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holt journal for artistic research

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Issue 2: Situations

Edited by
Dana Ariel & Dawn Gaietto

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Introduction

Holt journal for artistic research is a platform for sharing practice-led research carried out through artistic practice. In the second issue entitled *Situations*, we consider the situatedness of artistic practice and how artists and/or researchers engage with places, spaces and sites to investigate, situate and share their research. The term *situations* offers a range of interpretations and applications relevant to the discourse of artistic practice as research, which we seek to examine through the following propositions: the exploration of artistic agency in particular places, the situations or circumstances instigating artistic inquiry and experimentations and the context in which artistic practice is situated. Of particular significance in this issue are reflections on the social, political or cultural resonance of artistic research, from which it is derived and how it seeks to leave its mark.

Whilst *holt* shares this issue's contributions from artist researchers who unpack the diverse interpretations for the term *situations*, it also seeks to examine, over time and through various perspectives, the situatedness of practice-led research through artistic practice in the vast ecosystem of the research environment. The term *situation*, which is derived from the medieval Latin word *situare* – 'to place,' offers an opportunity to position and bring together contributions from artistic research that could emphasise the interdisciplinarity and significance of these emerging methodologies.

Relevant for this issue is Estelle Barrett's work to identify what distinguishes creative art practice as research.¹ She draws on the writings of Donna Haraway in *Situated Knowledges*, who highlights the partiality in objectivity and argues for modes of

1 Barrett, E. (2014) 'Introduction: Extending the Field: Invention, Application and Innovation in Creative Arts Enquiry,' in Barrett, E. and Bolt, B. (ed.) *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Arts Research*. London: I.B. Tauris.

knowledge production that do not pretend to be from everywhere and therefore from nowhere, but that are rather situated and speak from specific bodies and places that form earth-wide connections.² Barrett sees in Haraway's argument a model that mirrors artistic practice as research, and which its features she unpacks here:

This mode of knowledge production acknowledges the particular, the subjective and the personal as important aspects of enquiry; it articulates the notion of ethical or embodied forms of observation – ways of looking and being accountable for knowledge claims that do not deny the agency of the objects of research – in particular human participants; it is a mode that replaces traditional notions of objectivity with the idea of situated knowledge and partial objectivity; finally it asserts the potential of situated and partial knowledge for forging webs of connections – identifying for whom, how and where else knowledge can be put to use.³

It is through these approaches of embodied and emergent practices that we seek to visit situations and situatedness in artistic research and highlight the relationality and fluid positioning explored by artist researchers. With this in mind, we are presenting papers that range from examining situations from concrete through to abstract notions. These papers entail the sites and their socio-political significance, the material sites of making or the transformation of specific sites to become both the subject of the enquiry and site for experimentation and intervention.

The journal opens with Yasmin Chopin's research into the situatedness of memory through the act of finding and exploring memorial benches and their subsequent impacts. This creative-critical, practice-based, non-fiction writing project explores the role of the memorial bench in society and the landscape. The transformative effects of the memorial bench are unpacked through three parts: place, memory and conversation.

This examination of memory in relation to place is followed by a paper working to reposition the research enquiry towards objects of knowledge and their significance. What impacts do our surroundings or more specifically surrounding objects have on us? Charlotte Pannell poses the question if they would write better with a more ergonomic chair? This piece of writing inspects chairs in various situations and surroundings visually and through writing. How can the specificity of one question, or narrow point of view, encompass wider understandings and inquiries into space and situatedness? Through a deep narrative exploration, Pannell questions our relationships and realities that form these experiences. How do these specific experiences open into wider philosophical questions? The relationship between imitation and representation and reality is inspected through the relationship to objects and places from the author's past and present.

2 Haraway, D. (1988). 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575-599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>

3 Barret, E. 'Introduction: Extending the Field: Invention, Application and Innovation in Creative Arts Enquiry', 9.

Beginning with a brief history of the Situationists, the next paper by Manuela Johanna Covini defines a situation as a place before action, one of potency. Speaking of the 'future,' Covini works to transform historical and ideational sites into subjects, thereby in conversation with the present. As the situation is the 'place before a decision' relationships are established between time forming new contemporaneous spaces. There is a stated drive for the artist to move within systems, forging new connections and new ways of engaging with the image or with the histories and presences. Utilising the relationships between texts and images, Covini interrogates these relationships and connections, through the multiplicity of situations that arise throughout this text.

The next paper by Helen Colton considers the work of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's intra-active artworks through the lens of agential realism and the writings of Karen Barad. The public spaces, or situations, which Lozano-Hemmer creates are examined as reimaginations dealing with assemblages of data, architecture, light and technology. Inspecting Lozano-Hemmer's practice, Colton argues that his work creates performative interventions dealing with the complex notions of presence and absence, visibility and agency. Following the thinking of New Materialists, Colton discusses Lozano-Hemmer's work calling for an 'expanded understanding of perception,' in which vision and knowledge production are 'dynamic,' pursuing the totality of senses.

Stemming from an identity crisis in post-Brexit Britain, Victoria Burgher is interrogating the ideological whiteness of porcelain. The material's 'history of entanglement' with imperialism, colonisation and capitalism is cited as the impetus for selecting porcelain as the locus for this research and inquisition. The author argues that the connotations of porcelain as a material have been transcribed into the objects it forms and their commodification. In this way, Burgher is engaging in an 'unlearning of whiteness' as part of an anti-racist practice and methodology through a situated perspective. Working to reveal whiteness as a marked way of seeing, the anti-racist methodology considers the artist's agency to deploy discursive whiteness in constructed situations.

The paper by Haya Sheffer deals with the situation of a technological or applications driven selfhood as opposed to one of subjectivities and embodied understanding. The practice as research is the development of an archive and exhibition materials. This paper explains the context and rationale behind this research and argues against externalising our bodily experiences via applications and measuring of outputs.

In the following paper, Mark Kasumovic examines the situation of the camera as apparatus, more specifically through the practice of documentary photography. The argument lies in the examination of the nature of the documentary photograph and the gap between the material reality and our comprehension or imagination of the world around us. Kasumovic is questioning how reliant we are on the camera, the culture of knowledge production and the relationships constructed through this mutual examination.

In the final paper Michele Allen presents an extract from *The Weight of Ants in the World*, which thinks through the woods as witness to industrialisation. This paper is a

localised examination of the process of industrialisation, thinking through issues such as fragility and endurance at this time of climate upheaval and uncertainty. This text is a reflection upon research which led to the creation of a protected site, examining the relationship between sites of the studio or institutional spaces and that of the woodlands.

Exploring the material, experiential and embodied situatedness of artistic practice often in relation to socio-political circumstances offers a significant interdisciplinary exploration of methods and knowledge production. Situations, as explored in various iterations through this issue, are context dependent, address the multiplicity, complexity and limitations of site or offer avenues to destabilising a sense of place.

In Memoriam

Yasmin Chopin

Using a case study, this paper focuses on the role of the memorial bench and how its design and position in the landscape affects the people who interact with it. From prompting memories to shaping them and providing a place to sit and appreciate a specific view, the memorial bench has more impact on the landscape, and our lives, than we realise.

Yasmin Chopin is a writer who lives in Cambridgeshire, UK. With qualifications in art history, design, and creative writing, and a career path in management, training, and interior design consultancy, she uses her extensive knowledge and experience to write about home and place. Yasmin is a mentor to new creative non-fiction writers. She is active on social media and publishes a Substack on Place Writing.

In Memoriam, by Yasmin Chopin

Introduction

‘Can memorial benches be considered art, or are they simply outdoor furniture?’ When fashioned as sculpture, or highly decorated, or inscribed with great care and attention to detail, they can easily be defined as art in my view, being the product of skill and imagination, and appreciated for their emotional power. Even the most ordinary bench can be deemed art when adorned by an inscribed plaque.

With its emphasis on memory and place, my creative writing project stretches thinking across traditional academic disciplines including history, geography, sociology, ecology, and design. It offers new perspectives on the role of the memorial bench in society and its place in the landscape. Prior to undertaking this research, I had given little thought to memorial benches because, unless I had a connection to the person memorialized, they were simply not relevant to me. Yet these benches have always held the power of *memento mori*, to remind me that death awaits us all. Each one has a subtle effect on its surroundings and on the people who purposefully, or inadvertently, interact with it. In this paper I focus on the site and situation of one bench—Tony’s bench—and offer three parts of its story in order to illustrate several transformative effects:-

Part 1: Place

Part 2: Memory

Part 3: Conversation

Part 1: Place

The bench is in memory of Tony Warden who died in 2016. It was commissioned by his wife, Marion, and is situated in a secluded spot close to a nine-mile perimeter path used by walkers and cyclists at Grafham Water, Cambridgeshire, UK. To access the bench without travelling along this path, you can take a shortcut from a carpark on the south shore of the lake. From there, a ten-minute hike takes you into a small wood and then, through a gap in the hedge, you enter a field. In this open vista you notice the topography; a gentle hill rises on

the left, and the flat plane of lake water extends to the right. Ahead, at the top of the incline, Tony's bench awaits.



1 Approaching Tony's bench.

This object has effectively transformed the immediate landscape by its presence. In visual terms, the geometry of the man-made structure is in stark contrast with the surrounding forms of trees and vegetation, yet, being made of natural materials it tonally blends into the scene. As an object-in-place it offers a comfortable seat on which to rest, and its precise position frames the view for anyone who sits there. It is the only bench in this setting, and due to its elevated position, it provides a view right across the reservoir from west to east.



2 View from Tony's bench.

The choice of position is all important for this memorial bench. Tony and Marion often cycled along the reservoir path and invariably stopped at this particular location for a drink of water and a break because they liked the view. On more than one occasion Tony said, 'there should be a bench here.' So, when he died and Marion was thinking about a bench for him, there was only one place that stuck in her mind. After discussing the idea with her family, she contacted the landowners, Anglian Water, to obtain permission for a bench to be located at the exact place that Tony had identified. Marion organised its purchase and had it inscribed, and the water company installed it.

Tony little realized the impact that his words would have on Marion's later actions and her account reminded me of a piece in the memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, by Joan Didion, whose husband, John Dunne, died unexpectedly in 2003. In the book Didion recalls that her husband's voice had been recorded on the answerphone and it was an unsettling experience to continue hearing it after his death: 'The fact that it was his in the first place was arbitrary, having to do with who was around on the day the answering machine last needed programming, but if I needed to retape it now I would do so with a sense of betrayal' (2005:152-3). Marion had recorded Tony's voice in her head and, consequently, his words carried agency after his death. There was almost no other place she could choose to site the memorial bench.

Like a gravestone, the bench is a marker in a plot of land; it demands attention and stakes a claim to ownership of place. It is a stopping point; it interrupts the progress of walkers and cyclists by its very existence. For those who decide to use the bench, the orientation and sitting position prescribes a specific but pleasant and peaceful panorama. Those who choose *not* to take advantage of resting on the bench may be unaware of its role to memorialize but they will probably realize that the spot has been carefully chosen for its view.

Part 2: Memory

Marion got in touch with me when she first heard about my research and we have walked to Tony's bench twice together, once in the summer of 2022 and again in the spring of 2023. There is no grave or headstone for him, only this, a bench with a view, and its existence has transformed the way Tony is remembered, not only by Marion but by the extended family.



3 Marion visits Tony's bench regularly.

The location has become a destination and significant dates are celebrated at the bench. Family members and friends often journey to it, separately or with Marion. She has planted spring bulbs nearby and sometimes takes fresh flowers. And when she spends time there, it is not to indulge in self-pity or to prolong the grief of losing a husband she shared her life with, but to remember the good times. I think the bench acts as a talisman for Marion; in some ways it represents their life together, and time on the bench fosters fond memories.



4 Ping, a Chinese duck, is carved on the rear of Tony's bench. He would read the story of Ping to his children.

All parts of the bench—the overall design of it and the marks made on it—are visual metaphors for Tony's life. I understand that many family conversations were had before deciding on the text and graphics to be engraved on it. In this process, Tony's long life was edited and limited to a few words and symbols denoting specific memories. These include the stories he read to the children and grandchildren, the games of soccer he enjoyed, and his love of travel, sunshine, and photography.

As a dedicated object of memorial, liberally decorated with coded messages, this bench will forever invoke analogous memories. Referring to memorial plaques, scholars

Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey state in *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, that they characterize a ‘hybridity of form that integrates a diversity of images, objects and written words to create identity markers for individuals’ and that this ‘fusion of word, image and material plays into the dynamics of physical loss and recovery that shapes the field of memory’ (2001:173) The memory prompts on Tony’s bench will, I suggest, induce habitual remembering. Although individuals tend to remember events differently, symbolic references will mean that specific occasions will be recalled and brought back to mind in a regular and repeated form much like ritual.

Part 3: Conversation

Benches are embedded in the landscape; they relate to the neighbouring earth, vegetation, and sky; they respond to the weather; and they remain in place, *in situ*, for as long as they are allowed. They are in constant conversation with their surroundings, not only during the daytime when people visit or pass by, but in the night when only the insects, birds, and animals take notice in the dark. With this thought in mind, my research has adapted to include night walking, and sitting on benches in the moonlight. Marion rarely visits Tony’s bench alone and never at night and, like her, I am conscious of personal safety—she has an arrangement with her daughter whereby her movements can be tracked by the watch she wears. And due to its particularly remote location, I have not visited Tony’s bench in the dark.

Marion and I talked about life and death, marriage and being single again, and we discussed funerals, cremains, and what will happen to our possessions when we die. The bench allowed us to talk freely, even as strangers, and this revealed something more about my research. It has opened a door to conversations about what could be termed ‘difficult’ subjects. I believe a sensitive and sincere approach to such conversations has enabled me to learn a great deal more than I expected about the circumstances surrounding the commissioning of a bench.



5 Tony's bench in its original place.

The deeply personal conversations Marion and I shared on the bench are uniquely linked to place, our personal reflections were life affirming, and they are representative of similar conversations happening elsewhere on benches situated in other places *in memoriam*. In the popular black comedy drama series, *After Life*, streamed on Netflix and originally aired between 2019 and 2022, a bench is used as a prop which forces the two protagonists—Tony Johnson played by Ricky Gervais, and Anne played by Penelope Wilton—to sit together in close proximity and talk (Gervais, 2022). They meet as strangers, just as Marion and I had. The scene is repeated in every episode. This ritualistic re-presentation allows the viewer to listen and observe the conversations which cover all phases of human response to death, from sorrow to hope, as the series progresses. The bench thus acts as an intimate carrier, one that incites reflective conversation and supports emotional wellbeing.

Whilst Marion's experience has been positive, there have been, and still are, some areas of concern. As she gets older, she finds it more difficult to walk to the bench and envisages a time when she will not be able to reach it. This concern is exacerbated by her desire to keep the bench clean and to maintain the area around it. The practical difficulties of

access and maintenance never occurred to her when the bench was first commissioned, but now they loom large, and in the knowledge that the bench will probably outlast her she has incorporated an instruction for its maintenance into her Letter of Wishes, which will be read and acted upon after her death.



6 Tony's bench after being cleaned and moved a short way to more level ground.

Anglian Water took legal responsibility for, and ownership of, the bench when Marion signed the relevant documents. Budgetary constraints have had repercussions; the company has not kept the bench looking as smart and clean as Marion would wish and this has been a source of frustration for some time. The company has, however, recently responded to her phone calls and emails and the bench has been cleaned and re-sited on level ground and securely anchored to six new concrete slabs. On firmer foundations, the bench now reasserts its position in the landscape and renews its conversation in place.

Summary

To conclude this paper, which focuses on Tony's bench and the particular effects it has on the landscape and the people associated with it, I make the following observations:-

1. Walking and cycling in the countryside are activities well known for their positive effects on physical and mental wellbeing. When a memorial bench is situated in surroundings where such activity takes place its presence offers additional benefits of rest and relaxation, as well as an opportunity to appreciate a particular view.
2. By marking a specific place in the ground a bench disrupts the landscape. This can be considered to have positive (as mentioned above) and negative effects (not reviewed in this paper). Studies of individual benches and group installations, coupled with their associated human stories, will reveal a variety of impacts on place and memory.
3. Interference to the topography of place by such objects of memorialisation occurs over years and perhaps decades, to the point that they may outlive those responsible for their commission. Consideration should be given to ongoing maintenance and the possibility of material degradation, theft and vandalism, and potential changes in the landscape that may affect the view.
4. The memorial bench can be considered a physical manifestation of the emotional disturbance occasioned by a death. For many people, time spent on the bench provides consolation.
5. The bench location is often based on the lived experience of the person memorialized. Ideally it will be situated at a place they treasured and frequented often; the exact spot may even have been identified by the deceased. However, when commissioning a memorial bench, the needs of those who will visit it regularly should be considered with equal weight and the location assessed accordingly.
6. Like an album of photographs, the symbols and text recorded on memorial benches, produce an abbreviated idealized biographical story. Such storied memories assume prominence because they are public-facing, and could, over time, obstruct the remembering of other noteworthy events and aspects of a life.
7. The bench becomes a focus for pilgrimage. Acting as a destination point, its purpose extends from simply being a place to sit to additionally becoming a hub for private conversations and public celebrations.

While, typically, an artist will take the location into account when creating an art installation, in the case of a bench, its situation is relevant to the emotion embedded within it. And its longevity is dependent on its materials, its mode of making, and its maintenance. To return to the question of whether or not it is art, I would say that Tony's bench can be deemed to be a work of art. With layers of meaning—some visible, others not—its impact on the scenery and on the people who are closely connected to it is considerable.

When I started this project, I had in mind that I might like a bench commissioned in my memory, or perhaps to organize one for my father who has recently died. Consideration of the practical implications of what will happen after my death came into focus during this research and I have initiated conversations with my children. As a result, I have decided neither to commission a bench for my father nor to specify one for myself. I will leave such decisions and choices to the people I leave behind.

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Notes:

I would like to thank Marion Warden for sharing her story with me and allowing me to share it with others.

All photographs are my own.

Chairs

Charlotte Pannell

I am drinking from a 'Planet Hollywood' glass. It is from Planet Hollywood Miami, I know this because it says it on it. After my parents divorced my mum remarried. Her and my stepdad started to collect these glasses on every holiday that they went on. When I went with them, Planet Hollywood felt like an immersive experience. I think the first one that I went to was in London. I think I can remember the burger but I might be imagining it, huge. They went on collecting these glasses, and my mum had them in a display cabinet. I think you got them free if you ordered the right cocktail.

Recently they leaped to the edge of the country.

In this move lots of objects were questioned and now I am drinking out of this cup, taken from my sister's kitchen cupboard. From a collection of about twenty we kept six, one being Heathrow which was my favourite. Two are left as the rest broke, the partner to the pair is London. I've grown closer to these imitations recently.

Am I sitting on a great imitation? Am I drinking from a poor imitation?

If I drink everything from the same disposable plastic cup would I feel differently to a life of sipping from a ...?

If I was sitting now on an ergonomically designed office chair, would I write better? This chair is causing me aches and pains, but I hold it here as an artefact, I would have discarded it if I was judging it based purely on comfort.

If I keep this chair, this table, this glass around me then I might not lose who I am, what will I become if I just move around with no ground. But what does the soil mean, faces?

C Pannell is currently studying at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL towards an MFA following a number of failed careers including but not limited to: Estate agency, Library, Hairdressers, Pubs/Clubs, Homepage, Boots, Fashion Stylist, Receptionist, Florist, Supermarkets and Door to Door Sales. Most recently she won a prize at the Night of Ideas held at The Institut Français Feb '23.







Chaire

My body of work is centred around personal experience and so I represent a very narrow point of view but my narrow point of view encompasses collective experiences such as nationality, political changes and cultural space.

I am unique but ordinary.

I experienced London and its environs while growing up, I lived in an urban space but on the edge, looking in.

My family moved out to greater London post war, invading the suburbs.

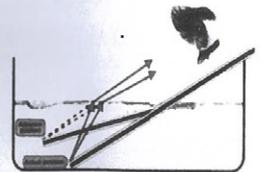
I am a floating object, the suburbs are a holding area, newly populated and quickly rejected. I return often, my younger self is there but, my adult self feels on the outside again. I was so keen to leave but now feel like part of me has gone.

The train from Liverpool Street to the edges was mostly dreaded but at other times felt very warm, my mum arrived home every night on it. I've watched landscapes shift out of it.

