

② Cultivating Museum Ecologies Otherwise

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Q. Do you consider your work to be ecological? In what way? What are you trying to engage with?

I consider my work to be ecological since it engages the interrelationship between an institutional ecology (artificial), the indigenous (previous) ecology of the collection and the institution's exterior ecology. And how those ecologies can interact with each other. For me, ecology is about the 'relationality' of a political body and other political bodies: its physical environment.

Q. Related to the previous question: What kind of role does the ecological have in your practice, whether that be in terms of materials, supply chains, processing/transferring resources, infrastructures, collaborations, thought processes/theory, spaces, and so on?

I am using ecology as a tool/or vision of remediation to deconstruct the linear preformed futurity of institutions. This process transforms solid, situated things into flowing gestures. This ecological dimension creates a space for remediation within my work, which is very important.

Ecologizing in the museum can be seen as a potential protocol of historical narratives and their associated power, liberating its boundaries. This especially concerns the question of how we can challenge the predominant western vision of the Global South that exists as a 'prototypical, oppressed residue' in Ethno-colonial museums. So here, I see ecologizing in the museum as a method to decolonize colonial objects by repositioning them into the biosphere.

For my current on-going project 350,000 Leaks, I use a water pipe and its flows as a means of connecting the bodies of objects with wider ecosystems. I am exploring how they can make visible the sociopolitical, institutional, historical and psychological design systems of objects in museums and how they can recirculate the objects. This process can open the strict extensive border and potential magnitude of clogged things in the museum.

I'm asking whether bamboo, ceramics, gourds, parrot feathers, fruits, and shells of objects can finally get wet together with us? The objects can be re-metabolised via subversive existence of water pipes to the ocean. In other words, the presence of the water pipe can potentially unpick the frozen sequence of the objects, which are supposed to be in tropical climates but find themselves stuck in sterile museums. This method could bring the ecological sensitivity of objects back to life.

The research includes analysing the direction of the water pipes and their speed and flows, by mapping the locational, spatial boundless scale, length, and floor plan of the Tropenmuseum in collaboration with the microorganisms in the water, climate scientists and urban architects. I am creating a cartography of the Tropenmuseum by reassembling and drawing the reticulation of water passages, rainwater wells, water taps, and waterkelders which can open the circuit of sealed objects: revealing the structural sequence of the water path from glass cabinet to the room in the depot to outside of the museum, to the canal in the city, and ultimately all the way to the ocean.

Mapping water pipes and tropical objects on the map will indicate the object's re-positionality. It constellates the liquid interchange between the leakage of water, tropical objects, and the dripping of tap water. The ultimate territorial border of the objects, starting from the museum to the ocean and then potentially to their original region, is marked and seen by the water's path and represented in an unfinished sequence of objects.

This perspective resonates with Astrida Neimanis's posthuman feminism, which rethinks the body as a watery existence beyond traditional divisions between human and nonhuman beings. We are all bodies of water, and through the circulation of water we are conceived as relational beings that are continuously connected to and permeated by one another. Water moves across rivers, seas, clouds, and bodies, forming a shared world—a hydrocommons. Through water, we constitute a materially entangled community with others, animals, and the environment. The movement of water across borders and boundaries invites us to understand the body as open, entangled, and continually in flux.

This speculative, performative map marks around 60 species of Southern objects related to climate sensitivity. This marking of cartography becomes a political action by revealing things and surroundings that are not seen. The scale of perspective on the map will reestablish the surrounding of the object's context.

Using this process, I navigate the related dynamics between the colonial body and ecological time. Climate and colonial museums generate waves of the latent intrinsic beings of colonial objects. This premise and artistic approach will open possible resilient passages for translocating from solid retention (museums) to fluid protention (anticipating new futures, cancelling pre-formed time), from denaturalising to naturalising, from depot to ocean, from the Global South to Global North.

The motion/notion of return is a diplomatic/decolonial tactic used to circumnavigate multiple timelines, giving critical kinesis to colonial museums that extend the linearly pre-formed western futurity. This approach to colonial objects metabolises the very potential movement of self-constitution and revitalises latent oppressed layers in the object. It can extend the typology and capacities of colonial objects that have disputed histories. It becomes a venue where we can discuss new epistemologies.

