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performing (as) waste, sticky care in feminist materialist performance and curation

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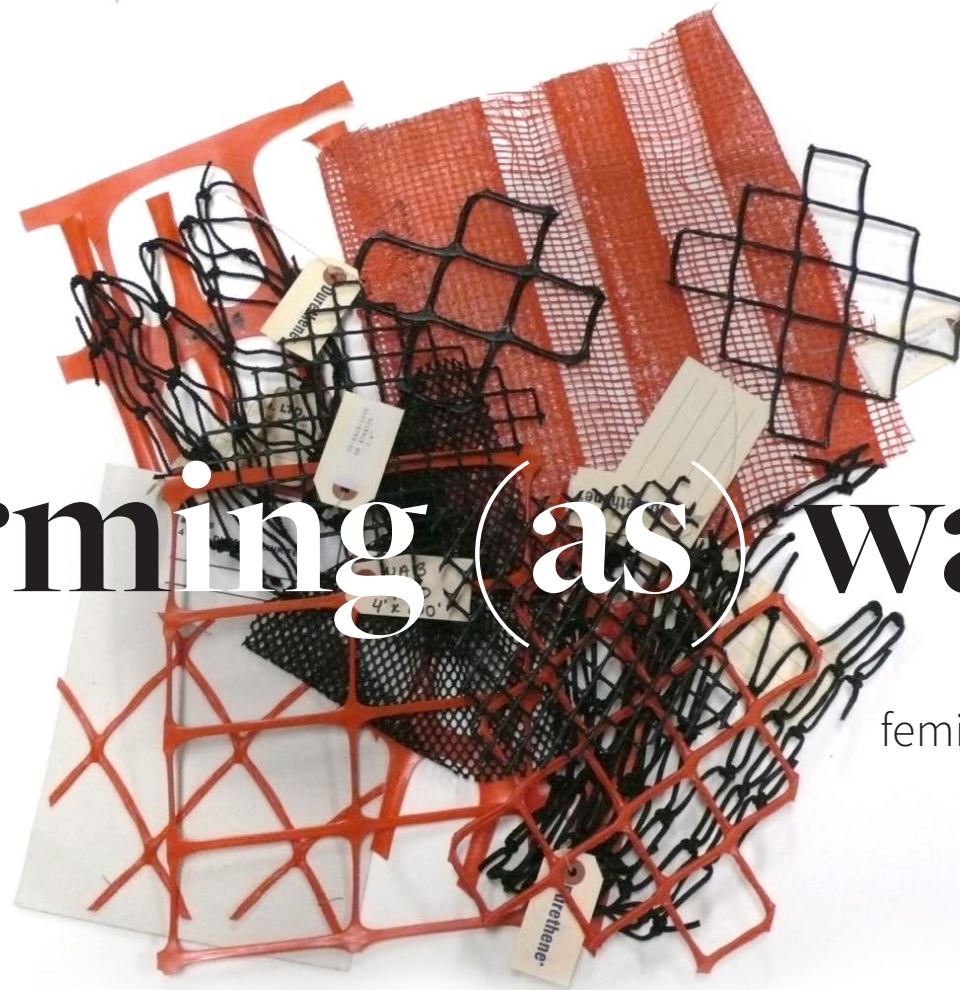
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Bettina E. Knaup

performing (as) waste

sticky care in
feminist materialist
performance
and curation



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sticky care in feminist materialist performance and curation

by Bettina E. Knaup

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis is based in my curatorial practice and engages with feminist and queer artists who are inspired by and explore discarded matter, materials and bodies. Engaging with waste and death, dwelling in landfills, morgues, kitchen and wastelands, these artists create connections to that which is not meant to be seen, felt, touched, smelled or be attended to, questioning the dualism between vital life and dead, inanimate (waste) matter. Challenging Western waste habits built on distance, disposability and denial these artists experiment with waste intimacies and different forms of knowing and relating.

Considering performance art as well as curatorial practice as a field for embodied knowledge production, this study explores the following questions: What performative modes of knowing in relation to matter do these artists develop and experiment with? What does it take to respond to these practices curatorially, to curate in a complex web of more than human relationalities and to consider waste in curating? How can performance and curation engender and enable “ongoingness” (Haraway) or a “methodology of continuing” (Ukeles), while facing indeterminacy, uncontrollability, vulnerability and destruction?

While following a path towards performative and curatorial waste intimacy inspired by these artists, I have been turning to scholars and writers from very different fields such as feminist materialist ecological philosophy, science and technology studies, discard studies, performance studies and curatorial studies. What the gathering of these artists and the related readings suggest, is that

matter’s vitality cannot be captured by a focus on (biological) life alone, but also transcends the assumed boundaries between life and non-life. It also brings to the fore a focus on specific sticky waste matters - sticky no-thingness - rather than abstract flowing materiality. While these sticky waste matters might be ‘alive’, such liveness entails not only “kicking” (Barad), “dancing” (Haraway) or “acting” (Folgers, Bennett), but also, I argue, remaining, sedimenting, accumulating, lingering, waiting, decomposing or deteriorating. A more diversified imaginary of material liveness and of the event emerges here, which extends beyond life and non-life boundaries.

The artists and works are inhabiting, questioning or experimenting with such boundary layers between life and non-life. Their work resonates with scholars who have fundamentally troubled the imaginary of such boundaries ranging from the skin or membrane which delineates a bounded body or organism (Braidotti, Barad, Povinelli), to the ground imagined as the boundary between the world of the living – bios – and the world of inanimate matter – geos (Stengers, Latour, Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, Haraway, Ingold). Following the leaking, sticky waste matters that cannot be contained nor externalised or eliminated, matters that are hard to grasp and to know, I argue that the artists explore modes of call and response that involve excessive, “tentacular” (Haraway), more than human touch and care. Their work resonates with authors reflecting on matters of care, proposing a-subjective, haptic, durational and sticky modes of knowing with care (Puig de la Bellacasa, Haraway).

Artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook for instance has created long durational performances in the presence of the dead, questioning the ‘epidermal fiction’ of contained bodies and instead experimenting with ‘becoming decomposition’. Mierle Laderman Ukeles has been engaging with the ground, questioning the fiction of the wasteland or waste-sink as groundless outer space and instead has experimented for decades with modes of inhabiting such wasteland in proximity. Sarah Vanhee has experimented with durational forms of ‘suspending discarding’ and ‘excessive handling’ on stage and in the studio.

My research is based in and proceeds through a curatorial approach. I have been developing three curatorial methodological concepts: curating as middling-muddling, curating as sticky care and curating no-thingness. This has implied giving up curating as overviewing, surveying, ordering or categorising, and instead suggests to attend to lateral, peripheral, transitional relations. This curatorial modality resists detecting and delineating but rather attends to leaking, muddy, sticky form at the threshold of its continuous unforming. While it is based in movement, it does not imply to cross far distances, but rather alludes to sinking into, to inhabiting, giving in to the strands, streams, tendencies or forces accumulated in this particular muddle. What has emerged is not formlessness, but a non-cohering open form. Following the many unrealised proposals and potentials of some of these artists, considering their durational ‘method of continuing’, their urgencies against the forces of impossibilisation, I have proceeded in the idiom of impossible curatorial proposals. These proposals are written as if they were possible, imagining and preparing collective materialisations.

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Introduction

1. After ending, before beginning

This research project begins with a desire to suspend, to do otherwise. It is grounded in my practice as a feminist curator and organiser, which I understand as a mode of gathering and being gathered, patterning and being patterned, of co-creating (temporary) communities of imagining and experimenting to live otherwise. I have been gathered by and gathered numerous feminist and queer authors, activists, poets and artists, over the years. One such gathering was the traveling performance archive and exhibition project *re.act.feminism #1* and *#2*, featuring live performances and traces of performances by roughly 180 artists and collectives. The focus was on remaining and returning, or more concretely on feminist, queer, gender-critical works from the 1960s until the early 1980s and how they remain and return in forms of re-performances, re-enactments, appropriations, reformulations

and archival projects.¹ While this project has officially ended in 2014, it somehow lived on – not surprisingly given its focus – even if only in aspirations, desires, critiques, proposed and failed revivals, publications.

It also lived on in my imagination through a number of artists' work, which stayed with me, demanding something else, something more, requiring other forms of encounter, encounters that would exceed the formats of *re.act.feminism*, or other curatorial methods familiar to me. Works by the following artists remained and returned, asking me to suspend and to curate otherwise: María Teresa Hincapié, who has created durational performances with her household left overs in countless bags and boxes (*Una cosa es una cosa*, 1990); María Evelia Marmolejo, who performed with/in sewage and discarded placentas

at the banks of the Cauca River (*Anónimo 4*, 1982); Senga Nengudi sculpting and performing with worn, stretched and sagging nylon, evoking wasted but defiant bodies (*R.S.V.P.* series, since 1976); Mierle Laderman Ukeles, remaining artist in residence in the New York City Department of Sanitation for more than 40 years (since 1979); Cecilia Vicuña placing hundreds of fleeting assemblages of found materials called *Precarios* or *Basuritas* (little rubbish) in landscapes, streets and gutters over many years (since 1966).

Other artists stayed as well, such as performance artist and author Eleonora Fabião, indirectly through her research for the *re.act.feminism* archive directing my attention to some of the artists mentioned above, and more concretely through a performance proposal

¹ I curated this project together with Beatrice E. Stammer and with the support and collaboration of numerous colleagues. The first edition was titled *re.act.feminism - performancekunst der 1960er und 70er jahre heute* in Berlin, Ljubljana and Erfurt (2008-2009). For more information including video- and audio-documentation see <http://www.reactfeminism.org/nr1> (accessed 03.03.2021). The second edition, *re.act.feminism # 2 - a performing archive*, travelled between 2011-2013 to seven venues across Europe. It was accompanied by an online platform and concluded by a book publication in 2014. Detailed information can be found in Knaup & Stammer (2014) and at: <http://www.reactfeminism.org> (accessed 03.03.2021). For critical discussions see Danbolt (2013); Schneider (2014); Reilly (2018). For an introduction into and overview of the extensive debates on performance and the archive see Jones & Heathfield (2012).

– so far unrealised – of retrieving, assembling and collectively redistributing the waste from Guanabara bay in Rio de Janeiro. Others, who were not part of the re.act. feminism project, have entered the gathering over time: Tejal Shah and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, who have been visiting and in some ways also inhabiting the landfill and the morgue, enacting wayward intimacies; and Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl, Sophia New, Nana Petzet and Sarah Vanhee, who have all developed propositions of keeping waste – at home, in their studio, in the art institute, museum or on stage.

These artists are seeking long durational engagements and intimacies with the discarded and the wasted, challenging material, spatial and temporal boundaries, questioning the dualism between vital life and dead, inanimate (waste) matter. Responding to the exploitation

of resources and diminishing of life on a global scale, as well as to the mounting “mountains of disavowed waste” (Bennett, 2012: 248) being put away into landfills, rivers or oceans, or traded globally to countries of the global South, I argue that these artists do important work in developing micropolitical sensibilities, knowledges and practices in search of more sustainable and solidary modes of (not only human) life. While I have not engaged with all these artists with equal intensity, they have all contributed to my study in one way or another, leading me –so to say- through and beyond the archive, into the waste depot.

Contemporary Western waste habits, practices and policies are mostly built on distance and externalisation, on what waste scholars have described as “active not knowing” (Hawkins, 2006: 16) and as an “enactment of

forgetting” (Hird, 2013c: 106). This is evident in the daily consumption habits of many citizens of industrialized societies, ingrained by the quasi-automatic discarding of single use items and the rapid replacement of consumer goods after their planned obsolescence (Davis, 2015; Hawkins, 2006; Moore, 2015). It is also evidenced by a lack of public scrutiny regarding the vast majority of global waste streams produced by construction and other industries, which mostly remain overlooked in the debates centring on domestic/municipal waste (Gregson & Crang, 2010; Liboiron, 2014; Graeber, 2012). Also, the patterns of waste disposal with a growing, highly unequal and structurally racist/neocolonial regional and international, often illegal waste trade underlines such a practice of waste externalisation (UNEP, 2015; Nixon, 2011; Pellow, 2007).



Fig. 1 Maria Theresa Hincapié, *Una Cosa es una cosa*, 1990, performance at XXXIII Salón Nacional de Artistas, Corferías, Bogotá. | Fig. 2 María Evelia Marmolejo, *Anónimo 4*, 1982, photographic documentation of performance at Banks of the Rio Cauca, Colombia, photo Nelson Villegas | Fig. 3 Senga Nengudi, *Study for Mesh Mirage*, 1977, photo: Adam Avila | Fig. 4 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance*, 1979-80, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City

However, despite all attempts to put waste away as far as possible, it is increasingly difficult, to remain blind to the “persistence of waste” (Bayly, 2012: 38) everywhere, including – through the flows of toxins, chemicals, plastic particles – in food chains and bodies of human and more than human beings. Waste does not disappear, it turns up, and increasingly so in unexpected ways.

The growing plastification of rivers, oceans and food chains, resulting in new multispecies lifeworlds (Davis, 2015; Gabrys, 2016)² is but one evidence. Another indicator is the decreasing willingness of many countries of the Global South to serve as waste dump, resulting in recent waste import bans and the return of illegal waste shipments to sender countries.³ While the Western paradigm

of waste-distance and -denial was never an option or lived reality for many communities located in the Global South, and especially for indigenous people, living “on a day-to-day basis with, on, and off waste” (Bell, 2019: 98; see also Alexander & Reno, 2012), it seems that the capitalist operation of sinking waste elsewhere, beyond what Jason Moore has called the “waste frontiers”, is meeting “limits of an entirely new character” (Moore, 2015: 280) with risk and vulnerability increasingly “encroaching on zones of privilege” (Chen, 2011: 272).

There are various modes of (public, political) response to this waste crisis, ranging from apocalyptic scenarios on one side of the spectrum, “using waste to stage the destruction of the planet” or the human species (Hawkins, 2006: 7), to optimistic celebrations of so called zero waste and green economy approaches on the other side of the spectrum with calls for an increased management and control of illegal and hazardous waste streams, the introduction of technological fixes for problems such as plastic gyres in the oceans, to the re-introduction of waste into circular economies through recycling. What these otherwise widely different approaches have in common is a focus on waste as inert, passive material, that is either misused and destroyed, or managed, controlled and reevaluated by humans.

2 The so-called “plastisphere” are ecosystems with 1000s of microbes and bacteria living on plastic particles. A new geological formation has been dubbed “plastiglomerate” (Davis, 2015: 235).

3 China has issued a ban to import nonindustrial plastic waste in 2017 (for details see Brooks et al., 2018; Heinrich-Böll Stiftung, 2018). Malaysia is sending back falsely declared plastic waste to Western countries as from early 2020 onwards (see Davidson, 2020).



Fig. 5 Cecilia Vicuña, *Shadow of a Loom*, 1993, Hudson Street, New York City, photo: César Paternosto | Fig. 6 Eleonora Fabião, *Black Stain*, from *Stains* series, 2013, Rio de Janeiro, photo: Felipe Ribeiro | Fig. 7 Tejal Shah, *Landfill Dance*, 2012, video, part of *Between the Waves* 5-channel video installation | Fig. 8 Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Reading for corpses*, 2002, video

Following the artists mentioned above, as well as the work of numerous feminist, materialist philosophers, scholars from the fields of science and technology studies, discard studies and environmental humanities, I argue for an alternative approach, which enables a different relationship to waste material, one that explores waste's complex material specificity and intra-relatedness, its temporality beyond cycles of extraction, production, consumption and disposal, its agency beyond human intentionality and control. A central challenge of such an approach is to navigate the complex relationship of waste and (non-)knowledge – of willingly ignored and forgotten, actively suppressed, incrementally composed, or essentially unknowable knowledge (Weber, 2014b: 121-122; see also Hird, 2013b: 107-108; Lewé et al., 2016: 19). While some authors stress the indeterminacy and uncontrollability of waste (Hird, 2012; Hird, 2013c;

Alexander/Sanchez, 2018) others point to the necessity of determinacy, management, control in view of largely unequal waste distribution and effects (Gille, 2013). I argue that the artists discussed in this dissertation are inhabiting exactly this contradiction, offering modes of living in proximity with waste's enduring presence, its complex inter- or rather “intra-actions” (Barad, 2003: 815) with human and more than human agents, without full knowledge and control, nor in denial and forgetfulness. Experimenting with different forms of (non)knowing, they explore how to imagine, engender, enable “ongoingness” (Haraway, 2016; Bayly, 2012), offering a “methodology of continuing” (Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 1974: 216), while facing indeterminacy, uncontrollability, vulnerability, maybe even futility and finality.

Isabell Stengers has forcefully argued – in view of ecological damage and catastrophe – against the temptation to define the terms of an abstract answer, especially by those living in Western, neoliberal extractive societies. Instead, she argues for countless experiments in order to stir imagination and actions (Stengers, 2015: 50). One place to look for such experimentation is the field of performance art, following those artists who experiment with waste intimacies – living intimately with, off or even as waste, creating connection to that which is not meant to be seen, heard, felt, touched, smelled or attended to. Another field of experimentation could be the practice of art curation and the related artistic institution. On the one hand these could be predestined contexts for reflecting upon, reinventing, reimagining, experimenting with urgently needed, different ecological relations to the wasted and the discarded. On the other hand, these fields

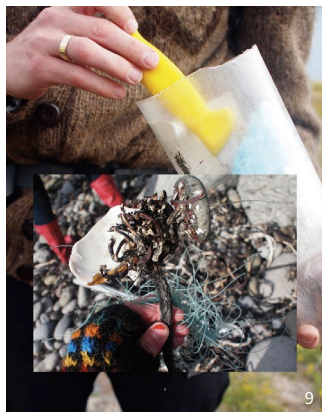


Fig. 9 Kristina Lindström & Åsa Ståhl, *Plastic Imaginaries*, 2016, research, installation & booklet | Fig. 10 Sophia New & Ruby New Belasco, *The matter between you and me*, 2015, video | Fig. 11 Nanna Petzet, *Community Cooker*, 2017, photo: Helge Mundt | Fig. 12 Sarah Vanhee, *Oblivion*, 2017

are also implicated in wasteful, production-oriented practices of a fast-paced event culture. A crucial question is then how curatorial practices and art institutions could accommodate, reflect and support the resonances of such artistic practices – not only by conceiving and hosting critical programs about the anthropocene, climate change, the waste crisis – but also through questioning their own mode of operation, their own waste habits.

Considering performance art as well as curatorial practice as a field for embodied knowledge production, this study explores how several artists generate materialist (non)knowledges and sensibilities and how a corresponding materialist curatorial practice could create and support wider resonances of these works. What do these increasingly present, indeterminate, contagious mountains and underground storages of waste look like from the perspective of artistic performative and curatorial practice? How can performance and curation be practiced as an ongoingness, and as presence in view of such destruction and extinction? What clues and inspirations for less ‘productivist’ curatorial practices can be drawn from these artists, some of whom have critically engaged with curatorial practice and with institutions?

While following this path towards performative and curatorial waste intimacy inspired by the artists introduced above, I have been turning to scholars and writers from very different, sometimes even disparate fields such as feminist materialist ecological theory, science and technology studies, discard studies, performance studies and curatorial studies.

I am implying ‘turning’ here in the sense of ‘middling’ and ‘muddling’ – terms drawn from Donna Haraway (2016), Isabell Stengers (2005), Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (2014) and Tiainen et al. (2015) and further developed into my curatorial methodology below. ‘Middling – muddling’ implies to give up overviewing, surveying, ordering or categorising, and instead suggests to attend to lateral, peripheral, transitional relations. It resists detecting and delineating – art works, disciplines, fields – but rather attends to leaking, muddy, sticky form at the threshold of its continuous unforming. While it is based in movement, it does not imply to cross far distances, but rather alludes to sinking or delving into, to inhabiting, giving in to the strands, streams, tendencies or forces accumulated in this particular muddle. What has emerged is not formlessness, but a non-cohering open form.

More concretely, I have not attempted to survey feminist new materialist and ecological theories or the relatively new and expanding field of discard studies but I have rather entered these different fields from the perspective of the artists and their works, processes and materials, as well as from my curatorial practice perspective. There is great resonance between these performance artists and many authors from the overlapping fields of science and technology studies, process philosophy, ecological anthropology and feminist and queer theory, who have in recent years turned towards matter, its vibrancy, animacy or agency, transgressing assumed boundaries between vital life and dead, inanimate matter, between human and more than human or inhuman entities. Feminist and queer authors have been at the forefront of what some have called a ‘new materialism’, which is not surprising, given their lasting investment with those who straddle these divisions. Authors such as Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Mel Chen, Donna Haraway, Myra Hird, Kim TallBear and many others – while not necessarily embracing the “founding gestures” of a supposedly ‘new’ materialism (Ahmed, 2008) – have been exploring what it means to be and to know “worldly” (Haraway, 2007: 3-4), or – in other words – to be not only *in* but also “*of the world*” (Barad, 2003: 828; Bennett, 2010: 114).⁴ While worldly flesh – captured, permeated,

4 For genealogical accounts of such new materialism(s) see for instance Alaimo & Hekman (2008); Coole & Frost (2010); Dolphijn & van der Tuin (2012); Folkers (2013); Gamble et al. (2019). For distinguishing new materialisms from other schools of thought such as speculative realism or object-oriented ontology see Sheldon (2015); Bennett (2015).

contaminated, wired, resisting, creating, pleasuring – has for a long time been the focus of various feminisms’,⁵ I am especially interested in authors who have expanded their focus beyond the human, the organic, beyond life and with an enlarged sense of agency. Matter is, in the vision of these materialist thinkers, not a passive and fixed, essential substance, nor is it a blank page waiting for social inscription (Barad, 2003: 821), but it might “kick back” (Barad, 1998: 112), be an event, a “symphony”, a “subject and object shaping dance” (Haraway, 2007: 4), involved in “acting in concert” (Folgers, 2013: 29). The performativity of matter has been most explicitly articulated by Karen Barad, who – building on insights from quantum field theory and expanding Judith Butler’s notion of performativity – develops an understanding of “intra-action” and “agential realism” as affective encounter between human and non-human agents, considering both how discourse actively shapes matter but also how “matter comes to matter” (Barad, 2003).⁶ This vibrant materialism transcends any narrow understanding of the human and involves for instance the “genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists”⁷ which occupy 90% of the cells of the ‘human’ body (Haraway 2007: 3), or the metals, chemicals or plastic

particles entering food chains and therefore contributing to what Stacy Alaimo has called “transcorporeal bodies” (Alaimo, 2010: 18).

While many of these materialist authors are subsumed under the rubric of a “new” materialism (Alaimo & Hekmann, 2008; Coole & Frost, 2010; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012), this perspective has also been described as “old”, only newly and differently assembled (Folgers, 2013: 18). Many authors have traced complex genealogies in detail, complicating and qualifying the alleged newness as ‘renewed’ (Coole & Frost, 2010: 4), ‘reinhabited’ (Bennett, 2015: 225) or ‘recovered’ (Gamble et al., 2019: 113). The various strands of materialist theories have many predecessors, undercurrents, connections and resonances – including Western process philosophies (Folgers, 2013; Gamble et al., 2019; Hekman, 2008), to non-Western indigenous agent ontologies as extensively discussed in indigenous studies literature (Rosiek et al., 2019). I will trace connections and resonances to the artistic practices foregrounded in this study, some of which predate theoretical debates on a new materialism and might offer further insights. Their work has led me to specific read-

ings of feminist ecological materialist theories together with performance studies’ and waste studies’ pertinent contributions.

What the gathering of these particular artists with their focus on waste and death and the related reading of performance studies, waste studies and feminist materialist and ecological theories suggest, is that matter’s vitality cannot be captured by a focus on (biological) life alone, but also transcends the assumed boundaries between “Life/Not-Life” (TallBear, 2017).⁸ They bring to the fore a focus on specific sticky waste matters – what I have come to call sticky no-thingness – rather than abstract flowing materiality. While these sticky waste matters might be ‘alive’, such liveness (Schneider, 2017) entails not only kicking (Barad, 1998), dancing (Haraway, 2007) or acting (Folgers, 2013; Bennett, 2010), but also – I argue – remaining, sedimenting, accumulating, shadowing, lingering, waiting, lying dormant, decomposing or deteriorating. A more diversified imaginary of material liveness and of the event emerges here, which extends beyond life and non-life⁹ boundaries.

5 See especially black feminism’s long history of theorising flesh, especially Hortense Spiller’s analysis of “captive flesh” in and beyond slavery (Spillers, 1987) or Cherrie Moraga’s “theory in the flesh” (Moraga, 1983); for a recent analysis in the context of new materialism see Alaimo’s *Your Shell on Acid* (2016).

6 While some have critiqued the alleged rejection of social de/constructivism in such approaches (Ahmed, 2008), other rather stress the simultaneous continuities and discontinuities between feminist de-/constructivism and materialism (Lykke, 2013). For a recent summary of critical debates see Gamble et al. (2019).

7 Protists are one-cellular organisms, that are neither plants, animals nor fungi.

8 A number of authors have argued that “if death, passivity and receptivity literally have no being and no place in the ‘flat ontology’ of life, this has dangerous conceptual and political consequences” such as overlooking “the implications this privileging (of life over non-life) has had on the exploitation and expropriation of human and non-human bodies associated with non-life” (Gamble et al., 2019: 120).

9 Authors use different spellings: Gamble et al. (2019) propose “non-life”, Povinelli (2016) prefers “Nonlife” and TallBear (2017) uses “Not-Life”. I have settled on non-life, when not quoting other spellings.

The artists and works assembled in this thesis are – I argue – inhabiting, questioning, probing, experimenting with, or transcending such boundary layers between life and non-life. Their work resonates with scholars who have fundamentally troubled the imaginary of such boundaries ranging from the skin or membrane which delineates a bounded body, organism or cell, to the ground imagined as the boundary between the world of the living (bios) and the world of inanimate matter (geos).

Artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook has created long durational performances in the presence of the dead. While not explicitly addressing waste from an ecological perspective, her work offers insights into how to perform, live, make art in the presence of waste and death, how to question the ‘epidermal fiction’ of contained bodies and instead experiment with ‘becoming decomposition’. Questioning the epidermal fiction of containment also features in works by artists Eleonora Fabião, Tejal Shah, Cecilia Vicuña and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Their work resonates with scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad and Elizabeth Povinelli, who de-dramatise the distinction between life and non-life, which has been described as “epidermal imaginary” (Povinelli, 2016: 51). Povinelli argues that the policing of such boundaries forms the precondition for extraction, and – as I elaborate further

below – also on “wastelanding” (Voyles, 2015) (see chapter ‘Beyond epidermal consciousness’).

Artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Tejal Shah, Sarah Vanhee are engaging with the ground, questioning the fiction of the wasteland or waste-sink as groundless outer space and instead experiment with modes of inhabiting such wasteland in proximity. Their work resonates with authors such as Isabell Stengers, Bruno Latour, Deborah Danowski, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Donna Haraway, Tim Ingold, Erin Manning and Brian Massumi who have engaged the ground, the earth, or rather the mud – this sticky matter between land, sea and air – through various figurations, proposing forms of living in (not on) specific, diversified, populated messy zones through acts of ‘muddling’, ‘middling’ and ‘wallowing’ (see chapter ‘Into the mud, muddle, middle’).

Following the leaking, sticky matters that cannot be contained nor externalised or eliminated, matters that are hard to grasp and to know, the artists, scholars and works assembled here explore modes of call and response that involve excessive, “tentacular” (Haraway, 2016: 42), more than human touch and care. This form of touch and care – which can involve hands, feet, eyes, ears, tendrils, tails (Ukeles, Vanhee, Shah, Rasdjarmrearnsook), threads and

knots (Vicuña), waves and rays (Shah), body extensions (Shah), ‘mudders’ or ‘maintenance extensions’ (Ukeles) – enacts specific forms of knowing, that proceeds through remaining, lingering or what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has called – referring to Susan Leigh Star – as “nonsplitting-practice” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015: 62-63). It engages in repetitive, embodied call and response across intervals of time or space and binds into liveness very unusual collectives (Schneider, 2017; see also Heathfield, 2014: 179). Through artistic experimentation with ‘suspending discarding’ (Sarah Vanhee), with ‘touching numbers’ (Mierle Laderman Ukeles) or ‘excessive handling’ (Vanhee, Ukeles, Shah) the artists gathered here perform what I call ‘sticky care’. Their work resonates with authors reflecting on care, especially Maria Puig de la Bellacasa who has proposed a-subjective, haptic, durational and sticky mode of knowing with care (see chapter ‘With sticky care’).

There is a long and complex history of visual artists’ use of discarded and decaying materials throughout the 20th century (Rübel, 2002; Bühler, 2010). As art historian Benjamin Bühler has elaborated in detail there are numerous artists who have been focussing on excavating residual histories of everyday culture through its waste.¹⁰ Others have been exploring and commenting upon the

10 The work of Arman, Ilja Kabakow, Kurt Schwitters, Daniel Spoerri can be given as example (Rübel, 2002; Bühler, 2010).

exploding consumer culture since the 1950s or have questioned more broadly the status of the durable art object and the role of the museum as its preserver.¹¹ The work of the artists discussed here ventures in different directions, foregrounding the persistence and agency of waste matter while questioning the role of the human as maker, interpreter, transformer or sole point of reference. Some of them can be contextualised in the broader field of ecological or land art¹², or in the context of a recent turn towards waste in the visual arts from an ecological perspective.¹³ However, while many of the latter artists work through acts of material recycling or transformation in sculpture or installation, the artists foregrounded here work in a performative, durational register, experimenting with modes of living with/as waste.

While performance studies have engaged in depth with ecological issues in environmental dance, or site-based performance in urban and rural landscapes (Kershaw, 2012; Bottoms et al., 2012; Heddon & Mackey, 2012) there has been relatively little direct engagement with issues of wasted matter and bodies. Therefore, Simon Bayly has recently called to pay more attention to waste in the context of an ecology of performance (Bayly, 2012: 38-39).

Inspired by the artists introduced above I am following this call.

My research is based in and proceeds through curatorial practice.

This has implied using a multifaceted curatorial approach both as a method of inquiry throughout my research and as a medium for evidencing research results. I have been using and further developing three methodological concepts, which resonate with the artistic approaches and scholarly reflections introduced above, and which are further elaborated below – curating as middling-muddling, curating as sticky care and curating no-thingness. This approach questions the notion of the curator as the one who selects, chooses, distinguishes, who has an overview and surveys a field from a distance. It has necessitated exploring my research questions through extended curatorial conversations with the artists, their collaborators, assistants, producers, through closely following work processes and materials, including -where possible- a haptic redoing of artistic methods (curating as sticky care), through detailed archival and site specific research grounded in the thick of material assemblages (curating

as middling, muddling), through waiting, non-doing and imagining (curating as no-thingness), as well as a parallel reading and interrogative writing process that considers artistic and theoretical work as informing and building on each other.

Although I have resisted the notion of curating as selecting, and although I have followed the work of all the artists mentioned above – in the written version of my research, I nevertheless only focus on three in-depth case studies the artists Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Sarah Vanhee. There are pragmatic reasons for this, such as my intense and therefore time-consuming method or the postponement of some specific projects relevant to this research by some of the artists. But it is also, and perhaps most of all, motivated by the specific way these three artists engage with duration – Sarah Vanhee's collection of all her garbage for an entire year, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' 40 years of artistic residency in the Department of Sanitation, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's seven years of repeated visits to the morgue – that exceeds the boundaries of any single project or art work, challenging the respective host institutions as well as any curatorial response.

11 Exemplary are the works of Robert Rauschenberg, Dieter Roth and Mark Dion, among others (Rübel, 2002; Bühler, 2010). There are also those artists who have developed participatory, interactive, large scale projects working with waste such as Noah Purifoy and Dan Peterman, among others.

12 Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work has been discussed in this context (Kastner & Wallis, 2005). There are also a number of artists who have developed related landfill works such as Mel Chin, Agnes Denes, The Harrisons and Nancy Holt (Boetzkes, 2019; Lippard, 2014).

13 Many visual artists working with installation, photography or sculpture have recently engaged with waste addressing ecological issues, such as Vik Muniz, Chris Jordan, Song Dong, Gabriel Orozco, Pinar Yoldas. For an in-depth discussion see Boetzkes (2019). For further reading on art and waste see Boscagli (2014); Davis, Turpin (2015); Perraudin (2016); Tittel (2016); Yaeger (2008).

Following the many unrealised proposals and potentials of some of these artists, works, materials and processes, considering their durational “method of continuing” (Ukeles, 1974: 216), their urgencies against the forces of ‘impossibilisation’.¹⁴ I have proceeded in the idiom of im-

possible curatorial proposals. As Karen Barad has stated: “Don’t for a minute think that there are no material effects of yearning and imagining. Virtual particles are experimenting with the im/possibilities of non/being, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t real, on the contrary.”

(Barad, 2012b: 13) These proposals are written and will be pursued in such a spirit, as if they were possible, imagining and preparing collective materialisations.

2. (Not) knowing waste matter: sticky no-thingness

Before delving into the work of the artists who are in the focus of this study, I would like to turn – by way of introduction – to waste and its study, or rather to the (im)possibilities of knowing and naming waste matter. As many have noted, waste is hard to grasp and to know. It resists – maybe by definition – classification and definition, as it seems to be their other: mutable and multiple; mingling qualities, states, beings, matters, temporalities; persisting and dispersing, accumulating and disappearing, sedimenting and evaporating.

Waste has many names – refuse, remains, residue, left overs, rubbish, garbage, trash, throwaways, dirt, filth – the list could be continued at length. In the context of this research I have – for several reasons – settled on using the term waste: This rather generic term is relatively unspecific and therefore relates not only to one type of waste – such as garbage, trash or rubbish referring to house-

hold or municipal waste, but also other types, such as the more prevalent industrial waste. The term does not foreground so exclusively the human act of differentiation, as other terms like refuse, discard or throwaway do. But most importantly waste is based on a complex etymology which hints at many contradictory dimensions relevant in this study: through its link to the latin root word *vastus* it references both, immensity in scale and nothingness, it has a territorial and indirectly also a temporal dimension (for a detailed discussion see Viney, 2014); its link to the medieval “common wastes” references a collective and subversive dimension, which is central to the artistic practices foregrounded in this study (Cooper, 2010: 1117; Goldstein, 2013 and chapter ‘At home, in the studio, on stage – Sarah Vanhee’).

Waste has been and is the focus of extensive research and debate. What has been in the foreground in waste studies for a long time was a conception of waste as inert and passive, as ‘stuff’, which is being acted upon and falling off or down in the process of making and creating. Authors such as Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*, 1966), Michael Thompson (*Rubbish Theory*, 1979), Susan Strasser (*Waste and Want*, 1999), and John Scanlan (*On Garbage*, 2005) among others have elaborated in depth how alternately the subject, value, the symbolic order, or figure/form are constituted through human practices of wasting. As Mary Douglas has famously stated – “[where] there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is a by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity” (Douglas, 1966: 36).

¹⁴ I have drawn this term from the German ‘Verunmöglichung’ in order to highlight the active process of turning something into an impossibility.

Waste itself appears in this and in related accounts mostly as transient matter, as essentially undefinable, as “anonymous stuff falling between valued objects and simple dust” (Kennedy, 2007: 7), as indistinguishable “formlessness” (Scanlan, 2005: 14), or as “matter out of place”, which only becomes waste in the wrong place (Douglas, 1966: 36). What is highlighted instead in these perspectives are the human acts of differentiation, “a lifetime of cutting-off, disconnection and removal” (Scanlan, 2005: 13), or processes of reintegrating / revaluing for instance through recycling. A related dimension stressed in some of these accounts is the uncanny aspect of such transient matter, lurking in the background, always threatening to contaminate or subvert the established order/system. This is expressed in the following statement by Scanlan: “We only acquire or understand the valuable (or develop ideas of the relationship between the self and the object world) as the result of a galloping retreat from an undifferentiated mass of things (which may also be called ‘nature’) that could otherwise swamp us” (Scanlan, 2005: 13).

Western urban waste management can be read as the technology par excellence enacting such ‘retreat from the swamp’. The main focus of this field of knowledge and practice was for long the enactment of hygiene / purity / control in dense (Western) urban centers and the transport of waste out of them. What happened with waste

once removed and dumped, who might be affected and how so, was for a long time of lesser or no concern (Weber, 2014b).

These perspectives have increasingly been amended, extended, questioned and challenged in various fields of scholarship, activism and practice, such as science and technology studies and discard studies (influenced by new materialist philosophies and environmental humanities), as well as environmental justice perspectives and indigenous studies. What is being stressed is that waste is “more than a symptom of culture” (Reno, 2015: 557), or extends beyond “the register of the categorial” (Gregson & Crang, 2010: 1026), that it has complex material effects and even agency while inter- and intra-acting with multiple actors, beings and forces. In this recent research perspective, waste is therefore no longer understood predominantly as a passive residue but rather as an active agent – a notion that also resonates with the artists discussed in this study.

What is being analysed by many scholars is waste’s material specificity, interrelationality and generative potential. Inspired by new materialist philosophies, which consider matter’s immanent agentic potentials and have in some cases addressed waste explicitly (Alaimo, 2010; Bennett, 2010; Chen, 2011; Connolly, 2013), this literature looks at

waste’s ‘agency’, it considers complex interactions with more than human actors and tries to notice, to sense, to follow what waste ‘does’, how it remains and affects human and nonhuman worlds (Bell, 2019; Gregson & Crang, 2010; Hawkins, 2006; Lewé et al., 2016; Mauch, 2016; Reno, 2014; Reno, 2015). However, concrete waste materiality seems to be somewhat elusive and hard to grasp. This may be due to the fact that there is no ‘waste materiality’ in general, there are only particular waste materials (Reno, 2015: 558). Correspondingly in some languages a general term for waste did not exist or has emerged only late during the 19th century. Instead in old German, in Latin and Greek a differentiated vocabulary was used to describe the heterogeneous types and sources of substances which were discarded or recycled. While this heterogeneous vocabulary focussed on the materials, the newly evolving abstract terms rather stressed the human act of discarding while waste matter was retreating in the background (Weber, 2014a: 7-10). In a similar vein anthropologist Tim Ingold has argued that an abstract notion of materiality – by presupposing a distinction between materiality and immateriality, solid object and ephemeral surround – gets in the way of understanding “the multiple trails of growth and transformation” converging in any material, be it rock, air or flesh.¹⁵ Therefore he proposes “that we take a step back, from the materiality of objects to the properties of materials”, which are not

15 For a consideration of the material dimension of air see the edited volume *The Life of Air* (Bakke, 2011).

“tokens of some common essence – materiality – that endows every worldly entity with its inherent ‘objectness’; rather they partake in the very processes of the world’s ongoing generation and regeneration” (Ingold, 2011a: 26). Materials “do not exist [...] but occur.” (Ingold, 2011a: 30; see also Coole & Frost, 2010: 10) Rosiek and Snyder stress that indigenous studies scholarship – taking this material non-human agency for granted – have long focussed on knowing particular materials and matters, rather than contemplating generalised and abstract categories (Rosiek & Snyder, 2020: 7).

In similar ways discard studies have begun researching waste as something else than “stuff that ‘just is’, but rather [...] [as that which] becomes” or un-becomes in very specific ways (Gregson & Crang, 2010: 1028). This perspective has been and continues to be developed through transdisciplinary approaches that overcome a number of academic divisions that have led to the outsourcing of dealing with concrete waste matter to either specific fields of practice and/or vulnerable populations.¹⁶

There is the division between social policy analysis, which has for long included concrete waste matter only as stuff being governed – “[b]lack-boxed, manipulated, treated, distributed, and contested” – and waste engineering and

management, to whom dealing with concrete materials has been delegated, as Gregson and Crang elaborate (Gregson & Crang, 2010: 1028).

Another example of such academic divisions is that between academic research and activism. Environmental justice movements were the first to push for a closer attention to the effects of very specific, often hazardous waste matter and have analysed the highly unequal, structurally racist distribution of risk and vulnerability through patterns of waste disposal (Bell, 2018; Nixon, 2011; Pellow, 2007; Zimring, 2016). They have contributed to paradigm shifts in waste management, so that a focus on different waste streams emerged, such as effluent, municipal waste, industrial waste, or particularly damaging waste streams such as electronic, plastic or nuclear waste (Reno, 2015; Weber, 2012; Weber 2014b).

Another division is that between predominantly Western waste scholarship and perspectives from the Global South as well as indigenous studies. A Western bias in research has tended to over-emphasise experiences from affluent societies and accordingly practices of waste distancing and disposal (Bell, 2019; Mount, 2015). While recent research – as elaborated above – is beginning to overcome this exclusionary perspective and is develop-

ing a relational and much more international approach, Bell argues for the necessity to study more extensively the practices and modes of life of those who work and “live in/with/of waste” on a regular basis in many countries of the Global South (Bell, 2019: 101). An important element of such an approach is also the recognition of indigenous perspectives, which highlight “the co-existence of people and their material traces (residues) on the (living) landscape” (Bell, 2019: 117; see also Reno, 2014; Rose, 2003; Zahara & Hird, 2015).

Recent approaches are also beginning to overcome the division between the arts and science/humanities. References to artists dealing with waste abound in discard studies,¹⁷ and some authors such as Jennifer Gabrys explicitly consider artist’s contributions to a speculative generation of material waste knowledge (Gabrys, 2016: 144; see also chapter ‘In the landfill – Mierle Laderman Ukeles’). However, a comprehensive reflection on artists’ specific contribution to waste knowledge is only just emerging (see especially Boetzkes, 2019). My study is intended as a contribution to that effect. It focuses not only on antecedents – for example, how the call by scholars to take perspectives in waste management and engineering seriously, has been preempted by decades (and perhaps even influenced) by the work of an artist like Mierle La-

¹⁶ For a short reflection on waste studies’ interdisciplinarity and a possible related marginalisation see Kersten (2016: 13-15).

¹⁷ Certain art works are being referenced extensively, especially Agnès Varda’s film *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000) and Lucy Walker’s documentary film *Waste Land* (2010), featuring the catadores on Rio de Janeiro’s Jardim Gramacho landfill and their collaboration with artist Vik Muniz (Boscagli, 2014; Boetzkes, 2019; Harrison, 2016; Hawkins, 2006; Lewe et al., 2016; Yaeger, 2008). It seems to me that what has been foregrounded by some authors are predominantly narrative forms, as in literature and documentary film.

derman Ukeles¹⁸ – but also on the specific speculative methods developed by artists, living intimately with/in/as waste. What I wish to foreground in this study is what Barbara Bolt has described as “material thinking” in the arts, that “involves a particular responsiveness to or con-

junction with the intelligence of materials and processes in practice” (Bolt, 2007: 30). Such material thinking not only emerges through defined art works but also through the processual “work of art” (Bolt, 2007: 33), which I have considered extensively throughout this study. This en-

tails the unrealised or unrealisable proposal, the left overs and little nothings, as well as the gaps and intervals and long durations of artistic practices.

18 Ukeles has entered the Department of Sanitation of New York City as artist in residence in 1979 and worked intensively with waste managers and landfill engineers since. Some scholars in the field of waste studies have also been working extensively with waste management agencies. Anthropologist Robin Nagle for instance has trained to become a sanitation worker and literally followed in the footsteps of artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles by becoming Anthropologist in Residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation. She explicitly references Ukeles as her role model for her research (Nagle, 2013: 31). Other waste scholars have intensively worked on landfills, such as Rathje & Murphy (2001) and Reno (2016).

Interlude

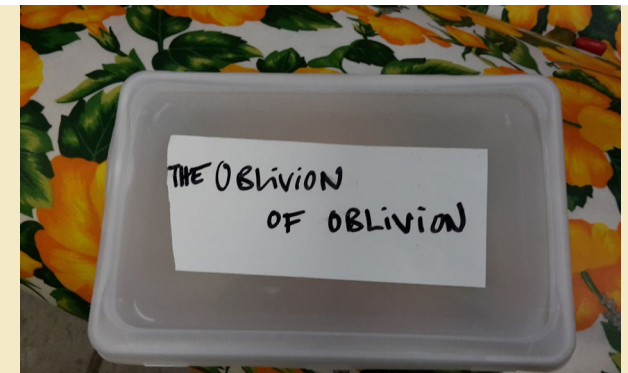
Early on in my research I came across these finds:

Two samples of thick black plastic landfill lining are glued onto a sheet of paper with a quote of an 18th century Rabbi, handwritten by artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. The document enmeshed with rubber is stored in a cabinet alongside materials about one of Ukeles' earlier serial art works (*Air Art* series) in her office and archive at the New

York City Department of Sanitation. I find it in a specific folder labelled “Rubber letters” next to correspondences with numerous industrial plastic producers with whom Ukeles tried to collaborate in the late 1960s. Peeling the samples from the paper revealed an imprint, a stain from the leaching plastic, forming a shadow on the story, which begins with the following words:

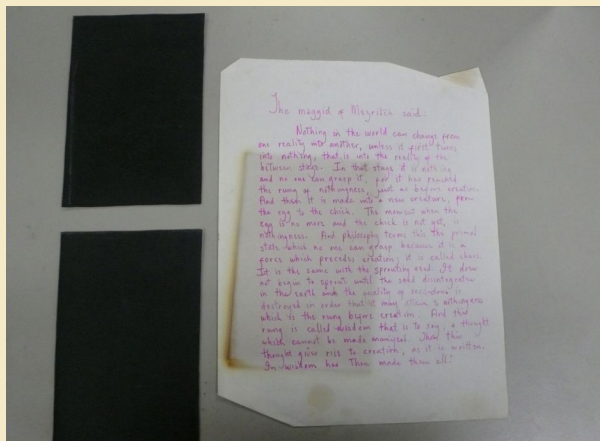
Nothing in the world can change from one reality into another, unless it first turns into nothing, that is into the reality of the between stage. In that stage it is nothing and no-one can grasp it, for it has reached the rung of nothingness...

**Ukeles, the Maggid of Mezritch said...,
undated document**



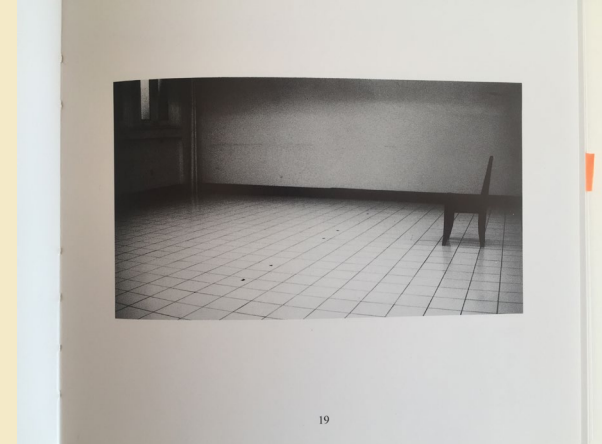
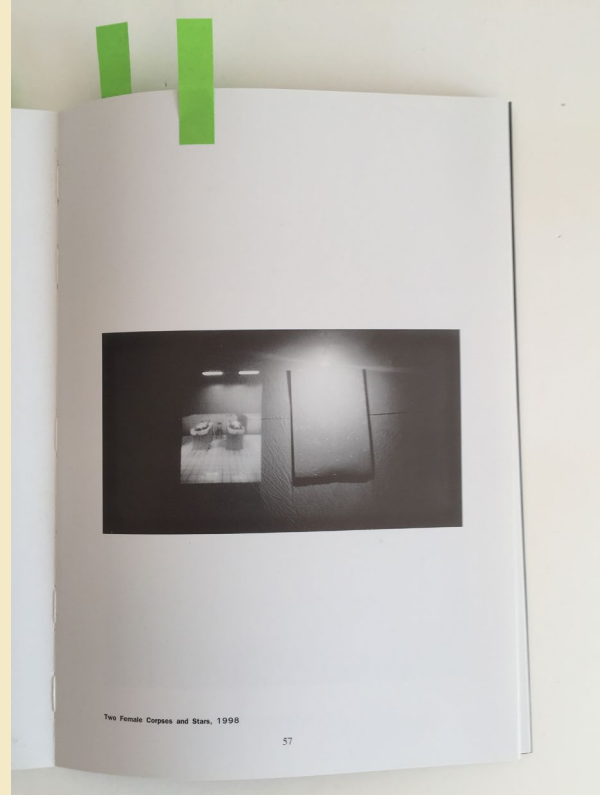
This “rung of nothingness”, or rather this sticky no-thingness, which assembles air, rubber, ink, paper, industries, art, shadows, leaching plastic, and betweenness – and which is not nothing – intrigued me, and remained, while escaping my grasp.

I encountered another intriguing ‘sticky no-thingness’ when following Sarah Vanhee’s *Oblivion*, a touring stage performance, in which she engages with every bit of waste, that she had collected during one full year,



carefully unpacking it in front of an audience for several hours. Talking with her assistant after one of these performances, she showed me a little plastic box, labelled *The Oblivion of Oblivion*. It entailed the waste of the waste, the little bits and scraps, which had deteriorated to such an extent that they couldn't be handled on stage anymore – mouldering content of teabags, which had attracted fishmoth while being stored, and a few other items such as a dustball and some tiny shards. Rather than throwing these away, the assistant had carefully collected every bit, kept them in a box, and carried it along to every presentation of the performance, although its content never appeared on stage. This waste of the waste, this shadow oblivion, treated with such care, accompanied me while following Sarah Vanhee's work.

While visiting Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook in Chiang Mai and in Bangkok she gives me a series of self-edited books, which poetically document her early work and a series of performances in the morgue of the university hospital of Chiang Mai. Some grainy photographs draw my attention. One of them depicts an empty chair, in an empty room with tiled white floor. The chair is placed parallel to the rear wall, facing some tiny floor markings and a window. It seems to be dark outside. The image has no title. Another image depicts two small, grainy photographs hanging on a textile background. It is titled *Two Female Corpses and Stars*. It is not clear where the picture was taken –



The 'rune of no-thingness' assembled in these moments, escaping my curatorial grasp, is seeping through the following pages.

maybe in a studio or gallery for an exhibit. As far as one can see the left image shows two dissection tables with blurry bodies in a tiled, neon-lit room. An empty chair is placed between them. An unidentifiable figure or rather a shadow is bending over one of the tables. The other image shows stars in the dark expanse of the universe, hardly visible. I am drawn to these photographs seemingly taken before, between or after Rasdjarmrearnsook's performances, featuring empty chairs facing no-thingness, and alluding to dark infinities beyond the tiled walls of the enclosed morgue.

Waste matter as sticky no-thingness

Following the transdisciplinary waste studies as well as engaging with the material thinking of the artists, works and processes discussed in this study, I have come to describe the unknowable, contradictory, out of scale dimension of waste matter as sticky no-thingness.

Many authors in waste studies have approached the fleeting material dimension of waste through the notion of thingness, that is “what’s left after objectification breaks down, ... what we suddenly notice when an object seems to drop out of all the systems that give it meaning and value” (Hawkins, 2006: 80). William Viney stresses in his *Philosophy of Waste* – referencing the thing theory of Bill Brown – that the confrontation with the thingness of an object reveals that there is material reality outside human control: “we sense how objects exceed our relations with them” (Viney, 2014: 30-32). Also Jane Bennett begins her influential study *Vibrant Matter* (2010) with a reflection on the “force of things”, particularly that of an assemblage of debris in the gutter of a Baltimore street (Bennett, 2010: 1, 4). Its “thing-power” is more than only a negative “recalcitrance” (Bennett, 2010: 1), or “intractability” of objects, rather it has the capacity “to produce effects”, to form relations, “to shimmer and spark”, to become “vibratory” (Bennett, 2010: 5). However, while thingness is being conceived in these accounts as disruptive, collective, agentic, as revelatory of materiality, it cannot fully escape its other

– the delineated object, the product, the commodity. It might therefore resonate mostly with the human-made artefact, with consumer waste that is retaining its form and not yet deteriorating – plastic bottles, plastic bags, or similar items figuring prominently in many of these stories. Bennett herself states the disadvantages of the concept of thingness as ‘overstating fixed stability’ and lending itself to an “atomistic rather than congregational” understanding of agency (Bennett, 2010: 20). Some authors have therefore been pushing this notion further while considering waste deterioration and (bacterial) metabolism. In his article *The Ecology of Materials* anthropologist Tim Ingold defines (organic and non-organic) things “as gatherings of materials in motion”, like a compost heap, engaged in processes of “continual interchange of substances” beyond membrane, skin or surface. Correspondingly he speaks of “leaky things” (Ingold, 2014: 65). And Jennifer Gabrys – following specific material waste streams such as plastic and electronic waste along its intra-acting flows of transformation – argues that waste things become “non-things” (Gabrys, 2013: 219): “in a waste-based materiality, ‘things’ are rarely present as discrete entities, since materiality involves processes of breaking down, transforming, dispersing and reworking” (Gabrys, 2013: 218).

I would like to follow Gabrys’ waste no-thingness and add another quality to describe such leaking and transforming waste-based materiality – that is stickiness. While a lot of materialist thought inspired by Deleuze and Guattari has used the figure of liquid flows to describe matter (Bennett, 2015: 229), stickiness invokes slightly different connotations. It implies accumulation, concatenation, a liminal state between hard and fluid, wet and dry, static and flowing; it renders differentiation or distancing impossible; it slows things down (see also Lewé et al., 2016: 9-10). Slowness and accumulation are important when considering waste materiality, as many authors have stressed, especially those who engage with toxicity. Rob Nixon has described the “slow violence” of toxicity occurring “gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon, 2011: 2). Nancy Tuana has explored the long durational processes of toxic accumulation across racialised and impoverished bodies, landscapes and cities at the example of Hurricane Katrina (Tuana, 2008: 2001-02). Mel Chen traces toxic animacies which queer the boundaries of the subject, of intimacy, of life / non-life, hinting at modes of being and sociality beyond a normative event horizon of efficiency and acceleration (Chen, 2011).

What emerges in these and related accounts is a sticky, slow metabolic materiality that exceeds life / non-life boundaries, that can reach enormous scale and / or disappear from visibility, that is unmanageable and unknowable, but also needs to be known and to be taken care of.

This paradoxical complexity is for me captured in the notion of waste matter as sticky no-thingness. The artists foregrounded in this doctoral thesis confront, engage with, inhabit this material but also ungraspable dimension – in their art works, but also through what Barbara

Bolt has called “the work of art” (Bolt, 2007: 33). In the following section I will address what this implies for a curatorial practice.

3. Curating waste matters: no-thing to be exhibited

As elaborated above my research project is embedded in my practice as a feminist performance curator and organizer. More specifically it is inspired by a feeling of limitation to adequately respond to and support artistic work which fundamentally challenges material, spatial and temporal boundaries, seeking long durational engagements and intimacies with the discarded and the wasted, questioning the dualism between vital life and dead, inanimate (waste)matter. It began with a desire to suspend, to unlearn and possibly reimagine conceptual frameworks and common protocols of curatorial practice. More specifically it seeks for inspirations for non-productivist curatorial practices, which proceeds otherwise than through discovering, revealing, presenting and disseminating formed objects, works, events, beings and spaces. How can curation be understood and practiced as ongoingness, considering and supporting the continuities of

artistic experimentation and material formation which includes the afterlives of artistic processes, the material left overs, the unrealized or even unrealizable proposal, or the intervals of no-thingness interspersing long durational artistic practices?

Suspending and changing is nothing new to the curatorial field. To the contrary, curatorial practice and discourse has undergone fundamental transformations since the second half of the 20th century so that some authors even define reinvention as the essence of the culture of curating (O'Neill, 2007a: 7). Following upon and responding to multiple artistic developments since the 1950s which have been summarily (and controversially) described as dematerialization in the visual arts¹⁹ and dedramatization in the performing arts (Klein; Sting, 2005), a process where “all definitions of practices, their supports and

their institutional frameworks have shifted and blurred” (Rogoff, 2013: 41), curating has changed correspondingly and has increasingly engaged with the processual and performative dimension of transdisciplinary artistic practice and instigated respective institutional transformations. While historically being rooted in museological practices of conservation of art objects and describable as “a trajectory, that led to a final product or emanated *from* this final product”, curating “has opened up to inconclusive processes whose outcome might be learning or researching or conversing or gathering or bringing a new perspective into circuits of expertise” (Rogoff, 2013: 42). In this process curating has also been increasingly embraced by other disciplines than the visual arts, especially by the performing arts.²⁰

19 Lippard's and Chandler's rather loose use of the term dematerialisation (Lippard & Chandler, 1968; Lippard, 1997) has been critiqued since its publication, but remained influential nevertheless. For an extensive discussion of genealogies, precedents and alternative descriptions, as well as the different conceptions of materiality articulated in global conceptualism and its critique of the art object, see Berger (2019).

20 This is evidenced by numerous publications (Butte et al., 2014; Davida et al., 2019; Ferdman, 2014; Malzacher et al., 2010; Malzacher & Warsza, 2017), the establishment of professional training courses and academic programs (e.g. Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University since 2011; Master Curating Performing Arts at IUAV University of Venice since 2017; course program Curating in the Performing Arts at University of Salzburg since 2017) and the gradual replacement of job-titles in some theatres and festivals (artistic director, chief-, senior- or assistant curator instead of director, selector, programmer, coordinator or dramaturge; see for instance: Festival Steirischer Herbst, Graz; Theater Hau Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin)

While there are many different, conflicting approaches to curating in these expanding fields, most have in common a focus on the generative rather than the mere organisational or representational dimension of curatorial practice (Bismarck et al., 2012; Eigenheer et al., 2007; Heathfield, 2014a; O'Neill, 2012). Bismarck has proposed that the central element of curating can be described as the production of relations in emerging assemblies of a wide variety of materials, artefacts, works and that these assembled “materials [...] are in action”, that “they obtain changing and dynamic meaning” or even produce knowledge while being related to one another in ever new public and spatial constellations (Bismarck, 2007: 19). Bismarck writes here in relation to the visual art context but later widens her understanding of the exhibition “as transdisciplinary and transprofessional space of appearance” and considers not only artefacts but also people, spaces, contexts as ‘materials’ in these emerging assemblages (Bismarck, 2010: 51-52). The expanding discourse about curating in the performing arts adds a more explicit consideration and understanding of the temporal and embodied dimensions of such assemblages, which include “cross-disciplinary work(s) in time, in space, with bodies, in relational encounters” (Jackson, 2017: 25).

Such practice of relational curating is contested and contradictory, mostly due to its resonance with changing working conditions and forms of subjectivation in neoliberal capitalism (Bismarck, 2007). Some even describe the curator as the epitome of neoliberal economy – as the flexible and dynamic professional being able to successfully mine the ever-changing field of relational creativity and affective sociality (Rolnik, 2017; Schneider, 2010: 66) or perform in exemplary manner the core task of consumer societies: “the art of choosing” (Hantelmann, 2011: 8). Hantelmann links the rise of the curator and his/her main medium – the exhibition – explicitly to the fundamental socioeconomic transformations since the mid of the 20th century:

A society in which the focus is shifting from production to consumption needs new actors and protagonists. In this context, the curator emerges as a figure who to a certain extent selects exemplarily, who is constituted in choosing (particular works of art, discursive positions, aesthetic acts, et cetera), and above all in whom consumption is manifested not only as a receptive capacity, but as a productive and generative force.