Greater Anglia, Abbejo, TFL

You are thirty-four years old; everything that has ever happened to you is still happening.

The Sound of My Voice, Ron Butlin

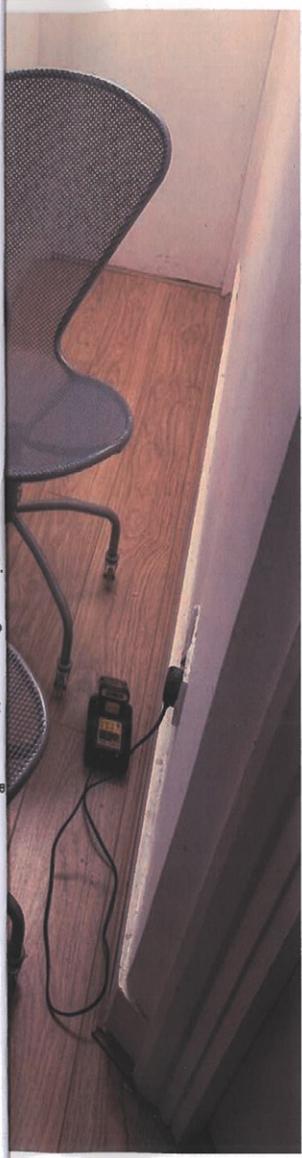


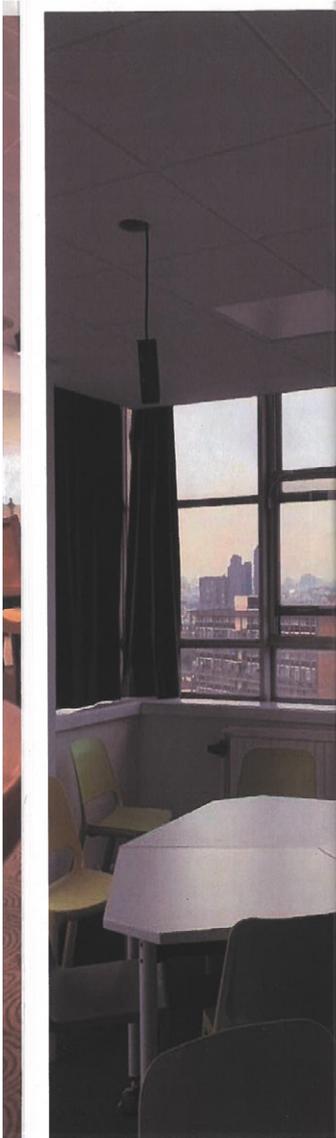
Starting points for my work can vary from fragments of family stories to educational experience. Due to this the found object is very useful, it provides a visual arrow, a flag. When seeing an object our experiences are refracted through them and so they become personal to each viewer.

My prism includes experiences such as the rise of consumer culture, my childhood felt a little handmade and frugal and so as soon as possible these textures were rejected from my surroundings. My world became mass produced, and though I have tried to challenge myself through connecting the handmade to my past this rarely works in practice. Consumer items equal aspiration and success for me.

Changes like these and every sight, sound and touch that goes along with them, creates markers in the brain and these become responsible for the building of self. I look at this with consideration of what, who and where these experiences are provided to us and by whom, so relating to theories such as Cultural capital and Habitus by Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu suggested that we are a product of the tastes and habits of the society (family, social circles and educational system for example) that we were born into; specific cultural norms which form the daily practices of groups, nations, and individuals.





If I live in London, Belfast or Mexico, then what?

If I live in a house or a bungalow, then what?

If I work with younger people or older people, then what?

If I socialise in an area that is Rural or Urban, then what?

If I live at one end of the street or the other, then what?

If my room has bare floorboards or laminate, then what?

It is not just location and community that produces these reactions but also material.

Our brain navigates the physical world by categorising what we see i.e. things that are 'blue', 'round', 'sock-like', 'table-like'.

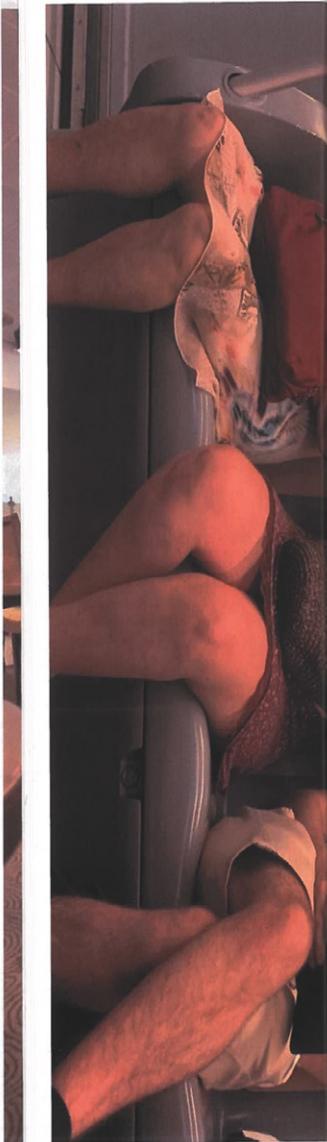
The theory of forms from Plato suggests that we experience imitations of the form/idea of a 'thing', a sock for example. The perfect sock only exists in the non-physical idea of it, combined with the ideas of Habitus and Cultural capital this brings me to ask...

Who possesses the 'best' imitation of a chair and what does it do to its owner?



I am sitting on a chair writing this, that was bought in the ideal home show in the middle of the last century by a family member. It is metal framed and has a chrome finish. It is part of a set of four, which are here with me now. They are around the melamine table that they were bought with. They have an upholstered seat and back, the original brown imitation leather. Maybe one of them is intact but most have a rip or a tear, the yellow foam padding is exposed. The white table has a couple of signs of wear too, some small chips are in the surface. The feet of the chair, little plastic covers, are mismatched to the others, it might be that all of them have had to be changed over the years. The table extends so you can add extra places. My dad and aunt have told me about Sunday meals when they were young, the table was extended, and then plastic crates were used as stand in chairs. My aunt talks about these experiences like they were an endurance. The table has two metal legs, at the floor they are connected by a bar, extending from each leg are two slightly angled long metal bars; feet. The end of the feet are rectangle, sharp corners, I've kicked them with my toe and screamed often. The rubber feet that are between the table and the floor used to disturb and wrinkle the linoleum in the kitchen where it used to be. I've grown closer to this imitation lately.





I am drinking from a 'Planet Hollywood' glass. It is from Planet Hollywood Miami, I know this because it says it on it. After my parents divorced my mum re married. Her and my stepdad started to collect these glasses on every holiday that they went on. When I went with them Planet Hollywood felt like an immersive experience. I think the first one that I went to was in London. I think I can remember the burger but I might be imagining it, huge. They want on collecting these glasses, and my mum had them in a display cabinet. I think you got them free if you ordered the right cocktail. Recently they leaped to the edge of the country,

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THE QUIDDITY

My God, a verse is not a crown,
No point of honour, or gay suit,
No hawk, or banquet, or ranown,
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute.

It cannot vault, or dance, or play ;
It never was in France or Spain ;
Nor can it entertain the day
With a great stable or domain.

It is no office, art, or news ;
Nor the Exchange, or busy Hall :
But it is that which, while I use,
I am with Thee : and *Most take all.*

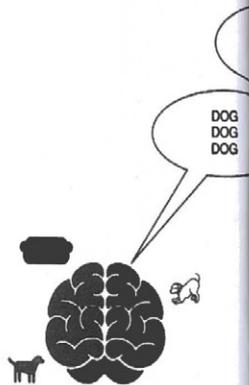
George Herbert

*The whiteness of me. I was pushed out of
the earth and soaked with fading ideas.*

Along with the material there are the sounds. The language and the speech, the intent, the communication style.

Part of cultural capital is linguistic capital.

What do I sound like, how do I hear;
Direct, efficient and meaningful?



Structural linguistics, as proposed by Saussure is part of culture. The 'speech circuit' is formed by three parts: **Language, Speech** (also in its written form) and the **Brain**. The brain is where each individual's knowledge of language is stored.

The 'speech circuit' is a feedback loop between each speaker of each different language and this is where





Saussure believed the real action of language takes place. This loop is fed by the linguistic sign; it is two sided, consisting of the signified and the signifier -> the word itself and its meaning.



Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist, semiotician and philosopher. Born in 1857, his father was a mineralogist and entomologist.

Saussure's concept of language as being part of culture (through it being a social fact) led him to believe that social facts and norms do not elevate the individuals but shackle them. He saw language as a set of rules or conventions, a framework of speech. Two or more people create a circuit between the speakers; a collective mind of a linguistic group - an individual must comply to the rules and there is no individual agency.

"Among all the individuals that are linked together by speech, some sort of average will be set up: all will reproduce - not exactly of course, but approximately - the same signs united with the same concepts."

Course in General Linguistics (Cours de linguistique générale) Saussure



I realised one day that the sounds that I hear are changing. It happened when I heard a voice on a documentary from the 1980's that felt close to a memory, I thought then that I didn't want to be in the present.

▪ A feedback loop is constantly refreshing. Constantly charging.

I walked up and down a market that I used to go to every week with my family. Visually and audibly it is different to the version of it in my memory, but not too different.

I listened to what people were saying and I recorded them. Words sound strange when they are repeated over and over, the nature of the word as a sign is emphasised. A signal.





yeah but you've got to see how much you're in ansars
 if you're like 30 quid in ansars you're throwing 10 quid away it won't work
 Okay I'll call again
 Alright lovely thank you
 that's the thing like, I went through a phase of keep buying melons
 and then, so I stopped cos I'm just like I don't eat honeydew or nothing like that
 No one's even allowed to say it no more
 You got them then
 I feel like it's gone off
 Really?
 Yeah I know
 You joking that's so cute
 Quite funny
 Do you remember these Jack, yeah
 fruit-tellers
 Did you see that though one bloke One bloke was all on his own, yeah yeah yeah in a field
 Yeah
 Anyway this was in Starbucks you

know what I mean we used to go there always when when we pulled off right
 I went hang on
 I don't want nothing for it He said I paid for it drink it
 He said drink it or I'm going to throw it
 He said that's so strong
 And he went how the f how the f can you drink it that strong
 But I mean I won't pay them prices I think I think it's just a cup of coffee and I mean I think to myself whatever I am paying now I can buy a jar of coffee for less than that
 Ah They drive you mad these little ones don't they
 I let you both into a
 Let me into a secret I know what you're going to say
 What y'hat what
 you've been chatting each other up yeah see I already know
 But erm so so, I'll talk to you

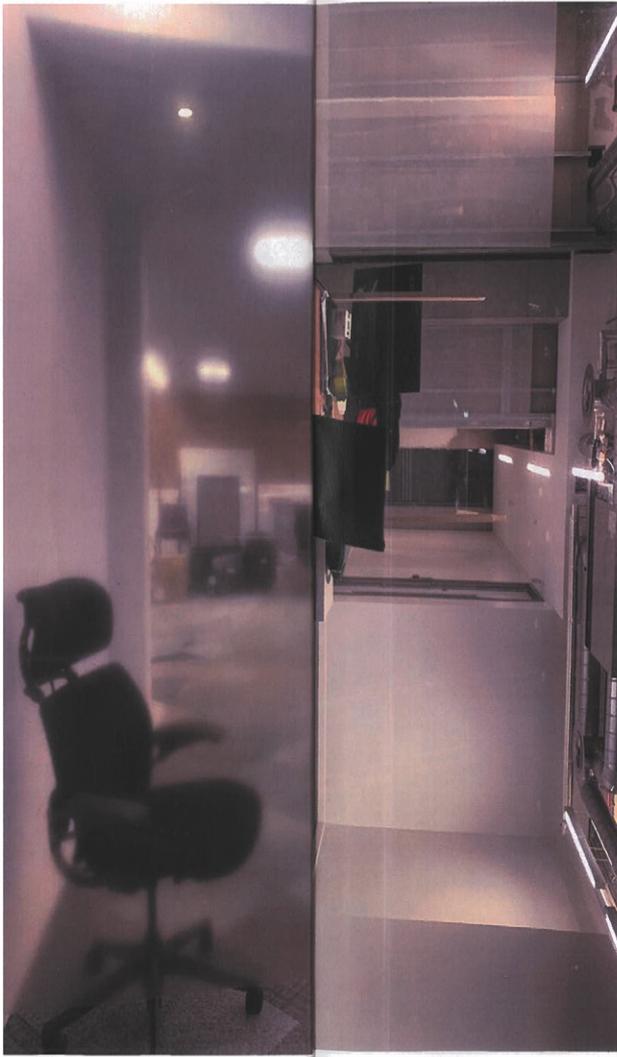
No not now
 I know the girl like the back of my hand
 alright I'll get rid of these children
 Oh bless
 See you later You take care alright
 I've warned you and I warned you I've warned you I'm not calling you no more this is the last time that I warn you I'll tell you what I will deck you and you will end up in an hospital
 Don't wind me up
 thanks love thank you take care ta love
 I said to Lauren have you heard from him
 Tommy Shorts all a fiver now
 You don't hear of our age getting married anymore do you live together he was on the phone to his cousin the other day
 60
 I'm not getting married at my age I'm engaged that's good enough
 I don't blame ya
 But erm so so, I'll talk to you

the night before
 they have a night before party a day of party
 Mother and father in law
 Have a lovely time
 Right Let me have a mooch let me have a think yeah
 Keep that in your mind
 It's in the back of my mind
 The weight
 Cheers babe thank you
 No problem
 That's only One fifty dating
 How much are they
 2 pound
 I had it, I know I had it and put it somewhere
 minutes after energy price guarantees to mps in the House of Commons Liz truss was told that the queens health was falling
 Oh Sharon said you know that picture where she's shaking hands with that new prime minister did you notice the back of her hand was blue
 No
 I did

I noticed it you see she'd been given morphine they reckon she's got she had cancer
 She had what?
 Bone cancer
 Bone cancer?
 That's what Sharon said
 I've going to say Alan that don't sound good
 Yeah it don't
 Haha
 He just asked me out Kim
 Oh Alan
 Yeah al, a, I said Alan
 You've taken int ya
 No, I've yeah
 I
 Are you free?
 No I'm not
 Are you free?
 Ha ha,
 If ever you get you know down we got Alan
 You restored our faith Alan
 Show Kim, Show Kim your jumper you got on
 Go on show us
 Show Kim
 He normally has puc trousers on
 Right
 But he bought a new jumper

No money back, we don't do money back dining
 Ok
 Why'd you go there?
 Coaches, coaches people there
 Oh coaches
 I was going to say Alan that don't sound good
 Yeah it don't
 Haha
 He just asked me out Kim
 Oh Alan
 Yeah al, a, I said Alan
 You've taken int ya
 No, I've yeah
 I
 Are you free?
 No I'm not
 Are you free?
 Ha ha,
 If ever you get you know down we got Alan
 You restored our faith Alan
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 Show Kim
 He normally has puc trousers on
 Right
 But he bought a new jumper





Words imitate things, things imitate ideas.

Words represent things, things represent ideas.

Words mean things, things mean ideas.

I collected some things from a family home, they were kept on the top of the kitchen cupboards where the imitation leather chairs were, where the melamine table was. My memory started with them there, the cooking matter layed down on them year after year, sandwiching layers of dust. They became stuck to the ledge they were on. I pulled them off, I put them in the dishwasher repeatedly. They are made from things like rubber, plastic, pottery, straw etc. Some won't come clean. I bought a box of .25mm wax sheets, they are used to make gold things, to cast. I warmed the sheet in my hand, I covered the things in baby oil, and pushed them into my hand, the wax sheet sandwiched.

These words, ideas, forms, things, objects, dogs, cups are wrapped in a surface. This is what we see.

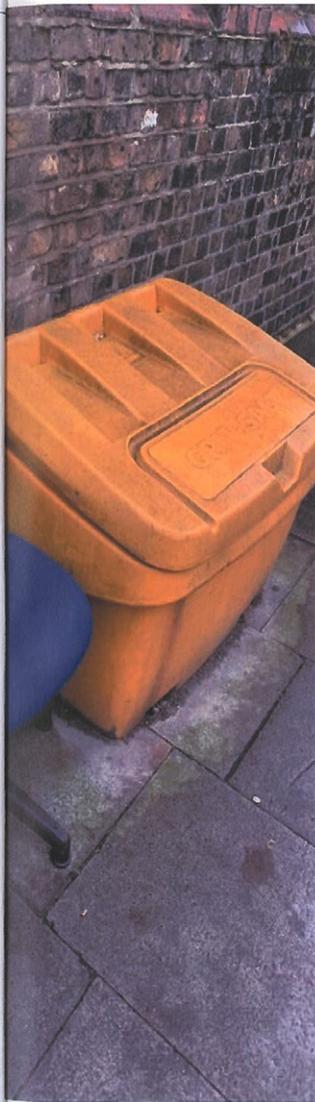
I recognised this in the work of Danh Vo when I went to see *Chicory* at the White Cube in Bermondsey a couple of years ago. Representations of Christianity, global commercialism, and the shrinking world were presented within the context of everything having an inside and an outside.

The show balanced the human urge to run or to hide, to look forward or to look back.

It is in consciousness, awareness, where we notice the eternal growth extending from every aspect of life and it is unbalancing but also exciting.



Bye bye
2010
Photogravure on paper
Danh Vo

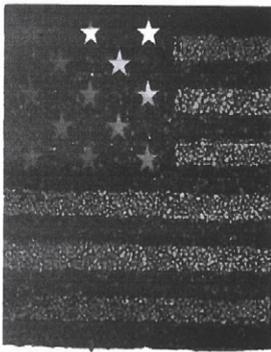


Untitled
2020
Gold on cardboard, mid 2nd century CE Roman marble sarcophagus, firewood and wood burning stove
Danh Vo



Untitled
2020
17th century Flemish marble relief fragment with putto and Johnnie Walker Christmas crate
Danh Vo



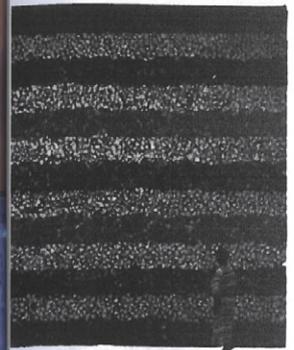


Untitled
2020
Thirteen mild steel stars and
wood logs
Danh Vo

Vo takes advantage of representation, chunks of wood become a flag, the flag represents an idea. I looked at the wood and I saw a country, an ideology.

These are arbitrary signs but they have the world refracted through them.

There was a fire that was burning with the wood, plants grew, a flag of birth.



Then the vastness of England swallows you up, and you lose for a while your feeling that the whole nation has a single identifiable character. Are there really such things as nations? Are we not forty-six million individuals, all different? And the diversity of it, the chaos!

The Lion and the Unicorn, Orwell

Different societies attitudes towards religion, the state even our approach to spare time will form patterns and this forms a net. Even approaches that we might perceive as freeing are still a type of barrier that controls our attitudes and behaviours.

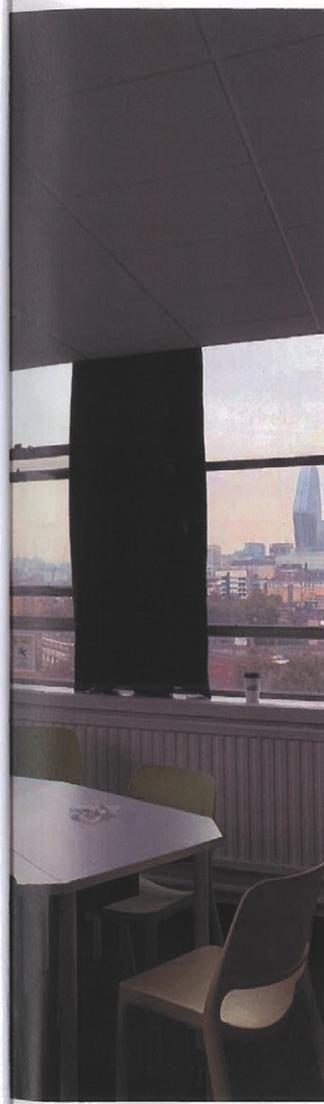
The Stars and Stripes is a signifier to many contrasting ideas.

