

EDS. DENISE ZIEGLER | LAURA BELOFF | CYNTHIA BLANCHETTE | HANNA VAHVASELKÄ



# THE PRESENCE OF EXCHANGE

GIFT in Artistic Research and Beyond





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# The Presence of Exchange –GIFT in Artistic Research and Beyond

*This project started something in all of us. Although many felt there were too many meetings, some of which were not very concrete. The exchange did not always meet our presences. We were triggered by the open discussion about power dynamics between humanities scholars and artist-researchers which proved to be thought-provoking. Over time, as the process unfolded, art and theory began to intersect through our meetings, exhibition development, and the conference. This was stimulating. As the project progressed, a desire and need emerged in us for a slower, more in-depth research approach—one that would allow for deeper engagement in a discourse with others, extended reflection, and further development of one's own research. Finally, a question emerged, how to translate artistic research into meaningful content for visitors. These experiences and discussions have culminated into this publication at hand. (Gift as an Experiment, 2024)*

The concept of the *gift* is deeply embedded in social, cultural, and philosophical traditions. Yet, in a rapidly changing world shaped by technological advancements, genetic modifications, shifting political landscapes, and blurring of what it means to have a bond with each other—we have brought together academic scholars and artist-researchers to interrogate existing and projected knowledge about the concept of the gift. This publication integrates empirical research,

theoretical and fictional texts, art objects and artistic research to a nuanced and diverse understanding of the gift.

Prior to this publication, an exhibition and a conference emerged from a nine-month collaborative process initiated by the Gifts/Presents/Presence research team from Tampere University led by Professor Olli Pyyhtinen and project coordinator Niilo Rinne. The project had collaborators from the Academy of Fine Arts of Uniarts Helsinki and the Aalto University's Department of Art and Media, including the editorial team of this publication—Denise Ziegler, Laura Beloff, Cynthia Blanchette and Hanna Vahvaselkä. The conference and exhibition titled *Gifts/Presents/Presence—Meanings and Materialities*, held in June 2024, engaged both theoretically and creatively with the concept of the gift, using the empty industrial space of Valssaamo at the Cable Factory in Helsinki as a dynamic canvas. The process of sharing—both in terms of spatial negotiation and temporal interaction—became an integral part of the scholarly discourse.

As we make the final edits for this publication, diverse thoughts and questions arise, shaped by the rapidly shifting conditions of the world around us. In this evolving landscape, one wonders: could gift-giving be considered a form of resistance or activism? And how does the act of giving function within systems of power, obligation, and reciprocity? What about love?

A year ago when we were busy producing artworks and building the exhibition, the world still felt relatively stable. Soon after, everything began to shift at an accelerated pace. In this context, exploring the concept of the gift feels more timely than ever, as today's world appears increasingly solipsistic.

It has been long argued that gift is always reciprocal (Mauss, 1990; Pyyhtinen, 2014). In this publication, we examine gift both as a material exchange and as something imbued with immaterial significance. *The Presence of Exchange* delves into how artist-researchers

conceptualise, materialise, and articulate the idea of gift—its role in society and in our lives. Nine authors and author groups, as well as two invited guest authors compile thoughts and ideas expressed in and through artistic practices. They speculate from artistic perspectives on gift economy, gift as an invitation, as a bond in relationships and entanglements, gift as a test and as a form of presence in exchange, among other aspects.

Mirimari Väyrynen's text *Relational Painting: A Chain of Encounters and Possibilities* investigates the relational aspect of gift-giving and receiving in the author's painting practice. Through the experiment *A Chain of Encounters and Possibilities*, the ability to foster relationships which build narratives of human experience is explored through a practice of gifting and receiving images. Laura Beloff & Katri Naukkarinen's text *Shining a Light on the Gâteau Vivant—Structural Colour, Art, Perception, Capital and the Flavobacteria Presented as a Gift* investigates the authors' artwork *Gâteau Vivant*, which explores the bridge between bacterial and human worlds through a series of cakes growing with living nanostructure colour. The artwork is unpacked through the lens of gift theory, the Umwelt theory, and the concept of genomic capital. Cynthia Blanchette develops in the *Souvenir of the 'Me'* a parasitic souvenir by giving it a name and claiming that the idea has existed since the first human trail was tread upon. We collect souvenirs as mementos, religious relics with holy awe, but we also collect living organisms into our bodies. Sometimes external organisms are also intentionally planted for well-being—commonly in a form that is referenced by the presented artwork, titled *Shitload*.

The core aspects in the *Gift of Inheritance: What is a Gift that One Cannot Experience?* are radioactivity and myth. Aurora Del Rio's text delves into cultural and societal aspects surrounding the actions and plans regarding contamination and radioactive waste.

The text investigates gift-giving and receiving in relation to radioactive inheritance through artistic research. The invited guest author Nina Liebenberg's text *Denise Ann Darvall's Heart* weaves together the first heart transplants with the last message sent by Amelia Earhart piloting the Model 10 Electra in 1937. The collage-style text navigates through recorded real-life events and fictional imaginaries, leaving space for the reader to expand on a concept of 'a heart gifted'. *Translating the Absence-Presence of Waste into Video Art* is the title of the co-written text by Sonja Lampinen, Olli Pyyhtinen & Niina Uusitalo. It explores how the absence-presence of waste was transformed into an audiovisual format in a video installation created collectively by the authors. They also reflect on how the making of the installation was preconditioned by different kinds of gifts, such as concrete materials received for free or solidarity-based help in the production process.

In the dialogue-based text, Denise Ziegler and Niilo Rinne discuss their individual contributions to the exhibition *Gifts/Presents/Presence—Meanings and Materials*. In *Blankets, Dust and Larch Tree Needles—Reflections on Exchange* both authors carefully describe how their works were created, how both processes involved (gift-kind of) intuitive and surprising elements, and how the artworks came together in the industrial exhibition space. By revisiting and reconsidering these processes, they endorse exchange as a form of presence. Using landscape as a metaphor, Heidi Hänninen, the founder of Kontula Art School (KAS!), describes those different human realities that she encounters through her work in urban space. She reflects her art practice as a gift from the fourth sector towards building a socially sustainable city. Her text *Lahja yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen maisemassa* (A Gift from the Landscape of Collective Public Art) is published in the book in Finnish. Hanna Vahvaselkä's text, *From the Trees, With Love*, explores the concept

of gift through the concrete live gesture of handing a piece of wood to the audience. The wooden gift is an open invitation to enter in a playful yet deeply dedicated dialog with the material at hand. Also this text is printed in Finnish.

Juan C. Duarte Regino's text *Weather as a Gift: From Divine Favour to Resonant Dialogues* explores weather and atmospheric phenomena by translating their dynamic nature into sonic experiences. He asks: "Is weather merely a given condition that we passively observe, or something we actively participate in producing?"

Finally, our invited second guest author, Harri Laakso, writes on events in which something happens and seems to involve more than one thing—but what happens appears difficult to describe. His text is focused on photography, gifting and love. "In some way these events inhibit the formation of a proper relation. Yet something seems to get accomplished, something created."

With this note we are gifting this publication for interested readers.

The editorial team, March 2025.

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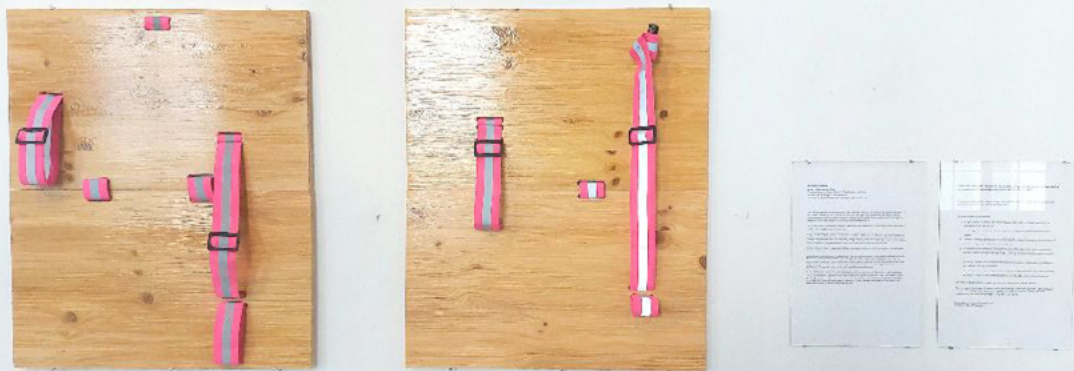


Figure 1. Väyrynen, M. (2024). *An Etc. of Encounters* [Oil on wooden board, safety string and text. 60 x 175 cm]. @ Mirimari Väyrynen.

# Relational Painting: A Chain of Encounters and Possibilities

MIRIMARI VÄYRYNEN

## Introduction

This essay explores the concept of the gift through an experimental painting process called *An Etc. of Encounters*. Here, the gift is understood as a continuous chain of giving and receiving—not necessarily as tangible, exchanged counter gifts, but rather as gestures of attention generating stories and strengthening connections. Thus, the gift is approached as moments, experience and appreciation of living-*with*.

