❸ Holding Poison, a Roundtable on Toxicity in Ethnographic Museum Collections
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❸"Holding Poison": a roundtable on toxicity in ethnographic museum collections

2024

From 2022 to 2024, Aram Lee was artist in residence in the project 'Pressing Matter, Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums'. ① For this residency, she proposed a project engaging with the institutional climate in European ethnographic museums, which ended up focussing on toxicity. The following conversation, held between Aram Lee, Esmee Schoutens, researcher at the Wereldmuseum, and Katja Kwastek, art historian at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and researcher in Pressing Matter, revolves around Aram's work Holding Poison which was performed at Wereldmuseum Amsterdam on June 9, 2023 as part of her residency.

Aram Lee has a long-standing interest in how humans relate to objects, specifically in the context of colonial relations. Her graduation project, entitled Dutch Wife (2018) engaged with a traditional, human-size bamboo object which you 'hug' to cool your body. It is called guiling in Indonesia, but was often referred to as a 'Dutch wife' in colonial times. This, Aram reckoned in our conversation, tells a lot about objectified humans and humanized objects, and their gendered aspects. After she moved to Amsterdam in 2019, Aram followed up on her research in human-object relations through gestural performances. She invited performers and audiences to imagine handling objects which have been deprived from their use context as they are kept in colonial collections, encouraging us to feel the objects even through their material absence. One of her motivations was to open up new approaches to these objects, different from institutional descriptions and presentations. She holds that you can touch an object by imagining it, and that such a connection can be very intimate and emotional.

Esmee Schoutens:
How was it for you to be in the depot of the Wereldmuseum when you went there for the first time? How did it feel to see so many objects together, where there seems to be no space for absence because there's so many?

Aram Lee:
Of course, I expected to encounter this kind of aesthetics of classifying, categorizing and numbering the objects, with the more than 350,000 objects the museum holds.

Katja Kwastek:
I think what Esmee is wondering is if with the Pressing Matter residency, you somehow felt changing sides. Because suddenly you were in the privileged position to be able to access all the objects. Was that an odd feeling or did it feel just right to be allowed to actually handle some of them yourself?

Aram:
When I went to the depot of the Wereldmuseum in the first phase of my residency, I did so because I was interested in the museum's climate ecology and how it is connected to the outside world. I was unexpectedly confronted with an object with a white powder-like material on its surface and the conservator was telling me I should not touch it, because it's very toxic. I initially hadn't planned to engage with the DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) treatment. But when I literally saw it on the surface of the objects, I got interested in it. In my previous research in relation to ethnographic museums and collections, I had never considered the toxicity of objects. It is something that I only encountered because of my fieldwork in the depot, and it became a central aspect of the

work. Where did this toxicity come from? And what does it mean when your body or an object has become toxic?

Esmee:

This is interesting. In your earlier performance Tropical, Objects, Turns (2019), there weren't any objects, and it was all about their absence. And then when we were in the depot, you actually couldn't handle these objects either, even if you wanted to. At least in museum protocol, you're not allowed, because of the toxicity. Did this change something in your concept of gestural research – not being allowed to touch present objects versus imagining absent objects through gestures?

Aram:

It is not just about absence. I am interested in the metaphysical levels of objects, their invisible aspects: invisible due to toxicity or due to actual absence. Invisible because they are not here, or invisible because they're too small for the human eye to see, like microbes. There are many levels of invisibility in the museum which I wanted to explore. Also the museum climate is invisible, and we even don't really see how the institution is controlling it.