Hantelmann, 2011: 11

It is in such a description of the curatorial role as exemplary selector and consumer that the apparent impossibility of this section’s title *curating waste matters* shines through. Waste appears as the other of curating, as that what is constituted by selective curatorial acts but remains outside of its remit once curatorial distinctions between what deserves to be curated and what can be wasted have been established. However, while I agree with Hantelmann’s analysis in that it can explain the attraction, prominence and wide reach of the practice of curating and the figure of the curator,²¹ I argue that neither the experience of an exhibition, event or performance nor the process and effect of curatorial labour are completely subsumed by the regime of distinction, selection and consumption. This resonates with authors who stress the (albeit always contradictory and fleeting) potential of curatorial acts to enable – under specific preconditions – an arena for critical re-negotiation and intervention in such institutional and economic regimes (Bismarck, 2010: 53; Tyzlik-Carver, 2016: 275-76; Rolnik, 2017).

In the following paragraphs I will draw on some of these fleeting acts in order to locate and contextualise my own practice within a legacy which is not fully subsumed under the regime of selection, production and consumption, as described by Hantelmann. Rather than re-narrating the well-rehearsed and often repeated plot of curatorial

21 See also Balzer’s *Curationism* for an analysis of the current “cult” of curating (Balzer, 2015).

history as the rise and fall of the individual curator as author and power figure²² I would like to proceed in the spirit of what Elke Krasny has called “feminist durationality” (Krasny, 2016a: 100). In the context of debates on feminist curation she rejects the narrative of feminist waves and related curatorial initiatives as tied to a temporal model of linear progress, of advancement and obsolescence and instead argues for recognizing continuities of influence and resonance²³: “It is my firm conviction that a feminist turn in curating builds upon questions raised, answers suggested, and transgressions risked by many, many others” (Krasny, 2015b: 66). In a similar spirit I would like to complicate some common assumptions about the development of curating and outline some (feminist) legacies which inspire and inform my own approach. One way to narrate curatorial history is to understand it as a development from the narrowly defined professional position of the museum *curator* to diversifying creative practices of freelance *curating* to the systemic and discourse ori-

ented *curatorial* evolving further into the *postcuratorial* or *posthuman curating* (Tyzlik-Carver, 2016: 31-53). Such a genealogy suggests a development from individual to collective or systemic practices, from craft to discourse (see also O’Neill, 2007b) and from materiality to immateriality (see also Krysa, 2006). However, the development is – as Tyzlik-Carver also concedes – more complex, non-linear and interwoven (Tyzlik-Carver, 2016: 32)²⁴, with overlooked or undervalued undercurrents and legacies, which might hold important inspiration for a practice of curating, which extends beyond the notion of curating as selection, production and consumption.

collective practices

The shift from the narrowly defined professional position of the museum curator as a rather remote figure caring for museum collections and art objects towards the diversifying creative practice of freelance curating taking place in and outside the museum evolving since the

1960’s is mostly narrated along the lines of visionary activities of a few (mostly male) Western curators and their influential exhibition projects.²⁵ A major aspect of this shift has been described as the increasing creative and also subjective involvement of curators in the co-production of art, and thereby – as some have critically noted – the re-introduction of the figure of the author exactly in a period when its decline or death had been declared in the arts (Bismarck, 2007; Hantelmann, 2011: 6; O’Neill, 2007b: 15). Tyzlik-Carver expands this common narrative by focussing not only on the self-instituting of the curator as author, but on the curatorial invention of new formats, contexts and institutional frameworks for the encounter with art, that goes beyond individual authorship (Tyzlik-Carver, 2017: 45).²⁶ But her analysis nevertheless focusses only on respective approaches by individual curators. A more collective, participatory and networked approach to curating is mostly dated as emerging only in the 1990s (Bismarck, 2014).

22 For more details on such a genealogy see Bismarck (2007); Bismarck (2010); Ferdman (2014); Hantelmann (2011); Meyer-Krahmer (2015); Richter (2016); Tyzlik-Carver (2016).

23 See also Clare Hemmings, who has proposed an in-depth critique of standardised narratives about linear feminist and queer genealogies in the field of theory (Hemmings, 2011).

24 However, the terms have appeared in specific historic periods, ‘curating’ for instance didn’t exist as a verb in the 1960’s, as Guy Brett has stated (quoted after Tyzlik Carver, 2016: 37; see also O’Neill, 2007b: 15). And ‘the curatorial’ as a noun only emerged in the 2000s.

25 As Tyzlik-Carver states “the history of curating beyond the narrative of its main protagonist – the curator – is yet to be written” (Tyzlik-Carver, 2016: 33). For a critique of this still common narrative see Meyer-Krahmer (2015). This tendency is also replicated in some otherwise critical feminist accounts of curatorial histories. Amelia Jones for instance retells the history of feminist curation along the lines of a few major feminist exhibitions, curated by individual curators. Two decades of feminist curatorial practices in the 1980s and 90s are nearly completely overlooked in this account – described as either completely lacking or poor (Jones, 2016: 9). Also in recent accounts of curating in the performing arts the figure of the pioneering curator is reanimated (Malzacher, 2010; Warsza & Sellar, 2014). However, as Meyer-Krahmer concedes, this tendency might also be owed to the ephemerality and invisibility of much of curatorial activism (Meyer-Krahmer, 2015: 3). It is much easier to research large scale, highly institutionalized and therefore well documented practices, than projects of those, who Terry Smith summarily designates as “under the radar proliferators” (Smith, 2012: 73).

26 Tyzlik-Carver proposes to read curatorial experimentation since the 1960s as part of the various waves of institutional critique, not only as a response thereof (Tyzlik-Carver, 2016: 33-53; Tyzlik-Carver, 2017: 46). Sabeth Buchmann’s analysis of Lucy Lippard’s curatorial approach of a systemic and distributed authorship questioning overrated subjective creativity is also relevant in this context – Lippard being nearly the only female/feminist curator ever mentioned among those early ‘pioneering’ curators of the 1960s/70s (Buchmann, 2012; see also Obrist, 2011).

I would like to stress that the expanding remit of curating evolving since the 1960s has not only been fostered by individual curators working in or with institutions but by the curatorial activism of numerous artist and activist groups and collectives taking place around the same time.²⁷ While these were in many cases not highly visible and institutionalised they nevertheless formed important legacies and continuities of influence and resonance. Among those were numerous feminist curatorial initiatives by artists and activist collectives, many of which considered the complex group process of curation and organization to be an essential part of their project.²⁸ Some authors therefore speak of a collective curatorial drive of these early projects, re-inventing structures, struggling “for new forms of communities” and self-organizing with-

out external curators (Richter, 2016: 64-65; Krasny, 2015b: 66; Krasny, 2016a: 100; Horne et al., 2016: 117, 125). Also in the performing arts and in the heterogenous artistic field now called performance art such curatorial activism pushing institutional boundaries was prevalent (Ferdmann, 2014).²⁹ While a detailed analysis of these legacies goes beyond the scope of this research and would need further scrutiny I would like to stress that many of these projects proposed curatorial acts as forms of in- or co-habitation and as shared life. They also resonate with the many communal art spaces which have emerged since the 1960s in flats, cafés, bars, farms offering spaces to gather, dwell, perform, live, blurring boundaries between the private and the public, between production and re-production.³⁰ I suggest that these activist curatorial leg-

acies – which inform my own practice – are embedded in a logic of care, which has an ambiguous status in curatorial discourses. While frequently referenced,³¹ not least due to the etymological root of curating stemming from latin *curare*, to take care, it is rarely being reflected upon in depth or such an explicit discourse is only just emerging (see for instance Krasny, 2015b; Reckitt, 2016). This has several reasons. There is on the one hand a strand of curatorial thought (and practice) which understands the contemporary curator mostly as the antithesis of the early incarnation of the role as a (hidden) caretaker of a museum collection. Caring as a practice associated with invisibility and low status, with repetitive ordinariness and with durational obligation seems anathema to the contemporary profile of the curator as a highly visible, creative,

27 For an overview of selected – mostly Western – examples of artists appropriating curatorial roles and strategies (and vice-versa) see for instance Smith (2012: 101-138); O'Neill (2012); Richter (2013).

28 Some examples are *Damebilleder* (organized in 1970 in Copenhagen by feminist collective Kanonklubben), *Women House* (organized by the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts in 1972 in Los Angeles), the numerous exhibitions organized by “Where We At” Black Women Artists (WWA) collective in New York during the 1970s, or large scale exhibitions organized in complex group processes such as *Kvindeudstillinger XX pa Charlottenburg*, Copenhagen 1975, *Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977*, Berlin 1977, or *Unbeachtete Produktionsformen*, Berlin 1982, just to mention a few examples. For a reflection on divergent space making strategies in such collective feminist exhibition making see Kaiser (2013: 155-159). An insight into the numerous activist feminist, gendercritical and queer exhibitions at Berlin's neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (nGbK) since the late 1970s is provided by their archive section, available at: <https://archiv.ngbk.de/en/feminismus> (accessed: 03.03.2021) and <https://archiv.ngbk.de/en/gender-queer> (accessed: 03.03.2021). For an overview of international feminist group exhibitions from 1970-2014 see Schor (2015: 488-502). For a reflection on collective feminist queer curatorial practice in the 21st century see an interview with Kuratorisk Aktion (Dimitrakaki, 2013).

29 There is a particularly rich history of such experimental curatorial initiatives in the field of performance art with numerous festivals, elaborate happenings and event series, environments and exhibitions realised by artist groups or collectives. A necessarily incomplete list of examples includes the exhibitions or rather events set up by the Japanese artist collective Gutai; the various Fluxus Festivals; large scale conferences organized by the Belgian collective Mass Moving, the transnational happening by Alan Kaprow, Marta Minujin, Wolf Vostell; events at Judson Church, Belgrade Student Cultural Centre SKC; performative Pleinairs in former GDR.

30 Countless examples could be listed here: See Giulia Palladini's extensive reflection on the New York underground art scene of the 1960s, including the affective labour of Ellen Stewart to make the LaMaMa Theatre a home and Jack Smith's “mobilization of private life as a different habitat of artistic creation” especially through performances of idleness presented in his own home (Palladini, 2017: 119, 73). For Hélio Oiticica's creation of communal Nests in his New York apartment and his artistic labour of “creisure” see Harris (2018). For a reflection of (West-) Berlin's underground performance culture of the 1980s dwelling in bars and clubs see Müller (2013), who explicitly contrasts the figure of the curator emerging in the 1990's with those earlier artists-activists-hosts. He also linked the scenes of the 80's with important earlier avant-garde figures, particularly with Valeska Gerd and her bars in New York and on the island Sylt. Feminists often created their own spaces, such as the Women's Building, Los Angeles; Franklin Furnace, New York; Bar Pelze, Berlin; or the farmhouse by artist Erika Stürmer Alex in the former GDR, which became the location for numerous performance and land art happenings (Richter, Stammer & Knaup, 2011), just to name a few examples.

31 See for instance the many statements in the *Curating Live Arts Reader* (Davida et al., 2019), which entail short references to care: Isabel Sachs speaks of curatorial care as listening and paying attention (quoted in Davida, 2019: 57); for Judie Hussie Taylor to care means to know (quoted in Davida, 2019: 82); for Nicole L. Martin a radical practice of curatorial care implies to witness and unveil racial structural antagonisms and exclusions (quoted in Davida, 2019: 311); and Roselle Pineda compares curatorial care with community work (quoted in Davida, 2019: 277).

flexible, mobile professional akin to the artist, whose core practice seems to entail the facilitation of (access to) visibility (see for instance Smith, 2012: 41, 43). Care might in this line of thought be considered a maybe necessary, but tedious, less important side aspect.³² On the other hand there are a number of authors and practitioners who articulate a critical reservation against a too close association of curating with caring for very different reasons. This reservation is mostly linked to the hierarchical and asymmetrical dimension inherent in care practices as well as in curating (Fowle, 2007: 17), an aspect which can also be traced in the etymology of the term curating, with the latin root word *curare* building the base for both, *curates* – the one who has a cure – and *custos* – the one who guards and controls (Bismarck, 2010: 50; Schneider, 2010: 64–65). In a similar vein some authors have argued that the mobilization of care in curatorial discourse might therefore allow to eschew curatorial accountability and obliterate its hegemonic effects (Buurman, 2016). Some authors have therefore chosen to conceptualize the relational dimension of curating rather in terms of hospitality, as hosting artists, art works and exhibitions, involving conviviality and reciprocity but also regulation, inequality and hierarchies (for an overview of these discourses

see Bismarck & Meyer-Krahmer, 2016). Hospitality has of course many resonances to care, but also differs from it. To highlight here only one of the most obvious points of divergence: while hospitality is tied to a transient moment of encounter, with audiences, art works, artists, participants understood as temporary guests, the notion of care rather invokes modes of shared lives, of living together and depending on each other, and implies to understand the encounter as a form of co- or inhabitation.³³ I will reflect in more depth below on what curating as a method and practice of care implies and why I embrace it despite its ambiguity (see also chapter ‘With sticky care’).

knowledge practices

Another common trope in accounts of curatorial history is that of a development from craft to discourse and knowledge generation. Most prominently this is reflected in the notion of *the curatorial* (used as a noun, not as adjective) introduced in the 2000s. The curatorial is understood as a larger phenomenon distributed across myriad actors and agencies, as producing knowledges that might affect worlds beyond the arts and as questioning, intervening in or reproducing the cultural institutional context. On the one hand it is used as an analytical category

in the context of research and discourse (Tyzlik Carver, 2016: 45–51; see especially Rogoff & Bismarck, 2012; Bismarck et al., 2012; Martinon, 2013; O’Neill, 2007b). On the other hand some authors and curators have also used it to describe their own specific, knowledge oriented and interventionist approach to curating. Among these is Maria Lind, who has also coined the term “performative curating” (together with Sören Grammel and Katharina Schlieben in the context of their work at Kunstverein Munich), which has similar connotations than the curatorial (Lind, 2009; Lind, 2012; Smith, 2012: 50–52; Sheikh, 2017). The expression performative curating was suggested to describe their “interest in the means and conditions of production”, their “focus on the pre- and post” of the exhibition or event and their interest in critical exhibition and institutional histories (Lind & O’Neill, 2011: 42; Schlieben, 2002). Foregrounding the processual, temporal and collaborative dimensions and the notion of knowledge production in the arts these curators understood the exhibition as experiment or temporary (pre- and post-) production space and performative curating as a mode of intervening into modes of production (Schlieben, 2002; see also Doherty, 2007; Lind, 2012). The notion of performative curating has also recently been taken up

32 Smith for instance describes the specificity of curating – in distinction to the work of the art historian or art critic – as “forging the exhibition in the context of practical constraints and conditions.” (Smith, 2012: 36), with care somehow being located in the realm of (negatively connotated) constraints and conditions. Bismarck concedes that the “social and organizational competence remains the basic ability of the curator” but sees the “symbolizing skills” of the curator as central (Bismarck, 2010: 52).

33 This resonates with notions such as “co-dependant curating” (Krasny, 2016a: 103), “curatorial fidelity” (Džuverović & Revell, 2016: 140) or “curating as complicit love” (Harney & Desideri, 2013: 130; *Les Complices**, 2020) elaborated in more detail in chapter ‘With sticky care’.

by curators and authors in the field of the performing arts aiming to elaborate more explicitly the relations and resonances between the broad understanding of performativity as “world making power” (Jackson, 2017) and the history of curatorial practices and inventions in the field of theatre, dance and performance (Malzacher & Warsza, 2017; Ferdman, 2014; Butte et al., 2014; Malzacher et al., 2010). Much more than in the visual arts their focus lies on the social and embodied dimension of temporally and spatially constituted assemblies. As Jackson states in straightforward manner: “to curate performance means caring for the bodies and communities it gathers” (Jackson, 2017: 26).³⁴ In addition, Malzacher argues that theatre and performance practitioners have well established reflexive methods to engage with embodied practices and unpredictable processes which might include failure or non-closure (Malzacher, 2017: 31-32).

While the specific discourse about the curatorial or performative curating have emerged in the 2000s mostly in institutional contexts,³⁵ knowledge generating critical

curatorial practices have a longer history and various predecessors. Artists and curators have for a long time critically engaged with scientific discourses or with new technologies and have experimented with various research methodologies and the specific contribution of the arts to knowledge generation. Laboratories, academies, research labs – now common and well established formats – have evolved occasionally since the 1960s and more frequently since the 1980s. I would posit that feminist initiatives played an important but often overlooked part in this context not least due to feminism’s history of performatively re-inventing institutions and knowledges.³⁶ Take for instance Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ exhibition proposal *Care* which was part of her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*³⁷ and suggested living in the museum while carrying out daily maintenance work, including (de-)polluting, rehabilitating, recycling daily imports of waste together with scientists as well as conducting extensive interviews with numerous waste and maintenance workers, appropriating qualitative research methods as used in anthropology or the social sciences

(Ukeles, 1969). Another example is the collectively curated exhibition *Unbeachtete Produktionsformen* (translatable as Unnoticed Forms of Production, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin 1982) that aimed at temporarily foregrounding the disregarded, the unnoticed, the unnoticeable processes of (female) creation, sociality and productivity. The working group organizing the exhibition conducted extensive research in various neighbourhoods and communities in Berlin and decided to set up a series of thematic environments allowing further research and encounter, rather than displaying art works.³⁸ These environments focussed on themes such as economy, waste, dematerialization, the kitchen, publics, violence and resistance and the senses³⁹ and provided the backdrop for numerous planned and spontaneous performances, actions, interventions and (research) encounters (*Unbeachtete Produktionsformen*, 1982; Kaiser, 2013). Inspired by comparable activist and artistic practices in the feminist and anti-racists art movements in the 1970s the research oriented, interdisciplinary, mostly collective and explicitly feminist *project exhibitions* emerged during

34 The body is not completely absent in curatorial discourse in the visual arts, but is mostly considered in critical analysis of the ideology of the white cube and how it positions and constitutes the spectator as a bourgeois individual being trained in upholding/honouring the object (Richter, 2007; Osten, 2007; Hantelmann & Meister, 2010).

35 Tyzlik-Carver therefore links the curatorial to the second wave of institutional critique, which attempts to change the institution from within (Tyzlik-Carver, 2016:45).

36 A few authors have considered early feminist art educational initiatives and their curatorial output in the context of the history of (artistic) knowledge generation, and focussed specifically on *Womenhouse* (Osten, 2007; Lehmann, 2019). A later, mostly overlooked initiative in this context was the *International Women’s University* realised in the year 2000 after many years of collective deliberation and preparation in the cities of Hannover, Kassel and Lüneburg, Germany, offering an integrated, transdisciplinary art and science curriculum and various artistic programs, which I have co-curated at the time (Neusel et al., 2002, Loreck, 2002, Knaup, 2002).

37 The full manifesto is available at: <https://feldmangallery.com/exhibition/manifesto-for-maintenance-art-1969> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

38 Members of the working group were: Julia Dech, Monika Funke, Matthias Mann, Sabine Kaatzer, Ingrid Krolow, Christine Liebel, Margarethe Raspé, Beatrice Stammer, Renate Steinchen, Gisela Weimann, Lo Zahn. For further information see <https://archiv.ngbk.de/projekte/unbeachtete-produktionsformen> (accessed: 03.03.2021)

39 The original titles were: Abfall; Ökonomie: Die Careseite der Medaille; Entdinglichung; Blick in die Küche; Spurensuche nach weiblichen Zusammenhängen; Gewalt und Widerstand; Öffentlichkeit und Kommunikation; Sinne und ÜberSinne (*Unbeachtete Produktionsformen*, 1982).

the late 1980s and 1990s in Western Europe and the US. They were mostly cumulative, evolved over longer durations and in various stages of researching, gathering, and exhibiting, and most importantly were inspired by, embedded in and/or contributing to the emergence of critical counter publics and communities⁴⁰ (Osten, 2007). Marion von Osten describes the initial impulse of this curatorial practice as follows:

the 'project exhibition' attempted to integrate the experience of alternative artistic practices into the exhibition work: the opening up of the art space for a non-art public, the collective production of new 'knowledge spaces', the self-assertion of social groups as opposed to their representation in a product, the use of the art space for theme-related discussions, and the establishment of transdisciplinary networks which could be active and productive in other areas of society as well, beyond the pure exhibition context.

Osten, 2007: 63

Many likeminded interdisciplinary projects and festivals have emerged since, aiming to enable critical discourse and artistic production, experimenting with art/science dialogues and various research methodologies, inspired by artistic inquiries and methods.⁴¹ They form part of a rich legacy, which has foregrounded collectively generated, embodied knowing based in everyday practices, labours and experiences, intervening in prescribed demarcations of who and what can become the subject and / or the object of knowledge. Methods are expanding beyond a project logic, are long durational and serial, aiming at creating and sustaining connections across gaps and intervals. They try to envision and enable what might not yet be possible. Below I will elaborate further how curating can experiment with a materialist practice of knowledge generation, that is blurring boundaries between objects and subjects, considering the sticky no-thingness of waste matter and wasted matters elaborated above (see chapters 'Curating as grounded practice', 'Curating no-thingness', 'Curating with sticky care').

material practices

A related implicit assumption in curatorial discourse is that curating has evolved from a material, object – centred practice to a predominantly immaterial, relational, processual practice of symbolic meaning or knowledge production (see for instance Bismarck, 2010: 52; Krysa, 2006: 10-14). This development is polemically critiqued by Jens Hoffman who attempts to re-introduce a conservative definition of curating as exhibition making in the visual arts, against an alleged overall de-professionalisation which allows everybody to become a curator and leads to a prevalence of what he describes as the "paracuratorial: lectures, screenings, exhibitions without art, working with artists on projects without ever producing anything that could be exhibited" (Hoffmann & Lind, 2011; Hoffmann, 2015). While the rejection of processual, discursive and performative artistic practices as a relevant object of curatorial action and their relegation to the sphere of the 'paracuratorial' seems outdated and could easily be dismissed as irrelevant – especially given the

40 Often quoted early examples are the exhibition *If You Lived Here...* by artist Martha Rosler, addressing homelessness and gentrification in New York City 1989 or projects in the context of Shedhalle Zürich in the 1990s (Osten, 2007) – an alternative art space, which initiated a programmatic revision opening the program to social and political issues and appointing teams instead of artistic directors (1994-1997: Renate Lorenz & Sylvia Kafehsy; 1996/97-1998 Ursula Biemann & Marion von Osten). An explicit feminist focus and interdisciplinary collaboration involving scientific, activist and artistic communities characterised these early years (Lorenz, 2021). Exhibitions include *Game Girl* (1994, Renate Lorenz); *When tekkno turns to Sound of Poetry* (1994, Sabeth Buchmann & Juliane Rebentisch); *Censorship* (1994, Sylvia Kafehsy); *NatureTM* (1995, Renate Lorenz & Stephan Geene); *Sex & Space* (1996, Marion von Osten); *Kültür* (1997, Ursula Biemann); *Money Nations* (1997, Marion von Osten).

41 I would like to mention a few examples, which I have either attended, which have been important inspirations, or have been developed by organisations with whom I have collaborated, thereby highlighting the wider relational web that informs and sustains my own practice. These include the feminist initiatives by media art organization Constant vzw founded in 1997 in Brussels (by artists, programmers, designers, among them Laurence Rassel and Nicolas Malevé). Festivals such as *Verbinden / Jonctions* or the *Digitales working days* brought new media, cyber-feminism, open-source programming, film, performance and visual arts together, using a mix of methods and approaches stemming from rigorous research, the intimacy of kitchen talk, as well as the exchange of food, recipes and programming code. Importantly for a feminist context, which is confronted repeatedly with a loss of historical memory, Constant vzw experimented early on with innovative modes of open archiving and therefore focussed not only on knowledge generation but also on keeping and transmitting knowledges, available at: <https://constantvzw.org/site/-Projects,1-.html?lang=en> (accessed: 03.03.2021). In the field of performing arts programs such as the festival *City of Women* in Ljubljana (which was founded in 1994 and that I co-curated from 2001-2004) or the series of episodes organised by the collective *Arika* in Glasgow focus on interdisciplinary, thematic, community-based exchange.

fervent embrace of performance, dance and immersive, experiential practices by many museums, biennials and art venues globally – I posit that the expressed anxiety of “working [...] without ever producing anything that could be exhibited” is nevertheless widespread. It references a fleeting, threatening, seemingly immaterial no-thingness – be it understood as time-based practice, as liveness, performativity, duration, potentiality, or as the unrealisable, the impossible, the unproductive, the wasted or the failed. What I would like to argue here is, that this dimension of no-thingness is not immaterial, and that an alleged development of curating from a material to a predominantly immaterial practice is based on equating performativity with immateriality. I would rather like to contribute to an understanding of curating as a complex material practice, engaging various flows and accumulations of matter, bodies, energies and beings (see also Heathfield, 2014b: 182). Even “working [...] without ever producing anything that could be exhibited” matters and materialises. I am drawing here particularly on those scholars in the field of performance studies, who have articulated a complex materialism of presence

and liveness, extending beyond the delineated body and object. In this perspective liveness, presence and duration expand “beyond a human register” (Schneider, 2010: 62), and include seemingly inanimate or even dead beings, states or “things” (Lepecki, 2013). Human and non-human bodies, photographs, sculptures, drawings, affects, dreams, ghosts, rocks, props, stuff, things are all trading “promiscuously in animacy” (Schneider, 2015: 9) in these accounts. The specific quality of such material liveness seems to be residing in the interstitial, in intervals (Schneider, 2017: 165), in the delay or break (Lepecki, 2019: 106), in a “fractured [...] continuum” (Heathfield, 2014b: 179), in the sticky betweenness, which is being touched upon in encounters in nonlinear time:

If we acknowledge that the ‘live’ is an open category, a contested category, a category most exciting because its limits flow, are sticky, not entirely containable, and are as yet porous and undefined, then [...] [t]he interesting quality of liveness may lie in the efforts we make in passage, between shifting states of being.

Schneider, 2010: 63

Schneider has described this dimension as “intrainimation”, “a weave of call and response-ability” among human and nonhuman matter across intervals of space and time (Schneider, 2017: 165).⁴² Lepecki foregrounds *vivência*, the “lived experience of experimentation” (Lepecki, 2017: 108),⁴³ which continues in the afterlife of an encounter with a specific dimension of artistic works, which he describes as thingness, as a non-dualistic alterity, performing “an ongoing revolt against the colonizing entrapments of subjectivity and objectivity, the organic and the inorganic, art and life” (Lepecki, 2017: 113). As elaborated above I would like to push the notion of thingness somewhat further away from the delineated art object, closer to a waste-based materiality. Therefore, in the context of this study, I am rather following the notion of sticky no-thingness. It seems to me that Hoffmann’s anxiety is directed at this ungraspable – but not immaterial – sticky no-thingness.

I am seeking to engage curatorially with this fleeting but nevertheless material dimension and experiment with methodologies of a materialist curating⁴⁴, which evolves

42 Schneider builds this idea on Barad’s notion of intraaction and the cut: “Adopting intra- for intrainimation, we might say that animate and inanimate both differentiate and co-become each other through a cut, or interval, in and as relation without the resultant distinction among intra-actants being essentially prior to or inherent in the interval of their exchange” (Schneider, 2017: 165).

43 He specifically draws on writing and artistic experimentation of artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica.

44 New materialist theories are being received with great interest in the artistic field and also in curatorial practice. This is evidenced in numerous discursive and artistic events and exhibitions developed roughly over the last 10 years. Among them are *Materiality # 1-3* (a series of exhibitions at Sorø Kunstmuseum, 2012-2014), *World of Matter* (Hardware Kunstverein, Dortmund / Cuny Graduate Centre New York, 2014), *A Matter Theatre* (Conference at House of World Cultures, Berlin, 2014), *Hybrid Matter* (Nordic Art & Science Network Program, 2014-2016), *Alien Matter* (Transmediale Exhibition, House of World Cultures Berlin, 2017), *Dirt: An Apparatus* (Residencies and Performances, Kampnagel Hamburg, Inkonst Malmö, Uferstudios Berlin, 2015). For a description and review of some of these and other events and exhibitions see for instance Cox, Jaskey & Malik (2015). What needs further exploration however are the deeper challenges of such materialism(s) on a methodological level, which implies to go beyond a thematic approach.

beyond, beside, or beneath formed bodies, spaces or (no-)things. This involves taking account of, enabling, responding to, staying with the continuities of experimental artistic creation, its ongoingness across gaps and breaks, beyond the formed, finished, contained art work. Considering this as sticky material process in the sense described above involves considering the emergent forming and unforming of no-bodies and no-things in no-spaces, rather than assembling seemingly determined bodies, subjects, objects and artefacts in a given space. It also implies decentring the role of the curator as the only active agent, operating somewhat freely and detached. Rather he/she/they are attracted to, enmeshed in, attached to, responsible for the matters, objects, materials, bodies involved. And these might bring their own animacy into the mix.⁴⁵

not abandoning curating

I would like to come back to the encounters with material no-thingness described above and what these and related acts and matters could hold for curating. They point at long durational processes, at labour of (archival) care, at sticky material accumulation and resonance, at stubborn resistances to disappear. I am seeking a practice that neither abandons these matters, nor turns them into curatorial objects for display, nor defines them as uncuratable.

Maybe this is an impossibility, but one I hope worth pursuing.

Considering how quickly formerly critical practices have been absorbed within an ever expanding and accelerating art market and knowledge economy, some practitioners and authors have recently proposed to avoid or eschew the term curating or the curatorial altogether. They declare a postcuratorial turn (Sheikh, 2017; Kortun, 2017), propose to escape curating (see the notion of fugitive curating proposed by Desideri & Harney, 2013) or focus on those artistic acts and propositions which are considered “uncuratable” (Lepecki, 2017: 111). Lepecki describes a number of artistic acts and propositions, which hint at different material relations subverting subject – object, human – nonhuman, organic – inorganic dichotomies and thereby have the potential to escape neoliberal colonialist entrapments. He focusses mostly on Lygia Clark’s work with relational objects, “carried out without an audience, without institutional framing marking them as art, and without any object to serve as proof that an art project had taken place. In other words, there would be nothing to be exhibited” (Lepecki, 2017:109). Lepecki concludes that such works are so opposed to a curatorial logic, that they are essentially uncuratable, unassimilable (Lepecki, 2017: 103).

While I sympathise with this notion, I fear that defining such radical acts resulting in “nothing to be exhibited” as the other of curating, as uncuratable, involuntarily affirms Hoffmann’s above quoted relegation of such no-thingness into the sphere of the paracuratorial. It thereby portrays an object- and subject-centred logic of curating as the only possible modality. I would like to follow a different path: rather than abandoning curating I have chosen to continue. I am doing so while drawing on legacies which hint at another logic of curating, rearticulating curating as form of shared life, as inhabitation, and by expanding these approaches to embrace more than human forces and agencies and modes of sticky care. Rather than abandoning I experiment with an understanding of curating which posits the seemingly impossible, the ungraspable no-thingness and the wasted as firmly within its remit.

45 A very different approach venturing beyond human subjects in curating is Tyzlik-Carver’s proposal of post human curating, focusing on technological/computational agencies involved in curating as a distributed practice (Tyzlik-Carver, 2016).

4. Curating as method in practice as research

Over the past three decades extensive experimentation, debate and various models of institutionalisation have developed in relation to artistic practice as research.⁴⁶ They vary in different fields of practice, ranging from the visual and performing arts, to design and more recently also curatorial practice and they have developed distinctly in different regional contexts (for a summary see Nelson, 2013: 8-19). While approaches differ, there is a shared understanding that practice as research is based in what Paul Carter and Barbara Bolt have described as “material thinking”, a speculative process which follows the “intelligence of materials” (Carter, 2010: 22), their “colloidal, humid and combinatory” qualities (Carter, 2010: 19), through involved handling (Bolt, 2010: 31) and a process of recontextualisation. What is being foregrounded is processual knowing, rather than abstracted knowledge (Nelson, 2013: 20).⁴⁷ There is also agreement that to develop practice as research implies:

- to use the respective practice both as a method of inquiry and as a substantial medium for evidencing the research results (Bolt, 2010: 29; Carter, 2010: 15-16; Nelson, 2013: 8-9; Perez-Royo et al., 2013; Haseman, 2010: 150-151);

- to house and attend to a mix of practices and methodologies (Barrett, 2010: 7, Carter, 2010: 16; Nelson, 2013: 7);
- and – given the imaginative and inventive character of creative practice – a typically processual and generative methodology (see Barrett, 2010: 3,6; Carter, 2010; Nelson, 2013: 52-53).

This implied in my case using a multifaceted curatorial methodology throughout my research process, rather than creating a curatorial project as result or as illustration of my research, or to present a theoretical reflection on a curatorial project after the fact. But what constitutes a curatorial research methodology, how is knowledge being enabled and fostered in and through curating? Meyer-Krahmer has pointed out, that an epistemology of curating remains a desideratum although – as elaborated above – curating is understood by so many as research or knowledge-oriented practice (Meyer-Krahmer, 2015: 4). He proposes to take what he understands as the methodological core of curating – the creation of spatial, temporal constellations of art objects – as his starting point and concludes that essentially curatorial knowledge

generation is constellational and relational and might be comparable to essayistic procedures as proposed by Adorno – a methodic – unmethodic discursive argument based on a spatial constellation (Meyer-Krahmer, 2015: 4; Meyer-Krahmer, 2019: 68-69). I would like to venture in a different direction, not only considering the displayed end result of curatorial labour, and not only defined art works or objects but the larger durational process and the many involved agencies, forces and beings including the above described no-thingness. In the context of curatorial approaches focussing on performance I would also like to stress more explicitly the spatial, durational and embodied quality of curatorial knowledge generation.

In his reflection on praxeological curatorial thought Terry Smith indirectly points in such a direction, by hinting at embodied experience and potentiality: “Exhibitions constitute a venue in which objects, images and ideas can be arranged in forms that prefigure aspects of reality reimagined, framed by ‘what if’” (Smith, 2012: 212). He stresses how exhibitions offer visitors a shared space and a “guided pattern” of experiencing (Smith, 2012: 35). This resonates with Irit Rogoff who understands the curatori-

⁴⁶ There are further terms in use, such as ‘practice-based’ or ‘practice-led research’. Following Nelson I am favouring ‘practice as research’ in order to avoid a chronological hierarchy implying practice might come first with theory following (Nelson, 2013: 9-10).

⁴⁷ Practice as research builds on rich histories of alternative epistemologies which have developed since the second half of the 20th century in multiple struggles about who and what can become subject and object of knowledge (Brandstetter, 2013; Barrett, 2010).

al as “a series of existing knowledges that come together momentarily to produce what we are calling the event of knowledge, a moment in which different knowledges interacting with one another produce something that transcends their position as knowledge” (Bismarck & Rogoff, 2012: 23). What is essential in her account are the transdisciplinary encounters of different knowledges pushing against each other and the participants, witnesses or visitors who enter the constellation. She also points to the potential of the ‘what if’ – as the “unfulfilled potential” of this event of knowledge, which has affective qualities (Bismarck & Rogoff, 2012: 24). Adrian Heathfield reflects more explicitly on curating related to performance and dance and invokes a curatorial sensibility which takes account of and supports performance as a “medium of inter- and intra-generational response, but also as a self-replicating and self-differentiating force, situated within a fractured creative continuum [...] that cannot be reduced to [...] its instances or moments” (Heathfield, 2014b: 179).⁴⁸ Drawing on vitalist art historical writing he expands such a durational material understanding of the art work and its reception also beyond performance, considering how touch and movement reverberate through material form (Heathfield, 2014b: 182-183).

Following Heathfield (2014b), Bismarck & Rogoff (2012) and Smith (2012), as well as the deliberations above, I argue that curatorial knowing emerges not only through a momentary spatial constellation of art works as bounded objects which are assembled to form a discursive argument. It rather evolves in duration, including the multiple processes that lead up to and follow such constellational assemblage or gathering, including participants, witnesses, users, spaces, beings, ideas, matters and energies involved. Together these agencies and forces form a multitemporal constellation that can be inhabited and which reverberates beyond the temporality of a singular event or exhibition.

To further specify and experiment with such an approach, I have worked with three methodological concepts which are informed by my practice as well as theoretical writing.

Curating as middling - muddling

While some authors have foregrounded the acts of choosing, selecting and extracting as paradigmatic for the curatorial per se (Hantelmann, 2011) in my own experience as well as in the view of many authors (Bismarck, 2010; Bismarck & Rogoff, 2012; Martinon, 2013; Smith, 2012) it is also and maybe mostly the act of assembling, gathering and relating that is the driving impulse of curatorial work. While obviously these notions are not mutually exclusive,

they nevertheless represent different articulations of curatorial labour with divergent implications and effects, ranging from distance and distinction to involvement and attachment. While it is a commonly held view in curatorial literature that these assembled materials are somewhat “in action” or in a state of constant becoming (Bismarck, 2007: 19), I would like to further stress the material agency and animacy involved. Materialist thought – as introduced above – stresses matter’s unbounded and agentic quality, a “vitality (that) precedes, or subsists within, or is simply otherwise than, formed bodies”, a “creative materiality” (Bennett, 2010: 55-56) that has a „tendency of combination” (Carter, 2010: 18-19). Translated into the curatorial this implies a decentring of the role of the curator as the only active agent, operating somewhat freely and detached. Rather he/she/they are attracted to, enmeshed in, attached to, responsible to the matters, objects, materials, bodies involved. And these might bring their own vitality or animacy into the mix, turning into co-curating forces.

In order to further articulate how this dimension of practice can be translated into a method I have worked with the concept of ‘middling’, as suggested by Isabell Stengers (2005), Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (2014) and further developed by Tiainen et al. (2015). In the context of reflections on ecological and slow science Stengers has

48 He writes in relation to the exhibition *Moments*, ZKM, Karlsruhe (2012).

used Deleuze's notion of *penser par le milieu* considering the double meaning of milieu as surrounding and as middle. She writes:

'Through the middle' would mean without grounding definitions or an ideal horizon. 'With the surroundings' would mean that no theory gives you the power to disentangle something from its particular surroundings, that is, to go beyond the particular towards something we would be able to recognise and grasp in spite of particular appearances.

Stengers, 2005: 187

Brian Massumi and Erin Manning have taken up Stengers' non-extractive thinking through the middle and further elaborated an ecological, immersive, non-neurotypical modality of perception, inspired by autism activists and writers.⁴⁹ This fieldwide, non-human centred perception, which considers the unboundedness and relationality of matter, things, and more than human bodies has been described by Manning and Massumi as "dance of attention" in the mode of "middling" or "aroundness" (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 6-7).⁵⁰ Middling is not related to centrality, to a central position of overview, but rather to peripheral, lateral, transitional perception, questioning where the body, the object, the field begin and end. Their approach

has been taken up and further specified by Tiainen et al. as a materialist, cultural studies method of "middling", which resists (perceptual) ordering, categorising and extracting the figure from the surrounding field of relations (Tiainen et al., 2015: 31-36).

I have been using this approach through engaging at length with artistic processes, related sites, involved people, matters and beings – through studio, rehearsal, archive and site visits, interviews and observations. It has implied a specific, peripheral perception and engagement which I further elaborate in my case studies – describing for instance my work in the archive of Mierle Laderman Ukeles in New York City, or my residency in Chiang Mai waiting for Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook. Following Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Tejal Shah's engagement with the muddy landfill as well as Donna Haraway's thinking in the muddle I have also further elaborated middling as a grounded practice (see chapter 'Curating as grounded practice'). I also further experimented with such middling - muddling in my curatorial proposals.

Curating as sticky care

A central aspect of curatorial practice especially in the field of performance and performing arts is the ongoing labour of creating, maintaining and caring for relations, of sustaining dialogue and conversation, and of creating conditions for the possibility of experimental artistic practices and encounters to emerge. Not necessarily leading to tangible, measurable output this relational work has resonances with care work. While the notion of care has an ambiguous status in curatorial discourse – as elaborated above – I draw on non-idealising feminist discussions of carework which do not give up the ethically important notion of care while acknowledging its ambiguity. In order to specify further what this aspect of practice implies for a research methodology I am drawing on Puig de la Bellacasa's "thinking with care" as a "material doing of everyday labour", and a laborious "living hand to hand" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012: 201-202). As I will elaborate in more depth below such care can be understood as a-subjective, haptic, sticky and durational (see chapter 'With sticky care'). A-subjective care is understood as collective and collaborative but not necessarily symmetric, as passing through, traversing or happening in between, and thereby extending beyond the (human) subject. The haptic dimension invokes a slowed down perception,

49 Manning & Massumi draw their terminology from autism activists and elaborate that subtractive neurotypical and immersive non-neurotypical perception is not to be thought of as a dichotomy but a "polarity governing a continuum" and also as potentially overlapping (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 6).

50 They refer here to Ralph Savarese's concept of aroundness in autism (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 154 fn. 4). While using the term middling in several texts, they do not elaborate the term further (see also Tiainen et al., 2015: 42, fn. 58).

sensitive for otherwise neglected detail in encounter. It also describes a practice of mimetic repetition or “every-day redoing” in order to generate knowledge (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 117). The stickiness of care encompasses the residual and subverts subject – object relations. It is associated with duration and an “uneventful temporality” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 118), and therefore binds curating to continuities of artistic expression as lived life beyond definable art works.

This approach has necessitated exploring my research questions through extended curatorial conversations with the artists but also with their collaborators, assistants, producers or helpers. It has implied to closely follow work processes also beyond and beside defined or realised art works – considering the unrealised or unrealisable proposal or potential. It prompted me to closely consider the involvement of materials for instance through a haptic redoing of artistic methods or processes. Curating as sticky care most of all implies to make artistic experimentation not only visible but possible and therefore to speculate on its possibilisation in continuity. I have therefore chosen to proceed through curatorial proposals which speculate how the seemingly impossible can be translated into further materialisations.

Curating no-thingness

Reflecting on my own curatorial practice and its inherent methods there is a third aspect which I consider relevant in the context of curating as research. It also resonates with theoretical writing and with the material dimension of no-thingness on which I have elaborated in the previous pages.

Curating as assembling, as creating and maintaining relations always faces the interstitial, the gap, the in-between, the matter of emergence or dissolution. Coming originally to curating through feminist organising in the 1990s, my work is indebted to and informed by queer feminist thought and activism, which departs from the interstitial, the crack, the in-between world, and the bodies and practices which inhabit those.⁵¹ I have therefore always attempted to consider this dimension not only on the level of content but also on a methodological level. This can take very different forms and ranges from very pragmatic, common and small-scale to conceptually more far-reaching interventions. It can mean to take into account the background, interstitial, liminal or adjacent spaces and labours involved in production. It can imply to allow for ‘emptiness’ or ‘low density’ within programs,

to make space for something or someone else, for other voices and/or presences, which are not fully anticipated and/or controlled.⁵² It can imply to not glance over or homogenise inconsistencies, frictions, breaks or gaps. This avoids tendencies towards coherence or conceptual closure, and hopes to create room for multiple engagements within a respective program, situation or event. These strategies point at multiplicity, at heterogeneous involvement of participants, co-authors, partners, and therefore at possibilities for the emergence of what cannot be known and foreseen.

In the context of this study, I have come to think of this as curating no-thingness. It implies to consider and attend to matters of emergence or dissolution, such as those described above, it can involve to wait or even to withhold (see chapter ‘Curating no-thingness’).

Curating as proposing

I have been using and further reflecting upon these three curatorial methods throughout this study. They are elaborated in more depth in the following chapters, resonating with the three artistic case studies and theoretical reflections. They are also exemplified further in a num-

51 Especially black feminism has enacted interstitial politics through focussing on the interconnections between gender, race and class oppressions. For interstitial feminist perspectives see Kimberlé Crenshaw, 2017; for an analysis of black feminist organising and interstitial politics see Springer, 2005.

52 Such an approach can also be traced to a number of philosophers. Isabelle Stengers argues for slow science to make room for “allowing a passing through of that what cannot be articulated rationally but opens up possibilities of imagination” (Stengers, 2015b: n.pag.). Deleuze also considers gaps and silences: “The problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don’t stop people from expressing themselves, but rather force them to express themselves” (Deleuze, 1995: 129).

ber of ‘impossible’ curatorial proposals. These proposals are taking their cue from the artists, materials, sites and involved institutions, from the (sometimes invisible) work processes, from the unrealised potentials or seemingly impossible propositions. They speculate how the seemingly impossible – especially the challenge these durational artistic processes are posing for hosting institutions – can be translated into further materialisations. Through the medium of the impossible proposal – which rests between speculation and intentional plan of what needs to be done – the impossible remains on the verge of possibilisation, suggesting continuities of engagement and possibly sticky transfers between artists, communities, institutions⁵³ which extends beyond these pages. While the propositional is a familiar form in artistic practice,⁵⁴ I wish to experiment with it also as a curatorial medium. I draw inspiration from artists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles who has written her influential *Manifesto of Maintenance Art* as exhibition proposal and has continued to

practice the art of proposing with “excessive patience” (Ukeles, 2017) for many decades (see chapter ‘Sticky proposals’).⁵⁵

Curating as writing

The present written form of my curatorial research does not attempt to reflect waste-based materiality in a literal way in its own form. It is neither conceived of as heap or compost, nor as a stuffed waste bag – although these were some ideas, that emerged and were discarded along the way. But it nevertheless resists certain expectations for academic writing to line up in linear order and closed form. Coming from spatial curatorial practice – which allows alternative itineraries, spatial juxtaposition, alignment or overlaps, as well as perspectival change – the linearity of academic writing posed a challenge in composing this doctoral thesis. I have consulted many examples of a spatial enactment of text which can be found frequently in artist books, and rarely in academic writing.⁵⁶

I have settled for a form which does not fully predetermine the order in which chapters should be read. Three different types of texts are layouted in a way which allows to read them in alternating order, separately, or alongside each other, with glances moving back and forth between them. Their position in relation to each other is however not completely random but resonates with the chronology of my research process:

The three in depth case studies engaging with the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook and Sarah Vanhee are set parallel to three theoretical chapters which are inspired by these and related artistic approaches, and were written in parallel, but reflect underlying themes which run across the different artistic approaches. These theoretical reflections have also allowed me to deepen the three curatorial methods outlined above, which I have used throughout my research. I conclude with my curatorial proposals, written in the

53 For an inspirational collective experiment of “Generating the Impossible” see Manning & Massumi (2014: 111-133).

54 The proposal has been used differently in various articulations of conceptualism, ranging from predominantly linguistic proposition, which didn’t rely on realisation (Berger, 2019; Buchmann, 2014), to proposals which were meant to be realised and were conceived – as in the case of Hélio Oiticica – as “non ending”, as “insurgent form-making in the resistance to subjection” (Harris, 2018: 117). This resonates with the long history of instruction pieces in performance art (Obrist, 2013).

55 Many more examples could be mentioned, mostly stemming from artists, such as *True riches*, the imaginary re-opening of the closed ICA’s live art and media department in 2009, initiated by Tim Etchells and Ant Hampton through a series of program proposals from artists and curators, available at: https://timetchells.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/True_Riches_low.pdf (accessed: 27.02.2021).

56 Examples of artist books abound. Some I have consulted are *Small Acts of Repair* by Goat Island, which presents alternative introductions on alternating pages (Bottoms & Goulish, 2007); and *The Precarious* – a book accompanying Cecilia Vicuna’s 1997 exhibition in Kortrijk, Belgium, curated by Catherine de Zegher, which can be turned and be read either from ‘front’ or ‘back’ cover (de Zegher, 1997). Looking for a form which brings different types of text close to each other on one page in an academic context I came across Annemarie Mol’s *The Body Multiple*, a study which reflects on “the way medicine enacts the objects of its concern and treatment” which comes always in multiples, and the gaps and connections to those literatures which elaborate Western medicine’s unity (Mol, 2002: vii). Inspired by her experience as a student – moving between philosophy class in the morning to anatomy class dissecting corpses in the afternoon (Mol, 2002: x) – she presents anthropological stories of medical treatment in the upper part and reflections on how to relate to the extensive literature in the lower part of her book.

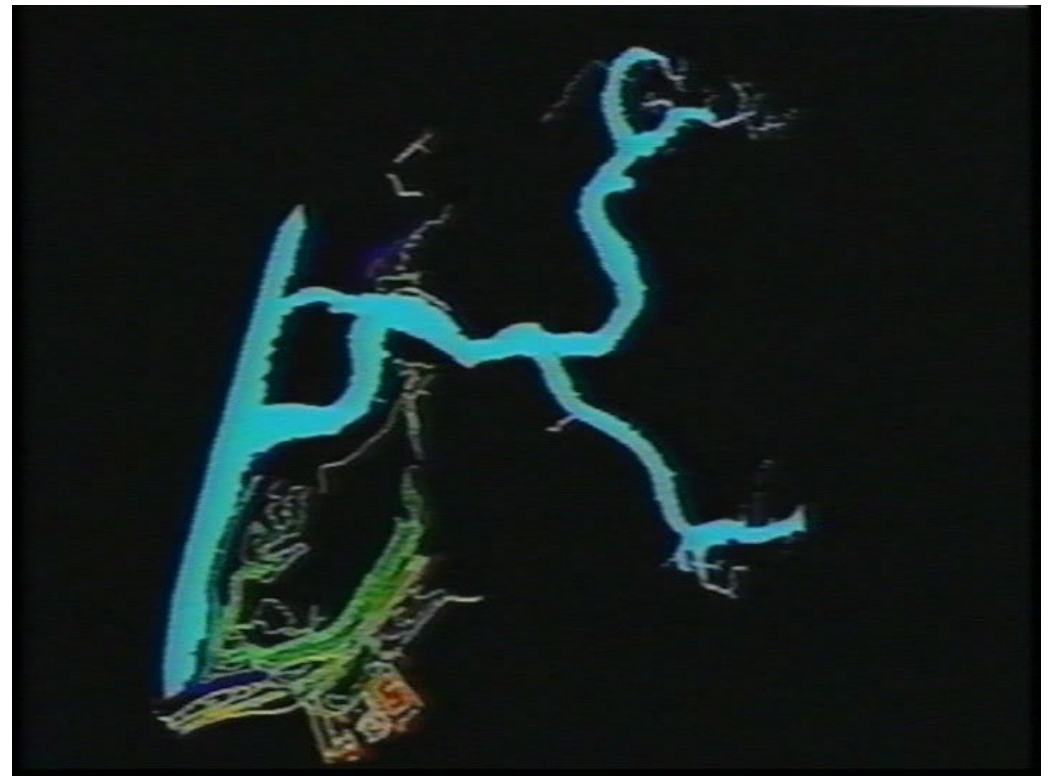
spirit of “non ending” (Harris, 2018: 117). This arrangement of texts indicates that these different reflections and speculations form resonances, they are interrelated, they come close to each other but are not fully integrated. Interspersed between the three case studies and integrated within the curatorial proposals are images, which I have taken during the research or encountered in books, archives or exhibitions throughout my research. They have accompanied me and have inspired the composition of this thesis, as well as the curatorial proposals. Thus, the focus of these visual materials and their composition lies not on a comprehensive visual representation of the artistic works discussed, nor on an illustration of my curatorial proposals, but rather on those “sticky images” (Mieke Bal, 2000), that have remained and shaped the course of this research.



INTO THE MUD,
MUDDLE, MIDDLE



In the landfill – Mierle Laderman Ukeles



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Fresh Kills: Imaging the Landfill /Scaling the City*, 1995, video

1. Introduction

I think we learn to be worldly from grappling with,
rather than generalizing from, the ordinary.

I am a creature of the mud, not the sky.

Haraway, 2007: 3-4

Maintenance is true underground art. Society's
attitude towards maintenance shows in the buried
location of most networks of maintenance systems:
sewers, subways, gas lines, telephone cables –
put the rags and mops away in the cleaning closet.
Their hidden nature is rationalized by an aesthetic
of hygiene and amenity despite the fact that these
networks signify the fabric of our capability for
ongoingness [...]

Ukeles, 1974: 215

Waste unfolds spatially. Waste escapes containment, it moves “waywardly” (Alexander & Sanchez, 2019: 13) while being deposited, while dispersing, sedimenting, percolating, remaining. Its etymology (stemming from latin *vastus*) references abandoned, deserted land but also immense scale, oscillating between desolation and abundance (Viney, 2014: 18; Cooper, 2010: 1116-1117). These two meanings reflect in a nutshell very different historical perceptions of waste and land, ranging from wasteland as uninhabited, uninhabitable or not used properly – and therefore available for colonisation, extraction and pollution – to alternative understandings of liminal wasteland as proximate, inhabited, abundant – as expressed for instance in the medieval notion of “common wastes” (Cooper, 2010; Goldstein, 2013; see chapter ‘A landscape of things – for improper uses’).

1. Middling in the archives of Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Mierle Laderman Ukeles has been artist in residence in the Department of Sanitation in New York City for roughly 40 years.¹ Over the years she has realised numerous performances, actions, exhibitions and installations in or with the Department, in collaboration with workers, engineers, administrators, and the many materials at play in waste processing. Although her work has gained wide recognition in the art world it is only recently that she had her first large scale retrospective at the Queens Museum in New York City in 2016-17 (Phillips, 2016) and that she gained wider attention in scholarly writing (Jackson, 2011; Jackson, 2014; Baraitser, 2017; Boetzkes, 2019). While her work is mostly known for her feminist engagement with reproductive maintenance work, and sometimes read as predominantly conceptual and therefore immaterial, I am interested to gain a deeper understanding of her very material, durational, visceral engagement with the whole system of waste processing, her work with (waste) materials and her long durational inhabitation not only of the Sanitation Department but also of landfills.

My first encounter with this dimension of her work was through documentation of her well known *Touch Sanitation* performance (1979-1980), which I exhibited as part of the larger feminist performance project *re.act.feminism*². Two videos document this year long performance, in which Ukeles met and shook hands with every single of the 8,500 sanitation workers of New York City between July 1979 and June 1980. The video *Touch Sanitation. Sanmen Speak* (colour, sound, 58:21 min) focusses mostly on her encounters and conversations with the sanitation workers. The video *Touch Sanitation. Waste Flow* (colour, sound, 57:37 min) follows the route of waste from the streets to the landfill. While it also features the workers and workings of waste transporting, the operators and machines, during the course of the video waste is more and more foregrounded and

1 It is not easy to determine an exact date of the beginning of her residency, as it evolved gradually. She made the proposal to the Department in 1976 and had a desk since 1977 but the concept and official term was introduced only later (Ukeles, 2017c). Phillips gives a detailed account of her journey into the Department (Phillips, 2016: 87-90).

2 I exhibited Mierle Laderman Ukeles work as part of the serial *re.act.feminism* archive and exhibition project (2008 - 2014). Documentation of this work was part of a travelling video archive and part of a large scale installation shown at Centro Cultural Montehermoso, 2011-2012 (Knaup, Stammer, 2014).

Some of the artists gathered in this study directly or indirectly probe, question, re-inhabit, re-claim grounded waste as common, populated boundary zone. They question the practice of landing or sinking waste in what are imagined to be outer, unpopulated, groundless zones and instead reimagine and engage with the ground and more specifically with the landfill as populated, inner zone. In dialogue with these practices, and especially with Ukeles' extensive work in relation to landfills, this chapter explores selected feminist and ecological materialist literature and its relationship to the earth, the ground, the mud – this sticky matter between land, sea and air.

Landfilling is still one of the most commonly used method for depositing waste globally (Weber, 2012: 473). It is a paradoxical practice – spatially pervasive but mostly invisible, based on complex knowledge generation by a few and forgetfulness by many.

Borrowing the terminology from Traci Brynne Voyles' study about the "legacies of uranium mining in Navajo country" entitled *Wastelanding* (Voyles, 2015) and making an explicit reference to forms of colonialist exploration and space travel, I shall call this pervasive practice wastelanding. Voyles defines wasteland "as a racial and spatial signifier that renders an environment and the bodies that inhabit it pollutable" (Voyles, 2015: 9). As many scholars have elaborated and as detailed in the chapter 'A landscape of things – for improper uses' the demarkation of a land as wasteland – as uninhabited, uninhabitable or not used properly – has been the precondition for colonization, enclosure and extraction that precedes pollution (Cooper, 2010; Goldstein, 2013; Lewé et al., 2016; Scanlan, 2005). Jason Moore has

becomes one of its main agents and actors. I remember the strong synaesthetic effect of waste's presence while watching the video for the first time, the vague olfactory and visceral sensation, while watching the streams of waste pouring from trucks into barges, and the endless heaps of waste being loaded into the vast (then still operational) Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island. I found another hint at Ukeles' fascination for material in her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art!*, in which she famously and rigorously declared her maintenance work to be art: "MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK" (Ukeles, 1969: 3). One part of the manifesto is a proposal for an exhibition with the title *Care*, in which not only her working would be exhibited as art, but also huge amounts of waste would be brought into the museum: "the contents of one sanitation truck; a container of polluted air; a container of polluted Hudson River; a container of ravaged land" (Ukeles, 1969: 4). While this proposal of landing waste in the museum was never fully realised, a fascination for and an engagement with (waste) material³ – with recyclables like glass, paper, aluminium, rubber, plastic, or electronic waste, with soil, or methane gas produced by bacteria in landfills – is a recurring feature in many of Ukeles' works spanning several decades. Her imagination leads her into the mess of it all, as a staff-member and long time collaborator of Ukeles at the Sanitation Department told me in an interview:

She has a free imagination and a really great appreciation of what the sanitation department does, I mean as you know, she is interested in the nitty gritty of how everything works and literally down in the dirt and the weeds. [...] Things like slopes and soils and the materials used as part of the closure construction are all really fascinating [to her]. [...] She adores the physical materials and materiality [...] she loves that.

Geller, 2017

Clearly this is one of the pertinent questions, which Ukeles' work also tries to answer: how does 'every thing' (not only humans, but also slopes and soils and plastic and bacteria) work down in the dirt?

3 Ukeles stresses, that material is how sanitation workers call garbage; in her manifesto *Maintenance Art Works meets The N.Y.C. Department of Sanitation* (1977) she wrote in paragraph II entitled "The Meaning of MATERIAL": "Always remember this fact: sanmen call garbage ----> MATERIAL" (Ukeles, 1977: 2; formatting as in original).

explicitly linked the long history of capitalism's interrelated exploitation of "cheap nature-as-tap" (for the extraction of resources) and "cheap nature-as-sink" (for depositing waste and toxins), the latter of which operates through externalisation beyond "waste frontiers" (Moore, 2015: 279-80). Wastelanding therefore implies the externalization of waste in what is considered unpopulated and/or pollutable outer spaces, affording the privilege of distance and forgetfulness, while affecting and polluting many others, as these spaces have of course never been unpopulated and are only 'outer' for some. Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles has hinted at landfill work as a form of space and timetravel, describing landfills as "inner city – outer space" (Ukeles, 1981b: 76) and herself as "time-traveller" (Ukeles 2003: 22). Also Tejal Shah's speculation on how to inhabit, decode, decipher and recuperate wastelands suggests time- and spacetraveling figures. Both artists reclaim these outer zones as inner space, as a sticky, muddy field from which escape and externalisation is not possible.¹

Their work resonates with many feminist, ecological materialist thinkers who have proposed a different relationship to the earth, the ground, the mud.² While not directly addressing issues of waste or landfilling they fundamentally question the idea of separability and externalization so inherent in wastelanding. There are various strands of such "return to earth" (Clark, 2011: xii), "becoming earth" (Braidotti, 2013, 81) or "re-earthing" (Latour et al., 2018: 6). Some are tightly coupled with the Anthropocene thesis, which assumes

1 This resonates with Nixon's "vernacular landscapes", which are the opposite of landscapes used for extraction and pollution and perceived as "out there, [...] a separate nonrenewable resource" (Nixon, 2011: 17).