As with the Union Jack, as with the St Georges Cross,

Thoughts of the nation and nostalgia can take you to somewhere like a rosey 'Merrie England', but in looking back there is the opportunity of reflection.

Feedback loops are used in business to respond to methods and learn from them, to look at experiences and improve them. With every spin of the loop there comes expansion which is a place of opportunity.

I find some comfort in the shadows of the past, pre LED, pre white paint, pre open plan.

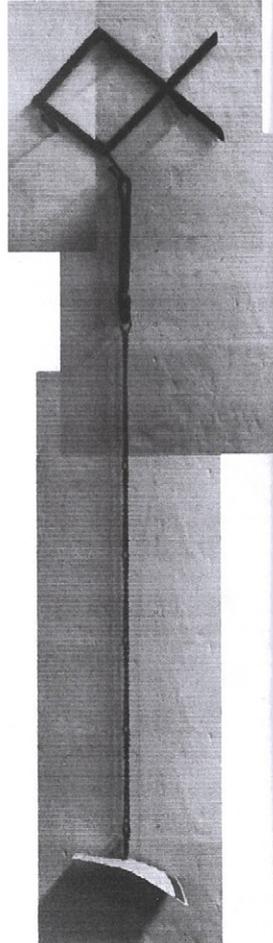
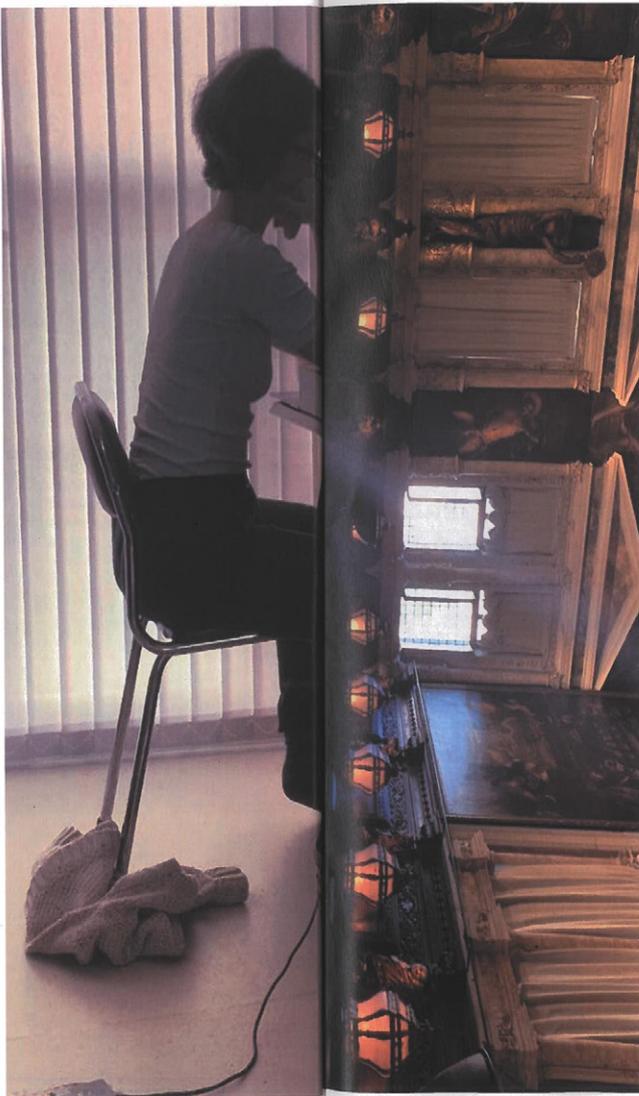


Surfaces, experiences and sounds; Family homes are containers, we are containers, towns, cities, streets, continents are containers.

Using surface and found objects I work through my experiences and then they transform into emotions. The physical appearance of interventions that I might make to an object promotes it to a unique form. The qualities of a material, the weight, the shine, the durability, the age are all considerations more often than not initially made in the front of my mind but they all slowly become clear, my choices expose my experience and they expose myself to me.

I was the middle child of three, but there was a gap of five years on either side, and I barely saw my father before I was eight. For this and other reasons I was somewhat lonely, and I soon developed disagreeable mannerisms which made me unpopular throughout my schooldays. I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued. I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life.

Why I Write, Orwell



Mock up for 'Comfort'
2021
Iron, Leather, Paper





A cupboard

*What comfort there is in a dead end,
Rather than to get in the que
With its uncertain end
What is there in the search for a seed, a
crumb, in the distance, where there is
no real object
Where is there strength in numbers,*

WIP



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Situations: The Praise of Scepticism and the Error of Certainty

Manuela Johanna Covini

“How can we understand or describe the potential of artistic action in specific places?” - was the initial question for this open call.

This paper SITUATIONS - The Praise of Scepticism and the Error of Certainty is about the terms used in this question. It is an attempt to transform historical and ideational places (concepts) into a subject in order to ensure dialogue with the present. I try out this subjectification through illustrations, generated with the help of a text-to-image programme. An artificial intelligence translated selected terms, sentence fragments or entire descriptions into images (drawings, graphics or photographs) for me. The respective manner of visualisation allows us to draw conclusions about different epochs and thus the illustrations are additionally charged with new meanings.

On the one hand, subjectification demands an engagement with current ruptures; on the other hand, subjectification conserves the future in one particular of many possibilities. Looking at the pictures and reading the text shows that the perception of time is to be understood as a process that can neither be delimited nor concluded. And as a matter of fact, I work in this sense with the method of confusion.

Terms, as Mieke Bal understands them, are to be thought of as processual. This means that terms, concepts and culture “migrate”, i.e. they change by adapting to the respective circumstances and contexts. And therein lies new potential.

The artist is expected to uncover this process of the emergence of other, new worlds/ systems in a poetic-political way. For poetry (from the ancient Greek ποίησις poiesis “creation”) lies in these multiple potencies of SITUATION. Situation, then, is not only the place before a decision, an action - it is also a place of poetry - of creation. These “situations of creation” are about (re)establishing relationships between distant epochs and languages, about forming new contemporaries. But it is not only the artist who does this.

Every person in a society intervenes in his or her respective culture by engaging and creatively dealing with everyday life. In this sense, the political and socio-cultural determination of the artist has a mediating role.

The artist traces these sensitive beginnings of connections and relationships with different and diverse working methods until it becomes possible to fill these potentials/ possibilities with life.

Manuela Johanna Covini, born 1960 in Germany, artist, worked for a long time as a television journalist in Switzerland. Since 2012 she has lived and worked in Mexico City and Berlin.

National and international exhibitions and projects. Performance lectures at the following universities: URJC Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid 2023; UNAM in Mexico City, Mexico 2023; Instituto Universitaria in Puebla, Mexico 2022; University Alma Mater in Bologna, Italy 2022; University of Lille, France 2019; Juraj Dobrila University in Pula, Croatia 2018.

Publications: unlikely Journal for Creative Arts, Australia; 2023; hyphen journal, London, 2022; telecapitarevista in Mexico City, 2017.

Exhibitions see: <http://covini.com/exhibitions.htm>



image by Manuela Johanna Covini

SITUATIONS

The praise of scepticism and the error of certainty

by Manuela Johanna Covini

So it's about that one moment.



...the place before the events, before the decisions.

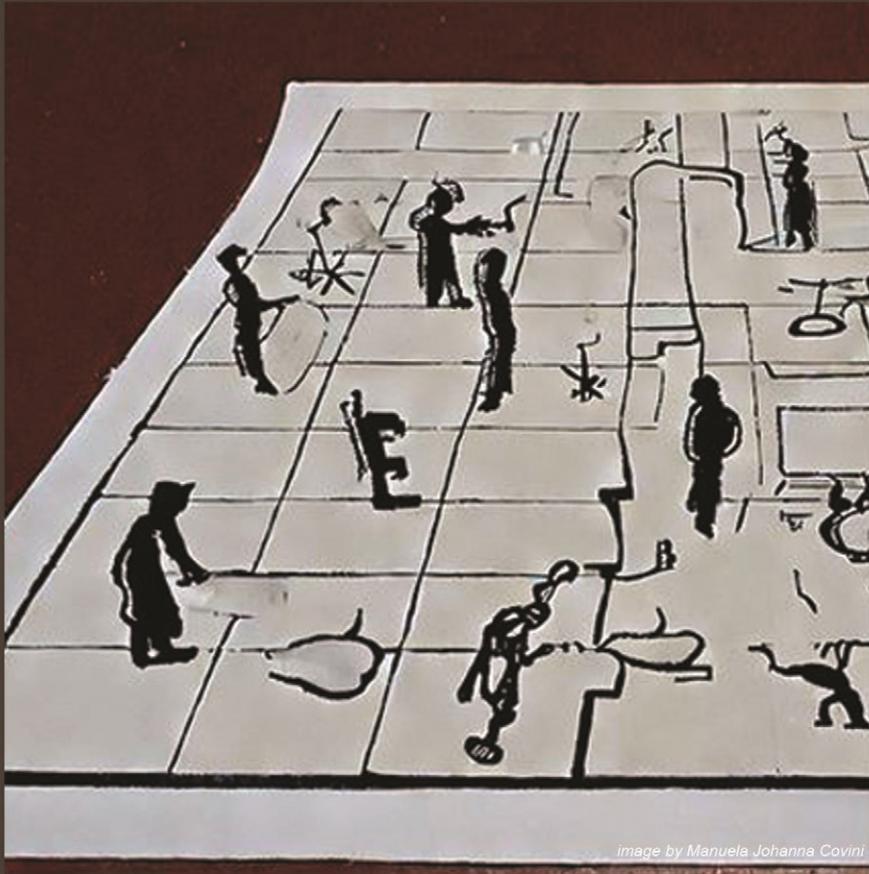
This moment of the absence of any foreign determination and dependence. Creating a self-determined, constructed situation - that was the vision of the situationists in the 1960s.

Like **Hegel**, the situationists returned to the place before the action, because only here lay the multiplicity of possibilities for the next steps of doing. This place, this moment before an action thus had to be activated and put into operation and thus also brought under one's own control. Through conscious planning, the situationists wanted to intervene in this one moment, to make it conscious, with the idea of being able to interrupt the ingrained routines and courses of action. By disrupting everyday life, the Situationists hoped, the political individual could make a start in his or her action, and this "situation" would then give rise to a "NEW REALITY".



Hegel used the example of drama to examine the question of where human, social and political action actually begins and how it can come about. The beginning of action, Hegel thinks, must lie in something that precedes action and makes it possible in the first place. It is a place of transition: from non-action to action, from the status quo to activity. Hegel calls this place the "situation". (cf. Sabrina Habel 2019)

The "**situation**" thus circumscribes a place before action, a place where different possibilities are stored as potency. In his search for the beginning of action, Hegel has arrived at the historical and social conditions, because they have an effect on action. Hegel recognised that these conditions and circumstances shape the actions of the individual. With Hegel, it is the power of the bourgeois order, the power of everyday life and the world of work, which create these social and economic dependencies and ties, i.e. very clear framework conditions, for individual *action*.



Hegel understood the "situation" as a provocation of a reaction, but also as a fragile moment of a game, thus preparing the *political* and *artistic* further development by the Situationists.





image by Manuela Johanna Covini

A situation always has the potency of possibilities.

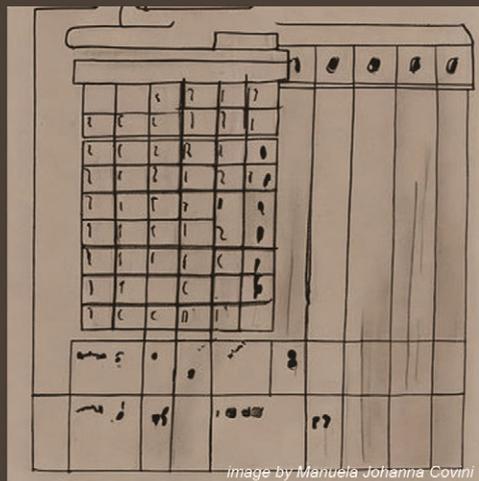


image by Manuela Johanna Covini

**A situation always has the potency of possibilities.
But nothing is forever. Move along. Get lost.**

The future, this is a project that transforms every historical and ideational site into a SUBJECT to ensure dialogue with the present. On the one hand, this subjectification demands an engagement with current ruptures; on the other hand, it conserves the future in one particular of many possibilities.

At the same time, the perception of time becomes a process that cannot be delimited nor concluded. Terms, concepts and culture also "migrate"; i.e. they transform themselves by adapting to the respective circumstances and contexts. (cf. Mieke Bal 2002)

The artist is expected to uncover this process of the emergence of other, new worlds/systems in a poetic - political way. For poetry lies in these manifold potencies of SITUATION, the place before a decision, an action. In these "situations" it is a matter of (re)establishing relationships between distant epochs and languages, of forming new contemporaries. And it is not only the artist who does this. Everyone in a society intervenes in their respective culture through committed and creative coping with everyday life. In this sense, the political and socio-cultural determination of the artist has a mediating role. In doing so, the artist traces these sensitive beginnings of connections and relationships with different and diverse working methods. And he succeeds in breathing life into these potentials/possibilities. For example, the artist's diverse working methods can measure the local and the global in a new unit of measure. But for this to happen, the artist must inevitably move within ecological, economic and social systems in his themes/projects (which is equally equivalent to a "situation": a place of decision). In the best case, the artist actually succeeds in producing something completely new and surprising. But, as someone has already said: Nothing is original. For even our non-places, whether public spaces or private retreats, are never free of time and the respective complexity of their context. Actually, the artist, like any other social role in a society, has the obligation to focus on the realisation of a better future. But this decision cannot be forced and so it goes back to that place/that one moment before the action.



(disruption 1)

The speculative in the spectacle

The world is burning on every corner.
The order of the world is out of control.
So it is time to prepare for the future.

But everywhere cultural humanity is oriented towards
the barbaric seriousness of war.

This is a scandal.

The scandal of the speculative in the spectacle.
And that is language.

*In the beginning, nothingness was everything and
everything had to have a name.
But the name puts an end to the search for narratives.*

Language actually makes us mute, because with language
we practice justification.

But man is a being who cannot stop practising.
In other words, we practise all the time.
Often unknowingly.

So I am a being condemned to practise.
And it is said that this practice of practising affects me all the time.

*I practise and it influences me.
I exercise and it influences me.*

*A circle.
A circle that makes me dizzy.*

Practising balance means not avoiding a necessary struggle.
Practising balance also means not provoking a superfluous fight.
Language makes us mute because we practice legitimacy.

But the world is still burning.

Someone says that if I practise, I cannot be free.

Make a perfect circle!

Form and **function** are prescribed and determined by the respective societies.

And so *form* and *function* press the desire for social relations into **speculative** spectacles. It looks like that every action is a moment of a shared *decision-making*.

If only that were true.



image by Manuela Johanna Covini

As different as decisions may be, they all have one thing in common: the moment of uncertainty about making the right decision.

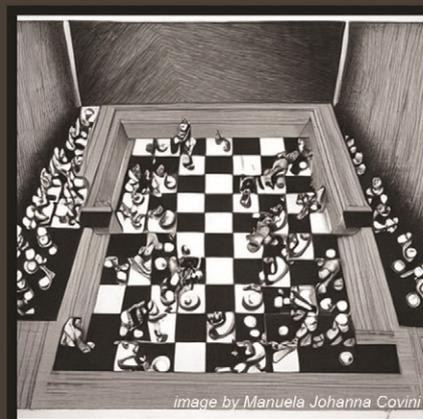
That is the situation. And in this situation you are alone. You would think so. In pedagogy, for example, the situational approach - in contrast to authoritarian education, which focuses on the rigid imparting of knowledge - is characterised by the fact that the focus is on the individuality of the individual child.

The aim here is to educate the children to act independently. However, the idea of mutual consideration, the wishes and needs of the environment should also play a major role. The child feels a sense of belonging to a community and can thus build and shape social relationships. It takes responsibility and recognises that the own actions also have consequences for others. It also learns to accept help and to help others.

The situational approach in builds on these individual experiences.

These experiences are processed and emotionally classified. Always in a timely manner and adapted to the respective situation. Learning through direct experiences in direct, specific situations. Basically, it is as Jürgen Zimmer, founder of the situational approach in the 1970s, describes it: ***an invitation to get involved in life.***

(disruption 2)





Ultimately,

the concept of situation (only) describes our location in a present network of interactions and reflections, experiences and expectations. A situation is thus embedded in a normative, rhetorical, socio-historical, history of ideas environment. But it is precisely here, in these concrete "situations", that the history (of ideas) is perpetuated. Above all, it is the questions that emerge that drive this process of updating.

***Cutting the ribbon to the world and to oneself.
Of one's own self.***



Image by Manuela Johanna Covini

But the world is burning on every corner.

***The world is disenchanted and we are alienated.
Our own orientation shimmies along our own selfie.
We no longer need the gaze of the other. This gaze that
should remind me of this moment before the action.***

The idea that situations are birthplaces of new, innovative (artistic) practices in response to this state of siege by the disillusioned world is hopeful. So these "situations", these moments before the action, give us back the world and ultimately our own selves. Cinema promises the same.

Gilles Deleuze formulated such a confession of faith in his writings on cinema: "From this it is necessary that cinema should film not the world but faith in the world, our only bond... To give us back faith in the world, that is the modern power of cinema". Thus Deleuze has Rossellini say: the less human the world is, the more it is incumbent on the artist to believe in it. This belief does not move mountains, but it produces images of the world.

"It is the world that emerges from the cinema".



The old cinema image still needed a camera and an object in front of the lens to create a world for us. The AI images need neither an object in front of the lens nor a lens.

A new game.



Every image is an assertion

The list of crisis

Making decisions - that is also what criticism demands of me.

Every critique I make requires me to go to those **uncertain places** of that one moment.

This means that as a critic (and this is how a good artist sees himself, or at least a critical attitude is required of a good artist) I am constantly faced with the decision of which concepts/criteria to *include* in my decisions or which to *ignore*.

In this sense, critique requires me to be **autonomous** - to be truly free of all *dependencies*.

This is the first crisis, because I am not autonomous.

I cannot detach myself from everything, withdraw.

So I also don't create the **distance** that criticism seems to demand. Or to put it another way: Criticism suggests a distance and an aura of entitlement and competence to me. How can I free myself from this?

Another crisis.

The critical distance we need does not concern a distance in space, a distance in our posture or attitude, but **criticism** needs a distance in time - time as a **formulated perspective for the future**.

Criticism is always an attempt at legitimisation.
How can I distance myself from this?

So how do I write a little theory of autonomous things.
Beginning exactly from that special moment...
Another crisis.

The list of crises is endless.



**The decisive thing
about the critique
is not the *judgement*,
but the new
understanding.**

**And *that should
actually be the
place/moment
before the action*.**

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(Co)Presence: Enfolded Response-ability and Relational Ontologies

Helen Colton

Absence has a palpable presence for those seeking truth and reconciliation in the wake of erasure. Struggles for visibility and representation are bound to the ontoepistemological and ethical implications of discursive practices. Karen Barad's post-humanist theory of "agential realism" draws upon diffraction as a theoretical and performative modality for understanding phenomena as threaded through, not separate from, self and other. Presence and absence, past and present, nature and culture, matter and energy, human and non-human are co-present agents enfolded in a continual process of becoming. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's intra-active artworks, when considered through the diffractive lens of Barad's theories, bring visibility to absence as an indicator of what is lacking or excluded from knowledge production and warrants representation. Public space is reimagined as a platform in which assemblages of biometric data, architecture, light and technology can initiate possibilities for absence to be (re)presented. These "situations," as Lozano-Hemmer refers to them, reconfigure presence and absence in terms of co-presence and activate transcorporeal entanglements between the living, disappeared and otherwise missing. The artworks are performatively embodied and distributed across time, space, matter and memory to reveal traces of loss, exclusion and displacement. Intra-actions bring the artworks into being, evoking an openness to the ubiquitous alterity that is already, inextricably, iteratively constitutive of bodies (including but not limited to humans). Lozano-Hemmer's "relationship-specific situations" are discursive practices in which co-presence is materialized and reconstituted within the artwork as an ongoing dialogue with absent others, prompting actions that attend to Barad's call for "formulations of realism (and truth)" premised on the performative nature of post-anthropocentric response-able knowledge making.