The experimental painting process *An Etc. of Encounters* proceeds from the relational aesthetics, where the art object itself is not the focus of interest but rather guides for exploring the meanings of experience and intersubjectivity within art-making processes. Echoing this idea, and the essential question of relational aesthetics regarding what art *does*, through *An Etc. of Encounters*, painting is brought forth as an active and affective entity capable of carrying stories, embodying values, and fostering relationships. Thus, *An Etc. of Encounters* is a playful attempt to demonstrate how painting—whether in creation or perception—is entangled with real world events; concrete acts, gestures, and connections.

## An Etc of Encounters

*An Etc. of Encounters* is part of my ongoing artistic research project<sup>1</sup>, where I explore the affectedness of painting through experimental painting processes. It will consist on two parts<sup>2</sup>, the fi st of which was presented at the exhibition and international symposium Gift/Presents/Presence - Meanings and Materialities, which took place at the Cable Factory in Helsinki, Finland, in June 2024.

The exhibited work consisted of two oil paintings on wooden boards. I had begun the painting process by carefully imitating the wood grain patterns on the boards, then continued by applying multiple transparent colour layers, attempting to replicate the imitation with each layer. However, gradually, changes and transformations overtook the initial pattern, and lines, forms and shades “grew” out of their origins. Due to the multiple transparent oil colour layers, the surface of the paintings developed a glossy finish and vibrant colours. Once the painting was dry, I drilled holes and bound the boards together with a reflective safety string that I had received as a gift from my mother years ago for some reason and had kept in storage unused.

The purpose of *An Etc. of Encounters* was to initiate a chain of gift-giving and receiving through paintings within the exhibition context mentioned earlier, allowing me to explore the relational aspects of the praxis. Additionally, I aimed to address, in a playful yet concrete way, painting’s ability to generate narratives, foster relationships, and embed values of the contemporary era.

- 1 I am working on a doctoral dissertation entitled *Around Affectedness of Painting. Experimenting Relational Processes*, at the Academy of Fine Arts, Uniarts Helsinki.
- 2 The next part of *An Etc of Encounters* will focus on the question: “What does it feel like to live with a painting?” As in the fi st edition, I will give some paintings to anyone wishing to participate in the project. After a year, I will ask the participants to describe their experience of living with the painting.

As part of the exhibition at the Cable Factory, I offered two paintings to whomever interested in participating in this experimental chain. In return for receiving a painting, I asked the participants to offer a gift of any kind to another person and to encourage subsequent recipients to continue this act of giving and receiving. I also requested that each participant send me an image or description of their gift-giving process, addressing questions such as what type of gift they intended to give, to whom, how, when, and why.

During the exhibition, I received two inquiries about participating in the project, the first one coming from anthropologist and researcher Francisco Martínez. Martínez rightly anticipated that Finns might be a bit hesitant to participate in this kind of an experimental project, and gave a friendly symbolic push during the opening evening to sculptor and researcher Hanna Vahvaselkä to also parttake. Vahvaselkä first refused, but was to be talked into the experiment in case there were no other participants showing up.

Whether it was due to Finns and other nationalities among the conference and exhibition guests being shy or perhaps confused about my experimental project<sup>3</sup>, but by the end of the exhibition, the only people expressing their willingness to participate were Vahvaselkä and Martínez.

As both wished to receive the same painting, I crafted a fortune wheel out of sticky notes and a pen, executed the allotment on my kitchen table, and sent the verdict to both participants in a form of a video message. Luck was on Martínez's side, and he got the painting he had hoped for. Since both persons lived outside of Helsinki, several weeks passed after the exhibition's closure before the actual gift-giving could take place. In July 2024, I planned a visit

3 Alongside the exhibited paintings there was description of the project and introductions how to participate in it.

to Tallinn—where I knew Martínez lived— accompanied by a friend visiting from Málaga, and arranged an appointment with Martínez. With the painting in an IKEA-bag, my friend and I took a ferry to Tallin, carried the painting a bit for sightseeing, and headed on to meet Martínez. The three of us had a lovely coffee and painting handing over moment in Tallin´s bustling Old Town that day. About a month later, I received an email from Martínez with the description of his gift-giving plan and an image of the gift he was about give to his friend, designer Victor Gurov.

Due to the summer holidays and other goings-on, Vahvaselkä and I didn´t see each other for some time. In Autumn we agreed that I would leave the painting with her name in the Researchers´ Wing at the Academy of Fine Arts - a place we both frequently visited, so she could pick it up when coming to Helsinki. Not long afterwards, Vahvaselkä informed me that she had retrieved the painting and sometime later I received an email from her describing<sup>4</sup> the gift-giving plan for a friend named Miissa.

## Gift-giving description by Hanna Vahvaselkä<sup>5</sup>:

### **Pieni ihana kirja**

*Kun asuttiin vielä Laajalammella enkä osannut edes lukea sain naapurin Minnalta kiertokirjeen. Kirjeessä oli järjestyksessä nimiä ja osoitteita ja monimutkainen ohje. Ohjeen mukaan minun piti lähettää pieni pehmeäkantinen, muutaman sivun mittainen minikirja listalla ensimmäisenä olevalle henkilölle. Tämän jälkeen minun tuli poistaa listasta ensimmäisenä oleva nimi, lisätä oma nimeni listaan viimeiseksi*

4 Vahvaselkä had written her gift-giving description in Finnish. To preserve its original nuances and celebrate linguistic diversity, I have decided not to translate it into English in this publication.

5 Vahvaselkä wrote her gift giving description in Finnish and I wished to maintain the original nuances of her text in this publication.

*ja kopioida se ohjeineen samansisältöisenä viiteen eri kirjeeseen. Nämä kirjeet minun tuli jakaa viidelle tuttavalleni. Jos toimisın näin alkaisi postiluukustamme pian tipahdella lukuisia pieniä ihania kirjoja.*

*Äidin avustuksella osallistuın leikkiin. Muistan saaneeni paluupostissa vain yhden kirjan.*

*Vuosia myöhemmin, kun olin jo muuttanut Helsingistä takaisin kotiseudulleni Etelä-Savoon, uusi ystäväni Susanna kutsui minut mukaan uuteen kiertokirjeeseen, jossa minikirjan sijaan lähetettiin ja saatiin pokkareita. Sain taas vastauksena vain yhden pokkarin, mutta tuo Eero Alénin Linkolan soutajan päiväkirja oli sitäkin vaikuttavampi. Erityisesti kirjasta mieleen jäi se, miten Vanajavedellä kalastaessaan Linkola ja soutaja joutuivat kalareissujen päätteeksi hautamaan maahan valtavia määriä verkkoihin jääneitä, roskakaloiksi luokiteltuja lahnoja.*

\*

*Kesällä 2024 lupasin osallistua Mirimari Väyrysen lahjaprojektiin. Sain Mirimarilta lahjaksi puisen teoksen, jonka seurauksena lupasin antaa lahjan jollekin, joka taas vuorostaan antaisi lahjan jollekin. Miettiessäni lahjan saamisen ja antamisen monimutkaista ketjua muistui mieleeni lapsuuteni kiertokirje ja saamani ihana kirja. Tuosta kirjasta taas tuli mieleeni sarjakuvataiteilija Miissa Rantasen teos Juhannussahti. Sen lisäksi, että Miissan teos on samankokoinen, joskin hieman pidempi kuin lapsuuteni kirja liittyy se myös lahjan tematiikkaan. Käsikirjoitusta teokseen tehdessään, pyysi Miissa minua lukemaan sen ja antamaan siitä kommentteja. Pyyntö oli minulle suuri luottamuksen osoitus ja eräänlainen lahja; se sai minut tuntemaan, että ajatuksillani on väliä. Viime vuosina Miissa on omalla työllään taidekasvattajana saanut varmasti monet muutkin tuntemaan itsensä näkyväksi, kuulluksi ja tärkeäksi.*

*Lähetän Miissalle lahjaksi pienen tyhjän kirjan.*

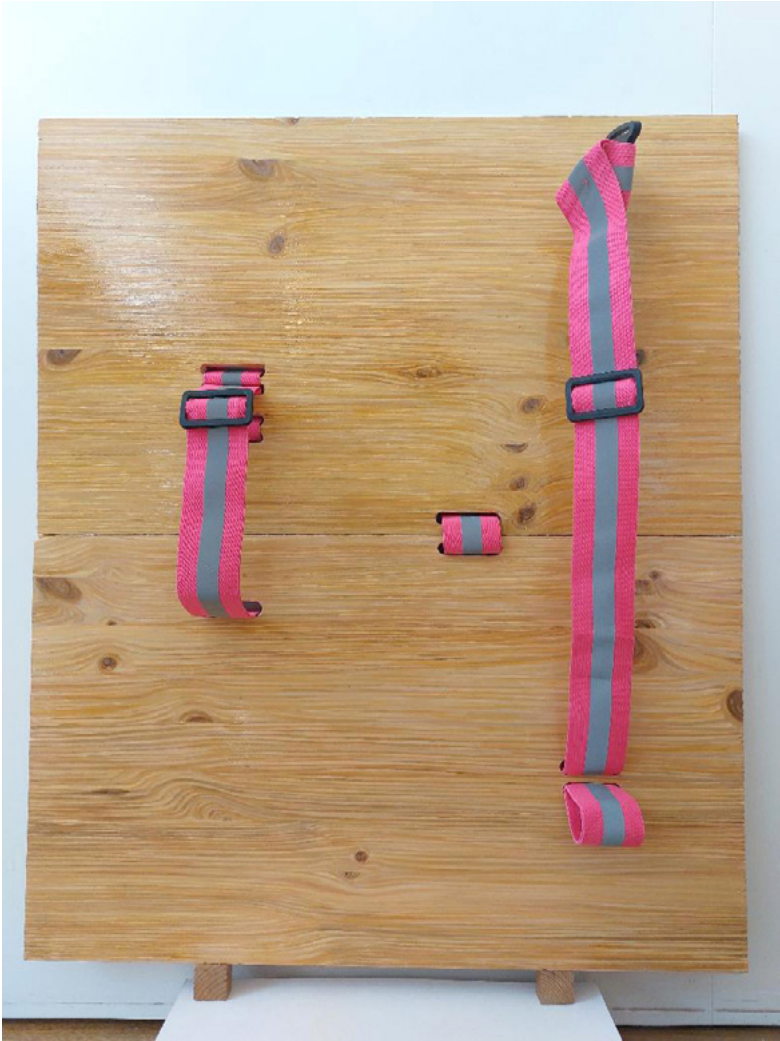


Figure 2. Väyrynen, M. (2024). *An Etc. of Encounters* [Oil on wooden board and safety string 60 x 50 cm]. @ Mirimari Väyrynen.