To answer this question and to address the feeling that my earlier curatorial acts of displaying documentation of Ukeles' work were simply not commensurate with the scope of her work, that her work demands something else, I am re-visiting Ukeles' extensive work space and archive in summer 2017. I am spending several weeks in the Sanitation Department's headquarters in Lower Manhattan, where she occupies two offices with four rooms. I am visiting the (closed) Fresh Kills landfill, I am speaking with her, with collaborators at the Sanitation and the Parks Department, but most of all I am muddling and middling – to use Haraway's and Stengers' formulation – in her vast archive.

Informed by my method of curating through the muddle – middle, I aim to question the notion of the curator as the one who selects, chooses, distinguishes, who has an overview and surveys a field from a distance. My understanding of muddling-middling as a methodology of curating questions attempts of ordering and categorization, of extracting the figure from the surrounding field of relations, and instead suggests to attend to lateral, peripheral, transitional relations. It also implies giving up on the idea of being the sole maker of curatorial assemblages and instead considering the materials and matters, people and sites involved as co-curating agents. The following account is the result of this curatorial engagement with Ukeles' archive and her work.

Summer 2017 is a special period for visiting Ukeles archive, as she is preparing to move her long-time offices and archives out of the premises of the Department of Sanitation in Downtown Manhattan.⁴ She is also in the process of doing an inventory of her massive archive and donating most of her papers to the Archives of American Art.⁵ It seems to be a period marked by movements of contraction, expulsion and dispersion.

4 There are several reasons for this move. Buildings of the Department of Sanitation have been sold by the City of New York, so that employees will have to move into the remaining buildings, resulting in reduced office space, a process euphemistically described as "consolidation of space" (Ukeles, 2017a). Ukeles has also left New York, her long-time home and working context, to move to Israel near her family.

5 The transfer of her archive took much more time than anticipated and was only concluded in 2020. For further information see: Archives of American Art. Available at: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/mierle-ukeles-papers-21742#overview> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

a new geological era since human activity is being recorded in the earth's rock strata. While many aspects of the Anthropocene thesis are considered controversial – such as when to date its beginning, and how to account for a highly differentiated, and differently culpable Anthropos – there seems to be a consensus about the recognition that humans or rather some specific humans have become a geological force.³ Some scholars intend to expand, sidestep, complicate or explicitly criticise the Anthropocene narrative and its inherent abstractions. Instead they seek an engagement with the inhabited and lively ground, the dirty and messy zone of earth/ground/mud in proximity, rather than assuming the far horizon of planetary overview (Stengers, Haraway, Latour, Ingold, Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, Hird). In the following chapter I am asking which earth-bound⁴ (Latour, 2017: 248-253) patterns of thought, movement and inhabitation those authors propose and which modes of materialist

2 It has been a longstanding concern among feminists to dis-associate the feminine and more generally feminist thought from the earth and the life rhythms of growth and decline, fertility, boundedness, and the chaotic mess associated with it (See also Alaimo, 2010: 5). Related fields of scholarship and activism such as various strands of eco-feminism have therefore been relegated to the background of the field's debates, controversies and developments during the last decades. However more recently there is a growing interest in knowledge production that has been considered irrelevant or outmoded for a long time and a (partial) re-claiming or rearticulating of earthbound figures as well as eco-feminist scholarship. See for instance Isabell Stengers', Donna Haraway's and Puig de la Bellacasa's repeated reference to the neopagan feminist witch Starhawk (Stengers, 2015a: 140; Haraway, 2016: 166; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 148-151); Stengers' use of the mythical figure Gaia, Haraway's reference to Medusa and other earthbound goddesses (Stengers, 2015a; Haraway, 2016); see also the reprint of out-of-stock classics such as Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism* (2014).

3 For detailed discussions of the anthropocene perspective see for instance: Danowski & Viveiros de Castro (2017: 8-22); Haraway (2016: 44-47); Davis & Turpin (2015).

During the first day of my visit I am overcome by a feeling of drowning. Drowning in the mass of materials, the seemingly endless flow of correspondences, notes, papers, drawings and sketches, slights, photographs, props, samples of various materials, resulting from more than 50 years of intensive collaborative work, filed in countless cabinets and stored in shelves in the four adjoining rooms. Ukeles' assistant, who is working on the archive's inventory, tries to explain how the material is organised – or rather not, as many previous attempts have failed or have not been properly passed on from one assistant to the other. There are sorted and unsorted cabinets. There are messy corners. There are “treasures”, kept in a special glass vitrine, and “things without place”, laying around (CT, 2017). I am intrigued that a black plastic bag filled with dirt and gloves – remains from a performance during which she swept a Museum's entrance in 2013 – is kept among the “treasures” and her children's drawings for Sanmen from 1979 are among “things without place” (see p.71). I ask her assistant if she sees the end of the tunnel of her laborious inventorising task and she firmly states “No!” (CT, 2017).

I am searching for clues, a beginning, an entry point, a route, a rescue-net. I begin by looking for lateral inspiration, for peripheral, accidental clues. I take note of things laying around, or seen out of the corner of my eye, while walking through the space. I soften my focus, I perceive sideways, I am walking in circles, without clear direction. There are some newspaper clippings sellotaped to the wall next to the door: two cutouts of scanned images of leopards next to a scan depicting an array of lines crisscrossing the map of New York City. It looks similar to the maps documenting the Sweeps of Ukeles' *Touch Sanitation* performance from 1979-80. But taking a closer look there is a header on the right-hand top corner reading John Cage. It's a blurry print out of John Cage's graphic score, called *49 waltzes for the five boroughs*. For this work “he superimposed 49 triangles on a map of New York City, using chance means to determine the locations of each angle” and asked the listener “to go to the apex of each angle and listen to or record the sounds of the city in that place” (Cage, 1977; see p.72). There are numerous recordings, as well as video and sound clips online with reenactments or adaptations of these scores.⁶ Many of Ukeles' works imagine, perform, reenact or sculpt routes, sweeps, walks and dances. They could be considered scores as well, waiting for their adaptations or reenactments.

knowing, artistic making or curating could be enabled by such earthly moves. While doing so I have been following the various earthbound figurations which populate these accounts – ranging from a pagan, bitchy Gaia, to a queer Medusa, and to various polymorphous, “tentacular”, more than human and other than godly existents.⁵ I have been inspired to do so by the figures suggested or enacted by artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles – such as her *Mopfoot* persona, enacted in early performances (*Revolving Doors*, 1978. See p.72), or the racing *Water Creature*, which she detects in the Fresh Kills landfill (Ukeles, 1996b: 89; see p.35)⁶ – and by artist Tejal Shah – such as their queer dancing, desiring, caring unicorns, which populate a suburban Indian landfill, a dying mangrove forest, or a dirty muddy shore (*Between the Waves*, 2012. See pp.142-143). (See chapters ‘In the Landfill – Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ and ‘Sticky proposals’) These figures are composited, more than human, not only living, polymorphous, earthen, queer, prosthetic and assembled. They inhabit a muddy zone, being in relation with undetermined collectives, composing, experimenting, continuing.

4 This adjective is borrowed from Latour’s notion of “the Earthbound” (Latour, 2017: 248-253), which is further elaborated below.

5 Stengers refers to Gaia’s paganism (Stengers, 2013: 177) and Margulis calls Gaia a “tough bitch” (Margulis, 1995). For Haraway Gaia, Medusa and other tentacular beings sit in “queer planetwide litter” (Haraway, 2016: 175, fn 11). Povinelli (and Stengers sometimes) speaks of existents, rather than beings, indicating their life and nonlife transcending quality (Povinelli, 2016: 5).

6 See Ukeles’ video and audio composition *Fresh Kills: Imaging the Landfill – Scaling the City* (1995) referenced in more detail in chapter ‘Walks, sweeps, routes and dances’.

There are more papers and images sellotaped to the door, among them the iconic image of striking and marching African American Sanitation men in Memphis 1968, each carrying the *I Am a Man* sign, demanding to be counted as full workers, citizen, men, and protesting to be treated as garbage.⁷ Another clipping is an article entitled *City Trash by the Numbers* (see p.71), with some entries highlighted in pink or marked with an arrow, such as:

The amount of garbage (in tons) generated annually by New York City: 3,269,659
Pounds of garbage: what an average New Yorker generates daily: 2.9
Pounds of garbage: what an average American generates daily: 4.4
Number of DSNY workers’ hands artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles shook as part of her seventies piece “Touch Sanitation”: 8,500.

In the manifesto *Maintenance Art Works meets The N.Y.C. Department of Sanitation* (1977) she also focusses on numbers. Across the page she wrote:

GOAL: TO FEEL IN THE GUT IMMENSITUDE + ENDLESSNESS -> SCALE
See these numbers – feel them
my favourite – 23,000 tons of garbage created every day in N.Y.C.
Best way to convert space (of 23.000 tons) is DURATION.
Ukeles, 1977

I am intrigued by how she aims to count everyone and everything, how she aims at touching numbers, digesting numbers in order to feel the spatial and temporal scale of numbers in the gut.

6 See for instance John Cage’s *49 Waltzes for the Five Boroughs*. Available at: <http://49waltzes.com> (accessed: 01.03.2021); *John Cage’s 49 Waltzes for the Five Boroughs Goes Viral*. Available at: <http://www.thefader.com/2012/09/05/john-cages-49-waltzes-for-the-five-boroughs-goes-viral> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

7 The strike was triggered by the death of two black sanitation workers being crushed by a malfunctioning collection truck and the refusal of compensation by the city. It addressed the violent systematic racism of the city government and white unions. Martin Luther King Jr. supported the strike and gave his famous “I’ve been to the mountaintop” speech in Memphis.

2. Gaia earth intrudes

A number of authors in the fields of philosophy, science and technology studies and cultural studies have in recent years proposed to reclaim, to further articulate and translate James Lovelock's and Lynn Margulis' Gaia hypothesis, such as Isabell Stengers, Bruno Latour, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski and Myra J. Hird. These authors stress in different ways the connections to or the divergences from the Anthropocene perspective,⁷ but all agree to use Gaia – this mythical name for the earth – as a more appropriate tool to stimulate different feelings, thoughts and responses to the ecological crisis of the present. The fact that the Gaia hypothesis emerged originally in the context of space travel – in search for conditions of life on other planets – but was only fully developed by looking back down to earth and considering bacteria as its “fundamental actants” (Hird, 2010: 54) or the “first artisans” of a history of co-evolution (Stengers, 2015: 44) makes it resonant with a reconsideration of wastelanding as indicated above. Some authors have also stressed that Gaia – this “cosmical accident created by life's geomorphic agency” (Viveiros de Castro & Danowski, 2018: 179) – is essentially a waste world (Hird, 2010: 57).

While scientists are “still in the process of discovering Gaia” (Lenton et al., 2018: 2) and a detailed analysis of scientifically accepted,

⁷ For details on convergences and divergences from a scientific point of view see for instance: Lenton et al. (2018: 3); Viveiros de Castro & Danowski (2018: 181); about differences between Latour and Haraway see Latour (2017: 99-100, especially fn 77).

I begin a slightly more systematic research through the archive, looking for documents of specific works I have listed beforehand. I begin chronologically with an early performance, *Revolving Doors Have Wings: My House in Parts and Wholee: Holy House, Home House, City House/Sanity-Shine Dept., Artist House*, performed at the Whitney Museum in 1978. She performed in, with and through a revolving door, a hole in the wall of the museum so to say, in circular movement connecting inside and outside. I come across a series of photographs which depict Ukeles with mops, brooms and rugs tied to her body, a bandana in her hair and a sign pinned to her shirt reading “This is not I”. The ‘not-I’, not self-identical, somewhat wild figure on all four, that she calls Mopfoot draws my attention (see p.72). It reminds me of the proud Leopards on the wall, but also of the Beaver, the animal after which the street is named in which the Sanitation department is located in lower Manhattan, near Wall Street. In her performance script Ukeles wrote

Mopfoot is a maintenance machine. Arms and legs all are extensions ending in cleaning implements [...] She grumbles a lot about “Never done, never done, again again again.” To pick things up she has to pitch forward onto the floor because her maintenance extensions partially immobilize her limbs [...] She generally does not have a pleasant look on her face.

Ukeles, 1978: 2⁸

The Beaver could also be considered a ‘maintenance machine’: it works continuously by building dams, canals, routes, creating wetlands, maintaining eco-systems. It inhabited the territories formerly called Manahattan by the indigenous population of the Lenape, before European settlers nearly exterminated the Beaver through excessive pelt trade – and the indigenous population by violent colonisation.⁹ Beaver Street is among the oldest streets in what was the colonial settlement New Amsterdam. Part of it was a drainage ditch¹⁰ and a considerable part of today's Lower Manhattan is built on landfill, much of it garbage (Nagle, 2013: 29).

⁸ Mopfoot also appeared in the earlier performance *Washing* at A.I.R. Gallery, New York City, 1974 (Phillips, 2016: 65).

⁹ Aptly the New York City seal depicts two beavers. See for further detail: *Explained: the Seal of the City of New York*. Available at: <https://walkaboutny.com/2020/01/29/explained-the-seal-of-the-city-of-new-york> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

¹⁰ See for further information: *Beaver Street, Financial District*. Available at: <http://forgotten-ny.com/2015/01/beaver-street-financial-district> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

debated or contested aspects of Gaia theory would lead beyond the scope of this research, one can state that the core of Lovelock's and Margulis discovery was that the ensemble of all "living beings could collectively regulate aspects of their global abiotic environment: the chemical composition of the atmosphere and oceans, and potentially also the climate" (Lenton et al., 2018: 2). This has fundamental consequences for the conception of organisms, life, nonlife: "If living beings *produce* aspects of their environment, then their material boundaries no longer stop at their membranes and epidermis, and they expand as far as their influence on the environment can reach" (Lenton et al., 2018: 6). In other words, "[t]o say that the biosphere is Gaian is to say that, since its formation, the evolution of the Earth (and all of its inhabitants) has been a consequence of profound, immutable and inextricable associations between life and nonlife" (Hird, 2010: 56). The next basic conclusion by Lovelock and Margulis – that this ensemble of coupled processes forms some kind of entity, or rather follows functions or goals – is where many authors diverge. This hypothesis has been one of the main reasons for many scientists to reject Gaia theory initially, but also among those who now reclaim and further develop it, remain disagreements. Isabell Stengers on the one hand argues: "And Gaia, the 'living planet' has to be recognized as a 'being', and not assimilated into a sum of processes, [...] endowed with its own regime of activity and sensitivity [...] Gaia [...] is something that *holds together*" (Stengers, 2015a: 44-45). For her the question is not so much if it holds together, but how, and this has been interpreted differently by Lovelock in the 1970s (assuming balance) and by scientists today (stating increasing instability) (Stengers,

After leaving Ukeles' office on this first day of my research I turn towards East River down Wall Street. I pass by a man who digs through a large pile of garbage bags with recyclables that occupy nearly all of the narrow sidewalk. I turn to take a photograph – a blurry picture of a person from behind kneeling in the midst of waste, touching, sorting, reassembling – not unlike Ukeles' Mop-foot. Continuing my walk towards East River, I think about the last hours and some of these relational clues and impressions:

- the contraction, gravitation and dispersion of materials in and beyond this archive;
- the extensive walks, sweeps, routes and dances as scores for movement and sound;
- the paradoxical notion of touching and digesting numbers;
- and those on all four who work in, attend to, or dig into holes, pits and ditches.

I decide to follow these clues, take them as my guides on my journey through the archive, through the sanitation department, through Ukeles' work, "down in the dirt and the weeds", following "things like slopes and soils and materials" (Geller, 2017).

2. Contraction, gravitation and dispersion

A sustained interest in material oscillations between gravitational contraction and evaporative dispersion is an underlying thread running through Ukeles work, as some of her poetic work titles show, ranging from *Bindings* (1963-1967), *Landfull* (1979) and *Landing* (since 2008) on the one hand to *Air Art* (1966-1969), *Methanogenesis I-IV* (1994-1996), *Blizzard of Released and Agitated Materials in Flux* (1993) and *Evapotranspiration – This Land lives and breathes* (1999) on the other.

Bindings are early works which she developed while an art student at Pratt Institute, and only very few of which still exist (Phillips, 2016: 30-32)¹¹. Materials tightly stuffed into knotted, painted

¹¹ Her first large scale retrospective exhibition in 2016 and the related catalogue feature one of these bindings (Phillips, 2016). Numerous slights exist in the Ukeles archive.

2015a: 45). Latour on the other hand concludes that Lovelock's (and Margulis') greatest invention was to give up on the idea of wholes and parts altogether and therefore rejecting the idea of Gaia as a whole, a living, unified planet or even a superorganism, while nevertheless tracing effects of connections among agencies (Latour, 2017: 102). For Latour Gaia is "distributed intentionality" (Latour, 2017: 98), overlapping "waves of action" (Latour, 2017: 101), scientific and secular through and through.

In addressing this debate, I am especially interested to consider why and for whom these two authors might offer such different readings of Gaia (while also agreeing on many aspects). For Isabell Stengers a name is "to bring about and not to define" and therefore a tool "to confer on what is named the power to make us feel and think in the mode that the name calls for" (Stengers, 2015a: 43). In view of "the coming barbarism" of unleashed capitalism and related climate change Gaia is an appropriate name, as it calls for thinking and feeling intrusion rather than belonging (Stengers, 2015a: 44). Stengers' Gaia is most of all "she, who intrudes" and who doesn't need nor care for 'our' response to her intrusion. She is neither a fragile patient nor a nurturing mother, but a rather irritable, touchy, "ticklish" and potentially threatening being, as her response to human action might be completely disproportionate or unjust (Stengers, 2015a: 46-47; Stengers, 2014: 2)⁸. It is not she – this assemblage of systemic, coupled, non-linear processes – who is threatened by extinction, nor her co-evolving micro-organisms, but the manifold living species,

8 This resonates with Margulis, who named Gaia a "tough bitch" (Margulis, 1995).

cheesecloth formed three-dimensional, vaguely bodily organic shapes, which were tied to and protruding from canvas, or other supporting structures such as a spring framework, a plank, an old door and a pegboard. Through their inherent tension and pressure these undetermined forms suggested movement and some of the overstuffed shapes literally "exploded in a mess", a mess which required her care (Phillips, 2016: 32). They were filled with waste such as old papers, rags or aluminium foil and – as the slights in Ukeles collection reveal – they were also often photographed as waste, for instant leaning on a fire hydrant at the curbside of the street or laying down on a littered sidewalk. These works resonate in many ways with the proto-feminist¹² artistic explorations of the day, such as the use of ephemeral, textile materials, the exploration of 'female' gravitational bodily forms (Eva Hesse, Senga Nengudi, Louise Bourgeois a.o.) and – like many other early feminist works – caused a scandal at her University.¹³ However, what interests me most while revisiting these works now is the combination of waste with gravitational bodily shapes on the ground, alluding to intestinal and / or sexual organs: bodies, inhabiting the sidewalk, bounded by the necessities of digestion, ingestion, attraction, wasting. They seem to me like an early reference to a theme that runs through Ukeles' work: the search for pleasure in necessity, in bounded engagement with the ground.

Her next series of works, entitled *Air Art*, set a counterpoint to the heavy, gravitating *Bindings*, expanding her exploration of materials to air filled, floating rubber, vinyl and plastic and "engaging expanded scale and interactivity" (Phillips, 2016: 33). The (never realised) *Air Art* works ranged from human scale wearables, so-called *Baffles*, to large scale inflatables protruding from and partially enveloping modernist, vertical architectural icons such as the Seagram Building in New York City. The playful drawing *Air Art: Bloom – Seagram Building* from 1967-68 envisions an "Air Art Skyscraper Happening" with green window and door inflatables as well as larger red tubes or tentacles protruding in all directions from the upper part of the building, subverting its geomet-

12 For a discussion of the term see for instance: Wark (2006: 37).

13 The administration heavily criticised Ukeles works as pornographic and even characterised her as "over-sexed"; as a consequence of such constrictions of artistic freedom her supervisor resigned, and Ukeles took a leave of absence from her studies (Ukeles, 2000: 456; Phillips, 2016: 32).

human and non-human, populating the earth. Stengers therefore reminds her readers of the old meaning of Gaia as the fearsome one, long before the “cult of maternal love” has been associated with her (Greek) name (Stengers, 2015a: 45). And while Stengers insists (like Latour) that Gaia is also of scientific origin, that she is also scientific fact (Stengers, 2015a: 44, 48), she insists similarly that her intrusion has a transcendental dimension, that is “a major unknown, which is here to stay, [to] exist at the heart of our lives” (Stengers, 2015a: 47). Stengers’ Gaia – “a bastard child of scientists and paganism” – has the power to “dislodge ‘us’ from our commanding position” (Stengers, 2013b: 177). The response to Gaia’s intrusion therefore can’t be a global, abstracted, unified one – and most of all it can’t be provided by those alone “who have both provoked her intrusion and now decipher it through data, models and simulations. [...] Learning to compose [with Gaia] will need many names, not a global one, the voices of many peoples, knowledges and earthly practices” (Stengers, 2015a, 50). And this is perhaps the main reason why Stengers insists on a not exclusively scientific understanding of Gaia, invoking the mythical, fearsome Gaia as “something that holds together” in indeterminable ways: composing answers must not be left to Western science alone, it must be – as a matter of survival – open to many collectives, not only secular ones, to many knowledges and ways of being: “There will be no response other than the barbaric if we do not learn to couple together multiple, divergent struggles and engagements in this process of creation, as hesitant and stammering it may be.” (Stengers, 2015a: 50)

ric, closed off form and verticality. Phillips writes, “These disobedient and adventurously enterprising modules (or opportunistic parasites) inflate and deflate while their electromagnetic skins attract and repel each other to create amalgamated forms” (Phillips, 2016: 33). The drawing also envisions “people softening building” by jointly exhaling through tubes into the large inflatables. These works therefore imaginatively connected humans to large-scale urban structures through extended skins and a joined metabolism. They were not only expanding closed off individual bodily form through wearables¹⁴ but created (imaginative) connection to larger systems and structures, to a moving, breathing zone, that resonates with Latour’s Gaia as “a pellicle, a varnish, a skin” (Latour, 2016b: 6) or with Ingold’s “indivisible field” that binds together earth and sky, ground and figure (Ingold, 2011a: 97).

While these works had a conceptual, phantasmagoric dimension, they were also based on extensive material research and were intended to be realised. Ukeles conversed with numerous experts, visited several factories, received technical training to gain in depth understanding of the properties of plastic and electromagnetism (Ukeles, 1967b, 1970, 1974; Gieck, 1967; Hackim, 1967). But the secrecy of competitive companies, the unwillingness of engineers to collaborate with (female?) artists, the costs of materials, and the state of development in the industry prevented her from producing even functioning small scale models. The main problem was the impossibility to properly seal the various forms, they continued to leak and during her four years of extensive research she couldn’t get them flying off the ground (Ukeles, 1974: 40-44; Ukeles, 1970; Phillips, 2016: 32-36).

The intense material engagement with both these early works – the exploding *Bindings* and the leaking *Air Art* – and the eventual ‘failure’ of these forms’ membranes or skins to separate, to contain, to hold together, held a generative potential for Ukeles. In both cases the uncontrollably leaking matter posited an obstacle, it disturbed her intentions, demanded her care and eventually, after giving up on her attempt to mend the leaking and to generate sculptural form, inspired her

¹⁴ Several contemporary artists have developed such strategies, for instance Nicola L with her serial work *The Red Coat - Same Skin for Everybody* (1969-1997), Miriam Sharon with her *Tent pieces* (since 1975), or Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolés* (since 1964).

Also for Latour it is a matter of greatest urgency to call upon Gaia and he goes into much more depth to expand and translate Gaian theory for political thought and action.⁹ Latour uses the name Gaia as provocation “to make people think anew about this innocent prefix ‘geo’, which had become dead and stale after having entered into the name of too many disciplines” (Latour, 2014: 2), although he is less interested in her mythical roots and rejects the idea of Gaia as a being (Latour, 2017: 289). Instead he draws on various scientific fields to further elaborate how (and where) to think and feel with Gaia. Latour’s Gaia is neither the globe or blue planet – both of which are in his view discredited concepts, too large and too small at the same time, only perceivable from nowhere, from a non-situated perspective. Nor is it the – equally discredited – inhabited territory or land as stable (back)grounding for identity (Latour, 2016a). Neither the land nor the globe are – to rephrase a formulation from Haraway – available to think with anymore (Haraway, 2016: 5). Instead, he proposes to think, act and feel with Gaia – but not Gaia as a holistic entity or goddess, nor animated spirit, but as a completely secular, mostly scientific figure, that is composited or composted through and through, full of movement, local and proximate (Latour, 2016a; Latour, 2017: 60, 140; Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017: 88). In order to understand better and further develop Lovelock’s and Mar-

9 Following his eight Gifford lectures on the new climatic regime entitled *Facing Gaia* held in 2013 in Edinburgh and the subsequent French publication of *Face à Gaia* in 2015, the English translation *Facing Gaia* in 2017, he published the more popular terrestrial manifest *Down to Earth* in 2018, held several performance lectures and curated the large-scale art exhibition *Critical Zones* at ZKM Karlsruhe, 2020 (together with Peter Weibel), in order to address and assemble broad publics.

Manifesto for Maintenance Art! (Ukeles, 1974: 40). The manifesto declared repetitive, embodied acts of care and touch, rather than the wilful creation of sealed (sculptural) form, as art. This move – while resonating with other artistic experimentations at the time, opening towards processual¹⁵ labour – was unique in its specific approach towards materiality. It did not only foreground the invisible but excessively material labour processes involved in maintaining the home, the city, the museum and the allegedly immaterial processual art (Jackson, 2011), but was also informed by and called for an understanding of materiality, that considers the life of materials beyond human intentions and beyond closed loops. The latter resonates with scholars’ understanding of waste-based materiality.

Discussing plastic decomposition and transformation in oceans and beyond, Jennifer Gabrys stresses that waste’s “materiality involves processes of breaking down, transforming, dispersing and reworking” (Gabrys, 2013: 218-219) which involves digestive processes of non-human actors such as bacteria and mostly expands beyond closed, containable loops. She stresses that – while “the notion of the life-cycle [...] articulates ways for materials to loop back through cycles of production and consumption without material loss or waste” – the process of degrading plastic in oceans is far from such a closed loop as new, unpredictable intra-actions between plastic, plasticizers, bacteria, migrating chemicals, currents, deep sea creatures and food chains occur (Gabrys, 2013: 219). We can see these intra-actions as forms of collective consumption and metabolism with ethical implications, as Myra Hird suggests reading bacterial metabolism through Haraway’s and Derrida’s notion of “eating well” (Hird, 2010b: 36-38). Gabrys – following Hird – suggests that eating well “is a way to encounter bacteria [...] as part of the material collectives in which we all participate” and “about recognizing connections and interdependencies” as well as “ethical relation and obligation” (Gabrys, 2013: 218) beyond human control.

15 For a detailed contextualisation of Ukeles’ *Manifesto of Maintenance Art!* in the context of conceptual and feminist art see Jackson (2011); for a detailed reflection on feminist art and touch see Phelan (2007); for a general reflection on dematerialisation in art see Berger (2019); Lippard (1997).

gulis' concept of Gaia, Latour draws especially on the field of soil science and the study of the so-called 'critical zone'. According to the US *Critical Zone Observatories Network* it is "a living, breathing, constantly evolving boundary layer where rock, soil, water, air, and living organisms interact" (Critical Zone Observatory, 2017). For Latour this critical zone research – studying specific, idiosyncratic sites, mobilising scientists from different fields as well as activists and citizens, and using "haptic technologies" (Latour, 2016b: 6) – is a localised practice of the senses and a practice of care. He describes for instance how in the study of watersheds the involved actors are "gaining the sensitivity necessary to inhabit and survive on this piece of land. Everything happens as if each watershed entered in intensive care where the associated humans begin to gain or to recover some feeling for what they are doing" (Latour, 2016b: 5). He therefore proposes to extend the concept of the critical zone from its originating field and use it as to better understand the earth as Gaia, as "the thin layer [...] within which everything alive we have ever encountered is being processed" and as "a pellicle, a varnish, a skin that is always considered not from the outside as a globe but from the inside as a highly controversial, multilayered and disputed set of intermingling entities." Correspondingly the inhabitants of Gaia do not reside "on Earth" (as on the globe) but "in Earth" (Latour, 2016b: 6). Latour goes on to name these inhabitants of Gaia the "Earthbound" and contrasts them with (modern) Humans (Latour, 2017: 248-253), who he also calls "soil-less" (Latour, et al., 2018: 6). The Earthbound are most of all sensitive and responsive to the multiple and uncontrollable loops that form Gaia, while Humans are those who "remain indifferent to

Ukeles has realised numerous projects reflecting on the accumulation and dispersion of waste materials, pointing to the life of materials beyond human intentions and beyond closed loops. One example is her series of workshops and exhibitions entitled *Methanogenesis I-IV* (1994-1996), reflecting on the work of bacteria in releasing methane gas, or the numerous walk through installations with waste materials such as *Blizzard of Released and Agitated Materials in Flux* (1993). She articulated an understanding of materiality that embraces the leaking, the uncontrollability, the dispersion, but also sticky defiance which troubled her early works. In a 1993 lecture script she wrote "each material is on a different journey than each of us. True, we can capture and form matter; but its journey is not ours" (Ukeles, 1993b). Calling for more explicit modes of unforming and release, she wrote a year later:

How do we learn to love our power to reach into the ceaseless flux of materiality, to take hold of material, to bring both hands together and allow the material to well up in between them, to generate form, to initiate function, and then to understand that there is more! The "more" is the back half of creation: to encode into the forming its own un-forming, the release of the matter from this particular shape, weight, and that set of determinations — in other words to set the material free, free from us, from the lust-lock of the single making — to let the material flow and be possible for other shapings and other turns. Ownership of the environment means to make and to build-in the forms unmaking: an agitated release.

Ukeles, 1994b: 2-3

While in both her early works – the 'intestinal' *Bindings* and the 'breathing' *Air Art* – she has indirectly hinted at such release through the notion of digestion and metabolism, it is mostly through her long durational acts of repetitive touch, grounded walks and insistent inhabitation of the land-fill that the agitated release or the unforming unfolds its aesthetic potential in Ukeles' work.

the consequences of their actions” (Latour, 2017: 251; see also 140, 239, 248). More explicitly he distinguishes “Humans [...] as those who take the Earth” from the “Earthbound [who] are *taken by it*” (Latour, 2017: 251)¹⁰.

Overall Latour makes only passing remarks on how exactly the Earthbound reside, move, sense and perceive *in* Earth, how they “are taken” – and here seems to lie a main difference to Stenger’s account. It seems that he mostly considers a mode of sensing, or “being taken”, that is technically mediated and linked to describing or visualising data: “They [the Earthbound, B.K.] belong to the territory outlined by their instruments. Their knowledge extends as far as their ability to finance, to control, to maintain the sensors that make the consequences of their actions visible” (Latour, 2017: 252; see also 140). For him – as for Stengers – it is crucial to “generate alternative descriptions”, but the modality he proposes is predominantly techno-scientific: “How could we act politically without having inventoried, surveyed, measured, centimeter by centimeter, being by being, person by person, the stuff that makes up the Earth for us?” (Latour, 2018: 94) Also Viveiros de Castro and Danowski note that Latour “does not seem too sure what to think about his Terrans. At times they are conceived as an emerging network or Latourian scientists [...] At other times, Terrans appear as the name of a common cause,

10 The use of upper case and formatting is quoted as in the original. Danowski & Viveiros de Castro use the term “Terrans”, rather than Earthbound, referring to Latour’s original french term “Terriens” (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017: xii, 94 and 145, fn 28). See also Haraway’s use of the term “terra” and “terrans”. She uses both upper and lower case (Haraway, 2016: 49, 175 fn 11).

3. Touching numbers

Numbers seem important for Ukeles. Many of her works literally handle large amounts of matter and huge numbers of people, and her archive is full of meticulous lists, containing exact numbers, amounts, dimensions, measurements. To name a few examples:

- she met and shook hands with 8,500 Sanitation workers during her one-year *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80) performance;
- she brought 20 tons of recyclable materials into the Institute for Art and Urban Resources (now PS1) for her Installation *Re-Entry* (1987), for which she mounted plastics, rubber, glass, dewatered dredge earth, aluminium cans, computer parts on scaffolding to create a passageway for visitors to pass through;
- one million pounds of crushed recycled glass were brought into MOCA Los Angeles for her *Unburning Freedom Hall* Installation in 1997;
- she and her assistants bound 14,000 hand-pulled recycled polystyrene blobs and 6,000 washed and smashed steel and aluminium cans onto 572 floor to ceiling suspension metal wires for her installation *Blizzard of Released and Agitated Materials in Flux* in South Korea (1993).

In her paper *Maintenance Art Works meets The N.Y.C. Department of Sanitation*, she explicitly links numbers to embodied sensation, to seeing and feeling them in the gut, and proposes to translate numeric or spatial scale into duration in order to enable such numbered sensation: to sense the time it takes to shake 8,500 hands during *Touch Sanitation*, or the time it takes to touch every single of the 14,000 aluminium and plastic objects which formed *Blizzard*. Not a few, not a representative sample, but everything and everybody. This approach suggests that it matters not to discard, not to dismiss and instead to pay attention to everybody and everything, to every single touch.¹⁶

16 This resonates with Sarah Vanhee’s excessive handling described below. It can also be related to artist Symrin Gil’s practice of collecting and counting little waste items. Brian Massumi describes her counting as “going back over a collected-together plurality of things, in an abstract movement through the neutral space of number. All that counts is the bare fact of this many having come together. Counting registers little nothings in a belonging-together” (Massumi, 2013: 188).

which concerns all of the planet's collectives" (Viveiros de Castro & Danowski, 2018: 182-183). They argue with Latour's elusive but also somewhat exclusive description of the Earthbound or Terrans and propose not to exclude those who might fall outside of his collective of sensing scientists. As Viveiros de Castro and Danowski elaborate, Latour considers indigenous collectives – whom he calls the “people of Pachamama” – not up to the task, mostly due to a lack in numbers and a lack of scalable technologies (Viveiros de Castro & Danowski, 2018: 184-185; Latour, 2017: 128). However, in similar way to Stengers, they argue against excluding non-Western, non-secular collectives and ponder

the possibility that the generally small populations and relatively weak technologies of indigenous peoples and so many other sociopolitical minorities of the Earth could become a crucial advantage and resource [...] in a permanently diminished human world. Our author [Latour, B.K.] does not seem prepared [...] to accept the highly likely possibility, that we – the people of the (capitalist) core [...] highly dependent on a monumental consumption (or rather, waste) [...] – that we [...] might be the ones who will have to scale down [...]

Viveiros de Castro & Danowski, 2018: 185¹¹

In a few instances, however, Latour has also pointed towards scaled down, not only scientific, not only high end technological modes of becoming earthbound or residing in Earth.¹² An example is his Sixth

11 See also the conference they organized in Rio de Janeiro: *The Thousand Names of Gaia: From the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth* (2014). Available at: <https://thethousandnamesofgaia.wordpress.com/about> (accessed 27.02.2021). For further critiques of the exclusion of indigenous and non-secular thought see TallBear (2017); Rosiek et al. (2019).

Ukeles has described the process of garbageification “un-naming”, an un-differentiation that strips objects of value and meaning and equates hard with soft, wet and mouldy with dry, heavy with light (Ukeles, 2002: n. pag.). As Shannon Jackson has stated, Ukeles’ “sanitation aesthetics [...] seeks to counter the garbageification of the object world” by re-valuing, re-differentiating objects and forcing “earthly humans to construct a different relationship to material” (Jackson, 2011: 76). I would add that this re-valuing proceeds in a paradoxical mode, which holds political potential. By confronting scientific or economic systems of differentiation and value with material embodiment, with felt sensation, which questions quantification, determinacy and control, she hints at the inadequacy of purely systemic, rationalistic modes of counting what matters. Instead, she enacts and calls for a necessary intimacy with the discarded and devalued. While Ukeles counts, she also touches and that touch often leaves her unbalanced. After *Touch Sanitation* she wrote:

I was completely unbalanced, because I felt that I had absorbed 85 hundred volts of electricity through my right hand from shaking that many hands, and the energy was residing inside of me. I needed to pass it along. I needed to send the energy back out to the people because it was always for them. I was the medium, the battery, that had to get rid of some of that energy or I would explode, so I did this transference of energy out of my other side.

Ukeles, 2000: 455¹⁷

Also the realization of the installation *Blizzard* left her “out of order”, so full and at the same time “completely empty – OUT”, not least through the repetitive work carried out with her assistants, “the real dirty work, boring work of recycling” (Ukeles, 1993a: 66-67):

all human meaningful work comes through the laying on of hands onto material [...] I try to believe that, seeking ecstasy. But, I worry that, while we do this, terrible numbing blankness is happening to our synapses. That is where we still are – still, I am afraid at a stupid point, I think, in relation to materiality on the planet.

Ukeles, 1993a: 67-68

17 Ukeles realised the *Energy Pass-Along Performance: Make Waves* on 20th July 1980 in the context of the 15th Avant Garde Festival curated by Charlotte Moormann (Ukeles, 1980).

Gifford Lecture which he begins with a short videoclip and a description of artist Tomás Saraceno's installation *On Space Time Foam* (2012) (Latour, 2013). Although he does not really elaborate this reference much further,¹³ I would like to follow this clue or trail, leading me to other thinkers, practitioners and artists as well as other modes of inhabiting the “times of urgencies” (Haraway, 2016: 35). In the short video excerpt from Saraceno's installation presented by Latour we can see people crawling across and through a huge, elevated, multi-layered, instable and moving plastic-membrane, which forms the large-scale installation filling the big interior space of Hangar Biotica in Barcelona.

Latour accompanies the clip with the following statement:

I made the mistake of believing that they [the visitors, B.K.] could jump or even fly. I believed that this work of art [...] was a sort of vertiginous trampoline! I soon realized that visitors were more like insects about to be stuck on flypaper: they could crawl, turn around, roll on one another, but, no, they could neither jump, nor fly. Saraceno had managed to figure a way of rendering fully concrete the experience of shifting from history to geostory by making the décor itself become a recalcitrant and unexpected participant in every movement of those who were literally embedded in it.

Latour, 2013: n. pag.

12 See also Viveiros de Castro and Danowski arguing for a “enlarged definition of [...] technology” including ancient and recent sociotechnical inventions, but also nonhuman “bricolage, tinkering, the hack, the crack, the exploit” (Viveiros de Castro & Danowski, 2018: 187).

13 The reference to Saraceno was not included in the subsequent publication of his lecture series (Latour, 2017).

She seeks something else than numbness, less stupid, more ecstatic. Ecstasy describes a state beyond the self,¹⁸ trance-like. And touching endless flows of matter might enable such a state, questioning the boundary between the self, material and other. It is on the one hand touch's thoroughly debated co-relationality and reversibility that holds the potential for blurring the boundaries of the self (see Phelan, 2007; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 95; see also chapter ‘Excessive handling – “through so many hands”’). Furthermore, here I am also interested to bring into the picture Karen Barad's materialist understanding of matter itself as touch:

materiality ‘itself’ is always already touched by and touching infinite configurings of other beings and other times. In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of ‘us’ is constituted in response-ability. Each of ‘us’ is constituted as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other.

Barad, 2012: 7

Barad draws on quantum field theory's radical understanding of the co-extensivity of matter and the void, or the “infinite touch of nothingness [which] is threaded through all being/becoming” (Barad, 2012: 8). Barad elaborates how in classical physics particles, fields and the void are thought of as separate building blocks of the universe, while in quantum field theory “particles no longer take their place in the void; rather, they are constitutively entangled with it. As for the void, it is no longer vacuous. It is a living, breathing indeterminacy of non/being. The vacuum is a jubilant exploration of virtuality” (Barad, 2012: 4).

While Ukeles doesn't draw on quantum field theory, I argue that she nevertheless invokes this aspect of infinity and nothingness, that lies at the heart of her boundary blurring, repetitive acts of touching large flows of matter. In a letter to the Visitors of the walk through installation she wrote:

18 As the Not-I of Ukeles' *Mopfoot* persona described above. *Mopfoot* appears in the performances *Washing* (1974) and *Revolving Doors Have Wings: My House in Parts and Wholee: Holy House, Home House, City House/Sanity-Shine Dept., Artist House*. (1978).

What he points at as a key example of what it could mean to live earthbound,¹⁴ are the crawling, rolling, turning, insect-like movement patterns of the participants, loosing the (human) capacity to stand on hind legs and move or jump with two feet on stable ground. Instead they are stuck and their insect-like movements are inseparably entangled with their ‘environment’ so that the relationship between (back-)ground and (human) figure get mixed up.

Stuck like insects on flypaper, rolling, stumbling in and through a plastic layer or skin, equipped with sensors and feelers, less human, less far reaching or up-scaling than the “Latourian scientists” mentioned by Viveiros de Castro and Danowski above (Viveiros de Castro & Danowski, 2018: 182-183): such a precarious and more than human mode of inhabitation resonates more with yet another proposal for naming/reading the urgencies of the present, described by Donna Haraway as tentacular Chthulucene and elaborated in more detail below.

I suggest this earthbound mode of inhabitation Latour describes also resonates and contrasts in interesting ways with the landfill, on which artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles got stuck for so many decades, and whose (public, artistic, collective) inhabitation she has insistently proposed over and over again (See chapter ‘Holes, pits and ditches’). But while many contemporary landfills are large scale underground plastic-wrapped formations, which are imagined to

14 In a few instances Latour has used earthbound as adjective indicating a specific, but not further elaborated form of embodiment. He speaks for instance of “earthbound scientists as embodied creatures” (Latour, 2017: 252).

Dear Visitor,
as you enter this blizzard, into the NO-LONGER-AND-NOT-YET, I ask you, “Are you passing through these revolutionary materials? Or, are they passing through you?”

Ukeles, 1993a

“No-longer-and-not-yet”, the combined negation of past and future, can be read as this touch of nothingness, the infinity that blurs the boundaries of the self, that unbalances, and disturbs any order of who passes through whom.

In order to think further about what touching dizzying infinities of waste in repetitive acts might imply I shall briefly turn to waste studies and waste activism. Counting and tracking waste, for instance accumulating plastic waste in the world’s oceans, plays also an important role in the many scientific attempts to grasp the extent and the effects of (plastic) pollution. It is a laborious, Sisyphean task, given the scope of the world’s oceans, the excessive rate of plastic production and consumption worldwide as well as the many obstacles and unknown parameters involved.¹⁹ While research has accelerated in the last decade, methods and frames of reference often remain the same since the beginning of these inquiries in the 1970s, which involves a lot of collecting and counting of samples, as well as tracking of movement (Law, 2017: 206). As Jennifer Gabrys has pointed out scholars do employ highly speculative approaches in this endeavour and on the other hand many citizen and artist initiatives contribute to this emerging knowledge as well (Gabrys, 2016: 144, 146-149)²⁰. Examples are the many beach cleanups,²¹ citizen sensing projects such as the Marine Debris Tracker (Gabrys, 2016) or the International Pellet Watch Initiative, which asks peo-

19 While estimated figures exist in relation to the amount already in the oceans and the annual plastic input from land, these figures are to be treated with caution and many questions remain open, such as the so called “missing plastic”, the huge amount of plastic that should be there and can’t be accounted for, which has most likely been degrading into microplastics, sinking to the deep sea, entering the food chain, or accumulating in arctic ice. For overviews of current research about ocean plastic pollution see Lavender Law (2017); Gabrys, (2013b: 211-213).

20 See also Lavender Law who explicitly calls for the involvement of citizen scientists in the global attempt to gather more and better data about plastic pollution (Lavender Law, 2017: 223).

21 See Ocean Conservancy organising beach cleanups and waste counts globally, available at: <https://oceanconservancy.org/about> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

be stable and contained, but are actually moving, settling, leaking and contaminating, Saraceno's beautiful and very clean plastic formation floats above ground, offering a surprising and unstable, but wholly safe playground for its visitors. Furthermore, the workforce behind Saraceno's studio creations remains largely invisible, whereas Mierle Laderman Ukeles' decade-long laborious engagement with the landfill attempted to make the labours of the many beings and creatures inhabiting and maintaining the landfill visible (See chapter 'Holes, pits and ditches'). Rather than the playful short term visitors of Saraceno's installation I would therefore suggest Ukeles' numerous figurations as befitting models of the Earthbound: *Mopfoot* – a persona created by Ukeles during early performances (*Washing*, 1974, and *Revolving Doors have Wings*, 1978. See p.72) – a crawling, endlessly labouring creature with haphazardly assembled extensions, which oscillates between human, animal, machine and which often works on all fours, near the ground (Ukeles, 1978); or the racing *Water Creature* which she detects in the waterways of the Fresh Kills landfill but which also resonates with her own practice of muddling through the landfill (Ukeles, 1996b: 89; see chapter 'Walks, sweeps, routes and dances'; see p.35).

3. Medusa erupts and loops with many tentacles

Ukeles' *Mopfoot* and Shah's unicorn like creatures resonate with yet another, somewhat scaled down name/story/image for the urgencies of the present proposed by Donna Haraway. As with Latour and Stengers, naming and storying is for Haraway a tool for thinking, but

ple to collect, count and send in pellet samples from beaches around the world (Takada, 2013).²² Gabrys states that given the edges of unknowability of plastic pollution speculative tracking and sensing practices constitute important contributions to knowledge and responsibility in yet to be developed forms of cohabitation (Gabrys, 2016: 155). While Gabrys understands sensing as monitoring practices which are "computational, often networked, frequently automated, and increasingly ubiquitous" (Gabrys, 2016: 3), many tracking initiatives do also involve 'hands on' sensing and counting.

Encountering ungraspable, dizzying infinities of devalued, discarded matter through the paradoxical act of (hand-)touching numbers is Ukeles' proposal and explicit invitation to visitors and audiences to inhabit waste worlds. It is a proposal of embodied ongoingness in (not only human) collectivity at the edges of knowledge, which refuses to succumb to purely rationalistic, technological modes of counting what matters.

4. Walks, sweeps, routes and dances

Not only touching but also walking is a central method of Ukeles. Many of her works imagine, perform, reenact or sculpt walks, routes, or dances. Most famously her *Touch Sanitation* performance (July 1979-June 1980) followed the routes of sanitation workers across all districts of New York City. The performance was organised in 10 circular sweeps (each lasting between 2–6 weeks) visiting every Sanitation worker and all 73 Sanitation districts with its garages, marine transfer stations, incinerators, landfills, "creating a city-wide spiral tracking form, hand to hand" (Lippard, 1980: 50-51; see p.72). She did not only meet and shake hands but also quite literally followed in the footsteps of the sanitation workers, learning and embodying movement patterns and daily choreographies.²³ One of the main physical challenges for sanitation workers is – according to

²² International Pellet Watch (2021) *Frequently Asked Question*. Available at: <http://www.pelletwatch.org/en/faq.html> (accessed: 03.03.2021); see also Takada (2013).

²³ *Touch Sanitation* entailed several types of performances entitled *Roll Call*, *Shaking Hands* and *Follow in Your Footsteps*. The latter entailed reenacting movement patterns by workers on site.

also explicitly for living and inhabiting. She writes: “stories [...] propose or enact patterns for participants to inhabit [...] on a vulnerable and wounded earth” (Haraway, 2016: 10). She is therefore somewhat more explicit about *how* to think and inhabit a “damaged planet” (Tsing, 2015). Rather than further invigorating the homogenized notions of the Anthropos in the Anthropocene, or Capital in the Capitalocene, even the Plantation in Plantationocene,¹⁵ she argues not only “to reduce the earth’s urgency to an abstract system of causative destruction” (Haraway, 2016: 37) and insists that next to these many names describing the ongoing destruction, a name for “ongoingness” is also needed (Haraway, 2016: 100-101). With Anna Tsing she understands the Anthropocene as an epoch in which “places of refuge” for re-flourishing and “reworlding” are shrunk to a minimum or are fully disappearing. But she also hopes that the Anthropocene might be a boundary event, that marks severe discontinuities, but that does not (yet) exclude the possibility “to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge” (Haraway, 2016: 100). She does not use Gaia as her main guide out of the Anthropocene, as Gaia theory is still linked too tightly, through its roots in autopoietic system thinking to the globalizing, universalizing concept of the Anthropocene.¹⁶ Instead, she chooses Medusa as a thread to follow and develops another pattern to be inhabited – “the Chthulucene” (Haraway, 2016: 51-52). The Chthulucene is drawn from a

15 Latour describes the Plantationocene as a mode of “appropriation of land, as if land was not there”, or a “de-soilization of the Earth” (Latour et al., 2018: 5-6).

16 But she also does not reject Gaia nor does she understand her proposal as in opposition (Haraway, 2016: 175, fn 11). For a detailed discussion of Haraway’s early response to the Gaia hypothesis see Clarke (2020).

anthropologist Robin Nagle – not smell but weight (Nagle, 2013: 53-63)²⁴ and movement patterns are therefore composed to balance weight and gravitation in often circular movements. In a statement written years later Ukeles describes *Touch Sanitation* as a “dis-mapping of the formal city, and a re-mapping of the entire living City from its underbelly up” (Ukeles, 2010 [2016]: 223) or more literally from the gravitational, moving body upward.

In a documentary about her work (Syre, *World of Art*, 1996) Ukeles states: “My work has a lot to do with walking. Just plain walking through a place has a lot of meaning for me. When I look back at my work – you can see me walking through systems or cities or towns.” Walking – and also dancing, considering the number of ballets and choreographies she has created with sanitation trucks and snow removal machines (see Conte, 2015) – is for her a mode of learning, of understanding and gathering knowledge.²⁵ In a text about her experimental video and sound work *Imaging the Landfill* (1995) she reflects on the differences and relations between complex computer generated imaging technologies and working and walking on the ground of the vast Fresh Kills landfill in New York City, which at the time was still open and operational:

Noting the landfill’s practically unimaginable scale, those who work on site state that it takes years of orientation to learn to find one’s bearings there. The comprehensibility and certitude of aerial photos and manipulated computer-based images vanishes the first moment one steps onto the grounds of the landfill.

Ukeles, 1996b: 90, 92

While she playfully engages with the – at the time innovative – imaging technologies of the Department of Sanitation, combining macro- and micro scales, satellite imagery and microscopic representations of anaerobic bacteria, she asks urgent questions such as how they “affect the parameters set to deal with the future of the landfill [...] Do the integrative capabilities dull us

24 Robin Nagle was for many years anthropologist in residence at the New York City’s Department of Sanitation and took training to become a sanitation worker herself. The result is her book *Picking up. On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation workers of New York City* (Nagle, 2013).

25 She has also realised or proposed a number of ‘sculpted walks’ passageways, or walk through installations such as *Blizzard of Released and Agitated Materials in Flux* (1993), *Re-entry* (1987) and *Flow City* (1983-2001) a.o.

complex, wide-spun, non-linear earthen etymology and offers a story abstaining from apocalyptic thinking and instead enabling “ongoingness” (Haraway, 2016: 55). It refers to Greek *khthon* (of the earth, subterranean) and *kainos* (now, beginning), to the *chthonic* ones¹⁷ (the various Medusa affiliated goddesses and forces of the underworld) as well as to the spider *pimoi* *cthulhu*,¹⁸ the octopus *cyanea*¹⁹ and the symbiotic coral reefs (Haraway, 2016: 52). What new path to inhabit do these messy earthen or underworld/undersea creatures, which Haraway summons to composite the *Chthulucene*, offer and how is it supposed to lead out of the Anthropocene?

This pattern highlights first of all non-patriarchal, queer kinship relations crossing human, animal, species divides. The figures Haraway invokes – like the winged goddess *Potnia Theron*, the protector of wild animals, or *Potnia Melissa*, the Mistress of the Bees, as well as the related snake-adorned Medusa – are all more than human (Haraway, 2016: 52f). Also odd connections of kinship or inheritance are drawn upon, such as the blood drops from Medusa’s decapitated head, which according to myth created the coral reefs in the red sea, which are a preferred habitat of the octopus, also called the spider of the sea (Haraway, 2016: 54). But importantly these queer, loopy kinship relations are always specifically located, as “we are not connected to everything but to something” (Haraway, 2016: 31).

17 For an extensive etymology of the *chthonic* ones see Haraway (2016: 173–174, fn 4); she explicitly rejects H.P. Lovecraft’s male deity *Cthulhu* and rather appropriates a female lineage of *chthonic* ones, see therefore her different spelling of the *Chthulucene*.

18 The spider was named after Lovecraft’s *Cthulhu* and is therefore renamed by Haraway as *Pimoi* *chthulu* (Haraway, 2016: 31f).

19 For more details see Haraway (2016: 55f and 188, fn 69).

to the profound scale of the waste? Do we envision and overlook?” (Ukeles, 1996b: 93) The video begins and ends with a flickering abstract computer image of the landfill’s waterways turned at a 90-degree angle around the East West axis so that a figure with multiple extensions appears, which she entitled “Water Creature racing across the landscape” (Ukeles, 1996b: 89). An image that resonates with Latour’s figure of the *Earthbound*, Ingold’s orientation towards the ground and most of all Haraway’s tentacular and muddy being: an image of a being that walks above and below ground with many extensions and sensors, that does not only live on but in the landfill. Ukeles has done exactly that, for many decades: In her multichannel video installation *Penetration and Transparency Morphed* (2001–02) – documenting her walks with more than 20 “pathfinders” across the landfill (see for more details the following chapter) – we can follow her walking conversation with a wetlands specialist. Together they enter the mudflats in the remaining saltmarsh of Fresh Kills – this terrain that is both water and land, unimpressive to the untrained eye, but “vital”, “impressive” and “abundant” for Ukeles’ pathfinder, actually the centre from which everything else could potentially be restored, so he hopes. In order to be able to walk the mud they put so called mud-ders above their rubber boots, which are inspired by – so the expert explains – the web foot of a great blue heron. But – in a strange side remark – he states that they only work well for those who “believe” in them. Maybe, what he really suggests is that in order to be able to walk the mud, one has to become a little like this great wading bird – or like Ukeles’ water creature.

5. Holes, pits and ditches

While Mierle Laderman Ukeles is famous for her early long-term performances such as *Touch Sanitation* or *I make maintenance work one hour every day* involving hundreds and thousands of maintenance workers, her decades long engagement with landfills, especially the Fresh Kills landfill²⁶ in Staten Island, New York, is less recognized but equally astonishing. It began as early as

26 Kills is a Dutch word for stream referring to the marsh land on Staten Island that was turned into a landfill in 1947 (Lippard, 2016). I am using the original spelling (Fresh Kills), which has mostly been used by Ukeles; the New York City Parks Department has recently introduced a new spelling for the future park: Freshkills Park. See: <https://freshkillspark.org> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

Secondly, the Chthulucene is a pattern of tentacular connections above, below and under-ground/under-water. Wings, stings, snakes, tentacles, spider legs – tentacularity does not allow for a closed-off form but creates ubiquitous contact zones and “continuously spin(s) out loopy tendrils” (Haraway, 2016: 33).²⁰ Tentacularity can be related to Viveiros de Castro and Danowski’s expanded, not only human understanding of technology mentioned above. It does not privilege vision, but foregrounds haptical sensing in combination with non-linear, compound vision: “The snakes and bees are more like stinging tentacular feelers than like binocular eyes, although these critters see too, in compound-eyed insectile and many-armed optics” (Haraway, 2016: 52)²¹. This gives “a blow to modern humanist [...] figurations of the forward looking, sky gazing Anthropos” (Haraway, 2016: 53). Next to troubling linear vision tentacularity also questions the alignment of movement with upright posture and linear progression by highlighting lateral (Haraway, 2016: 53) and often grounded movement patterns – not unlike those insect-like visitors of Saraceno’s installation and even more so Ukeles’ *Mopfoot* and Shah’s unicorns.

And thirdly, the Chthulucene pattern – like Stengers’ Gaia – does not promise balance nor harmony, but eruption, danger, and mortality in the here and now. Haraway neither proposes reconciliation of relations nor restoration of a damaged planet, but rather local niches for

20 See also her discussion of connections between spiders and octopuses in relation to their capacities to “make a net or mesh of bonds”, to “looping” and “polymorphism”, as well as in relation to their bodies as “knot of mobile animated bonds” (Haraway, 2016: 188, fn 69).

21 See also Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of optical touch and haptic vision and Ingold’s discussion of these concepts (Ingold, 2011a: 133).

1977 during the preparation stages of *Touch Sanitation* and lasts until today.²⁷ During the preparation and realization of the *Touch Sanitation* performance, she visited the Fresh Kills landfill several times, as roughly 500 workers were active there, as well as the other New York landfills, which were still operative at the time (Ukeles, 2017c). Fresh Kills was then the world’s largest landfill, and after New York’s other landfills were closed successively, it received staggering amounts of municipal solid waste until 2001.²⁸ As early as 1979 she received two grants to develop proposals for earthworks at urban landfill sites.²⁹ And since 1989 she is the New York *Percent for Art Artist* for Fresh Kills with a dual mandate to participate in the overall master plan for the end-use of the site as well as to design permanent artworks (Phillips, 2016: 178-179).³⁰ This initial mandate was given at a time, when the landfill was still in use and was supposed to operate (in parts) for 20 or more years. With the sudden decision in 1996 to close Fresh Kills by 2001, with the temporal reopening of Fresh Kills after September 11 to receive the debris of the World Trade Centre, with a public design competition for the overall transformation of Fresh Kills into a public recreational park 2,5 times the size of Central Park, the conditions and frameworks for her commission have changed fundamentally

27 Her other engagements with landfills include *Evapotranspiration - This Land lives and breathes* (1999), an unrealised proposal for the rehabilitation of the Hiriya landfill near Tel Aviv; and *Turnaround Surround for Danehy Park* (since 1989), a realised public art work. Other artists developing designs/projects/proposals for landfills include Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield*, 1982; Nancy Holt, *Skymound*, 1986 (it remains unfinished until this day, see Sullivan (2020), who proposed to complete the work); Mel Chin, *Revival Field*, 1991. See also Amanda Boetzkes recent analysis of artists working in and on landfills, including in film and photography (Boetzkes, 2019).

28 For a detailed history of the Fresh Kills landfill see Rathje and Murphy (1992); and the extensive historiography by Melosi (2020), which entails a chapter on Ukeles.