To come back to the objects: I did experiments in my studio to try to understand these objects. They have this white-powdery body because they have been treated with DDT in the past, which was developed in the mid-nineteenth century as an insecticide. I tried to understand what would happen if these toxic objects were moved. They cannot be restituted back to their home, due to their toxicity. Through my research and artistic practice, I have come to the conclusion that museums have a long history of refusing life and attempting to control all living things that are not allowed to enter them. Various preservation technologies, such as climate control, refrigeration, vacuum-sealed rooms, animal and insect traps and UV lights, have been deployed to maintain the material reality of objects in the collection. This practice of preservation is deeply rooted in western material traditions. Alois Riegl, following Aristotelian thought, seesmaterial decay as enactment of mental decay. ② If objects are meant to represent our memories, then their material decay implies forgetting. But what do museums perpetuate through these preservation practices? Does the material permanence of objects actually represent the permanence of mind and memory? I wanted to explore these questions within the context of European ethno-colonial museums, considering the distinctions between caring for, and preserving objects.

One of the earlier conservation technologies uses DDT. It's a synthetic chemical compound that gained prominence in the mid-20th century as a highly effective insecticide. DDT was widely used in museums, and also widely used on land. Its use was historically motivated by colonial expansion. It was often linked to colonial projects aimed at modernizing or supposedly improving local conditions. DDT was used as a means to biologically control territories, serving as a continuation of colonial hegemony aimed at eradicating diseases and sanitizing people and land, including their lives and cultures. It was used by people intruding other lands. During the Vietnam War, Americans and Europeans widely used it to protect themselves, and to counter the unease of facing unfamiliar landscapes, including unknown diseases, bacteria, and viruses.③

The numerous entanglements between the chemical industry and conservation practices are well documented. For example, during the First World War, German museums used substances produced for the military for preservation purposes. From 1940 to 1970, ethno-colonial museums in Europe employed DDT to manage their vast colonial collections. It was used to sanitize and preserve objects, particularly those made of organic materials. There was limited knowledge about the origins of the objects that came from their colonies; their provenance was frequently unknown. Many of these items were made of unfamiliar organic materials such as plants, gourds, feathers, and animal skins, and likely harboured unknown insects and other living organisms. DDT was used to address and pacify these unknown life forms, as it could effectively kill all living organisms within the objects. ④

This reflects the efforts of European museums to control the living entities coming from the colonies, preserving them in a static collection frozen at the moment of their demise. This method represents a hierarchical approach towards the living within conservation practices.

While DDT ensured the longevity of the objects, it also rendered them extremely toxic over time. DDT becomes dangerous to humans when an object is moved. One of the objects that I encountered in the depot of the Wereldmuseum was a whip used for horse riding. It was a little fragile and broken, and it had been treated with DDT, so I couldn't move the object. In my studio, I made a similarly shaped object and applied some white powder on top of it and then I tried to make some movements, trying to understand what happens to it if I move. As if it was in use when you're riding a horse.

Esmee:

Indeed, DDT only becomes really poisonous for humans when an object is moved. The crystals that have formed on the surface, sometimes look like white powder and sometimes they cannot be seen with the bare eye, as they are very small particles. When an object or material is taken up or used these particles let loose and start circulating in the air and get into our respiratory systems. That's why in the depot the objects that are poisonous with DDT are stored on the regular shelves. They have a sign "DDT", but they can lay there in between the other objects. There are some shelves where some objects have these warning signs attached, lying next to ones that are "save".

Aram:

When they have a red sticker, it means they are poisonous.

Esmee:

They can lay there still, and everything will be fine. But as soon as they're moved, the DDT is released.

Katja:

Yes, but "everything will be fine" only for the humans handling it. From a human perspective everything is fine if you don't use the object. But from the object's perspective, they have basically been killed. And that's not reversible.

Aram:

These objects only exist when they function, like the whip. The whip, when you see it, looks just like an old branch. But the object can only really exist when it is used for riding horses. In the collection, the whip was maybe the most 'active' object I saw. What interests me is how these objects actually behave(d).

