

After Objects

Aram Lee

Visitor 30451: We are here, in this space full of alien murmurs and noises of existence in extinction, to collectively talk about how you can confront your institutional surroundings and question the world by reflecting on your epistemology. I hope we can unfold some dimension which is more sensitive than our disconnected nerves.

RV-360-7049: This unfolding should start with whether we can accept someone else's temperature, humidity and landscape of memories. I mean, what kind of resonance can I experience if there is a place where my mind is not different from yours and 'our' mind is indistinguishable from 'their' mind?

I was displaced into this collection to contribute to the flourishing of Western culture. Until 1894, this location was a cemetery. Without realising it, the institution was continuing the plot's deathly identity. We, as wrapped and labelled curiosities, were brought here to inspire the land that captured us. But we were no more than a sensual muse. Collected bodies were flattened to no thicker than a museum's catalogue, pressing the fragile faces of people and landscapes into a torpor in the wide ruins of extraction. It is the site for other life, and the site for unwanted beings.

Like in a dream, a person used to hold me in her hands and make a sound by sliding my dry body against itself. The end of my brown gourd stomach is covered with feathers plucked from the neck of a dead parrot she loved. Gourds are widely cultivated in the kinds of tropical and subtropical areas I come from due to their specific function of holding and keeping water cold in warm climates. Thirteen green feathers hang as if warping the stick. The feathers fluttered when she moved. They function as a memory tool. The collective memory, land, ecosystem and nature's condition were engraved and recorded. The lower part of my long wooden stick pierces the empty gourd just enough for her to hold me. I speak with the sound of pebbles hitting my insides while the thirteen feathers shake. All this heat and humidity is scaled and inscribed in me.

Aram Lee

Our bodies are deeply associated with the lands. Our materiality has been performed only in a particular habitat. The untouchable entity bears the texture of fingerprints of the last people who used it. We can simulate societal belief systems by unfolding more than a thousand million living clusters to play.

RV-1508-1: This is an ontological question. If I speak about my current positionality, I need to talk about the structure of a museum as a model of memorisation. This art of remembering is to locate the memory in a solid structure and monopolise the materials eternally. They, with their modern scientific statements, insisted that we had to be sorted and measured according to a category in the physical space and locked away on heavy pedestals. Everything is silently operated by the self-consciousness of the building. The plinth publishes the order of the world.

TM-3071-8: But a space without a plot should fail to remember. For that reason, there are numerous inert ruptures in this space for memories, such as my unfinished echoes of the uncountable and muted voices. The meaning of my body and specific name is unclear as they're only heard through someone else's captions.

TM-3071-4: Our stories are elusive or unknown, while simultaneously, there seems to be nothing ambiguous about us. There is an inventory number carved on the napes of our necks. This building wants to remember the enormous chains of entities that prove colonial memories can be controlled and tamed in an artificial climate. Look at the faces under the shadow of a building without radiance. Under this climate and its institutional ecology, our bodies have been amalgamated, suppressed, disillusioned, privatised and denaturalised. In this ellipsis of landscape, our particular stories and climate nerves have been ignored ever since we were moved from our original homes to the vacuum of a vitrine. Historicity is solidly situated in the future through our entire lives and the interplay between society and us is disconnected. The internal nature of the Other and external nature is confronting. Within this artificial stasis, we are just illuminating a landscape of empty oblivion that cannot give rise to anyone or anything.

Visitor 30452: Could you tell me more about your uprooted body and what's clinging to its roots?

RV-360-7052: My words hang by my roots, but my mouth cannot make any sound because the voices are externalised.

Visitor 30453: I understand this. I had to take a mandatory tuberculosis test within the first few weeks of arriving in Europe. Waiting in line for it, there were people all around me

speaking dissimilar languages, sitting just like you are now. I remember holding my breath in front of the sleepy doctor with my arms raised and showing my bare chest for an X-ray. The internal body was diagnosed in order to be legalised and registered. This was the Othering process by which the inside is forcibly externalised, a process of objectification of the human body. What should my body have to prove? So what potential and subversive role can your existential materiality play in this situation?