29 She received the National Endowments for the Arts, Art in Public Places Planning Grant to create earthworks for New York City’s landfills and the National Endowments for the Arts Design Arts Independent Projects Fellowship to prepare a juried competition for projects on NYC landfills by other artists (Ukeles, 1992; Phillips, 2016: 176, 226); the latter project entitled *Re-Raw Recovery* was supposed to result in an exhibition and a performance/public dialogue at the Franklin Furnace performance space and eventually in the realisation of the selected proposal, but mostly aiming at “laying claim to these places” and “creating an energy field of public debate and creation for these sites” that “we have all made in common” (Ukeles, 1981a). The proposals remained unrealized, not least because soon after most New York City landfills were reclassified as inactive, hazardous waste sites (Ukeles, 1992: 13).

30 “Since 1982, New York City’s Percent for Art law has required that one percent of the budget for eligible City-funded construction projects be spent on public artwork. Managed by the City’s Department of Cultural Affairs, the Percent for Art program has commissioned hundreds of site-specific projects in variety of media”. See: *The Department of Cultural Affairs Percent for Art*. Available at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dclapercentforart/index.page> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

the “modest possibilities of partial recuperation”, for learning to be “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016: 10).

While Haraway links her concept of tentacularity only in passing to anthropologist Tim Ingold and his notion of living life along lines,²² I would like to stress this connection and trace its resonances further. Ingold doesn’t call upon mythical figures such as Gaia or Medusa, but his attempts to rethink or unthink the groundlessness of Western societies, his description of the inhabited world as a constant material (human and more than human) process of movement and intermingling resonates both with Stengers’ and Latour’s ‘Gaia-zone’ and with Haraway’s Chthulucene and elaborates in more detail what inhabiting these zones might entail.

In *Being Alive* Ingold analyses how groundlessness has emerged in the West through scientific narrative and technical invention. He outlines how human evolution has been narrated as a process of “head over heels” tightly linked to the emergent human capacity to stand upright and walk, thereby freeing the hands to grasp and manipulate (Ingold, 2011a: 33-34). The human, in this Darwinian narration – so Ingold asserts – is a divided creature with the waist as a dividing line and with a clear functional separation between hands and feet. “Whereas the feet are impelled by biomechanical necessity [to] support and propel the body within the natural world, the hands are free to deliver intelligent design upon the world”, while the brain and the capacity to think is imagined to reside statically in the skull far away

22 In quoting him she writes: “Tentacularity is about life lived along lines” (Haraway, 2016: 32, see also fn 8, p. 175), stressing connectivity, knotting, knitting, weaving and meshing.

over and over again. This might explain why it was only in 2014 that one of her numerous proposals for the landfill site was eventually approved by the City’s Public Design Commission and has been in the planning state since.

Completion of *Landing* – so the fitting title of the work – was originally anticipated in 2019, but the work is currently on hold.³¹ More than 30 years after Ukeles was named *Percent for Art Artist* of the Fresh Kills landfill, and more than 40 years after her first encounters with the landfill the possibility of landing a work in the landfill still remains uncertain. Arguably, it will take many more years until the site will be opened to the public:³² the still ongoing processes of landfill closure, monitoring and remediation, the lack of funding and commitment on the part of politicians, are among the reasons given for this perpetual delay (Ukeles, 2017c; VC 2017).³³ However, I believe that these circumstances are not the only reasons why her intensive, decades long, indepth engagement has resulted only in comparatively small-scale implementation and some of her most daring proposals have remained unrealized. I suggest that it is also her relationship to indeterminate (in some cases toxic) waste-matter, that profoundly disturbs the conceptualization of landfills, including remediated landfill parks, as “sites of forgetting” (Hird, 2013b). Her landfill proposals are therefore too challenging to be realised on the scale that she has daringly imagined and proposed again and again.

In her master thesis from 1974 she made the following remark about the material, grounded dimension of her maintenance art, years before she started her engagement with the New York City Department of Sanitation and with landfills:

31 Its realisation will be severely delayed or might even be reconsidered due to increased costs and lack of funding, as a staff member of the Department of Sanitation informed me (Geller, 2020). See also Freshkills Park (2021), available at: <https://freshkillspark.org/os-art/landing> (accessed 03.03.2021).

32 A collaborator at the Parks department points to a wide temporal horizon, but assumes it will be somewhat before 2036 (MP, 2017).

33 Ukeles assumes that the fact that Fresh Kills is not near any major real estate development contributes to the slow development and lack of funds (Ukeles, 2017c). See also: Melosi (2020: 520-546).

from the ground (Ingold, 2011a: 35). Rather than being an empirical description of evolution he elaborates how this view is embedded in a Western, colonial perception of life and how its emergence is conditioned by technological inventions such as paved roads (enabling mechanical movement such as the upright military gait), shoes (reducing perceptability of feet and changing its anatomy) and chairs (privileging sedentary perception mediated through vision unimpeded by kinaesthetic sensation by feet) (Ingold, 2011a: 37-39). He then goes on – turning ‘heels over head’ so to say – to ask how to think and perceive with the (unclad) feet and “what the effect would be of adopting [...] a fundamental orientation towards the ground” (Ingold, 2011a: 45). I would like to highlight here three of his speculative answers:

- the de-privileging of the visual sense in favour of touch;
- a mode of perception tied to movement rather than to a static point of observation;
- and – by considering pedestrian touch, which is related to carrying the weight of the body versus touch by hands, which is carrying the weight of objects – a coming into focus of the ground itself, instead of just being background against which objects/figures stand out (Ingold, 2011a: 45-46).

Such a ‘coming into focus of the ground’ troubles two assumptions – first, that the ground is a homogenous, isotropic surface and second, that it can be clearly separated from the air or sky and from delineated objects, things or beings, such as plants, humans, animals, built structures. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, he writes “what we call the ground is not really a coherent surface at all but – just

Maintenance is true underground art. Society’s attitude towards maintenance shows in the buried location of most networks of maintenance systems: sewers, subways, gas lines, telephone cables – put the rags and mops away in the cleaning closet. Their hidden nature is rationalized by an aesthetic of hygiene and amenity despite the fact that these networks signify the fabric of our capability for ongoingness: they are “put away” as they aren’t “nice”. Maintenance represents the soft, embarrassed underbelly of human support-activity – the invisible girdle.

Ukeles, 1974: 215

To dig metaphorically but also literally into this buried underground location, has been a central concern in many of her projects and proposals since, and it should come as no surprise that her longest lasting, ‘epic obsession’ lies with one of the most daunting and challenging underground locations: the landfill. It is also worth noting that with her interest shifting from waste collection to waste disposal, she shifted from the Sanitation Departments major concern (“getting it off the streets”) – to what was – and probably still is – considered secondary (“the department’s step-child”) (Ukeles, 2017c).³⁴

Landfills are the oldest and still most commonly used means to discard waste globally (Weber, 2012: 473). While for centuries landfilling implied mostly depositing household and other waste in decentralised pits close to dwellings and settlements, content, volumes and methods have changed, diversified and expanded on a massive scale with urbanization and industrialization. Often placed in abandoned mines or gravel pits, or – as in the case of Fresh Kills – in wetlands, which in the early to mid-20th century were considered ideal dumping grounds, they are creating highly unnatural landscapes, growing mounds over time, and settling gradually after closure. They can also be considered a form of extractivist reversal, sinking into the ground what has been extracted in form of resources in the first place (Moore, 2015). Traci Brynne Voyles has described

³⁴ This imbalance is also visible on the DSNY’s website, with information about ongoing remediation work, closed landfills, which are still in its ‘aftercare’, and the amount, content and destinations of waste exports either difficult to find or not present at all. Annual reports until 2013 entailed at least some detailed figures about these issues, while the latest 2019 report does not entail any information (see also: Melosi, 2020: 531-533). This focus on waste collection and transport has a long history in waste management generally, as elaborated below (See also: Weber, 2014b: 130-131, 143).

like the skin – a zone in which the air and moisture of the sky bind with substances whose source lies in the earth [...]” (Ingold, 2011a: 87). He describes this zone as being one of movement. Building on his understanding of materials as being in constant flux, as occurring rather than existing, as “flowing, scraping, mixing and mutating” (Ingold, 2011a: 28), the ground is as “the surface of every solid [...] but a crust, the more or less ephemeral congregate of a generative movement” (Ingold, 2011a: 24). This constant movement troubles the notion of solid, closed-off objects²³ and binds together earth and sky, ground and figure “within one indivisible field” (Ingold, 2011a: 97).²⁴ This indivisible field resonates with Latour’s critical zone and his Earthbound residing *in* Earth, but also with the always specific and identifiable, traceable meshwork²⁵ of relations, that Haraway describes. But her concept of tentacularity is a somewhat more radical, more-than-human formulation of the “fundamental orientation towards the ground” Ingold is seeking (Ingold, 2011a: 45). Rather than proposing to think with unclad (human) feet, tentacles combine the functions of hands and feet (and sensors and feelers and technological extensions) and thereby overcome the distinction described by Ingold as so deeply embedded in Western thinking. They similarly overcome the privileging of vision over touch and they engage in constant – non-linear, lateral – movement.

23 He speaks of a “world without objects” (Ingold, 2011a: 131).

24 He links this indivisible world, that he also calls the “weather world”, to Deleuze & Guattari’s smooth space (Ingold, 2011a: 132), and Mol & Law’s fluid space (Ingold, 2011a: 86-87).

25 Haraway does not use the term meshwork, but speaks often of enmeshed relations or of tentacularity that creates “a mesh of bonds” (Haraway, 2016: 188: fn 69). For an in-depth reflection on the concept of meshwork see Ingold (2011a: 63-97).

such reversal – in the context of the legacies of uranium mining in Navajo country – as wastelanding (Voyles, 2015). With its references to colonialist exploration, the term is apt to describe the pervasive practices of landfilling, whose environmental racism is well documented (Elrod, 2012; Zimring, 2016). Wastelanding also corresponds to historical understandings of wasteland as either uninhabited or not used properly and therefore available for colonization, extraction and pollution (Cooper, 2010; Goldstein, 2013; Lewe et al., 2016; Scanlan, 2005). Wastelanding involves the externalization of waste in what is considered unpopulated and/or pollutable outer spaces, affording some the privilege of distance and forgetfulness, while affecting and polluting many others, as these spaces have of course never been unpopulated and are only “outer” for some. Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles has understood her landfill work as a form of (reversed) space travel,³⁵ describing landfills as “inner city – outer space” (Ukeles, 1981b: 76) questioning the practice of landing or sinking waste in some outer zone and instead engaging with the landfill as populated, inner zone.

According to waste scholar Myra Hird, 95% of the world’s garbage ends in landfills, while the overall operational life span of most of these sites is estimated to be limited to not more than 20 years (Hird, 2013b: 111).³⁶ This results in the increasing need to export waste to still open or new landfills elsewhere, which has turned waste trade into a booming (highly fraud and problematic) global economy.³⁷ Another attempt to respond to what Jason Moore has described as increasing lack of waste sinks (Moore, 2015) are zero-waste approaches, which most often however do not entail a

35 Metaphors of space travel have also appeared in waste studies and activism. One of the most notorious cases of colonialist waste export (or wastelanding) had been described in such terms by involved activists: a cargo ship containing tons of hazardous incinerator ash from Philadelphia was on route for 16 years in order to unload its cargo somewhere in the Global South; after being turned away from port after port the crew illegally dumped parts of its cargo on a beach in Haiti – like “on another planet” – as local activists complained. After 12 years of “return to sender” activism the US had eventually to take back parts of its waste and bury it in a landfill near Philadelphia (Pellow, 2007: 107-120).

36 However, considering the amounts of illegally traded and dumped waste globally and the difficulties to compare statistical data it seems difficult to verify exact figures. European waste statistics for instance do not consider exported waste, nor waste used for landscaping in its landfilling rate, which amounts to 45.8 % in 2016 (Eurostat, 2019: 7). Weber points to the fact that percentages of landfilled waste differ greatly regionally and globally (Weber, 2012: 473).

37 For details see for instance the 2015 report by the United Nations Environment Programme on waste crimes (UNEP, 2015).

4. Into the mud

For both authors – Ingold and Haraway – thought is closely tied to (earthbound) movement and inhabitation, but for Haraway it is quite literally a dirty, muddy and also a more than human affair. Haraway describes her work as “material-semiotic composting, as theory in the mud, as muddle” (Haraway, 2016: 31). She uses muddle – not only referring to the notion of confusion but also to the old Dutch meaning of muddying the water – “as a theoretical trope and soothing *wallow* [my emphasis, B.K.] to trouble the trope of visual clarity as the only sense and affect for mortal thinking. Muddles team with company. Empty spaces and clear vision are bad fictions for thinking” (Haraway, 2016: 174, fn 7). By taking Haraway literally I would like to suggest that not only company and muddied vision, but also wallowing seems to be a good fiction for thinking. I am stressing her use of wallowing because it is associated with a specific form of movement, embodiment or inhabitation – resonating with Ukeles’ *Water Creature* and Shah’s unicorns. Wallowing is a whole body immersive, dirty affair, plunging in the middle of the mud, nothing remaining untouched, unstained. Wallowing is horizontal, rather than vertical, it implies giving up upright posture and is associated with rolling or tumbling movement – not unlike the earthbound movement patterns described by Latour in relation to Saraceno’s installation, only much more exposed and dirty. While the wallow or muddle is full of movement – wet, slimy dirt is advantageous for all kinds of micro-movements – wallowing does not imply crossing far distances, but rather remaining in the muddle. What I would like to highlight therefore

reduction of production and consumption and thereby of waste, but mostly a focus on increased recycling rates and thereby on diversion and reduction of waste being landfilled³⁸. In this context, a revival of waste incineration can also be observed, which due to improved technology is no longer perceived primarily as an environmental hazard but as a value-creating process (through energy generation and production of slag as construction material) (Vergara, 2012).

As waste and science scholars have elaborated landfills can be understood as vast real-life experiments (Weber, 2014b)³⁹, which are situated in a contradictory relationship to knowledge and non-knowledge and different categories thereof, such as lost or forgotten knowledge, actively suppressed or willingly ignored knowledge, or unknowable knowledge (Weber, 2014b: 121-122).

Waste historian Heike Weber outlines how landfilling has developed historically in the context of growing urbanization as a task of urban hygiene, which seemed fulfilled by transporting waste out of dense urban centres. In a detailed analysis of the history of landfilling in Germany she traces the predominant actors and knowledge areas, which influenced waste operations until the 1970s. These were mostly municipal city planners and experts for transport and management of large labour forces, who focussed on the technical and managerial questions of waste collection and transport, as well as efficient dumping procedures, but not on the afterlife of waste in the landfill (Weber, 2014b: 130-131, 143). Also internationally, the stubbornly persisting paradigm guiding much of landfilling practice until at least the 1970s was that of the landfill as large compost heave or “transient reactor”, in which waste somehow decomposes into earth.⁴⁰ This paradigm persisted despite the fact that in certain scientific fields knowledge of slow degradation processes, of anaerobic fermentation and related hazards linked to production of methane gas and leachate

38 For a critical discussion of the complexities and relatively little effect of such diversion practices, which mainly leave disposability intact and help industry, see for instance Alexander & Reno (2012); Hird et al. (2014: 443-445); MacBride (2011); Oldenziel & Weber (2013); Fuhr et al. (2018)

39 Weber describes these as experiments not conducted under laboratory conditions, but in life, realised without full knowledge and controllability of conditions and effects (Weber, 2014b: 121).

40 Until the beginning of the 20th century such conception was more or less adequate, as the composition of what ended in (Western) landfills was mostly organic and mineral. Other materials such as glass, metal, leather, textiles a.o. were collected by rag pickers along the whole chain of waste transport (Weber 2014b: 123).

by stressing Haraway's reference to the wallow is that the grounded thinking and engagement that she proposes, the thinking or being in the mud or muddle, is limited and scaled down, sticky, implicated and exposed. Rather than the notion of "landing on Earth" that Latour has recently advocated in the context of the large-scale exhibition and publication project *Critical Zones* (Latour & Weibel, 2020), which suggests arriving at the scene from somewhere else, muddling or wallowing starts from being in the midst. Rather than taking its cue only from those (critically addressed) "members of modern industrial societies" (Latour & Weibel, 2020: 11), who live alienated from the Earth, especially from those zones which have been imagined and treated as external, extractable, infinite resources, the notion of muddling and wallowing takes its cue also from those multiple, not only human collectives already inhabiting the zone of exposure.²⁶

To conclude I would like to summarise and condense the resonating stories and reflections of Stengers, Latour, Viveiros de Castro and Danowski, Haraway, Ingold. Together they propose a messy pattern to be inhabited by the Earthbound, or Terrans. This pattern is specific, local, relational, connected, but also fragmented, contradictory and potentially threatening – a zone, skin, membrane or undivisible field (rather than a globe or planet), which trembles and shakes

26 This also resonates with Gómez-Barris' focus on "submerged perspectives" of artists and activists in the Americas, who already inhabit the "extractive zone" and "see, hear and intimate the land differently" (Gómez-Barris, 2017: xx). She attends to alternative forms of resisting and living by invoking the "muck of life" (Gómez-Barris, 2017: xx) in "hidden worlds of opacity" (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 2), by "wading into what lies below" (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 12) and dwelling in the "muck" (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 134).

had existed before (Weber, 2014b: 129)⁴¹. Landfilling practice lagged behind, was detached from or actively ignored scientific developments until the 1970s, which marked the beginning of a (slow and gradual) paradigm shift (Weber, 2012: 473; Weber, 2014b: 131, 133)⁴². And it is important to note that, in addition to many specific local conditions conducive to her residency, it was exactly in this period of paradigm shift -and therefore of necessary institutional change – that Ukeles was able to enter the Department of Sanitation.

What evolved then as a new paradigm was the idea of the landfill as a "long term storage" (Weber, 2012: 473) or even "permanent reactor" (Weber, 2014b: 144): "Eventually the concept of the perfectly isolated landfill was developed that would physically encapsulate the waste and thus inhibit any contact with the circumjacent water, air or soil" (Weber, 2014b: 144)⁴³. But as most existing landfills were set up before new laws and regulations were implemented and because engineers soon discovered that landfills would need "decade-long after-care procedures, due to ongoing interior reactions" (Weber, 2012: 473) the idea of "perfect isolation" proved to be an illusion. At present some predict even more than 500 years for necessary aftercare measures (Weber, 2014b: 144). Landfilling has been therefore analysed by some science scholars as a real-life experiment conducted by the involved actors despite gaps in knowledge and uncontrollability of parameters and environmental dynamics. What is being practiced at best is recursive learning from failure and constant readjustment. (Weber, 2014b: 120-121) However, the extent of unknowability and non-knowledge and the externalization of risk and vulnerability into peripheries and into the future is hardly being addressed proactively and publicly. Myra Hird therefore describes landfills as "permanently temporary waste deposits for imagined futures to resolve" (Hird, 2017d, 189) and as

41 She analyses international case studies from the US, UK, France and Germany. For a detailed historical analysis in the UK see Cooper (2010).

42 So-called sanitary landfills introduced in the US, France and the UK much earlier were according to Weber still based on the idea of de-composition; the main measures introduced in these landfills were compression, layering and covering waste, but not protecting ground water (Weber, 2014b).

43 See also Gregson & Crang, who speak of landfills as "storage/containment technologies" (Gregson & Crang, 2010: 1029).

in unknowable ways. The Earthbound or Terrans move and think laterally in such muddy terrains, from which no externalisation, no escape, no abstraction is possible. They deploy their more than human feelers, tentacles, senses, their low-key technologies to compose with this unfathomable existent. They face limits and exposure and existentially depend on forming collaborations with many collectives, knowledges and beings.

Following the artists foregrounded in this study I suggest to amend this story by considering landfills as important part of such ground or pattern to be inhabited. To re-imagine and re-engage with landfills as inhabited ground means to revise and reverse the common practice of wastelanding. It involves to confront unrestorability, potential danger and unknowability.

5. Curating as grounded practice: into the mud, muddle, middle

What do these earthbound movements of thought elaborated above imply for the practice of curating? Can curating be practiced as being “taken by the ground” (Latour, 2017: 251), in a way that resonates with the discourses described above and the artistic practices foregrounded in this study? What does it imply to curate while being moved by a trembling earth and at the same time ‘to be stuck’ – as the insect like visitor of Saraceno’s installation referenced by Latour, or as Mierle Laderman Ukeles on the landfill, or the wallowing thinker-activist in the muddle proposed by Haraway? More concretely:

ubiquitous places of forgetting, the presumed end point to the garbage we diligently put on sidewalks to be taken away to dumping stations and then to the countryside and other countries for burial out of sight, and mainly, out of mind. This forgetting is made possible through legislative decision, regulative decree, risk models, community accession, and engineering practice.

Hird, 2013b: 107

Forgetting is also enabled – she continues – through externalising the job not to forget, to manage and to contain, to administrators, scientists and engineers (Hird, 2013b: 120). She points to the fact that landfill engineering, has to take into account so many unknowns – from the exact (partly hazardous) content of long-time operational landfills to the results of interactions between various unknown materials and bacteria to the long-term effects of climate change – that its promise of containment is at best temporally limited, even if its use of technology is highly elaborate (Hird, 2013b: 112-114; Hird, 2017c: 202). Therefore, although the main focus of much of landfill engineering lies on measuring, controlling and containing leakage of fluids and gas, waste scholars do stress the mobility of complex assemblages of “known, unknown, unknowable entities” and the partial uncontrollability of these “sites of natural flows” (Hird, 2013b: 107-108; Lewé et al., 2016: 19). Hird concludes, that “failure is there from the start. Waste never leaves; it is never fully contained or controlled” (Hird, 2013b: 114). and demands an environmental ethics that takes the “asymmetric relationship between geo-bacterial liveliness and humans” (Hird, 2013b: 107) and the related unknowing into account rather than bracketing out indeterminacy (Hird, 2012: 463).

The uncontrollably rising, settling and flowing landfill is not unlike Latour’s, Stengers’ and Viveiros de Castro & Danowsky’s ‘Gaia-zone’, or the undividable field of Ingold and Haraway’s Chthulucene that I discuss in chapter ‘Into the mud, muddle, middle’: an unstable, risky ground to be urgently composed with rather than forgotten and/or externalized. Ukeles has called it “a rich, awesome Zone, highly charged and vibrating, awaiting the entry of Art” (Ukeles, 1992: 12). By deciding not to forget the landfill and most importantly to continue, despite the fact that the overall process of her commission has been so unpredictable and most of her proposals got rejected or delayed over and over again, Ukeles has proposed and enacted an inhabitation, which resembles that of

how could curating resonate more closely with processes of unmaking, wasting and thereby also landfilling, re-considering the landfill as inner space, re-grounded in proximity?

I suggest that Latour's being stuck and Haraway's wallowing in the muddle resonate with Stengers' thinking through the middle,²⁷ Manning and Massumi's fielding and aroundness and Tiainen et al. middling, which I have discussed in the introduction in the context of my curatorial methodology, but link it more explicitly to the ground. What I suggest through these associations is a practice that does not afford far vision, fast movement nor does it allow to disentangle or subtract the figure from the ground or the object from its surrounding field. It is a muddy, sticky and implicated practice.

Artistic creation has been understood and practiced by many as composing with the earth²⁸, but in the field of curating such an explicit reflection is only just emerging.²⁹ Mostly, the curator is envisioned as an ungrounded figure in the sense described above, a figure that is not *taken by* the ground, but rather *taking the* ground: either as a given and stable background across which curatorial journeys and

27 Science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin – often quoted by Haraway – has made this connection: “I learned that the story has no beginning, and no story has an end. That the story is all muddle, all middle” (Le Guin, 2003: 65-66).

28 See for instance the field of land and earth art (Kastner & Wallis, 1998; Boetzkes, 2010; Lippard, 2014). Dance and performance has its own complex and very rich history of engaging with the forces of the earth, with gravity, topography, landscape a.o. (Leigh Foster, 2011; Lepecki, 2006; Stewart, 2010; Daniels, Pearson, Roms, 2010; Lavery, Whitehead, 2012). And in philosophy Deleuze and Guattari have most prominently reflected upon art and its relationship to the earth, an approach taken up by Elizabeth Grosz in *Chaos, Territory, Art* (Grosz, 2008).

29 See for an albeit very differently delineated, Heideggerian understanding of the earth and its relevance for curating: Martinon (2020).

the tentacular terrans or earthbound described above: taken by the landfill, sensitive and responsive to its movements, deploying low key technologies and senses to compose with this “existent” (Povinelli, 2016: 5)⁴⁴ in artistic, scientific and pagan ways (Stengers, 2013), collaborating with many collectives, knowledges and beings in a complex temporal engagement. When I asked her how she managed to persevere for such a long time, she answers that she has “excessive patience”. Long time before this conversation, in her master thesis, she had written that maintenance art “is specifically a process of researching the methodology of continuing: continue again, and continue again, and continue again, and continue again” (Ukeles, 1974: 216). It seems that she has perfected that method over time.

Ukeles' more systematic exploration of landfills began when she became the *Percent for the Art Artist* for Fresh Kills in 1989. Next to working on her commission she has realised a number of video and sound works directly reflecting her research about Fresh Kills such as *Imaging the Landfill - Scaling the City* (1995) and *Penetration and Transparency Morphed* (2001-02), as well as a series of related projects elsewhere, which were informed by her landfill research, such as the *Methanogenesis* project (1994-96)⁴⁵ and the *Pit/Egg - A New Low for Holland landscape* installation (1992).⁴⁶

44 I am drawing this term from Povinelli, who uses it to reference what others have “described as life, thing, organism, and being”, explicitly crossing life nonlife boundaries (Povinelli, 2016: 5).

45 *Methanogenesis I-IV* was a collaborative art work consisting of workshop, performances, and an exhibition exploring connections between microorganisms and waste infrastructures. It was realised over two years involving her residency at the Mountain Lake Workshop (at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute), and was co-developed with its director Ray Kass. It involved the reenactment of the scientific discovery of anaerobic bacteria in 1776, blind drawing experiments, etc. Bacteria as well as landfill lining materials such as plastic lining and clay figured largely in the experiments and exhibition. The notes and papers in her archive show that she extensively studied the role of bacteria in waste decomposition, some of her notes read: “1/2 of all living material on earth is single cell bacteria [...] who owns the environment?” (Ukeles, 1994a). For more information see Mountain Lake Workshop, available at: <https://www.mountainlakeworkshop.org/ukele> (accessed: 03.03.2021); Philipps, (2016: 239).

46 The *Pit/Egg - A New Low for Holland* installation was realised for the World Horticultural Festival Floridade, in Zoetermeer, The Netherlands (10 April - 11 October 1992). She used a water-based site to create a large, low, round basin lined with a marked plastic sheet, similar to those used for landfill lining, to point towards invading river-based toxins and the constant labour necessary to maintain and restore the site (Philipps, 2016: 235; Brand et al., 1992).

events unfold, or as a somewhat unrelated, outer space, that has little to do with the artistic exchanges going on inside the walls of an artistic institution or more broadly inside the cultural, social, artistic realm; or as a necessary resource tap and waste sink (Moore, 2015) to fuel the global circulation of artistic and curatorial productions. The rapid circulation of artistic trends, talents, new work, projects or discourses is a standard feature in the art world. It requires from curators to make such works or projects amenable to wide and diverse audiences and creating ever new interfaces and formats of encounter. Anna Tsing has – in a different context – dubbed projects that lend themselves to global circulation as “scalable” and the labour required as “scaling up” (Tsing, 2015: 37-40). Translated into the field of curating this implies curating as selecting, choosing, distinguishing, as overviewing and surveying ‘a field’. The curator is a figure who transposes, transports, remixes objects, things, beings, contexts from there to here to there. The curator is a traveller and also creates a journey, a “pathway” for viewers to experience (Smith, 2012: 36).

being stuck in the field

Taking the notions of ‘being stuck’ mentioned by Latour, ‘muddling’ and ‘wallowing’ alluded to by Haraway as inspiration for rethinking curating as grounded practice implies to scale down and to slow down, to inhabit, rather than only to traverse the field or the ground. Although curating has often been described in relation to a field – either in a disciplinary sense as being embedded in the field of dance or performance art, or as an interdisciplinary practice that evolves through trespassing across various fields (Rogoff, quoted in

Her research about Fresh Kills began with engaging all those, whose job it is not to forget – the engineers, scientists, technicians, landscape architects, workers, scholars who were actively engaged with Fresh Kills, but also the concerned neighbours and activists. She proceeded through excessively “probing into”, “delving into everything about Fresh Kills”, reading every report, reviewing samples of every material, and consult external scientists, as the Department of Sanitation’s landfill engineer, a long time collaborator of Ukeles told me (Gleason, 2017). Asking questions and thereby providing different angles, perspectives, “different descriptions”, seemed to him to be her main method, at least in the earlier stages of her engagement with Fresh Kills. He explained:

she wasn’t directing the design [...] what she was doing was understanding the hole design and putting it in different perspectives, from a community perspective or how other people would look at it [...] she understood it in certain ways, she was able to get people involved to look at it and get their perspective on it [...] but she wasn’t coming out to say you have to do this or that [...] she would not be pinned down.

Gleason, 2017⁴⁷

Her approach to follow those who work in and on Fresh Kills led her to a temporal and spatial engagement with the site that challenged to a certain extent the department’s sense of boundaries. The same engineer as well as his long-time collaborator, both stress her excessive use of time, that would collide with the department’s budget restrictions. Rather than being efficient or goal oriented, her approach was “iterative” (Geller, 2017) as it followed the process, the emerging questions, engaging for instance at length with external advisors or experts hired by the department, coming up with ever new questions. She was also particularly interested in understanding implications of (technical or regulatory) changes, such as the application of new materials or technical solutions (Gleason, 2017). Such an approach is geared towards the temporary nature but also indeterminacy rather than stability and applicability of knowledge and thereby follows a different temporal regime than the one of linearity and efficiency expected by the Department of Sanitation.

47 Providing different descriptions seems also to be her main legacy: “I think the issue of her impact on the long term isn’t about her projects, it’s the thousands of people in the department that she has interacted with and given them a different perspective to think about what is going on. And it’s probably not thousands but tens of thousands of people. That’s where I think the bigger impact lies” (Gleason, 2017).

Lind, 2012: 18) – the curator is rarely envisioned as a figure living *in* the field. The curator is rather portrayed as akin to a traveller or trader, who visits and expertly scans and maps a harvest, choosing, what will be carried on, to other places (For notions of curating as travel or mobility see Lind & O'Neill, 2007: 41; O'Neill, 2012: 89). Irit Rogoff has suggested an interesting variation of the curator as traveler/trader, that somehow binds him/her/them to “the field”. She proposes to rethink curating as smuggling enacted through “field work”, or more precisely “the work *of fields*” (Rogoff, 2006: 3). Smuggling is a laborious, collaborative, cumbersome practice, which involves “surreptitious transfer(s)”, and which “does not breach a line, [...] but traces a parallel economy going over its lines again and again and in the process, making them an inhabitation, expanding the line of division into an inhabited spatiality that someone else might also occupy [...]” (Rogoff, 2006: 4) Rather than understanding the curatorial as exposing, revealing, representing or manifesting pre-existing objects and meanings, she proposes it as a practice that can enable and “access a different mode of inhabitation” (2), in this case one that questions and subverts geopolitical, disciplinary and institutional boundaries of exclusion. While Rogoff does not elaborate her proposal for curating as smuggling in relation to the ecological crisis, it might nevertheless resonate with the grounded practice I am searching for. By describing curatorial field work as work *of the fields*, the field becomes co-compositional in such endeavour. While smuggling is linked to purposeful mobility and the traveling / trading of objects, it is also slow, itinerant, improvisational, repetitive, it enacts inhabitation rather than (only) passage.

In terms of space, she followed those active in or around the landfill across its vast topography but also underground and outside, beyond its borders. The multichannel video installation *Penetration and Transparency Morphed* (2001-02) documents her walking conversations with more than 20 experts, neighbours, activists and workers, whom she calls pathfinders. She walks, follows, listens, bends over, kneels down with them, revealing a multitude of perspectives, passions, paradoxes. The landfill does not emerge as a stable object, nor with clear boundaries or centre, but rather appears as a pathway of multiple creatures, matters, knowledges flowing through, intermingling, building (temporal) clusters, sometimes across time and space. Migrating birds,⁴⁸ traveling seeds, bacteria, the remnants of the early indigenous landfill at the same site, the region's largest shopping mall across the street, mud, algae, tides, wind, smells feature largely in the more than 6 hours of video recordings. The ground is literally “dynamic”, “active”, “full of energy”, so the pathfinders interviewed by Ukeles, due to waste, water and bacteria producing methane gas and leachate, which is collected in a complex underground infrastructure, and with decomposition resulting in the differential settlement of the mounds (Ukeles, *Penetration and Transparency Morphed*, 2001-02). While complex technologies are being implemented to “control” all that movement, contain all the leaking, even the landfill's engineer admits in his interview with Ukeles to the limits of this endeavour: speaking of leachate and gas, he remarks: “some of it you are actually controlling, some of it not”, admitting that “yes, there might be leachate that escapes”. And concerning the development of the settlement of the landfill's mounds he states that “you can't project what's gonna happen”. As the scope and scale of this remediation project is actually unprecedented he describes their work with a vocabulary closer to carework than engineering: “quilting”, “balancing”, “monitoring”, “learning as we go through it” (Ukeles, *Penetration and Transparency Morphed*, 2001-02). This vocabulary also resonates with the description of landfilling as real life experiment pointed to above.

48 See also her Single-channel video and audio composition *Fresh Kills: Imaging the Landfill - Scaling the City* (1995), which entails recordings of 45 types of birds living on the (then still operational) landfill.

I would like to push this understanding of curating further into the field or into the ground by using Manning and Massumi's "experiential fielding" (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 8), Latour's 'being stuck' and Haraway's 'wallowing' as an inspiration. They envision a less (uni-)directional practice akin to flight; while also linked to movement, the pattern they allude to is less tangential, directional, more circular. What if the "inhabited spatiality" created by repetitive curatorial moves would not (only) be a line, path or (escape-)route, but a wallow?

As elaborated above, Manning and Massumi propose – building on autism authors and activists – a non-neurotypical, non-human centered modality of environmental, field-wide perception, a "dance of attention" in the mode of "middling" and "aroundness" (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 6-7). Such environmental awareness affirms "the interconnectedness of modes of existence, foregrounding the relationality at the heart of perception" (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 6-7). It is an "expression of the field" (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 10) and directed "toward what *the field* wants" (6) it even "becomes the field, integrally co-compositional with it" (11). Becoming the field and suspending the "subtraction of objects from the total field" (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 9) and their "expression in use-value" (8) seems like a suspension of curating altogether. At least a version of curating as subtracting, travelling/trading and as assembling seemingly determined bodies, objects and artefacts in a given space. It might imply to be stuck, at least temporarily, to move in circles or laterally, to even sink into the ground, around and around, again and again. It might imply to co-compose and bring to expression "what the field wants" (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 6).

In addition to walking across the landfill Ukeles is drawn to what happens underground. Already in an early concept paper for Fresh Kills she asks: "How deeply and with what level of resonance can (we) bring the public into a penetrating interaction with the 'place'? Can we literally bring the public 'inside' [...]?" She also suggests to use video technology "right into the compost rows, and 500 feet below ground into the groundwater – so we can see the greatest of transformers – the microbes and the anaerobic bacteria – doing their magic" (Ukeles, 1993b: 9). In two more detailed and elaborate concepts from 2001 outlining her guiding principles as well as 11 proposals (with numerous sub-projects) she asks if one can "make the place transparent as the crucible of our interaction with the material world?", wanting visitors to

See the re-creation of the 'ground'
See below ground infrastructure
See ongoing flows: leachate, gas, groundwater and tides
See microscopic action: anaerobic and aerobic [...]
See / hear [...] creatures who could and do live here.

Ukeles, 2001a

In order to reach this goal, she proposes *Flow Flatlands* – building on her similarly epic and unrealized project *Flow City*⁴⁹ – suggesting transparent pathways or tubes right through the landfill combined with media fieldposts or living labs which process dredge, landfill gas, leachate, waste objects, together forming a

radical kind of flow-through decentralized Mega Visitors Center where the visitors move through real working spaces – not a traditional Visitor Center that, like a lobby in a factory is a way of encapsulating visitors in an abstract space that re-presents watered down versions what's happening out there.

Ukeles, 2001b

⁴⁹ *Flow City* (1983-2001) was a proposal co-developed with the Department of Sanitation over years for a permanent public art work at the West 59th Street Marine Transfer Station, NY, bringing the public right into the endless flow of waste transfer from land (truck) to water (barge) (See: Ukeles, 1996a; Phillips, 1989; Phillips 2016: 142-145).

curating as muddling, middling

Manning and Massumi only allude to what such fielding in the mode of muddling, middling or aroundness might entail:

You have to soften your focus [...] You have to let what is normally your peripheral vision take over [...] The experience is then all movement-texture, complexly patterned, full of change and transition, teemingly differentiated.

Manning & Massumi, 2014: 10

Their approach has been elaborated further by Tiainen et al. who propose a new-materialist, cultural studies method of “middling” (Tiainen et al., 2015: 31-36). Writing not so much about but rather alongside musician Björk’s *Biophilia* concert-film they elaborate how middling involves a lack of focus on delineated form, shape, function and on distinctions between foreground and background. It involves at every step of cultural analysis or also curatorial practice resisting the “pull of rapid perceptual categorizations, assigned functions and subject/object logics” (Tiainen et al., 2015: 36). Middling can involve framing and following specific expressions and matter flows (Tiainen et al., 2015: 19-31) – acts that somehow align more closely with curating – but only as “relational coming into being [...] at a threshold” where dualistic distinctions (between subject, object, matter, meaning, singular, collective, and I would add form and unforming, inside and outside) “cannot yet be [...] arrested” (Tiainen et al., 2015: 32). In middling, curating as arresting is perpetually delayed. In middling, curating can only take blurry, shimmery, muddy, leaky form³⁰, always at the threshold of its own unforming, its wasting, its sinking into the ground.

Several years later some of her project proposals become part of the draft master plan that has been proposed by the winner of the design competition – the renowned New York landscape architects Stuart Comer & Field Operations. From 11 proposals 4 remain, one of which is a reduced version of *Flow Flatlands*, with several underground earthworks housing interior labs for ecological learning.⁵⁰ The other proposals focus on connecting ‘everybody’ (1 million citizens) to the site through offerings of waste items, and on transparency of the inner workings of the landfill through overlooks around the perimeter of the site allowing visitors and neighbours to observe the works while the site is still closed, and an extensive light sculpture tied to the gas infrastructure underground (Field Operations, 2006)⁵¹. None of these four proposals will be realised. The work that was eventually approved and might possibly be realised as her *Percent for Art* Commission (*Landing*, 2008-ongoing) is an overlook inside the future park allowing multiple views of the landscape as well as the large Staten Island shopping mall directly adjoining the Eastern perimeter of Fresh Kills, connecting the centre of consumption with the landfill (Phillips, 2016: 186-187; Ukeles, 2016b). As an echo of her earlier attempts to dig into the ground the overlook is connected to two earthworks, one of which is conceived as a hollow in the ground offering a place to ‘land’ in or at least near the waste.⁵² As of now even this very subtle attempt to bring visitors in a relationship to the inner life of the landfill is in discussion due to security issues (Ukeles, 2017c).⁵³

50 In the Draft Master Plan this proposal is entitled Discovery Center and described as “a distributed field of earthwork structures and mounds with high-tech interior hollows -eggs- for hands-on learning, experimentation and exploration of advanced developments in ecology, technology and the flow of urban materials” (Field Operations, 2006: 26).

Although none of Ukeles proposals towards integration of learning labs into the landfill will be realised, the commissioner of the New York City Parks Department does speak of the Freshkills Park as a “field station” for educational and / or scientific activities and scholar Nevin Cohen speaks of it as a “laboratory” for the study of degraded land (quoted by Melosi, 2020: 541).

51 For an extensive discussion of Ukeles’ *Proposal for 1 Million People to Participate in a Public Artwork: Public Offerings: Made by All, Redeemed by All*, see: Jackson (2011), and Boetzkes (2019).

52 Over time Ukeles has created a number of installations and performances, in which she has literally dug holes into walls, ceilings, floors, or in the ground. Among these very different works are *Mikva: The Place of Kissing Waters* (1986), *The Pit* (1989), *Pit/Egg: A New Low For Holland* (1992).

53 As of now (January 2021) the work is still in a planning state and construction hasn’t begun. Its realisation might even be reconsidered or at least severely delayed due to increased costs and lack of funding, as a staff member of the Department of Sanitation informed me (Geller, 2020). For possible updates see: Freshkills Park, available at: <https://freshkillspark.org/os-art/landing> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

Maybe Rogoff's vision of curating as smuggling can be aligned to some extent with such curating as middling-muddling, which delays arrest. At one point Rogoff alludes to the process of seepage in order to explain her curating in the mode of smuggling (Rogoff, 2006: 5). Seepage is similarly humid, grounded and populated as the mud, muddle or wallow, it sinks into the ground, slowly percolating through sedimentations, carrying myriads of beings and matters along, subverting closed form or structure. Seepage (or leachate, this major ingredient of any landfill) is hard to know, assess and to predict in its composition, movements and effects. A difference between seepage and smuggling is however, that seepage does not have a final destination, or point of arrival, it is also less intentional. Curating in the mode of seeping, muddling and middling therefore delays arrest and enacts release but it avoids arrival.

Such an admittedly very speculative approximation of what grounded curating through the muddle – middle could imply has meant in the context of my study to spend time at and pay detailed attention to important sites of artistic creation and to understand those as being part of a larger network of relations with numerous beings and forces involved in expression. Rather than expanding my journeys into regional field trips, encountering as many artists and works as possible, I have spent extended time with specific sites and contexts of work:

30 Tiainen et al. write repeatedly of shimmering, blurring, gliding formations and qualities in Björk's film (Tiainen et al., 2015).

In a conversation with the department's landfill engineer about relations between his and Ukeles working methods he noted that she "would keep delving into what is hidden, what's not there, what's not obvious to people", which for him is the exact opposite of his own approach:

These are big public [...] projects, infrastructures that costs hundreds of millions of dollars, I don't want people to know it is there, because if they know it is there, they get curious, start looking around it and then they do damage to it, so I am always interested to hiding things, and she wants to show everyone [...]

Gleason, 2017

And while there might be many technical and regulatory reasons why it is difficult to literally have visitors flowing, walking underground through a landfill, it is also clear that the approved overall design concept of the park now leans towards beautification and recreation or – as others have put it more bluntly – "camouflage" (Sullivan, 2008: n. pag.). As curator and art critic Lucy Lippard, one of the earliest supporters of Ukeles in the 1970s, wrote in a recent evaluation of the Fresh Kills park project:

Given the fact that New York City's mountains of garbage will rise again in someone else's backyard, we should worry. For most of its life, Fresh Kills may have been invisible to the population of New York City, its absentee landlords – but its undead impacts cannot be forgotten, escaping only as friendly gas.

Lippard, 2016⁵⁴

In an ironic reversal, one of Ukeles earliest and her latest impossible projects seem somewhat connected: while in the 1960s it was impossible to realise the floating, pulsing plastic inflatables of her *Air Art* series, as they were always leaking, it is now impossible for her to enter or come even close to the supposedly never leaking, impermeable underground plastic formations that are

54 Despite the fact that the DSNY under the direction of commissioner Kathryn Garcia (appointed in 2014) is explicitly following an ambitious zero waste policy – sending zero waste to landfill in 2030 – the annual figures of waste disposal remain relatively unchanged around 3,2 mill tons p.a. since 2014 and are recently increasing (see Annual Reports of NYC Department of Sanitation (2016) and (2019); see also: Melosi, 2020: 530-534). Detailed information as to where and how waste is being exported to and/or disposed of is not anymore entailed in the annual reports of the DSNY since 2014 (see for instance Annual Reports of NYC Department of Sanitation (2013: 39-46) and (2014-2015).

I have repeatedly visited artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles' offices and archive at the New York City Department of Sanitation, located in Manhattan's Beaver Street, a former drainage ditch in the early colonial settlement, named after the beaver which was nearly extinguished in excessive colonial pelt trade. As outlined in the chapter 'Middling in the archives of Mierle Laderman Ukeles' I have been explicitly using muddling – middling as a method of lateral, peripheral, grounded perception during these working visits, as well as while visiting the Fresh Kills landfill, located in a large terrain of wetlands, a site of early indigenous inhabitation, an important habitat for migrating birds, a burial ground, at times the world largest landfill.

I have been spending weeks in Chiang Mai while waiting for meetings with artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook. During this time I have visited the campus of Chiang Mai's art academy, her institutional work place but also the home of the stray dogs, which she feeds and cares for. I have been visiting her home in the rural environs of Chiang Mai, which hosts more dogs and dog graves, and passed regularly by the hospital morgue – the important site of her practice – which is located in between the University and her home, but which I was not able to visit. I have been staying in an artist residency at the periphery of the city, following the lateral inspirations provided by my host and further artists in residency.

I have traced and considered the map of the extensively touring waste performance by Sarah Vanhee as inherent part of her project, as its ground. I have also tried to track and map the origin of household waste items, which I have begun to collect while following Van-

meant to contain and bury the waste forever. While Ukeles was able to become artist-in-residence at the New York Department of Sanitation during a time of paradigm shift – and thus a potential openness to experimentation – ultimately, however, the newly established paradigm of the permanently closed landfill also prevented the realisation of most of her landfill projects.

Impossibilities have a lasting fascination for her. When the engineers and technicians whom she consulted for her early *Air Art* projects told her "It can't possibly be done" she kept asking "If they can go to the moon, why can't I fly them?" (Ukeles, 1974: 42) and concluded her letters to these experts and plastic factories with "I truly hope we can work something out – it's so difficult when things are impossible" (Ukeles, 1970).

We might revise her question in relation to Fresh Kills and ask how it is that elaborate and dangerous extraction technologies digging out every last bit of resources are being implemented everywhere while her proposals to dig into the dirty underbelly of the landfill are deemed technically and financially impossible. I therefore suggest to consider Ukeles' enduring engagement with the impossible, her decades long probing and relentless proposing as vibrant performative artistic contribution in its own right – one that exposes the rationale behind deeming her work impossible and asks us to "continue again and continue again and continue again" (Ukeles, 1974: 216).

6. Middling in the archives of Mierle Laderman Ukeles again

When visiting Ukeles' archive in summer 2017 for the second time I was hoping to witness the difficult process of making decisions about the distribution of her archival materials and the physical action of sorting, organising, packing boxes and discarding. But the overall process of inventoring takes much more time than planned.⁵⁵ While Ukeles is supposed to personally sort through the countless cabinets and drawers to determine what might be either too private to end up in a

⁵⁵ While it was originally planned that the papers would be donated to the Archives of American Art in autumn 2017, this only happened in 2020. For further information visit: Archives of American Art, available at: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/mierle-ukeles-papers-21742#overview> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

hee's work. A dense landscape of criss-crossing (European) transport routes, of differently specialised, waste producing regions, has emerged (See chapter 'Suspend circulation – "not without"').

These experiences, observations and expressions seep through my research, writing and proposals – open-endedly. They have contributed to an enlarged but also grounded sense of the artistic practices in question. Ukeles' landfill work for instance is for me inextricably connected with the muddy ditches of Manhattan and the myriad waterways and mudflats of the wetlands which have been turned into New York City's largest landfill.

Rather than making 'site specific proposals' in locations I visited or 'selecting' specific work for later display, in my proposals I have attempted to envision similar forms of grounded, durational inhabitation and follow the methods proposed and practiced by these artists.

Following Sarah Vanhee's proposal for an alternative art institution as "a hole in the ground" (Vanhee, 2017; see chapter 'Proposing sticky transfers'), Ukeles' unrealised underground landfill labs, or the hidden and contested practice of Rasdjarmrearnsook's morgue dwellings, the three proposals project long durational grounded inhabitations. They seek to proceed in the mode of seeping, muddling and middling, in repetitive movement, without arrival.

publicly accessible archive, or what she might give to her gallery rather than to an archive, or what might even be discarded, this action is constantly postponed.

I am interested in a specific shelf filled with boxes and bags, in some cases labelled with mysterious captions: Material Samples MTL; Top Box B; To be Sorted: Bags, Clothes Hangers; Landfill Materials and Toy Trucks; CAC Rubber Bits a Compass (metal). In most cases it simply reads: to be sorted MLU. I would love to observe or even assist in this sorting, however, her assistant asks me not to propose such an endeavour, as this would distract her from the more important tasks at hand, that is to work through her papers. Only paper documents as well as video and audio files will be handed over to the Archives of American Art, as they do not house three-dimensional objects, nor material samples. Of course, this makes these boxes even more alluring: her archive is full of them, carefully packed, some of them obviously very old, not opened for a long time, but orderly stored for decades. I respect her assistant's demands, not wanting to disrupt their incremental, slow process. But later in the week, when Ukeles trusts me with the keys of the archive, so that I can come in and out whenever I want and continue to work while she will be gone over the weekend, I cannot resist. I spend two days alone, carefully taking out box after box, unpacking and repacking every item – and documenting the process along the way.⁵⁶ I enjoy some boxes, some materials more than others, some boxes hold surprising and intriguing items, such as a small square taped textile package, labelled "Another Washcloth, Don't Throw Out, Save", in others I find expectable paraphernalia, such as T-shirts or Baseball hats from Sanitation Departments of the various cities in which she has staged performances. My favourite materials and objects are the many gloves, some mirrors, surprisingly patterned and sequined fabrics, plaster casts of two hands, plaster casts with eyes, multiple and varying landfill lining materials and plastic nets, asphalt and glasphalt samples, a block of clay and bricks. Some of them are close to the body and seem very familiar. Others seem strange, such as the asphalt samples in close up, or the orange plastic nets and fences, despite the fact that I must walk on them or see them daily. Others are of abstract beauty such as the various landfill lining samples, rubber mats, metal coils.

⁵⁶ I manage to take 26 boxes out of the shelf and open 22, as there are some carefully taped shut. Some additional boxes are out of my reach, stored behind heavy and large items (see pp.74-76)

After these laborious acts of un-packing and re-packing, I wonder why I worked through them with such frenzy and for what purpose. Was I simply following the nostalgic fetishization of archival objects, “the campy kitch of garbage” or “the erotic afterlife of the rejected” (Ukeles, 2001a: 1)? Or was I in some way redoing in the archive what Ukeles has been occupied with in many of her works: digging out, attending to the hidden, marginal, what is not of priority now, what might be thrown away. Was I “touching numbers” – as she did in many of her projects – repetitively unpacking, touching every single (waste) item in her archive? If so, what did I learn? Surely it told me something about her paradoxical fascination for the many landfill lining materials, materials that hold together, maintain, supposedly keep garbage from leaking, keep it in place, undercover, invisible – while in her most daring yet unrealized proposals she wanted to lift this cover or dig underneath. Surely it also revealed her tendency of accumulation, of retaining, not only of papers, notes, drawings, documents, correspondences, but also of materials and objects.

Maybe I was also anticipating, preparing for, interfering in an action that she will have to go through in the near future? In two papers that Ukeles has pointed me to, I find interesting statements about her relationship to matter and materiality. She had not only asked for bringing hidden matters to visibility, she asked for their “agitated release”, to “set the material free, free from us, from the lust-lock of the single making, to let the material flow” (Ukeles, 1994b). In a lecture script she elaborated further:

Each material is on a different journey than each of us. True, we can capture and form matter; but its journey is not ours. When our journey shifts or ends, it doesn’t mean the end of the materials we have gathered with so much possessiveness. We need to learn to pass through materials without ruining their chances for other cycles, other journeys.

Ukeles, 1993b

I am interested in what kind of journey the materials in those boxes will embark on – those leftovers of archival reorganization and redistribution, materials which are not considered to be ‘document’ by the Archives of American Art. What kind of “agitated release” or “sticky transfer” could be imagined?

Views of the Mierle Laderman Ukeles' archive at DSNY, 2017, photo: B. Knaup



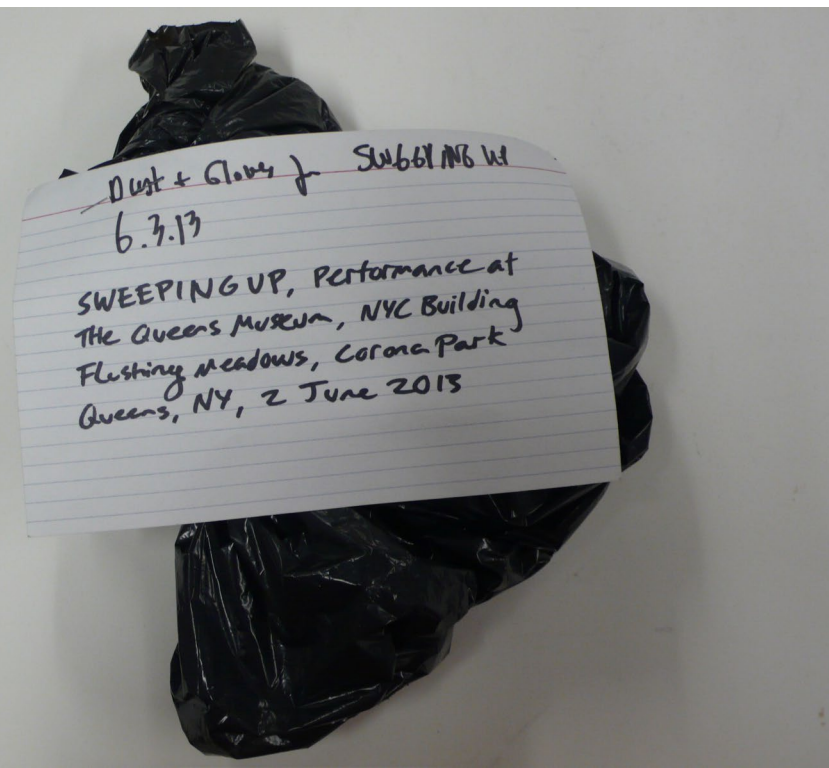
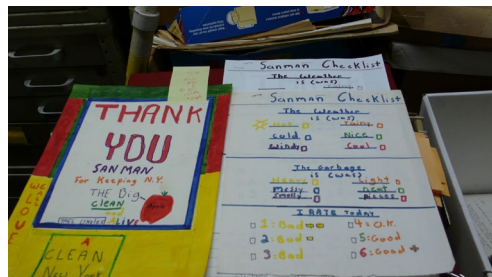
The City of New York Department of Sanitation (DSNY), Beaver Street, 2017, photo: B. Knaup.



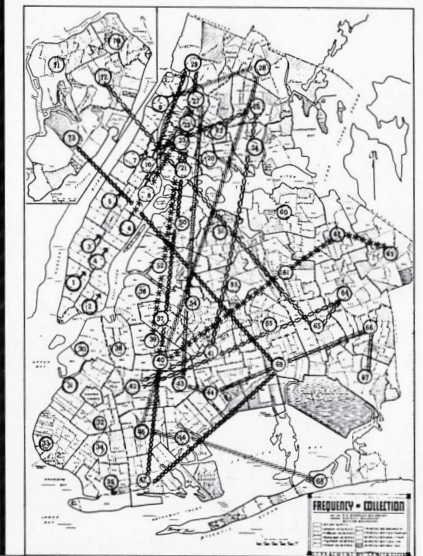
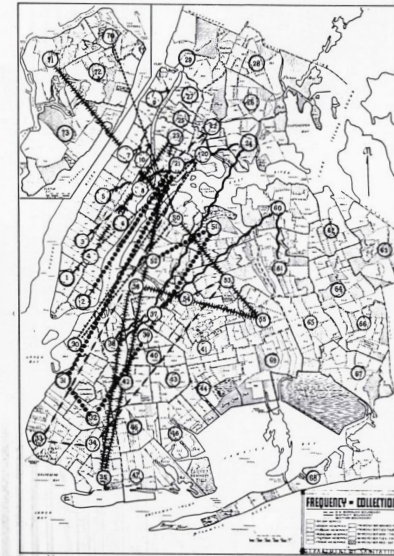
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Views of the Mierle Laderman Ukeles' archive at DSNY, 2017, photo: B. Knaup



SWEEP 1	SWEEP 2	SWEEP 3	SWEEP 4	SWEEP 5	SWEEP 6	SWEEP 7	SWEEP 8	SWEEP 9	SWEEP 10
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N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT	N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT	N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT	N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT	N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT	N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT	N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT	N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT	N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT	N.Y.C. SAN. BOROUGH DISTRICT
MAN. 1 B.K. 2 B.K.L.N. 3 Q.N.S. 4 S.I. 5	MAN. 2 B.K. 3 B.K.L.N. 4 Q.N.S. 5 S.I. 6	MAN. 3 B.K. 4 B.K.L.N. 5 Q.N.S. 6 S.I. 7	MAN. 4 B.K. 5 B.K.L.N. 6 Q.N.S. 7 S.I. 8	MAN. 5 B.K. 6 B.K.L.N. 7 Q.N.S. 8 S.I. 9	MAN. 6 B.K. 7 B.K.L.N. 8 Q.N.S. 9 S.I. 10	MAN. 7 B.K. 8 B.K.L.N. 9 Q.N.S. 10 S.I. 11	MAN. 8 B.K. 9 B.K.L.N. 10 Q.N.S. 11 S.I. 12	MAN. 9 B.K. 10 B.K.L.N. 11 Q.N.S. 12 S.I. 13	MAN. 10 B.K. 11 B.K.L.N. 12 Q.N.S. 13 S.I. 14

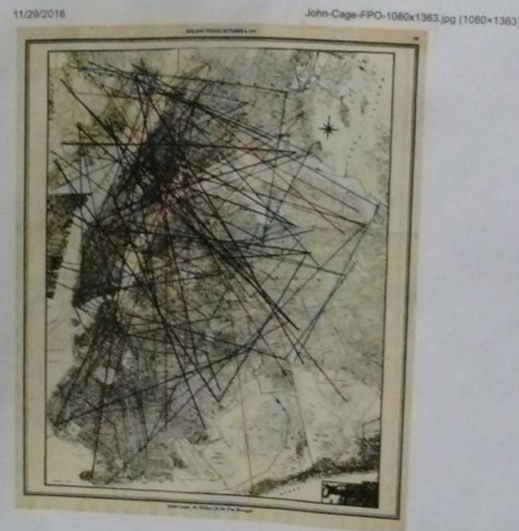


Note: Waste Disposal sites are visited in Collection Districts in which they are located. Headquarters, Clinic & Training are plugged in last.