### Gift-giving description by Francisco Martínez:

*“I gave to Viktor Gurov one of the collages of the installation ‘Liquid shadows at the border’, which I created with photographer Riina Varol. In this work, we coloured a series of photos done in Kulgu by Enas Amerkhanov between 1972 and 1987. The result of this collaboration is eight Byzantine collages inspired by the liminal standing and bonding gestures among garage users in Narva.*

*In return, Viktor has promised to give me one of the collages he has recently created himself, once our Ex Libris exhibition is over. For this show, Viktor has selected over 120 covers from the library of the former School no. 1 of Sillamäe, digitalised them and created a series of adventurous collages inspired by the original aesthetics. The collages resemble new book covers, pending to be read.*

*So far, my collaborations with Viktor have been a present; not only because he is a gifted designer, but also because of his openness to conduct field research with me. Viktor works as a creative director in the National Library of Estonia and we had previously collaborated in two other projects *Life in Decline* (2021) and *Keeping Things in the Dark* (2023).“*

*To prepare these exhibitions, we undertook archival and field research in Eastern Estonia, entering into mining tunnels, abandoned buildings, energy plants, bunkers, military museums, and waste-recycling labs for oil shale ash. We also identified local stencils, attending concerts, buying sweets and interacting with locals of different generations.*

*I gave a present to Viktor as a form of gratitude for our ongoing collaboration. So, it was meant to happen because of his generosity, more than just answering to your call to create a chain of reciprocity. There is a third, unplanned reason for giving a present to Viktor: he suddenly decided to get married, so my collage acquired the aura of a wedding gift, unexpectedly.*

## Continuums and Encounters

When exploring the concept of gift through the experimental painting process of *An Etc. of Encounters*, I first turn to painting situated within relational aesthetics.

Coined first by Nicholas Bourriaud and formulated here by César Villanueva and Hans Lundberg, relational aesthetics refers to “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Lundberg & Villanueva, 2010, p. 1-3; Bourriaud, 2002, p. 5). Anthropologist Anne-Sophie Reichert further emphasises that a central criterion for relational art, according to Bourriaud, is that “the artwork allows enter into dialogue” (Reichert, 2016, p. 90; Bourriaud, 2002, p. 109).

Relational aesthetics is often discussed in relation to performance and community art. However, in this essay, I dress it on painting. Painting inherently contains structure of a chain of relations—namely, between the painter, the material object, and the viewer. In this chain, without the painter, there is no object to perceive or communicate through; without the object, there is no material for the viewer to interpret; and without the viewer, the object—and, over time, the entire practice of painting—lacks meaning. As much as painting is characterized by the practice of applying paint, pigment, colour or other medium to some sort of surface, it is simultaneously conceptual—a representation of abstract matters: feelings, experiences, events, relations etc. As such, it embeds real-world elements and phenomenon.

One of the most fascinating aspects of painting, for me, is its ability to create connection and indirect communication between people who have never met or who lived in different eras and locations—making it a kind of mediating object. The background for *An*

*Etc. of Encounters* is rooted in viewing my own paintings as “quotations of quotations” and “imaginations of imaginations”—works formed through chains of thoughts, experiences, and envisions of the world. Understanding my works as part of a time-transcending continuum gives me a sense of belonging to an ever-emerging and transgenerational, porous phenomenon called culture. It allows me to think I am working *with*; not only the present, but also with painters yet to come and those who have passed. This connection is one of my professional sources of happiness.

When exhibiting, I at times also feel like beginning a chain of communication or world viewing suggestions, which could be playfully thought of as a “message in the bottle” type of process. Two fascinating recent occurrences illustrate this idea perhaps more explicitly. In 2018, on a West Australian beach, a message in a bottle was discovered<sup>6</sup>—132 years after being tossed into the Indian Ocean from a German sailing barque as part of an oceanographic experiment to study global currents and find faster, more efficient shipping routes. Similarly, just last year in France, students of archaeology unearthed a message in a bottle<sup>7</sup> handwritten by a former archaeologist 200 years ago. The note inside was simple; marking the writer’s presence and his archaeological excavations at the same site in January 1825. In both cases, the role of the messages as mediators is recognisable with ease. In the context of this essay, they could be named as gifts from the past enabling us to connect with persons who inhabited and acted upon these lands before us. Like paintings, the found messages carry a “touch” of an individual and offer a

6 <https://museum.wa.gov.au/explore/videos/worlds-oldest-message-bottle-discovered-western-australia>

7 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/students-discover-french-archaeologists-200-year-old-message-in-a-bottle-just-in-time-on-an-eroding-coast-180985129/>

glimpse on viewing the world in a particular era, at one time offering us material to reflect and build further .

### Gift-giving as a research method

To further explore the concept of gift through *An Etc. of Encounters* and relational art aesthetics, I incorporate the affective quality of painting and the question of what paintings *do*. However, before doing so, I briefly explain my motives for giving a painting as a gift. Giving art for free is a complex issue<sup>8</sup>, not the least from the perspective of appreciation and the ability of artists to make a living. These questions are tied to cultural politics and should be discussed carefully and with the importance they deserve—especially in the times we live in. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of this rather short essay, I must leave that discussion for another occasion. My motivation for giving paintings without economic charge in this particular experimental case is research based. Through *An Etc. of Encounters*, I aim to create exemplifying situations where painting can be understood as an active and affective mediating object—*doing something*. Thus, *An Etc. of Encounters* seeks to demonstrate, in a playful yet concrete manner, the affectedness of painting.

Sociologist Glen Sjöstrand, in his article *The Symbolic Meaning of Gifts as Relational Art* echoes anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, stating that “giving and receiving is not necessarily straight forward reciprocal—nor the value of the gifts equals” (Sjöstrand, 2010, p. 58; Sahlins, 1972). According to Sjöstrand, there is no one-to-one correlation between the gift and the repayment when it comes to the value of the goods or services exchanged (Sjöstrand, 2010, p. 58; Sahlins,

8 See for example Glenn Sjöstrand’s text in the book *Rewriting Relational Aesthetics* on art project *Art Fika*, where coffee is offered free for some cafeteria customers.

1972). Furthermore, Sjöstrand observes that “gifts are most of all expressions of social relations, in such a way that they can never achieve the status of being measured in equal value” (Sjöstrand, 2010, p. 58; Sahlins, 1972).

### Gifts of collaboration and living-with

Moving from questions of gift’s value towards to what paintings *do*, I once again turn to Sjöstrand’s insights on the meaning of the gesture of giving—namely that gift-giving might foster creating reflexive thinking about the taken for granted reality (Sjöstrand, 2010, p. 68). Here, I believe, the concept of gift aligns uncomplicatedly with the meanings of art. Approaching reality from unconventional and distinct angles is, in my view, one of the elementary functions of painting. Art, thus painting, is a rebel—capable of inventing its own rules and logics outside the mainstream, or even reality, while also playing with and imagining other possibilities and values. In the specific context of giving art for free, Sjöstrand has argued following Stephen C. Wright that “it preconditions trust and solidarity between people” (Sjöstrand, 2010, p. 54; Wright, 2004). By gently disrupting the routines and rules of everyday life, I hope the participants in my experiment are able to see it as an invitation to play together and to celebrate our ontological foundation as creatures *living-with*.

When searching more words to describe what paintings *do*, I return for a moment to the previous chapter and my understanding of my own works as “quotations of quotations” and “imaginations of imaginations”. This idea aligns with what Anne-Sophie Reichert writes, building on Bourriaud, that “relational aesthetics frames art as a place and moment of interaction—an arena of exchange” (Reichert, 2016, p. 89; Bourriaud, 2002, p. 7). The ever-emerging flu of influences of the buzzing world could be considered as seeds—or

why not as gifts—that a painter receives. In turn, she/he/they passes forward *ideas* about the world in a form of a painting, joining at once to the world-building chain in which each contribution holds some sort of affectedness. In the context of relational aesthetics, art is, as curator and anthropologist Alex Ungprateeb Flynn writes, “an open-ended shared space in which viewers become active coparticipants and coproducers in the elaboration of meaning” (Ungprateeb Flynn, 2022, p. 2). Thus, intersubjectivity is positioned at the core of relational aesthetics.