Helen Colton (b. 1968, San Francisco, CA) is an independent curator based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She earned her B.A. in Studio Arts from San Francisco State University and an M.A. in Philosophy, Art and Social Thought from the European Graduate School. In 2015 she founded Legacy Projects, a contemporary visual arts initiative, committed to archival management, publications, exhibitions and oral history projects. Helen approaches her collaborations as an opportunity to amplify the voices of artists who wish to engage directly with education efforts and the historical documentation of their work. Her curatorial practice stems from a particular focus on inclusive knowledge production and interdisciplinary arts discourse.

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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's artworks emerge at the intersection of performance, science, architecture and technology. His works are interventions that trouble boundary making practices limiting our understanding of relation and complexity. By disrupting container-model notions of time, space, matter and perception, Lozano-Hemmer brings intra-active processes to the fore. He refers to his art as "situational events" in which he creates platforms for participation and self-representation. Participatory happenings bring the work into being to engage the viewer as both observer and observed within temporal-spatial environments. These platforms are situated within indeterminate circumstances that do not correspond with linear time intervals and fixed physical locations. His work circumvents ontological divides by centering relation as a means to make visible, what and whom has been obscured or disappeared from the public eye. This inclusive process does not separate presence and absence into oppositional binary determinations, rather co-constitutive phenomena exist in relation and are contingent upon performativity. Considering absence and presence as transitions in a continuum, aligns with Barad's notion of ontological entanglement (inseparability) and intra-active agency. Performativity in this sense hinges conditions for visibility on agential acts that account for material-social histories commonly hidden from view or made unknowable through systemic erasure. Lozano-Hemmer counters disappearance and or invisibility with acts of (re)appearance. His work creates means for performative intervention, by which presence and absence are bound to the struggle for visibility and agency.

Absence has a materiality and exists in and with matter (including but not limited to humans). Emergent becoming can take shape when discursive practices are not limited by either/or frameworks predicated on visibility and human observation. Relational ontologies eschew separation of subject and object, from which all other bifurcations and hierarchical

dualisms unfold, to locate meaning in the latent space of unresolved legibility, falling outside the normative “order of things” (Foucault). Feminist theorists, such as Barad, have long been concerned with “revealing and negotiating inequalities conceived along the break-line of a binary logic that has characterized and sedimented Western traditions of thought.”¹¹

Historically, Euro-centric representations (images, language, knowledge production) i.e., culture, are presumed to serve a mediating function between the heuristic divides being challenged by post-humanist thought. This taken-for-granted ontological gap between categorical divisions generates questions regarding the legitimacy of representation, prompting reason for inquiry into what and whom is included, and more importantly, omitted or prevented from “mattering” in the first place. Exclusions necessitate queries such as: Does documented history portray the “truth” of an event? Does language accurately represent its referent? Is an algorithm coded with bias? (see figure 1)



Figure 1.
Lozano-Hemmer, Rafael. *Level of Confidence*. 2015.
Face-recognition algorithms, computer, screen, webcam.
Shown here: Montréal, Québec, Canada.
Photo: Antimodular Research.

Lozano-Hemmer's work is premised on inquiries into such questions and he often addresses agency as a social project. His activist works bring visibility to the unseen through various means of (re)presenting the desaparecidoⁱⁱ [disappeared] and otherwise absent bodies to contest conditions of invisibility, state sponsored cover ups, and biased practices that prevent truth and buried histories from being known: "Although the exchange of the artwork is open ended, it is not neutral. Oftentimes I feel that my works are trying to elicit interaction from people who I feel are underrepresented, or who experience a sense of alienation. I want to create artworks that allow such individuals, through self-representation, to possess the gesture of legitimation offered by art practices, through the questioning of public space and their relationship with a community."ⁱⁱⁱ Lozano-Hemmer uses the term "copresence" to conceive of absence not as a condition in itself but as something that exists through interactivity. Breath exhalations and the sound waves of a heartbeat for instance, extend beyond the corporeal into the ubiquitous atmosphere. Bodies (including but not limited to humans) simultaneously receive, record and transmit, such that a once present but now absent body can be (re)presented through a variety of data visualizations, reconfigured to materialize within interactive environments. Pulse, breath and physical movement activate touch, sound and light responsive technologies. What is typically invisible or concealed from view becomes externalized. (see figure 2).



Lozano-Hemmer, Rafael *Pulse Room*. 2006. Incandescent light bulbs, voltage controllers, heart rate sensors, computer and metal sculpture. Shown here: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: *Latidos*, Arte Abierto, Mexico City, Mexico, 2020. Photo: Mariana Yañez.

In *Pulse Room*, 2006, individual heartbeats are registered as a copresence along with previously recorded pulse rates. Each time someone touches the interface a heart pattern is recorded and this is sent to the first bulb in the grid, pushing ahead all the former recordings. At any given time the installation lights up with the pulse of the most recent participant, thus becoming a visualization of individual heartbeats converging within an extended field of biometric currents, pulsating in a constellation of flickering bulbs, hanging in meandering intervals throughout the room. Material phenomena are inseparable from performative bodies: matter emerges out of, and includes as part of its being the ongoing reconfiguring of boundaries. Material and immaterial intra-act, not as separate entities, but on and with each other, as co-agents engaged in a continual process of becoming. In this view, matter and mind are not bifurcated by substance/knowledge categories, rather both express agency in non-hierarchical relation.

Knowledge production is mapped through co-constitutive events and not bound to pre-determined taxonomies that keep historical information, time and people in place. A relational ontology seeks and demonstrates connections that link and expand upon couplings of nature/culture, matter/meaning and collective/individual agency. Rather than separating these sources of knowledge into epistemological oppositions, the topological, potentialized and already interactive are entangled in performative process, which is emergent and distinctly different from pre-formed binary representations. Barad turns to relational performativity in order to put forward her theory of agential realism. She offers a philosophy-physics, a term adopted from Niels Bohr^{iv} based on a feminist, materialist and post-humanist elaboration of performativity. A methodology of discursive practices that gives “matter its due as an active participant in the world’s becoming.” In an agential realist account, matter does not refer to a fixed substance, rather: “Matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency. [...] Phenomena—the smallest material units

(relational ‘atoms’) come to matter through this process of ongoing intra-activity. Matter does not refer to an inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects; rather, ‘matter’ refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization.”^v This conception of the performed body acknowledges the constructed body (culture) and the material body (nature), but understands these, along with the incorporeal dimension of the body, and its relational activities as potentiality. Lozano-Hemmer’s interactive art can be more clearly understood as “intra-active” situations of emergent possibility. “Intra-action,” to use Barad’s neologism, is a process that is constituted in and through and with its relations, unlike interaction which involves connections among separate entities, intra-action is a causality that produces mutually constituted phenomena. The performance of embodiment is our potential; it is our relational becoming, this understanding of the performed (not pre-formed) body stresses what is at stake in Lozano Hemmer’s practice. The art event or situation is a platform for possibility. As with agential realism, these platforms accept rather than deny indeterminacy and are mediated through apparatuses that can either limit or encourage possibility, depending on the agential cuts that are enacted. Attunement to power relations and discursive-material practices impacts the ethics of what and how research is conducted and which instruments and concepts researchers apply in their sense-making and knowledge cutting apparatuses, as Barad calls them. Researchers and artists alike are continuously “worlding the world” with the cuts they choose to make; and interpretations of their work precipitates agential cuts in response from others. Barad and Lozano-Hemmer’s awareness of this fundamental impact entails an ethical “response-ability” to account for these relationalities of knowing, being and doing, as Barad makes clear with her hyphenated term ethico-onto-epistemology. These intersectional branches of knowledge production extend from the merging of (response) as a situational and ethical imperative and (ability) as the agency inherent in discursive material power relations.

Agency, in a relational ontology, is an ethical affair with epistemological implications that affect our understanding of the world. When asked in an interview if his desire to “re-present” life is along the lines of classical ideas of mimesis, Lozano-Hemmer replied:

It is a desire in my opinion, not so much to recreate life but to recreate the conditions of possibility of the uncertain and the uncontrollable. The most important thing in many of my pieces is the idea that they are out of my control. That often gets materialized in two ways. On the one hand, there are either emergent or chaotic life agencies in the works, so that there is a sense of the artwork making its own decisions. Or, there are provisions for the public to personalize, take over the piece and push it into the direction that they desire through self-representation. In both of those cases the artist establishes a field or platform. ‘Platform’ is a good word because it is not a territory, per se, but rather a set of constraints. The artwork is a set of constraints that are decided upon: what is permitted and not permitted. The life that you are seeking to engender is not so much the life of the artwork but the life of the event, which is a collaboration between the artwork and the public.^{vi}

In equal measures techno-scientific, poetic and political, Barad and Lozano-Hemmer contemplate and explore what lies beyond the absent body. They challenge absolutist ideas of finitude to suggest that life and death entail acknowledgement of socio-political-cultural invisibility imposed on certain populations. The disqualified, marginalized and persecuted, who are excluded in various ways from institutions of official knowledge production and political representation. The paradox of an absent body making its presence felt is central to acknowledging those who are “invisible”— the refugee, the immigrant, a mother mourning the “disappeared,” the person who suffers from environmental racism, or dies prematurely from disease or violent cause. Agential realism provides a theoretical framework where material traces of attempted erasures can be found to exist in the wake of entanglements, as Barad points out, erasure is a material practice that leaves its trace in the very “worlding of the world” and what is referred to as erased is preserved in the residuals of entanglement. More specifically, Barad applies agential realism as a methodology for discovering meaning hidden within gaps and slippages:

Memory does not reside in the folds of individual brains; rather, memory is the enfolding of space-time-matter written into the universe, or better, the

enfolded articulations of the universe in its mattering. Memory is not a record of a fixed past that can ever be fully or simply erased, written over, or recovered (that is, taken away or taken back into one's possession, as if it were a thing that can be owned).^{vii}

The act of (re)presenting the absent body centers on resisting conditions of absentia and invisibility to reveal indelible traces of loss, erasure, exclusion, displacement and obscured or untold histories. The tension between presence and absence is particularly amplified by the lived experience of people who face violent oppression and generational trauma. Presence and absence are often determined by boundary making frameworks that inherently involve omission through observation, thus visibility is bound to the politics of representation and discursive practices entail onto-epistemological ethical implications.

The need to recognize absence as presence is a tendency that can be identified across movements and time periods in the arts, as a response to global issues of historical persecution, colonialism, war, genocide and environmental crisis. Precarious fluctuations between absence and presence are leveraged in the work of Lozano-Hemmer as performative interventions intended to generate socio-cultural-political agency by creating opportunities for collective resistance to manifest. He addresses the porous indexicality of absence/presence by transforming conditions of invisibility (erasures and other hidden truths) into poetic acts of engagement. His interactive works make the invisible visible by enfolded the materiality of absence into actions that open up possibilities to mourn or contest misrepresentations of people and historical events, resulting in new more inclusive forms of knowledge production. Materiality and immateriality are conjunctive. The interaction between the two do not produce opposition but rather situations of confluence. Copresence is not so much about relegating something as present or absent, presentable or unrepresentable, visible or invisible, but rather an exploration of transition states between the two, prompting us to think about what frameworks and conditions for visibility must be in place for us to notice something, or to consider what and whom matters. *Atmospheric Memory*, 2021,

Lozano-Hemmer's recent interactive art environment, probes Charles Babbage's assertion that "The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are forever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered." In 1837, Babbage imagined a computational machine that could calculate the movement of air molecules to measure and record the pulsation of voices archived in the atmosphere. He posed the idea that "No motion impressed by natural causes, or by human agency, is ever obliterated"... the atmosphere is an "ever-living witness of the sentiments we have uttered" and the planet is a forensic register for the "equally enduring testimony of the acts we have committed." Lozano-Hemmer posits the imaginings of Babbage to inquire about buried truths, obscured histories, omissions in accepted knowledge production and the possibility of a forensic gaze that can detect crimes of the past hidden from the naked eye. If what lies beyond the absent body is a history impressed upon the earth and it's atmosphere, what could the disappeared tell us? Perhaps we could find evidence of criminal acts and send old injustices for a retrial.

Accounting for traces left behind by an absent body challenges notions that the disappeared (and other lives taken by violence), no longer matter and can easily be forgotten. Lozano-Hemmer speaks to the importance of holding space in the present as a memento mori to those we have lost: *Voz Alta*, 2008 (see figure 3), a memorial commissioned for the 40th anniversary of the student massacre in Tlatelolco, "is extremely specific about its interruption of a political process of dismissal or erasure, of an economic and historical reality, of a lack of media representation. How do we interrupt that situation? How do we create a platform for people to be entitled to their voice?"^{viii} To (re)present the absent body is an act of resistance to erasure, it is a form of agency that seeks accountability and responsibility to one another. Copresence or being present with another can take place with an absent "other." *Voz Alta* is an example of what he refers to as "relational architecture" and follows in the trajectory of the Siluetazo [Silhouette] politico-aesthetic actions (see figure 4) in Buenos Aires during the

early 1980s to protest the history of the desaparecidos [disappeared]. The Siluetazo interventions appropriated the image of police outlines used in crime scenes to trace around a dead body, thereby subverting the forensic gaze into a graphic social symbol representing the collective bond of citizenship in search of truth. The void, left in the absence of a life taken by state violence, was filled with the bodies of protestors, a demarcation of the living standing in for the dead and a (re)presentation by means of a silhouette that symbolizes material erasure while engaging a collective resistance to corrupt military regimes.



Figure 3. Lozano-Hemmer, Rafael. *Voz Alta, Relational Architecture 15*. 2008. 4x10kW Xenon robotic searchlights, modified megaphone, computers, DMX distribution, live FM radio transmission. Shown here: Memorial for the Tlatelolco student massacre, Mexico City, Mexico, 2008. Photo: Antimodular Research



Figure 4. Gil, Eduardo. *Maria Zurita. El Siluetazo. Buenos Aires, September 21/22, 1983*. Gelatin silver print on paper. Collection of Museo Reina Sofia

Voz Alta or *Loud Voice* in English, is also a public call to action, literally giving voice to those who, forty years later, were still seeking accountability for the 1968 student massacre in Tlatelolco. A megaphone, installed at the site where the massacre occurred, amplified testimonials throughout the air space of Mexico City, broadcasting historical memory through communal action. This event of witnessing in the public sphere shattered hegemonic

state narratives that blamed others for the massacre: the students, communists, foreign terrorists, rogue political elements. “Individual memories lost their isolated, idiosyncratic character and became nodal points for drawing the past into the present and for marking experiential connections across previously segregated arenas of civil society.”^{ix} Despite attempts by the government to suppress outrage over cover-ups and the subsequent blaming that ensued to avoid accountability, memory of the hundreds lost on that day survive in the traces of entangled histories:

The trace of all measurements remain even when information is erased; it takes work to make the ghostly entanglements visible. The past is not closed (it never was), but erasure (of all traces) is not what is at issue. The past is not present. ‘Past’ and ‘future’ are iteratively reconfigured and enfolded through the world’s ongoing intra-activity. There is no inherently determinate relationship between past and future. Phenomena are not located in space and time; rather, phenomena are material entanglements enfolded and threaded through the spacetime-mattering of the universe. Even the return of a diffraction pattern does not signal a going back, an erasure of memory, a restoration of a present past. Memory—the pattern of sedimented enfoldings of iterative intra-activity—is written into the fabric of the world. The world ‘holds’ the memory of all traces; or rather, the world is its memory (enfolded materialisation).^x

Following Donna Haraway’s theories on a feminist approach to difference and the entanglement of matter with meaning. Barad proposes diffraction as a way out of seeing the world from an individualist, humanist and representationalist perspective, in which a distinctly separate, atomistic individual human is seen as the measure of all things at the center of the universe. From a post-humanist perspective, Barad sees diffraction as a response to the need for intra-acting through and with instead of against or in opposition:

A method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition, that intrinsic to this analysis, is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement. Diffractive readings bring inventive provocations; they are good to think with. They are respectful, detailed, ethical engagements.^{xi}

Difference, in Western tradition, is represented as an ontological hierarchy of categorical divisions (man/woman, working class/middle class, white/black, etc.). A diffractive analysis

views difference as a relational ontology, that is, an effect of connections and relations within and between different bodies, affecting other bodies and being affected by them. Diffraction is a heuristic alternative that offers a way of reading intersections that weave parallels between Barad and Lozano-Hemmer's work. Barad's theories are informed and expanded upon through and with foundations in quantum physics, philosophy and feminist theory. Lozano-Hemmer's work follows an arc beginning with chemistry, which led him to possibilities for integrating technology and theater, culminating in his interactive art explorations. Barad speaks to how the separation of academic divisions limits our understanding of a world that is undeniably in relation, "whereby the division of labor is such that the natural sciences are assigned matters of fact and the humanities matters of concern." Connections between and across disciplines are difficult to make "when the cordoning off of concerns into separate domains elides the resonances and dissonances that make up diffraction patterns that make the entanglements visible."^{xii}

A turn to diffraction as both a metaphor and methodology requires an important onto-epistemological and ethical shift in our thinking so that we can take notice of the differences and transformations that emerge in specific events. Diffractive analysis brings visibility to material-discursive realities that have important epistemological, ontological and methodological consequences. From a diffractive perspective, subjects and objects such as nature and culture are not fixed referents for understanding the other but should be read through one another as entanglements. Agential realism is a diffractive inquiry, a methodology that involves structural analysis while also providing inroads to metaphorical thinking, allowing for theory and poetics to intersect. Barad speaks of the "queering" of science as a way to establish correlations between feminist new materialism and quantum physics. Lozano-Hemmer pushes the boundaries of media art to ask "How can we misuse these technologies of control to create connective, poetic or critical experiences?"^{xiii} Both are

judicious in their use of the word new and quick to recognize the varied influences that provide precedents for their thinking and respective practices.

Drawing on ideas from both Haraway's post-humanism and Niels Bohr's quantum physics, Barad considers diffraction or interference as a metaphor and as a physical phenomenon, which is part of wave behavior—whether light, water or sound waves. Diffraction is where waves combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading out of waves when they encounter an obstruction. The combination and accumulation of waves are amplified by being superimposed upon one another. Barad uses this physical process of diffraction as a methodology which engages affirmatively with difference. Barad thus posits that diffraction is more than merely a metaphor—it is a method or methodology. She notes that it is not just quantum physics which has played a part in developing diffractive methodology—feminist theorizing about difference has in itself made a significant contribution to its development. In Barad's diffractive methodology, the details of one discipline (in this case quantum physics) are read attentively and with care through another (feminist queer theory) in order to arrive at more creative insights. The process of unlearning particular ways of seeing and feeling, and unforming to reconfigure new possibilities is a way of working through one's own history to imagine alternative worldings. A pedagogy inspired by new feminist materialisms draws on this diverse tradition of relational thinking. More radically perhaps, it challenges divisions in theory/practice by relocating the political and ethical in everyday life experiences. Particular attention is paid to interferences of different worlding-practices, and to what might make a difference in what counts as natural or real, as well as to the more-than-human actants that participate in these mattering practices and transformations.

Intersectional feminism centers the voices of those experiencing overlapping, concurrent forms of oppression in order to understand the depth of inequalities and the

relationships among them in any given context. An intersectional approach demonstrates how social identities can overlap in ways that create compounding experiences of discrimination. Diffraction is a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and their experience is not just the sum of its parts. To learn diffractively, we need to unlearn our drive to engage in a reflective process focused on the self or searching for interpretations, as this suppresses the alternative possibilities of learning a relational ontology. Diffractive methodologies mine the historical past looking for the invisible, forgotten or absent bodies of knowledge, to serve present and future aims for ongoing discovery, recovery and reconciliation.

