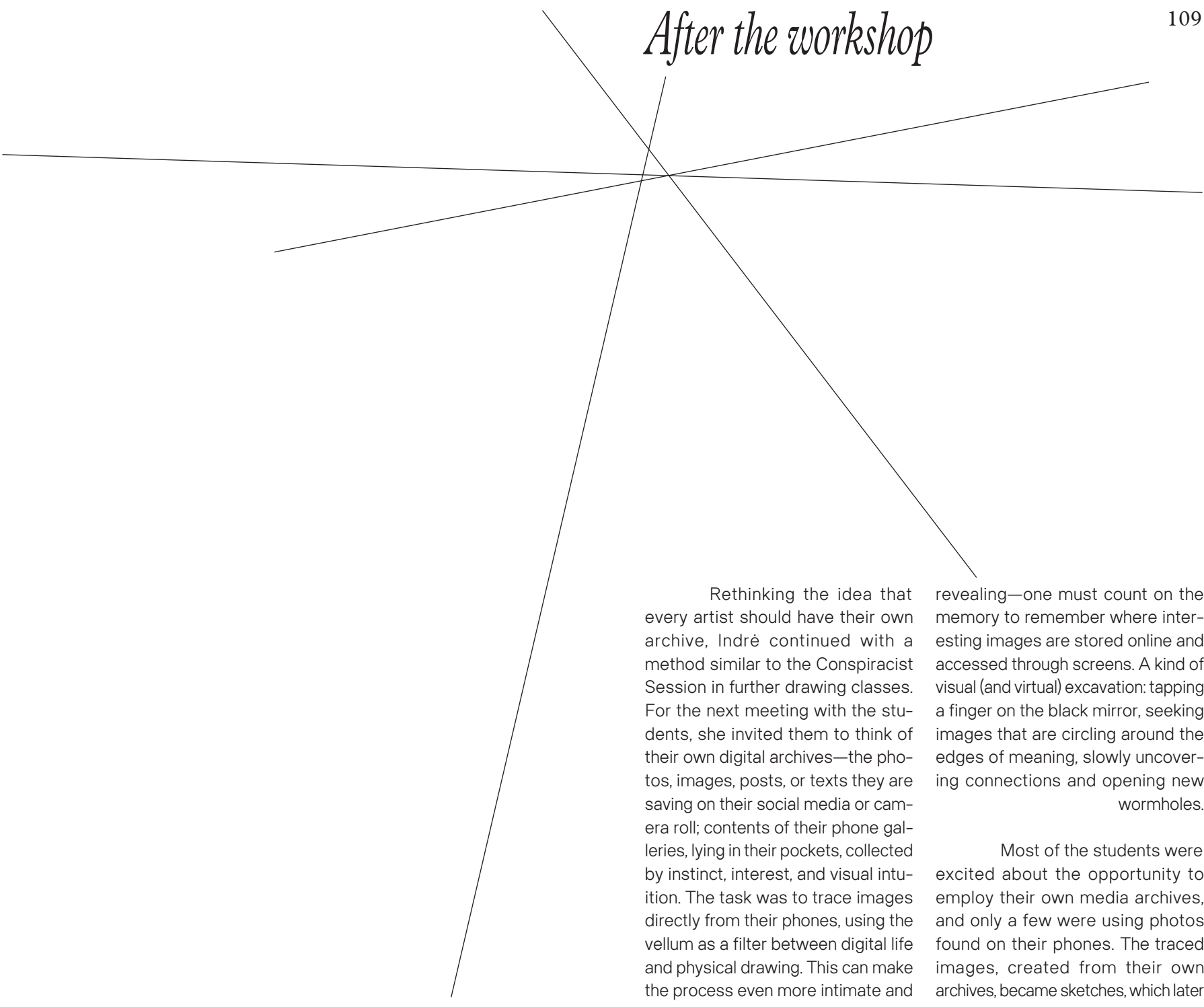
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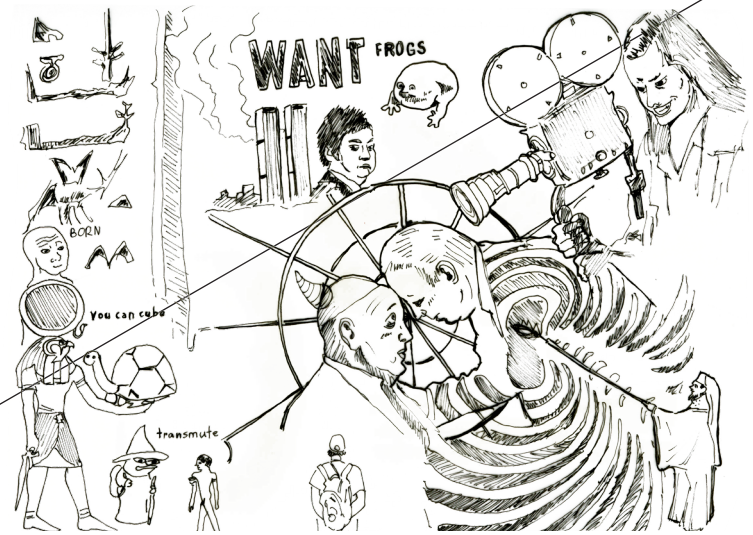
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Rethinking the idea that every artist should have their own archive, Indrè continued with a method similar to the Conspiracist Session in further drawing classes. For the next meeting with the students, she invited them to think of their own digital archives—the photos, images, posts, or texts they are saving on their social media or camera roll; contents of their phone galleries, lying in their pockets, collected by instinct, interest, and visual intuition. The task was to trace images directly from their phones, using the vellum as a filter between digital life and physical drawing. This can make the process even more intimate and