Through this embodied practice, the relationality of the objects will be unfolded

and propagated. So the marginalised narration will be awoken and performed, potentially shaping another future. They become real invited witnesses to reply and to discuss the interdependence of the Global South and the Global North, which are ultimately connected to one another. The extended ecological dimension will give a renewed resilience to colonial objects and test their bidirectional passage as interlocutors. It metabolises the potential ecology of cross-trans-territoriality in objects. Their re-existence is moving toward co-existence.

Q. In what ways have you encountered the ecological in the museum?

I encountered the ecological in the museum via the leakage of their infrastructures, which contrasts their artificial ecology. I found many things living, vibrating, and moving in the water from the museum's borders (literally in its liminal space), its damp basement walls. From there I found the potential for a plurality of dialogues challenging the historical monolog of coloniality.

Q. How does your work engage with the infrastructures of the museum? Why is this important?

It's important because I am interested in the object's ontological condition in the museum. The walls of the building, the climate system in the depot, all this infrastructure actually trains and disciplines the objects. Even though their geographical bodies are deeply engaged with their land-specific conditions, the museum influences the material, even the epistemological reality of Southern objects, the diverse climate formations of their material reality and the landscape of their body; including form, ideas, material, technique, function and human dimensions... Therefore its exterior climate is important as well. Climate time in real time is the primary key in my project to dealing with an interregnum in museums, to quote Gramsci: the old is dying, and the new cannot be born. For me, this sums up colonial museums and my work speculates other futures generated by displaced objects and displaced climate.

Q. In what ways do you understand colonialism/capitalism/ecology to interact?

The binary concept of nature and humans incurred various environmental problems and dominant structural paradigms in time. This dichotomy includes white-aboriginal, object-subject, nature-culture, human-non-human and as a result of this extraction comes the state of the body becoming currency, debt, commodities. This also signals the logic of 'gore capitalism,' in which violence itself becomes

an economic rationality, revealing a structural reality in which life and the body are treated as exchangeable and expendable resources within the market's value chains.

The colonial museum is a prototype to perpetuate these ideas while also echoing the multitude of colonialism, capitalism and ecology. On a planetary scale, the structure of coloniality continues its establishment of dominant time in capitalism as an updated notion of the Global South and Global North. The suppressed body of colonial objects from the southern hemisphere is a construction of the past and a synthetic time of past - current - (preformed) future that generates a singular hegemony. Additionally, think of the realities of ecology as (even) visualisation of this chain, they are an expanded meaning of toxicity in relation to colonial restitution, in light of the ongoing realities of the Global North dumping toxic waste in the global South.

Q. Tell us about your recent work 'Holding Poison'. What are the implications of this microbial perspective within museums and artworks? And I'm also interested in the links between micro and macro-scale: who or what has agency in this shift and interaction? Finally I'd like to ask you about the notion of toxifying/purifying in this context.

Holding Poison is the first chapter of a trilogy that make up the aforementioned 350,000 Leaks project. When I followed the sequential waterway in the museum, I found life from water leaking from outside to inside. After this discovery, I started to ask if a museum can embrace any living thing so it can finally become a space for life? What actually constitutes life and what can be considered life? These microbes from the water are the institution's diverse 'vibrant matters' as living forms of life. These fluid elements are in stark contrast to the stasis we always associate with institutions.

By working with immunologists in the Microbes laboratory at Amsterdam UMC, we found portraits of ninety-five microbes living in museums found in leaked water on the wall of the museum, vibrating, pulsing and expanding. I started to question whether this form of liminal zone be performed as an extension of the border, to compose a different reality. These living cultures have their own movements and will. These unruly movements and their performativity are significant because they're the uncontrollable others, the unruly knowledge, they are empowerment. How does this malleable, moist body, itself a multitude of heterogeneous matter, challenge the idea of the poisoned objects, with their white crystalised disciplined bodies covered in the pesticide DDT?

It was important to scale them up and make them perceptible, sensual to us (like the climate). Because of this micro and macro-scale perspective we can re-establish the connection between the surroundings of the museum's enormous, controlled system and an object's positionality in our sensorium. I studied the gestures of microbes and applied them to 96 robotic moving microbes with sensors attached. Those tangible microbes were moving around the museum including the exhibition space, depot, staircase and reception.

The choreography of poisoned objects weaves together the liquified things in the museum, including microbes and poisoned objects. Here the performed objects were microbes, but they can also be opened agents, subalterns, things on the border, current ecologies, and meta-physical agents that are not seen in our society.