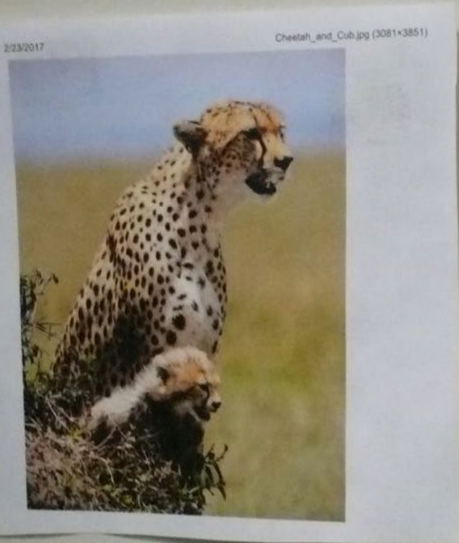
Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *10 Sweeps*
from artist designed brochure for *Touch*
Sanitation performance, 1979-1980



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, performance documentation of
Revolving Doors Have Wings: My House in Parts and Wholee: Holy
House, Home House, City House/Sanity-Shine Dept., Artist House,
1978, viewed in Ukeles archive at DSNY. photo: B. Knaup



Newspaper clippings in Mierle Laderman Ukeles' archive at DSNY, 2017, including
graphic score of John Cage's *49 waltzes for the five boroughs*, 1977, photo: B. Knaup





Mierle Laderman Ukeles, photo album of Fresh Kills landfill, undated, Ukeles archive at DSNY, photo: B. Knaup

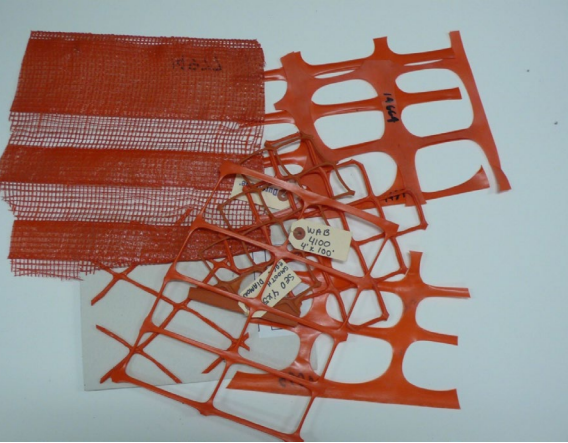


Fresh Kills landfill, Staten Island, New York, 2017, photo: B. Knaup



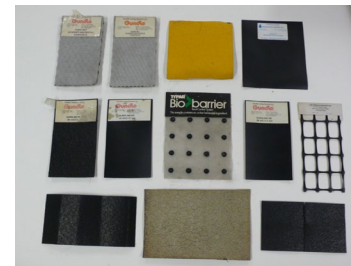
Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Materials Collection, Ukeles archive at DSNY - The City of New York Department of Sanitation, all photos taken in 2017 by B. Knap



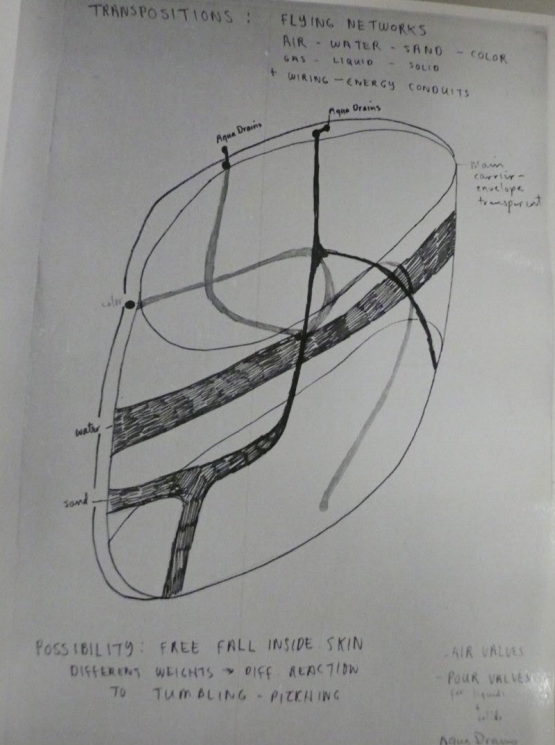


Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Materials Collection, Ukeles archive at DSNY - The City of New York Department of Sanitation, all photos taken in 2017 by B. Knaup



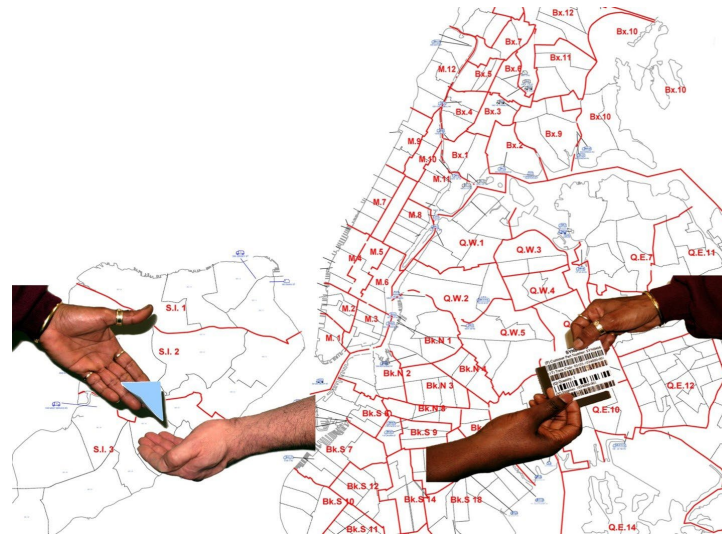


Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Materials Collection, Ukeles archive at DSNY - The City of New York Department of Sanitation, all photos taken in 2017 by B. Knaup

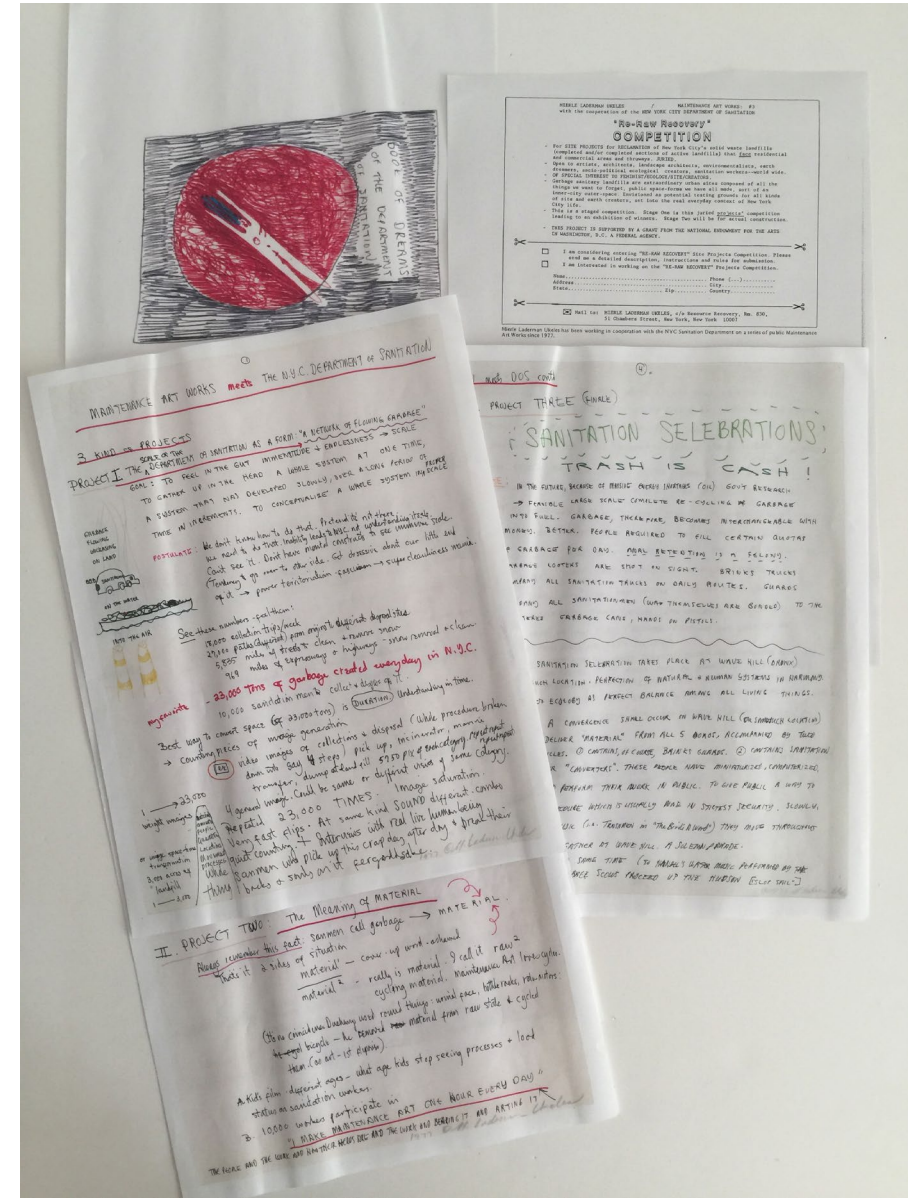


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Mierle Laderman Ukeles, various manifesto and proposal printouts, photo: B. Knaup



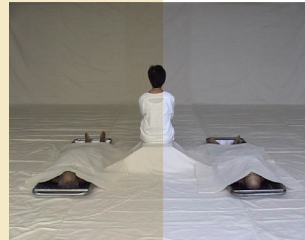
Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Proposal for 1 Million People to Participate in a Public Artwork: Public Offerings: Made by All, Redeemed by All, unrealised proposal, 2000-2002



BEYOND EPIDERMAL CONSCIOUSNESS



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Death Seminar B*, 2005



Conversation II, 2005



This is our Creation, 2005

In the morgue
– Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook

1. Introduction

Waste worlds are – etymologically speaking – also death worlds, worlds that have been deserted, without life, as the latin root of *vastus* – empty, deserted, ravaged landscape – indicates. Also the German word *Müll* with its etymological roots in the left overs of the process of milling refers to life's other, to dust. Waste scholar Guy Hawkins links the Western waste habit of distancing, denying, forgetting (Hawkins, 2006: 16) to this intimate relationship between waste and death: “sensing how we are in and of the world [...] means sensing our similarities and interdependence with waste. It means sensing the inevitability of our own wasting. [...] to be blind to waste and its materiality is to be blind to death and the fact of loss” (Hawkins, 2006: 122). But waste is also beyond the etymological dimension, beyond the level of individual death and loss, centrally linked to global processes of destruction of life. According to Rob Hengeveld the climate crisis and processes of mass extinction can essentially be described as waste cycles being out of balance, so that the waste of one form of existence cannot be absorbed anymore as resource by other forms of existence: (some) human's overconsumption of a specific form of waste resource (carbon) leads to excessive production of other forms of waste (such as plastic waste and carbon dioxide emissions) which can't be absorbed anymore or are absorbed in a way that creates

1. Waiting for Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook

For many years now I have been intrigued by the work of artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, who has created a series of long durational performances in the presence of (and with) the dead in a hospital morgue. I had encountered this work in several exhibitions across Europe in the form of video installations, and through a lecture by feminist literature scholar Annika Fuhrmann in Berlin many years ago. Fuhrmann's passionate words and Rasdjarmrearnsook's cold but also tender images stayed with me and while composing this research project on waste intimacies I never doubted to include her work, although on the first glance it might seem unrelated to the topic of waste, around which the research is organised. Rasdjarmrearnsook does not address issues of ecological degradation, devastation or species extinction, nor does she explicitly consider human remains as waste. But I hold that her work nevertheless offers insights into how to perform, live, make art in view of and in close relation with waste and death.

My mode of engagement with Rasdjarmrearnsook's work is one of temporal deferral, of anticipation, of laborious waiting and multiple returns. As I consider curating and research a form of cohabitation, an ongoing (sometimes virtual, even imaginary) conversation with artists and works and contexts, I plan to visit Rasdjarmrearnsook in Chiang Mai, Thailand and research her long durational performative¹ practice in the vicinity of the sites, contexts and environments of her work. However, my first letters, sent via friends of friends, remain unanswered. Sometime later I receive a fellowship allowing me to travel to Chiang Mai, where she lives and teaches at the art academy since several decades. In preparation for this journey I continue in my attempts to establish contact, learning that she has a reputation for being reclusive, and that even if she would answer and would agree to meet me, I should be prepared for short term changes of plans.² Given her year long performative engagements with bodies relegated to the fringes of society, with corpses in hospital

1 While any art work can be understood in its performative, generative dimension, I do read Rasdjarmrearnsook's work with the dead as performance – as further elaborated below.

2 David Teh's has elaborated withdrawal as a central currency of contemporary Thai art, navigating global and national expectations simultaneously: “[T]he intellectual profile of the Thai artist more often rests upon absence, or more precisely, on a calculated *withdrawal*. Far from a renunciation of the world, this withdrawal is a concrete, socially defined performance, that earns the artist a certain charismatic power” (Teh, 2017: 123). While he detects certain related undercurrents in Rasdjarmrearnsook's work, he points to her many wilful and explicit provocations through performances and publications and therefore does not subsume her work under this rubric.

death and destruction (Hengeveld, 2012: passim; see also Chakrabarty, 2015: 169).¹

Many authors, such as Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, have provided a critical response to either apocalyptic or techno-euphoric visions facing the catastrophic effects of climate crisis and extinction events on a planetary scale.² Rather than investing in apocalyptic thinking, feminist, postcolonial, queer scholars opt for more modest inquiries into modes of post-anthropocen-

1 Popular and academic considerations of the possibility of extinction of life on a planetary scale include Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* (2015), Clive Hamilton's *Requiem for a Species* (2010) or Rob Hengeveld's *Wasted World* (2012).

2 Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have surveyed popular and academic discourses on the end of life on a planetary scale in depth. These range from imaginaries of "a world without people" to those of "a people without a world" (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017). The former, mostly articulated in the philosophical field by speculative realists and object-oriented ontologists, but also radical preservationists, consider the world before human existence and after humanity's probable extinction. The latter – articulated by such different schools of thought as the techno-euphoric singularitarians and transhumanists, or the proponents of green capitalism – either imagine to transpose humanity on technological platforms (and eventually on outer worlds) or promote to fully absorb the environment through technological innovation and advanced extraction. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro along with many other authors have critiqued these articulations in varying ways – as expression of a neocolonial, Eurocentrist, humanist anxiety; as violent abstraction from the uneven distribution of causes and effects of ecological violence (Ahuja, 2015); as human hubris given that most (bacterial) life on planet earth will continue to exist (Haraway, 2016), and as a negative humanism, which reintroduces the nature culture divide, that many claim to dismantle (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017: 35-36).

morgues, with animals awaiting their death in the slaughterhouse, or with the numerous stray dogs with whom she lives, works and performs, I consider her lack of communication with me rather consistent with her artistic practice. Also given the frequent Western (mis-)readings of Thailand's art practices as incarnation of relational and/or ecological art (Teh, 2017), I understand her silence as an appropriate reaction towards an unknown Western curator and researcher.³

I decide to wait.

Meanwhile I receive an invitation by two young queer feminist performance and sound artists, who have established a new artist residency in Chiang Mai, called Extantation. They offer to host me during my stay and help me to get in touch with Rasdjarmrearnsook. After they deliver another letter via a colleague I am relieved and excited to learn that she eventually agrees to meet. Her first email, though, already announces another potential deferral, in case her creative process and strict working and writing schedule might require it: "I have to control myself not to perceive other language [...] I hope you understand my situation."

Of course, I do.

Therefore, I am not surprised to learn, soon after my arrival in Chiang Mai in November 2017, that my meeting with Rasdjarmrearnsook is being postponed towards the end of my stay. Again, I wait, although now in the vicinity of the site of her yearlong performative explorations and hosted in a related artistic environment. Extantation is situated at the fringes, both geographically – being located at the rural edges of the city – and more importantly conceptually – focussing on experimental and ephemeral artistic and community practices. As the website reads, Extantation is a place for "the extant, the forgotten, the marginalised, the uncategorised, the invisible, and for the ones in-between", located "where urbanism meets countryside and the un-rural population dissolves into the rural".⁴ Given the name of the art space, the focus lies mostly on

3 Teh analyses how Chiang Mai and especially the Land Foundation co-founded by Rirkrit Tiravanija drew an international "stream of devotees" (Teh, 2017: 135) including renowned Western curators and critics celebrating it as utopian home of relational art (Teh, 2017: 136). Placing it in the context of Thailand's economic boom and subsequent crisis of the 1990's, its national conservative political context and especially the royal "sufficiency" ideology, Teh outlines the "conflicting ideological baggage" (Teh, 2017: 136) of such retreat to the land, which often got lost on international audiences (Teh, 2017: 134).

4 See: *Extantation*, available at: <https://www.transartists.org/air/extantation> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

tric ongoingness despite of, or in full view, of the ongoing extinction events (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017; Tsing, 2015; Haraway, 2016). These authors seek in different ways to de-dramatize the boundary between (human) life and death and question the life and non-life boundary. This is not to ignore or belittle the devastating effects of the climate crisis and ongoing extinction events but rather to mobilise horizons of possibility. Many of these authors draw especially from thinking and experiences by those who already live and know extinction intimately (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017: 104), they explore what it means to “remain in the end time” (Latour, 2017: 217), to “exist alongside” (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 4) or “through an effort of mutual attention” (Povinelli, 2016: 28), to live “in the mess” (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015: 8).

Addressing the question of how performing and curating can be practiced as ongoingness in view of the environmental destruction, I have engaged with artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’s long durational performances in the presence of the dead. This might seem an unlikely choice, since her work doesn’t explicitly address ecological devastation, degradation or species extinction. However, I argue that her prolonged inhabitation of the morgue, her extended intimacy with ‘becoming decomposition’ can nevertheless offer insights into how to perform, live, make art in the presence of death and waste related destruction (See

the extant, which is “something very old, that is still existing” (Cambridge English Dictionary), something or someone “not destroyed, lost or extinct” (The Free Dictionary). It seems to be the adequate context to engage with the work of an artist who communicates with those who are relegated to the edges of (human) existence, but who nevertheless remain and have a very visceral presence. While I am waiting and preparing, I am hosted by sound artist Tara Transitory,⁵ who guides me around the city of Chiang Mai, to meetings with other artists, scholars, organisers and writers, night markets and restaurants, and I come to understand her mode of hosting as a quasi curatorial practice: carefully listening, intuitively suggesting, mindfully interweaving encounters, stories, sounds and images into my research, but also withholding, redirecting, intermitting.

Here are some of the stories, images and sounds, which stayed with me throughout my research, resonating indirectly: the faint shadows of the matrilineal culture of the region now being divided between Northern Thailand, Laos and Myanmar, as recounted by Tara Transitory and by expert of spirit dances Vithi Phanichphant⁶; the sounds and images of joint improvisations of Japanese experimental Biwa player and singer Kakushin Nishihara⁷ and noise artist Tara Transitory, who rehearse in extantation at the end of my residency; Kakushin Nishihara performs with a collection of dolls and the decorated skull of her deceased dog surrounding her (see p.104). Dogs have a strong presence in my research not only through the many street dogs barking and hauling day and night, but also through the dogs Rasdjarmrearnsook has assembled around her – at home, in the university, in her art works.

5 For further information see: berliner künstlerprogramm des daad, available at: <https://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/gast.php?id=1380> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

6 For the prevalence of matrilocality and at least the local salience and malleability of matrilineal spirit cults in Northern Thailand see Bowie (2008: 139-141); Walker (2006).

7 Nishihara – trained by the only female classical Biwa master in Japan – fuses noise with the traditional Japanese Biwa and her own blend of collage art. For further information see: https://performingarts.jp/E/art_interview/1.html (accessed: 03.03.2021).

chapter ‘In the morgue – Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’). Her work resonates with other artists assembled in this study, who engage with waste, troubling the boundaries of life and non-life. While engaging with her work I have been turning to two authors who deconstruct a narrow focus on human life and death, questioning in different ways the life – non-life binary. In using the term ‘turning’ here, I am resonating with the sense of “aroundness” and “middling”, elaborated in previous chapters as my curatorial methodology (Manning & Massumi, 2014: 6-7; Tiainen et al., 2015: 31-36). Turning means to perceive laterally, to move while writing, or write while moving, to not be able to determine boundaries. It resonates with what Elizabeth Povinelli, in a side remark, has described as stepping into the streams of concepts, whose “currents [...] pull [...] in different directions” (Povinelli, 2016: 7). While engaging with Rasdjarmrearnsook’s work – I have been stepping into the ‘stream of concepts’, which pull in different directions, while being related. Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Povinelli have both developed theorisations of biopolitics as the governance of human life and death, arguing for the necessity to develop non-anthropocentric articulations which take into account ecological devastation affecting human and non-human existents on a planetary scale, but also scenarios of possibility (Braidotti, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Povinelli, 2016). In different ways, they both propose endurance as a modality of ongoingness. But their focus diverges: while Braidotti

2. With the extant dead

The main focus of my research is a series of works by artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, which performatively engage with corpses, realised in the University Hospital Morgue in Chiang Mai, Thailand and in Turin, Italy between 1997 and 2005. More than 25 single channel videos and multichannel video installations, two live performances, as well as three artist books including numerous photographs, installation views and texts resulted from this extended engagement with the dead. Although these works, which have evolved over several years and in multiple series, are most often presented individually or in small series, I consider them as a whole. This is not in order to devalue one or another individual work from the series, nor to establish a clear boundary between the artist’s engagement with the dead and other works in which she engages with the living – such as the villagers and monks in her neighbourhood, or the many stray dogs with whom she lives and performs regularly.⁸ By focussing on the whole series of her morgue performances I want to take account of the long duration and the repetitive, accumulative character of this work. I am intrigued by the fact that she returned to perform rather similar acts again and again over for so many years. I am intrigued by the fact that she managed to repetitively enter and inhabit an institutional realm, which is usually closed to the public and to artists.

While I wait to meet Rasdjarmrearnsook, I visit a local art archive, the art academy, I pass by the morgue, which is not far from the academy, and eventually her studio in her home near Chiang Mai and her gallery in Bangkok.⁹ I am attempting to gain an understanding of the ‘whole body’ of her work with the dead, its ground, boundaries, depths, temporalities and rhythms. I try to view every video, photographic document or writing in relation to this work that I can get hold of, but despite my attempts to gain access to it in its comprehensiveness, its contours remain blurry. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Rasdjarmrearnsook and her gallery do not provide an exact catalogue of her works, other than customary in visual art contexts: some titles have changed over time; some older works are not accessible anymore through her gal-

⁸ Her contribution to dOCUMENTA 13 entitled *Village and Elsewhere. In this circumstance the sole object of attention should be the treachery of the moon* entailed living for 3 weeks with her dog in a fenced cottage in Karlsruhe park (dOCUMENTA, 2012: 290-291).

⁹ 100 Tonsong Gallery, for further information see: <http://www.100tonsongallery.com> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

stresses the cosmic vibrancy of life, Povinelli argues for the necessity to consider more explicitly the radical potential of non-life.

2. “Life beyond death”³

Inspired by Rasdjarmrearnsook’s mundane, intimate, sometimes playful and desiring relationship to the dead, by the “impossible intimacies” and feminist desires she foregrounds (Fuhrmann, 2013: 769), I am drawn to Rosi Braidotti’s affirmative articulation of *zoe* as inhuman life force beyond death.

Braidotti argues for the necessity to rethink “death and mortality in the contemporary bio-mediated context” (Braidotti, 2013: 110) and calls for a political theory that is not based on the notion of a bounded subject defined by the horizon of death, and therefore based on lack, injury and loss, but rather based on *zoe* defined as a generative life force beyond individual subjects. Such political theory aims to open a horizon of multiple solidarities including the inhuman, as well as multiple modes of suffering and dying.

lery or herself, although they had been published earlier;¹⁰ sometimes groups of works have been presented together under a different title than when presented individually. The three artist books dedicated to this series of works expand its contours further by interweaving poems and prose, video stills and photographs, installation sketches and installation views, transcripts and biographical photographs zooming in on details, zooming out providing overviews at a glance or by directing the reader elsewhere (Rasdjarmrearnsook 1999, 2002, 2006). Installation views with viewers and transcripts of discussions about the work are included, folding the work’s reception back into its presentation. She also deliberately supports or withholds intelligibility of (parts of) her work in international circuits through translating spoken or written text into English or not. Her artist books for instance entail translated and untranslated sections, some of her videos in this series are subtitled in English, others not. Unintelligibility is a feature that also reappears in a video work, that prominently refers to her engagement with dead bodies. In a recent exhibition in Bangkok’s 100 Tonson gallery¹¹ she presented a split screen, single channel video in the entrance corridor, featuring two differently made up Rasdjarmrearnsooks talking with, through, next to, above and about her many works. *Betweenness in “I was told that your work is too sad for Christmas”* (2017) features two figures – the professionally dressed Rasdjarmrearnsook wearing a dark wig, jewellery and make up, seated at a desk or in an artist studio, and the more casually and colourfully dressed Rasdjarmrearnsook with her grey curly hair outdoors in the garden. Both deliver a monologue (subtitled in English) while being in constant touch with dogs, playing at her feet, laying on the desk, sitting next to her on the garden bench. The two simultaneously talking figures are alternating with excerpts of her video works, often in synch across the split screen. Sometimes the two Rasdjarmrearnsooks are also blended over these video works, flickering ghost-like through them. Where in conventional exhibition settings visitors often encounter documentary material contextualizing and explaining the art work – often through the voices and views of experts or curators – Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook claims the authority to contextualize and elaborate her own artistic practice. This is particularly relevant given the extensive criticism and scandal her work has produced.¹² At the same time she refuses to deliver a coher-

10 Examples are *Pond* (1989), *Reading for female corpse in Refrigerator* (1998), *Two female corpses and stars* (1998) (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 1999).

11 Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: *An Artist is Trying to Return to ‘Being a Writer’*, 28 Jul 2017–14 Jan 2018, 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok.

12 David Teh notes that her work with ‘outsiders’ of society, such as patients in a mental hospital, corpses, stray dogs, animals awaiting slaughter, might have been controversial in Western art contexts, but they were downright “inflammatory” in Thailand’s conformist public sphere (Teh, 2017: 156).

3 I am quoting the title *The Inhuman: Life beyond death* of chapter 3 of Rosi Braidotti’s book *The Posthuman* (2013: 105).

She especially criticizes the neohumanism that is brought forward by anthropocene induced fears of (human) extinction (Braidotti, 2017: 39) and instead argues for the necessity of a posthuman ethics confronting life as *zoe*. (Braidotti, 2010: 210). Inspired by a vitalist materialist understanding of the unity of matter she articulates an exuberant version of *zoe* as a life force that embraces and expands beyond death. *Zoe* is in her view a relentless, generative inhuman life force beyond contained organisms, beyond bios. It is the other of the humanist narrow notion of life as bios, embodied as anthropos. It is the site of intensified technocapitalist exploitation and necropolitical horrors,⁴ but also – she insists – a potential source of resistance and hope.

In my vitalist materialist view, Life is cosmic energy, simultaneously empty chaos and absolute speed or movement. It is impersonal and inhuman in the monstrous, animal sense of radical alterity: *zoe* in all its powers. This does not mean that *zoe*, or life as absolute vitality, is above negativity, because it can hurt. *Zoe* is always too much for the specific slab of enfleshed existence that constitutes single subjects.

Braidotti, 2013: 131

4 For a detailed analysis of necropolitics following Achille Mbembe, see Braidotti (2013: 122-130). See also Mbembe (2003).

ent, rationally accessible discourse. The babel of voices delivered simultaneously – entailing contradictory statements, philosophical reflections, memories, interpretations, questions – and the overlapping images of corpses, dying animals in a slaughterhouse, patients in a mental hospital, villagers in rice fields, playing dogs, form a constantly shifting kaleidoscope. While quoting the genre of the expert interview, she defies linear intelligibility, authenticity and stable meaning and instead offers a fragmentary, highly affective and subjective survey of her work – a survey though, that doesn't explain, that does not dissect nor delineate the body of her work.

She began the series of works with the dead in 1997 after a long process of acquiring permission from the Maharaj Nakorn Chiang Mai Hospital Morgue. She was interviewed by 23 doctors over half a year before she was eventually granted access to realise performances with corpses under certain conditions and regulations. These concerned the length of time she was allowed to spend with individual dead bodies; she was also required to present videos for review before publication (Rosenberg & Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2015; Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2017). As stated repeatedly she has performed mostly with the dead without relatives (Rosenberg & Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2015; Teh, 2017: 156)¹³. She had initially planned to perform only one particular series of works, in which she would read classical Thai love poetry to the dead, but she has continued again and again and over many years, exploring different constellations and actions. She mostly performed at night and over the weekend, in order not to disturb the daily routines of the morgue's workers, but also to avoid the noise of the nearby airport (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2017). At times she also entered spontaneously on her way to work at the University, while passing by the morgue, which is located nearby (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2017). Initially the encounters were performed with great difficulties and were documented only intermit-

13 Curtin elaborates that she had been granted permission to perform with bodies donated for anatomical research, which might include those donated before the actual death, to those handed over by family unable to afford a funeral and those without any relatives (Curtin, 2009: 107). She therefore relied on institutional practices of procuring consent for using corpses for research and regulating the respective relations to the deceased, or legal representatives. What motivated the donations remains obscure and is not focus of her art work. If the purpose of the donation would have encompassed artistic research of the kind Rasdjarmrearnsook conducted, remains unknown and was subject only to the judgement of the many doctors with whom Rasdjarmrearnsook spoke before obtaining permission.

This vital force beyond subjectivity, beyond species, this “one life” that doesn’t answer to a name, that doesn’t belong to an I, reduces death to just another time sequence (Braidotti, 2010: 210): “Death is overrated. The ultimate subtraction is after all only another phase in a generative process” (Braidotti, 2010: 212). Life and death are located on a continuum, but with death not representing the ultimate horizon towards which all beings are propelled, but what lies always already in the past (Braidotti, 2013: 133).⁵ She asks her readers to use defamiliarisation of both life and death as a method, thinking of life as unnatural and inhuman and death as friend:

Making friends with the impersonal necessity of death is an ethical way of installing oneself in life as a transient, slightly wounded visitor. We build our house on the crack, so to speak. [...] The proximity to death suspends life, not into transcendence, but rather into the radical immanence of ‘just a life’, here and now, for as long as we can and as much as we can take.

Braidotti, 2013: 132

⁵ This resonates with biologists and geologists tracing the emergence of life from non-life, tracing chains of beings across aeons (Clark & Hird, 2014: 44). It also resonates with Karen Barad’s exploration of nothingness at the heart of every existent. She draws on quantum field theory’s radical understanding of the co-extensivity of matter and the void, or the “infinite touch of nothingness [which] is threaded through all being/becoming” (Barad, 2012: 8).

tently and photographically (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2017; Toop, 2007: 61). She then switched to video recordings, in order to better capture the temporal dimension of her performances.¹⁴

Viewing these works diachronically reveals continuities, repetitions and recurrences, but also shifts, turns and changes. She began with statically seated, distanced and solemn, soft spoken readings, facing the dead, sitting behind them or on their side, mostly on a chair with a book in hand. These constellations were repeated frequently over many years (*Reading for three Female corpses*, 1997; *Reading for one Female Corpse*, 1998; *Reading for Male and Female Corpses*, 1998; *Conversation of Two Women*, 1998; *Reading Inaow for Female Corps*, 2001; *Reading Inaow for three female corpses*, 2001). She continued by exploring movement, walking through ailes of numerous lined up corpses, turning right and left, pacing the room and returning (*A walk*, 2002; *Reading for Corpses*, 2002; *Thai Medley I-III*, 2002). She was getting closer to the bodies through laborious acts of dressing and adorning (*Wind Princess*, *White Birds*, 2002; *Sudsiri and Araya*, 2002; *I’m Living* 2002; *Thai Medley I - III*, 2002) and even more intimate by reading her own erotic poetry, but also by deploying haptic camera moves zooming in on fleshy body parts (*Chant for female corps*, 2001; *Three Female Scape*, 2002; *Conversation*, 2002). Atmospheres were changing from solemn to playful through colourful decoration and singing (*Thai Medley I-III*, 2002), and from earnest to the satirical by trying to engage the dead in discussions about dying, death and afterlife in staged seminars and classes *The Class I-III*, 2005; *Death Seminar A*, 2005). Eventually she was giving up upright movement and/or language through sitting and laying down on the ground next to the bodies – sometimes silently (*Death Seminar B*, 2005; *This is our creation*, 2005; *Conversation I - III*, 2005).

The rooms in which the performances took place, the equipment used and the overall mode of representation of the subjects involved remain more or less the same throughout the years. All videos and photographs are staged in sparse interiors identifiable as those of a hospital morgue: the dead are lying on metal tables, in metal trays and sometimes even in shallow basins swimming in water or formaldehyde; the often window-

¹⁴ The work is mostly presented and known as video installation, however in earlier exhibitions as well as in her artist books, photographs have been part of the work (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 1999, 2002, 2006, see p.105). The videos have often been framed in relation to performance, as “documentations of performances” (Curtin, 2009: 105), as “performance videos” or “performances” (Fuhrmann, 2013: 769-770). In my interview she confirms the performative quality and integrity of the actions in the morgue as vital part of her art work (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2017).

She acknowledges that confronting life as *zoe* is a painful endeavour. (Braidotti, 2010: 210).⁶ Braidotti characterizes this immanent, life and death encompassing living of *zoe* as a form of endurance: “Lest we delude ourselves with narcissistic pretences, we need to cultivate endurance, immortality within time, that is to say death in life” (Braidotti, 2013: 135). Endurance involves continuity (beyond individual existence) and acknowledging and reworking specific suffering.

Rasdjarmrearnsook’s dwelling in the morgue resonates in some way with Braidotti’s notion of *zoe*, especially with her defamiliarisation strategy and her suggestion to make “friends with impersonal death” (Braidotti, 2013: 137). But Braidotti’s vitalism of constant becoming and overflowing (Braidotti, 2013: 137), the description of *zoe* as a “cosmic roar” (Braidotti, 2013: 55)⁷ invokes a different event imaginary than the one enacted by Rasdjarmrearnsook. While the artist also foregrounds the auditive and vocal senses

6 Dipesh Chakrabarty also advocates a *zoe*-centric, rather than human-centric, perspective in the humanities in times of climate crisis, but also attests to the tensions between these two paradigms, tensions that in his view have to be inhabited, but can’t be resolved (Chakrabarty, 2015).

7 Again, this cosmic roar resonates with Karen Barad’s description of nothingness woven through all existence. In her article *On Touching - the Inhuman that Therefore I am* she asks her readers to “sense the abyss” to listen to the “cacophony of whispered screams, gasps and cries, an infinite multitude of indeterminate beings diffracted through different space times, the nothingness [is] always already within us” (Barad, 2003: 8-9).

less empty rooms are tiled and starkly illuminated by neon light. In some cases the viewer encounters even more abstract sceneries, with a static camera focussing on a small interior space sparsely covered in white sheets (for instance *Wind Princess*, *White Birds*, 2002; *Sudsiri and Araya*, 2002; *I’m Living*, 2002). The corpses are mostly anonymised, faces and large parts of the bodies are covered with white sheets and sometimes with colourful textiles, but often one can see feet, legs, arms and the top of the head. Only in some cases the bodies are covered completely (*Reading for corpses*, 2002). The bodies are of those recently deceased, in most cases there are no signs of advanced decomposition. With one exception (*Conversation of two Women*, 1998)¹⁵ the viewers don’t learn anything about the biographical dimension of the dead, the artist does not engage with identifiable subjects and their personal history, nor with their relatives. In most cases the artist is the only living subject who appears in the photographs and videos with the dead, but dressed in similar colours to the textiles used to cover the corpses. No visual or auditory references to the staff working in the institution or her own collaborators are made. Also no additional equipment, no trace of the work taking place in these rooms are visible: no shelves, cupboards, working tools, no clock, no calendar, no image or signage on the walls can be seen. What appears is a somewhat recognizable but also timeless, abstract, partly deserted interior space, foregrounding the contrast between the seemingly impermeable surfaces such as tiles and metal and the permeable skin and textiles shrouding those bodies present – alive or dead.

Some authors and curators have proposed to read her work with the dead as focussing predominantly on issues of loss and mourning, or on a critical inquiry and reclamation of funeral rites, drawing on the artist’s biography and on Thai Theravada Buddhist traditions (Clark, 2014; Curtin, 2009: 106-107; Toop, 2007: 63-64). Others have strongly focussed on issues of gender, intimacy and desire, considering the gendered representations in the videos, the artist’s use of poetry, and her history of public engagement with feminist issues (Fuhrman, 2013; Fuhrmann, 2015; Veal, 2014). It is indisputable that Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’s numerous works with the dead invoke scenes of human loss and mourning.¹⁶ Many of the actions performed – such as reciting text and singing in the presence of corpses, dressing and adorning corpses, spending time

15 Rasdjarmrearnsook makes explicit reference to the cause of death of this young woman, who had committed suicide. Fuhrmann offers a detailed reading of this particular work (Fuhrmann, 2013: 778-779).

16 She did publish herself related statements and also the titles under which she exhibited her works, such as “Lament” or “Lament of Desire”, support such a reading (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 1999).

in her series of morgue works, she proceeds in a different, more silent register. In her practice with the dead evolving over many years she proceeds from reading, speaking to, to humming and eventually falling silent, while “[t]he soundless listening of the bodies emanated a perfume named knowing” (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2002: 23). I am wondering what might be overlooked or overheard, in Braidotti conception of inhuman life as jubilant roars? What about listening to deafening silences, or sensing daunting non-events?

3. Beyond the epidermal

Several authors have complicated Braidotti’s understanding of a jubilant, relational, cosmic, noisy vitalism with its focus on constant becoming and vibratory eventhood. Elizabeth Povinelli asks if such a vitalist focus might not overlook those forms of existence that escape the notion of life, that are inert, below the threshold of the event⁸. Not life is in her view the miracle, but “Nonlife” is what

8 Another example is Mel Chen who considers the queer animacy of toxins, especially in the case of her own multiple chemical sensitivity and metal poisoning, which questions the life death boundary, and creates states that are not geared “toward continuity or productivity or reproductivity but to stasis, to waiting” (Chen, 2011: 277). See also Gamble et al., who argue that “this privileging (of life over non-life)” has theoretical implications, such as overlooking “the exploitation and expropriation of human and non-human bodies associated with non-life” (Gamble et al., 2019: 120).

9 As mentioned above, authors use different spellings. I use *non-life*, unless quoting the spelling of other authors.

silently next to corpses – are improvisations, but also decontextualisations of customary Thai, but also international, funeral practices. Arnika Fuhrmann has analysed in depth how Rasdjarmrearnsook is referring to and subverting Theravada Buddhist funeral rites, which are performed exclusively by male monks, and which have largely replaced older spiritual traditions, in which women played a much more prominent role.¹⁷ She has also analysed how Rasdjarmrearnsook mines the tension between the Buddhist doctrine of the futility of attachment and its demand of a swift detachment from the dead and common Thai practices of continued attachment to the deceased (Fuhrmann, 2013: 772).

However, even a superficial glance at the playfulness, indeterminacy and complexity of these works reveal that there is more at stake than human loss, mourning and grieving. Fuhrmann has elaborated this point, criticising a too narrow reading of Rasdjarmrearnsook’s work. Instead, she focuses on issues of sexual desire and offers an in-depth reading of the texts recited – classic love literature and Rasdjarmrearnsook’s own erotic poetry – as well as the performance of gendered subjectivity in the videos, considering the framing of many corpses as explicitly female. She also considers the larger artistic, intellectual and pedagogic oeuvre of Rasdjarmrearnsook, especially her long-term engagement with feminist issues both in her art works and in her controversial writing,¹⁸ especially in light of the wider conservative and resistant politics of gender and national identity in Thailand in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁹ Fuhrmann makes a convincing argument that Rasdjarmrearnsook most centrally develops a “feminist anatomy of desire in an idiom of negativity” (Fuhrmann, 2013: 770). As Fuhrmann elaborates, Rasdjarmrearnsook continuously links scenes of death to non-normative desires and signals a world in which multiple modes of female sexual and affective becoming are possible: a performance of impossible intimacies and attachments (Fuhrmann, 2013: 788-789).

17 See also Pfeiffer & Rasdjarmrearnsook (2016: 6) with references to the gendered regime of labour in Theravada Buddhism. Rasdjarmrearnsook elaborated that in her performances she claims the role / position usually occupied exclusively by men such as the chanting monk or the male guest of honour (Pfeiffer & Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2016: 6).

18 See the sculpture *Departure of Thai Country Girls* (1995), the installation *Prostitute’s Room* (1994), the performance and video *The Nine Day Pregnancy of a Single, Middle-Aged Associate Professor* (2005), or her controversial essay *Phom Pen Silapin* (I am an artist) (2005), in which she used the male pronoun (Veal, 2014; Fuhrmann, 2013).

19 Fuhrmann describes how – since the late 1990s in a period of economic recovery after the crash in 1997 – national identity and citizenship were more closely aligned with and articulated through normative prescriptions of sexuality (Fuhrmann, 2013: 771). “In this context, homosexuality, transidentitarian positions, and the public performance of femininity fell under the scrutiny of the state in unprecedented ways but also came to stand at the centre of new discourses about sexual and democratic civil rights” (Fuhrmann, 2013: 772).

holds, or should hold for us, the more radical potential. For Nonlife created what it is radically not, Life, and will in time fold this extension of itself as it has already done so often and long.” (Povinelli, 2016: 176) Questioning the distinction between life and non-life Povinelli proposes the concept of “geontopower” to better understand the workings of neoliberal governance in settler-colonial states and beyond, rather than through the concepts of biopower and necropower:

geontopower [...] does not operate through the governance of life and the tactics of death but is rather a set of discourses, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife.

Povinelli, 2016: 4

It is based on the maintenance and management of the distinction between bios and geos,¹⁰ and is the precondition for the massive extraction of geological resources on a grand scale and the enclosure, criminalization and degradation of those, mostly indigenous, populations, who trouble this life / non-life boundary. She describes how – in times of the Anthropocene and Meteorocene, when the human is being considered a malignant geological force

10 Other than Braidotti she equals life with bios and *zoe*. (Povinelli, 2016: 5)

I would like to build on this analysis of impossible intimacies and take it further to explore additional layers of this work, focussing on the one hand on the material dimension of her extended, durational performative engagements with corpses, and on the other hand on her intervention in the institutional contexts governing the examination, handling, processing of the dead.

I meet Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook for the first time in November 2017 in the open courtyard of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Chiang Mai (see p.103), where she is a full time professor and the head of the Multidisciplinary Art Division. The roofed open space located in the lofty campus area hosts a cafeteria and a couple of wooden benches and tables, a popular meeting place for students and faculty of the art department. It is also inhabited by a number of stray dogs, who are taken care of by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, some of her colleagues, and the keeper of the little café. It is actually the dogs who really live there: they sleep on tables and benches and only reluctantly make space for those human passer-by, who occasionally want to sit, drink and chat; they lay in front of the entrance to the ground floor seminar room during class, as if to follow intently the deliberations inside. They greet Rasdjarmrearnsook upon her arrival like polite hosts welcoming a visitor.

The University is an important but also a controversial context for Rasdjarmrearnsook. She has spent her life in academic institutions, but she has also an aversion against official, institutional contexts, as she explained to me during this first meeting (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2017). She studied print making at Silpakorn University Bangkok, for a long time the stronghold of conventional Thai modern art (Clark, 2014: 15; Teh, 2017: *passim*).²⁰ At Silpakorn – generally a supportive context for her artistic development – she was discouraged from engaging with sculpture as it was considered not an appropriate genre for women artists, a prescription that fortunately could not prevent her from eventually pursuing sculpture, installation, performance and video art (Clark, 2014: 110, 123; Teh, 2017: 154; Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2014). She has been teaching at Chiang

20 David Teh traces the histories of Thai modern art, especially its link to the ‘birth’ of the nation in the 1930’s, through the institution of a modern state art academy, founded by an Italian steeped in the tradition of Italian academic fine art. The 1970’s and 80’s saw the wilful production of a traditionalism, which evolved alongside the restoration of the monarchy, searching for a cultural essence in the “three pillars” of Buddhism, nation, monarchy. Thai contemporary art developing since the 1990’s articulated a more complex, critical relationship to cultural nationalism, tradition, but also Western appropriations and exoticisms (Teh, 2017: 10-12).

and the heating of the planet pushes life to its extinction – the life / non-life boundary is shaking and consequently the mode of governance depending on and maintaining this division becomes more visible and explicit (Povinelli, 2016: 14). “It is this [...] crisis of the governance of Life and Nonlife that I call geontopower” (Povinelli, 2016: 172).¹¹

Povinelli looks at geontopower from the perspective of those who defy the life / non-life binary – in this case the mostly indigenous Australian community and experimental film collective Karrabing, with whom she has a long-standing collaboration and has co-created several films¹². In most parts of her book, she brings contemporary critical movements of thought such as biophilosophy and new materialism in dialogue with their analytics, artistic articulations and modes of existence. One of her main claims is that, while these different philosophical approaches attempt to escape dualist thinking dividing nature and culture, human and nonhuman, life and non-life, through their fixation on event and assemblage they (sometimes

11 She also elaborates how geontopower was subtending biopolitical power regimes all along and is therefore not a principally new phenomenon. She understands the different formations of disciplinary power, biopower, necropower, geontopower not as mutually exclusive, as that can exist simultaneously (Povinelli, 2016: 5-6).

12 For further information on *Karrabing Film Collective* see: <https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/de/berlinale-forum/archiv/programmarchiv/2017/programm-forum-expanded/kuenstler-expanded/karrabing-film-collective.html> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

Mai University since 1987, but it took a long time before she was accepted as full professor. Her appointment was opposed several times by various colleagues, who had criticized her art work for crossing disciplinary boundaries or not adhering to ethical standards (Teh, 2017: 156). According to Rasdjarmrearnsook, it was especially her work with the dead that had enraged one physician, who claimed that dead bodies belong to medical science and not to art, and who threatened to sue her, managing to defer (but not prevent) her lifetime appointment as professor (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2017; Pfeiffer & Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2016).²¹ Her subsequent engagement for the promotion of interdisciplinary studies in art – most recently by establishing the Multidisciplinary Art Program within the Fine Art Faculty in 2012 – could be understood as a strategic response to these institutional obstacles.

I suggest that the fact that many of her art works engage with institutions or choose institutions as a backdrop – especially her long series of performances with and for the dead in the University Hospital Morgue of Chiang Mai, but also her videos with patients in a mental hospital (*Great Time Message: Storytellers of the Town*, 2006) and a work filmed in a slaughterhouse (*In a blur of desire*, 2006) – can be read as a response and commentary to the institutional world she professionally inhabits. Engaging primarily with institutions that house those who are not considered to be adequate subjects of academic discourse nor aesthetic practice, as well as inviting dogs as permanent residents into the art school, can be understood as pursuing a transgressive engagement with the institution in general and with the academic art institution in particular (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2017; Pfeiffer & Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2016). While the art works I am referring to do not engage explicitly with their respective institutional contexts as such – the videos’ viewers neither learn anything about the concrete, material institutions in which she filmed and performed these works, nor do staff members, with whom she must have had regular contact and exchange, play any explicit role in the videos, nor does she reveal many details of these contexts in the writing that regularly accompanies her work – I nevertheless suggest that her durational artistic inhabitation of these institutions plays an important role

21 “A professor has told me that the faculty of medicine at Chiang Mai University feel that I am taking their ownership of bodies away from the discipline of medicine. They had never thought before that bodies are for art. Artists don’t have that right to the body and there is a subversion involved in saying that the artist is going to be collaborating with medicine and they can be on an equal level. Some of them had threatened that if I was trying to do this project again they would take her to court” (Pfeiffer & Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2016: 6).

involuntarily) reiterate rather than challenge geontopower and its subtending division of life and non-life. She asks:

Do we desire the virtual and ceaseless becoming because they allow us to escape what is worse than death and finitude, namely absolute inertness? And insofar as we do, are we simultaneously extending the qualities and dynamics of one form that we believe existence takes (Life) onto the qualities and dynamics of all forms of existence? When we do this are we denying the ability of other forms (the not-Life not-Nonlife) to undefine, redefine and define us?

Povinelli, 2016: 55¹³

What would such re- or un-defining look like? Povinelli elaborates that a common understanding of life across the humanities and sciences is essentially based on the imaginary of a “metabolic performativity” of an epidermal organism, an organism that is bounded through a membrane, and self-organized and self-contained (Povinelli, 2016: 38-40). In her view even the notion of assemblage is too often infused by or avails for such “epidermal imaginary” (Povinelli, 2016: 51) and vitalism’s focus on vibrant eventhood is informed by self-generative potency so central to definitions of life. She argues not to transfer the

¹³ This might resonate with Claire Colebrook’s provocation that certain articulations of vitalism are a form of delusion, escaping the prospect of extinction by declaring that we have become one with the larger immanent life force exactly in a time when human dominance becomes most deadly (Colebrook, 2012: n.pag.).

and forms part of her artistic practice. By trespassing boundaries and claiming space and extended time for artistic inquiries into who can speak, can be listened to, who is being addressed, who appears and can be seen or sensed, and where and when these acts take place, these works can be understood as commentaries on conventions of institutionalising knowledge.

My main argument is that Rasdjarmrearnsook is claiming space and time for knowing and desiring differently at the heart of rationalised, academic, techno-medical knowledge on the one hand and cultural, spiritual or religious practice on the other hand. She intervenes in two instituted practices in relation to the dead:

- the maintenance of personhood under conditions of having died as realised in many cultural, spiritual and religious mourning and burial practices;
- the dissection of the body into a cartography of discernible, analyzable objects as practiced in the scientific scene of autopsy.

While highly diverse and complex, the abovementioned practices aim to establish clear boundaries of discernible, epidermal, contained beings or objects, boundaries between human and matter, humans and animals, boundaries between body parts and wholes, between inside and outside, and between territories and subjects.

By attending to, foregrounding, blurring, de-contouring, liquefying, extending skins and surfaces, Rasdjarmrearnsook troubles those boundaries and instead offers desires, dreams and enactments of being otherwise – being uncontained, being beyond human, being beyond the life-death binary.

3. Knowing (death) differently: becoming decomposition

In her essay on abjection, Julia Kristeva described the corpse as “the most sickening of wastes”, and specified further that “the corpse seen without god and outside of science” is the “utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life [...] As in true theatre without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva, 1983: 3-4). In his extensive (Western) cultural history of caring

imaginary of life onto all existences, and calls instead for a perception which is not bound to the skin (Povinelli, 2016: 42), a non-epidermal consciousness, that doesn't look only at living and dying of self-contained organisms but also considers other characteristics, other temporalities, such as dormancy, inertness, endurance (Povinelli, 2016: 21). She also speaks of "unskinning subjectivity and assemblages" (Povinelli et al., 2017: 180). She attests to the difficulties of such endeavour "[b]ecause the concept of life is always pressuring the concept of assemblage to become embodied – constantly apprehending a radical open field as an epidermally closed one" (Povinelli et al., 2017: 180).¹⁴ I am intrigued by the non-epidermal imaginary she calls for, but I argue that such imaginary is not incompatible with, or the opposite of, embodiment. Performance has a long history of troubling and subverting the notion of bounded, epidermal bodies, and extends liveness beyond the living, as introduced above.¹⁵ The non-epidermal Povinelli calls for especially resonates with the work of the artists presented in this study – with Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook and her foregrounding of the permea-

14 Also Ingold critiques the notion of assemblage as tied too narrowly to bounded bodies, or what he calls a "blob" and which he contrasts with his understanding of living life along lines (Ingold, 2015: 7).

15 A consideration of the countless performance works which are engaging with, opening or injuring skins is instructive here (Heathfield, 2004; Phelan, 2007). See also those artists who explore "extended skins" through collective enactments. (Knaup & Stammer, 2014: 158-167).

for the dead body Thomas Laqueur builds on this insight but also slightly modifies it: it is not by thrusting the corpse away, but actually by finding elaborate, historically and culturally varying modalities of living with and nearby corpses, of endowing them with meaning, of maintaining the personhood of mortal remains, that the "utmost of abjection" is being kept at bay – the corpse as waste, as undistinguishable, disposable matter.²² He traces – across different historical periods as well as different religious, secular and philosophical communities a sustained "commitment to the existence of a person after death. Her poor bereft body – bones, dust, ash, atoms, eaten by the fish of the sea or the birds of the air – is a token of her continued being somewhere, somehow" (Laqueur, 2015: 56). Even those who explicitly reject metaphysical beliefs such as various atheist philosophers, refuse in practice – so Laqueur, quoting here the poet Alfred Tennyson – "to countenance a world in which the dead are really as dead as 'the rocks of an earth that is dead'" (Laqueur, 2015: 56). Laqueur follows the long tradition of separating the ways of being into two categories, that of physical/natural and that of spiritual/cultural existence, and locates in the seemingly universal human refusal to let the corpse be "mere matter" the birth of culture (Laqueur, 2015: 11).

By drawing on feminist materialist philosophers' understanding of the continuities between life, death and non-life, in what follows I shall consider Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's extended performances with corpses as an interrogation of this dualistic perspective and the frail boundary between the "human corpse" and "mere matter". Her interrogation ambiguously shifts between maintaining and blurring that boundary, or rather bears with and endures the ambiguity.

While most readings of Rasdjarmrearnsook's work with the dead focus on practices of mourning and on her critical engagement with Theravada buddhist funeral rites, little attention is being paid to the human corpses in their very material specificity. In these writings they appear as somewhat stable, static, contained objects, quasi a-temporal, as if already embalmed. Jan and Aleida Assmann describe embalming as a "restoration of personhood under conditions of having died" (Assmann, 2000: 46).²³ The corpse is stabilized and

22 See also Olson, who elaborates the difference between contemporary landfill and cemetery containment measures in the US and Canada, which indirectly supports Laqueur's theory: "in the case of landfills, containment aims to protect the surrounding environment from waste, while in the case of cemeteries, containment aims to protect the corpse from the ravages of the surrounding environment" (Olson, 2013: 61).

23 My translation from German: "Wiederherstellung der Person unter Bedingungen des Gestorbenseins"

ble, dissolving membranes in the morgue, or with Ukeles' extended engagement with the leaking landfill.

Drawing from her colleagues' articulations, analytics and practices responding to "vicious colonial assault" (Povinelli, 2016: 77), Povinelli develops this non epidermal imaginary further, considering located material patterns of entangled substances, including toxic ones, which cross the life / non-life binary, biology and geology, which extend the human and other organisms into the ground, and vice versa. "Various bodily substances sink into and become the compost out of which other substances grow, are eaten and then return. Buried or burned bodies reenter this cycle and reemerge from specific locations" (Povinelli, 2016: 78). Humans and other existents are connected through their secretions to the ground. She concludes that they might even become each others' organs (Povinelli, 2016: 176; Povinelli et al., 2017: 180). They sink into, sediment, change state, they turn towards or away from each other, they provide or withdraw care from each other, but they do not die (Povinelli, 2016: 28). Rather, they manifest or withdraw, and endure – "a form of survivance in which survival does not quite fit into the picture" (Povinelli, 2016: 90). I argue that such 'becoming each other's organs' is signalled by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook in the morgue through 'becoming corpse', it is suggested by Mierle Laderman Ukeles' breathing air art inflatables and even more so through her

re-incorporated among (living) humans. Correspondingly several authors have suggested that while Rasdjarmrearnsook's work blurs the boundaries between the living and the dead or the human and the non-human, it does so by reintegrating the dead among the living (Toop, 2007: 64) or the non-human among humans (Pfeiffer & Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2016). Also Fuhrmann interprets scenes of reversal between the living and the dead predominantly as a de-stabilization of the (living, human) subject (Fuhrmann, 2013: 787-789) or more generally her intimate engagement with corpses as a critique of the limits of intimacy among the living in Thai social life (Fuhrmann, 2013: 778). But what if the many scenes of blurring the boundaries between the living and the dead do not only incorporate the dead among the (human) living, but also the living among the (not solely human) dead? What if, by considering the instability of the corpse itself, those scenes suggest multiple modes of becoming corpse, becoming (waste) matter, becoming decomposition?

When Rasdjarmrearnsook repeatedly blurs boundaries between the living and the dead one might claim she does so by keeping the dead firmly among the living by dressing them, or by reading and speaking to them. But she also suggests a becoming corpse for instance through dizzying camera zooms which do not distinguish which body is being depicted (*Thai Medley*, 2002), by lying down in between the dead bodies on the ground (*This is our creation*, 2005), by repeatedly turning her back to the viewers (*Conversation I & II*, 2005), or by suggesting her own absence or potential death in an installation and a series of photographs featuring absence (*Rites of Passage*, 1997). In *Rites of Passage* (1997) – an early installation realised in an abandoned former hotel near Chiang Mai's station²⁴ – she creates correspondences between herself and the dead by depicting them as equally absent, featuring an empty glass coffin and an empty chair. In a series of photographs, she is turning herself into the absent, disappeared figure and the dead into those who remain and wait by depicting repeatedly an empty chair next to the corpses (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 1999: 19, 21, 44-47, 50, 51). Rather than reading her work mostly as a communication between the living, that is between herself and the video's viewers (Cameron, 2006; Curtin, 2009: 108), I suggest that she goes as far as blurring the boundaries between the dead and the viewers, by spatially addressing the viewers and the dead on the same

²⁴ The installation was part of *deserted and embraced*, a public art project curated by Helen Michaelson and realised in collaboration with the Goethe Institute Bangkok in the abandoned Railway Hotel in Chiang Mai, August 1997 (Michaelson, 1998).

insistence to connect to the landfill, and it emerges also through Sarah Vanhee's imaginative extension of her audience's metabolism into the sewer system.

Povinelli describes this survivance as a "a form of occurring that never punctures the horizon of the here and now... The quasi-event is only ever *hereish* and *nowish* and thus asks us to focus on condensation, manifestation, and endurance" (Povinelli, 2016: 21). Endurance – and here she speaks of the barely perceptible daily struggles of her colleagues to remain in existence – is hardly perceived and mostly read as "nothing, laziness, sloth, and the unchanging" (Povinelli, 2016: 22).

While also Braidotti questions bounded existence and de-dramatises death, while she also suggests an ethics of endurance as "reworking pain into a threshold of sustainability" (Braidotti, 2010: 211), she foregrounds metaphors of life, vibrancy, intensity, constant movement or noise rather than nothingness, inertness, silence. The non-epidermal imaginary Povinelli develops, invokes a different, slower, hardly perceivable "event imaginary" (Povinelli, 2016: 40), one that is inspired by geology more than biology, and one that also considers the slow violence of toxic waste accretion (Povinelli, 2016: 177, referring to Rob Nixon). It therefore resonates with those waste scholars who question the predominant focus of some materialist critical research

plane placing the viewers among the corpses. In the various iterations of *The Class* (2005) she is standing in front of a blackboard and frontally addresses the camera and a row of corpses laying either on the ground or on a raised platform. Also her grounded mode of installing the work suggests a gravitational pull, troubling balance and stability of viewers. Considering the etymology of the word cadaver stemming from latin *cadere*, meaning to fall, or *caro data vermibus*, meaning flesh given to worms (Cantor, 2010: 75), the gravitational mode of presenting her work on or near the ground at least suggests a potential resonance between viewers and the fallen, grounded dead.