revealing—one must count on the memory to remember where interesting images are stored online and accessed through screens. A kind of visual (and virtual) excavation: tapping a finger on the black mirror, seeking images that are circling around the edges of meaning, slowly uncovering connections and opening new wormholes.

Most of the students were excited about the opportunity to employ their own media archives, and only a few were using photos found on their phones. The traced images, created from their own archives, became sketches, which later

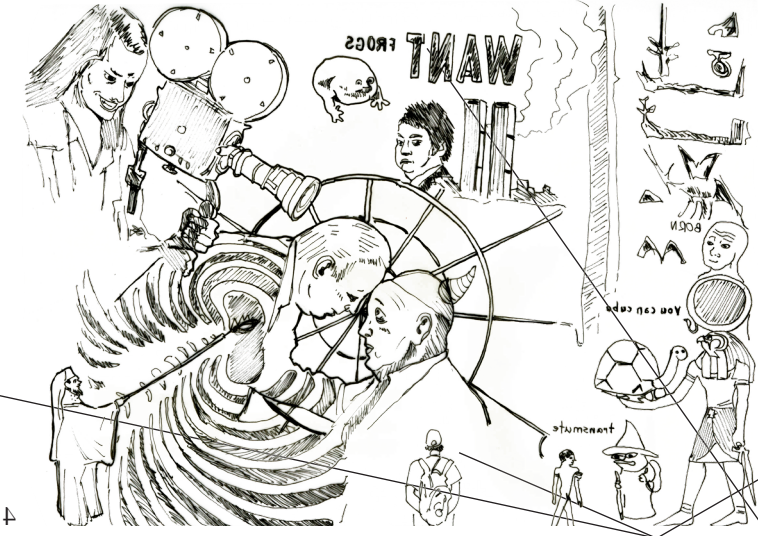


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developed to more complex drawings. It also showed quite strong thematic threads in most of the students, as their image selections showed similarities and consistencies rather than being chaotic, as Indrè was expecting in the beginning. The most recurring images were cats and cat memes. Jody Berland calls the online cat representations a 'truly global Internet phenomenon,' because they are significantly more visible in the media and virtuality compared to other species (Berland 2019, 149). Other recurring themes and images were body and face images; virtuality and digitality. The task quickly revealed that even diverse images could be connected via the drawing media itself when combining lines

and shapes together, and seeking visual repetition and overlaps.

The workshop offers a space to lay out the visual content of the research, revealing the breadth of the topic and uncovering surprising overlaps between images and ideas. It encourages connections and juxtapositions to spark unexpected flights of imagination. By tracing links between seemingly unrelated elements, the process aims to ignite new ways of thinking. More broadly, the workshop explores why certain images captivate us—especially those that are strange, charged, or unsettling. It serves as a method to reflect what images attract us, channeling curiosity and engaging with an archive in a tactile, visual way.



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Berland, Jody. *Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures*. MIT Press, 2019.

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Illustrations: 1 Saulė Jonušaitė, 2 Anonymous, 3 Kamilė Eva Juzokaitė, 4 Beatričė Jackutė.



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