Sjöstrand continues by noting that “within relation aesthetics, art invites individuals to participate not merely as consumers, but as co-creators of activities—fostering collaboration and mutual engagement” (Sjöstrand, 2010, p. 54). Additionally, Viviana Zelizer’s concept of circuits of commerce, introduced to me by Sjöstrand in his text, is also interesting in relation to my experiment. According to Zelizer, exchanges are inherently accompanied by conversation, interchange, intercourse, and mutual shaping, generating new understandings, practices, obligations, rights, symbols, and media of exchange (Sjöstrand, 2010, p. 57; Zelizer, 2000, 2006). I like to think that the given paintings indeed foster these kinds of activities and maybe even fairly profound reflections regarding our ontological relationality or life’s key events. Sjöstrand further observes that “within social ties, practices such as gift-giving and exchanges are often motivated by emotions like love, care, pride, status, or power, more than purely by utility maximization” (Sjöstrand, 2010, p. 57). I believe that curiosity and willingness to support my research are also among the motivation list of the participants in *An Etc. of Encounters*.

## Conclusion

Rather than exploring painting in this essay as an individual expression and produced in vacuum, I have approached it as a mediating

object formulated in social processes. My aim has been to encompass the role of intersubjectivity and the co-production of meanings in painting processes.

By affilting *An Etc. of Encounters* with the legacy of relational aesthetics, I have been able to shift my role from “an artist that makes things to being to an artist that makes things happen” just as Professor emeritus and musician Tony Valberg writes quoting artist Deller in his article *Being-with: Access to Relation, Participation, and Togetherness in Contemporary Art* (Valberg, 2017, p. 3; Deller quoted in Thompson, 2012, p. 17). This conceptual change has allowed me to replace questions of representations and materials or of colour and form with the question, “What do paintings do?”

Within the chain of gift-giving in *An Etc. of Encounters*, painting has been assigned the role of a mediating object, embedding relationships and fostering action. With an “excuse” of the received paintings and the accompanying task of gift-giving, the participants have travelled, had coffee, recalled feelings of acceptance, celebrated a wedding, revisited the pages of a book and thought of a friend and fish—layering the meanings of their paintings. Assuredly, there have been multisided senses, actions and feelings involved in the chain of gift-giving within *An Etc. of Encounters*. As cultural anthropologist Anne-Sophie Reicher writes<sup>9</sup> “in this sense, (experiment’s) uniting forces are affective and material, felt and sensed” (Reichert, 2016, p. 88).

For me, *An Etc. of Encounters* has offered an opportunity to explore, in a playful yet concrete manner, how painting may resonate within human social contexts. Through the experiment, I have attempted to expose the painting’s role as an active participant in

9 Reichter refers to performance art, but as I found her words helpful, I aligned them with my experimental painting process of *An Etc. of Encounters*.

human experience—it's essence as an object, and in this particular case, a gift—capable of carrying stories, embodying values, and fostering relationships.

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**Credits:**

Gift-giving description 1 credit: Hanna Vahvaselkä

Gift-giving description 2 credit: Francisco Martínez



# Shining a Light on the *Gâteau Vivant* – Structural Colour, Art, Perception, Capital and the Flavobacteria Presented as a Gift

LAURA BELOFF & KATRI NAUKKARINEN

## Introduction

This paper revolves around the *Gâteau Vivant* artwork, offering a wide perspective into its workings that allow for a complex set of relations to surface; into the histories and circumstances surrounding this work and its material basis.

The artwork is created in the form of a cake, presented as a series of cakes, covered with cloches. The cake is made of an agar growth medium coloured black with nigrosin dye and introduced with *Flavobacterium Iridescent 1* (IR1) strand that under the created conditions has a lifespan of several days. During that time, a living structural colour produced by bacterial colonies can be witnessed.

The aesthetic choices made by the authors, presenting organic matter shaped in a cake form and encased with glass domes, familiar from cake shops, are visual references to a culture with a long

history of celebrations and gift-giving. However, beyond the beautiful surface qualities, these wobbly jelly cakes with the smell of life and rot reveal an unsettling reality, pointing our attention towards the commercialisation and instrumentalisation of life. The *Gâteau Vivant* artwork functions as a central focus for the authors' exploration of non-human organisms' lifecycles and their recently developed relation to human society and also to its economic demands. The *Gâteau Vivant* presents the obvious; we, humans, have isolated the bacteria from its original habitat and are experimenting with it for our own benefit – often with legitimation from science, technology, as well as the art sector.

Recent decades have made it clear that human society is facing various challenges we need to address in the near future, and already today. Several of those challenges concern the natural environment and its use as a resource. In this paper, the concept of gift and its theories are used as a kind of a filter, through which the examination of the bacterial cake reveals a wider societal viewpoint.

The emerging questions that the artwork brings to light are, for example: What kinds of social relationships do we have with non-humans today? Are there possibilities to evolve towards reciprocal and gift-based models with non-humans? What is the role of art in all this? These questions among others are explored through looking at the *Gâteau Vivant* in the light of different concepts such as *gift*, *umwelt*, and *genomic capital*.

## Modelling the Gift

Gift-giving has been widely researched and theorised in several disciplines, such as philosophy, anthropology, social sciences and humanities. Many researchers claim that gift-giving has a history of thousands of years in our human culture. For example, scholar Ariane Burke's research has asked why *Homo neanderthalensis* disappeared

and modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, survived. She suggests that one of the reasons was the creation of symbolic objects that were used as a type of a gift by *Homo sapiens*, which allowed forming social relations and maintaining them even across long distances. These relationships were enforced by the cultural and symbolic objects, such as adornments, personal ornaments and weapon decorations, among others. Such objects have been found abundantly from the period of the expansion of the *Homo sapiens* (Burke, 2012).

Burke suggests that these gift objects established social contracts, creating an obligation for reciprocity and fostering expansive social networks to ensure survival and improve coping mechanisms (Burke, 2012). When investigated from this perspective, gifts clearly serve as tangible symbols of social relationships. Moreover, there exists a consensus among scholars that gift-giving inherently places a reciprocal obligation on the recipients.

Reciprocity is at the core of Marcel Mauss's seminal essay *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, which was originally written in 1925 in French, with the first English translation published in 1954. Mauss studied specifically gift-giving and gift-receiving in archaic cultures. One of Mauss's claims is that the recipient receives, in addition to the material gift, something of the donor's spirit, which will want to return to its origin (Mauss, 1990). This pull for the spirit's return points to the characteristic of reciprocity in gift-giving, but it also complicates the situation in case the gift, or the debt, is 'paid back' to another person instead of the donor. However, without this binding for reciprocity the gift would not be able to institute above mentioned social relations (Fritsch, 2015).

Another type of motivation for gift-giving is an example given by Olli Pyyhtinen in his book *Gift and its Paradoxes*. The fairytale figure, Snow White, receives an apple as a gift from her stepmother (Pyyhtinen, 2014). Many of us are familiar with this fairytale and



Figure 2. Beloff, L. & Naukkarinen, K. (2024). *Gâteau Vivant*. © Katri Naukkarinen.

know that this is a poisoned apple. Indeed, in many Germanic languages since Old High German, ‘poison’ has been addressed with the word ‘gift’, which in English has historically been used with more positive connotations. From the authors’ point of view, the example of the Snow White fairytale is comparable to the *Gâteau Vivant* artwork. Something that in the first instance seems a delightful and pleasant gift turns out to be something completely different – something dangerous. The unexpected side of the *Gâteau Vivant* cakes is not necessarily chemical or physical, rather, their deception lies in their appearance, as they are “cakes” only in their visual form. A closer look from a different perspective uncovers how these cakes reflect our societal conditions and economic expectations. It is interesting to think about these examples as types of social relations, which might turn out to be dangerous.

Pyyhtinen has partly similar ideas as Ariel Burke on the rise of *Homo sapiens* over *Homo neanderthalensis*, highlighting the role of



Figure 3. Beloff & Naukkarinen (2024). *Gâteau Vivant*. © Katri Naukkarinen.

gift-giving in forming relationships. However, Pyyhtinen frames this within a *feminine economy*. He writes (in reference to Helen Cixous 1986) that “in a feminine economy the fruit of the gift is the relation established – the bonding value. The relations weaved by the giving are more important than the possible direct profit drawn from it” (Pyyhtinen, 2014).

When you give a gift, there is often an expectation of receiving something in return, a notion that seems to persist in today’s capitalist society as an unspoken rule. But Pyyhtinen points to a different perspective that “the gift is something given without guarantee of repayment and typically in order to establish, nourish and stabilise social ties” (Pyyhtinen, 2014).