For my performance in the museum, Holding Poison, it was not possible to bring the toxic objects to the audience. I asked and they said it's only possible when they are kept in a closed glass box. And it would still be a difficult process, because of the toxicity. This of course also goes for repatriation requests. When they would want to or have to restitute the object, it could not go back to its home because of its toxic body. I wanted to focus on this impossibility of restitution, and even touch or interaction. You cannot go back home, you cannot... They are in a very deadlocked state.

Katja:

Do you know about a claim for repatriation when the museum would say "Oh, yeah, but we actually can't do it. It's toxic." ?

Aram:

One of the researchers in the Wereldmuseum was telling me that in a lot of European museums this has happened; they wanted to return objects, but it turned out not to be possible because they were toxic, poisoned bodies. So I asked myself how I can engage with this. I wanted to focus on this impossibility of being restituted or even be touched or interact with any kind of reality.

Some of the objects were originally used for ritual ceremonies in local communities. They will never be able to return home and be used by the people who once held them. Their collection and conservation has completely isolated them from their original context. These objects are segregated from their faith, their ancestors, temporal changes, and the physical world, turning them into timeless toxic monuments. Their bodies are poisoned, their memories are poisoned, anesthetized. This shows that preserving does not always equate to caring. Museums do not allow for life. Living things always come from outside the museum and die when they're inside. The only things we accept are those that are institutionally secured and proven, which essentially means: dead things. Museums perpetuate their institutional power by emphasizing the materiality of objects.

If conservation in colonial museums supports a hierarchy in living worlds and perpetuates western hegemony, what could be alternative ways of caring instead of poisoning/conserving? Can museums genuinely embrace and nurture life? Is it possible for varied life forms and living entities within museums to rewrite cultural narratives? What can be considered life in a museum? And can we even invite anything living into the museum? That was actually the reason why – during my residency - I related to the water pipes of the museum. When I went to the underbelly of the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, part of the building of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), there was a wall basically dividing the inside and outside. This wall was wet. Perhaps it was groundwater from the outside, coming through. It is in between states, it can move. I wanted to look at what's living at the border. I collected this water and went to the lab at the VU medical faculty. And in this lab two scientists showed me the microbes living in the water. We made 98 portraits of the microbes living in one drop of water that I collected from the museum building. Seeing the portraits was very interesting. These marginalized beings, living on the border. I wanted to combine the DDT objects with these watery bodies. These microbes, with their bodies from water, could they be used to detoxify or decolonize the state of being locked? Even to rematriate? This is why I wanted them to perform together.

Katja:

You 3D-printed the microbes, right? And made them into animate objects by integrating some motors. In the performance they featured in the Great Hall of the Wereldmuseum, together with a 3D print of the whip. So, in your performance, the microbe-sculptures were metaphors or symbols for water or for liquid bodies that could potentially detoxify the whip?

Aram:

Yeah, you can say that. And then water here is not just to detoxify, but it's also creating a pass. It connects inside to outside. Following the water pass, to a very far-away, they might arrive home or at a place where they can get out of this toxic body. That's what I tried to choreograph within my performance.

Katja:

Next to the microbe-sculptures being technically moved, the performers were reenacting the movement of the microbes. But how did they use the whip then?

Aram:

There was always one person with the whip. And she was reading a poem in relation to the whole choreography, entitled Holding Poison. It is an existing poem that was written during the Japanese colonization in Korea. It uses poison as a metaphor. It engages with its relation to the colonial periods and our attitudes to coloniality. In this poem, poison refers to coloniality, but also to the deadlock state that you are holding poison, but you're not able to use it. This person with the whip was reading the poem with the whip, that is enacting movements related to the regular usage of the whip.

Katja:

She handled the 3D print of the whip.

Aram:

Yes, it was printed in clay and baked. And then, all the microbe-sculptures were vibrating. Their vibrations have a duration, which is the duration of their living time: 40 minutes. That's the average lifetime of the microbes, measured in human conceptual time. Then they disappear and others appear, or they expand.

Katja:

You also represented the DDT in the performance. When the performer was starting to perform with the whip, there was powder on it. And that was then spread in the room?