Also the process of decay, dissolution, becoming elemental is present in many of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's works with the dead, even if this aspect is not revealed through explicit, challenging imagery but in rather subtle modes. One aspect is humidity and liquefaction. Decomposition is essentially a process of liquefaction and evaporation of soft tissue (Cantor, 2010: 77), a process that deeply troubles and subverts the notion of a contained and bounded body (Roar, 2010: 77). Many of Rasdjarmrearnsook's works display humidity – ranging from photographs of corpses lying on the humid surface of a ceramic washbasin with strands of wet hair glued to its edge, to bodies covered with white sheets displaying wet stains, to bodies lying in ponds or glass basins either fully or partly covered in liquids, to soundscapes of running or dropping water. An early and rarely represented and discussed work goes slightly further. The five-channel video installation *Pond* (1998) displays many fully visible, uncovered corpses floating in basins filled with water or formaldehyde, filmed from above (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 1999: 36-37). Uncovered they appear particularly frail, with signs of discoloration clearly visible. At one occasion the work has been installed as projection on the ground across a large dark room potentially affecting the viewer by suggesting a liquefaction of the very ground he/she walks on (*Lament of Desire*, Fremantle Prison, 1999; see installation views in Rasdjarmrearnsook, 1999: 58-65).

While a central element of funeral practices is the commemoration of identifiable individual subjects, personhood is not foregrounded in Rasdjarmrearnsook's performances and in some cases even abandoned altogether. The dead remain anonymous and mostly unidentifiable, personal biographies and the cause of

and philosophy on movement, velocity and circulation above ground. Instead these scholars ask for a more sustained focus on what happens underground in the ever expanding landfill sites and with “once living organisms returning to base matter” (Clark & Hird, 2014: 45). They argue that “there has been a pronounced reluctance to prise beneath the ‘uppermost’ stratum of worldly activities over the last few decades of critical social thought. While a multitude of ‘things themselves’ have been followed across the globe, their pursuit has rarely extended far into regions that are devoid of human presence or indifferent to human entreaty” (Clark & Hird, 2014: 47). What happens in these expanding underground waste worlds dominated by unknown and unknowable bacterial and microbial relations, becomings and extinctions, hardly ever reaching “our technologies of presence” (Clark & Hird, 2014: 45), provides the ground but also possibly withdraws the vital support for other forms of life (Clark & Hird, 2014: 51).

I suggest that Povinelli’s proposal of a non-epidermal mode of endurance and care resonates with the sticky no-thingness that I have foregrounded in relation to waste matter – a sticky, slow metabolic materiality that exceeds life / non-life boundaries, that can reach enormous scale and / or disappear from visibility, that is unmanageable and unknowable, but also needs to be known and to be taken care of. She writes “the enduring is not a thing that

death are not being referenced²⁵ and in most cases faces and large body parts are being covered. Several works are also performed among larger groups of dead bodies, lined up in long rows of stretchers or floating in ponds (*Reading for male and female corpses*, 1998; *Pond* 1998; *A Walk*, 2002; *Thai Medley I-III*, 2002). While these works display discrete and complete bodies, a series of multi-channel video installations zooms in on body parts, sometimes identifiable as forearms, legs, torsos, or heads, sometimes displaying abstract, unidentifiable fleshy landscapes (*Chant for Female Corpse*, 2001; *Three Female Scape*, 2002; *Conversation*, 2002). These multi-channel video installations abstract from the imagery of an individual, complete and self-contained body.

Rasdjarmrearnsook also implicitly questions the exceptional status of the human corpse in relation to animals. In the videos *Death Seminar A* (2005) and *The Class* (2005) she tells several stories comparing the death of dogs with that of humans, and she critically discusses the common saying “dying like a dog”, which assumes a fundamental difference between human and animal death, and which she considers an insult for dogs Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2006). In many exhibition set-ups she presents her works with the dead together with videos or sculptural installations with dogs (Sculpture Centre, 2015: 24-25). When she was asked in an interview if she had ever imagined her own death – a question that also appears in some of the lessons with corpses²⁶ – she answered “I already have my grave. A beautiful grave in the garden with another twelve graves for dogs [...] everything has been prepared” (Clark, 2014: 118). The wish to be treated like a dog in death is also ascribed to the philosopher Diogenes, who according to Laqueur is one of the few for whom “the dead body [i]s fundamentally profane, unenchanted, a part of nature, mere matter, carrion” (Laqueur, 2015: 36). I argue that for Rasdjarmrearnsook, ‘living and dying like a dog’, and the ‘mere matter’ of the dead body aren’t unenchanted and that by spending extended time in the presence of the many different, indeterminate, changing dead bodies, by performing acts of care while suggesting depersonalization, liquefaction, de-composition, she opposes such a dualistic perspective and de-dramatises the linear boundary between life and death and thereby – while I am aware that I am stretching here the frame of her work – also the boundary between life and non-life.

25 With one exception, mentioned above (Fuhrmann, 2013: 778-779).

26 At the end of the video *The Class I* (2005) she asks “Before the class ends, does anybody have questions? Ah! You want to know, if I could choose, what kind of death I would prefer?” (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2006: 44, see p.106)

endures but the creativity of keeping in place something that is constantly changing.” (Povinelli et al., 2017: 182) It involves attending to in “constant mutual orientation” (Povinelli et al., 2017: 182) while not being able to delineate boundaries or detect leakages.

The epidermal is both foregrounded and questioned in Rasdjarmrearnsook’s work, but not in the mode of spectacular subversion, but rather in slow, repetitive gestures of endurance and care. She turns toward the dead, she turns away from the solely human living, she dwells again and again in a site of academic, rationalised knowledge production, but insists on knowing differently. She refuses to delineate contained form, foregrounds leaking membranes and substances, giving in to the gravitational pull. Mierle Laderman Ukeles has extended such ‘non epidermal’ gestures into the ground and the landfill, and asks what it would imply to see, feel, understand these waste sites as our (external) organs. And also Sarah Vanhee’s vast waste-scape blurs boundaries of spectators bodies into the ground and the sewer, suggesting becoming waste.

4. Knowing (death) differently: intervening in the scene of autopsy

The clinical morgue, and especially the scene of autopsy, is historically a central locus for the establishment of Western knowledge (Klaver, 2005: 27; Böhme, 2011: 29; Mandressi, 2011). The dissection of the corpse in the anatomical theatre lays the groundwork of modern, Western medical science and art but also resonates beyond. By trespassing again and again into the state medical, scientific institution, by performing with and for corpses donated for research, by quoting the pedagogical scene of the pathology class in works such as *The Class* (2005) and *Death Seminar* (2005),²⁷ Rasdjarmrearnsook intervenes in this institutional context and (at least indirectly) invokes the scene of autopsy. But the modality of knowing she advocates for and explores differs substantially from that proposed in the scene of autopsy.

While the history of anatomy and autopsy, with many precursors and undercurrents, is too complex and diversified²⁸ to be recounted here in detail, it is worthwhile outlining a few central aspects and moments in this history. Dissection was practiced in Antiquity in Egypt and Greece and again since the early Renaissance in Europe. A precondition for its dissemination across Europe was the church’s changing attitude towards the relation between body and soul, resulting in Pope Sixtus IV decision that it would be a celebration of God rather than a sacrilege to open the body’s interior and his subsequent permission to open the bodies of Plague victims in the mid 15th century. Over the course of the 16th Century autopsies were performed regularly in public and became part of the medical curriculum (Klaver, 2005: 10-11). The rigid separation between the arts and sciences heralded by the above mentioned physician at Chiang Mai University, who had questioned and opposed Rasdjarmrearnsook’s practice and institutional progression, was not yet instituted and numerous artists were regularly among those witnessing and performing dissections (Cantor, 2010: 178; Klaver,

27 The series of works entitled *The Class*, *The Class II* and *The Class III* (2005) all feature Rasdjarmrearnsook standing in front of a blackboard while addressing a group of ‘students’ – corpses lying in one or two rows in front of her. She presents questions for discussion focussing on various concepts such as ‘no return’, time, death in literature, the desire of the dead, etc. (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2006: 42-51). *The Class* is a single channel video, while *The Class II* and *III* were performed live in Turin, in Ospedale delle Molinette, as part of *T - Torino Triennale Tremusei*. La sindrome di Pantagruel, 9.11.2005-19.3.2006. *Death Seminar A* (2005) features a looser seminar setting, with Rasdjarmrearnsook sitting and corpses arranged lying in a semi circle (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2006: 21, see p.78).

28 See for instance Hartmut Böhme’s proto-history of anatomy and dissection drawing on the widespread medieval practice of disseminating and worshipping bodily relics across Europe (Böhme, 2011).

4. Curating no-thingness

I have sketched briefly in the introduction what a blurring of boundaries between life and non-life, which I have described in the context of waste as sticky no-thingness, might imply for a curatorial practice. I have stated that I am seeking to engage curatorially with this fleeting but nevertheless material dimension and experiment with methodologies of a materialist curating, which neither abandons these matters, nor turns them into curatorial objects for display, nor defines them as uncuratable. Confronting no-thingness in curating resides in the dissolve, in attending ordinary revulsive ungraspable matter, matter that can't be sorted, purified, recycled, matter that leaks, sticks around, leaves traces, dis- or re-appears. It involves attending to the continuities of experimental artistic creation, its ongoingness across gaps and breaks, beyond the formed, finished, contained art work. Considering this as sticky material process in the sense described above means considering the emergent forming and unforming of no-bodies and no-things in no-spaces, rather than assembling seemingly determined bodies, subjects, objects and artefacts in a given space. I have described in the introduction some instances of encountering such no-thingness throughout my research – the shadowy imprint of leaching landfill lining on a handwritten note in the archive of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the mouldy left overs of left

2005: 11). On the contrary the performance of autopsies as public ritual and spectacle became an important element of legitimising this new practice and alleviating its scandal, and were also the subject of numerous paintings (Böhme, 2011: 42-43). Only with its increasing acceptance and use in legal procedures, in education and research autopsy retreated slowly behind closed doors into the realm of science. Overall the practice of dissection helped instituting a mechanistic, compartmentalising view of the human body in Western medical science and considerably influenced the development of painting and sculpture, based on an empirical, incisive view into the interior of the naked body.²⁹ The term autopsy (from Greek: *auto* and *opsis*, “to see with one's own eyes”, Klaver, 2005: 2-3) was initially used in a broad sense linking vision with knowledge: “[...] ‘autopsy’ operates as a concept that can navigate various disciplines with ease, traversing a number of disparate fields, from medical science to the arts and humanities, for at its most simple denotation it simply points to the privileging of vision in Western culture” (Klaver, 2005: 3).³⁰ Accordingly, the architecture of the anatomical theatre was designed to enable and support visibility³¹, with the performative arrangement of early public dissections privileging the gaze and scientific discourse. It was performed as public lesson with the central elements of dissection, presentation and explanation (Mandressi, 2011: 56). The detailed relationship between the acts of cutting, of demonstrating organs and body parts and of explaining, reading or writing changed over time: while initially the dissection mainly served as illustration of a textbook (Carlino, 1999: 6; Klaver, 2005: 11; Cantor, 2010: 178), this relationship was reversed over time, with the ‘locus of truth’ moving from the text into the empirical body, which served as evidence (Mandressi, 2011: 55).

The central knowledge strategies applied in autopsy were incision, objectification and mapping. Mandressi speaks of the cut as the central strategy of thought, the cut that attempts to dissect the body in its small-

29 Some speak even of a new “culture of dissection” since the 16th century, which spoke to the desire for partitioning the world (Klaver, 2005: 14). For a detailed history of autopsy see Cantor (2010: 177-210); Aries (1982: 451-503); Klaver (2005: 9-36), Carlino (1999). For an analysis of the development of painting based on famous works such as Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* and others see Gutjahr (2014); Böhme (2011).

30 However, some authors also point to the relevance of touch in the overall dispositive of autopsy, which does not only require to see but demands a certain “haptic virtuosity” (Mandressi, 2011: 55).

31 The first temporary anatomical theatre was erected in Montpellier in 1552 and the first permanent theatre in Padua in 1584, shortly followed by further buildings in Zaragoza, Leiden a.o. (Mandressi 2011: 59). The anatomical theatre in Padua with its elliptical shape was even mirroring the anatomy of the eye (Mandressi, 2011: 60).

overs of Sarah Vanhee's performance, the shadowy emptiness in Rasdjarmrearnsook's artist books. I have also elaborated my mode of engagement with the work of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, which involves waiting, or following the gestures of the host of my Chiang Mai residency, artist Tara Transitory. She redirected my attention, intermitting my obsession to grasp 'the whole body' of Rasdjarmrearnsook's work, leading me instead to the faint extant traces of decolonial practices of matrilinearity in Northern Thailand and beyond and to the relations between her's and Kakushin Nishihara's sound art. There have been more of these encounters, seeping through my research:

One example are the connections between the street actions of artists Eleonora Fabião and Cecilia Vicuña. I learned about Vicuña's work through Fabião, in the form of stories she gifted to the *re.act.feminism* archive (Fabião, 2014). I have engaged with both artists since, in conversations and through participating in performances, sensing the urgencies they both convey. Fabião performs street actions as "things that must be done" (*Things That Must Be Done Series*, 2015).¹⁶ Vicuña affirms that "to believe nothing can be done, is the poison" (Vicuña, 2017d).¹⁷ They both

16 I had the chance to collaborate in this performance. For further information see Fabião & Lepecki (2015).

17 I have conducted interviews with Vicuña about her work (Vicuña, 2017c, d) and she invited me to join a ritual performance in Elefsina near Athens on 25.4.2017.

est parts. What counted as a part was only what was solid, had a clear boundary, and was (mostly) dry, while bodily fluids and ephemeral matters were either not considered at all or seen as disturbing, as staining the process (Mandressi, 2011: 69-72).³² The practice of autopsy with its focus on opening unknown territory, detecting delineated (dry) objects and boundaries was established at the height of the colonial project and has many resonances with it (Mandressi, 2011: 70). Next to the cut, objectification and mapping are central elements of the procedure of autopsy, dissecting the body into "a geography of objects" (Klaver, 2005: 34). As Klaver elaborates "since the advent of dualism in the Renaissance it has been possible for the Western Academy to teach objectification, to train the subject to imagine the object apart from oneself, to set the object 'over there' as a field of study and exert a topography on it" (Klaver, 2005: 27).

The history of autopsy is also inextricably linked with fraught processes of procuring bodies for research. Historically bodies used involved executed criminals and in (settler) colonial states the enslaved and the colonized indigenous populations. In many cases public dissections became even part of legal sentences and were widely associated with punishment. When the demand for corpses for non-forensic autopsies increased in the 18th century many countries passed anatomy laws allowing the use of unclaimed corpses in poorhouses and workhouses for anatomical research, effectively replacing the executed with the poor (Klaver, 2005: 19-21; Cantor, 2010: passim). In the 20th century a new narrative was established through the introduction of regulations regarding a respectful treatment of corpses, linking donations for autopsies with altruism rather than with punishment or poverty (Cantor, 2010: passim).

The establishment of forensic medicine and the wider application of the practice of autopsies in contemporary Thailand, dates back to the late 19th Century and is – as historian Quentin Trais Pearson has elaborated – tightly linked to the complex history of national politics of Siam, the later Thailand (Pearson, 2014). Siam, the only independent State in Southeast Asia and thereby an exception to colonial rule,³³ had nevertheless entered various unequal trade treaties with the imperial powers which granted extraterritorial legal rights to

32 This presented a fundamental shift away from the earlier medical theory of humors focussing predominantly on bodily fluids (Klaver, 2005: 28-29). Correspondingly techniques of dehydration played a large role in the newly established practice of autopsies (Mandressi, 2011: 71-72).

33 The claim of the historical exceptionalism of Thailand is however critically discussed, pointing for instance to its use by national elites (Curtin, 2017: 135).

perform fleeting acts on the verge of disappearance, inserting *Staines* or *Precarios* in the public sphere. Eleonora Fabião has been roaming street and parks in Rio de Janeiro wrapped in body bags (*Staines*, 2013; see p.8), staining the public space with a plastic clad moving being, “an abstract body ... no gender, no skin color, being in some limit between a body and a corpse, the bagged and wrapped dead ones”, exploring the tension between immunisation and intimacy (Fabião quoted by Ribeiro 2015: 313; see also Fabião 2015: 206-219). Vicuña has inserted countless ephemeral assemblages of debris called *Precarios* in gutters, on riverbanks, or on the seashore (*Precarios*, since 1966). These minuscule assemblages of found materials are “composed in such a way that every material holds another in balance”, temporarily (de Zegher, 1997: 21). They are neither objects, nor things, but a response, a “witness to a relationship” as Vicuña writes in her poem *Precarios* (1996). (See chapter ‘Sticky proposals’; see p.153; see also Vicuña, 2017a).

When meeting Cecilia Vicuña in Athens during documenta 14, I receive another gift – a piece of unspun red wool, a signature material that Vicuña uses in many of her performances and temporary installations, which she considers as “poems to be inhabited” (Vicuña, 2017c). Referring to the unspun wool Vicuña describes to me how “nothing holds it together” (Vicuña, 2017c). Vicuña explores this nothingness, or in my understanding this ‘no-thingness’,

foreign residents. As Pearson explains, Siam therefore became a “plural legal arena” which guaranteed privileged status for foreign subjects (Pearson, 2014: n.pag.). In order to defend the rights of harmed or murdered Siamese subjects against foreign residents the Siamese state had to appeal to foreign consulates, where only forensic evidence according to Western standards was accepted. Therefore formalised procedures for dealing with the dead in cases of ‘unnatural death’ were gradually introduced (Pearson, 2014: n.pag.; Pearson, 2018). Pearson elaborates that “[t]hrough forensic medicine, the dead bodies of Siamese subjects became an important but overlooked arena in which the contest for Siamese political sovereignty was fought” and coined the respective regime as “dead body politics” (Pearson, 2018: 394). By tracing the development and application of forensic medicine in Siam and later in Thailand (for instance in the Tsunami aftermath) Pearson argues that it also serves nationalist political agendas and determines the boundaries of citizenship (Pearson, 2014: n.pag.). As elaborated above Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook repeatedly intervenes into this institutional context, which lies at the heart of knowledge production and semi-colonial state formation, claiming time and space for different forms of knowing and being. In what follows, I will discuss in more detail the ways in which I suggest she intervenes in the scene of autopsy, articulating alternative approaches to the knowledge of the body and challenging the privilege of visibility over other senses.

Questioning epidermal consciousness

While Rasdjarmrearnsook enters the typical scene of autopsy, the central act of incision is not foregrounded in her work. Although one might argue that she offers the otherwise invisible, hidden dead inside the morgue to the objectifying gaze of the video’s viewers – an operation not unlike the one proposed in the theatrical setting of public autopsies – at the same time she refuses to unveil the bodies, to disclose their interior as a source of knowledge. The cut, the dissection of a seemingly complete body in its separate parts, the topographical mapping as central technologies of knowledge are not applied. Instead, what is visually foregrounded across the many iterations of these works is the permeable, soft, porous, potentially unknowable status of the membrane – the skin, the tissue, the textile – in contrast to the impermeable, hard surfaces of the morgue such as metal, glass or tiles. This membrane does not present a clear boundary, it connects as much as it separates, it dissolves as much as it contains. This becomes evident in the many scenes in which she wil-

which holds a universe together, in many works. She often performs near or alongside polluted waterways and deltas – in urgency witnessing the no-thingness of complex relations, such as in the case of Concón beach, Chile (*Kon Kon*, 2010), a former ritual site, not far from an oil refinery built on top of an indigenous burial ground, alongside the river delta of the Aconcagua River (Vicuña, 2017b; Vicuña, 2017c). It reminds me of Fabiao's so far unrealised plan of retrieving, assembling and collectively redistributing waste in Rio de Janeiro's polluted Guanabara Bay.

Another sticky no-thingness reverberating through this research are the relations between the placenta performances of Colombian artist María Evelia Marmolejo (*Anónimo 4*, 1982; see p.7) and Berlin based artist Sophia New (*The matter between you and me*, 2015; see p.9). Marmolejo is one of the first performance artists who engages with feminist issues in the late 1970s in Colombia and who has evoked and responded to Colombia's violent history of colonialism and ecological destruction through performing with certain types of waste (Knaup & Stammer, 2014: 281). New encountered Marmolejo's work in the context of the *re.act.feminism* project and in response she created a performance-video with her daughter, in which they handled, observed, and talked about their placenta, which was kept for 9 years in the freezer (Sophia New and Ruby New Belasco, *The matter between you and me*, 2015). After the

fully blurs the boundaries between the living and the dead, between herself and the corpses, for instance by wearing textiles similarly coloured to those worn by the dead, by lying down next to them, by camera moves which make it impossible to distinguish who is being depicted. In a series of works she 'dresses' the dead, but in fact she only lightly lays dresses or rather textiles loosely sewn together, over them (*I'm living*, 2002; *Sudsiri and Araya*, 2002). The camera never assumes that piercing or incisive gaze which scholars describe as central to the scene of autopsy. The camera rather scans and lightly touches the bodies and the sceneries. This aspect is also present in *Three Female Scape* (2002), a three-channel video installation which displays close ups of bodies lying in a glass tank in liquid, accompanied by a softly dripping soundscape, with the different body parts – heads, torsos, legs – distributed across the three screens. While this work abstracts from the notion of a bounded, complete body it does not foreground the cut, as in autopsy, but rather the slow dissolution, the immersion, the blurring of boundaries (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2002: 25-26).³⁴

Multiple senses

While autopsy is highlighting vision, Rasdjarmrearnsook invokes multiple senses, such as touch, balance and sense of position, smell and hearing. While she does not foreground directly touching the dead bodies in her performances, many of her videos have nevertheless a haptic dimension. They zoom in on details, blurring boundaries and thereby giving up optical clarity. The camera is often following the surface of a body or bodies, as if caressing or lightly touching them. Laura Marks concept of haptic visuality resonates with Rasdjarmrearnsook's strategy: "[h]aptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (Marks, 2002: 3). In her analysis of video art as a medium for haptic visuality, Marks particularly identifies "denial of depth vision and multiplication of

34 Two earlier sculptural works come to mind, which also reflect and subvert the fiction of bounded bodies: *Self* (1996) is a small sculptural installation displaying an abstracted, somewhat organic form haphazardly sewn together from white cloth, tufts of hair and dirt spread over the ground (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 1999: 12, 27). The loosely stitched seams of this form resembling an organ resonate with the loosely covered corpses, or the tentatively sewn textiles barely imitating dresses in *Sudsiri and Araya* (2002). Another sculptural work – *Dinner with Cancer I & II* (1993, 1994) – alludes to the disintegration of an ill and dying body. The messy oil stains on the floor underneath the empty metal bed wildly connected with cables and various bowls filled with unidentifiable liquids hint at the mess of disintegration, which we do not see in the morgue works, but which is indirectly invoked.

performance Sophia New and Ruby New Belasco's had put the placenta back into the freezer and – after a few presentations¹⁸ – decided to temporarily withdraw this work from circulation, at least until they both would know what to do with this thing, or rather what this no-thing demands of them, this transcorporeal organ that once was a part of both of them, frozen and waiting (see chapter 'Proposing sticky transfers').

These are sticky matters in “between stages” (Ukeles, undated) turning into and returning from no-thingness. In the introduction, I have argued against understanding this no-thingness as uncuratable instances or acts (Lepecki, 20 : 111), proposing instead an understanding of curating which posits the ungraspable no-thingness as firmly within its remit. What does that mean? I suggest that a crucial question for curatorial practice is to increase the possibilities for attending to such matters, such states of dissolution and relationality. Following Rasdjarmrearnsook and Povinelli, but also the artists and their artistic gestures described above, this involves repeatedly turning towards, witnessing, waiting, listening. At times, it implies to withdraw, to fall silent, to withhold from curatorial

18 Among others in the context of the series of encounters *Studio 13: Ecologies of Practice* I have co-curated with Silke Bake, Alice Chauchat and Siegmund Zacharias in Berlin's Tanzfabrik in Winter 2016 - 2017. Tanzfabrik Berlin (2017) *Studio 13*. Available at: <https://www.tanzfabrik-berlin.de/de/studio-13> (accessed: 30.03.2021)

surface” (Marks, 2002: 4) as central elements, which encourage vision as (caressing) movement rather than focus (Marks, 2002: 8).³⁵

Another sense invoked is that of balance and positionality. Rasdjarmrearnsook spends extended time in the proximity of dead bodies, sitting next to, adjacent, behind, between or in front of dead bodies, walking between narrow rows of lined up dead bodies, or bending over or lying down between them. The sense of proprioception registers position and relationally of the body in space.³⁶ Through experimenting with her own positionality in relation to the dead, but also by positioning the viewer in specific relations to the works and the depicted bodies, she explores embodied spatial relations as base for sensual perception and cognition. The presentation of her videos often take the form of horizontal multichannel video installations near the ground, sometimes directly bordering the edge of the floor, or being projected onto the floor, suggesting a gravitational pull to viewers.³⁷

Other senses invoked are that of smell and hearing. Smell is omnipresent in the morgue, an aspect implicitly referred to in the videos through the adornment of the bodies with fragrant flowers, but also through the depiction of ventilators. In one of the artist books dedicated to her work with the dead, she writes: “The soundless listening of the bodies emanated a perfume named knowing [...]” (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2002: 23). The sentence equates perception with transmission (“listening [...] emanates”), it interweaves synaesthetically the auditory with the olfactory sense, and points towards a beyond of the sensuous (listening beyond sound and smelling beyond scent). The auditory sense is especially foregrounded in her work through her repeated vocal address of the dead, but also the use of other soundscapes such as dripping water. But most

35 I do not want to argue here that haptic visuality is the only or dominant feature of Rasdjarmrearnsook's morgue works. Marks also stresses that most video works combine haptic and optical visuality (Marks, 2002: 12). However, the foregrounding of surfaces and textures and the blurring of boundaries are an important element of her work.

36 For a discussion of proprioception as the sense of position in space, as well as the broader concept of kinesthesia as the embodied sensation of movement involving the interrelation of many senses, see Reynolds & Reason (2012: 18-19).

37 See installation views of *Reading for Corpse*, ArtPace, 1998 and *Lament of Desire*, Freemantle Prison, 1999 (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 1999: 30-33; 58-65); various works at Edsvik Museum and Kiasma, 2000 (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2002: 12-15); *The Class* and *Conversation II*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2005 and *Conversation I*, at 51. Venice Biennial, 2005 (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2006: 25-29); *Lament*, 2006 (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2012: 29).

display or circulation altogether, to allow for emptiness, breaks and gaps. At times it means to continue enabling specific modes of encounter and transfer – sticky, connective, leaving traces, affecting everybody and everything who got in touch.

importantly she points towards the possibility of the improbable, towards an excess, a speaking with those beyond language, a listening beyond sound, a knowledge that can be smelled but not spoken.

With, through and beyond language

Language is a central element of autopsy, be it in the educational settings through oral description and discussion, or in written statements in forensic autopsies. Language also plays a central part in Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's work with the dead, but – although she cites certain conventions such as the presence of books in most classical paintings of autopsies (Carlino, 1999: 6; Klaver, 2005: 11) – her approach differs fundamentally from that applied in the scene of autopsy. First of all, she explicitly addresses the corpses – as listeners of poetic readings, as (silent) participants in group discussions, as experts of issues surrounding death – rather than only speaking about them, and identifying, naming, describing discernible body-parts.³⁸ Secondly her mode of language is not analytic nor scientific, but associative and poetic. She reads from classical love literature and her own erotic poetry. In the pedagogical scenes, she uses storytelling and colloquial modes of conversation. Her artist books assemble poetry, notes, diary entries, and transcripts. By repeatedly introducing poetry into the morgue, into the scientific scene of autopsy, which typically aims to establish facts as evidence, she claims space for a different, poetic form of knowing.³⁹ Thirdly she addresses those who don't converse (anymore) in human language, whose rational understanding can't be assumed, but whose participation in the dialogue she nevertheless presupposes. In her last works with and for corpses she gradually leaves books, blackboards and language behind, instead softly singing while laying down (*This is our creation*, 2005), drawing on the ground (*Death Seminar B*, 2005) or humming (*Conversation I-III*, 2005).

As described earlier, one central aspect of decay after death is liquefaction and dissolution. "Death reveals an inability to hold back the unbounded nature of the body" (Roar, 2010: 77). The bounded nature of the body is revealed as fiction, as 'epidermal' fiction, to echo Povinelli's formulation (Povinelli, 2016; see chapter

³⁸ Elizabeth Klaver describes in her analysis of autopsy in contemporary culture how corpses are not addressed but treated as objects in medical (educational or medico legal) autopsy (Klaver, 2005: 23-26).

³⁹ See also her book title *Why is it Poetry rather than Awareness* (Rasdjarmrearnsook, 2002). Judha Su writes about the why of poetry in Rasdjarmrearnsook's work: "It takes a risk, and goes into exile from moral truth" (Su, 2014: 84).

‘Beyond the epidermal’). I argue that by foregrounding the fragility, permeability, indeterminacy of the skin or the shroud, by attending to it but without extracting its hidden knowledge, by returning again and again to that same scene and attending to it with multiple senses, by experimenting with different modes of language, Rasdjarmrearnsook exposes and questions that fictitious boundedness of the body and any attempt to know it through analysis, cartography, incision or disruption. While her focus lies on human death, I argue that her work gestures beyond and can be read also as a practice troubling more broadly the boundary between being / nonbeing, life / non-life. By creating intimacy with becoming corpse, becoming decomposition, becoming elemental, Rasdjarmrearnsook bears with, endures, does not turn away from what she cannot know.

She does so in an institution that is hermetically sealed from a broader public. By repeatedly claiming entry and inhabiting this space, by enacting various scenes of communion – in smaller and larger groups, ranging from solemn to joyful, from formal to intimate – and by exposing these gatherings in public, she opens a public space of intimacy also for her viewers, one that enacts other forms of knowing and being.

While the conditions of engaging with the institution are not foregrounded in her work – such as the relational work she relies on for making her artwork possible, including obtaining and processing permissions – I argue that through this repetitive act of intervening in and opening the institution and its inherent *modus operandi* Rasdjarmrearnsook’s work enacts seemingly impossible, wayward, public intimacies.

Multidisciplinary Art Department, Fine Art Faculty,
Chiang Mai University, 2017, photo: B. Knaup



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook with stray dogs at
Multidisciplinary Art Department,
Chiang Mai University, 2017, photo B. Knaup





Extantation Artist Residency, Chiang Mai, 2017, photo B. Knaup



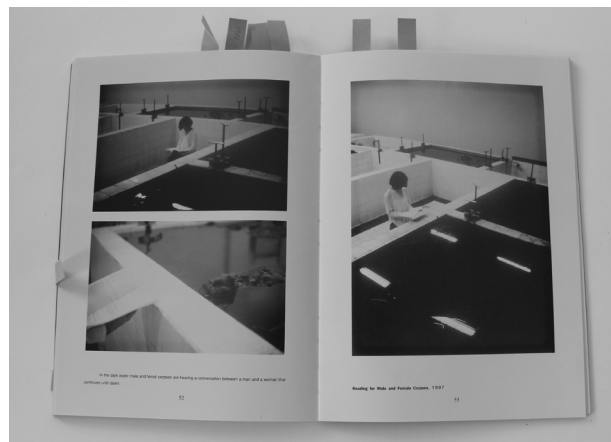
Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Betweenness in "I was just told that my work is more or less too sad for Christmas"*, 2017, single channel video, exhibited at 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok, photo B. Knaup

Rehearsal Set of Kakushin Nishihara & Tara Transitory at Extantation Artist Residency, Chiang Mai, November 2017, photo B. Knaup



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Thai Medley I & II*, 2002,
detail from artist book *Why is it Poetry rather than
Awareness*, 2002, photo B. Knaup

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, artist's books: *Lament*, 1999,
Why is it Poetry rather than Awareness, 2002,
Art and Words, 2006, photo B. Knaup



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Reading for Male and Female Corpses*, 1997
as pictured in artist book *Lament*, 1999, photo B. Knaup



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, transcript from *The Class*, 2005, as printed in artist book *Art and Words*, 2006, photo B. Knaup

The Class

Good evening! I would like to welcome every one to this talk.
First of all, I would like to introduce myself.

I am presently here standing in front of you as a living person. Ah...my standing position is between you and a green board behind me. I am standing here with only one purpose in mind: to have a talk. I am willing to accept the fact that this talk might be without any form of discussion, that it might be only half a conversation. So be it.

Would you mind if this kind of talk is not perfect? You wouldn't would you?
And anyway, what is a perfect talk?

Death : D E A T H is today's topic.
Tell me what you think? Ah! You need some more time to think. How about you? Do you have something to say about today's topic? You also need some more time to think.

Very well, as the atmosphere here is very quiet, it may help a little if I begin: I seriously think that today's topic may help us to cut straight to close ties and connections that do exist between the living and the death. Like the ties between us, you and me.

I hope you do realize now how important this issue is?

There are many kinds of definition of Death. I am going to write this on the board behind me so that all of us can clearly see what death is.

(As a living person I hate writing on a board. I prefer the computer. It doesn't show my dreadful handwriting.) Now, about the meanings of the word DEATH

First meaning: an act of dying or being killed. There are different kinds of death; a sudden death, a horrible death, a peaceful death, which is most people prefer

Second meaning: the end of life; the state of being death

There is power in death. A very interesting point indeed, death as a kind of power. What kind of power then, you may ask.

The power that destroys life. What did you say?

Someone could say, Life can be destroyed without death, and he would be right. I agree with you.

But we are not talking about life here; we are talking about the word 'death'.

Death is not always connected to life. The word 'death' is also used for something's ending or destruction of something like the death of hopes, the death of capitalism, the death of one's plan.

Someone has question again. Does DEATH only have negative meaning? No, it does not. I think you know that already. It all depends how the word is used of course. If we say death of death, which could be meaning new life.

Most of people would believe this to be positive. But please note, not according to the Thai Buddhist way of thinking and not for the people, who commit suicide.

People also use the word 'death' in other context such as at death's door, in at the death, dead of night, dead of winter, dead in the water, etc.

Now may be a good time to see what Thai culture says about Death. There are some verses or sentences about death, such as 'To hen kan yoo lad lad / Oh! I just saw him. This short Thai sentence also has a double meaning that implies: Oh! I just see him, and now he is dead.

Another expression is 'Tai Tang Pen'. It is an expression used to indicate people who die while still being alive, people who must endure extreme suffering, but only for a short time. Because there is always sunshine after the rain.

I am wondering if there could be a similar expression for the death, like 'Tai Tang Tai', death while being death.

I am sure that you may know more about this than I do. What is it like? No need to explain it right now.

Let's talk little about living people now and what they believe dead people want. We as living persons often pray for the dead and hope that they could go to 'Sukati', meaning the realms of bliss and/or heaven, with no way to ask them if they really want to go to heaven. This can show that the living persons are having 'hell' now in this life.

Did you reach 'Sukati' or heaven after departure from this life?

Ah! You just die. You don't know now. What do you want to say? It takes time to reach heaven. It could be long time, I agree.

If there is a heaven for the death or not, is a question we will not try to answer here.

Death as part of some wonderful literature is in my opinion much more interesting than questions concerning heaven.

In the story 'One Hundred Years of Solitude', an old man, once a general, is sitting one evening in the front of his old house when a man from a passing parade who recognizes him asks:

"What are you doing here general?" "I am here to wait for my funeral parade", the general said.

In an article I once read, the process of individual dying is compared to dying in mass-like the Tsunami victims. It says that disasters like Tsunami deprive the victims of the mystery and the secret of death. The charm of death become charm-less.

This reminds me the last scene where the same general dies in a standing position under a tree behind his house. His relatives know that he is dead because they see the vultures circling the garden. Scenes like this bring us back to reality.

Could it be that death connects us closer to reality than life?

Did you experience a charming death? Who are the ones to experience the charm of death, the living or the dead?

Anyway, it might be difficult to answer. It's very thin line

Between Life and death. One of Napoleon's statements illustrates this very well:

"an eye winked forcefully, a breath taken deeply, it happens

either on a moments of total happiness, or at the time of death".

What do dead persons expect? Are your expectations different from the time when you were alive? Do you expect to reach heaven like we pray you to? I don't know. All you may know though.



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, study for *Three female-scape*, 2002, detail from artist book *Why is it Poetry rather than Awareness*, 2002, photo B. Knaup

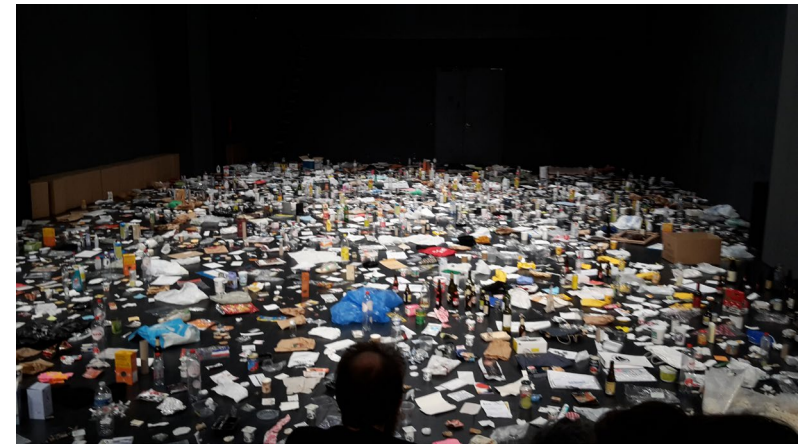
WITH STICKY CARE



Sarah Vanhee, *Oblivion*, 2015, photo: P. Deprez



photo: J. Willms



**At home, in the studio, on stage
– Sarah Vanhee**

1. Introduction

Waste is a matter of care. As opposed to what the German term *Entsorgung* suggests – a term which means disposal, but could also be literally translated as ‘disengagement from care’ – waste does remain and it does require ongoing labour of care. For the longest time this labour has been made invisible, relegated to elsewhere and elsetime, to specialists, and mostly to marginalized peripheries and communities, to future generations, and to more than human actors as well. Jason Moore has conceptualised this operation as central to capitalism’s ongoing exploitation of cheap nature as tap (for the extraction of resources) and as sink (for depositing waste and toxins) (Moore, 2015; see chapters ‘Introduction’ and ‘In the Landfill’). In his rendering capitalism does not only exploit people’s labour power but also makes nature work for free as tap and as waste sink, which includes “not just continents, but bodily, subterranean, and atmospheric spaces” (Moore, 2015: 280). However, he also detects a tendency of what he calls “waste frontiers” to “enclose and fill up faster [...] than [...] new ones (can be located)”, which aggravates capitalism’s inherent contradictions and “is throwing up limits of an entirely new character” (Moore, 2015: 280). While the externalization of waste has again and again met resistance, has thrown up multiple scandals and crisis, has resulted in new environmental political movements, policies and practices, it seems nevertheless that the current waste crisis has reached a different level. The sheer volume and pace of revelations regarding the spread and the effects of pollution globally, of waste streams such as (micro)plastic spreading to the furthest reaches and dangerously close, or the recent decisions of major global waste importers to ban or send back Western waste imports are underpinning Moore’s argument. Waste turns up¹ constantly and everywhere (while of course not evenly distributed). As a consequence, the question of waste labour and waste care is inescapably brought to the fore.

1 Gabrys also uses frequently the notion of “turning up” to describe material intra-actions of plastic waste (Gabrys, 2013: 214).

1. Suspend circulation – “not without”

Ursula K. Le Guin has given special attention to the bag. In her much referenced essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*¹ she turns this mundane, seemingly irrelevant “thing that holds something else” into the hero of the story of evolution. Not the stick, spear, sword, or tool, “those long, hard objects for sticking, bashing and killing” (Le Guin, 1989: 167), but the container for carrying seeds, berries, roots, fruits was most likely among the first and most important cultural inventions in a period when early humans largely depended on gathered food. “A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient” (Le Guin, 1989: 166). But gathering and collecting doesn’t make for good stories, as opposed to hunting and killing, which became the dominant inspiration for the all too familiar hero story – linear, adversarial, heroic, triumphant or tragic. Donna Haraway takes inspiration from Le Guin in her quest for non heroic stories of ongoingness in times of ecological devastation. With Le Guin she argues for fiction that takes inspiration from the bag or sack, from gathering, holding, bundling words, things, meanings, attentions and placing them in messy but specific relations, rather than featuring linear homogenous hero stories (Haraway, 2016: 118). The hero doesn’t really stand out well in a bag full with the stuff of life, he or she might be submerged, covered, lost at the bottom of things, or just somewhere in the middle. There is no stable ground in a bag, no order or hierarchy established once and for all. Bag stories are unending stories, bags are transitory, they are opened, closed, opened again, they are tied and untied, they carry from here to there and back, they can take filled shape or crumple,² they spill, they leak, they don’t contain.

1 The science fiction writer is an important inspiration for many scholars, such as Donna Haraway (2016: 5) or Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015: 287).

2 For a more detailed analysis of the bag in everyday use and especially its rhythmic quality see Connor (2002).

One important dimension of waste labour is related to recycling, to processes of “transformation and revaluation [...] of objects, materials, spaces and the people who carry out this work” (Alexander, Reno, 2012: 1). Practices of “disassembly and reassembly” (Alexander, 2016: 37) of materials take place on a global scale, alongside globally spreading waste streams, and in vastly different contexts, organizational forms and with diverging implications.² The mobilization of the notion of care in these contexts is frequent but has also contradictory and, in some cases, problematic implications. It is linked to recycling’s promise to alleviate the burden of (hazardous) waste and therefore perform something akin to “environmental care” (Alexander, Reno, 2012: 3). It resonates with practices of maintenance, reuse or repair common in the domestic sphere. And some aspects of waste labour also resemble specific qualities and characteristics of care work, such as repetitiveness or attention to (material) detail. However, as some scholars have shown, the mobilization of care in these contexts might also be problematic: The portrayal of recycling as environmental care might obfuscate the complex side effects and contradictory nature of recycling processes, ranging from dangerous and exploitative working conditions, to the dumping of the unrecyclable, often toxic left overs of recycling processes, to the incentive it poses for ever more consumption and waste production (Alexander & Reno 2012; Gregson et al., 2016). Others have shown how the conceptualisation of waste labour as care work can also be used to facilitate the privatization and devaluation of waste labour as informal, domestic labour, which doesn’t require proper recognition and pay (Fredericks, 2012).³

2 For an overview of histories and developments of the concept of recycling and conditions of recycling labour see Alexander & Reno (2012: 1-32), Gregson et al. (2016), MacBride (2011), Hawkins (2006). For a more detailed analysis of gendered labour relations in different regions and waste sectors see Cox (2016); Fredericks (2012); Maclaren et al. (2003); Norris (2012); Samson (2003). An analysis of racist labour relations in the waste sector and more broadly of environmental racism in the US is provided by Zimring (2016).

Waste and bags are closely related. Not only is waste most often being collected, transported and deposited in waste bags – be it big bags, or household waste bags – but also the plastic waste bag itself has turned into a major ecological problem, a dystopic icon and agent. The waste bag seems far removed from Le Guin’s carrier bag theory of fiction and it is rather linked to the (increasingly failing) imaginary of immunity, containment and protection (Hawkins, 2006: 26).

Sarah Vanhee’s *Oblivion* (2015) could be understood as a waste bag story in that ambiguous sense – referencing and questioning the waste bag as container promising separation, immunity, and disposability, and offering waste bag stories that are messy, leaking and unending.

Vanhee has kept all her dry household waste for one full year between November 2014 until October 2015. She has carefully collected, cleaned and dried every item, brought them back home, when traveling, stored them in bags or boxes at home and in her studio. She took note of all the websites she visited, including ads or pop up windows, all the spam emails she has received, all production related correspondence, all readings, all the films and music watched and listened to, all the ideas, suggestions, inspirations, good or bad advice received and discarded during her research and creation process. She has kept a shitting diary. She has photographed every piece of organic waste before throwing it away. *Oblivion* – a touring theatre performance of 2,5 hours mostly set in black box theatres and premiered in 2015 – shares these materials with the audience. While Vanhee carefully unpacks more than 40 boxes filled with waste (one for each week, except some weeks after giving birth to her son, and 2 weeks of holidays), a thick soundscape interweaves her storytelling with music, film scores and sound recordings. She quotes from readings and conversations, from online ads, headlines, spam mail, production related correspondences, recites her shitting diary, retells and reenacts film scenes, acknowledges everybody and also *everything* that contributed to the work: her waste, her

In the following chapter I nevertheless propose to not give up the contradictory notion of care, and especially consider those aspects of care work which cannot simply be subsumed to restoring productivity. Waste care goes far beyond recycling and cannot be described only as extracting resources, restoring value and preparing new cycles of consumption. Waste care includes for instance acknowledging, attending to and maintaining final waste deposits, the intentional and unintentional ones, the planned, controlled or wild ones, ranging from designed landfills to wild dumps to the uncontrolled accumulations of waste in the oceans, or in precarious bodies of those disproportionately exposed to the “slow violence” of pollution (Nixon, 2011).⁴ This kind of labour is either relegated to experts and often conceptualised in the idiom of management or techno-science (Hird, 2013c), or it is individualised, or remains completely unacknowledged and obfuscated. This labour is also often confronting unresolvable questions, maybe even futility, or unknowability (Hird, 2012; Hird, 2013c).

Also, there are more actors at play than humans. In a materialist perspective waste is not a passive recipient of care but partakes in it: many more beings, not only humans, are involved as well. Jennifer Gabrys, for instance, has elaborated the notion of “more-than-human-work” including “working materialities” in relation to plastic waste and processes of degradation (Gabrys, 2013: 209-210). Expanding the concept of carbon worker from climate change discourses through metabolic post-Marxian and new materialist conceptions of work, she suggests to include

3 An example is the transformation of the waste sector in Dakar in the context of structural readjustment programs, analyzed by Fredericks. In her case study she shows how the conceptualization of waste work as community based, participatory and close to women’s domestic labor facilitated the negation of value and proper pay (Fredericks, 2012: 130-136).

4 For a detailed analysis of toxicity flowing through transcorporeal bodies see Alaimo (2010); Chen (2011) considers the laboring intoxicated bodies, connected globally along lines of capital flows.

mother, her grandparents, her lover, the infrastructure, the invisible workers near and far, technologies, authors, affects, collaborators, producers, friends. She writes:

I considered every thing as some thing. At times I felt very rich because there were so many things. At other times I felt like I was drowning in things. At some point I thought I’d better sit still on a chair and not move, to be sure not to produce anything. Slowly I started to understand that I would need to take a different ethical stance towards “my” “refuse”, that my “waste” and me are interconnected and part of the interconnectedness of things in the world, and that I would have to listen to what all these things were telling me and what they were calling for rather than imposing any kind of rational order on them. [...] Like nature *Oblivion* doesn’t discriminate between what’s valuable or worthless. The network prevails over the entity, what is usually invisible becomes visible – a slow celebration of things unhidden.

Vanhee, 2015b

Beginnings and endings of this piece are blurry.

Beginnings: The first boxes are already opened and unpacked, when I enter the theatre hall in Berlin on a late November evening in 2015. I have seen the piece several times subsequently and sometimes it begins even earlier, for instance in the foyer of another theatre in Hanover, when a friendly stranger approaches me and starts a conversation, which grows more and more unusual and uncomfortable: “May I ask a personal question? Did you shit today before coming here? Was it a lot or just a little? Was it pleasant, unpleasant, hard, soft? Did you still consider it yours when it entered the toilet, or after you flushed it into the sewers? When and where exactly did it stop being yours? If you would estimate all the shit you have excreted in your life so far, how much would that be?” Questions rarely considered and shared in conversation. Questions that extend the boundaries of ‘my body’, of ‘me’, into the sewer system, the underground.

“the intra-actions that take place in relation to biodegrading plastics in oceans” and a whole range of agents, such as “EU fishers paid to fish for plastic, to marine researchers [...], to animals and birds that ingest plastic debris, to bacteria that may biodegrade these materials” (Gabrys, 2013: 214). Plastic biodegradation at work is understood here as collective material process (Gabrys, 2013: 218).⁵

I argue that this kind of collective waste-care-work needs to become public and a common domain for experimentation. Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles has practiced for decades maintenance art engaging with waste workers of the human and more than human kind. She has developed her understanding of maintenance art based on the material engagement with sticky and leaking waste matter and through a continuous practice of “laying on of hands onto material” (Ukeles, 1993a: 67-68) (see chapter ‘In the Landfill’). Artist Sarah Vanhee suspends discarding waste, but also turns away from recycling or transforming. She rather experiments with the radical opposite – keeping, storing, attending to waste, excessively touching waste, resting in waste, bringing waste circulation to a temporary, relative stand still – in order to contemplate other modes of relation, other modes of mutual care.

In the following I shall draw on feminist engagements with care work, considering especially those accounts which place care in the context of more than human material worlds. I specifically engage with the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa – a feminist activist and scholar in the field of Science and Technology Studies – who has articulated the most elaborate and extensive version of this approach. In *Matters of Care* (2017) she focuses on what it implies to think and produce knowl-

⁵ See also Myra Hird and her focus on bacteria’s productive and creative agency in landfills (Hird, 2013c: 113-114) and her argument for an “environmental ethics of landfilling” that is based on “working-with” (Hird, 2013c: 120).

Endings: After 2,5 hours of unpacking her boxes of waste and telling countless stories Sarah Vanhee leaves the stage while the last box remains on the set, not fully unpacked. It is this late November evening in Berlin, and the stage is too small to contain all of her collected waste. It takes a moment until spectators realise that the performance is indeed over, but even when the black light goes on, immersing the overwhelmingly shocking and strangely beautiful landscape of trash into a fluorescent scenery, it seems difficult for some to leave the set, including me. I stay on, as others do, we want to observe the re-packing of waste into the 43 cardboard boxes. We want to touch, to grasp, to wander around, to linger a bit longer. Several months later I asked the production collaborator Linda Sepp, who Sarah Vanhee also described to me as the “keeper of the trash” (Vanhee, 2017), if I might be allowed to help repacking after the show, and she allowed me to join this laborious effort. The waste has to be packed chronologically, not at random, a specific week’s waste needs to be stored in the corresponding box. Every box is numbered and every item out of a specific box is marked with the corresponding number in fluorescent colour. Voluntary helpers like me and also the local crew are allowed to join this effort and are asked to build piles of objects with the same number. But packing the items into the boxes is a task which requires special “material knowledge”, as Sepp later explains to me, a knowledge based on her continuous engagement with this specific material, its behaviour, its role in the performance, and therefore she doesn’t allow anyone except herself to do this work (Sepp, 2017).

Endings: But even after leaving the theatre, the piece continues to do its work: the handout, which was distributed together with the evening program, consists of a seemingly endless list of references and source materials, which Sarah Vanhee has used, encountered, considered, discarded, and which might instigate further research. Two pages narrowly printed in small font with book titles, youtube links, film titles, newspaper clippings, policy reports, song titles, etc.

edge with care and to do so in more than human worlds. I am also inspired by Puig de la Bellacasa's method of writing, which she develops in close reference to Donna Haraway as a refusal to separate foreground from background, the new from the dated, the individual from the collective, and which bears some – even if faint – similarities to the artistic strategy of Sarah Vanhee in her waste performance *Oblivion*: foregrounding on stage what is usually relegated to the background or to invisibility. Such writing style can be demanding for readers, as it doesn't allow "to skim through, or generalize the claims", to dissect or distinguish between "relational webs and novel thought", or to "systematically control a totality" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 75-77). My following attempt at reading and referencing Puig de la Bellacasa and other authors who theorise care is therefore no comprehensive summary, it is rather an agglomeration or agglutination, where I follow "sticky words" (Bennett, 2012: 263) and accumulate and expand relational webs around them. The notion of sticky words has been proposed by Jane Bennett in the context of her reflection on material agency as recognized by hoarders through their specific mode of relation to (waste-) materials. Referencing the "default grammar that diligently assigns activity to subjects and passivity to objects" (Bennett, 2012: 263) she suggests to experiment with words as "sticky substances to slow the perceptual transformation of thing-powers (slowness, inter-corporeal infusion, strange attraction) into human powers (imaginative projection, artistic production, use- or aesthetic-value)" (Bennett, 2012: 267). In this vein I suggest that Puig de la Bellacasa's understanding of care as a 'messy ground', as 'a-subjective', as 'sticky', and as a way of haptic 'living hand to hand' can also speak more broadly to artistic and curatorial practices embedded in attempts toward knowing and living with more than human waste worlds.

Endings: In the course of several conversations, I learn that it is also hard for Sarah Vanhee to leave this piece behind. When I ask her what she will do with the waste, once the piece won't tour anymore, she answers that undoubtedly she will keep the waste and not throw it away. She doesn't know yet, when that will be, and what exactly she will do with the material. But throwing it away seems impossible (Vanhee, 2017b).³

I am intrigued by the open question, posed by the main agent in this work: the waste. How and where and with whom does the waste remain? In which theatre storage, cellar, museum, or landfill? The work is still touring while writing these words – but after five years, and more than 60 performances, it is foreseeable that its stage life will come to an end. Meanwhile I follow the waste: I help after the performance to repack it, I am speaking with those who take care of it, monitor it for fish moth, repair it, when it deteriorates, transport it across Europe. In turning towards certain modes of production in my analysis,⁴ in considering material singularity I attempt to follow and imitate Vanhee's method, in the sense of the haptic care as an "everyday redoing" elaborated in the chapter 'With sticky care' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 117): to consider everything as something, to consider the extended 'body of the performance', the before and after, and in between and beyond.

There is no abstract performance with the title *Oblivion*. There are only all these many specific performances, related memories and stories (Vanhee, 2017b):

- 3 Talking at different times with the production collaborator, who has next to Vanhee the most intimate relationship with the waste, reveals a changing attitude towards it; while in the early stages of the performance's life it seemed impossible for her to imagine throwing away the waste turned into carefully maintained prop (Sepp, 2017), in the later stage it seemed logically for her to let go of it (Sepp, 2019).
- 4 Exposing modes of production has of course a long history in theatre, most explicitly foregrounded in the various articulations of postdramatic theatre (Lehmann, 1999).

2. Reclaiming the messy ground of care worlds

I have been following Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's in-depth reflection on care, focussing on certain 'sticky' words or concepts which resonate with the artistic practices foregrounded in this study and reflecting in particular on my own curatorial feminist legacy. Some of those concepts are in the centre of her own reflection (such as the grounded and the a-subjective dimension of care), others are foregrounded by me, such as the stickiness of care, which has emerged as a central concept in this study. While I am following Puig de la Bellacasa, I am adding further layers and contexts, building on the rich feminist materialist legacies of research and theorisation of care⁶ and on the practices of the artists foregrounded in this study. With Puig de la Bellacasa I argue for the need to reclaim the notion of care – despite and because of its ongoing “hegemonic revival”, its pervasive mobilisation in neoliberal discourses around self-care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 8-10) but also in other sectors.⁷ However, reclaiming is not an innocent operation, as Puig de la Casa elaborates: “reclaiming requires acknowledging poisons in the ground that we inhabit rather than expecting to find an outside alternative, untouched by trouble” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 11). Instead of longing for a pure and ideal concept she therefore elaborates care as a “living terrain” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 8), a messy, impure, troubled or even toxic ground, which can't be escaped

6 For a glance at the vast field of decades of feminist care research see Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 2-10); for a short overview of the current care crisis and respective shifts of the organization of care labour internationally see Aulenbacher, Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Liebig (2018) and Aulenbacher, Lutz, Riegraf (2018); for an overview on care migration and domestic labour see Lutz (2018a); for the entanglement of care and colonial agendas see Federici 2004, 2012; Murphy, 2015; for activist-artistic perspectives see Precarias a la Deriva (2011) and Boudry, Kuster, Lorenz (2000); for extensive empirical surveys on care practices and ethics see Mol, Moser, Pols (2010) and Barnes, Branelly, Ward (2015).

7 The mobilization of care is pervasive in many sectors. An example is the German chemical industry, which promotes its image through the *Responsible Care Initiative*, available at: <https://www.vci.de/nachhaltigkeit/responsible-care/rc-in-der-praxis/listenseite.jsp> (accessed: 03.03.2021).

Oblivion in Hanover (June 2017), where the sound of the May thunderstorm drowned that part of the soundscape in which we, the audience, could have listened to a recording of the sound of some of the waste;

Oblivion in Montreal (May 2018), where she had to interrupt the performance to tell technicians to turn off the air conditioning as the small and light waste items flew around and where it became incredibly hot;

Oblivion in Montreal (May 2018), where the stage crew – helping to sort the waste after the show – had put on gloves, which made Vanhee laugh;

Oblivion in Quebec City (May 2018), where so many people left the show;

Oblivion in Tallinn (August 2017), where the curator who had invited her, still has a memory of a more or less waste free time before transition of the communist system in Eastern Europe and has kept her first plastic bag as a precious memorabilia (Vanhee, 2017b; Vanhee, 2018a).

There is no *Oblivion* without all the transport routes:

From Gent to Berlin to Lancaster to Noisiel to Lisbon to Brussels to Salzburg to Groningen to Gothenburg to Leuven to Frankfurt to Oostende to Kortrijk to Valenciennes to Rennes to Amsterdam to Timisoara to Lille to Hannover to Tallinn to Marseille to Bergen to Bremen to Montreal to Quebec City to Rome to Cagliari.

There is no *Oblivion* without all the collaborators, without all the theatres, with their walls, stages, back stages, storages, cellars, dressing rooms, foyers, workers, technical equipment, audiences, institutional policies and procedures.

There is no *Oblivion* without packaging: household waste consists largely of packaging – all those paper and plastic bags, bottles, tubes, cans, envelopes, boxes, pouches, shrouds. All those bags in which Sarah Vanhee collected her waste at home or while traveling. All those cardboard boxes in which her waste is stored and trans-

and abstracted. In the context of reflecting on waste legacies and related artistic and curatorial work foregrounding care I stress the relevance of acknowledging such impure, messy groundedness of care, which has several dimensions.

There is the fundamental dependency of existence on care as “doings of everyday labour” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012: 201-202). Care in this sense is not predominantly a moral obligation or an affective engagement, but an ontological state: all forms of life are grounded in care. This resonates with numerous philosophers’ articulation of life’s fundamental precariousness. Isabell Lorey, for instance, building on the work of Judith Butler and Jean-Luc Nancy understands precariousness as “a condition proper to both human and non-human living beings”, “a socio-ontological ‘being-with’” (Lorey, 2011: n.pag.).

Puig de la Bellacasa also describes care as a “toxic terrain” which refers to its inherent tensions, contradictions and asymmetries, to care as a “field of domination” and exploitation, and to the pervasive appropriation and commodification of care especially in the context of neoliberal governance (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 9-11). Isabell Lorey has offered a comprehensive analysis of the pervasive governmental precarisation, which leads to a generalisation of insecurities and increasing demands for individualised care practices. Building on feminist activist practices, she does not give up on care but rather advocates its politicisation through acts of collectivisation like a care strike or care revolution (Lorey, 2012). Puig de la Bellacasa argues strongly against any attempt to purify care, but rather advocates for political and intellectual work as an “ongoing effort within existing conditions without accepting them as a given” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 11). She builds on the complex, and in parts also conflictual strands of feminist discourse around care, including feminist care ethics, which have troubled legacies or seem outdated,

ported – one box per week. All those special bags that were used to fly the vacuum cleaned waste to Canada – bags that reminded Vanhee of body bags (Vanhee, 2018).