If we look beyond human social relations and their formation, and examine the connections between humans and non-humans, it becomes apparent that a different set of rules applies. Throughout history, humans have developed agriculture and domestication

practices, and more recently, advanced biotechnology through scientific methods. Clearly visible in many of these practices is the tendency to take without necessarily giving back. In earlier times, such behaviour might have been connected to survival, but in today's Western world this tendency is a matter of values and individual profit

Part of the interest in the *Gâteau Vivant* artwork stems from the exploration of the functions and limitations of our human vision, particularly in perceiving colour. Jakob von Uexküll has introduced a concept of *umwelt* that investigates specifically the relation between organism's perception and survival. In 1934 Uexküll defined the concept of *umwelt* based on his experiments with more-than-human species (Uexküll, 1992). The *umwelt*-concept has increased its popularity in the last decades with the emergence of the field of biosemiotics<sup>1</sup> in the 1990's, and through the concept's prolific use by humanities and art scholars.

Uexküll defined the *umwelt* as a species-specific realm of life, where each species' *umwelt* includes aspects of their own specific world. In other words, they only see what is necessary for them to see, mainly, for the species' survival. For instance, Uexküll's empirical experiments indicate that the Siamese fighting fish (*Betta splendens*) does not recognise its own image when presented at a rate of 18 frames per second. However, it does identify the image as that of a fighting fish when displayed at a rate of at least 30 frames per second (Uexküll, 1992). From this experiment it is concluded that the fish sees everything in slow motion, in comparison to human perception (Uexküll, 1992). As fighting fish are feeding on fast moving prey, their perception is adapted to this fact for being able to catch

1 In short, biosemiotics is investigating the meaning making in living organisms and how they understand signs.

food. One can see in this example how Uexküll's concept of *umwelt* is tightly connected to biological conditions of living and surviving; it emphasises the inclusion of things based on each individual species' biological faculties, which determine what they can perceive and what remains beyond their sensory capabilities. The aspect of seeing or not-seeing also appears to be connected to social bonding, primarily occurring within each species rather than, or to a lesser extent, between species.

Like argued above, living organisms sense and interpret diverse signals from their environment. One of the ways is, for example, perceiving colour that is the focus of the following section.

### Living Colour: Flavobacterium IR1

The *Gâteau Vivant* is a visual artwork that plays with human perception, questions scientific ways of seeing, ponders over the relationship between gift-giving and bonding with more-than-human species, and highlights the deceptive nature of surface appearances. This section will introduce a few facts about our perceptual abilities in relation to the artwork.

Nature presents two primary mechanisms through which we experience colour: pigmentation and structural colouration. Pigments operate by absorbing specific wavelengths of light and reflecting others. The reflected portion of the light spectrum define the colour we perceive. For instance, a green pigment absorbs all other visible wavelengths but reflects the one that corresponds with what we visually interpret as green. Pigment-based colour is relatively stable and largely independent of the viewer's position. In contrast, colour produced by structure can be said to be unstable, as it relies on local interactions where light refracts and reflects in highly specific ways. These microscopic structures do not absorb and reflect light in a uniform manner like pigmentation, but instead

manipulate light waves through interference, diffraction, or scattering. This causes the reflected colour to change dynamically based on the angle of the light source and the observer's position.

When *Flavobacterium IR1* colonies grow, they align themselves in parallel, with regular spacing between individual cells. This alignment forms a highly organised nanostructure: a 2D photonic crystal (2DPC). As light hits this crystal structure, it interacts with the regular spacing, causing constructive and destructive interference of light waves. This in turn results in the reflection of specific wavelengths of light, only visible from certain angles.

Although colouration is a shared experience to some extent, there are personal variations in how our brains translate wavelength signals to the perception of colour. With structural colour, it is especially interesting how the influence of the viewer's position brings another layer to subjectivity of seeing in general.

Being able to observe colour in the *Gâteau Vivant* equals witnessing the interaction of light with living nanoscale structures, otherwise invisible to the human eye. As the bacterial colonies emerge, grow old and expire in the displayed cakes, so do the colour-producing structures. At the same time, we are reminded about microbial life being more than an invisible layer of our biological reality or shapeless goo. Instead, they are shown as communities capable of constructing sophisticated organizations in favourable circumstances. In many species, structural colouration is tied to camouflage, mating displays, and other intra- and interspecies signalling. The iridescence observed in *Flavobacterium IR1* plays a role in interactions that extend beyond what humans might consider its characteristic aesthetics. It has been recently suggested that the biological function of *Flavobacterium*'s structural colouration is linked to its predatory qualities: Forming the 2DPC means the colony approaches maximum packing density, which is seen as

a prerequisite for efficient predation of other bacteria (Hamidjaja et al., 2020).

Bringing about the life cycle of this living colour to an exhibition presents a way for the authors to consider both bacterial and human *umwelts*. Our limited human *umwelt* may lead us to view bacterial genomes primarily as resources, but this *umwelt* may evolve and recalibrate through the destabilising force of new relations. The authors present the colour formation by *Flavobacterium* colonies as a gift to the viewers, and invite them to consider their understanding of colour perception as well as the wider ethical implications of harnessing bacterial life for the sake of art. The structural beauty in the *Gâteau Vivant* thus creates bridges between bacterial and human worlds, emphasising complexities beyond human perception.

## From Nature through Biotech towards Art

The *Flavobacterium* IR1 bacteria used in the *Gâteau Vivant* are noted to have one of the most intense forms of microbial colouration. They originate from sediment and the brown algae *Fucus Vesiculosus*, collected from brackish waters near Rotterdam Harbour, in the Netherlands. The authors acquired the *Flavobacterium* through a connection with a biotechnology company. The company has a commercial interest in the organism, while the authors were driven by an attraction towards the interesting aesthetics and the possibility to use them in an art context. Both the company and the authors are faced with the same question: How to balance scientific or creative endeavours with ecological responsibility.





One can see that the *Gâteau Vivant* cake presents a viewpoint into the workings of a biotech industry that has retrieved the bacteria from its original habitat and given it a new home in the laboratory. Typically, biotechnological approaches focus on the bacteria and its unique properties with an aim of creating a commercial product modelled after it or its characteristics, often involving the cultivation, as well as use of the bacteria itself. As an example, the structural colour of these bacteria could lead to the creation of a new type of biological paint, produced without toxic chemicals. This aspect opens two sides of the product development – on the one hand, it raises ethical questions regarding the use of a living organism for commercial purposes, and on the other, it aims to promote non-toxic and sustainable practices within the chemical industry, as the colour is formed by structure and light instead of chemistry.

The term *genomic capital* is used by scholars Erica Borg and Amedeo Policante who define it as “branches of industry that employ genetic matter as raw material and genomic biotechnologies as means of production”. They write the following: “It is no longer possible to think of the molecular realm of the genome as being isolated from socio-economic tendencies, technological interventions and political struggles.” Borg and Policante point out that “the contemporary bioindustrial revolution is built on manufacturing lives: life-forms engineered to produce a growing variety of valuable commodities” (Borg & Policante, 2022, p.15). This indicates that our interactions with these organisms are closely connected to larger societal contexts.

In the case of the *Gâteau Vivant* and *Flavobacterium IR*, the authors also received a gene-edited strain from the biotech company, engineered so that the bacteria could no longer produce structural colour. This strain was used as a control for comparison. This successfully edited colourless strain indicates that gene-editing could potentially enable the production of a wider range of

colour-producing organisational structures in the bacterial colonies, which in turn would make the *Flavobacterium IR* even more prone to commercialisation.

One aspect in the harnessing of more-than-humans for human development and benefit cannot be disregarded – it seems that from an economic perspective, nature is considered free.<sup>2</sup> No price tag means no exchange value – and humans have been and are willing to take from nature without introducing reciprocal payment back towards it. This aspect is pointed out in an interview of scholar Alyssa Battistoni, who regards that this attitude has led us to today's environmental crisis (Kari Martin, 2021).

In ancient times, symbolic objects and gifts were rooted in social cohesion, spirituality, and reciprocity within communities. However, in the current capitalist context, these symbolic acts have been repurposed or reinterpreted in economic terms, often focusing on ownership, profit and human gain. For example, the ongoing manipulation of more-than-human organisms for human benefit raises questions about our responsibilities towards them, the 'others'. The concept of *genomic capital*, as defined by Borg and Policante in the context of biotechnology, adds further complexity to this relationship that crosses disciplines and perspectives. Therefore the authors propose art as a provider of an alternative space to critically question the current order and values of our world, and to consider alternative visions and models.

## On Interspecies Relations

In a capitalist society influenced by *genomic capital*, the relationships between humans and more-than-human organisms can be seen to be largely driven by exploitation, extraction, and commercialization.

2 Here the term 'nature' refers to the natural environment and natural resources.

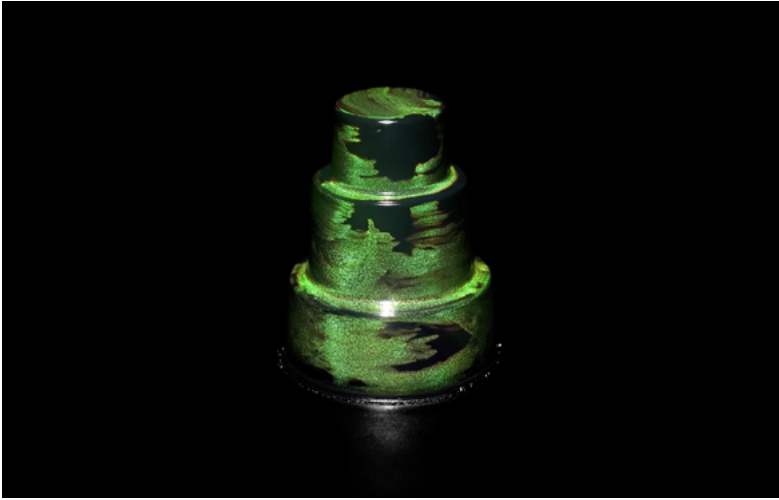


Figure 5. Beloff, L. & Naukkarinen, K. (2024). *Gâteau Vivant*. © Katri Naukkarinen.