Aram:

Yes, we had to clean it afterwards.

Esmee:

Over time, DDT enters the structure of the object, its materiality. These objects are porous to a certain extent, such as wood. That is the problem with DDT, that it intrudes so far into the object that it's really difficult or even impossible to remove it. Next to it being very time-consuming. At the same time, you talk about the water in the underbelly. I like the word underbelly because it's humanizing the building. This building is also porous. The water can move between its inside and outside. Can you say something about this porosity and how this comes back in the work?

Aram:

The water that I collected from the damp wall comes from the outside. From the pore, literally, the hole. Somehow there is an invisible hole in the museum's wall.

Esmee:

Yes, and your work accentuates this porosity. We try really hard in museums to keep everything living out, except for visitors, and to have a really controlled environment. But in the end, it is always porous. It's impossible to keep everything out but all preservation and conservation standards are aiming for this ideal, yet unrealistic, and perhaps undesirable situation. Because there will always be even the smallest insects or the smallest drops of water that still manage to somehow get in. Climate change is enabling more insects to settle and survive in other places and additionally more insects are reaching adulthood, which means they will be able to reproduce more.

Aram:

Indeed. DDT was used in the past to prevent malaria. But also for immigrants or people in the colonies that had to move from here to there. When you were afraid of some foreign disease you sanitized the human bodies. They didn't yet know that DDT was harmful. During the Vietnam war the Americans and Europeans used it a lot in the whole Asian continent, to protect themselves or to avoid diseases. It is interesting that it was used a lot for objects or people moving from here to there. It does not just concern immigrants, but when things are not from your own context, you're afraid of diseases or certain bacteria or viruses. So it was used basically in the process of displacement. And in the museum context, it was used for conservation and preservation.

Katja:

But it wasn't seen as harmful to humans and probably it wasn't even seen as harmful to objects. Sanitizing objects and killing all the microbes was seen as something positive. There was no awareness that these are actual living

objects, which are killed through sanitizing them. Even nowadays any kind of museum collection or archive still tries to get rid of as many living things as possible. The museum is not seen as an ecosystem where things are allowed to decay. It's about eternal preservation. That is the main paradigm. Even if today, they don't use toxins anymore.

Aram:

In Europe, at least.

Esmee:

Pesticides are still commonplace today, in many different fields. And also concerning the pesticides we use for agriculture, sometimes we don't necessarily know the long-term effects for ecosystems or our bodies. It's a similar history in a way.

Aram:

What I find interesting is that for humans and objects alike, basically, the role of these toxins is to stop movements, right? These objects cannot go back to their region. Basically, it's always happening when you cross the border. DDT is used to undo the uncertain state of other bodies. I think that was the main reason why the ethnographic museum used it a lot because for lots of objects they didn't know what kind of insects they have. Also, because they come from a different climate. We are not aware what these objects could potentially have within them. So, for lots of objects made out of natural material, they used DDT to kill all the living things.

Esmee:

DDT was still used in European ethnographic museums until the 1990s in some cases. ⑤ Objects were either sprayed with DDT or were put in a bath of DDT to make sure to cover all of their surface and let it penetrate them. It was a widespread practice and at the museum we don't have a good overview of all poisoned objects because these treatments were not well documented in the past, something that you asked for, Aram. I see a relation between the scale of looting and collecting for ethnographic museums and the scale of the use of this poison. It also adds another layer to the "restitutionary moment" or wave we might be in today: what does toxicity mean for that process? But also accessibility, can you say something about that?

Aram:

I see many metaphysical levels of objects, some are invisible such as toxicity, absence or the microbic. I wanted to explore this invisible level and dimension in the museum. I was able to access the depot and touch some objects with gloves a little bit, but there is a surface to these ancestral belongings that contain details and senses that one really needs to feel. Only certain people are allowed to touch those objects and through my performance I also wanted to discuss this politics of touch.