There is no *Oblivion* without the waste of the waste, the “oblivion of oblivion”, those deteriorating infinitesimal small items which can’t be handled on stage anymore; or that mouldering content of teabags, which the production collaborator has carefully collected and stored in a plastic box, and which travels along with every performance (Sepp, 2017 & 2019).

“Not without” – a large part of Vanhee’s story telling on stage consists of acknowledging everybody and everything without whom “this work, you are being part of right now, would never have been there.” A repetitive, rhythmic, seemingly endless concatenation of sentences, many of which begin with “Not without”.

Not without waste – there is nearly no sentence spoken without handling and touching waste. These sentences are not naming, explaining, classifying the waste. Some collected words and phrases themselves are waste, such as fragments from spam mail or online advertisement slogans. Jeroen Peters has suggested these words and soundbites become things among things, alienated from narrative function (Peters, 2016: 2). Following my reflection on waste materiality I would rather describe them as sticky no-things, gathered on the same plane as the growing waste-scape. They form part of this collection of remaining matters – remaining in touch. The sticky no-thingness of waste points towards a collectivity gathered, it renders differentiation or distancing impossible.

When starting to write this reflection of her work, I also stop throwing away my own household waste (see p.139). In my attempt of haptic redoing, I imitate Vanhee’s method, accepting the collective imperative of sticky waste no-thingness: I am cleaning every item, drying it, storing it, keeping it in one bag per week. It is labori-

without erasing differences nor by severing connections. Feminist discourses highlighting inequalities and exploitation inherent in care practices also entail writings on the mostly overlooked specific conditions of care work performed by women of colour in the context of slavery and its aftermath (this has been discussed in detail for instance by Patricia Hill Collins, 1986; Judith Rollins, 1985; Hortense Spillers, 1987), and on the growing transnational workforce of mostly female migrant care workers enabling self care of affluent white Western women in the global North (see for instance Aulenbacher, Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Liebig, 2018; Lutz, 2018a). As these authors have elaborated, care is indispensable, but also a troubled, complex, contradictory ground.⁸

The groundedness of care has a further dimension in Puig de la Bellacasa's writing, which is particularly relevant in the context of my reflections on artistic and curatorial waste practices. She foregrounds quite literally the ground and the soil as the "home to most residues" and as the living infrastructure, inhabited by countless invisible "soil workers", who also care for 'our' food webs (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014: 28, 35). And while Puig de la Bellacasa does not directly address waste as a matter of care, a relationship between care and waste nevertheless comes forth here. Drawing on heterogeneous sources such as soil science, archaeology and information science she elaborates how soil can be understood as the "utmost residual". "Soil is [...] the actual result of decay, of remains that didn't resist to dissolution" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014: 29). What resists dissolution, be it archaeological remains or plastic waste, is considered a relevant research subject or a problem for respective disciplines, while soil is turned into mere background or

ous, not easy to clean waste, as most of the packaging is not meant to be cleaned and used again. The material quickly occupies a lot of space, it spreads, grows, expands. I keep it stored in bags and from time to time unpack it – not spilling everything on the floor but carefully spreading things out, one by one. During these exercises I follow spontaneous impulses:

I begin to order, to sort, to build piles, to categorize: plastic, paper, aluminium, small, big, still useful or useless, things that remind me of a specific event or occasion – this flight, or that dinner – or things that stick out because of their colour or design, like the pink little feather from a wrapped present and the neon yellow fruit net.

I build strangely beautiful assemblages – beading all the little things with holes on this piece of blue-white drawstring, or piling everything that is of the same colour, no matter what material, size, or shape.

I collect words: gut für berlin, excellent, repair, original, care, only the finest, auf sanfte art, bio aus liebe, aromatisch, premium, angetrieben von der leidenschaft, clean, natur, frisch.

I pay attention to memories triggered by specific items, for instance the aluminium packaging from the little Thai fast-food stall around the corner run by a group of women. It reminds me of an early period in my childhood, in the early Seventies, when my parents ordered "Food on Wheels", a proto food delivery service, probably used while my mother was pregnant. It also brings back memories of these rare moments, when my mother bought pre-packed Chinese spring rolls – an exotic novelty at the time in the provincial West-German city where I grew up – to be heated in the oven in discardable aluminium containers. I remember eating them with her in the kitchen, a special moment of intimacy and affection. I have of course used and discarded these aluminium packaging countless times before. But I have never

⁸ See also Baraitser speaking of care being inextricably bound up with its failures (Baraitser, 2017) and Sharpe's articulation of care as "living in the wake", attending to the afterlife of slavery, a past that refuses to pass (Sharpe, 2016).

container. She experiments with a different perspective, considering “soil as living web” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014: 32), “as infrastructure”, which enables “other kinds of work” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014: 33). Part of this living web are those beings who process decay, who are “taking care of excess waste” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014: 35). Borrowing a term from Susan Leigh Star, she argues for a kind of “infrastructural inversion,”⁹ which would bring soil’s waste work and care work to the forefront. This resonates with the notions of “more than human work” suggested by Gabrys and Moore’s concept of nature’s cheap labour, referenced in the introduction to this chapter.¹⁰ It also resonates with the work that waste performs, as Sarah Vanhee and her collaborator acknowledge in the performance *Oblivion*.

Such groundedness of care implies for Puig de la Bellacasa that there is no general, abstract definition of care, as it is grounded within specific, varying, material conditions, restrictions and practical doings (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 11). Care is “unthinkable as something abstracted from its situatedness” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 6).

3. Care as a-subjective, sticky and haptic

Departing from such messy groundedness of care in the following I focus on three aspects of such situated doing, which speak to the artistic practices in this study and which can also be brought into fruitful connection to curatorial practices: care as a-subjective, as sticky and as haptic.

⁹ For detailed references to Susan Leigh Star’s work see Puig de la Bellacasa (2014: 35).

¹⁰ See also Raj Patels and Jason Moore’s *History of the world in seven cheap things* (2017), including “cheap care” and “cheap nature”.

cleaned them, looked at them again, or even attended to them in full detail. I am surprised that such a mundane and generic item can trigger such a distinct, textured and detailed memory, linking domestic labour, consumerism, migration, love.

I try to decode the imprints on plastic or cardboard packaging – 12 Arcoplastica – TO 528/019, Alcas * 7, Cripak 0295343855, etc. – to track and map its origins: a research on waste provenance. It is surprisingly easy to identify the producers of this seemingly anonymous material. A whole landscape of companies, of specializations, of labour, of small towns, cities and regions and of transport routes emerges.⁵

I start to count, to estimate, to measure. When spreading all the waste collected so far it fills half of my flat’s floor. I am overwhelmed by the amount and start to wonder how much waste I must have produced in my life so far. Consulting statistics I find out that it is easy to identify average figures for the last 15 years, but reliable and comparable data for earlier periods is difficult to find, not so much due to a lack, but rather to an overflow of data collected according to criteria which varied regionally and changed frequently over time (Köster, 2017: 28). With a lack of reliable statistics I resort to reasonable speculation, concluding that I must have produced at least 18,35 tons of household waste in my life so far.⁶ What if I had to live with all of it?

⁵ Many companies are based in Italy: Arcoplastica near Turin specialized in packaging for the food sector; Groupe Guillin, a Europe wide consortium; Alcas based in Montelupo near Firenze specialized in packaging and utensils for ice-cream, yoghurts, finger food and coffee to go; or the Italian SEDA International Packaging group based in Neuhaus an der Pegnitz near Bayreuth, specialized in coffee to go cups and lids, as well as other cardboard packaging.

⁶ In 2014 the average German produced 454,5 kg household waste per year, which is slightly above the European average of 409,27 kg of household waste in 2014. This average figure includes the highest rates in Denmark of 608,41 kg and the lowest in Romania of 194,04 kg. These figures have changed relatively little since 2004 (Eurostat 2017). Based on this data I made the following calculation: For the period 01/2000 – 09/2018 I calculate: 454,5 kg p.a. (=8522,25 kg); for 01/1980-12/1999 I assume 75% of that figure: 340,9 kg p.a. (=6818 kg); for 10/1966-12/1979 I assume 50% of that figure: 227,2 p.a. (=3010,6 kg).

a-subjective care

Joan Tronto's and Berenice Fisher's by now classic and often quoted¹¹ definition of care is a valuable starting point for this endeavour. Tronto and Fisher understand care as

everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life sustaining web.

Tronto & Fisher, 1990: 40

Puig de la Bellacasa builds on the potential of this generic definition: it refers to an expanded understanding of care as the doings of everyday labour including those beyond the home or the hospital, it binds labour and the affectively charged ethics and politics of pursuing a 'good life' closely together, and at least implicitly points to the interdependency of all (not only human) life as an ontological state rather than a moral obligation (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 4-5). Such combined focus on the three dimensions of labour, of affect and of ethics/politics allows to stay close to the ambivalences and inherent asymmetries of care, rather than smoothing out its contradictions (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 5). But she also complicates the notion of the 'we' proposed in that definition, reflecting on practices of care that extend the solely human realm.¹² Rephrasing Tronto's and Fisher's definition she writes:

However, after these exercises I realise that Sarah Vanhee doesn't do any of this: she neither transforms trash into surprisingly beautiful sculptural installations – an approach that has a long tradition in the visual arts, but also has its place in the performing arts⁷ – nor does she salvage objects for re-cycling. While quoting from the corporate advertorial language of commercial packaging, she does not foreground it or analyse it. Nor does she directly link individual waste items with personal memories and autobiographical stories, although references to her mother, to other family members, or mothers of others, appear in her storytelling. She doesn't map and focus on the socio-political and economic conditions of a specific waste sector such as the European packaging industry, nor does she measure or quantify her trash. What she does, instead, is suspending: suspending circulation but also suspending all these very familiar modalities of knowing and relating to materials. Knowing through sorting, naming, classifying, counting. Explaining her working process and methodology to me she elaborates:

I took different objects, looked at them, looked for [...] what is there to be seen, what can I read in it, sometimes very scientific, [...] or like a horoscope basically. Then I was also doing all kinds of exercises, speaking with the objects physically, putting myself in a state of hypersensitivity and feeling the different materials, listening to them. [...] And then once you do that, that object does become more special than the other ones. [...] [I]n all my work I refer a lot to the notion of listening to the objects, imagining the whole life path and all the energy of other people that had been put into it, from the moment it's designed, to the moment it is made, all the different materials, through all the hands it has been already [...].

Vanhee, 2018a

11 Their definition is referenced, for instance, in: Baraitser (2017); Krasny (2015a); Puig de la Bellacasa (2017).

12 For reflections on care for specific non-human others such as trees, farm animals or endangered species see also Desai, Smith (2018) and Dooren (2014).

7 See for instance Kate McIntosh's *Worktable* (2011), a live installation in which participants are invited to explore the process of destroying and then recomposing material objects; or Clément Layes' *Things that surround us* (2012), in which the performers explore and transform a mundane thing world through muscular and machine enhanced engagement.

Care is everything that *is* done (rather than everything that ‘we’ do) to maintain, continue and repair ‘the world’ so that *all* (rather than we) can live in it as well as possible. That world includes [...] *all* that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.

Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 161

Who is implied to be included in this notion of ‘all’ depends on specific contexts and situations, it is neither universal nor arbitrary, but involves “specific ecological and human – nonhuman entanglements” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 161). But most importantly this “a-subjective” definition of care understands it as something that is traversing, passing through, that is “always happening in between” (166), involving human and nonhuman agencies, forces, materialities. Such notion of care also means “to consider the many ways in which nonhuman agencies are taking care of many human and nonhuman needs” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 161). This understanding of care as passing through resonates with other articulations of care. Disability activists, for instance, have long challenged notions of care as a one-way process between two clearly defined and fixed roles of able bodied care-giver and dependant care-receiver. Instead, they articulate care as a dynamic relationship involving various actors contributing their respective knowledges and experiences in order to enable care (Barnes, Brannelly, Ward et al., 2015: 14-15; Barnes, 2015). Or in the field of dance choreographer Katherine Hall has analysed movement patterns of care and describes them as

circular orbiting energy, where the centre of the act of caring shifts between the person cared for, the person caring, the person witnessing the care, [...] the phone, the chair, the clothes, the walls, the politically enforced systems affecting this situation [...] and therefore the balancing of power shifts among all involved.

Hall, 2018: 6

Handling – not tackling, solving, or transforming. Listening, touching and speaking with or next to – not about. Attending, returning, unlearning, while suspending.

Jeroen Peters suggests to read Vanhee’s work and especially her relationship to waste materials through Jane Bennett’s concept of inorganic sympathy (Peters, 2016: 4). In *Powers of the Hoard*, Bennett elaborates on dimensions of material agency or thing power, as described and expressed by hoarders. Rather than considering hoarders “as bearers of mental illness” she understands them “as differently-abled bodies that might have special sensory access to the call of things” (Bennett, 2012: 244). One of the dimensions of such material agency or “thing power” is what she calls “inorganic sympathy⁸” between the human and non-human inorganic:

Hoarders (again more acutely than ethnographers or theorists) feel the force of the ‘its’ that scientists increasingly find at work inside us, for good and ill. In an act of sympathy and self-recognition, the hoard accesses the it-stuff within the hoarder herself and forms bonds therein. This bond can be as adamant as rock, as durable as teeth or bones.

Bennett, 2012: 258-259

Bennett invokes sympathy⁹ as a mode of relation that is neither characterised by instrumentality nor by deliberate aesthetic appreciation (2012: 259). It is rather a “strange attraction” (2012: 267), or – as she elaborates with reference to Roland Barthes’ notion of advenience – a movement towards (2012: 261-263). While I agree that there are many resonances between Bennett’s inorganic sympathy and Van-

8 In reference to Freud’s death drive she also speaks of subterranean sympathy (Bennett, 2012: 259).

9 Also waste scholar Guy Hawkins invokes sympathy – especially in relation to the afore mentioned bag – as a complex, ambiguous and multifarious affective relation to waste, which questions any fixed status of waste items such as the plastic bag as unequivocally bad (Hawkins, 2006: 22-24). She asks if “sympathy and ethical concern for rubbish” – considering for instance the complex material and “social life of bags” – could be the more effective starting point for changed ecological relations rather than “command moralities” (Hawkins, 2006: 23).

Such a-subjective care, passing through, unfolds above but also below ground, in the soil, or the swamp,¹³ the landfill, or waste storage, these prime locations of the residual, with all their attending workers.

sticky care

Further expanding this understanding of care in the context of knowledge creation, Puig de la Bellacasa builds on extensive debates in the field of Science and Technology Studies and especially on a speculative reading of Donna Haraway's "promiscuous" writing style (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 73) and her method of "sticky mediations" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 88). She refers to Haraway's dense and eclectic writing style, her gathering of many unlikely companions such as cyborgs, machines, dogs, lab-rats, scholars, goddesses, tentacular beings, activists, friends and complicated legacies, none of whom "comes without its world"¹⁴ (Haraway, 1997: 37). These are sticky companions, they bring worlds with them, which can't be relegated to the background, in order to stage the new in the foreground, they form bonds and attachments, they "populate(s) a world" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 77). It is also an approach opposed to purification, instead arguing for "revulsive attachments" and for "holding contradictions and complexities together" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 88-89).¹⁵

Stickiness is not further elaborated by Puig de la Bellacasa, but with its affinity both to waste and care I want to dwell a little longer on this term. As I have sug-

13 See Puig de la Bellacasa's engagement with the Swamp Pavilion at 16th Venice Biennial of Architecture, 2018, available at: <http://www.swamp.it> (accessed: 27.02.2021).

14 This quote by Haraway is used by Puig de la Bellacasa as the title of her essay on thinking with care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012).

15 Elsewhere Puig de la Bellacasa refers to scholar and poet Susan Leigh Star and her scholarly and poetic "nonsplitting practice" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015: 62-63).

hee's *Oblivion*, I argue that there is another dimension at play, which goes further than what is expressed through the fleeting, temporary, volatile notions of sympathy, attraction or movement towards. I suggest that Vanhee explores what Povinelli calls an "effort of mutual attention ... in the activity of endurance" (Povinelli 2016: 28; see chapter 'Beyond epidermal consciousness') and what I have described, building on Puig de la Bellacasa, as laborious, a-subjective, sticky and haptic form of care work, "living hand to hand" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012: 207; see chapter 'With sticky care'). I suggest there is another temporality at play, and a laborious effort of attending and caring.

2. Excessive handling – "through so many hands"

Agnès Varda's documentary film *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000) makes several appearances in Sarah Vanhee's *Oblivion*.¹⁰ The film's introductory soundtrack appears in the beginning of the performance. Towards the middle Sarah Vanhee suddenly stands up and – addressing the audience directly – reenacts the first interview scene of the film. The soundtrack of that same scene reappears again later in the course of the performance. In the reenacted and replayed interview scene an elderly lady is standing next to a field and speaking of the labour and pleasures of gleaning, which was in the days of her youth a collective endeavour carried out mostly by women. She points to the empty field to her side, which due to evolved harvesting technology does not offer much for gleaning anymore. She reenacts the gestures of gleaning. She speaks of the hard labour but also of the conviviality. And she points to the house on the other side, declaring that she was born there and will also die there. The reenactment of this scene is one of the few moments in *Oblivion* in which

10 As mentioned in the introduction it is also frequently referenced by scholars focussing on waste (Boscagli, 2014; Boetzkes, 2019; Harrison, 2017; Hawkins, 2006; Lewé et al., 2016; Yaeger, 2008).

gested throughout my study, waste materiality is often being described as sticky, as escaping clear cut definition, as being in between fluid and dry, hard and soft, closed off form or dissolution (Lewe, Othold, Oxen, 2016: 9-10). Waste leaks, it sticks around, it builds unexpected agglomerations. Also materialist philosophy has focussed on waste materiality or more generally on

a host of messy states and processes “intermediate” between subjects and object, or better put, not readily assimilable to either prefabricated container. There is dust, soot, flower, steam, mist, fog, a vague premonition, a pile of trash, cloud, drizzle, green mold, placenta, a lava flow, a wetland, a flood zone [...] rotting flesh [...] viscous fluids, porous membranes [...]
Connolly, 2011: 72

These zones of indiscernability, Connolly states, fundamentally question human mastery over a world of solids. Such non-solid, sticky (waste) substances are also often the focus of care work, sticky substances that escape and question the solid form, object or body, such as blood, shit, pus, snot, pee, sweat, mold, sewage, refuse, garbage, leachate, humus. While the notion of care might lend itself to projects of purification,¹⁶ I suggest that care work inhabits this interstitial world, which I have described as sticky no-thingness, unable to mend the leaking, clean the mess, rather being exposed to, attending and experiencing repetitive dissolutions of closed off form¹⁷ (see Introduction).

16 See especially black feminist scholarship regarding the nexus of care, purification and whiteness, e.g. Stoler (1995); McClintock (1995).

17 It also resonates with “dwelling in the dissolve”, a practice proposed by Stacy Alaimo as engaging with the unescapable transcorporeality of exposed being. What emerges in her thick descriptions of such embedded dwelling is a focus on the laborious engagement with multiple material agencies, including toxic substances, their unequal distributions, effects, affectivities, their “scientific capture”, but also the pleasurable dimension of such dwelling “as the stuff of the world” (Alaimo, 2016: 183, 187).

Vanhee addresses and faces the audience directly. Her monologue is otherwise kept in indirect speech, speaking of everything, everybody and herself equally in the third person; she also rarely looks at or turns toward the audience directly, not more often than directly addressing the waste.¹¹ Furthermore, she hardly stops touching and unpacking waste while speaking. The scene therefore stands out, forms an interruption, a cut, maybe a clue. It condenses gleanings, labour, the earth, collectivity, pleasure and death in unspectacular, mundane ways. It is also multi-temporal, interweaving past and future.

I follow the clue and enter further into Agnès Varda’s film. It features contemporary urban and rural gleaners, who nowadays work mostly alone. Gestures of bending down and picking up – enacting a close relationship to the ground – reappear throughout the film. Hands also play a central role in the film, including the hands of the filmmaker, that other gleaner, la glaneuse of the film’s title. Varda’s hands appear repeatedly, in detail, on the steering wheel, on the camera, or while gleanings alongside her interview partners, touching potatoes or other gleaned items. While zooming in on her hand with the small digital camera in her other hand Varda says: “My hand in detail [...] to enter into the horror of it I find it extraordinary. I feel as if I am an animal. Worse, I am an animal I don’t know” (Agnès Varda, *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse*, 2000). I assume her hand becomes one of those more than human, tentacular, finery knots of enmeshed life described by Ingold and Haraway. Both authors describe relational existence beyond the fiction of bounded bodies and closed off-form, beyond what Ingold calls “blobs” (Ingold, 2015: 3). Instead they propose to think with lines and tentacularity, “loopy tendrils” (Haraway, 2016: 33) and a tangling “meshwork” (Ingold, 2015: 3). Tentacles, fingers, flagellum, tails, hands,

11 This resonates with another waste performance by artist Yingmei Duan. In her performance installation *Rubbish City* (2008) she refuses to look at audience members while encountering them wandering through a thick maze of piled waste. André Lepecki has described the experience of this work as “alongsideness without identification” (Lepecki, 2012: 80).

The notion of stickiness can also be applied to the specific temporalities of care-work. Care time is uneventful, non-linear, dispersed, fragmented, repetitive, durational.

While events are those breaks that make a difference, marking a before and after, that gets recorded in history, care, in spite of all the work of political reclaiming, in spite of its hegemonic marketization, remains associated with the unexciting, blended with the dullness of the everyday, with an uneventful temporality.

Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 118

Studies of care work in various fields point towards its repetitive, often cyclical character, but also its temporal indeterminacy and multiplicity requiring to combine and balance multiple temporal demands, urgencies, interruptions, extensions.¹⁸ Lisa Baraitser has proposed a detailed reflection on the multiple ways time seems to be suspended in care, which she calls ‘unbecoming time’ and which involves for instance staying, maintaining, repeating, delaying, enduring, remaining (Baraitser, 2017: 4-5). Puig de la Casa uses the metaphor of a thickening of time, elaborating that care time “suspends the future and distends the present, thickening it with myriad multilateral demands” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 207). This does not entail purifying care time from timescales other than the present, but it suspends excessive futurity, and an understanding of temporality as one-dimensional, linear and progressive. Drawing on the work of Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vasilis Tsianos she posits that care rather happens “as a plane of ‘continuous experience’” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 166). Papadopoulos

18 For a reflection of the complex temporal patterns of migrant domestic workers see Anderson, Shutes (2014); about intermittent temporality of care work with children see Sichtermann (1981); about (ir)regularity, repetition, reiteration in care work see Mol (2008) and Mol, Moser, Pols (2010).

lines are the knots enabling messy connectivities (see chapters ‘With sticky care’ and ‘Into the mud, muddle, middle’)¹². Varda’s nonhuman hands are not hers alone, they enact modes of call and response transgressing closed off form, they merge with the camera, become digital image, waste, decaying flesh, potato, soil.¹³ They remind me of Ukeles’ focus on hand energies, her acts of ‘touching numbers’ discussed in the previous chapter, and the many fingery left overs in her archive. They resonate with Tejal Shah’s gloved and sticky fingers and body extensions featured in *Between the Waves* (2012) (see pp.142-143) and with Vanhee’s excessive hand touching unfolding throughout *Oblivion*.

The world of *Oblivion* emerging through and with household waste, is a world of intimacy and care, a world of bodily needs – a world of cooking, eating, nurturing, breast-feeding, digesting, of personal hygiene, of illness and death, of rules of propriety, of purity and property, of grooming, clothing, dressing, shopping, of corresponding and communing. Some of the recurring gestures and movements performed in the piece are bending, crouching, touching, picking up, holding – gestures linked to scenes of intimacy and care, but also to a kind of maintenance labour in and outside the home, which can’t be automatised and still needs to be done by hand – cleaning private and public buildings, sweeping roads and parks, nursing in hospitals and homes, harvesting fragile roots and fruits, disassembling and sorting materials in recycling facilities or on dumps. A recent study conducting field work in various recycling sectors in Western Europe especially in highly mechanised Material Recovery Facilities shows that next to the use of elaborate technologies manual labour is still needed to preselect and pick “anything that either should not be in the recyclables

12 See also Cecilia Vicuña’s continuous engagement with the thread, with weaving, knots and lines. Catherine de Zegher elaborates this dimension of Vicuña’s work in her essay *Ouvrage: Knot a Not, Notes as Knots* (de Zegher, 1997). See also Vicuña’s artist book *Red Thread* (2017).

13 For a detailed reading of Varda’s *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000) focussing on the messy multiplicity gathered, see Kohler (2004).

et al. analyse the role of everyday experience in social transformation in fields such as migration, labour and care, seeking to trace the situated “art of escape” (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: xiii) in mundane everydayness. A different temporality than that of the event is at the heart of such practices. Building on process philosophers Alfred North Whitehead and Erin Manning, Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos propose continuous experience as “the ultimate ingredient of any escape route” (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: xvii):

The passage of continuous experience – i.e. back and forth between a nexus of actual occasions and an event – is always unstable and dispersed across incommensurable processes, moments and spaces. Continuous experience only exists as a fluid movement between.
Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 154

Such continuous experience is not linked to a bounded subject but to multiple relations: “it is dispersed in the multifarious connections between people, animals, things and occasions” (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: xvii). It is this heterogeneous entanglement, that can also be described as sticky, as Adrian Heathfield has proposed in his reflection on durational time in the context of performative aesthetic practices. He elaborates with Henri Bergson the distinction between regulated, measured “clock time” and experienced duration, the latter dealing “in the confusion of temporal distinctions”, and being felt “as a force and product of relational and inter-subjective exchange” (Heathfield, 2009: 22). He argues that it is this entanglement which makes experienced duration sticky.¹⁹

¹⁹ Heathfield references art historian Mieke Bal’s notion of “sticky images”, images and works that “stick around – they persist in time – and stick to their spectators, conditioning a tactile attentiveness” (Heathfield, 2009: 22; see also Bal, 2000).

stream or that is too problematic for the MRF’s capital intensive, mechanised systems to handle” (Gregson et al., 2016: 548). Textile recycling in many countries of the Global South is even more dependent on manual labour, on haptic and visual skill to sort types of textiles, to grade quality and detect soiled clothing (Norris, 2012: 40-44). In an interview Vanhee mentions to me the potentially endless hand chains affecting the piece, gesturing towards collectivity: “and if you look at it it’s quite amazing, now the oldest trash is four years old, how good it still stands, it is only because of all this care of all these people. And of course that I take with me: it has been through so many hands” (Vanhee, 2018). Her work unfolds in continuous touch with waste, over long durations – both in the preparation of the piece and its realisation phase – attending to all detail, not “sampling” (Vanhee, 2015a), not skipping or skimming through, not dissecting, sorting or distinguishing. Her unpacking on stage unfolds carefully, piece by piece. Every single item is being touched, handled, considered, placed – not unlike Ukeles’ hand-touching numbers, elaborated above. She does not grab a handful of waste, nor does she build piles. But she nevertheless proceeds swiftly, maintaining a more or less regular pace throughout the duration of the performance, in a rhythm of labour, rather than that of contemplation, aesthetic appreciation or creation. References to those human workers who touch what others deem improper, impure, or useless are frequent in her monologue: Vanhee speaks about care takers in old people’s homes, morgues and funeral homes, workers in waste and sewage processing plants, waste collectors in China’s and Ghana’s plastic scrap industry. But she does not only foreground human labour, but also the capacity of waste to “to work”, “to transform” or “to serve”. The repetitive chains of hand-touching-waste-touching-worlds question the centrality of human labour. This is particularly apparent towards the end of *Oblivion*, when she addresses waste, speaks with and even as waste. In this section of the monologue she lists all the various things waste is and does and becomes: it is addressed as “world traveler”, “prodigy of networking” and “expert”, as “powerhouse”, “marvel of science” or “soil”. This

The stickiness of care I would like to foreground is both related to materiality – the specific sticky no-thingness of (waste) matter – and to the durational, thick, multiple, entangled temporality of care time.

Haptic care as living hand to hand

Cohabiting in sticky proximity is another dimension elaborated by Puig de la Bellacasa as part of her reflection on thinking with care. She describes this as “living hand to hand with the effects of one’s thinking” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012: 207) involving a dirty and “material doing of everyday labour”, a laborious “living with” and “dissenting within” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012: 201-202).²⁰ I am interested to bring the idea of “living hand to hand” in dialogue with Sarah Vanhee’s ‘excessive handling’, Ukeles’ ‘hand energies’ and ‘touching numbers’. Living hand to hand invokes proximity, touch, transmission, vulnerability and reciprocity, but not in harmonious symmetry, but rather through acknowledging that demanding relations to some can create disconnection from others (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012: 204), and by not ignoring dissent but rather by “dissenting within” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012: 207). A long durational sense of commitment to building, maintaining, caring for a community, with whom, for whom, and alongside whom the thinking unfolds, therefore involves not to glancing over conflict, nor severing connections.²¹ Such sense of community includes commitment to those intimate, ordinary “layers of labor that get us through the day”, to those labourers who build

20 This resonates with the long debates in feminist epistemologies about committed knowledge (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 77-78). It also echoes Sarah Ahmed’s description of feminist theory as “what we do when we live our lives in a feminist way”, or feminism as homework or housework (Ahmed, 2017:11, 7).

21 Puig de la Bellacasa gives as an example Haraway’s resistance to “dividing and opposing webs of thought that share a history”, and her effort to care, read and write across conflicts, not smoothing out differences, but rereading, rearticulating and making “new patterns from previous disputes” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 73). Haraway has famously done so across very different theoretical positions in feminist theorizing, but also by refusing to denounce science and technoculture from a distant position of cultural critique.

aspect also shines through in some of the interviews I conducted with Vanhee’s collaborators for this piece, who have been taking care of the waste during rehearsals and during the touring. While their job entails to care for, but also to manage and control conditions of the waste during transport, set up and after the show – waste’s obstinacy, its specific “character” (Sepp, 2019), but also its generative and affective capacity shine through these accounts: from time to time waste gets lost, or waste that “does not belong”, for instance waste lingering on a theatre stage, finds its way into the boxes (WV & CB, 2019); waste “gets entangled”, it “sticks together”, it even forms a “herd” (Sepp, 2019); some waste has a frightening fragility and also wears out while most of it displays a similarly disturbing longevity and endurance (Sepp, 2019)¹⁴. And through this affective quality it can also participate in acts of care: for one of the collaborators the repetitive experience of the performance, the encounter with the waste and her detailed knowledge and regular handling of it, provides a “safe space” and makes her “feel at home” (Sepp, 2017). Care here becomes a-subjective, it is traversing, passing through, “always happening in between” as Puig de la Casa and many others have elaborated (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 166; see chapter ‘With sticky care’).

This a-subjective collectivity of haptic care work, of laborious “living hand to hand” (Puig de la Casa, 2012: 207), does not suggest however that everybody and everything is equally involved. *Oblivion* is deliberately set in a black box theatre, not in a gallery, where visitors might have been able to roam or to walk in and out (WV & CB, 2019), so that the experience of observing and witnessing Vanhee unpacking every single

14 Vanhee’s production collaborator describes her affective states during the different phases of *Oblivion*: when it became clear that every single little thing, every scrap, snippet, fluff would be important and that their maintenance be her “enormous responsibility”, she became tense, nervous and slept bad for a while; until she got used to her “herd” and regained some “sovereignty.” (Sepp, 2019) While the fragility of the waste unbalanced her, also its anticipated longevity brought vulnerability to the fore, but rather her own: “one develops a sensitivity for the fact that these objects will still be lying in some landfill in 100 years, even if one has already completely decayed oneself, so this becomes very clear if one attends to such objects for such a long time” (Sepp, 2019; translation from German by B. Knaup).

“chains of care”, including the night workers cleaning university offices, the care workers taking care of relatives at home, or those earthly, messy more than human beings who “foster the web of life” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 87-88).

Living hand to hand is therefore not highlighted here as a notion only applicable to humans. It might rather resonate with a speculation proposed by Haraway, discussing the fingery tentacularity of all those multiple beings living entanglement, living life along lines (Haraway, 2016: 32). She quotes Tim Ingold, who has developed in more depth the notion of “living life along lines”, arguing against the idea of a delineated and contained organism set off against a surrounding world, but instead for “a trail *along* which life is lived” (Ingold, 2011: 69, emphasis by the author). Ingold posits that beings are instantiated in the world as lines of movement (Ingold, 2011: 71) and that hands (or a tail, a flagellum, or tendrils) are the knots of such enmeshed life (Ingold, 2015: 3-8). Haraway has spun these ideas further invoking multiple creatures with wings, stings, snakes, tentacles, spider legs “continuously spinning out loopy tendrils” (Haraway, 2016: 33).²² Such tentacularity foregrounds haptic sensing, rather than linear vision (Haraway, 2016: 52). Hapticity is also invoked in care as living hand to hand and it also brings forth a more than human dimension. Puig de la Bellacasa elaborates on the hapticity of care in great detail, considering the promises and pitfalls of touch, its “lure” as seemingly “unmediated objectivity”, its ambiguity due to its inherent reversibility and its openness to violence, and especially the remaking of touch through touching technologies (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 98-109).²³ Touch emerges in these discus-

22 Ingold also references spiders, see his chapter on ants and spiders in *Being Alive* (Ingold, 2011a: 89-94) and the octopus (Ingold, 2015: 9-12).

23 She reclaims and interweaves concepts of a number of authors, including Claudia Castaneda’s concept of technohaptic learning in robotics, Karen Barad’s intra-active touch, Eva Hayward’s tentacular visibility, Laura Marks’ haptic visibility in video art and Papadopoulos et al. concept of haptic experience in the context of resistant political activism are invoked here (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 113-118).

box over a lengthy period of 2,5 hours becomes an essential element of the performance. Vanhee stresses the importance of spending this time together, of “working it together and investing in it as I invest in it; [...] we are on the same trip, we do it together” (Vanhee, 2018). However, not everybody and everything works equally: the seating arrangements is keeping the audience at a distance, destined to watch, not to touch, her waste touching performance. The promise of care as a world of harmonious communion or the lure of touch as immediate, sensual immersion, as swift access to knowledge are troubled here, in ways that resonates with Puig de la Bellacasa’s a-symmetrical understanding of care. What is being foregrounded, instead, is the unequal distribution of exposure to the touching and being touched by waste matters. However, audience members don’t remain completely untouched. As elaborated by many scholars such as Laura Marks in relation to video art, Susan Leigh Foster, Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds in relation to dance, or Rebecca Schneider in relation to performance art, viewers and spectators are materially touched without a tactile encounter (Marks, 2002; Foster, 2011; Reason & Reynolds, 2012; Schneider 2010; Schneider, 2017). Haptic vision as elaborated by Marks in the terms I have already discussed in relation to Rasdjarmrearnsook and further detailed in relation to care involves a semblance movement between the visual and the tactile. Writing about kinaesthetic empathy in the context of dance and performance, Dee Reynolds has proposed the notion of the ‘dance’s body’ – in distinction to the dancer’s or spectator’s body. Inspired by Vivian Sobchack’s notion of the film’s body, this expression designates “a body that is not identified with a fixed subject position of either performer or spectator, but which is both ‘here’ and ‘there’, invested as subject and object in the shared materiality and affective flow of choreographed movement” (Reynolds, 2012: 123).¹⁵ In analogy one could speak of the performance’s

15 Her reflection is based on extensive discussions of embodied cognition influenced to some extent by mirror neuron research, which posits shared bodily states between observer and observed (Reynolds, 2012; for an extensive discussion see also Reason & Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds & Reason, 2012; Foster, 2011).

sions as situated and specific, and as entangled in more than human assemblages. Referring to Karen Barad, Puig de la Bellacasa speaks of “intra-touching”, questioning “the attribution of agency merely to human subjects” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 114-115). As I discussed in a previous chapter, Barad draws on quantum field theory’s radical understanding of the co-extensivity of matter and the void, or the “infinite touch of nothingness [which] is threaded through all being/becoming” (Barad, 2012c: 8). Based on a detailed and intimate reading of quantum field theory she elaborates the philosophical, ethical and political consequences of such an understanding of matter. In her article *On Touching – the Inhuman that Therefore I am*, she asks her readers to listen to the “cacophony of whispered screams, gasps and cries, an infinite multitude of indeterminate beings diffracted through different space times, the nothingness .. always already within us” (Barad, 2012c: 9), and proposes “perceiving-feeling”, “sensory attunement” or a “multisensory dance” (Barad, 2012c: 1). She argues that only through such multi-sensuous, haptic encounter with this inhuman, elemental, indeterminate nothingness, can questions of justice and care be thought and developed:

Perhaps it takes facing the inhuman within ‘us’ before com-
passion – suffering together with, participating with, feeling with, being
moved by – can be lived. How would we feel if it is by way of the
inhuman that we come to feel, to care, to respond?

Barad, 2012c: 8

Such more than human intra-touching has for Puig de la Bellacasa consequences for knowledge generation, it holds the potential of slowing down perception, of sensitising it for otherwise neglected detail in encounter and to allow for vulnerability in knowledge making. Haptic engagement in this sense does not contribute to mastery, but to a recognition of the limits of knowledge, the laborious processes of its generation and to a recognition of unknowability, rather than promising a

body, or more concretely of *Oblivion*’s body. Considering the excessive, durational handling and touching of waste foregrounded in *Oblivion*, I argue that the fiction of the spectatorial body’s containment and its distance from waste-touching labour and vulnerability is being threatened. *Oblivion*’s body is a body without centre and without skin, but with inherent inequalities and contradictions.

Oblivion does not foreground a functional notion of care as useful, practical labour “that gets us through the day” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 87-88). Sarah Vanhee does not repair or transform waste, she does not prepare it for recycling and production. She labours, but suspends any notion of potential value generation, be it use- or exchange value. She therefore does not support the prevalent discourse and practice related to recycling, which has been criticized by a number of waste scholars. As Alexander and Reno have elaborated, dominant economies of recycling do not necessarily reduce resource extraction, consumption and waste production, but rather depend on a steady and increasing flow of waste. Detailed studies of waste streams, of waste labour and waste depositing show that recycling consumes energy, materials degrade and can therefore at some point not be reused, and eventually there are often highly toxic left overs which are landfilled or dumped. On a habitual level recycling practices can have a rebound effect, providing legitimization for continuing high levels of consumption (Alexander & Reno, 2012; Gregson et al., 2016: 545; see also MacBride, 2011). Furthermore, labour conditions in many countries of the Global South, but also in the supposedly “green and clean” recycling sector in the European Union are harmful: “dirty, often demeaning, physically demanding and in some cases, dangerous” performed mostly by itinerant and migrant workers (Gregson et al., 2016: 543).¹⁶

16 A more fundamental critique of recycling as essentially tied to the idea of property and capitalist accumulation is offered by Graeber (2012).

better, more direct, or efficient access to knowledge (aspects that are often invoked in touching technologies) (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 117). What is also being foregrounded by Puig de la Bellacasa as a central element of haptic care in knowledge generation is a form of mimetic everyday re-doing (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 117). She builds this understanding on film theoretician Laura Marks and her concept of haptic viscosity as a material and embodied vision, which is multi-sensory and involves mimesis (Marks, 2010: 142;²⁴ see also chapter ‘Knowing (death) differently: intervening in the scene of autopsy’). She also draws from Papadopoulos et al., who follow everyday resistant social practices, “in which another world is here, in the making, before events become visible to representation” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 117). Such understanding of care as haptic living hand to hand, which involves mimetic redoing, suggests to be “relating with, and partaking in, worlds struggling to make their own visions not so much *visible*, but possible” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 118, emphasis by the author). It resonates with the ‘excessive handling’ of waste enacted by Vanhee, the paradoxical ‘touching numbers’ of Ukeles, the multi sensorial attending in the morgue enacted by Rasdjarmrearnsook. Their durational acts of attempting to touch and being touched by everything, everybody, every detail (as in the case of Ukeles and Vanhee), their returning to the same scene again and again (as in the case of Rasdjarmrearnsook) slows down modes of generating knowledge and experience. These acts destabilise any sense of boundaries of contained bodies, communities or collectives, while also troubling the unequal distribution of ‘waste-touching-being touched’. I rather suggest that these artists – taking up Puig de la Casa’s formulation above – struggle to make a different relation with the discarded, the uncared for, not just visible but possible.

24 Reflecting on the work of the film critic, but also the film programmer and theoretician, Marks speaks of haptic, mimetic criticism: “it presses up to the object and takes its shape. Mimesis is a form of representation based on getting close enough to the other thing to become it” (Marks, 2010: 142). The haptic film critic “cannot achieve the distance from its object required for disinterested, cool-headed assessment” (Marks, 2010: 143).

I argue that the performance detaches care – at least temporarily – from ideas of a circular economy and the related generation of exchange value and even from the generation of use value through acts of maintenance and repair. It suspends care’s immediate subsumption under regimes of productivity and instead lays bare the texture, the viscosity, the complexity and the temporality of caring, without abstracting it from its material labour dimension. As I will elaborate in the next section such an act of suspension opens an arena for envisioning alternative material relations and other notions of use. I will focus more specifically on how Vanhee does so by blurring spatial and temporal coordinates.

3. “A landscape of things” – for improper uses

The wastescape emerging through Vanhee’s act of suspension – suspending the ingrained habit of discarding, deinvesting, disrespecting – and her durational labour of care is a horizontal plane, a “landscape of things” (Vanhee, 2017a, n.pag.).¹⁷ It is no utopian vision of an otherland beyond contamination and pollution, but a Western landscape tied to the extractivist paradigm of coloniality and capitalism. A landscape however, that can’t be abandoned and that needs to be cared for. Writing to Canadian indigenous author and activist Leanne Simpson¹⁸ Sarah Vanhee elaborates her motivation for *Oblivion*:

This is my land [...] Looking at it, at all the tangible traces of capitalism, imperialism, corporate greed, I started to wonder: how to decolonize? My thoughts were not so much directed towards the historical aggressor of the past, but towards the sneaky continuation of that tradition into

17 She writes: “I collected 150 square meter of trash over one year and spread them out. Every single thing next to another. A landscape of things” (Vanhee, 2017a, n.pag.).

18 This Letter was written for a Lecture Performance held in Valenciennes on 1.03.2017 (Vanhee, 2017a).

In the following section I will reflect further what such care as a messy ground, as a-subjective, sticky and haptic imply for curating.

4. Sticky care in curating

I have elaborated above that the notion of care has an ambiguous status in curatorial discourse, being central to practice while also being anathema to certain articulations of the curatorial role.

To seriously consider the above developed a-subjective definition of care as “everything that is done to maintain, continue and repair ‘the world’ so that all can live in it as well as possible” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 161) has the potential to deeply trouble curatorial logics. A notion of care which subverts the subject-object relation, the conventional assumptions about who and what is included and excluded in that understanding of ‘all’, and which encompasses the sticky world of the residual, binds curating to continuities of artistic expression as lived life beyond definable art works, and beyond a narrowly conceived cartography of an artistic or a curatorial ‘field’. I would like to further articulate such understanding of curating, by building on the notions of care as a-subjective, as sticky, and haptic elaborated so far. I also draw on the many practitioners and authors who have realised experiments or proposed concepts in a similar vein and on my own experimentations in the course of this study.

a-subjective curating in community

As indicated in the introductory chapter of this thesis contemporary feminist and queer curatorial practice and discourse propose long term curatorial commitments of care which are based on a sense of community and collaboration. Cul-

today’s western mindset. How to decolonize the colonizer? [...] My trash-scape tells me I live the way I live because of the exploitation of others. This is my shadow-me. Our shadow-culture. I did not personally choose for it but I live it. I usually don’t look at it. Usually it’s being removed from me before I can confront it. Usually I dispose of it in an almost bureaucratic act of daily abandonment. How about not letting it go? Turning towards it? Embracing it? Understanding it? Calling it ‘mine’? Calling it ‘ours’?

Vanhee, 2017a, n.pag.

The landscape form is closely tied to capitalism’s “promise of infinite accumulation”, through the representation of an “object world to be surveyed, classified and evaluated” from a “detached vantage point of an unseen and disembodied beholder” (Andermann, 2018: 11). Vanhee invokes this form of distant observation of a landscape but also troubles and disturbs it. The landscape she invokes is most of all a wasteland, which brings to the fore the many resonances and connections between waste and land (see also chapter ‘Into the mud, muddle, middle’). According to the Oxford English Dictionary the earliest use of the word waste can be traced to the first half of the 12th century describing uninhabited, deserted or uninhabitable land. The latin *vastus* – which forms the root of both waste and vast – refers to ravaged, deserted or empty land but also to enormous proportions, to both emptiness and immensity (Viney, 2014: 18; Cooper, 2010: 1116-1117, 1120). As William Viney elaborates there is temporal ambiguity in this notion of waste linking it to a time prior or after human use: “a type of landscape in which a particular kind of time has yet to occur or occurs no longer”. It describes a sense of territoriality which is “out of joint with the time of human activity and proportion” (Viney 2014: 18-19). However one can catch a glimpse of a different understanding of wasteland as abundant rather than desolate when considering the medieval use of the term “common wastes”, which signified “the uncultivated lands surrounding the cultivated spaces of manorial estates, which were [...] often subject of common rights. These common wastes

tural theorist and curator Elke Krasny speaks in this context of “co-dependent curating” as a practice which explicitly reveals and foregrounds the “dependence on spatial, infrastructural, economic, and affective resources” and on “exchange and collaboration with other human and non-human actors” (Krasny, 2016: 103). The founders of London based feminist art’s organization Electra propose concepts of “fidelity” as in fandom, friendship, or polyamorous relationships in order to describe their longterm commitment to slow curation and production and their critique of productivism inherent in much of contemporary curatorial practice (Džuverović & Revell, 2016: 140). Another example is the notion of “the accomplice” as articulated by the feminist and queer art space Les Complices* in Zürich, which explicitly rejects the notion of curatorial neutrality by taking a clear political stance against racism, heteronormativity and capitalist exploitation.²⁵ Their concept of the accomplice also resonates with Stefano Harney & Valentina Desideri’s idea of fugitive curating as “complicit love” (Harney, Desideri, 2013). They write: “Today to be a teacher, a performer, or a curator, to be someone who is supposed to organize others is immediately to choose between being an accomplice and being the police” (Harney, Desideri, 2013: 130). One way they suggest to avoid ‘becoming the police’ is through curatorial carework, operating through a form of caretaking of collective space “that extends within and against the situation of the singular exhibition and event” and “joins the caretaking already going on in these spaces” (Harney, Desideri, 2013: 133-134). These notions of co-dependent curating, curatorial fidelity in polyarmory, curating as complicit love and fugitive curating resonate with the long-term commitment to communities of practice, thought or activism as proposed by Puig de la Bellacasa and others. They imply to live with, to curate alongside, in order to add to the ongoing maintenance and creation of

²⁵ For more information visit their website, where they elaborate their stance against curatorial neutrality, available at: <http://lescomplices.ch/about/about> (accessed: 15.2.2021).

had particular ecological uses for the commoners, providing access to fuel, building materials and plants and animals which expanded the dietary possibilities of the commoners” (Cooper, 2010: 1117). Access to this abundance was soon discredited as “improper use” (Scanlan, 2005: 22), and increasingly regulated and prohibited through enclosures, redefining common wastes as wasted commons (Lewe et al., 2016: 13; for a detailed account see Goldstein, 2013: 364-366). John Scanlan elaborates how historically varying understandings of waste emerged and specifically how the modern Western meaning of waste as “unused potential” emerged and was a precondition for colonisation (Scanlan, 2005: 23-24). He points particularly at John Locke’s contribution to this remaking of waste, rendering the globe a wasteland (Scanlan, 2005: 24), “not abundant, but waste, demanding active intervention either by divine or human hand to order and valorize it” (Cooper, 2010: 1117, referencing Scanlan). European colonization and extraction were based on the representation of much of the world as empty “waste zones”, “authorising all manner of human interventions in the environment from colonization itself to the creation of private property regimes to the transplantation of new plant and animal species” (Cooper, 2010: 1121; see also Gidwani, Reddy, 2011).

Also on another level waste is deeply linked to the land. A major proportion of the world’s garbage ends in landfills, which form an important but mostly invisible part of contemporary landscapes (see chapter ‘Into the Ground and the Landfill – Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ for more details). And most of what becomes waste “has in one way or another been forged from subterranean ingredients. Whether it is metallic ores tunnelled from the ground, plastics fashioned from fossil hydrocarbons, or organic matter plumped by petrochemical energetic subsidies, the better part of what goes (back) down has first been brought up” (Clark & Hird, 2014: 49).

Vanhee on the one hand conjures up the mode of distant observation inherent in the landscape form: the audience is statically seated in a black box theatre and observes

communities, to support possibilities for communities to emerge, for encounters to be possible, but also to be protected from curatorial capture and exploitation of labour.²⁶

What is suggested here is a laborious and continuous engagement that includes considering those working in the background at the specific sites of curatorial engagement, e.g. cleaners, assistants, helpers, carrying out the often repetitive maintenance and production work. What a close reading of Puig de la Casa's notion of care brings into relief is an acknowledgement of the inherent asymmetries in any form of care and the awareness that care for some always involves withdrawing care from others. Rather than conceptualizing curatorial care as the radical other of conflictual or asymmetric relations my proposal is to not sever connections also across lines of dissent and conflict.

Another aspect brought to the fore through an in-depth reflection on care is a broader understanding of community, extending beyond the artistic field and also beyond an exclusively human realm. Following Puig de la Casa's and others' definition of a-subjective care as something that is passing through and that subverts subject – object relations – means to consider the wider web of life, the more than human chains of labor of all beings and forces present, involving for instance the materials involved, the build environments, infrastructures, technologies, the water ways, the ground or weather worlds, but also the trail of waste, the left overs of such artistic encounters. Such curatorial care then is more than friendship,

26 There are many who propose to curate in a similar spirit, see for instance Roselle Pineda's understanding of performance curation as community work and relational care giving (Pineda in Davida et al., 2019: 277-279). See also Rebecca Schneider, who argues for the need to carefully address the labouring (artist's and spectator's) body in the through the curator, especially in the context of performance curation (Schneider, 2010: 67).

the action from a distance. It is not invited to roam the emerging waste-land, to walk through it, to go in and out, nor does the audience surround the action.¹⁹ Instead it is called upon to observe and listen to a growing waste scape from a central, static and (relatively) distant, panoramic perspective. As Vanhee labours mostly close to the ground – steadily unpacking and spreading her waste across the floor of the stage, beginning sideways, reaching sometimes into the centre of the stage, sometimes to edges and corners, up to the feet of the viewers in the first row, until nearly the whole space of the stage is covered- the audience surveys the action from a slightly elevated and distant position.

On the other hand, she troubles the notion of landscape as a (readymade) object given to the mastering gaze. I suggest that Vanhee invokes – even if indirectly – the abundance of the “common wastes” (Cooper, 2010: 1117), rather than the empty lands ready for exploitation or the abandoned land after extraction, toxification or landfilling. Her wasteland is a populated zone, inhabited by many human and more than human agents, who engage in “improper use” (Scanlan, 2005: 24-25; Cooper, 2010: 1117), not abandoning nor exporting toxic inheritance. This resonates in some ways with the complex etymology of landscape, which does not only tie it to the gaze and distant vision, but to the everyday practices of those labouring the land. Tim Ingold refers to the common but in his view mistaken confusion of the suffix ‘scape’ with ‘scope’. While the latter is indeed linked to vision, scape has a very distinct etymology linking it to Old English sceppan or skyppan, meaning to shape (Ingold, 2011a: 126). Ingold concludes: “Medieval shapers of the land were not painters but farmers” and shaping was “work done close-up, in an immediate, muscular and visceral engagement with wood, grass and soil – the very opposite of the distanced, contemplative and panoramic optic that the word ‘landscape’ conjures up in many

19 Some of these elements were at times considered and abandoned in the preparation and rehearsal phase (WV & CB, 2019).

affinity, fidelity, even love, extended to certain artists, or care for a network of peers, as important as this might be. It might be akin to what the team at CASCO in Utrecht – an experimental artistic institution with strong affinities to feminist, queer, postcolonial discourse and activism – describes as their understanding of exhibitions “as forms of assembly of labour – including labour of matter and other non-human lives” (Rehberg et al. 2017, n. pag.).

In the context of this study such a-subjective, careful curating in community has meant:

- To return to those artists and works, which have stayed with me, posing a question or a challenge to my curatorial practice. These might be sticky works, in the sense Mieke Bal described “sticky images”, which remain in time (Bal, 2000). To consider and acknowledge this wider gathering of artists and works, not all of whom I could consider with the same intensity in this study, but who nevertheless influenced my approach.
- To conduct extended curatorial conversations with the artists but also with their collaborators, assistants, producers or helpers, with those workers behind the scenes of artistic production such as the long-time collaborators of the New York City Department of Sanitation, who were important interlocutors for artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles or the collaborators of the performance *Oblivion* by artist Sarah Vanhee.
- To visit and spend time in specific places of artistic production of these artists and to understand those as part of a larger network of relations with numerous beings and forces. (See chapter ‘Curating as grounded practice’)

minds today” (Ingold, 2011: 126). Vanhee engages in an expanded notion of such land-shaping as process,²⁰ bringing the erased background of the multiple shapers of the land to the fore, engaging in improper use, including danced excess and communality. In her letter to Leanne Simpson she wrote:

We can dance on our trash. To celebrate real excess, not the calculated and rationalized pseudo-abundance capitalism offers us. We can turn inside to the darkness and see who else is there. We can decide collectively not to forget. We can decide to organize ourselves to be citizens rather than shoppers.

Vanhee, 2017a: n. pag.

This ‘we’ involves waste as agent. Towards the end of the piece Vanhee speaks with waste, addressing it as worker of its transformation, and waste speaks through Vanhee, addressing the audience: “We are your land, your soil, your soul, your memory, we know everything about you, we are your DNA, your freedom, your democracy, we are made by you to be destroyed by you.” This we is a conflictual, unequal collective. And by setting clear boundaries between audience, performer and waste, between those watching and those labouring, she foregrounds the power dynamics at play in ongoing extraction and discard events. At the same time, she pushes against these boundaries – not only literally, by coming up to the feet of the audience members in the first row, but also through the inherent boundary blurring vastness of the waste-scape/waste-shape that is only highlighted through its containment within the four walls of the theatre and the limited time frame of the performance. Vanhee speaks of the destabilising effect of the potential uncontainability and vastness of the piece (Vanhee, 2018a) and describes audience reactions, speaking of similar affective states, describing for instance how they were searching for something to hold onto, such as vertical items like bottles, and how the piece made them feel sick

²⁰ See also Jill H. Casid for the notion of landscape as performative, and for “setting landscape in motion as a verb” (Casid, 2011).

- To consider in my writing and in my curatorial proposals those beings, forces, practices, people and networks of relations who brought certain practices to the fore and who helped realise this research: I knew of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook through the work of feminist scholar Annika Fuhrman, who I had met years ago; I could only meet and talk with Rasdjarmrearnsook in Chiang Mai through the help of a network of young queer artists and producers, who mobilised their contacts and who invited me to the artist residency Extantation in Chiang Mai; I learned about artist Cecilia Vicuña's work through a gift by artist Eleonora Fabião, through a story she told, an image she brought, an urgency she conveyed in the context of another joint research and curatorial project.

Curating as haptic

The notion of haptic care elaborated in this chapter brings a mimetic, embodied and vulnerable engagement with the continuities of lived experience and expression to the foreground. This slowed down and proximate form of engagement entails an element of mimetic repetition, or “everyday redoing” (Puig de la Bel-lacasa, 2017: 117). While a predominantly optical mode of engagement with artistic work focusses on detecting, delineating, identifying a ‘presentable’ art work, the haptic engagement is unable to detect boundaries between art work and work of art. It gets so close that boundaries blur, it feels the intensities, rhythms, continuities of a practice, it can’t distinguish between old and new, or between lived life and work. It might need to redo conditions of its existence or emergence in order to keep its rhythm ongoing. It might involve listening, following lines of work across gaps and breaks, walking alongside, revisiting, again and again, accompanying through everydayness and translating such acts into curatorial support. Distinctions between the ‘art work’ and ‘the work of art’ are blurred in such an approach, and what is foregrounded instead is a commitment to the possibility of the conti-

once they recognized that the material would come closer and closer (Vanhee, 2018). The vastness of her waste-scape blurs both temporal and spatial boundaries and coordinates: between background and foreground, between beginning and ending, between the spectator’s body, the waste, the sewer, the landfill.

The temporal register of the work points towards long duration, on the one hand the year during which Vanhee has collected her waste, present on stage through one box per week, and on the other hand the long time it takes to unpack the boxes during the performance. She attempts to halt the fast-paced metabolic circle of resource extraction and waste depositing and invites spectators to linger in a slow-motion-like loop, with repetitive acts, which could go on ad infinitum.²¹ This has affinities with what Adrian Heathfield has coined durational aesthetics – a “wasteful form of labour that saves nothing” (Heathfield, 2009: 22). He describes experienced duration as

the collapse of objective measure. Whether it is short or long in ‘clock time,’ its passage will be marked by a sense of the warping of time, an opening of regularity to other phenomena or inchoate orders. Duration will often be accompanied by the spatial senses of expansion, suspension or collapse, or by reverential, chaotic or cosmic phenomena as notions of temporal distinctions are undone. Time arises in duration in its indivisibility and its incapacity to become an object of thought, analysis, or representation.

Heathfield, 2014: 142

Durational aesthetics then engages with the “sense passage in which attention is drawn to time reforming, to time questioned, to time undone, to non-linear time” (Heathfield, 2014: 142) often in contrast to a temporal measure against which the

21 The production collaborator who was most intensively involved with the waste, also speaks of the objects as taking a pause, before they might be released, entering again the circles of deterioration or recovery (Sepp, 2019).

nuity of lived expression in, beyond or beside the ‘art work’ and the situation of curatorial display. It is a practice which does not only make artistic practice visible, but most of all possible (to rephrase Puig, 2017: 118), that enacts its possibilisation in continuity, against the forces of elimination.

Haptic curating in this study has involved redoing aspects of practice:

- To unpack and repack 22 boxes of various mixed materials in Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ archive; to feel those materials – the many gloves, plaster casts of two hands, surprisingly patterned and sequined fabrics, multiple and varying land-fill lining materials and plastic nets, asphalt and glasphalt samples, a block of clay and bricks.
- To help Sarah Vanhee and her crew sorting the waste after the performance *Oblivion*, a meticulous and slow process as elaborated above.
- To stop throwing away my own waste while writing about Vanhee’s work and repeatedly clean, handle and engage with this waste; to notice my haptic fascination for bags.
- To follow the lead of the waste bag further, throughout this research: ranging from the waste bag or box (like those in which Sarah Vanhee or Mierle Laderman Ukeles keep waste, paraphernalia or archival materials; the plastic box in which the oblivion of *Oblivion* is being stored; or the deep freezer box in which artist Sophia New and her daughter keep their placenta), to the body shroud or bodybag (used in Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’s morgue performances, in Eleonora Fabião’s street action *Stains*, in María Evelia Marmolejo’s performance *Anónimo 4* or Senga Nengudi’s stretched and sagging nylon shrouds (R.S.V.P. series), to human scale plastic wearables (by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Tejal Shah) and large scale architectural inflatables (by Mierle Laderman Ukeles or

work can be interpreted. In the case of *Oblivion* such measure is the yearful of waste neatly stored in box after box and the time it takes to unpack this waste on stage. But at the same time the work undoes any such measure, it points at multiplications, at infinities: What if we – the artist, the spectators, the collaborators – would have to handle the waste of every year, what if we would need to live with it all our lives. What of those who attend to, who handle and live with all our waste – those workers, beings, forces far away and very close.