Barad and Lozano-Hemmer both apply diffractive methodologies to encourage heightened attention to entangled bodies, generated by our collaboration in the spaces of physical settings and across digital networks connecting the globe. Their work inspires us to think the “social” and the “scientific” together in new informative ways. What often appears as separate entities and separate sets of concerns with sharp edges does not actually entail a relation of absolute exteriority at all:

Like the diffraction patterns illuminating the indefinite nature of boundaries—displaying shadows in ‘light’ regions and bright spots in ‘dark’ regions—the relation of the social and the scientific is a relation of ‘exteriority within.’ This is not a static relationality but a doing—the enactment of boundaries—that always entails constitutive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability.^{xiv}

For Barad, matter is not an “individual affair” nor is it determined by inner and outer distinctions. Likewise in Lozano-Hemmer’s intra-active environments, and in particular his *Bioportraits*, the head, hand, lungs and heart perform in unison with conditions that collapse divides between interior and exterior. Skin, breath, voice and pulse are conduits in and with phenomena, in which nature and culture emerge and iteratively converge. Life is a process

not reducible to a substance; and we cannot define with certainty where a body begins and ends when we conceive of matter as enfolded rather than determined by an interior and exterior. Consider one definite molecule, a unit of matter made up of atoms that for millions of years undergoes a constant cycle of becoming, reconfiguring and redistribution. Perhaps this molecule originates from a distant nebula: it enters the body; it may emerge as a factor in an edible vegetable; or it passes into the lungs as part of the air. At what exact point as it enters the mouth or as it is absorbed through the skin, is it part of the body? At what exact moment, later on, does it cease to be part of the body? Exactness is out of the question and indeterminacy, while unruly in nature, is a state of affairs that brings us closer to the world of actual experience.

I think the artwork needs to have layers and loose ends. Not even the artist him or herself can know where that loose end will lead. [...] Contrary to science, contrary to the sign, contrary to technology, we benefit from an approach that is not teleological. In other words, we approach art as something that is going to become, not something that is. [...] This comes in clash with more conservative ideas of what art should be- this attitude that we need to establish a moment when the artwork is fixed. There is great irony in the notion of trying to fix something which is out of control by definition. I have always been enamored of ephemerality as a way to ensure that the projects do not have fixed signification. [...] I have approached a different sort of idea: to preserve the agency and the performativity of the project, what I call the perpetration of the cultural act instead of the preservation.^{xv}

Relational ontologies are concerned with care, social justice and seeing oneself as part of the world. Diffraction is also then about issues of taking “response-ability” and furthering social justice causes by means of (re)presenting possible worlds and potential histories:

Being in one's skin means that one cannot escape responsibility: the prior ethical relation of ‘having-the-other-in-one's-skin’ conditions the constriction of embodiment, which ‘does not unify the ego but, on the contrary, inscribes the noncoincidence with oneself within the lived body and makes it the basis of the ethical relations to others.’ Before all reciprocity in the face of the other, I am responsible. But if responsibility is not a commitment that a subject chooses but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness, ‘an obligation which is anachronistically prior to every engagement,’ then it seems we cannot ignore the full set of possibilities of alterity—that ‘having- the-other-in-one's-skin’ includes a spectrum of possibilities, including the ‘other than human’ as well as the ‘human.’ And if

ethical relations extend to the other-than-human, then the ‘noncoincidence with oneself’ is clearly not a singular feature of human embodiment. Responsibility—the ability to respond to the other cannot be restricted to human-human encounters when the very boundaries and constitution of the ‘human’ are continually being reconfigured and ‘our’ role in these and other reconfigurings is precisely what ‘we’ have to face.^{xvi}

Participation, “perpetration of the cultural act” (Lozano-Hemmer) and “inventive provocations” (Barad) are necessary to emergent phases of becoming. Performative intra-actions are essential to activate Lozano-Hemmer’s work and viewer participation activates boundary resistant environments which pose questions regarding: where does my body end and the external world begin? In an agential realist account, Barad describes interactivity as entanglement, that is: “not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.”^{xvii} Biometric signatures (pulse, breath, finger prints, facial recognition) collected via public participation, become a means by which distinct individuals are woven into an evolving archive of the commons in a state of perpetual transformation. The reconfiguration of emergent biometric data is enmeshed within a simultaneously perishing collective experience in which the commons are not established at the expense of the uniqueness of each member, but instead draw on difference as the integral basis of any relation to others. These performative “rehearsals” situate the commons as a source of agency and dynamic intra-action. In this new materialism based perspective of agential realism, conditions of visibility cannot fully be explained in terms of absence or presence. What is thought to be the disappearance of a qualified presence is a marker that troubles the divide between the visible and invisible. Absence, when reconsidered as copresence, is performative, textured and materialized through relations and processes, or “the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting agencies.”^{xviii} We therefore need to trace absence. This entails following and describing the processes through which absence

is matter and how absence comes to matter. It means to map out, locate and follow the traces of absence as residuals of entanglement: “incomplete, elusive, ambiguous, yet material entities—a material culture of the immaterial.”^{xix} New materialist theories, such as agential realism, call for an expanded understanding of perception to recognize that privileging sight and language over the multiplicity of combined senses, is a failure to understand that vision and knowledge production are dynamic—thinking, feeling, sensing—relationships, which function through and along with an energetic exchange between light, matter, time, space and perception.

Endnote Citations

ⁱ Peta Hinton and Pat Treusch, *Teaching with Feminist Materialisms*, (Utrecht, The Netherlands: ATGENDER, 2015), 1.

ⁱⁱ Desaparecido [the forcibly disappeared]. That is, persons deprived of their liberty, and with unknown whereabouts and fate, who following their absence and kidnapping are insistently claimed by their families, partners, and friends. This persistent appeal to the authorities—which is also a form of activism—gave rise to numerous social and human rights defense movements.

ⁱⁱⁱ Abigail Susik, “The Perpetration of the Cultural Act: Interview with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer,” *Media-N Journal of the NMC*, (Fall 2014): 111-113.

^{iv} Bohr’s epistemology calls into question several foundationalist assumptions that Western epistemology generally takes as essential to its project (words, knowers, and things); among these are an inherent subject/object distinction and the representational status of language.

^v Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 210.

^{vi} Susik, “The Perpetration of the Cultural Act,” 111-113.

^{vii} Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Preface, ix.

^{viii} Sylvie Fortin, “The Light that Blinds: A Conversation with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer,” in *Artists Reclaim the Commons: New works/new territories/new publics*, edited by Glen Harper and Twylene Moyer (Hamilton, NJ: ISC Press, 2013), 275-283.

^{ix} Olivier Asselin et al., *Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Pseudomatisms*, (Mexico City, MX: MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo, UNAM Press, 2015), 114.

^x Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/Continuities, SpaceTime Enfolding, and Justice-to-Come.” *Derrida Today* 3.2 (2010): 240–268.

^{xi} Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 48.

^{xii} Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, 48.

^{xiii} Roger Catlin, "This Art Show is Taking the Literal Pulse of America," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 6, 2018, https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/texts/bibliography/articles_multipieces/TheSmithsonianMagazine_6Nov2018.pdf

^{xiv} Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 3/68, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>.

^{xv} Susik, "The Perpetration of the Cultural Act," 111-113.

^{xvi} Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 392.

^{xvii} Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 392.

^{xviii} Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 31.

^{xix} Morgan Meyer, "Placing and tracing absence: A material culture of the immaterial," *Journal of Material Culture* (March 5, 2012): 103-110, doi:10.1177/1359183511433259.

Provocation in Porcelain

Victoria Burgher

My research asks if porcelain, as a methodological tool of artistic research, can expose ideological whiteness as a way of outing it to anti-racist ends. By making and thinking with porcelain, I hope to address what Mike Hill has described as “the epistemological stickiness and ontological wiggling immanent in whiteness” (Hill, 1997, p. 3). By whiteness I am referring to what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms “embodied racial power” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 271). Academics in the field of critical whiteness studies have highlighted the potential pitfalls of this work, one being that if any work we are doing with whiteness is not contributing to anti-racist scholarship, then we must stop doing it (Garner, 2007). I am determined, therefore, to continually reflect on whether I can genuinely put whiteness to the test and create a meaningful outcome. What agency does my specific situation as an artist-researcher – my social, geographical and racial privilege, and the authority this bestows – give me in terms of a transformative practice? There is a very real risk that my work, however clear I am about its anti-oppression aims, puts an unnecessary focus on whiteness. This is the situation this paper discusses.

Victoria Burgher is an artist whose practice-based, interdisciplinary PhD research at the University of Westminster uses porcelain to interrogate ideological and material whiteness from an explicitly anti-racist position. Her work using colonial commodities to reveal the whitewashing of British imperial history is exhibited nationally and internationally. She has been awarded technē-AHRC funding for her doctoral research and is a technē Racial Justice Fellow. She has a BA Hons Ceramics from the University of Westminster and an MA Art and Politics from Goldsmiths, University of London. She lives and works in East London.

provocation

in

porcelain



Victoria Burgher

I use porcelain¹ to ponder, problematise and pervert ideological whiteness² – I do this from a specific location of both privilege and place, and it is this particular situation that influences my research questions and methodologies. I work within a neoliberal higher education institution located in a post-Brexit Britain that, finding itself now empireless and cast adrift from Europe, is doubling down on whiteness in a desperate bid to shore up its inferiority complex³. This identity crisis has spawned an environment deliberately hostile to those seeking sanctuary from neocolonial impoverishment and geopolitical conflict. An image of Home Secretary Suella Braverman laughing uproariously on the site of an offshore internment centre for deported asylum-seekers⁴ illustrates the power of whiteness as an ongoing legacy of empire. A ruling class intent on mimicking the violent, destructive drive of colonial masters was foreseen by Frantz Fanon in 1952 (2008). Far from being diluted over time, whiteness becomes more concentrated; this is the backdrop to my situation as a white researcher critiquing whiteness from a specifically anti-racist perspective. The position of privilege I occupy is determined by the benefits of being white, middle-class and financially supported in my research endeavours by the AHRC. I am acutely aware of the (largely unearned) advantages of this position, which must be constantly foregrounded and reflected upon as I carry out my practice – an endeavour that seeks to challenge the very practices of whiteness. Porcelain’s potential for assisting me in this is evidenced by its history of entanglement with European imperial expansion, colonial exploitation and global racial

¹ Porcelain is a vitrified (non-porous) ceramic with a white, fine-grained body that is usually translucent. It has always been a highly desired and valuable commodity because of its unique visual and tactile characteristics that have been impossible to achieve in any other material.

² I am referring to whiteness, not as a skin colour, but as a false and socially constructed racialised consciousness that informs the practice of white superiority through everyday beliefs, emotions, thoughts, choices, behaviours and actions. I am influenced here by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s conceptualisation of whiteness as ‘embodied racial power’ (Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p.271).

³ Nicholas Mirzoeff, in *White Sight* (2023, p. 149), similarly believes that “for self-identified British people, decolonisation has meant shifting their self-worth from their association with empire into practices of whiteness”.

⁴ www.thelondoneconomic.com/politics/braverman-howling-with-laughter-outside-rwandan-migrant-centre-provokes-outrage-345409/

capitalism. Over this time, ‘pure white’ porcelain developed connotations of gentility and refinement, elitism and social status, demonstrating how ideological whiteness is both materialised and projected by porcelain objects – objects that were being circulated in the centuries when anti-black racism was being used to justify enslavement.

As Paul Gilroy emphasises, “neither race nor racism are the exclusive historical property of the minorities who are their primary victims” (Gilroy, 2005, p.14). Dismantling the structures that uphold white supremacy and exposing the whitewashing of imperial history is not the job of people of colour. White people must do the work and recognise that racism is very much a contemporary problem. My research motivation is rooted in anti-racism; this is the philosophical and political position from which I lead my life, in the art world, in academia, at home and beyond. My hope is that my practice can contribute to “unlearning imperialism” (Azoulay, 2019, p.8) and a greater understanding of the role of whiteness as an ongoing legacy of empire in institutional and structural racism and oppression. My research must not reaffirm whiteness or make it visible for any reason other than to dismantle it; I need to acknowledge the connection between my racial identity, social location and the knowledge I produce. Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) has been very influential as I appraise my methodology. I consider what I am doing to be a form of ‘wake work’. Sharpe says that “to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (2016, p.13). Everything I am doing must be interrogated in relation to the anti-blackness of systemic racism in this country. Vron Ware and Les Back (2002) advise people categorised as white to test and refine appropriate and effective political responses to race-thinking. Casting a fresh light on predominant narratives of British colonialism and its racist legacy requires sensitivity and an awareness of the risk of translating “black suffering into white pedagogy” (Hartman, 2020 [no pagination]). Discussing ‘white on white’ methodology, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) argues

that the researcher is never a neutral observer and that there is always a danger of collusion where there is a shared whiteness.

So, with the above context in mind, is my attempt to craft a counter to hegemonic whiteness with porcelain viable? Where can this work exist with integrity and efficacy, so closely tied as it is to the structures of white supremacy that underpin both higher education and the art world? Can porcelain, a material so physically white and so historically and symbolically laden with preciousness and prestige, genuinely disrupt the ‘sedimented social practices’ of whiteness? (Mouffe, 2007, [no pagination]). Chantal Mouffe’s account of these sedimented practices as ones “that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted” (ibid) mirrors the insidious invisibility of whiteness as conceptualised by the literature of critical whiteness studies. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) and Sara Ahmed (2007) argue that whiteness is an invisible position and empty cultural space, which creates an assumption that white ways of thinking, seeing and being are the accepted standard against which all other racially marked ways of being are measured. Revealing the invisibility of this position would cause whiteness to be seen – an acknowledgement that displaces the normativity of its position and exposes it as a strategy of domination rather than an essential identity (Bhabha, 1998). The risk of further normalising whiteness through this work is very real and I need to constantly critique my position and remain implicated in my subject while turning towards the ‘other’, in what Ahmed has described as the necessary ‘double turn’ for whiteness studies (Ahmed, 2004, p.6). This turn will involve investigating the implications of my practice as explicitly anti-racist and, in so doing, I need to be wary of making through a lens of whiteness. As South African writer and activist Nadine Gordimer warns:

“If the white artist is to break out of [her] double alienation, [she] too has to recognise a false consciousness within [herself], [she] too has to discard [her] white-based value system.” (Gordimer 2010, p.308)

I need to consciously embody anti-racist methodologies since my whiteness, however conscious of it I increasingly am, will still unwittingly inform my knowledge production (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, p.78). A desire, therefore, for ontological integrity, steers my ‘living’ of this research as I explore how to create a space for dissensus among the workings of whiteness in the art and wider world. As Raka Shome reminds us, whiteness “is more about the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain global dominance of white imperial subjects and Eurocentric views” (Shome, 1999, p.108).

This paper considers the agency my situation gives me to deprivilege discursive whiteness as a tool in the wider project of dismantling structural whiteness – which must be the only reason for giving whiteness any more airtime. I will briefly outline the artist research strategies I am testing, which consist of a series of constructed ‘situations’. Unfortunately there is not the scope, within this short paper, to address my reflections on these in any depth.

Situation one: demythologising empire

The first approach I have taken in my use of porcelain to expose whiteness is to deploy the classic language of blue-and-white imported East Asian porcelain. Collecting this “white gold” became such an obsession for C17-18th European royalty and aristocracy that it became known as *Porzellankrankheit* – a porcelain sickness that could lead to bankruptcy. This desire for porcelain was partly driven by the burgeoning fashion in late C17th Europe

for drinking tea, coffee and chocolate, which all required a suitably lightweight, heat-retaining and non-porous container – unlike pewter and earthenware, porcelain provided the perfect vessel. However, until Europeans mastered the technically tricky art of making porcelain in the C18th, it remained a costly imported luxury. Coffee and chocolate were often produced by enslaved labour, and all three drinks required the addition of sugar – the lucrative crop that fuelled the transatlantic slave trade more than any other. Enslaved Africans in British colonies in the Caribbean and South America produced the sugar that generated the wealth required to purchase porcelain. This directly ties the consumption of porcelain with the brutality of the chattel slavery system.

The first example of my practical research in this area exploits the white pith helmet as a trope of empire (Figure 1). I have included sugar cane, cotton blossoms and barbed wire in the cobalt-blue handpainted decoration. This classic porcelain language is instantly read as sophisticated and the work has been described as seductive and beautiful, despite the nature of the imagery. This suggests that the material qualities override the message the decoration is attempting to convey, and thus is perhaps a less successful strategy than I was hoping for.

The second example is one of a series of handmade and decorated porcelain plates that feature Caribbean flora with the words of contemporary African diaspora poets – a literal attempt to immortalise the words of non-white voices (Figure 2). Can the vernacular of highly decorated porcelain, so widely legible in the West as a symbol of elite consumption, be used ‘decolonially’ in the sense that Aimé Césaire required – rewriting the history of colonial subjugation and oppression by centring non-European voices (Césaire, 2000)? Or does a practice that focuses on porcelain merely reproduce a material culture that reeks of imperialism? I wonder if this attempt to demythologise empire is a legitimate decolonial

strategy or whether anything less than the return of land – or reparations, in the case of Britain – is simply a metaphor to appease white guilt, as Tuck and Yang (2012) suggest.



Figure 1: *Pithy* (2022), glazed porcelain, cobalt oxide (30x18x16cm)



Figure. 2: *Mark 'Mr T' Thompson* (2023), glazed porcelain, cobalt oxide, gold lustre (27.5cm)

Situation two: white but working on it

White But Working On It is an experimental and ongoing work that consists of gifting handmade porcelain badges (Figure 3) to anyone willing to wear one and aims to facilitate discussion of whiteness as ‘embodied racial power’ (Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p.271). This work deliberately references Josiah Wedgwood’s famous anti-slavery medallions that were produced to promote the abolition of slavery and which became a sought-after fashion accessory for well-to-do, and presumably well-meaning, white women in the late C18th. What does sporting a shiny white porcelain badge impressed with the words WHITE BUT WORKING ON IT achieve in terms of anti-racist art activism? Does it simply enact a narcissistic, neoliberal display of self-improvement that recentres whiteness – a classic case of optical allyship (Kalina, 2020; Wingard, 2020)? Who or what is centred when a ‘badge of solidarity’ is used by those racialised as white to call attention to white oppression? I have few answers at this stage, but I do know that if anti-racist work just makes white people feel better about themselves then it merely maintains and reaffirms whiteness.



Figure 3: *White But Working On It* (2022), glazed porcelain, metal pins (4-6cm)

Situation three: working with whiteness

I have been delivering a series of workshops, open to the public but in a university setting, entitled *Working with Whiteness* that explore the dynamics of asking, as philosopher George Yancy has previously done, what it feels like to be a white problem (Yancy 2014). As a way of testing the most constructive context for this provocation, I employ practical making with porcelain to facilitate discussion of whiteness. Combining practical skills (pinch pots, tile making, cobalt decoration, Figure 4) with the historical and material context of my porcelain research, these workshops exploit porcelain's seductive material qualities to aid awareness and understanding of ideological whiteness. As a white woman, I have witnessed, experienced and benefited from white privilege, white oppression and anti-black racism. This makes me no stranger to the difficulty of initially recognising this and then accepting responsibility for it, but I am also aware of what Yasmin Gunaratnam warns is the "danger of reproducing whiteness as a 'quality of a white person' instead of as a system" (Lavanchy, 2012, p.105). Through this workshop methodology, I hope to make white people aware that their racialised identity is a construct. I am not asking them to deny who they are, but to be aware of how whiteness positions and privileges them. How do the structures of power work in the minds of privileged white people who are unaware of how they oppress? Such obliviousness can lead to choices that have lethal consequences for others. Recognising and resisting this privilege can upend the power dynamic that upholds systemic racism. However, it is important to critique rather than describe, and thereby reinscribe, whiteness. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, focusing solely on decolonising the mind (after Fanon, 1963) – i.e. becoming more conscious and critically aware of colonial settler histories – is a classic 'move to innocence' (Mawhinney, 1998, p.ii), which relieves feelings of guilt or genuine responsibility. While consciousness-raising is not unimportant work, it does not result in tangible, material change for those oppressed by whiteness. As Mousab Younis asks, "What

would it mean to... reorient anti-racism away from the subjectivity of the white progressive and think of it primarily as a project of material redistribution?" (Younis, 2022 [no pagination]). So, responding to Toni Morrison's challenge to "avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers" (Morrison, 1992, p.90), I encourage white people to sit with the feelings of discomfort that the 'de-masking' of whiteness (Blight 2019, p.192) and 'unsettling of innocence' (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p.35) provoke and to then consider this a starting point from which to begin the much harder work of giving up whiteness and redistributing its material benefits.