TM-3071-19: I'll start from two preconditions that I've thought of since being in this vitrine: objects manifest historical events, and the plasticity of time within an object enables them to be used again. Because our suppressed bodies have a synthetic time containing the past-current-future. They can become a conjunction for multiple voices when they are vascularised, creating a state of flow that can erode the pre-formed future.

RV-1508-1: I believe that can happen when an object exists as a poetic intellect.

Visitor 30454: Poetic intellect...

Visitor 30455: But it hasn't been performed.

RV-2363-97: How is it possible to be performed?

RV-360-7049: If we reverse the perspective of a single observer, can space be opened for others to thrive?¹

RV-360-7052: I am not sure.

Visitor 30456: Do you mean the captured object can potentially have or even simulate an action? But what is the state of being captured? A while ago, I heard a story from my mom about crabs. Since they only know how to walk sideways in a straight line, it sometimes happens that the crabs can't return to the sea and have to walk parallel to it forever. It was a story describing how even if you walk to the left or the right, you don't know how to move forward, so you end up in a kind of 'trapped state' where you can't get back to the sea or look at it. I can't confirm if this story is true, but it is true that you and I feel like trapped, stuffy blue crabs. This means we'll never know whether the sea is cold or hot, salty or not. We are forever waiting to jump into the sea again. What does it mean to contemplate our home from a distance, unable to return?

RV-2343-1: I can only walk in parallel eternally...

RV-2363-103: ...in a straight line that follows the grid of solid architecture...



Aram Lee, *Portraits of Microbes*, 2023. Together with immunologist Juan J. Garcia Vallejo, of the Microbes Laboratory at Amsterdam UMC, Lee found that one drop of water collected from damp walls in the underbelly of the Tropenmuseum contains ninety-five living cultures

RV-951-13: ...and by following the sequentiality of the museum's time.

RV-2343-1: So, by reproducing their dominant time, museums function as a disciplinary apparatus. Institutions have been continuously colonising time since it became inaccessible in the vitrine, where we were all swept up and relocated to. I think their purpose here is to constantly reinforce the dominant illusion that we have to be intensively controlled.

Visitor 30457: In Western material tradition, for Aristotle, objects are 'material enactments of mental decay. [...] If objects are made to stand for memory, the decay or destruction of the object implies forgetting.'² Perhaps this explains the ontological control of an object's life in the museum's depot.

RV-3981-33: Yes, so to avoid decay, as you see here, I wear the time grid indexed in the floor plan. They control and sanitise my climate while all four seasons pass by outside. But the problem is that while the building fears our decay, it perpetuates the immemorial power. The museum projects a totally different ideological vision onto my body. It privatises the heterogeneous landscapes of the archived things and removes all the vibrant scenes and living things inside of me. Controlling the climate of Others, is controlling the time and life of Others.

Visitor 30457: What do you mean by controlling life?

TM-3071-18: In the nineteenth century, Europe focused more and more on its desire for territorial expansion. However, there was a stumbling block in the way of that desire, malaria. France's failure to build the Panama Canal is a prime example of the power of malaria and other tropical diseases. Britain also lost many lives to malaria in South-east Asia, India and Africa. From 1939, the chemical DDT was used as a way to biologically control territory as a continuation of hegemony to remove tropical diseases and unruly living cultures. And until the 1960s, DDT was also used throughout the post war, postcolonial context.

Humans used DDT in a 'Shoot to Kill' policy on land and objects alike. This simple, efficient action says it all. This ideological technology in the (sub)tropics has been performed with uncritical faith in its transformative power.