Esmee:

What are the differences between preservation and care for you?

Aram:

Through my experience as an artist working with the museum, I realized that they are different things. Preserving something is not always equal to caring for something, because the DDT was an invention for efficient and eternal preservation. And because of this eternality this has now become a problem: objects might be eternally toxic.

In relation to living things: what does it mean to have an eternal body? You preserve something... To keep the body forever, what does it mean? Toxicity is the consequence, right? We wanted to keep the body forever and now we are, in this extreme case, not even able to interact with it anymore. Not to touch it and not to bring it back. Concerning preservation, I had these questions about the materiality of decay.

Katja:

If I get you correctly, you are questioning the implications of that idea of eternity. Why not accept that things might decay and that things are living? The museum works with the paradigm that everything should be kept forever. "Let's make things eternal because they are cultural heritage." But that takes away the life of the objects.

Aram:

If we want to make an eternal body, we want to preserve this body forever. But what do we want to actually preserve? Is it memory? Is it spiritual things or is it the people who are related to it? Or is it just the body? And if it's just about the body, what is that? Western tradition thinks conservation materializes the memory. But then I'm questioning: Whose memories and what kind of memory are we trying to preserve?

Esmee:

Pressing Matter obviously also departs from the idea of restitution and the system around restitution, but also what is necessary around the returning of belongings. Bringing in the question of toxicity here is very interesting. What does it mean to give back or to return an object that is toxic or poisonous to people, since we've already violently taken it from people, and then in another act of violence, we

give something back, that is perhaps toxic to these people. Sometimes you can remove the DDT, but it's a very labour-intensive process. And sometimes you also can't remove it because it's really too deep into the material. How do you see the institution and its responsibility in relation to this toxicity? Are there other possible ways of restitution or repair?

Aram:

This is a question for the institutions to address. As an artist, I cannot really answer it.

Esmee:

No, you don't have to. Artists don't have to solve the institution's problems. Maybe it was not so much a question, but more of a thought, just how you see restitution in light of toxic objects. The restitution processes now are already very slow and only very limited numbers of objects so far are being restituted...

Katja:

What I hear you saying is that as an artist, your interest is not mainly in restitution itself, but rather in making these ontological frictions public, or engaging with these frictions. While you point to the fact that the toxicity of the objects constitutes another hindrance to restitution in the end, you're more interested in how these objects are living in those archives at the moment? Is that correct? I mean, you were mentioning rematriation ⑥ before, and if I understand correctly, your main question is not "can we physically restitute?", but "can we, emotionally, symbolically rematriate, in re-establishing connections in some ways?"

Aram:

Of course, restitution is related to my projects, and it might even be the ultimate question at the end, even if I don't state it literally. As an artist, I cannot make the actual institutional decision to bring objects back. What I can do is propose imaginative restitution and rematriation—a term that, unlike repatriation, emphasizes returning not just to the nation-state but to the land, the community, and the maternal lineages of care. Some objects simply cannot be returned to their places of origin, because to return them would also mean returning toxic, harmful, crystallized colonial poisons—poisons that affect not only the body but also the psyche, leaving scars in both matter and memory. My work therefore invites the audience and the museum to think together about the continuity of toxicity: what does it mean that this body, held in toxic colonial enclosures, cannot go back to its motherland? What histories of violence continue to circulate through it? And what new forms of care or responsibility might emerge if we acknowledge that these objects are never neutral, but instead carry the traces of both harm and survival within them?

But related to your questions about restitution, and the toxic body: It's actually very interesting, because it's still happening everywhere. Not only in museums. I've recently been researching the restitution of land in Korea that was used by the US Military service and the Japanese colonizers for 117 years: Youngsan Garrison Compound. ⑦ It was a military place, so it's totally toxic, polluted with liquids like oil, but also arsenic. And now they are returning back the land. It is in the middle of Seoul, the core of the city, a very expensive location. It was totally blocked for 117 years. Starting from the Russo-Japanese war and throughout the Japanese colonization this location was occupied, and when the Japanese left, the US directly came and until a few years ago the US soldiers were there.