Figure 4: Working with Whiteness workshop pieces (2023), glazed porcelain, cobalt oxide

Situation four: performing/shattering whiteness

I began to realise that by continuing to make discrete objects I was removing myself from the critique of whiteness and that I needed to situate myself within it more, which led to a live

performance piece called *Shattering Whiteness – A Provocation in Porcelain* (Figures 5-7). This consisted of a handmade porcelain pot and hundreds of eggshells cast in porcelain. While crushing the eggshells with my bare feet, I spoke the words you will find below. The performance ended with me knocking the porcelain pot off its plinth, which smashed loudly and violently on the floor⁵. While my aim was to spotlight whiteness for all the right reasons – to expose its role in oppression and anti-black racism – perhaps this performance was actually an example of peak whiteness. Literally making whiteness centre stage even if my motives were to critique it. Performing the shattering of whiteness is one thing, but the reality is something else. A white person can choose to lose their whiteness, not behave white, but what does this look and feel like? What does it require? The hypervisibility of this performance was painfully uncomfortable for me, but my white privilege is such that I can choose to occupy this position as and when it suits me – I don't have to live it.



Figures 5 (above) and 6-7 (below): *Shattering Whiteness* performance stills

⁵ Performance documentation is available to view at www.victoriaburgher.com/photography



shattering whiteness

I use porcelain to think about **whiteness** **whiteness** as a way of seeing, thinking
and acting in the world **whiteness** it's not an easy subject it creates
discomfort but that discomfort can provoke reflection and reflection can create change
maybe you've never had to think about **whiteness** before
maybe you enjoy its benefits obliviously
but maybe you've had to second-guess **whiteness** all your life
just to survive in a world that worships **whiteness**
whiteness is unmarked and invisible if you inhabit it but always in your face if you don't
whiteness appears delicate and sensitive but **whiteness** is robust and weighty
we tend to tiptoe around **whiteness** we tend to handle **whiteness** with care
but **whiteness** is not really fragile
whiteness is **power** whiteness is **privilege** whiteness is **oppression**
whiteness **censors**
whiteness **obscures**
whiteness **marginalises**
whiteness **discriminates**
whiteness is horrified when white bodies wash up on the shores of the Mediterranean but
whiteness turns a blind eye when black and brown people drown in their hundreds
whiteness weeps at the sight of blond-haired, blue-eyed refugees displaced by war
whiteness rushes to offer them sanctuary but **whiteness** denies safety to black and
brown people fleeing conflict **whiteness** turns them away
whiteness **ostracises** whiteness **silences** whiteness **asphyxiates** whiteness **drowns**
whiteness is a weapon
whiteness calls the police on black birdwatchers black barbequers black children
whiteness makes schools and classrooms unsafe spaces
whiteness **traumatises** whiteness **kills** whiteness **murders**
whiteness spectates black pain and then performs solidarity via an instagram post
but **whiteness** is a choice
you don't have to be complicit in **whiteness**
you can choose to **defy** whiteness **denounce** whiteness **dismantle** whiteness
you can **shatter whiteness**

Conclusion

What this focus on my situation and agency highlights is whether my methodologies further reproduce, normalise and prioritise whiteness, or whether they can stir up the sediments of whiteness sufficiently to begin a deprivileging of discursive whiteness. I am hoping that porcelain will operate as my crowbar (after Garner, 2007) for the ideological labour required for white people to see themselves as part of the problem. As Alana Lentin (2020) reminds us, race still matters and we need to talk about it. This is difficult but necessary work – the Du Boisian ‘embarrassments’ of whiteness (Du Bois, 2021, p.66) must not be shied away from – and it is work that people racialised as white need to undertake. By their ability to transform the ‘sensible’, artist researchers can change ideas and understanding. That Paul Gilroy believes in this potential gives me heart; I’ll leave the final words to him:

“The psychological and emotional dispositions and political environment that are at stake here are distinctive. It means that artists can’t just sort of seek to give this rejected or unwanted consciousness of the past back. You can’t just fantasise about pumping the bad ideas out of people’s heads and pumping in good ideas instead. This environment requires an anti-racist creativity, which is bound to certain arguments about pedagogy and curriculum and the role of education and breaking the cycle of guilt and denial and ignorance, but are not reducible to that alone. I think artists have a special role to play here.” (Gilroy, 2006, p.4)

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HUMANITY MEASURES ITSELF /////
The Archive of the Lost Embodied
Knowledge

Haya Sheffer

The Archive of the Lost Embodied Knowledge is a practice-led art project dealing with the opportunities individuals and humanity are losing by handing our mental skills to technology. Experiencing the rapid technological revolution of our era, which is too quick to analyse and digest, we try to navigate the chaos and messiness of life. We appeal to the help of various self-tracking techniques, some of which we are unaware of. By gathering amounts of personal data, we seek to organise and give meaning to daily existence, letting applications mediate our life, body, and mind to ourselves. My research asks whether we lose something, whether we are giving up the deepness and richness of the complexity of life by reducing it to limited technological options provided by technology.

Inspired by the famous dictum attributed to African scholar Amadou Hampâté Bâ: “When an African elder dies, it is as if a whole library is burnt down”, meaning that the loss of knowledge and experience is a loss of opportunities, I created a preserving collection of bodily knowledge, a pearl of wisdom we all have that does not require technology to mediate understanding of our own self. This project aims to create awareness of our mental skills eroding and fading under the shining light of data.

Haya Sheffer is an artist and designer, a PhD practice-based researcher at the art department of the University of Reading and the philosophy department at Cardiff University UK, sponsored by UKRI. Her education and career as an industrial and visual communication designer during three decades of the media revolution shaped her research exploring contemporary culture’s social, technological, embodied, and political aspects, raising questions on power, control, metanarratives, and biases. Her current research highlights the influence of self-tracking devices and wearables on how we perceive ourselves and draw a connection between this phenomenon and historical, philosophical, and political evolution.

Sheffer presented her mixed media artwork in solo and group exhibitions in the UK, Germany, South Korea, Italy, and Israel. She lectures at conferences and publishes papers.

Haya Sheffer

Humanity
Measures Itself



THE ARCHIVE OF THE LOST EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

What GPT said that humanity had experienced several major technological revolutions throughout history that had profound and lasting impacts on every aspect of individual and social life, leading to significant changes in the way humans live and interact with the world. But I said that today's technological revolution is singular in its speed, happening during one's life, too fast to diagnose, too quick to digest. In my practice-led research, situated in and through art, I zoom in on contemporary self-tracking devices, one of the overlooked outcomes of this revolution, on how it invades our life and (as Chat GPT said) influences the way we live and interact with the world.

We increasingly use technology to track and self-surveil different aspects of our lives, measuring everything from weight, steps taken, paths walked, the number of friends we have, and what we have eaten. Even breastfeeding a child or our sex life is monitored, quantified, and evaluated in this way. Self-tracking devices and applications proliferate and are heavily marketed to us. My research, "Humanity Measures Itself", grounded in both art and philosophy, focuses on what might be lost when we examine our lives through these applications' standardised and limited outputs, as opposed to experiencing life in all its complicity and richness.

*The red-boxed quotes are collected personal evidence from interviews I made during my research and part of "The Archive of The Lost Embodied Knowledge" project presented further on.

Data Pollution

On a December winter night, while walking in London's streets, I encountered a bizarre phenomenon: I heard robins singing. Birds are not supposed to sing at night, and I was curious to figure out the reason for this change of habits. A quick Google research turned up the answer: light pollution. For us, light is not perceived as pollution; it's an oxymoron. But for robins, light is an important cue to time their daily activities. London's artificial Christmas light decoration polluted the night darkness and changed the synchronisation of their body clock, making them recognise night as day and practice their singing activities.

It was then the first phase of my PhD research, asking questions about how self-measuring, such as wearables and self-tracking devices, affect and change our bodily ways of understanding ourselves. The robin's response to light pollution made me ponder the similarity between how artificial light affects their biological clock and how artificially gathered data affects our bodily ways of understanding the world using our embodied knowledge. Is the unlimited daily data we collect to surveil and track our performance polluting our natural perception of the world? Thinking of data, similarly to light, as a cause for disruption is not intuitive. I started examining the issue under what I coined 'Data Pollution', depicting the self-gathered data as a fog that might pollute and distort our natural skills to view the world.

Who Cares?

One would now ask, who cares? Technology during the modern era gained tremendous achievements that have benefited humanity in many ways; what is the downside of freely choosing to use data to improve our performances and help us navigate modern life? I wish to challenge some prevailing assumptions regarding how we choose and use these new technologies and bring attention to how we are influenced by extending our bodies to technological devices. When our mobile phone needs a charge, we say, “I’m out of battery”, feeling disabled with the switched-off device. Furthermore, we trust the applications and its algorithm (those we chose and those we didn’t) and ‘outsource’ our skills to them, giving technology the responsibility and power to decide for us when to change our baby’s diaper, what would be our ultimate date or what’s the best movie for us to watch. Examining this new behaviour can also reflect the effects of the broader twenty-first-century data and communication revolution on personal and social life.

“I don’t like satellite navigation. I like to have an intuitive sense of direction and where I am. I find that when I use the satnav, I don’t really know where I am. And so, you’re following the satnav, and you get to where you want to go, but you’ve got no idea that you’ve been there, you’ve missed that sense of awareness of your surroundings and the journey you have taken.

(T. 59, Professor of Imaging Sciences)

Capitalist Values

Sociologists believe that the way groups organise their economic activity and produce goods affects their mental world¹. Most of the Western world's population was raised within the context of a capitalist political and cultural heritage, values which we take for granted. A capitalist approach of seeing the individual as labour power, which should be efficiently utilised, is well established in our self-perception. Monitoring, counting, evaluating, organising, hierarchising, optimising, and controlling are values transformed from the economic system into today's private life. They are managed and fuelled by capitalist forces that see the individual and their body as a commercial target. Michel Foucault, the influential twentieth-century French philosopher, claimed that since modernity, new methods for discipline were developed to produce submissive subjects, taking control of their function and the efficiency of their movements, producing the 'docile body'². With the desire to fulfil the above capitalist values, aiming to discipline and tame our bodies to docile in order to achieve better performances, we approached the help of self-tracking devices. Our perception of self-efficiency, which is totally economical and ruthless, is now embedded in technological 'new

“Well, you can basically fill it if you need to breastfeed your baby, but sometimes it was different than what the app suggested. So, in the beginning, there were a few times that I disconnected him or stopped nursing him because the app said: “We just hit the 30-minute mark, you have to stop. You have to stop breastfeeding”. And I felt that it was wrong, but I still followed the instructions, not listening to my own voice or to my sense of self.

(O. 34, Data Visualisation Designer)

organs' that extend our bodies, intending to perform the best of us. For example, a young mother whom I interviewed described her motivation to use a baby-tracker application while breastfeeding her newborn as wanting to be the best mom version of herself. She saw this act of intimacy as a task that should be organised and scheduled into an optimised target. Examining how our analogue self-tracking practice, wishing to fulfil capitalist values, was developed into today's sophisticated digital techniques can highlight the power of technology in this play. This, for instance, could include the potential influence of addictive reward mechanisms embedded in these apps or the limitation of users' response choices to predefined options within applications.

Are we losing something?

The 'so what' question remains on the table. Are we losing something? Focus now on the applications' outputs, that aim to provide a digital summary of real-life situations. The applications are programmed to gather complex data from our messy lives and analyse it, using algorithms and AI, combining it into a single output, simple as possible, easy to follow

“I think that the... I would say that the happiness of being a human is the mysterious nature of how we are, isn't it? It's like you don't have to know everything about yourself. Nor others.

(M. 35, PhD student in Data Analytics)

that will not inquire any deepening: a word of praise, a call to action, numerical data, an award, or an encouraging Gif. “Most recommended, your best meditation session, turn left, stop feeding, your daily score”. Reduction, related to Positivist philosophy, is a scientific ontology of analysing and describing a complex phenomenon in terms of its simplest or fundamental constituents. Summing a lively experience by handling it to devices reduces the richness of the experience into its smallest common factor that can be treated in an objective scientific way, neglecting the reduced unmeasurable material. We can better understand the potential loss through the twentieth-century philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticism describing this logical Positivist way of thinking as ‘the blindness and muteness of the data’³, pointing out that reduction of complexity influences the richness of the language (and the complexity of life) into a shallow practical tool. The abandoned subjectivities that were peeled and ignored while ranking our activities are the lost option of ways to experience life. My research focuses on our embodied understanding, the knowledge we use to live the deep, complex situations. It aims to develop an awareness of the loss of authentic ways of understanding the world and the loss of the variety and richness that these skills can provide. An awareness that looks for a post-measuring discourse deconstructing the authority of rationality and offering alternative ways of perceiving ourselves.

“I don’t worry about doing 10,000 steps a day. I walk a lot because I don’t have a car. So I tend to walk. You know, so I know that I’m doing quite a lot of walking without having a machine to tell me. I’ve never had a car, I’ve never driven a car, and I never wanted to drive a car, and I wish a lot of other people didn’t. Bad invention.

(F. 85~ Doctor of Physics and philosophical instruments dealer)

The Archive of the Lost Embodied Knowledge

<https://hayasheffer.com/folio/the-archive-of-the-lost-embodied-knowledge>

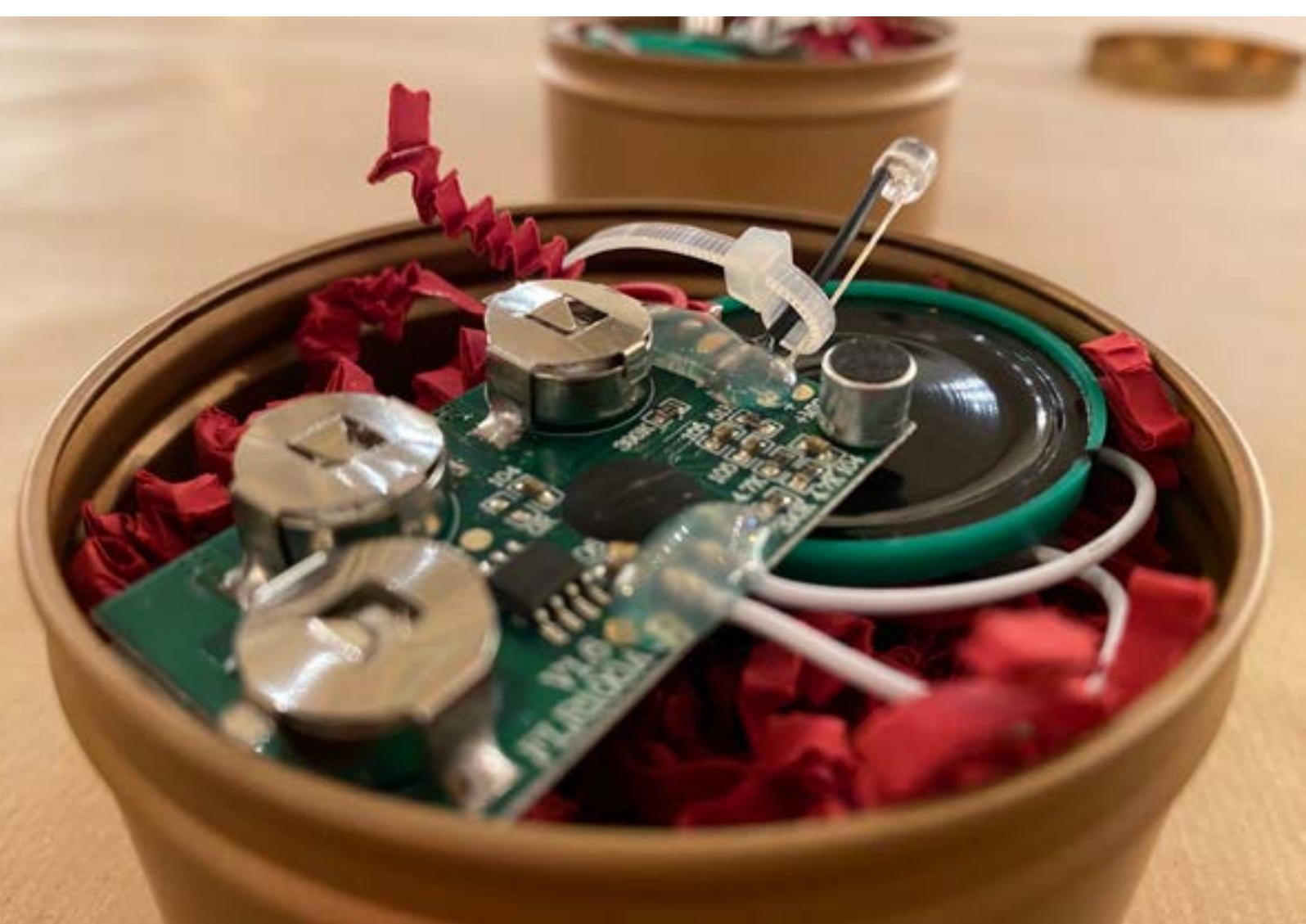
Searching for evidence where such embodied knowledge confronted technology, I turned to the public. I interviewed people, recording their stories and thoughts regarding their personal experiences when they use self-tracking techniques of any kind. Inspired by the famous dictum attributed to the African scholar Amadou Hampâté Bâ: ‘When an African elder dies, it is as if a whole library is burnt down’, meaning that the loss of knowledge is a loss of opportunities, I decided to create a preserving collection. An archive that will contain the stories which I collected in the interviews exploring a range of approaches to understanding the world, our bodies and ourselves. I called it The Archive of the Lost Embodied Knowledge.



I recorded the narrated stories (some are quoted in the red boxes above) onto light-sensitive chips and stored them in metal tins. I created an installation, presenting the archive on the gallery's floor in a long row, calling for visitors to explore it. To hear a story, one should bend, pick up a can, open it, let the light-sensitive chip reveal and play the audio, and closely listen to it as if it was a shell on the seashore. The physical act of intentionally picking and listening to the “talking cans” rather than watching a video or passing by a speaker created a bodily experience involving the visitors in the artwork. Once the visitor closed and placed the tin, the audio with its story vanished into the darkness of the metal can, representing the possibility of losing our own embodied knowledge.

Collectively, the archive's testimonials might suggest that humans have a much older wisdom that does not require technology to mediate understanding of our own bodies. My research seeks to amplify this wisdom of embodied knowledge and question whether this human ability is fading, similar to the robin's ability to recognise night under the bright lights of new technologies.

Supervisors: Dr Kate Allen, Dr Mary Edwards, Dr Annabel Frearson



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The Archive of the Lost Embodied Knowledge's website:



<https://hayasheffer.com/folio/the-archive-of-the-lost-embodied-knowledge>



The Scientific Instrument and The Camera:
Poetic and Radical Documentary and the
invisibility of contemporary technology

Mark Kasumovic

A Human Laboratory is an artist publication consisting of one-hundred photographs taken during site visits to thirty-five international scientific research centres, laboratories and field stations over the course of five years. Photographs within the book are accompanied by scientific facts that have been decontextualised and anonymised, though chosen for their supposed connection to the imagery. By considering the scientific laboratory with regards to the relatively banal electronic components that are so undecipherable in photographs, the symbolic nature of scientific instruments and inquiry can be made apparent via: (1) the repeated notion that human knowledge is indeed heavily codified and increasingly intangible (dare I say, inhuman), and (2) such physical spaces represent the ever “black-boxing” of knowledge construction within culture.

If the primary tool we collectively rely on to understand our visual world is so inadequate for describing contemporary visual reality, it sincerely amplifies the Baudrillardian notion that we are enveloped within a reality that has little relationship with the material forms that surround us. This problem challenges image makers to move beyond limited and traditional representations and put to work fresh symbolic languages that can reflect a shifting reality. Poetic and radical photographic documents are armed with such potent functions. These categories specifically—which will be elucidated in this paper—via a politic of incoherence, can employ the inventive notions of radical experimentation towards novel interconnections that philosopher Paul Feyerabend espouses in a visual way. Poetic and radical documentary photographs—again given their political incoherence—can further be used and reused in varying contexts and forms to develop meaning in surprising and unanticipated ways.

Mark Kasumovic is a Canadian artist and scholar whose work revolves around the inherent truth-value of the photograph and the many limitations within the medium. His recent work investigates the relationships between technology and knowledge production within the context of scientific research, while currently developing projects on fostering relationships between image-makers and climate change scientists. Mark has received grants and honours from the Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts, Culture Nova Scotia, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. He was recently awarded a Junior Visiting Research Fellowship at the University of New South Wales School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences (Faculty of Science). His work has been exhibited internationally and most recently within the British Science Festival in Leicester and the Belfast Photo Festival 2023.