It killed all life in the land, which still struggles to recover from it. Ethno-colonial objects in Europe were no exception. Some of the archived objects from the southern hemisphere were covered in the pesticide to kill the living microorganisms on them. This pest remained white and crystallised on the grain of my skin. But when it removed

¹ Based on the philosophy of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, oriental painting applies reverse perspective (scattered point perspective) by observing, moving and scattering the point of view. Spaces viewed from various perspectives coexist in one work. So there is no certain point to guide the viewer. This lack of perspective gives viewers some space to imagine, to be participatory.

² Forty, Adrian, Susanne Küchler. *The Art of Forgetting*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999.



the living biome from my body, it also removed my vibrant memories. Biologically speaking, to die is to be forgotten. It is sort of an amnesic process.

The problem is, no one is able to remove this white crystal from my body. It stays forever. One museum in Belgium actually tried to retribute one of their objects back to its region, but couldn't due to its toxicity. We cannot undergo restitution because we have been weaponised. Our untouchable, non-vibrant toxic bodies can't return. My poisonous, precarious body is denied its home. And so home in me is nullified. Notions of return mean something different here. It is a total interregnum which denies any living thing and living time.³

TM-3071-13: So, what does ecological removal mean politically? Conversely, if I finally get rid of this toxic material and become an ecological participant, what political implications does that have?

TM-3071-4: If we cannot remove it, then how can I live with my poison? What constitutes my poisonous life?

Visitor 30458: I only see the white crystals on your untouchable body.

TM-3071-18: All living things have their own time, including microbes. In this sense, the removal of living things on my body is the removal of time. There are no gestures allowed for my pesticidal body. For me, the museum's climate has an essentially political regime. They keep the system running by denying, oppressing the exterior ecology. After killing all our unruly living matter, the truthful scenography, including mood, humidity, temperature and smells... physiologically speaking, everything related to the act of breathing... cannot be played out. Those who are trapped here become an empty shell in a static frame. While exterior time elapses without return, we, the unknowns, conceal the continuation of hegemony.

This depot holds 350,000 other entities, which remain under the strict dictate that says once things pass through this gate and are registered here, they can never leave. They become eternal. The artificial climate is set to 50 percent relative humidity and a temperature of about 20-23 degrees Celsius. These conditions are considered to be the best for the preservation of the archive. But you know, once this universal climate is established, the origins of other bodies are forgotten.

RV-3981-33: Is it because my temperature was unfamiliar?

Visitor 30460: It seems the alienation of the Other is understood by the dissonance of the internal and external temperature.

RV-2452-708: Yes, sunlight has been extinguished. In this procedure I have forgotten my own temperature and humidity and my cold body no longer carries my previous ecology. All living knowledge has been removed, suspended. When it's caught in someone's hand, wearing a white glove, and with the 349,999 others being thinned out and sorted, my substantial memory has been reduced to several sentences in a description. Those who touch us, do not know our climate, its materials and habitat. I was treated as a riddle, stale and alien. I was scattered from place to place, and the hairs on my arms and legs were counted, while numbers were attached to me. My imprisoned evidence was misunderstood and my temperature denied. When the living matter is removed, its urgency is cut. My feathers could no longer speak and became only ornament. New, yet always the same people, understood me as numbers from the past, which had never been used and were always motionless. Everything has been institutionalised by extracting my ecological body.

Visitor 30461: The binary concept of nature and humans has led to various environmental problems and dominant structural paradigms over time. Given this, how can you and I escape the structure? If the concept of 'human beings' has been established in a way that excludes certain beings, can the process of deconstructing this artificial structure be used to deal with the Other? For example, can we think of ephemeral or innumerable events by conceptualising the material effects of climate culture? Could you propose a transformative event that repositions objects into the biosphere? I can sense your desire to be vibrant, living matter once again.