While she conjures the classical landscape form to be observed from a distant vantage point, Vanhee also pushes at its boundaries, destabilizing the static central perspective, the controlling, measuring, appropriating gaze. She does so by composing an unformed, unstructured, non-hierarchical horizontal plane, that offers nearly nothing – echoing the comment by a spectator that I have mentioned earlier – to hold onto. Every item relates to every other item, no order, no sense of direction, no perspective or modulated shape emerges. This resonates in some way with the notion of landscape play as introduced by Gertrude Stein and further developed by artists of the experimental avant-garde, and theorized by Elinor Fuchs, Hans Thies Lehmann and others (Fuchs & Chaudhuri, 2002; Lehmann, 1999; Strahler Holzapfel, 2016). As Hans Thies Lehmann has elaborated in reference to Stein, Fuchs and Wilson, the landscape play is not so much linked to the visual tradition of the pastorelle but rather offers a horizontal de-hierarchisation of theatrical elements (Lehmann, 1999: 104). Lehmann links the lack of a classical dramatic narrative in works by Stein and others to a landscape without central perspective, in which every single element relates to every other single element and which might even point towards a “post-anthropocentric theatre” in which humans join with other elements and objects on the same plane (Lehmann, 1999: 137).²² This aspect has also been stressed by Ana

²² For a short overview on the role of landscape in performance see Strahler Holzapfel (2016). An extensive discussion is offered by Fuchs & Chaudhuri (2002).

Tomás Saraceno), to the large plastic wrapped underground formation that is the lined landfill (as explored by Mierle Laderman Ukeles).

- To propose further haptic re-doings of the artistic methods researched, potentially involving institutions and audiences, as elaborated in my curatorial proposals below (see chapter ‘Sticky Proposals’).

Curating as sticky durational

I have elaborated above the stickiness of care as dwelling in the dissolve, engaging the no-thingness of (waste) matter and a specific thick and durational temporality. I have elaborated the curatorial encounters with sticky no-thingness above (see ‘Introduction’ and chapter ‘Curating no-thingness’). Durational, sticky temporality in curatorial care questions the focus on singular events or displays, on standardized timescales and temporal formats and instead involves considering the multiple, sometimes long durational processes of artistic creation, reflection, engagement and reception. Numerous authors and practitioners, especially those engaged with processual art and (long durational) performing arts, have articulated and practiced modes of curating that attempt to trouble and extend the singular event or the standardized time frame, as elaborated above (see ‘Introduction’). These approaches however still consider curating as being tied to a somewhat identifiable project and initiative – this venue, these artists and works, this schedule. In the context of this study I have considered more explicitly the durational aspect of curatorial labour, including the afterlife and waste of artistic and curatorial processes, the care-demands extended by forms of waste remaining, the non human / more than human timescales implied and touched upon.²⁷ In the context of this study such curatorial durationality has implied the following:

Vujanović’s recent reflection on contemporary landscape dramaturgy, in which she detects the “suspension of perspectival order” and instead the creation of a “landscape in its thingness in which the only way to situate ourselves as audience is to enter as one of the components of that unstructured world” and thereby experiment with what she calls an “impersonal view” (Vujanović, 2020: n.pag.).

Coming back to the feeling of sickness, which some audience members describe, and which I also experienced when first seeing the piece – my assumption is that it is not only related to the potential repulsiveness of waste, but also and maybe mostly so to the vastness of the piece and its destabilizing effect through the blurring of a stable perspective and clear boundaries, which is only highlighted through its measured containment. Potentially becoming just “one of the components of that unstructured world” (Vujanović, 2020: n.pag.), waste among waste, is the seemingly daunting invitation extended by *Oblivion*. However, Vanhee allures to the possibility that plunging into the abundance of common waste opens up a world of collectivity and improper uses. Towards the end of *Oblivion* she sketches some of the many possibilities for such improper use²³ – for instance by quoting her unrealized or abandoned ideas for the piece such as “calling everybody by their first name” including every waste piece, or “giving everybody a piece of my waste” creating webs of connectivity. By dancing with her waste. Or by imagining the potential journeys of her waste after the piece ends its touring. This abundant collectivity engaging in improper use does require work, sticky care work, work that expands or sidesteps notions of proper use or useful use.

23 This ‘improper use’ resonates with Sarah Ahmed’s thinking about “queer use” as using “the less used paths” (Ahmed, 2018: n.pag.). It also reminds of the artistic labour happening outside a framework of use value, as elaborated by Laura Harris (2018) and Giulia Palladini (2017) and referenced above in the chapter ‘Curating waste matters: no-thing to be exhibited’.

- To consider and follow the long duration of artistic practices, also those beside or beyond a definable art work, such as the countless unrealized project proposals in relation to landfills developed by artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles over many decades.
- To project what Mierle Laderman Ukeles has described as “excessive patience” into the future through imagining the possible ongoingness and collective enactment of some of her proposals.
- To consider the numerous delineated art works by artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook conducted in the hospital morgue of Chiang Mai as process, considering intervals and breaks as part of the work, and interweave them into the durationality of her practice.
- To consider the long process of developing and touring Sarah Vanhee’s performance *Oblivion* as the work.
- To imagine the (potentially endless) afterlife of the waste of Vanhee’s performance.
- To wait for a form of response to these practices to emerge.

Curating as sticky care most of all implies to make artistic experimentation not only visible but possible and therefore to speculate on its possibilisation in continuity. I have therefore chosen to proceed through curatorial proposals which speculate how the seemingly impossible can be translated into further materialisations.

²⁷ This resonates with Heathfield who argues that “durational aesthetics have significant consequences for the practice of curation itself”, pointing towards modes of inhabiting, both in relation to producing and spectating, and towards the “ongoingness of curation as public activity” (Heathfield, 2014: 148).

photo: P. Deprez



photo: Ørjan Deisz

Sarah Vanhee, *Oblivion*

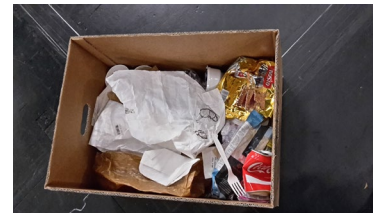
photo: B. Knaup

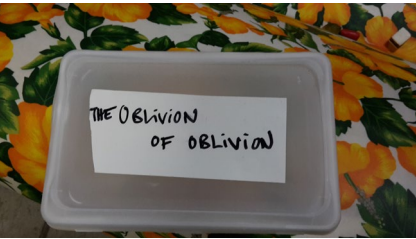


Sarah Vanhee, *Oblivion*, boxed-up stage set after the performance at Festival Theaterformen, Hanover, 14.06.2017, photo: B. Knaup



Sarah Vanhee, *Oblivion*, boxed-up stage set after the performance at Festival Theaterformen, Hanover, 14.06.2017, photo: B. Knaup





Sarah Vanhee, *The oblivion of Oblivion*, box with leftovers of *Oblivion*, backstage after the performance, Festival Theaterformen, Hanover, 14.06.2017, photo: B. Knaup

Oblivion by Sarah Vanhee Source Material

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Oblivion by Sarah Vanhee

Source Material

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Sarah Vanhee, *Oblivion*, handout sheet with sources, performance at HAU3, Berlin, 21.11.2015, photo: B. Knaup

Packaged airline Waste Bag, 2018, photo: B. Knaup



Bettina Knaup, personal household waste, 2018, photo: B. Knaup

Sticky Proposals

Introduction

Proposing is a standard mode of operating for artists and curators alike. It often proceeds in an administrative language when seeking support and endorsements from funding or commissioning institutions. In these cases, the proposal is mostly articulated in an idiom of feasibility and productivity. But surely for many artists proposing is also an artistic performative medium in its own right, which proceeds in various forms and languages, including drawings, dreams, sketches, poems, and many more. It would go beyond the scope of this research to elaborate this rich history, which ranges from those conceptual artists creating predominantly linguistic proposition, which didn't rely on realisation (Berger, 2019; Buchmann, 2014) to proposals which are meant to be realised, creating a repertory of experimentation as in the case of the many instruction pieces created by artists, dancers, choreographers alike.¹ I am inspired by those artists who have in-

tentionally exceeded the realm of the feasible or realistic, while nevertheless insisting on the urgency of realisation. As Harris has beautifully described in relation to neoconcretist artist Hélio Oiticica and his extensive production of (unrealised) proposals, these were conceived as “non ending”, as “insurgent form-making in the resistance to subjection” (Harris, 2018: 117). This ‘non ending’ production of proposals resonates with Ukeles’ ‘method of continuing’ through proposing, his ‘ultra waiting’ with Ukeles’ ‘excessive patience’. Both have insisted on a future of collective enactments against the forces of impossibilisation through insistent proposing. This resonates with the arguments developed by Didier Debaise and Isabell Stengers, who insists that we need to increase the realm of the possible “by means of resisting the probable” (Debaise & Stengers, 2017).

Ukeles’ proposals mix the idiom of administration – using a seemingly coherent ordering system, quoting several facts and numbers or using a managerial vocabulary such as ‘guiding principles’, ‘working phases’, ‘preparation and follow up meetings’ – with dreams or futuristic scenarios or exhibition proposals.² Some of her proposals have been realised, others are perpetually delayed. These proposals entail either bringing waste into the art institution and making the related carework visible or bringing art in a lasting way into waste management systems.³

While touring *Oblivion*, which brings waste into the theatre, but without questioning or disturbing the modus operandi of this institution, Sarah Vanhee presented a dream of an art institution, which resonated in some ways with Ukeles’ proposals. In a lecture held at a conference at Buda Kortrijk in 2017, conjuring dreams, reflections

1 See the exhibition *do it*, part of Manchester International Festival 2013 at Manchester Art Gallery (curated by H.U. Obrist, C. Boltanski, B. Lavier), focussing on instructions by artists, available at: <http://doit2013.org> (accessed: 27.02.2021).

2 The *Manifesto of Maintenance Art!* entails the exhibition proposal *Care* (Ukeles, 1969), the document *Maintenance Art Works meets the N.Y.C. Department of Sanitation* entails a drawing “Book of dreams of the Department of Sanitation” and a futuristic scenario of waste scarcity (Ukeles, 1977).

3 For example, filling the public museum with waste, entering the Department of Sanitation as Artist in Residence, or bringing the public into the landfill through underground labs.

and debates about the *Fantastic Institution*, Sarah Vanhee spoke critically about the discrepancy between the content of critical artistic programs organised by many cultural institutions and the way these same institutions operate internally. In this lecture she presented a phantasmagorical dream of an alternative institution that does not invest in vertical visibility and uprightness but would “give in to gravity”, allow its visitors and collaborators to “tumble or stumble or jump or slowly sink into a hole in the ground”, into a pit, a sink, a ditch, an abyss, but also a hiding place, a protective shelter, a cave and many other things. This institution would invest in other dimensions than visibility or status, it would not predominantly favour the new, but rather engage with afterlives, with what seems dead, and would open up “holes in time” (Vanhee, 2018b). During the same conference Bojana Kunst also activated a dreamlike core of the institution:

The core of every institution is imagination, a dreamy, misty kernel. When reflecting on the processes of instituting, it is essential to consider this misty core, which can be described as dreamy, foggy, steamy matter, or, to say it differently, an uncontrollable and wet foam of imagination, which brings people, animals and things together. But this dreamy fog of imagination is also a reason why institutions, when established, try to erase their misty core and build monuments to themselves in the form of solid spatial structures, rules, firm protocols and archival possessions of the past.

Kunst, 2017: n. pag.

Referencing the much discussed paradoxical tension between the imaginary and often revolutionary process of instituting versus the exclusionary violence often inherent in the successfully instituted (Athanasidou, 2015, quoted in: Kunst, 2017; see also Raunig, 2016; O'Neill et al., 2017) she argues for continued engagement with the specific temporality of the misty, humid, foggy process of instituting, for the “present eternity of the not yet”, a “temporal and imaginative rhythmical loop between acting as if and imagining what is not yet” (Kunst, 2017: n. pag.). What is invoked in both scenarios are dreams, darkness, sleep, regeneration, protection, poetic imagination, and a specific, non-linear temporality – rather the opposite of the limelight of the spectacular event, the fast succession of activities and projects.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook has in some way realised such dream of an alternative institution – like a “foggy cloud, or swamp” (Kunst, 2017) or a “hole in the ground” (Vanhee, 2018b) – by insisting upon her impossible proposal of intimate dwellings in the morgue, against all odds, facing many obstacles and resistances. By trespassing repeatedly into the (state medical scientific) institution, she has claimed space and time for artistic inquiries into who and what can speak, can be listened to, can be addressed.

I am inspired to continue proposing by these realised and unrealised impossible proposals by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Sarah Vanhee, by their long durational practices of

- trespassing into and dwelling in sites of forgetting, such as landfills or morgues;
- experimenting with remaining in proximity to waste in the private realm, the studio, the art institute or the theatre rather than exploring circulation, recycling, or transformation;
- reconnecting to the multiple collectives who inhabit or are implicated in these spheres, the many human and more than human beings, matters, or existents inhabiting wastelands;
- providing different descriptions, stories, signs, signals, in order to reread, translate, recompose with waste worlds.

Interlude Tejal Shah

Decoding, reading, translating waste worlds: Tejal Shah's futuristic, poetic, erotic fable *Between the Waves* (2012) has accompanied me throughout this research. I have experienced the immersive five-channel video installation several times⁴, have participated in generous workshops hosted by the artist and was frequently viewing and reviewing the work. *Between the Waves* is "set into the future of the long past", it might be a "transmission send ... in asymmetrical time" or the content of a "time capsule". It invites viewers to follow ecosexual, queer, unicorn like creatures, seeking slow pleasure, communication and encounter in immersive waste environments, which could be both "spaces of refuge or expulsion" (Shah, 2014). Clad in plastic DIY costumes,⁵ they engage in acts of low-tech reading and sign making. The main video (*Between the Waves*, channel I, colour, sound, 26.15 min)



guides viewers through five scenarios and landscapes organised in chapters – which also seem to stand in for a new – old alphabet:⁶

the sign- and love-making in a deserted landscape of rocks and abandoned ruins;

being washed up at a soiled shoreline, gathering and crawling in the mud;

caressing and cleaning a damp, destroyed mangrove forest;

stitching together a plastic coral reef under water;

licking and fucking in eye-cunt-plastic-grape assemblages in toxic dwelling above the city.





Another video follows a group of dancers in an open, still operational landfill, who alternately dance in unison like a semaphoric chorus signalling with all their extensions, or explore and sense and communicate with the mess in singular, improvised movements (*Landfill Dance*, channel II, colour, sound, 5.30 min).

The movement patterns of all these creatures are smooth and earthbound: they lay around, roll, embrace, tumble, stroll, crawl, stoop, crouch. They favour haptic touch, not only visual sense: they touch, lick, penetrate with all their multiple extensions. They are rhythmic: dancing, following, entering the waves, the ripples, the vibrations



of damaged landscapes. They make signs and signal, with tentacular extensions, fire, mirrors, morse code. Spoken language does not figure in these transmissions.

The installation – which spatially embraces its visitors⁷ – proposes various modes of caring, but also deciphering, translating, communicating with, experimenting, story-ing – not in distance from, but in the midst of, exposed to, inserted in and infected by wasted territories. It instigates a form of thinking in the mud or muddle, or even a thinking through wallowing, as proposed by Donna Haraway. Tejal Shah's futuristic, earthbound, wallowing, pleasure seeking creatures can't escape the damage, destruction and mess we have left behind, but seem nevertheless to offer a possible form of inhabitation of this “dream, you did not believe possible yet do not again and again wake from.”⁸

- 4 DOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, 2012; Tejal Shah - Unbecoming, Kunsthaus Hamburg, 25.10.-3.12.2017; Facing India, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg 29.4.-26.8.2018
- 5 The costumes in *Between the Waves* are an explicit quote of Rebecca Horn's video performance *Einhorn* (1970), in which the artist wears a kind of white corset and a headdress carrying an extended, erected horn or column on her head, referencing Frida Kahlo's painting *La Columna Rota* (1944) (Ruhkamp & Shah, 2018). They were handmade using collected waste, created in collaboration with designer Katell Gelebart (Shah, 2014).
- 6 A pictographic seal from the Indus Valley introduces each chapter. The language of the early Indus Valley civilization is – despite many attempts – not yet deciphered. Each chapter also corresponds to a poem by Minal Hajratwala, who is also one of the performers. For more details see Heidenreich's comprehensive description of *Between the Waves* (Heidenreich, 2015).
- 7 For a reflection on the experience of being embraced by *Between the waves* see: Koepfert (2013).
- 8 Transcribed from *Morse Code*, channel V, b&w, sound, 26:15 min.

Tejal Shah, *Landfill Dance*, 2012
Between the Waves, channel II, video, colour, sound, 5:00 min



Proposing intimate dwellings

I have read Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's multiple works with the dead as one extended work stretching across a longer period of time. It is this extension, this repetitive trespassing, this accumulated experimenting with different modes of being and knowing that has inspired me. A central aspect of her work with the dead is to enter an institution of knowledge, the university hospital morgue, the scene of autopsy, and to radically claim space and extended time for a mode of engagement that is based on non-knowing or knowing differently. She does so by foregrounding, sensing, listening, questioning, dissolving the epidermal being, confounding boundaries between live and death, life and non-life.

She has inspired my dream to enable situations which similarly stretch time, exceeding the usual temporal formats of exhibiting, presenting, perceiving art, and entering institutional realms usually not dedicated exclusively to artists, audiences, cultural workers.

Imagine regular inhabitations of the hospital, morgue, the landfill, the wasteland.

Imagine intermittent situations evolving over a period of several years.

Imagine those repeated actions: walking, dancing and dressing, sitting, reading, listening, conversing, laying down, dreaming, sleeping.

Imagine spaces of intimacy – the kitchen, the bedroom, the dressing room, the club and related encounters.

Imagine a connected dwelling, distributed in time and space.

Imagine listening to, encountering, probing (fictitious) epidermal beings, extended skins and the fiction of containment.

Imagine what it would imply “if everything was everything else's external organs” as Povinelli has proposed (Povinelli et al., 2017: 180)?

Following this dream I propose a series of residencies as distributed and connected *conversation rooms*, drawing on the etymological root of conversation as “to dwell, live with, keep company with”⁹. These residencies are resting amongst the discarded, amongst waste, in order to explore different sites and practices of waste storage, of remaining in proximity with waste, of waste intimacies, or of questioning the fiction of containment. Not understood as the established, often short term and production-oriented format for artists or experts only, these residencies are meant to be open for activists, artists, interested citizens, scholars, administrators, students and more-than-human beings and matters, offering longer term (funded) inhabitations. They should connect specific sites, institutions and communities in longer term collaborations and modes of exchange. They aim at – quoting Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Re-Raw Recovery* proposal – “laying claim to these places” and “creating an energy field of public debate and creation for these sites” that “we have all made in common” (Ukeles, 1981).

9 See: Online Etymology Dictionary, available at: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/conversation> (accessed 27.02.2021).

Proposing reversed wastelanding

Extending Ukeles' enduring engagement with the impossible, tracing the resonances between her never realised, leaking *Air Art* inflatables of the 1960s which were meant to connect the ground, water, buildings, beings into one larger metabolism, her perpetually postponed *Landing* (2008-ongoing) amidst the seemingly never leaking, the 'untouchable' underground plastic-wrapped formation of the lined landfill, as well as her dispersed archive I am proposing impossible curatorial acts – as if they would be possible.

Landfills are among the largest structures ever build by humans (Weber, 2014a: 12; Trumpeter, 2012: 279). Even if covered and artfully concealed they will remain in some form. Maybe these underground vaults distributed all over the planet are all that will remain? Taking a cue from Tejal Shah's time travellers, I wonder how they would read and decipher these distributed sites, as large-scale monuments, mines or archives?¹⁰

Sculpted Monuments?

Maybe large-scale art works on landfills such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Landing* (2008-ongoing) – a currently unfinished publicly commissioned art work for the former Fresh Kills landfill¹¹ – will eventually be realised¹² and seem to future generations an indicator for the ceremonial purpose of this site? Could *Landing* – sitting amidst vast salt marches – be read as celebration of, or rather memorial to the (long gone) life sustaining watery network that forms / formed the base of this landfill? Maybe the “racing water creature”, that Ukeles has seen in the Fresh Kills landfill's water ways, will be the most obvious remainder for those future visitors (*Fresh Kills - Imaging the Landfill*, 1995; see p.35)?

Storeroom, Warehouse or Mine?

Will these time travellers understand landfills as a distributed global storeroom, warehouse or mine, especially in view of the regionally highly variable composition of landfills and the accumulation of specific materials in certain places? What will they make of the remainders of places like Agbogboshie, a district of Accra, Ghana, or Guiyu, a city in the Guangdong Province, China, which grew into the world's largest electronic waste hubs in the early decades of the 21st century where thousands of workers are labouring under harsh conditions extracting resources from discarded computers, mobile phones, monitors, etc? (See for instance: UNEP, 2015) Currently scientific, political and legal discussions, as well as (disputed) pilot projects on landfill mining are under way (Weber, 2014b: 144; Buchert et al., 2013).¹³

10 The notion of monument, memorial or archive appears frequently in the respective literature: Weber speaks of landfills as “memorials of the 20th-century consumption culture” (Weber, 2012: 471), Melosi thinks of the Fresh Kills and other landfills as “archives of material and memories” (Melosi, 2020: 9), and Rathje has argued since the 1970s to rethink archaeology as garbology. Rübel refers to artists and intellectuals of the early to mid-20th century who have turned to waste as a “processual archive” of informal history (Rübel, 2002: 128).

11 Another commissioned but not fully realised art work in relation to a landfill site is Nancy Holt's *Sky Mound* (1984-on hold). *Sky Mound*, located in a former landfill four miles from New York City was designed to “incorporate gravel paths in alignment with the solstices, a large gunite sphere encircled by a moat to represent the moon, methane flares visible from planes overhead, and a pond that would attract wildlife and drain surface water from the landfill.” Only the pond has been realized, the rest is delayed “indefinitely” (Holt Smithsonian Foundation, 2021). Available at: <https://holtsmithsonianfoundation.org/sky-mound>. Accessed: 03.03.2021). A proposal to complete the unfinished work has been made recently (Sullivan, 2020).

12 Ukeles' *Landing* is currently delayed, not yet indefinitely, but for “a very long time before anything comes to realization” as a collaborator from the Department of Sanitation explained (Geller, 2020).

13 For an artistic approach reflecting on resonances between colonial gold mines and the ongoing e-waste mining in places like Agbogboshie, see: Louis Henderson, *All that is Solid* (2014, video).

Archives?

What would those time travellers make of the many (waste) archives – should they ever come across them? While landfill and archive appear to represent utter opposites – one intended for disposal the other for preservation – the stubborn persistence and indeterminacy of waste matter undermines any clear-cut distinction. Think for instance of one of the largest (legal) underground toxic waste depots worldwide, which is located in a salt dome in Herfa Neurodhe, Germany. Next to the stored big bags and barrels with toxic waste, it also holds an archival collection of samples from currently more than 50,000 waste deliveries since 1991.¹⁴ Roughly 500 km to the South West a former silver mine in the midst of the Black Forest holds another underground archive: since 1961, a selection of the most relevant files from the German federal archives have been regularly transferred to microfilm and stored in metal containers on metre-long shelves in the so called *Barbara Stollen*. They are meant to outlast war or natural disaster and function as backup files in case of irreversible damage of the German federal archives.¹⁵ They also entail some artworks inserted as part of an artistic intervention at the occasion of the

50th anniversary of the Hague Convention in 2004: artist Adalbert Hoesle commissioned works by 50 contemporary artists to be sealed in stainless steel containers and stored alongside the copies of archival documents in the high security underground archive; they are not supposed to be opened for 1500 years until the year 3504. Among these artists has been Nana Petzet, another ‘waste artist’ (see below, ‘Proposing sticky transfers’), who has worked with waste for decades and has most likely inserted some materials from her waste collection into this vault of cultural memory. (Hoesle, 2004) Had Mierle Laderman Ukeles been able to realise another of her numerous rejected proposals for the Fresh Kills landfill the affinity or even similarity between archive and landfill would be even more evident. In *Public Offerings* (2000-2002) she had proposed the transfer of cultural artefacts into the landfill on a massive scale: a million citizens were supposed to be collecting and donating items of personal meaning to be processed, digitally archived and then inserted into the former landfill¹⁶.

Would those time travellers read the countless landfills as distributed archives, as storages of knowledge, to be visited, to be studied, to be used as a site for learning and experimentation – as envisioned by Mierle Laderman Ukeles in some of her proposals such as *Flow Flatlands* (Ukeles, 2001b: 2)? Would they try to decode the signs they come across and translate them into other languages?

Reversed Wastelanding Residencies

I propose that not only future civilizations or imaginary time travellers decipher and explore the landfills as extended, distributed sites of depositing, archiving, learning, remediating or commemorating. I propose that countless activists, artists, waste workers, citizens, scholars, writers, composers, designers, students engage in a form of revised and reversed wastelanding, to co-develop speculative and material practices in relation to these sites. I propose a series of *Reversed Wastelanding Residencies* to explore landfills as common ground and cultural heritage and to create connections and possible transfers between various forms of deposits: local, global, active, abandoned, closed or remediated landfills on the one hand and the cultural, artistic, material archive

14 For more information see Brendel (2000) and the German radio broadcast *Die dunkle Seite des “Monte Kali”* (2019). Directed by Ludger Fittkau. Deutschlandfunk. Broadcast: 14.04.2019. Available at: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/weltgroesste-untertage-giftmuell-deponie-die-dunkle-seite.724.de.html?dram:article_id=446308 (accessed: 27.02.2021).

15 For further information, see: https://www.bbk.bund.de/DE/AufgabenundAusstattung/Kulturgutschutz/Sicherungsverfilmung/sicherungsverfilmung_node.html (accessed 27.02.2021).

16 The full title is *Proposal for 1 Million People to Participate in a Public Artwork: Public Offerings: Made by All, Redeemed by All* (2000-2002). The items should be collected through “Cultural Transfer Stations” installed across the city (Field Operations, 2006; Phillips, 2016: 184-185). Each item was to be embedded in a glass block, which then should be used to construct a path or another surface in the Fresh Kills Park (Field Operations, 2006; Phillips, 2016: 184-185). Each item was to be marked with a bar code, linking it to a vast archive of citizen’s information. Prototypes of the glassblocks are in Ukeles’ archive.

on the other. The Title *Reversed Wastelanding Residencies* is inspired by some of Ukeles' proposals such as *Re-Raw Recovery*¹⁷ and *Landing* as well as Traci Brynne Voyles' notion of wastelanding (Voyles, 2015). *Reversed Wastelanding* does not imply undoing the landfilling and pollution, but rather undoing the phantasy of unpopulated outer space. These residencies are offering a space for "asking questions and providing different descriptions" (Gleason, 2017)¹⁸ and for acts of translation and sign making as in Tejal Shah's *Between the Waves*. They are offering inhabitations – in, on or near the landfill – and aim to create connections and transfers to related artistic institutions, archives and publics.¹⁹ They aim to help undoing the wilful damage, ignorance, the active non-knowing that is so prevalent in landfilling practices and that is complicit in environmental destruction, racism and injustice. With this in mind, I propose the following actions:

Toxic Dwellings

Given the context in which I work and live, and the fact that Germany is among the world's largest waste producers and exporters I propose a number of *Reversed Wastelanding Residencies* involving critical sites in Germany, Europe and in related waste export destination countries. I suggest to select sites and seek collaboration from three different types of landfills:

1. Waste deposits in former mines, which are hosting the most problematic of wastes: un-recyclable, often hazardous end products of various production and re- or down-cycling processes. These waste deposits are posing similar unresolved problems as atomic waste isolation plants, but are less known and disputed: What happens when these sites are filled to capacity? What happens when containers start leaking? How to communicate the content of the deposits to future generations in many centuries from now? One example is the above mentioned large scale

hazardous final waste deposit in Herfa Neurode, but also a number of so called backfilling mines, which often house the toxic remnants of the incineration of plastic waste.²⁰ Germany is one of the few countries worldwide to use toxic waste for backfilling. Since China has issued its import ban for plastic waste with a number of countries following, these sites are in growing demand (Asendorpf et al., 2018).

2. Old landfills with mixed, often undeterminable contents. Some of those have triggered important environmental movements, such as in the case of landfills in former Eastern Germany, located near the border to West Berlin and West Germany, which were specifically built (or enlarged) to accept Western waste imports (in some cases toxic) in exchange for urgently needed currencies. They have regularly been the subject of environmental protests in the former GDR and some continue to be disputed, while others are forgotten.²¹

17 It was one of her earliest landfill related proposals: a public invitation for a design competition for New York solid waste landfills, published in the feminist art magazine *Heresis*, addressed to "artists, architects, landscape architects, environmentalists, earth dreamers, socio-political creators, sanitation workers – world wide" (Ukeles, 1981: 76).

18 This is how Ukeles' main interlocutor at the New York City Department of Sanitation has described her method to me (Gleason, 2017).

19 Interesting models are programs such as RAIR (Recycled Artist in Residence) at one of Philadelphia's landfill and PAIR (Public Artist in Residence) recently launched by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, both inspired by the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

20 Backfilling mines are former mines that need to be filled in order to prevent collapse. In Germany there are seven active sites. Waste deposited here is statistically counted as 'recycled'. Germany is among the few countries that allows the use of hazardous waste for backfilling (Asendorpf et al., 2018).

21 See for instance visual and performance artist Anna Zett who has recently explored resonances between the archive of the environmental movement of the GDR, the landfill and the decline of the former GDR in works such as *Deponie* (2018) and *Freiheit III* (2019).

3. Landfill sites in the main countries of destination for the legal and illegal export of waste. Among the recent main destination countries of German and European (plastic) waste exports is Malaysia.²² NGOs are currently engaging in research and activism in relation to such unregulated landfill sites, trying to locate them, to document their contents and source countries, as well as environmental impact (Greenpeace, 2020).

Each residence aims to create lasting connections between specific landfill sites, residents (artists, activists, students, scholars) and art institutions and stimulate relationships which enable to consider the legacies of waste as a form of common ground and cultural heritage and question the role of the art academy and archive in times of ecological damage. Of specific interest could be art institutions, which do offer artist residencies and who also engage in archival practices, and who are interested to expand their mission of hosting and archiving into the ground and into the landfill.

Given that access to many landfills will be difficult to obtain, given the complexity of landfill landscapes that cannot be grasped by short term visits, but need to be inhabited, collaborations with related local art and cultural institutions, who can offer residencies will be central. Another possibility is to develop a temporary living unit or module, which could be attached to waste infrastructures, which otherwise cannot or do not want to host visitors. Such a module could build upon Ukeles' floating *Air Art* works and be developed together with artists, designers and architects.²³

Archival Transfers

Regarding Mierle Laderman Ukeles' archive I propose the following actions:

What if Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the Archives of American Art, who now hold her extensive paper archive, and the New York City Department of Sanitation agree to a collaboration, which would interrelate and bind them for an indeterminate period of time:

What if the many boxes with material samples from Mierle Laderman Ukeles' archive – materials that have not been considered to have the status of a 'document' worth including in the holdings of the Archives of American Art – would be handed over and permanently housed by the Department of Sanitation and made publicly accessible for archival or other research.²⁴ A full artistic documentation of this material would be commissioned and added to the holdings of the Archives of American Art. The collections at the Archives of American Art and at the DSNY would therefore form a distributed but connected archive.

And what if this distributed archive would not be static but grow continuously – at least until the Fresh Kills landfill will have become a publicly accessible site and until the ambitious DSNY goal of zero waste to landfill will have been achieved? Imagine that until then the DSNY and the Archives of American Art would jointly offer an annual residency to an artist, scholar or activist, who would continue speculative, artistic research on landfilling – be it in relation to waste export – its composition, destinations and effects – or in relation to ongoing remediation work at NYC landfills. Documentation of this work and related

²² For details see Greenpeace (2020); Fuhr et al., (2018) and NABU (2018), available at: <https://www.nabu.de/umwelt-und-ressourcen/abfall-und-recycling/26205.html> (accessed 27.02.2021).

²³ An example could be the architectural collective Raumlabor from Berlin, who scrutinize infrastructures and places that are abandoned, left over or in transition, and who develop small scale modules enabling common use, re-use, renewal – such as their (unrealised) proposal of a mobile and adaptable dream hotel *Snuggle* (2009) or the prototype of an alternative art institution, *the House of Contamination* (2010). For more information, see: <https://raumlabor.net> (accessed 27.02.2021).

²⁴ Maybe the envisioned future *Sanitation Museum*, mentioned in the DSNY annual report 2016, would be a good location (NYC Department of Sanitation, 2016: 49).

material samples would be added to both the archival collection in the Archives of American Art and to the collection of material samples at the Department of Sanitation.

The morse code transmission from Tejal Shah's wasteland *Between the Waves* signals in "dreamtime". It weaves energies, ripples, signs, desires "no instrument can measure, in the dream, you did not believe possible, yet do not again and again wake from."²⁵ The work and particularly

this quote seem to collapse the inescapable nightmare of wastelanding and the impossibilities but continuously maintained potentiality of dreaming otherwise, which infused Ukeles' decade long work on landfills and inspires *Reversed Wastelanding*.

Proposing sticky transfers

The potentially unending nature of Sarah Vanhee's practice, her sticky form of care for everything as something, the call from her boxes filled with waste, which might cease to be stage props in the near future, but will continue to stick around somewhere, as well as her dream of an alternative institution, inspire my curatorial imagination. I am also inspired by an inherent contradiction of *Oblivion*: while her practice consists of a (temporary) suspension of circulation and extends an invitation to linger in a slow motion, careful attention among waste, *Oblivion* itself became a very successful, internationally touring stage performance, circulating with relative ease across Europe and even further to Canada. The modus operandi of the hosting institutions staging this suspended circulation in circulation was rarely affected by her methods (WV & CB, 2019; Vanhee, 2018). I am therefore proposing to expand and transfer her practice to the institutional field,

not in the mode of rapid circulation, but in a slow, sticky transfer, hand to hand, acting as if it would be possible.

I propose that *Oblivion* will continue to stick around and not fall into oblivion. I propose that it can rely on and fall back on (some of) the institutions which have been engaged in supporting, sharing, staging *Oblivion* so far.²⁶ I propose that these institutions become involved in a collective process of taking care of the performance's next stage, once the performance tour has come to an end. I am not suggesting an archival approach, but acts of after care and method transfer.

After Care

I propose that a few of these institutions will invite and host Sarah Vanhee and her team to figure out what the next journey of the waste, which became the main agent of *Oblivion*, could entail and provide the respective resources, for instance through a commission and residencies. Will the content of these 43 boxes (and the additional ones with the waste of the waste) be quietly discarded, or maintained and stored for an undefined period as prop, become the focus of documentary or archival endeavours, or turn into an agent of yet another performance, maybe one of collective deliberation, dissemination, or closure through burial or burning? What about the immaterial waste she took note of, the stories, abandoned ideas, the good advice not followed through? What to do with them without falling back into a logic of recycling, that the work itself otherwise disavows?

²⁵ Transcribed from Tejal Shah, *Between the Waves – Morse Code*.

²⁶ For a complete list of all theatres and art centres, who have hosted *Oblivion* see <https://www.sarahvanhee.com/oblivion> (accessed: 27.02.2021).

Method Transfer

I propose that institutions (the same or others) will also come together for a learning experiment and each – in the sense of the haptic mimetic care elaborated above – commits to adopt and implement one specific aspect of Vanhee's artistic methodology into their own institutional mode of operation, for instance take note of, consider, create a relationship with a specific dimension of their own material and immaterial wastes. This could entail the afterlives of various productions, events and activities, the discarded projects, the consumed ener-

gies and materials, or the usually invisible relations to the many maintenance workers enabling the institution's operations. How might such an approach contribute to reinventing their daily operations and re-figuring their relations with waste maintenance workers and agencies to further new ecological knowledge and practices? How might this alter the imaginary of the institution's future becoming?

Hand to Hand

This next phase of *Oblivion* will be accompanied by other artists and members of institutions who are already experimenting with the lasting legacy of waste by keeping, storing, digesting it, by listening to it, following it and by experimenting with the transfer of such approaches between different realms. They will be invited, – as advisers, companions, external witnesses, artists in residence – to add and share their expertise of experimental waste storage and method transfer and to accompany the process throughout its duration.

Interlude

Climbing a steep staircase Nana Petzet guides me in her attic, which is filled with boxes – holding her extensive waste and recyclables collection, assembled over more than 20 years. She designs alternative collective waste disposal, recycling and research systems, which she experimentally implements in her home or studio, which she transfers to public, artistic contexts, and whose wider implementation she projects through (fictitious) research reports and press clippings, videos, diagrams e.a. In 1995 she has prototyped the SBF System (an abbreviation for 'Sammeln, Bewahren, Forschen' [collecting, preserving, researching]) as an ecological alternative to the official German waste collection and recycling system DS (Duales

System [dual system]), introduced in the early 1990s. The SBF system essentially suggests that waste should not leave the (private) household at all, but rather become a final waste deposit site (Petzet, 2001: 35). Instead Petzet instructs how everybody – in a highly elaborate and methodical manner – can store, research and reuse waste, collect detailed waste flow data, invent new applications, build local exchange networks, until eventually, after reaching a degree of saturation, more waste production will be completely avoided. Nana Petzet has implemented the SBF system herself or transferred it in numerous model phases to art institutions and is still doing so. She is in the process – in collaboration with Kunsthalle Hamburg –

of making an inventory of her waste collection, using the Hida collection management software, which is used by more than 350 museums in Germany, to iconographically, technically, historically describe art works and monuments. She has also become a partner of the distributed and publicly accessible, official image database Bildindex der Kunst und Architektur and has made some of her data accessible and searchable in this context.²⁷ Her latest endeavour is to investigate the increased use of waste incineration and to transfer this technology experimentally into the private household or local neighbourhood, for instance by designing a community cooker, which is fuelled through burning waste (Community Cooker, 2017, p.9).²⁸

After a lengthy day at the conference Hybrid Matters²⁹ the artist and designer duo Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl are serving mealworm snacks at a bar. This action is part of their project Plastic Imaginaries (2015-2016), which experiments quite literally with waste storage and digestion: while speculatively anticipating a near future of living “in the aftermath of the plastic era” they have invited participants to cultivate mealworms that can biodegrade styrofoam and have developed and experimented with mealworm recipes in various workshop and events. They also published a speculative story which anticipates a world of resource scarcity, in which waste disposal is not advisable anymore, and governments instruct people to store plastic waste in-house (Lindström & Ståhl, 2017).

Their Un/Making Studio attempts to complicate and even turn around design’s modernist focus “on what is made” and instead explore “what is replaced, left behind and becoming waste”.³⁰

Brussel-based interdisciplinary art school E.R.G. (Ecole de Recherche Graphique) has developed into a zone of experimentation under the direction of feminist artist and curator Laurence Rassel. In 2019 she gave Sarah Vanhee and me a tour and organised meetings with various students and staff to learn more about their approach. She attempts to transfer approaches of Institutional Psychotherapy (IP) – developed by François Tosquelles, Jean

Oury and Felix Guattari in the context of the psychiatric hospital – to an art school. A central principle of IP is to apply care not only to patients but also to the institution as such. E.R.G. therefore defines itself as a place “where one enters zones of theoretical or practical risks”, where decisions are taken collectively, and where one learns from what does not work. The institutional mode of operation is as much part of education and reflection as artistic practice.³¹ One area of learning is waste. The school aims to take account of its own waste production and find solutions to its waste disposal, it experiments with waste cooking for the academy’s canteen and with the sharing of waste materials for artistic production.³²

27 See Deutsches Dokumentationszentrum für Kunstgeschichte – Bildarchiv Foto Marburg (2021) *Bildindex*. Available at: <https://www.bildindex.de> (accessed: 27.02.2021). If you search the German term Milch (milk) you will see a used milk carton from her collection appearing next to a series of lactating Madonnas. And the 199 image results for the keyword readymade entail three from Duchamp, three from other artists and 193 from Petzet. However, I am not suggesting to read Nana Petzet’s work solely in the context of the readymade, but rather consider her long durational performative engagement to keep waste in proximity.

28 For more information see: <http://www.nanapetzet.de> (accessed: 27.02.2021).

29 Hybrid Matters, available at: <https://hybridmatters.net> (accessed: 27.02.2021).

30 For more information see: <http://www.unmakingstudio.se> (accessed: 27.02.2021).

31 For more information see: http://wiki.erg.be/m/#Bienvenue_à_l'erg (accessed: 27.02.2021).

32 For a reflection on E.R.G. and Rassel’s strategies see: Sollfrank (2019).

Gathering and Inhabiting

I propose that this next phase of *Oblivion*, this investigation of the oblivion of *Oblivion*, will begin with a joint reflection on method transfers. This meeting will also be the beginning of the next phase of collaborations

- between the institution that will host Sarah Vanhee and her team and her boxes of waste and provide them with a context for exploring what happens next;
- between those institutions that will implement some form of experimental waste storage and an artist or practitioner in residence accompanying this process.

This long-term process of sticky care work, inhabitation, and exchange will culminate in a public gathering which shares experiences through manuals, databases, or hand to hand through reenactments, workshops and training sessions. It will also involve a joint action with the collected waste: Nana Petzet’s community cooker could be deployed here, burning some of the waste, maybe even the

content of Sarah Vanhee's boxes. Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl and other artists working with waste digestion could test and offer some of their recipes. Artists could experiment with performative modes of transfer and exchange – not least inspired by examples such as Nana Petzet's transfer of waste into artistic or institutional archives or Mierle Laderman Ukeles' unrealised performance proposal *Public Offerings* (2000-2002) – a large scale action involving citizens collecting and donating waste.

Acting as if it would be possible: Not without *Oblivion's* afterlife.

Acting as if it would be possible: Artistic institutions investing sticky care work, in order to sidestep the proper use, useful use of a performance, of people, of resources.

Acting as if it would be possible: the cultural institution as a hole in time and in the ground, to dwell in abundant collectivity.

Interlude Cecilia Vicuña

Arte precario (1996) ³³

Debris, a past to come: what we say about ourselves.

An object is not an object, it is the witness to a relationship.

A thread is not a thread, but a thousand tiny fibers entwined.

The word unravelling in the air, begins again.

The warp is the arm

And the weft is the world.

The city is the book

And our gestures in it, the writing.

³³ Quoted in: de Zegher (1997: 136-137).

Galaxy of Litter (1989) ³⁴

Changing signs, mine and those there by chance.

Little boats and trash mingling.

My basuritas touching the plastic plate

That will live a million years.

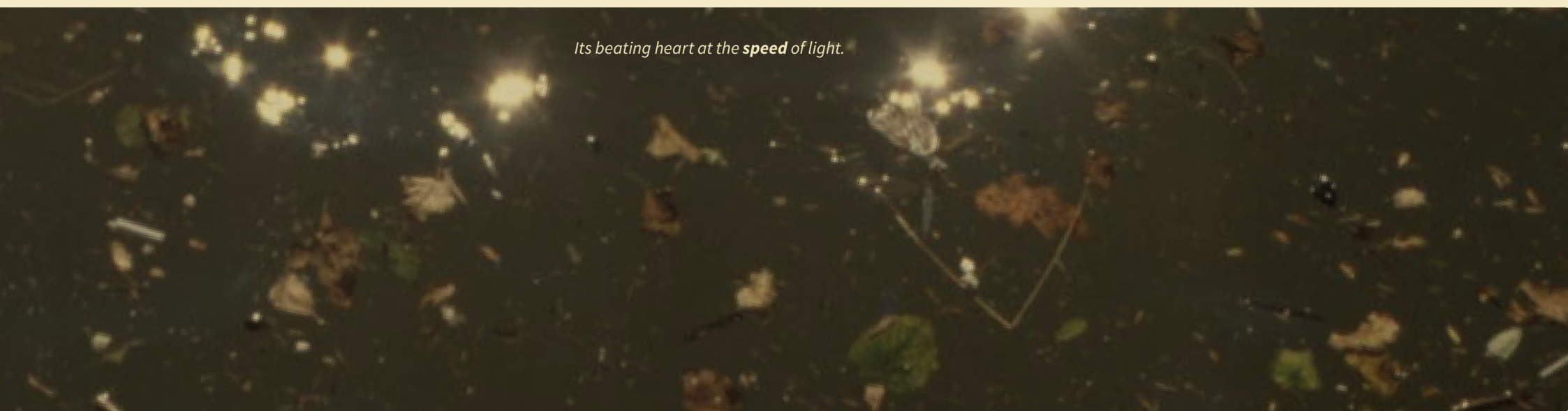
Is this our legacy, our remains?

The dying star releases a spray of light.

A black hole eats a passing star

34 Quoted in: Vicuna (2017a: 59).

*Its beating heart at the **speed** of light.*

A dark, textured surface, possibly asphalt or a similar material, is covered with numerous small, glowing yellow and orange specks. These specks are scattered across the surface, some appearing as bright, out-of-focus lights, while others are more distinct, small particles. The overall effect is reminiscent of a night sky filled with stars or a close-up of a dark, reflective surface covered in fine, glowing dust or debris. The lighting is low, with the primary light source being the glowing specks themselves, creating a high-contrast, almost ethereal atmosphere.



Cecilia Vicuña, *Galaxy of Litter*,
The Hudson River New York, 1989, photo: César Paternosto

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Ethics Declaration

The research for this project was submitted for ethics consideration under the reference Ref: DTP 17/ 025 in the Department of Theatre, Drama and Performance and was approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee on 03 July 2017.

Interviews are anonymised, unless explicit consent to waiving anonymity has been granted.

List of selected Artworks

as referenced in main body of this thesis

Björk				
2014	<i>Biophilia</i> [concert-film].			
Cage, John				
1977	<i>49 waltzes for the 5 boroughs</i> [score].			
Fabião, Eleonora				
2013	<i>Staines</i> [performance-series]. Brasil, Rio de Janeiro: Copacabana, Ipanema, Arpoador, Tijuca Forest. >> <i>Black Stain</i> >> <i>White Stain</i> >> <i>Red Stain</i>			
2015	<i>Things That Must Be Done</i> [performance-series]. Brasil, Rio de Janeiro; USA New York City.			
María Teresa Hincapié				
1990	<i>Una cosa es una cosa</i> (A thing is a thing) [performance, video].			
Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl				
2015–2016	<i>Plastic Imaginaries</i> [series of workshops, installation].			
María Evelia Marmolejo				
1982	<i>Anónimo 4</i> [performance, video, photographs]. Colombia: Banks of the Rio Cauca.			
Senga Nengudi				
1977/2003	<i>R.S.V.P. series</i> [sculptural environment]. USA, New York City: Museum of Modern Art.			
Sophia New and Ruby New Belasco				
2015	<i>The Matter between you and me</i> [video installation].	2001	<i>Chant for Female Corpse</i> [3-channel video installation, 11:51 min, colour, sound].	
		2002	<i>A walk</i> [video performance, 20:47 min, colour, no sound].	
		2002	<i>Reading for Corpses</i> [video performance].	
		2002	<i>Thai Medley I-III</i> [video performances]. >> <i>1st one of a Thai medley</i> [video performance]. >> <i>2nd one of a Thai medley</i> [video performance]. >> <i>3rd one of a Thai medley</i> [video performance].	
		2002	<i>Wind Princess, White Birds</i> [video installation, 50:19 min, colour, no sound].	
		2002	<i>Wind Princess, Black Cats</i> [installation].	
		2002	<i>Sudsiri and Araya</i> [performance, 2-channel video installation, 17:26 min, colour, no sound].	
Nana Petzet				
1995-ongoing	<i>SBF-System</i> [artistic concept for an alternative recycling system].			
2017	<i>Community Cooker</i> [experimental development of a furnace], with 9minus8@artsupport and Jochen Weber.			
Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook				
1993, 1994	<i>Dinner with Cancer I & II</i> [sculptural installation].			
1994	<i>Prostitute's Room</i> [installation].			
1995	<i>Departure of Thai Country Girls</i> [sculpture].			
1996	<i>Self</i> [sculptural installation].			
1997	<i>Reading for one Female Corpse</i> [photography].	2002	<i>I'm Living</i> [performance, single-channel video, 25:00 min, colour, no sound].	
1997	<i>Reading for two Female Corpses</i> [photography].			
1997	<i>Reading for Male and Female Corpses</i> [photography].	2002	<i>Three Female Scape</i> [3-channel video installation, colour, sound].	
1997	<i>Reading for three Female corpses</i> [video performance].	2005	<i>Death Seminar A</i> [video performance].	
1997	<i>Rites of Passage</i> [installation], Railway Hotel Chiang Mai, "Deserted and Embraced" exhibition and event, 11.08., curated by H. Michaelson.	2005	<i>Death Seminar B</i> [video performance].	
		2005	<i>Conversation I</i> [video performance].	
			<i>Conversation II</i> [video installation].	
			<i>Conversation III</i> [video installation].	
1998	<i>Pond</i> [5-channel video installation].		<i>This is our creation</i> [video performance].	
1998	<i>Reading for Male and Female Corpses</i> [video performance].	2005	<i>The Class I</i> [video performance, 16:35 min, colour, sound].	
1998	<i>Conversation of Two Women</i> [video performance].	2005	<i>The Class II</i> [live performance, video]. Italy, Turin: Sala Settorio, Anatomia dell' Università.	
1999	<i>Lament of Desire</i> [video installation].		<i>The Class III</i> [live performance, video]. Italy, Turin: Sala Settorio, Anatomia dell' Università.	
2001	<i>Reading Inaow for female corpse</i> [video performance, 5:52 min, colour, sound].			
2001	<i>Reading Inaow for three female corpses</i> [video performance, 7:18 min, colour, sound].			

2005	<i>The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single, Middle-aged Associate Professor</i> [live performance, single-channel video, 5:10 min, colour, sound].	Mierle Laderman Ukeles	1979-1980	<i>Touch Sanitation</i> [performances, including: <i>Roll Call</i> ; <i>Shaking Hands</i> ; <i>Follow in Your Footsteps</i>]. USA, New York City, with Department of Sanitation.
2006	<i>Great Times Message, Storytellers of the Town, The Insane</i> [3-channel video installation, 44:21 min, b&w, sound].	1963–1967 <i>Bindings</i> [sculptures, mixed media].		>> (1979) <i>Touch Sanitation. Sanmen Speak</i> [video, 58:21 min, colour, sound].
2007	<i>In a blur of desire</i> [video, 19:35 min, colour, sound].	1966–1969 <i>Air Art</i> [proposals for inflatables, drawings].		>> (1979) <i>Touch Sanitation. Waste Flow Video</i> [video, 57:37 min, colour, sound].
2012	<i>Village and Elsewhere: In this circumstance the sole object of attention should be the treachery of the moon</i> [live performance, video installation, photography]. 09.06. - 16.09.2012, Germany, Kassel: DOCUMENTA (13).	>> (1967–1968) <i>Air Art: Bloom – Seagram Building</i> [drawing]. 49.3 x 33.7 cm.	1980	<i>Energy Pass-Along Performance: Make Waves</i> [performance]. 20 July 1980, USA, New York City: Passenger Ship Terminal, 55th Street & Hudson River, “15th Avant Garde Festival” curated by Charlotte Moorman.
2017	<i>Betweenness in “I was told that your work is too sad for Christmas”</i> [single channel video, 22:00 min, colour, sound].	>> (1968) <i>Ford Foundation Building</i> [collage and drawing].	1980	<i>International Glove-Exchange: After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?</i> [performance]. 17 November 1980, UK, London: ICA, “Issue Social Strategies by Women Artists” curated by Lucy Lippard.
Tomás Saraceno		>> (undated) <i>Pentagon Bloom</i> [collage and drawing].		
2012	<i>On Space Time Foam</i> [installation]. Spain, Barcelona: Hangar Biotica.	>> (1969) <i>Air Art: On Land, in the Air, and in the Water with Growth</i> [drawing]. 46 x 60,1 cm.		
Tejal Shah		>> (undated) <i>Transpositions: Flying Networks</i> [drawing].	1981	<i>Re-Raw Recovery</i> [proposal for a juried competition for projects on New York City landfills]. Published in <i>Heresis</i> #13, Vol 4, No 1. p.76.
2012	<i>Between the Waves</i> [5-channel video installation].	>> (undated) <i>Transpositions: Inside/Outside Empty/Full</i> [drawing]	1983-2001	<i>Flow City</i> [proposal and planning for a permanent public art work]. West 59th Street Marine Transfer Station, New York City.
	>> <i>Between the Waves</i> [channel 1: video, 26:15 min, colour, b&w, sound].	>> (1969) <i>Flying Floating Color</i> [drawing]		
	>> <i>Landfill Dance</i> [channel 2: video, 5:00 min, colour, sound].	>> (1969) <i>Baffle. Personal Anti-Pollution Device. Personal Air Conditioning</i> [drawing]	1984	<i>Touch Sanitation Show Part I. Transfer Station Transformation and Marrying the Barges: A Barge Ballet</i> [installation, performance]. USA, New York City: West 59th Street Marine Transfer Station.
	>> <i>Animation</i> [channel 3: video, 1:40 min, colour, sound]	1969 <i>Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition “Care”</i> [manifesto: 4 typewritten pages]. 21.6 x 27.9 cm.	1985	<i>What is this and where does it belong</i> [installation]. USA, New York City: Brooklyn Arts and Culture Association.
	>> <i>Moon Burning</i> [channel 4: video, 26:15min, colour, sound]	1974 <i>Washing</i> [performance]. 13 June 1974, USA, New York City: A.I.R. Gallery (outside).	1985	<i>Vuilniswagendians (City Dance Machine)</i> [performance]. 15 May 1985, The Netherlands, Rotterdam, International Art Festival “Perfo 3 exhibition”.
	>> <i>Morse Code</i> [channel 5: video, 26:15 min, b&w, sound].	1974 <i>Maintenance art interviews with passersby on the sidewalk</i> [performance]. 15 June 1974, USA, New York City: A.I.R. Gallery (outside).	1986	<i>Mikva: The Place of Kissing Waters</i> [installation]. USA, New York City: Jewish Museum. Dimensions: 2.7 x 2.8 x 3 m.
Henry M. Syre		1976 <i>I make maintenance art 1 hour every day</i> [performance]. 16 September-20 October 1976, USA, New York City: Whitney Museum Downtown at 55 Water Street.	1987	<i>Re-Entry</i> [installation: plastics, rubber, glass, dewatered dredge earth, aluminium cans, computer parts on scaffolding]. USA, New York City: PS1.
1996	<i>A World of Art: works in progress Part 10: Mierle Laderman Ukeles</i> (1996). Directed by Henry M. Syre, Produced by Marlo Bendau, Milt Ritter [documentary]. Oregon Public Broadcasting production in association with Oregon State University for the Annenberg/CPB Project	1976 <i>Maintenance art questionnaire</i> [text piece: 7 typewritten pages, envelope]. 16 September-20 October 1976, USA, New York City: Whitney Museum, “Art <--> World”.	1989	<i>The Pit: A Meditation on Racism with 5 Texts</i> [installation]. 13 November – 19 December 1987, USA, New York City: Up South Brooklyn Arts and Cultural Association Gallery.
		1977 <i>Maintaining NYC in crisis: What keeps NYC alive</i> [performance]. 13 October 1976, USA, New York City: Whitney Museum.		<i>Recycle Works</i> [installation]. USA, New York City: Bronx Museum of the Arts.
		1978 <i>Maintenance Art Works meets The N.Y.C. Department of Sanitation</i> [manifesto: 6 typewritten pages, drawings]. 21.6 x 27.9 cm.		
		1978 <i>Revolving Doors Have Wings: My House in Parts and Wholee: Holy House, Home House, City House/Sanity-Shine Dept., Artist House</i> [performance]. 24 February 1978, USA, New York City: Whitney Museum.		
		1979 <i>Landfull</i> [proposals for landfills: drawings and text].		

- 1989-2015 *Turnaround Surround for Danehy Park* [public art project: “glassphalt” path and plantings]. USA, Cambridge, MA: Dahleny Park.
- 1990 *Garbage Out Front: A New Era of Public Design* [exhibition curated with Phil Gleason]. 14 June – 11 September 1990, USA, New York City: Municipal Art Society.
- 1992 *Pit/Egg A New Low for Holland* [landscape installation]. The Netherlands, Zoetermeer: “*Floriade*” – World Horticultural Festival.
- 1993 *Blizzard of Released and Agitated Materials in Flux* [installation: recycled polystyrene blobs, steel and aluminium cans, suspension metal wires]. South Korea, Daejeon: Recycling through Art Museum.
- 1994-1996 *Methanogenesis I-IV* [participatory installation and performance, co-developed with Ray Kass and Mountain Lake Workshop]. USA, Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Armory Art Gallery; Appalachian State University, “Views from Ground Level. Art and Ecologies in the Late 90s”.
- 1995 *Fresh Kills: Imaging the Landfill/Scaling the City* [single-channel video and audio composition].
- 1997 *Unburning Freedom Hall* [installation]. USA, Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art.
- 1999 *Evapotranspiration This Land lives and breathes* [proposal for the rehabilitation of the Hiriya landfill]. Near Tel Aviv.
- 2000-2002 *Proposal for 1 Million People to Participate in a Public Artwork: Public Offerings: Made by All, Redeemed by All* [proposal]. Fresh Kills Landfill, Staten Island, New York City. Published in: (2006) Draft Masterplan: Art and Culture at Fresh Kills, Staten Island, NY.
<https://freshkillspark.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Fresh-Kills-Park-Draft-Master-Plan.pdf>
- 2001 *Flow Flatlands* [proposal for a decentralized Visitor Center with underground learning labs]. Fresh Kills Landfill, Staten Island, New York City.
- 2001–2002 *Penetration and Transparency: Morphed* [6-channel video installation].
- 2008–ongoing *Landing* [public art development / New York Percent for Art Artist for Fresh Kills]. Fresh Kills Landfill, Staten Island, New York City.

Sarah Vanhee

- 2015-ongoing *Oblivion* [performance].

Agnès Varda

- 2000 *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* [film].

Cecilia Vicuña

- 1966–ongoing *Precarios* (also named: *Basuritas*) [assemblages].
- 1989 *Galaxy of Litter*, The Hudson River, New York City [photography; poem].
- 1993 *Shadow of a Loom*, Hudson Street, New York City [photography].
- 2010 *Kon Kon* [SD video, 54:00 min., colour, sound].



UAB
4100
4' x 100'

urethane

4' x 100' DIAMOND MESH FENCE

30-4421-1000
4' x 100'