I lived nearby. I grew up in that region and I didn't even know that the location was this big. A really big location in the center of Seoul. And now they are returning the land, literally, the soil, to the people, to create a park, or something like this. But this land, the soil itself, is poisoned because of these brutal military and colonial histories. Of course, as a colonizer, you have a different attitude when it's not your land and you are in a hierarchically high position. You are there, but you don't have that many considerations about the soil or the land you are using.

Here, too, I question the returning, because now they're returning and at this very moment, in South Korea, we don't know how to deal with this toxic land. I was thinking a lot, of course, about the DDT objects, that have much in common. And I was thinking about rematriation. Rematriation like an embracement of a motherland. You go back to the motherland and its knowledge to care for the Earth. I understand rematriation really in terms of reconnectivity, as restoring the relationship between ancestral lands and artifacts.

Katja:

For this land in the middle of Seoul, there is no other option than to give it back in its toxicity. So the question is how the colonizers can be held responsible to detoxify it? Also, the land will always retain the scars and wounds that have been enacted on it through the use of toxic materials. I agree that it is really interesting to compare this to the question of restitution of toxic objects. Here as well, the toxicity has become part of their history. And if they can be kept in the Wereldmuseum, couldn't they also be kept elsewhere - with this problematic and violent history forever embodied in them. And then the question is, how the ones who enacted this violence can still be held responsible, at any site, even if the object would be relocated.

Aram:

I brought up this example not only because it seemed similar, but also because it shows how such questions remain pressing issues in society. In the end, the ecological detoxifications will be paid for by the Korean government. So we return to the question on which toxic systems are based: who pays, and who continues to live with the poison? Who takes responsibility for detoxifying the land? This is why the repatriation of toxic land is such a compelling case for explaining these DDT objects. It is an ongoing and very public issue, comparable to the case of DDT objects in European colonial museums and in Global South contexts. In Korean society at the moment many people are angry—or at least surprised—when talking about this land, whose scale we hadn't even realized. I myself lived right next to it for more than 25 years.

Katja:

For me, your work is very much about creating awareness. Safeguarding toxic objects in the depots of a museum seems an easy solution for the party that is responsible for their toxicity. As long as they are hidden, most people are not aware, and cannot ask difficult questions. Whereas in the case of the toxic soil in the middle of Seoul, now that it is demilitarized, people are at least aware of the violence that has been done to the soil. So your work is very important in creating awareness of the fact that there are all these toxic objects in the depots of Western museums, which we often don't even see exhibited because they can only be shown under very strict conditions.

Esmee:

Thinking about that awareness, I believe your work then also points to the fact that repair goes beyond the material. Because if the material is toxic, there have to be other ways to repair - material, but also beyond material, in a more spiritual sense.

Aram:

Yes, exactly. This is a central question for me. As you said, when something is already poisoned, like the body of an object, then how to detoxify or how to approach this body in a more spiritual or metaphysical way? How to address the immaterial dimension, how to approach these poisoned memories? And then ultimately maybe relate back to the extended material dimension in some way, from artifacts to the memories and to the soil, the land, and back. I am still very much at the beginning of engaging with the toxic soil of Seoul, but I brought it up to emphasize that it's really an ongoing issue. I am very interested in the future of this toxic land, because anyways, we are going to make it public.

Maybe concerning institutionalised, poisoned objects it is a bit more difficult to think about the future because they are from the past. But still I can trace their whole life sequence from the brutal histories of them being taken to their body getting poisoned. In the end, it's about constitution of toxicity within objects, people's memories, and the land. But then it circles back to the people who originally owned the objects, to the original context, and then, what is the next step? What do these unreturnable poisoned memories and objects reveal? My question is all about unseen poisoned living beings, including humans, non-humans, objects, memories, and land. Although each of them is dying in its own way, they were all poisoned. Their permanent toxicity continues, stays with us, returns to us.