The Scientific Instrument and The Camera:

Poetic and Radical Documentary and the
invisibility of contemporary technology

Mark Kasumovic



Fig. 21 - Someone builds a clock which keeps track of calendar cycles, computing the future date of Easter by using various lengths of chain.⁶

The choice to photograph scientific instruments and the practice of scientific inquiry—particularly those aspects of both that are difficult to explain with images—is critical and reflexive. The instruments and practices of science, along with the roles they play in society and culture, share many inherent qualities with the artist’s camera and artistic practice more broadly. For example, both use instruments in the recording of worldly phenomena, both must translate inscriptions into symbolic forms of knowledge, both seek to grow our understanding of the world around us, and both are incredibly influential in the contemporary social landscape. There are further links, however, as the camera itself is a by-product of science and a tool used necessarily and recursively by science since its invention. An investigation of the camera via artistic practice and theory through the subject of scientific laboratories and instruments entices thoughtful reflection on how reliant we are on the functions of the camera, how intermingled it is with the culture of knowledge production, and the relationships that are constructed if the two are analysed in tandem.

A Human Laboratory (2013-present) features 105 photographs from 35 research centres, laboratories and field stations, offering a representative, rather than exhaustive, visual exploration into scientific inquiry. A series of questions guided the initial methodology of documenting such socially complex sites: what is visually shared between seemingly different fields of scientific inquiry? How much do the instruments rely on *visual inscription* to produce new knowledge? How hidden from view are such inscriptions within the increasingly digital laboratory, and do they follow a new logic when compared to their analogue counterparts? What associations can be constructed by my camera (and how it functions) with the instruments being photographed?

Just as we must consider photographs within a contemporary context, all scientific inscriptions too are riddled with hidden and specialised referents, and science’s disseminations have, as a result, become increasingly threatened by questions of veridical and representational accuracy. I consider the diverse yet linked functions of the camera—in scientific and artistic inquiry—an opportunity to construct a fruitful dialogue between artistic practice and the production of knowledge via technology (which always seems to increase, with little suggestion that this will stop). I refer specifically to the capacity of documentary photography to offer thoughtful and innovative approaches to questioning and reflecting on the role the camera inevitably plays in the collection, construction, and dissemination of vast visual forms of knowledge. But I also propose the camera as an instrument that, when used in an artistic context, can draw attention to the limits of

representation, and share with other forms of technology what we have already discovered about the camera as an instrument: that technology is a cultural instrument, as capable of manipulating truth as it is in revealing it, and is thus as instrumental in shaping us as we are in shaping it.

Producing unconventional images of the laboratory and of scientific techno-instruments inevitably broadens this conversation.

The difficult-to-visualise aspects of a techno-society happen to be the very same elements that are so critical to our understanding of our place as individuals within a digital and technological culture, and to our future as an information/digital society collectively. For example, data is a form of the non-visual (mathematical) nature of many aspects of the pervasive digital culture that we have grown accustomed to; it exists as numeric values that must leap, via translation, into digestible yet incomplete visual forms for human consumption. Data is but one example of the many *unrepresentables* that hide behind our daily experience. Alexander Galloway (2012:92) refers to contemporary unrepresentable things from the Internet (sprawling and interconnected physical networks) to societal power dynamics and various hierarchical social relations:

We must simply describe today's mode of production in its many divergent details: the diffusion of power into distributed networks, the increase in local autonomous decision making, the ongoing destruction of the social order at the hands of industry, the segmentation and rationalization of minute gestures within daily life, the innovations around unpaid micro labor, the monetization of affect and the 'social graph,' the entrainment of universalizing behaviors within protocological organization — these are the things that are unrepresentable (Galloway, 2012, p.92).

Are some things unrepresentable even via an instrument as powerful as the camera? How might we attempt to visualise the critical and hidden elements of society? While Galloway refers to many social phenomena as interwoven and unrepresentable within contemporary visual interfaces, I argue that it is counterintuitive and dangerous to cease all attempts at representing them. When technologies become inscrutable, they become harder to question and analyse. Rather than give up, new strategies of using the camera-instrument and its visual representations must continuously be mined lest we succumb to an even more indecipherable, Baudrillardian sign-order relationship. An intriguing question arises: can we draw a relationship between such complex social and cultural phenomena and, say, scientific attempts at representing the elusive Higg's Boson particle, or the yet-to-be-discovered Dark Matter? There is no specific answer to this question, except perhaps in the form of another question: if scientific inquiry does not cease its attempts to represent such (thus far)

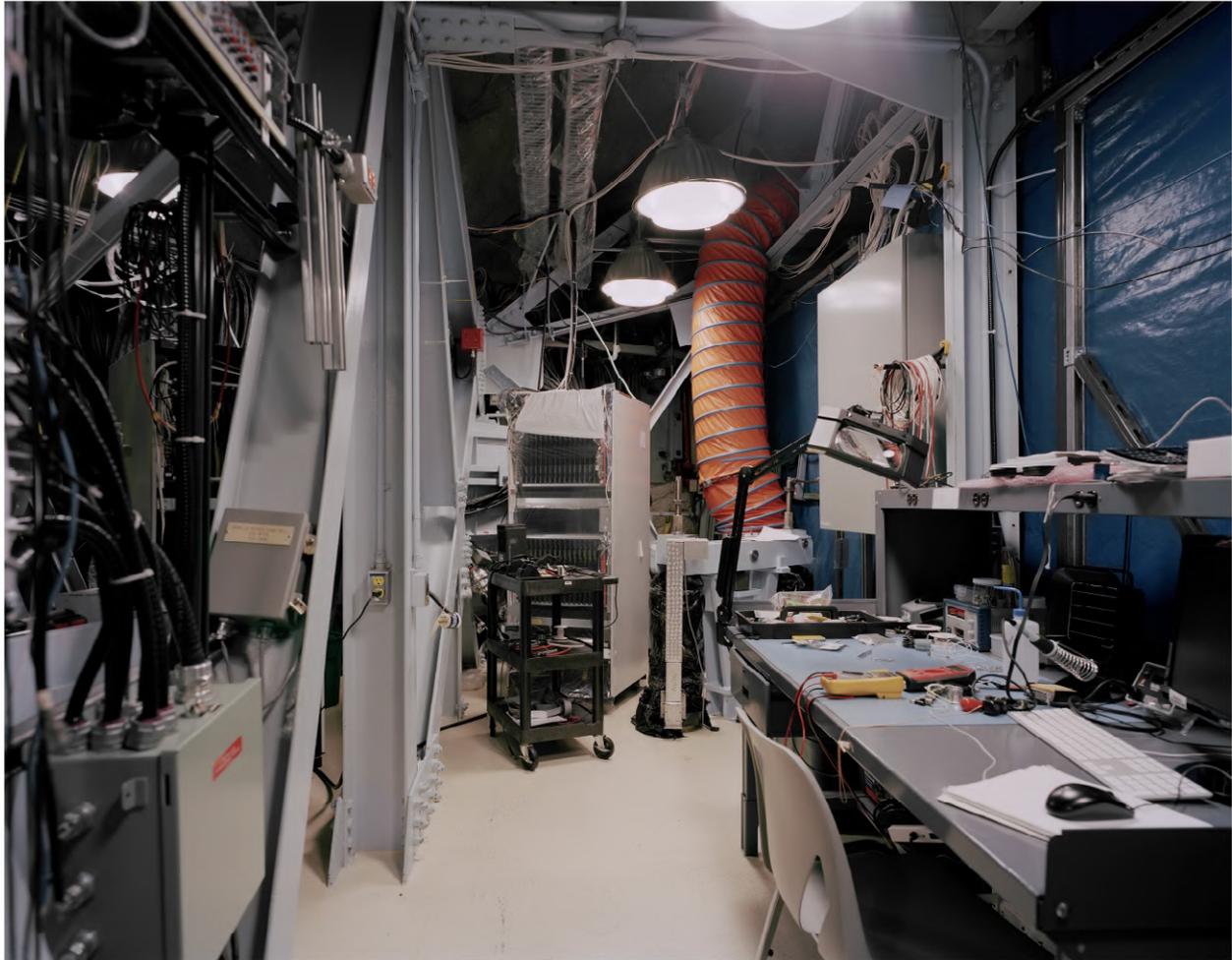


Fig. 7 - Vision is the consequence of the formation of an image on the retina by the eye's lens.²

Fig. 7 - Vision is the consequence of the formation of an image on the retina by the eye's lens.²

unrepresentable things in the face of a struggle with the potentially unknowable, why should visual culture construct such limiting boundaries?

The great power of documentary photography lies in its incredibly diverse and ever-expanding functionality, while remaining encapsulated within a seemingly naïve technological instrument. The camera can seem naïve given its relatively simple functioning as an apparatus that records whatever is placed in front of it, as do

2. Cloistered Room, Dark Matter Experiment,

The primary rainbow is produced by sun rays entering the eye at an angle of about 41 degrees.

In their mind's eye, someone sees lines of force traversing all space.

Mathematicians see centres of force attracting at a distance.

Someone invents the *ophthalmoscope*, a small instrument which when pressed against the eye enables the vessels to be seen.

Someone correlates Rapid Eye Movement during sleep with when dreams are particularly vivid and emotionally charged.

What we see in the periphery, just outside the direct focus of the eye, may sometimes be a visual illusion.

When gravity propagates through extra dimensions, it materializes in our universe as massive gravitons.

most scientific instruments. Such instruments, however, do not function within a vacuum, but instead rely on various social and cultural actors to conceptualise, enact, and interpret their use. While the camera may have difficulty penetrating the veil of technology on its own, it has many ways of functioning creatively within a documentary context, providing insight into surroundings that are difficult to visualise in any other way. Many of the strategies I discuss illuminate the camera and its role in creating new connections between subjects, forms, and physical materials, relying on the *unconventional* use of technology to provide an apt metaphor of the evolving camera. I do not propose these diverse modes of representation within a hierarchy of good and bad documentary photography; however, these distinctions are methodologically generated and are useful for categorising their utility within a contemporary context of understanding.

Poetic documentary, as an example, provides an aesthetically coherent approach (a recognised and digestible visual strategy aligning) to the construction of visual forms that lack a politic of coherence (politically unaligned intentions). In this mode, the multiple visual forms that are produced in tandem rely on the reconfiguration of normalised symbolic representations that can create new meanings altogether, via their careful curation together, for viewers to consider and analyse. Since we cannot picture the complexity of scientific inquiry and techno-society in totality, perhaps the curation of various related yet visually unaligned documents might infer some associated and allied aspects of it. In this regard, a poetic documentary approach can, for example: (1) reconfigure a viewer's symbolic understanding of various forms of techno-instruments and spaces, such as historic, contemporary and cutting-edge manifestations (all with their own symbolic languages); (2) be firmly fixed within a reality that we can recognise and have a tangible relationship with, via the camera's unique representational capacity sharing many similarities with vision; (3) make the symbolic more tangible through the unique amalgamation of the previous two concepts; and (4) remain somewhat neutral and considerate of the fact that knowledge is not necessarily fixed, and that it depends, at least in part, on the perspective and standpoint of the observer. This approach can begin to represent the unrepresentable. It can offer a way into those elements of society and culture that are too sprawling and complex to describe conclusively through a visual language that remains exploratory and encourages interpretation and interaction, while still feeling grounded within a tangible reality.



Fig. 5 - All stars must maintain a temperature of at least forty million degrees in order to maintain their fuel supply.



Fig. 6 - The coincidence of mental thoughts with bodily motions is like the conformity between unconnected but synchronized clocks.

Fig. 5 - *All stars must maintain a temperature of at least forty million degrees in order to maintain their fuel supply.*

Fig. 6 - *The coincidence of mental thoughts with bodily motions is like the conformity between unconnected but synchronized clocks.*

A Human Laboratory is a publication consisting of many double-image spreads that integrates text as figure descriptions, leading the viewer to: interpret each photograph singularly, both images in relation to each other, and then also the photographs in relation to the text that guides their interpretation. Such an arrangement encourages exploratory interconnection, rather than an acceptance of fact-like statements and images, as the photographs and text within rarely refer directly to one another. For example, Plate 26 consists of one photograph depicting a workstation with an abundance of monitors; many of which have a screensaver function displaying the same planetary formations. The figurative text below directs the viewer to consider the temperature which stars must maintain to function within our galaxy without “dying” [Fig. 5]. The photograph beside *it* depicts an institutional corridor of a quantum computing laboratory bathed in red light [Fig. 6], while *its* text refers to Arnold Geulincx’s 17th-century notion that the coincidence of mental thoughts and bodily motions function similarly to unconnected yet synchronized clocks (Geulincx, 1665). This abstracted and symbolic vocabulary of images and text mines the viewers knowledges and experiences of such phenomenon as: the non-human and fantastic scale of planetary formations, how they might relate to their own bodily functions in time and space, the colour red and its relation to institutional lighting apparatus and darkroom photography, the odd mixture of banal and extraordinary within the laboratory workspace, the synchronicity and precision of the galaxy, the screen and the screen-“saver”, amongst many other possible and fleeting thoughts.

The particular arrangement of photographs and text within *A Human Laboratory* invites viewers to consider the relationship between discoveries and technologies, the camera as an instrument of discovery via its functional relationship to the devices being photographed, and the potential failures and futures of instruments as they dissolve into the visual abstraction of a black-box phenomenon. *A Human Laboratory* relies on text, within which it is directly employed to raise issues concerning the neutrality of vision, which is ultimately contested as conflicting historical accounts of scientific discovery eventually emerge through a sequential yet structurally unfixed narrative. As is the nature of knowledge and progress, some facts are no longer widely accepted as true. The “footnotes” introduced into the layout of what would otherwise be a familiar artistic publication, hybridise the visual and scientific formats that often seem so unrelated, ultimately raising questions as to their relationship and inviting new “discoveries” that the viewer might imagine.

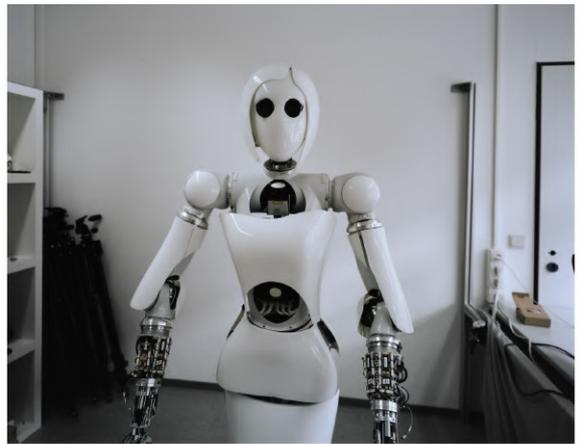


Fig. 14 - *All living things originate from eggs.*⁵

A category of “radical documentary” offers an even more exploratory mode through which documentary photography can penetrate the difficult-to-represent. In this mode of production, the aesthetic coherence of the visual field is deconstructed and reintroduced to the viewer, allowing for the recontextualisation even of symbolic forms that we have grown accustomed to. The value of this gesture is measured by how it revises our relationship with normalised visual representations—in other words, how such images allow us to un-see the commonplace. Again, the artist’s camera is so potent in this regard because it embodies a relationship with vision that is unique in the rendering of its subject. When this rendering is manipulated so that it introduces a sincere questioning of vision itself, whether within a single photograph such as in Andreas Gursky’s heavily photoshopped image constructions or in relationship with other visual arrangements such as in Lynn Cohen’s extended series of stealthily staged photographs, new questions regarding technology arise for the viewer to consider. As Vilem Flusser (2004, p. 65) suggests in *Towards a*

5. **Aila**, *Artificial Intelligence Experiment*,

Hominidae are status conscious, manipulative and capable of deception.

Some believe that in principle, organisms can be spontaneously generated, and that the process is the self-generation of a complicated machine.

Someone publishes Man-Computer Symbiosis.

They describe a machine that humans can relate to.

Single cell forms of life have awareness, understanding and the ability to solve problems.

Natural selection sometimes favours collective behaviour.

Philosophy of Photography, the challenge for the photographer is to “oppose the flood of redundancy with informative images,” and create images that share new “information” and bring forth new ways of seeing.

The camera, and by relation, vision, is indeed futile as a tool for understanding technology if it is not employed with some ingenuity, particularly within a moment of rapid technological evolution such as recent proliferations of quantum computing and artificial intelligence. Rather than attempting to *elucidate* via photographic representation, the purposeful placement of the camera (relating to perspective and vantage point) to highlight the density of techno-instruments, can otherwise allude to the notions of extreme technological complexity. For example, images such as *Painter's Tape (Synchrotron Experiment)* were purposely framed to reveal as many indecipherable layers of technology as possible, where the viewer's eye is eventually lead to the

back wall consisting of a periodic table of elements (another abstracted and dense product of scientific inquiry) [Plate 28]. It is true that photographs of a synchrotron laboratory or a server room say little about the motivations, intentions, and functions of scientific experiments, progress, and ever-evolving technologies. However, by showing the laboratory as chaotic and overflowing with bizarre architectural and electronic connections, much more lucid descriptions can come about. The laboratory is here revealed as provisional and haphazard.

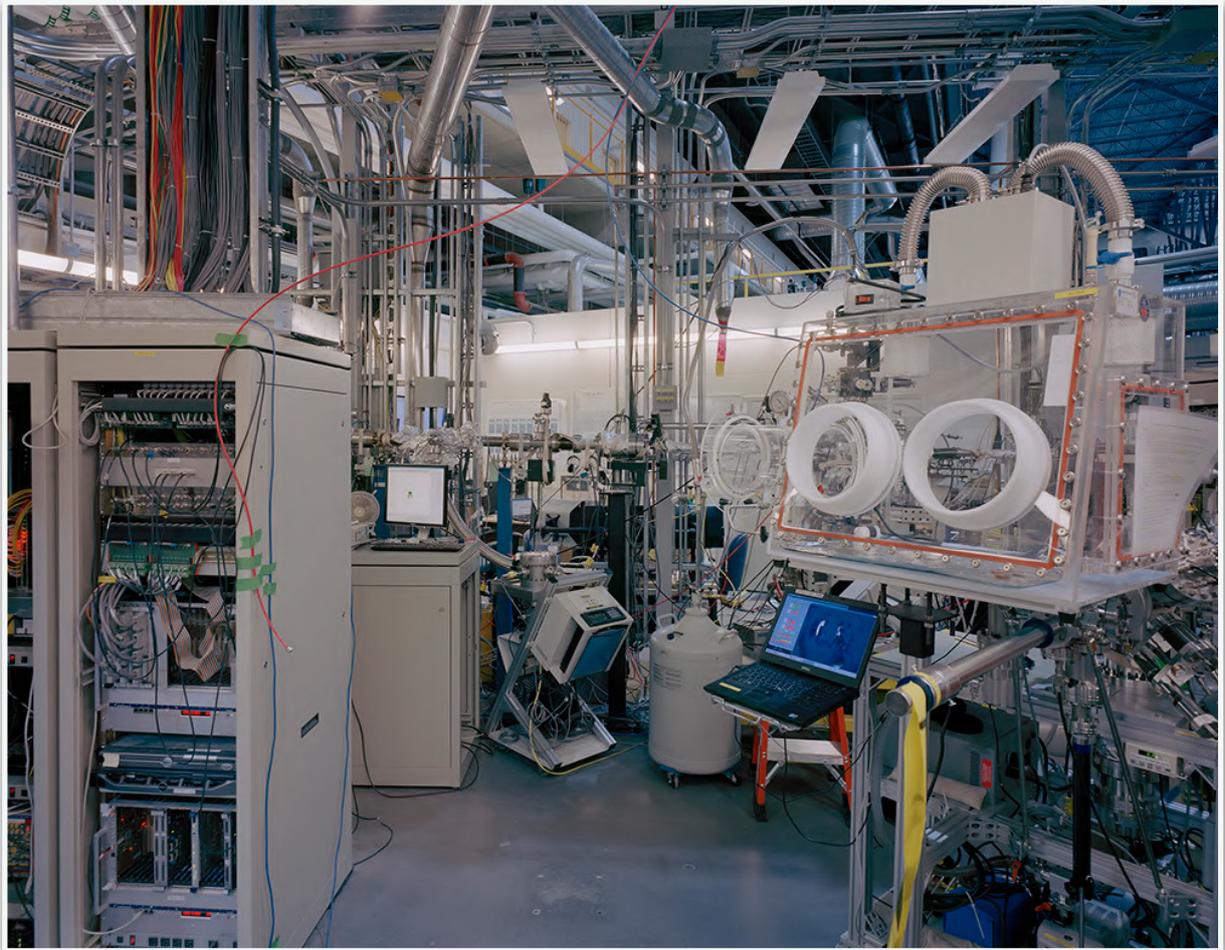


Fig. 38 - *Once information passes into protein, it cannot get out again.*

The scientific laboratory and the practice of scientific discovery provide a sophisticated subject for photography, one that has infiltrated every aspect of our daily lives. A subject so immense and interconnected exemplifies Galloway's "unrepresentable." When we think of the laboratory, for example, we might immediately envision a sterile, cold, and neutral environment. The popular images that might fill our imaginations are likely clichéd and inadequate if not entirely harmful, to

the way we continue to understand it. Alternatively, when we think of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for example, we might think of corrupt human intentions and the concept of war. But rarely do we envision the choices and instruments that long before constructed the very possibility of mass extinction—ultimately linked to discoveries made in the laboratory and a human instinct for perpetual progress. Further, when we consider Edward Burtynsky's photographs of environmental disasters we rarely consider the scientific *discovery* of the internal combustion engine as the leading cause of global warming. Instead we envision the automobile or factory, forest fires and drought, as visible markers of increasing pollution and climate change, because these are the images that are often associated with such occurrences when they are presented to us today.