The presented artwork, the *Gâteau Vivant*, offers a space for critical reflection on the implications of commodifying life. The Flavobacteria IR1 in the *Gâteau Vivant* are unknowingly part of a system that extracts their properties for human benefit, raising questions about the consequences of one-sided relationships.

The artwork was realised with a critical perspective by using the gift-theories as a filter. While on the surface the work is to be appreciated as an aesthetical representation of happy celebrations and gift culture, the constructed bacterial cakes reveal the implications of isolating organisms, such as bacteria, for economic or other purposes. The artwork intends to create tension between seeing nature as a resource for human gain and the potential for reciprocal relationships between humans and more-than-humans.

But what kinds of mutual reciprocity and social bonding exist between different species? It appears that the existing theories on gift and gift-giving focus almost solely on investigating human-to-human

social behaviour and the complexity of relations. When looking into research on more-than-human species, it has been evidenced by scientists that, for example, mice have empathic behaviours towards the members of their own species (Ueno et al., 2018). Another scientific study has shown that rats share their foods with hungry rats within their species (Schneeberger et al., 2020). Yet another study claims that many more-than-human species employ reciprocity and cooperative behaviour with the members of their species (Taborsky et al., 2016).

It already seems clear from these research examples that reciprocity in behaviour is not exclusively a human trait. In more-than-humans the reciprocity has been also detected in mutual assistance between species, called mutualism. Mutualism is defined by London's Natural History Museum<sup>3</sup> as a type of symbiotic relationship where all species involved benefit from their interactions (Osterloff, n.d.) An example of this could be a bird picking and eating parasites from a mammal's fur: one gets food and the other gets rid of unwanted parasites. A counter relation to mutualism would be parasitism, in which one species benefits and the other is harmed, and in commensalism one species benefits but the other is not harmed or helped (Osterloff, n.d.).

These examples between more-than-human species seem to be commonly in direct relation to a concrete and often immediate benefit concerning survival and staying healthy. Also, it is easy to perceive food being brought to the family-pack in the animal kingdom as a type of gift-giving. However, in human society and culture, gift-giving often functions with longer timescales that include memory, and it is not necessarily directly linked to concrete actions related to survival. All types of gifts in human culture should be

3 <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/mutualism-examples-of-species-that-work-together.html>

considered symbolic objects that form a bond over time and space, like proposed by Burke in relation to human evolution (Burke, 2012).

## Wrapping up the Gift

The *Gâteau Vivant* artwork functions as a representation of a network involving multiple actors, including bacteria, artists, scientists, viewers, the art context, the biotechnology industry, and the very concept of the cake itself. All these actors together shape the meaning and impact of the artwork.

The bacteria in the *Gâteau Vivant* are not just passive elements; they are active contributors with their own bacterial *umwelt*, playing a role in shaping the artwork's meaning. These tiny participants introduce an element of unpredictability to the artwork's stability, as we can control them only to a certain degree – let alone the unknown bacteria that encounter the growth medium and exploit it.

Moreover, the concept of the “gift” dictated the form of this artwork, inviting viewers to reflect on the meaning of gift and the current balance of reciprocity between humans and more-than-human entities. By specifically framing the bacteria's contribution as a “gift,” the artwork encourages a deeper awareness of our interdependence and challenges the anthropocentric tendencies that dominate these interactions.

With its wobbly cakes, sweating glass domes, iridescent greenish growing bacteria, and the intense smell of rotting, *Gâteau Vivant* highlights the agency of living organisms, questioning the clear aim and logic of control that are typical features of our capitalistic world.

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# Souvenir of the 'Me'

CYNTHIA BLANCHETTE

*At the same time the shadow of the divine person, laden with love, disappears—not exactly as vain appearance, but as dependence on a denied world that is founded on the reciprocal dependence of its parts.*

(Bataille, 1985, p. 132)

## Introduction:

This paper introduces the theoretical notions which propelled the *parasitic souvenirs* research and the artwork *Shitload*. The artistic research explores the concept of microbes as both souvenirs received and gifted, in exchanges of experience imbued with meaning and consequence, while the artwork itself offers the audience the prospect of internalizing faecal matter loaded with microbiota. The investigation of both, biological disgust protecting us from parasites and moral disgust protecting our values, play a key role in the artistic research. Although disgust is an ongoing target of investigation, this paper endeavours to develop the concept of *parasitic souvenirs* through the lens of gift and sacrifice. The sacred souvenir is paralleled with parasitic contamination to develop the concept of *parasitic souvenirs* to explore invasions of other dimensions of existence through the artwork *Shitload*.

The term 'souvenir parasites' has been coined to describe microbes collected from our external environment, while 'heirloom parasites' are understood as microbes which have evolved with humans (Mitchell, 2013, p. 191). It is my position that evolution has created information highways from our external environment into our internal environment for souvenir parasites to travel and that these microbes have mind-altering potency (Cryan & Dinan, 2012, p. 701). Using this position for the concept of the *parasitic souvenir* and the rich microbial makeup of tabooed faecal matter, I pursue to better understand the potentials of this mind-altering potency.

On a physical level, bidirectional communication is made possible between the gut (enteric nervous system) and the brain (central nervous system) by the gut-brain axis (Appleton, 2018, p. 28). Numerous studies have shown that intestinal microbiota is able to independently impact brain chemistry and behaviour through the gut-brain axis (Appleton, 2018, p. 29; Bercik et al., 2011, pp. 599-609). Here, it is worth mentioning that the microbiota can positively affect mental state (cognition), emotional regulation (mood), and mental health (Appleton, 2018, p. 28). Whereas imbalance in gut microbiota referred to as gut dysbiosis has been found to play a role in clinical depression, autism spectrum disorders, and other systemic conditions (Appleton, 2018, p. 30).

A microbe is a microorganism, and microbiota are the microorganisms of a certain environment, whereas the microbiome refers to the genomes of the microorganisms within a certain environment (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Things become less contained when considering that the human gastrointestinal tract is inhabited by 10 times more microbes than there are human cells in the entire human body (Cryan & Dinan, 2012, p. 702). Approximately 70 per cent of these microbes are unknown species, without classification or information on their operating mechanisms (Liu et al., 2021, p. 2).

The solid component of faecal matter alone is estimated to be 25–54 per cent microbial cells, making it positively loaded with hundreds to thousands of distinct microbe species (Bojanova & Bordenstein, 2016, p. 2). In short, we know that our gut microbes are crucial to our mental state, but we do not know much about what those microbes are doing, or for what purpose we have evolved to communicate with them, through them, or for them.

Now, let us move into the dirty stuff. In medical terminology, microbial load refers to the quantity of contaminant in an object or organism, and the dose refers to the quantity of medicine needed to neutralise the said contaminant. While faecal matter is feared for its potent microbial load, which has led to modern hygiene and sterilisation practices, it also carries with it the therapeutic potential of a treatment, seen in practices where it is used to treat depleted or unhealthy gut-microbiomes through a process termed faecal microbiota transplant (FMT). In this treatment, faecal matter from a healthy donor is transplanted into the gastrointestinal system of patients with gastrointestinal disorders, either orally or anally (D & Venkatesh, 2023, p. 1). FMTs are used to introduce microbiota into the gastrointestinal tract in cases of microbiome depletion, or imbalance, such as the treatment of *c. difficile* infections, and when donors are properly screened and tested, FMTs are generally considered a safe medical treatment (Merrick et al., 2020, p. 1). More recently, FMTs have shown to be a promising treatment for other systemic disorders (Merrick et al., 2020, p. 1). However, various regulations have made access to such procedures limited, leading to medically unsupervised do-it-yourself FMTs (Merrick et al., 2020, p. 5; Ekekezie et al., 2020, pp. 603–607). I imagine that as far as transplants go, FMTs are somewhat non-invasive because they use the natural orifices of the body, yet they are more psychologically invasive due to an emotional disgust response to faeces. This disgust response has likely impacted both governmental

policy making and medical swiftness in making the treatment readily available to those who would benefit from it.

### The Souvenir:

In the past, Catholics took pilgrimages to holy sites, and on these pilgrimages, relics were both witnessed and collected, the most sacred of which were raw materials of saints and holy sites (Swanson & Timothy, 2012, pp. 489–490). These relics present a fascinating case in which the artifact, for instance the remains of human carcasses, often cause tension between disgust and holy awe. These relics were said to have curative properties, and later protective souvenirs were marketed, replacing relics, to preserve the holy sites and detour pilfering (Swanson & Timothy, 2012, pp. 489–490). The meaning of souvenir originates in the Latin word *subvenire*, meaning ‘to come to mind’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Today, souvenirs are collected as mementos, and gift-souvenirs are given as tokens of appreciation to friends and family upon return from travel. Considering the current research on the gut-brain axis, it does indeed seem plausible that souvenir parasites, and the gut-microbiota as such, ‘come to mind’. And I have no doubt that those who embark on journeys collect new gut microbiota and indeed gift these new microbes through interactions with their friends and family upon return.