Their performance can deconstruct the categories of body, species and territories if we let them. It's in this heterotopian space that knowledge can leak and flow, creating a space where all agencies might be able to participate in the museum. The choreography can detoxify the space, and transgress this border and identity.

In these projects the dual toxicity is related to clogged things since the objects are covered with toxic pesticides and toxic modernity. Because of this we are not able to reconstitute the objects (both physically, and conceptually), and the toxic modernity is sealed. In contrast to their still life, vibrant matters are important here to give kinesis to the sequential hegemonic ecology of the museum. So, I used the notion of leakage as the opposite of toxicity, as a way to decolonize the museum to emancipate the toxic form of objects and visualise the potential porosity of the museum to breath.

Q. Your 2019 workshop 'Tropical, Objects Turns' looks at museum adaptations to climate change in the context of looted materials and objects from the global south in European museums. How did this workshop progress and how did it affect how you think about museums, their collections, and climate?

The workshop was organised into three sessions, Session 1: Performing for the Future Habitat, Session 2: Prototyping for the Future Habitat, and Session 3: Storytelling for the Future Habitat.

It started with the questions: In a potential scenario where our climate could get warmer and “tropicalised”, can objects that come from the tropics, but are kept in European museums, transgress their current passive state of untranslatability? Can forms and ideas from the South contained within objects lead us to future adaptations for new climate conditions? How can we re-translate the knowledge and social relations carried by these objects to an European context without privileging western modern conceptual paradigms?

I investigated this scenario and focused on objects in the context of Europe that are connected to us through various global warming transformations in order to understand upcoming new landscapes by sharing the object’s knowledge. By looking at the archive of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW) in Netherlands, the Southern objects, and their current context, the project draws out a new translation of tropical archives in museum collections on the history of colonial trade and exchange. The tropical objects are collaboratively re-read to create a new atlas of the objects from the southern hemisphere.

One example is an object from Suriname which is integral to a ritual rain ceremony. The object RV-360-7049 is an early 18th-century rattle made of a brown painted gourd with a wooden stick put through it. As well as bamboo, the gourd water bottle is one of the most common sights in the tropical collection in the NMVW. Gourds are widely cultivated in tropical and sub-tropical areas due to their specific function of holding and keeping water cold in warm climates.

Due to RV-360-7049’s use in water ritual ceremonies, it functioned as media used to connect tropical landscapes to humans. A piai (shaman) performed with it as it’s an integral part of a ceremony responding to the tropical climate. So we were performing with colonial objects but in the meantime imagining a future that is accelerated by global warming.

The scope of the workshop¹ was to map the object in unusual ways to produce a different understanding of it from those we are familiar with. The aim being to experience “the Tropics” through movement. How we engage with and move the body to use tropical objects, and the shape of the objects themselves, is the trait d’ union of the performance

choreography. These movements indicate contexts from where objects came, giving the possibility to experience their “indigeneity”. The Tropenmuseum archive is translated into a bodily experience, and not a visual or a verbal one. Through a process of a materialised collaborative moment of thinking together, the public co-creates a new speculative landscape by retranslating the objects from the archive. Through several workshops, I found the potentiality of colonial objects that can become vibrant matter, the knowledge can be awakened and ecologized. Also they become a prototype of a future habitat in our global reality, allow for the emergence of new landscapes and speak their urgent contention. Here I would like to mention the notion of rematriation, a return to a spiritual way of life with respect for Mother Earth, as a way to connect colonial objects and ecology.

Q. Your 2019 work

‘A Dissonance of Landscapes’ seems to look at the interaction between cultures with different cultural, historical, and geographical backgrounds. How do you see ecologies as part of this interaction? In what way does the ecological affect the imaginative possibilities within this artwork?

This is an interesting question. I think probably the embracing character of ecology can be seen as this heterogeneous landscape, in my work as well as the 19th century Chinese paintings. This can link to a mixed scene of tropical landscapes and european trees and soils in one painting. I consider how the ecological can affect the imaginative possibilities, because this painting is a dialogue of two totally different ecologies. And furthermore, I think conceptually the notion of ecology here at the end is seen as a ‘passage’. It is not about destination or conclusion, it is about the moment of ‘passing through’ that we are all meeting, interrelated, having conversations across us, and can then make new understanding.

So in my film, there is no “arrival” to or from a fixed point, only the constant inextricable journeying of cultures and peoples; but also maybe not only conceptually but literally, the displacement of climate, and migration of nature and culture is happening now so this type of imaginary scene as liminal space is not surprising.