I've been thinking more specifically about non-hierarchical relations between diverse living bodies, such as described by Stacy Alaimo as transcorporeality. ⑧ Within transcorporeality, not only are living things and matter internally and externally connected, but all species are internally entangled in a much larger flow that is difficult to find a trace of. Through a microscopic examination of the museum, I discovered such poor, invisible, unrecognized, unregistered forms of life. How can we account for these living entities, when there's a continuity of toxic forces and insensible violence affecting the life of things and their culture in the museum? This raises the question of what life means in an institution.

YEONGRANG KIM: HOLDING POISON

A long time has passed with
poison inside my mind.
A freshly secreted poison that
hasn' t yet hurt anyone
A friend tells me to stop spreading
that fearful poison.

Even without that poison,
when you and I perish for good
A billion generations will quietly flow past us

The earth will wear away
and become grains of sand
'Futile!'
What is the use of that poisonous mind?

Ah! Has there been a day not to resent
To be born into the world. 'Futile!'
But Wolves and Coyotes pounce back and forth,
aiming my mind
And I gave up myself to be fed by the beasts
alive, torn and clawed to pieces

I will willingly walk my path
with poison in my mind
To salvage my solitary spirit
on the very last day. ⑨

FOOTNOTES

① Pressing Matter, Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums, is a research project investigating the potentialities of 'colonial objects' to support societal reconciliation with the colonial past and its afterlives. It runs from 2021 to 2025, led by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Susan Legene) and Wereldmuseum Amsterdam (Wayne Modest), together with various other Dutch universities, museums, and societal partners.

② Adrian Forty and Susanne Kuechler, eds., The Art of Forgetting (Materializing Culture). Berg Publishers, 2001: 4.

③ See also David Kinkela, DDT and the American Century: Global Health, Environmental Politics, and the Pesticide That Changed the World. University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

④ For the history of toxicity and poison in ethnographic collections, see Lotte Arndt, "Poisonous Heritage: Chemical Conservation, Monitored Collections, and the Threshold of Ethnological Museums", Museum and Society 20, no. 2 (2022). DOI: doi.org/10.29311/mas.v20i2.4031

⑤ For a history of pesticide use in German ethnographic collections see Helene Tello. The Toxic Museum: Berlin and Beyond. Routledge, 2024.

The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, has started a research project in 2022 into the toxicity of its collections: EPITOX, led by Siska Genbrugge (www.africamuseum.be/nl/research/discover/projects/prj_detail?prjid=742).

⑥ Rematriation is a term coined in indigenous scholarship, established as a counter-term to repatriation, denoting the return to mother earth, claiming the restitution of relations to physical, social, and spiritual origins, human, and more-than human, closely related to a feminist ethics of care. See e.g.Robin R. R. Gray, "Rematriation: Ts'msyen Law, Rights of Relationality, and Protocols of Return," Native American and Indigenous Studies 9, no. 1 (2022): 1-27.

⑦ Kim Yoon-ju, Nam Jong-young, "Carcinogens, toxins detected in 66% of Yongsan Park land returned by US forces", Hankyoreh, 06.08.2022, english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1046213.html

⑧ Stacy Alaimo, Bodily Natures : Science, Environment, and the Material Self. Indiana University Press, 2010.

⑨ Yeong-rang Kim, Dok-eul chago〔독을 차고 / Carrying (or Holding) Poison〕, Munjang 10 (November 1939).

Pressing Matter, Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums, is a research project investigating the potentialities of 'colonial objects' to support societal reconciliation with the colonial past and its afterlives. It runs from 2021 to 2025, led by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Susan Legene) and Wereldmuseum Amsterdam (Wayne Modest), together with various other Dutch universities, museums, and societal partners.