Although the *parasitic souvenir* is a new concept, the idea can be claimed to be active since the first human trail was tread upon. Let us imagine this through the plight of the pilgrim. The pilgrimage trail was put to use by those in search of healing and redemption, and those simply wishing to see a relic, such as Jesus’ used swaddling cloth (pamper). Yet, earthly needs must be satisfied along the way, and so it happened that faecal matter built up along the trails to the holy places of the world. As travellers ate meals, licked fingers, and defecated, I imagine the trails became positively loaded

with faecal microbiota. Endlessly, with each defecation a parasitic load is left behind to be carried forward as a parasitic souvenir by the next pair of feet. I am not suggesting that people were being overtly unhygienic, but rather that it is simply unlikely that faecal microbiota from one pilgrim did not make it to others in microscopic amounts on route, due to the inability to wash in a timely manner. To this day, fields along highly trodden pilgrimage routes are being used as open-air lavatories, leaving reports of local communities praying that pilgrims do not defecate on their holy journey (Badcock, 2015). One could consider these pilgrimage trails as microbiome information highways; microbial exchanges are made by gifting faecal deposits along the path, while also collecting souvenir parasites of others from faecal matter which is then carried forward in the gastrointestinal system, only to later be re-deposited further down the trail with a novel microbiome. It is this exchange of microbes that happens all around us as we move through life that I consider the gift of the *parasitic souvenir* to the gut-brain axis.

### The Sacrifice:

Naturally, in the history one can always find cases of people who could be seen as having taken things too far. Here, we can look at Saint Margaret Mary Alocque who was coaxed by Christ himself to consume vomit and faeces of her sick patient (Laporte, 2000, p. 67; Monastery, 1927, pp. 80–81). The interpretation of Saint Margaret Mary Alocque's diary states that these acts were done as reparation to Christ for feeling disgust at the patient's bodily waste; in this action of penance she took up with her tongue and swallowed what a sick charge vomited up (Monastery, 1927, p. 80). Of the event Saint Mary wrote "*I experienced such great delight in this action,*" she continues, "*that I would have wished to meet with such opportunities every day, in order to learn how to conquer myself, and have God alone as witness;*"

(Monastery, 1927, p. 80). Saint Mary had insulted the gift of God's creation with her disgust, and through these sacrificial actions she was able to maintain her intimate connection with her Lord.

Christ is said to have made the ultimate sacrifice at the cross for man's sins. In Catholicism the sacrament, Eucharist, is the communion with the holy spirit. Through the process of transubstantiation, the body and blood of Christ are consecrated to bread and wine (Eucharist); Christ is received through spiritual nourishment at Communion. As a small child growing up with a strongly Roman Catholic extended family, I remember sitting in church watching Holy Communion, as everyone lined up to take a sip from the goblet and opened their mouths wide to receive the wafer of Christ. At the time, I did not understand what was happening and had the urge to partake in this act of community, but I was told I was not to because I had not been baptised. I recall wondering what the wafer tasted like, and in retrospect, I imagine I thought it was candy and this was why everyone was lining up for the tasting.

In the 9th century, the discussion over the Eucharist began with the theologian Paschasius of Corbie, who strongly believed that the real corporeal body of Christ was in the Eucharist (Vaillancourt, 2015, p. 188). Paschasius of Corbie stated that, "It is not right that Christ should be torn by the teeth" (Vaillancourt, 2015, p. 188; Paschasius, 831, p. 27), that Christ had already suffered enough in his sacrifice, and that he should not have to be further tormented through mastication. And this was to bring about the debate over whether the body of Christ should be chewed, or dissolve in the mouth, when receiving the Eucharist bread.

The Eucharist, not surprisingly, has been fraught with controversy and heated debate. One such issue of contentment does not lie where one might imagine, it lies with the Stercorists. The Stercorists believe that the Eucharist goes through the natural

digestion process, inevitably departing the bodies of disciples as 'holy shit' (Laporte, 2000, p.110). These faeces are considered purifying because they are pure and wholesome and in so have the ability to purify (Laporte, 2000, pp. 110 & 111). Then again other Stercorists debated the realism or symbolism of the body of Christ in the Eucharist, arguing it could not be the actual body of Christ as this would then be subject to the natural law of digestion, sending Christ into the sewers (Vaillancourt, 2015, p.191). It was further rebuked that the change of the bread into the body of Christ was real, and that Christ's body only fed the soul and was in no way subject to natural digestion (Vaillancourt, 2015, p.191). This debate dating back to the 9th century still resurfaces from time to time.

Within the context of consuming human waste, there are many ways of viewing sacrifice. First, I identify moral sacrifice, as a morality of cleanliness is lost in the consumption of human waste in receiving the gift of microbiota. Furthermore, there is a sacrifice made to one's self-identity through knowingly receiving faecal microbiota in FMTs or *parasitic souvenirs* that may alter one's personality. But more to the point, I understand the sacrifice in *parasitic souvenirs* as relinquishing of René Descartes's cartesian self, since to understand the importance of the microbiome is to accept that the mind is not separate from the body or the external environment. As one receives the gift of parasitic souvenirs, faecal microbiota move from the environment into the human gut, subsequently having the potential to affect the mind. 'Microbes think, therefore I am', does not have the same independent ring as Descartes's primary principle of contained existence, 'I think, therefore I am' (Descartes, 1596–1650). Here a gift of microbial diversity is gained by sacrificing what could be considered the Western individual's most prized attributes, the belief in one's own unique individualism. In other words, to knowingly consume a *parasitic souvenir* loaded with microbiota, is to

relinquish self-containment, to sacrifice one's current state of being. Or on the other hand, to give a *parasitic souvenir* is to share a piece of oneself and potentially lose some ability to claim uniqueness.

### The Offering:

Here, my artistic curiosity rests upon a pile of shit, contemplating the potentials of the microbiota that are said to affect the human mood, personality, and ego. Who is 'me'? What versions of 'me' are possible? Could there be an emerging market for recreational *parasitic souvenirs* for those seeking altered states of mind?

Akin to an 8 ball of street grade drug, one cannot know with certainty what one is receiving from the waste material of others. This is a gift that induces curiosity and fear: there have been cases of fatal parasites being transmitted and there have been lives saved. So, what might the infiltration potency of faecal matter from an unknown source be? I believe FMTs have the potential to become the next black-market trend in human fluids, comparable to the current market in human breast milk (Bhatia et al., 2022, p. 165). Uncontrolled black-market FMTs present unknown potentials, one could gain a positive disposition or a negative one, heal a disease or gain a disease, and indeed issues yet to be understood.

There may even be potential for the recreational use of human faecal matter, akin to other illicit drugs, possibly even the *parasitic souvenir*. We can consider this through holotropic breathwork, a natural alternative to illegal use of LSD. Holotropic breathwork is a form of rapid, deep breathing which was developed to promote altered states of consciousness through what was coined 'an invasion of other dimensions of existence' by its developers Christina and Stanislav Grof (1988, p. 344; Rock et al., 2015, pp. 3–4). Similarly, recreational use of faecal matter could be promoted as a natural method of experiencing microbial invasions of other dimensions of existence, due to the



Figure 2. Blanchette, C. (2024). *Faecal Suppositories* [sculpture]. © Cynthia Blanchette.

link between gut microbiota and mental states. I am suggesting that this is a psychological and corporeal trip for those adventurers who have always sought out the more controversial recreational materials, those always looking for new and unknown experiences.

My artwork *Shitload* was exhibited at the exhibition GIFTS/PRESENTS/PRESENCE: Meanings and Materialities (2024). The artwork presented as a mobile delivery system of FMTs. The bottom shelf consisted of a cooling system, while the upper four shelves presented an assortment of faecal suppositories, pessaries, nasal and auditory bougies, eye washes, and ointments. Each of the shelves loaded with faecal transplants bowed down under the weight of the load, creating a tension in exhibition attendees who worried that the shelves might collapse.

The aim of the suppositories was to present a variety of faecal donor and dose transplant options available in four distinct suppository sizes. Essentially, a display of products attempting to seduce the exhibition guests into the thought experiment. What does it feel like to have a different microbiota? Can we experience different places in the world through the microbiota of that place?

The suppositories were developed from gelatine capsules made by hand from handmade moulds. However, the creation of hollow gelatine capsules that had the capacity to hold both fluid and solid mass never became a competent process, gaining only a 50 per cent success rate. Yet, through this valuable process of riding the fine line of failure each suppository developed its own unique characteristics.



Figure 3. Blanchette, C. (2024). *Faecal Eyewash* [sculpture]. © Cynthia Blanchette.

The eye washes of unique hand-blown glass and moulded silicone eyecup present the viewer with luminous brown fluid and leave the impression of receiving faecal matter in the eye. The eye has been conceived as one of the cleanest parts of the body, and therefore the impression of contaminating the eye is rather repulsing. This can be further understood through imagining the different degrees of disgust experienced from a contact with a teardrop vs that of faecal matter.