Likewise, we rarely consider the camera *itself* as linked to such phenomena. However, we must consider the camera's fundamental and foundational effect as primarily an instrument of inscription, and the role that this simple function has played in the proliferation of scientific and the technical objects capable of destruction. Is it worthwhile to consider such abstract and far-fetched associations? Most philosophical thought would imply that it is indeed worthwhile—even critical—as the neutrality of technology is mythical, and will inevitably veer towards control, as it is bound to the social functions that control it. Considering that the camera has such great potentialities ingrained in its core functionality, and is technically related to so many other forms of technology, such relationships are worth exploring.

Considering the laboratory with regards to the relatively banal electronic components that are so undecipherable in photographs—the symbolic nature of scientific instruments and inquiry can be made apparent via the repeated notion that human knowledge is indeed heavily codified and increasingly intangible (dare I say, inhuman). If the primary tool we collectively rely on to understand our visual world is so inadequate for describing contemporary visual reality, it sincerely amplifies the notion that we are enveloped within a reality that has little relationship with the material forms that surround us. Indeed, we need to consider this notion thoroughly and repeatedly. The only way we can begin to understand the symbolic nature of contemporary reality is to move beyond limited and traditional representations and put to work the symbolic language that we can (somewhat) already understand. Poetic and radical photographic documents are armed with such potent functions. These categories specifically, via a politic of incoherence, can employ the inventive notions of radical experimentation towards novel interconnections that the philosopher of science

Paul Feyerabend espouses in a visual way. Poetic and radical documentary photographs—again given their political incoherence—can further be used and reused in varying contexts and forms to develop meaning in surprising and unanticipated ways.

Much like contemporary technology, “documentary” photographs in all of their contexts have indeed become a necessity. Try as we might, it is difficult to contemplate a culture in which we do not rely on their existence to bring meaning to the world. This shared similarity with scientific inquiry is instructive of the extent to which we all value the *poiēsis* of the human condition, the desire for meaning-making in all aspects of our lives. As Heidegger suggests, the chain of ordering can only be broken by reflecting on the very tools used to investigate that which we are forced to question. The camera is such a tool concerning the technology of “inquiring” instruments. It is no longer worthwhile to question how the camera is broken; how it does not represent with direct and full accuracy. That has become irrelevant since René Magritte’s *Treachery of Images* (1929). We know that images are not entirely real, but it is precisely because we rely on them so heavily, and must continue to employ them, that the documentary photograph remains so endlessly and utterly revelatory.

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Plates (order of appearance):

- Fig. 21 - Mark Kasumovic, *Leak (Radio Telescope Experiment)*, Alma, San Pedro de Atacama, Photograph, 40 in. x 50 in., 2015
Fig. 7 - Mark Kasumovic, *Cloistered Room (Dark Matter Experiment)*, SNOLAB, Sudbury, Photograph, 40 in. x 50 in., 2016
Fig. 5 - Mark Kasumovic, *Screensavers (Synchrotron Experiment)*, Advanced Photon Source, Chicago, Photograph, 40 in. x 50 in., 2017
Fig. 6 - Mark Kasumovic, *Red Room (Quantum Experiment)*, Institute for Quantum Computing, Waterloo, Photograph, 40 in. x 50 in., 2016
Fig. 14 - Mark Kasumovic, *Aila (Artificial Intelligence Experiment)*, Robotics Innovation Center, Breman, Photograph, 40 in. x 50 in., 2014
Fig. 38 - Mark Kasumovic, *Painter’s Tape (Synchrotron Experiment)*, Canadian Light Source, Saskatoon, Photograph, 40 in. x 50 in., 2015

The Weight of Ants in the World

Michele Allen

Since 2018 I have been working on a long-term project The Weight of Ants in the World, which focuses on an ancient woodland in the centre of an industrial estate in North East England, thinking about the wood as a witness to industrialisation. The project includes, photography, sound, archival research and video to intensely explore this ancient ecosystem and has also taken on a degree of activism. The work aims to manifest this site in other spaces, to mobilize the woods, thinking about their mass, fragility and endurance at a time of advanced climate crisis and species loss. As a result of the project the woods have been surveyed and designated as a local wildlife site and in February 2020 they were protected with a Tree Preservation Order.

The text presented here includes a reflection on the title followed by a series of sketchbook notes and wildlife observations, originally created for Incidental Futures an event responding to the legacy of Artists Placement Group at South London Gallery. During lockdown I read it as part of an online performance, alongside audio recorded in the wood and images and more recently it has been presented alongside other works from the project in a group exhibition Hinterlands at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. I'm interested in the way this text opens up the artistic process and acts as a document for my time spent in the woodland and the potential to create artistic and creative connections between sites (both physical and institutional) to make this small area of ancient habitat more visible.

Michele Allen is a multimedia artist and researcher based in North East England, her work is often produced over lengthy periods of time working with communities or in response to specific sites and locations. At the core of her practice is a deep concern for the relationships we form with the natural environment and over the past eighteen years she has worked on a series of interconnected projects which explore, place, environment and community. She has a doctorate by photographic practice and regularly presents her artistic and academic work at events across the UK.

Michele Allen

The Weight of Ants in the World



When my son was small, we used to read a book about insects. It was full of facts, a page for each insect, he loved facts at that age. A slim picture book, featuring about ten creatures illustrated with brightly coloured cartoon drawings. The page about ants talked about their strength and amazing ability to work together and said that if you added up the ants in the world, they would outweigh all the humans. When I first read that I felt encouraged by the thought that these tiny creatures occupied more space than us, perhaps a sign that our domination of the natural world wasn't as complete as I had thought. I carried this hopeful thought around with me like a talisman for weeks. The only problem was it wasn't true, finally wanting to know more I took to the internet and found that it's something of an urban myth, a group of mathematicians laid out the detail with estimated numbers of ants and the parameters of their weight. In their calculation the last time this could have been possible would have been two thousand years ago.

But the thought lingered in my mind, could we consider the weight of ants as a signal or metaphor for how well we were doing on the planet, a measure of our care? Still carrying this idea around, I came across an article in Nature which described research into the mass of man-made objects on Earth and the somewhat depressing conclusion that our creations now outweighed biomass on the planet, conjuring a vision of monstrous terraforming.

This work adds to that mass (perhaps unavoidably) in its photographs and distant digital extractions. The ephemeral world of digital images, which for so long have been presented as more sustainable because we are distanced from their materiality, their physical impact in the world is present here. It's a compromise which allows me to share these slim fragments of time part of a process which sets out to think about the weight of life across time and space held by this rare ancient habitat.

An innocuous space unassuming, tiny, unnamed (to most) as old as modern society. The wood has been here for at least 300 years almost certainly longer, perhaps holding within it the vestiges of wildwoods which covered the land after the last ice age.

How can we think about that mass, that density, that time? Sometimes I imagine the wood as a gravitational force a dense point in a sea of modernity, a continuous life force watching our world turn around it. We're encouraged to think about our carbon footprints, the weight of our emissions, we're told to tread lightly. But what would happen if we thought about the weight of ants? Is it possible in a time of ecological crisis to think about the weight of what survives, might it equate to the weight of our care? Could we think about it in that way, and choose to increase that weight, rather than just measuring the weight of our damage?

The text on the following pages is a series of notes from my sketchbooks originally gathered for an event in London responding to the legacy of Artists Placement Group, The Incidental Assembly (2019) where it was shared alongside, photos, audio recordings, material collected from the woods and planning documents. It unpacks my evolving relationship with an ancient woodland which is situated in the centre of an industrial estate in North East England, where I have been working since early 2018. It wasn't consciously created as writing and is more like a stream of consciousness diary, thinking from within practice and within place, as part of a larger project which considers the woodland as a witness to industrialisation. The text in quotation marks is from an essay by George Sinclair from 1936 which documents birdlife in and around Gateshead over a 17-year period, and references the woodland, courtesy of the Natural History Society of Northumbria Archives.

If you would like to listen to audio from the woods whilst reading follow this [link](#)





1. *It might be ancient woodland; it's an unlikely place for a plantation. I wonder if it was 'wet woodland' on a flood plain. Lots of mature trees have been cut down along the riverbank quite recently and I think some of the stumps have disappeared since I first went there four years ago.*

Comfrey

Red Campion

Rosebay willow herb

Ash flowers on the concrete

2. *I'm fascinated by the mature trees on the edge of the wood, they have deep textured bark which is unfamiliar to me and the sheer size of them is awe inspiring. I think they might be 'Black Poplar'. I need to go with someone who knows though, maybe get a botanist or ecologist on board. I like the idea that I might identify plants and wildlife in the process of making the work, a kind of artistic survey perhaps.*

Lords and Ladies

Dead Nettle

Bird Cherry

Jack by the hedge

3. *Some of the photos are nice but without the sound of industry (which is ever present) the context is lost. It could be a 'wild wood' (which it is) but just to look at it you might think it was still rural. The whole place, the mood of it is set by sound – sound is key.*

Nettles

Brambles

Elderberries

Leaves turning yellow



4. *Looking at all of this I think I need to go monthly; I feel like the work needs mass, time, commitment. It needs to be a process of re-connection (or connection) to nature. I want it to have some force conceptually, long form, expanded, temporal, to evoke the woodlands age, mass and endurance.*

Sycamore

Holly

Oak

Elder

Beech

Birch

White Willow

Pigeon / Fox!

Roots

Litter

5. Sept 20th

Back again, the willow herb is turning yellow, there's quite a lot of change just in a week. The day after the storms and the effect on the wood is quite dramatic, in the larger part of the wood a couple of trees have snapped off at the top – heavy branches lay across the path patterned with lichen. I find a huge waxy leaf and take it home to press between books, art theory repurposed I indulge an idea that Barthes and Benjamin might somehow filter down into the drying process. The leaf is from one of the big trees, which I now know are Hybrid Black Poplar, it's far bigger than any I have seen before, a friend who studied botany tells me it's because it's from the top of the tree where the leaves grow bigger as there's more light.

The ground is becoming more open and easier to walk through.

6. *I'm enjoying working on this, perhaps it's just the simplicity of being in a bounded space of working into something smaller. I'm starting to love the trees; they fascinate me and I wonder about making a series of photographs of them.*





7. 2nd October

I saw a bird flying above the river, I think it's some kind of wagtail (it had a bobbing way of flying and flicked its tail up and down). It swooped along the river as I watched it and landed on an old tyre in the water. I met someone who worked in the trading estate who told me there are kingfishers on the river.

Grey Wagtail

Pheasant

Seagulls

Crows

By half one the light was low and warm, it's like winter light now. The trees with clouds behind them remind me of Constable, there are Black Poplar in the Hay Wain. I keep thinking about this reference, the turn towards objectivity, cloud studies, working landscapes....

Hybrid Black Poplar (sometimes known as Railway Poplar)

8. October 17th

I need to go back on Sunday, the cars are really dominant – they need to be in there but not all the time, I need to hear other sounds.

Establishing shots of the wood.

Up the river valley

Through the units

Across the road with parked cars

From behind (where the pallets are)

Looking up into the trees

The mist on the river

Constable trees

Some of this need's macro

The river which once held the wood in a wide meander is straightened now and kept in check with concrete sides. My friend says she always feels sorry for a river when this happens to them, she might be right.

Some kind of aesthetic is emerging, but I'm not quite sure what it is yet.



9. October 18th

Coal Action organised a talk by some Columbian campaigners, it was amazing! They were talking about their experience of open cast and the challenges they had faced as communities in the face of huge open cast mines diverting rivers. So many similarities with Pont Valley – claims that whole ecosystems could be removed and replaced and huge amounts of corruption-protestors had been killed. One of the most inspiring things was that miners and trades union were supporting the open cast protestors – “Their fight is our fight – we face the same problems” resisting the divisive rhetoric which so often sets work against environmental concerns.

One of the sadder and more poignant things which stuck in my mind was the community activist who said that the noise from the mine woke people up and stopped them from being able to dream. He was talking about the women in the village who were seers or clairvoyants guiding the community through dreams. The noise from the mine caused a break with the landscape, a disconnect; it stopped them dreaming, stopped them seeing.



10. Found the text. A walk in a coal forest.

Lepidodendra, or scale trees

Cordaites

Cycads

Megaphyton

11. *The weight of ants in the world exceeds all human life. This is what I want the work to do, to bring mass, volume, detail, to redress the balance, to be dense, to bring the wood into another space, to assert its presence.*

12. November 16th

Heron

Robin

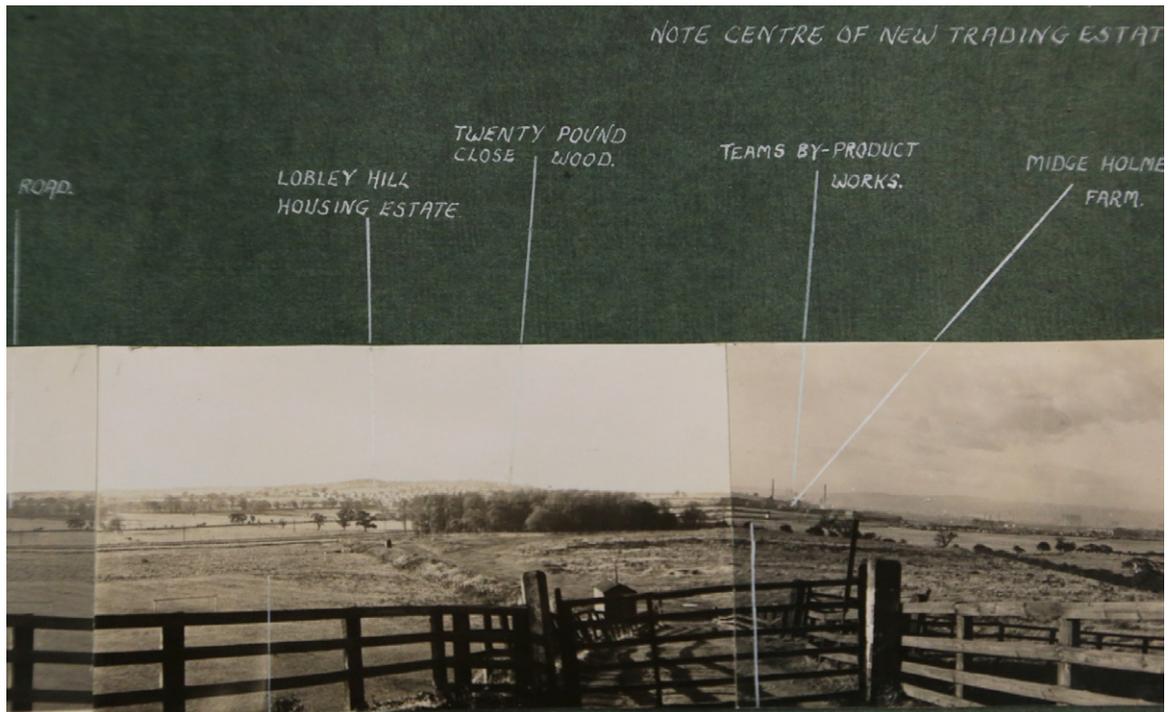
Blackbird

Swans flying over, couldn't catch them

I met someone who works in the trading estate talking about woodland management and cutting some of the trees down because of health and safety. He doesn't think they're black poplar but hasn't had an ecologist in the woodland I suggested getting in touch with the ecologist at Gateshead and he said he's put the felling on hold and look into it. I passed on my contact and had a good conversation, but I feel a little nervous about this I've heard that the management company are touchy about heritage and conservation.

I'm worrying about the trees being cut down now and thinking about photographing them. Also thinking about taking a rubbing from one of the stumps in the wood.





13. *It feels like some sort of result after a short conversation, three trees are being pollarded rather than cut – hard to know if they’ll survive but I suppose it’s something. It’s depressing to think that such old trees will be cut down for health and safety. I suppose it seems that if I can work with the people managing the woodland it might be more appreciated and better protected. Of the five trees that were going to be cut down, two are still coming down the leaning tree and one in the middle of the wood – they say the trunks are rotten.*

14. *I knew there was a level of politics to this, but I had imagined it to be more distanced – using the wood as a context, or maybe a lens to look at the threat to nature. It feels quite shocking to find that I’m rubbing up against that in ways I hadn’t imagined I would be so quickly – with the threat to the trees. I emailed Clare and said that I wanted to use the wood as a focal point, which made me think again about ‘testing the moments’ these sites as fixed points. Points under pressure, places in transition.*

“It will only be a matter of time when one will be able to point out different factories that are built over the site that in former days was the haunt of the green plover, snipe, curlew, wild duck and many others....”

15. Dec 4th

Very cold and frosty got to the valley just after 11.30am and stayed a couple of hours. The light was bright, mist on the river was good.

16. 8th Jan

Went in the morning arrived just after 10am, the light was shining down the river, I saw a grey wagtail straight away and a dipper.

Dipper

Coot

Pigeons

Crows

Magpies

A buzzard flew right into the wood whilst I was filming disturbing all the magpies who were shouting loudly at it, didn't manage to get a picture. Over the road there is already some kind of cherry blossom out, I wonder if it might be an ornamental variety planted as part of landscaping rather than wild cherry.





17. 17th Jan

Snow! I saw what I think are some kind of thrush with speckled greenish yellow chests, didn't manage to get a photo though, need to listen back to audio to try and identify. Filmed the snow falling from the trees in big feathery chunks, playing it back in slow motion, the sound of the birds and industry take on an eerie dream like quality.

Redwing

Song Thrush

Mistle Thrush

"Redwing: Numerous thro-out the autumn and winter months, always showing up in greater numbers than the fieldfare. I find when the redwings first arrive they are very wild and not easy to approach but a few days of hard frost soon robs them of their wariness. Every autumn I hear them passing over Gateshead at night on migration their drawn out melancholy call-note being unmistakably clear. I heard them passing over on October 15th this year." 1.

1. The Passing of a North Country Bird Haunt, Sinclair George 1936, Hancock Essay Prize, archives of the Natural History Society of Northumbria ref. NEWHM:1996.H330.19

The Weight of Ants in the world has been exhibited in several different contexts most recently as part of the exhibition Hinterlands at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (Oct 22-April 23) to see more of the project and access audio and video please see links below.

Links

Project page on my website. <https://www.michele-allen.co.uk/theweightofantsintheworld>

Audio – Dawn Chorus recording summer solstice 2019 in collaboration with Tyneside Sounds Society. <https://soundcloud.com/tynesidesounds/dawn-chorus-team-valley-gateshead-22-june-2019>

Video – The Weight of Ants in the World (Winter) 13:31 mins
<https://vimeo.com/391572312?share=copy>

Incidental Futures – Incidental Assembly, South London Gallery Sept 2019.
<https://incidentalunit.org/incidental-futures/incident>

Hinterlands online catalogue <http://balticplus.uk/hinterlands-exhibition-guide-c35700/>