RV-1508-1: Oh, I see it as an agitating transformation into a kind of monstrous vermin, bug or insect... no, no. I mean, I hope to change into vibrant knowledge. Then I can become a dynamic verb, instead of an unknown noun. In contrast, I have been caught in the continuous *moment of dying*. My desires, made up of excluded or oppressed voices, cannot be born while life is immortally taxidermized. But the remaining parrots and the scenery that gave us gourds and feathers still wait for me. As you mentioned about the acceleration of the binary concept in the world, on a planetary scale, the structure of coloniality has been continued in the updated notion of the Global South and Global North. Since hot and cold cannot be together, the authority and temporality of climate becomes problematic. When I travelled from the southern hemisphere to the northern, how many other bodies were loaded up, destined for Europe, and sanitised in huge ships for centuries? All the gigantic, little bodies had to embrace and adapt to another new climate, infinitely asking us to remain in a state of eternal stasis. However, as you know, all substances have their metaphysical energy.

³The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.' Antonio Gramsci, 1930.



The displacement of all southern substances can cause the movement of another entity here. It can cause a new collective. It could potentially generate an autonomous power. It tells us why the material and its potentiality had to be imprisoned. It is because of the fear of the unknown.

Visitor 30463: The noun form, 'apprehension', means a foreboding or dread of something. Its antonym is 'comprehend', which means 'understand'. It's interesting that fear and understanding are etymologically related. We project our unconscious fears from our feeling of strangeness onto others, strangers, aliens. To deny the infinity of unknowns, the aliens have been controlled both meta-physically and physically.

Visitor 30462: Are you thinking of *after objects*, which keep lingering in past-current-future scenery? Within this potentiality, and similar to what you said, I imagine all of you like old larvae that are yet to pupate. Your mummified material can be seen as larvae because of the potential climate you have in your bodies. In other words, you are old futures waiting for a climate that can wake them up and become ecologically attuned again.

RV-360-7049: My past life has been constructed by exploitation and monopoly. But a new way of life should be different. My social deprivation and oppressed environment can be transformed into ecological autofiction, the flexible format to exit. For example, 'climate time' can be the primary key to time travel in museums and among people who belong to the object's material culture in the past, present, and future. It can speculate about other futures generated by displaced objects and displaced climates. If we can remap the new topography of us outside of the map, I imagine we can become interlocutors that invite new citizens, new allyships and new landscapes to reply and discuss the interrelation of past and future. Indeed, imagining a different climate (climate as extensive meaning) would break the climatic colonisation of my materiality, as if the southern hemisphere eventually (inevitably, consequently, potentially) will be recursive here. If the outside of the building gets warmer, might I portray different forms of time, people and landscapes? If the sun penetrates the glass ceiling of the museum, will it awaken our poetic intelligence? Can it turn us frozen and captive things into a vital force capable of forming other futures? I envision futuristic habitats forming a new memory. Can the awakened, released knowledge and memory break the boundaries of ruling systems? If my bodies have water to be tapped, where should we flow?

In my dream, each of our waves has an autobiographical motion that ebbs outside. These waves then mix, collide, and sometimes flow together and parallel to each other.

When something solid becomes a malleable gesture, it transcends the physical limits of its territories. This transition metamorphosises my body into liquid waves as signals of resurrection or potential remediation. So, again, if I can become fluid, my scars can be transformed into a passage, like a vein from my single object-body to elsewhere and a larger net of interconnections. Imagine a museum that has veins connected to the outside.

RV-581-36: Oh, I imagine that I have a viscoelastic identity, so I can drip like sticky, transparent syrup on the ground of the museum.

Visitor 30463: Now your voice sounds like this paradoxical flashback preceding the presented body. As a living continuum to melt normative time, you must exist as poetry and overwrite the existing meaning so you can produce new meaning to create a map of unrecorded areas!

RV-2452-708: Poetry also has no sequential structure. So we don't have to worry about where to start again or where to end. In the structure of poetry, the exterior and interior are tangled. Since it does not operate with only one single symbol, poetry embraces diverse meanings and multiple relationships.

RV-951-10: ...to awake and unfurl.

TM-3071-18: an epiphany in the next scene.