At the exhibit GIFTS/PRESENTS/PRESENCE: Meanings and Materialities, the offering of FMTs coaxed out interesting behaviour in the guests. There was interest on many occasions in handling the faecal suppositories, it took the form of rather hesitant approaches and in some cases led to aggressive jabbing and squeezing of the gelatine capsules. In one case, an exhibition guest approached me with concern, asking if there is reason to be worried due to a faecal suppository leaking on her hand. Moments earlier, I had witnessed this same guest squeezing the capsule to what I could only imagine at the time was beyond its capacity to hold its inner contents. Some guests were indeed compelled to take the offering, to hand at least, and as such, tempting fate.

The artistic practice falls into what I have coined ‘trouble shitting’, making an artistic proposition to address a phenomenon. Basically, ‘trouble shitting’ is the ‘makings’ of a troublemaker, or as the saying goes a ‘shit disturber’. An interruption to a status quo.

Although ‘trouble shitting’ does not specifically have anything to do with faecal matter, the use of human waste matter, as in a protest, is common. The infamous Jumalan Teatteri (God’s Theatre) in Finland presents an example that cannot go unmentioned. In January of 1987, four theatre students made a theatre performance



that has not gone forgotten. They emerged on stage naked and began whipping the audience, spraying them with a fire extinguisher powder and throwing excrement at them, leaving the audience members running in a chaotic frenzy from the performers (Tapper, 2020, p. 101). The entire audience but one was driven out of the theatre, the audience escaped with their lives, smarting eyes, red lash marks and covered in shit, from a performance that lasted no more than a couple minutes (Tapper, 2020, pp. 101, 102). The police were then called, setting the remaining performers on the run – according to the reports it took a long time for the audience members to psychologically recover, and some never have (Tapper, 2020, p. 102)

We can also look at the work of Andres Serrano's *Immersion (Piss Christ, 1987)* as an example of a loaded artwork. Combining the sacred with the contaminated, he explored the use of human fluids in his works and in doing so, found himself at the frontlines of a moral culture war. Similarly, the artist Piero Manzoni explored the concept of human production, and the commodification of the artist in *Artist's Shit (1961)*. I believe there is a commodification of taboo in both Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* and Serrano's *Piss Christ*.

As with grotesque Catholic relics, the art world also swirls with controversy over the 'fake', and human waste artworks are no exception – especially today, when artists struggle against numerous restrictions in the use of biohazardous materials. To work around these barriers, the air of mystery or a bit of trickery can be a useful tool. In *Artist's Shit* the industrially canned tins have been rumoured to contain plaster rather than faecal matter, while Serrano has been quoted saying "The best artistic intentions are usually cloaked in mysteries and contradictions" (Okafor, 2024).

The common denominator between Serrano's *Piss Christ*, Manzoni's *Artist's Shit*, and *Shitload* is that they fall into what Julia Kristeva has defined as 'abject' (Kristeva, 1982), as they toy with

moral and evolutionary disgust. However, *Shitload* differs in its proposal of faeces as a healing material, bringing to the forefront the contradictory nature of faecal matter as an agent of life and wellbeing, as well as contamination and harm. The work brings into question the mysteries of microbial disgust, autonomy, and authenticity.

## Disclaimer:

This paper is written to unpack my artistic curiosity and research by way of thought experiment.

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# Gift of Inheritance: What is a Gift that One Cannot Experience?

AURORA DEL RIO

## Abstract

This paper explores gift-giving and receiving in relation to radioactive inheritance through artistic research by looking at the concept of “dangerous gift”. Finland is the first country in the world to open a deep repository for the final storage of high-level radioactive waste; the highly radioactive material to be buried underground will remain dangerous to humans for at least the next 100,000 years, constituting a poisonous “gift” for the generations to come. By examining how gift-giving can be related to danger, this research looks at different scenarios that this “gift of inheritance” can foster. Previous plans for similar repositories have considered that, within the contemplated timeframe of high-level waste (HLW) decay, our current civilisation may collapse. As an example, the US Department of Energy has convened various teams of experts to propose ways to “mark” the burial site, with the intent to warn future human intruders about the radioactive danger. Some of the contemplated proposals have looked at art as a way to communicate with future generations. This paper presents various examples of artworks that tackle nuclear heritages, some of them engaging with the ‘markers’

discourse. The paper further presents the author's artistic research 'Rituals of Inheritance' (2024), to reflect on radioactive inheritance as a dangerous gift. Finally, the paper considers the role of rituals and myths in relation to nuclear heritage practices.

## 1. Introduction – The Nature of the Gift

The first gift is the gift of nature, of life. Professor Christopher Lauer highlights how Schelling's philosophy considers Nature itself as a gift, as given prior to reason, in the form of an ability to 'perceive nature in its simple givenness [...] at once cognitive and religious' (Lauer, 2016, p.163). Such a gift is not to be experienced as an external object but from within, in which all parts of nature, and humans as part of it, are seen 'as organs of a single organism' (Lauer, 2016, p.164). Lauer further argues that Schelling already pointed to 'one of the most confounding paradoxes of contemporary environmentalism: in order to recognise the destruction wrought by mostly unquestioned assumptions of our primacy on nature, we feel compelled to recognize our primacy on nature' (Lauer, 2016, p.161). A sense of ungratefulness thus pervades human actions both in making sense of themselves and in the very way the gift of *nature* and *life* is received. This research revolves around one radical example of human impact on the planet, radioactive contamination, here looked at with a specific focus on radioactive heritage practices, through the symbol of the "dangerous gift".

Sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss has described gift-giving and receiving as a social dynamic, a relation of exchange that generates an invisible bond between a giver and a receiver (Mauss, 1925–2016). Accordingly, Mauss has identified three movements or obligations related to gift-giving: the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Such a bond is represented by the Maori concept of 'hau', which has been described as a spirit or an

agency able to animate the given object and perform through it as an intrinsic power. Mauss thus described this force as what drives the movements of the gift across the social dynamics of exchange. However, far from being only characteristic of the people from which this definition derives, a similar pattern can also be found in the Western world. Anthropologist Denis Vidal (2014) presents an overlooked connection between Mauss' theorisation of the threefold movement of the gift and the allegory of the three graces within the history of art, depicted for example in early Renaissance paintings and also found in the frescoes from Pompeii. The symbolic meaning of the Graces, that of giving, receiving and returning, was apparently already known to Seneca. Vidal points out that the Latin word 'grace' itself comes from the Greek 'charis', with the double meaning of beauty and favour, or pleasure and granted favour (Vidal, 2014). As a form of social dynamic, gift-giving and the obligations that it entails often imply the possibility of danger. A gift can be dangerous, or even poisonous when not simply unwanted. As an example, researcher Tracey Sowerby and author Alexandra Urakova have illustrated representations of dangerous gifts in literature: widely known are the Trojan horse from the Iliad, and Pandora's box from Greek mythology. A historical example is the smallpox blankets that were donated by Western settlers to indigenous people in the United States to make them fall ill (Urakova & Sowerby, 2023).

"Gift" conceived as a presence – the presence of what is given – is reflected by the assonances that this word entails across different languages.<sup>1</sup> However, such a presence is not always immediately perceivable by the human senses. The "gift" of radioactive

1 Gift as a form of given: from the English word "present" to the Italian old word for gift is "presente", which is the same in Portuguese and Polish for example. Latin root: *prae + esse*, before - being, or being at hand.

inheritance will remain hidden underground for generations to come. Radioactive contamination and specifically radioactive heritage are thus hereby thought of as an invisible gift, invisible at least for the current generation: a form of inheritance that is now left behind. This invisibility of the gift is reflected by the invisibility of waste itself: radioactive traces cannot be detected by human senses without the aid of technological devices, and radioactive poisoning may be the reason of an illness even decades after entering in contact with the source, thus making a causal connection often invisible or overlooked. Beginning with the first atomic tests and the two nuclear bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and successively following different scales of nuclear disasters related to energy production, the use of weapons releasing depleted uranium and thorium in war zones and in military areas, and the innumerable fallouts generated by nuclear weapons 'peaceful' tests worldwide have spread over the planet and even in the atmosphere a ubiquitous layer of radioactive particles. Even though several nuclear sites have undergone or will undergo processes of remediation, contaminated places cannot be decontaminated: the decaying isotopes cannot become non-radioactive before their due time. However, radioactive waste, radioactive or contaminated objects and contaminated soil can be moved elsewhere, for example, to above-ground or underground repository sites designed to store them until the decay process eventually terminates. While repositories for low- and intermediate-level waste are already operational in many countries, the first high-level waste repository opened in Finland in 2006. Other countries are currently in the process of designating a site or starting to build one.

High-level waste is mainly generated from spent fuel. According to the World Nuclear Association, even though its amount is only 3 per cent of the total production of waste, HLW accounts for 95 per

cent of the overall emitted radioactivity from waste.<sup>2</sup> It is now known that this waste will remain radioactive for at least the next 100,000 years. Even though other solutions have been contemplated, such as sending radioactive waste to space, or even applied, such as dumping radioactive waste into the sea, deep burial as a final solution is now deemed the most viable way to dispose of radioactive waste for good. When full, the repositories will be sealed and left behind. As an invisible gift, the radioactive particles thus concealed in the bedrock will represent a dangerous inheritance that future generations must handle for the next 100,000 years. Imagining how future societies may look like through deep time turned out to be a challenging task (Joyce, 2020). A hypothetical future driven by constant technological progress in the form of an accumulation of knowledge is not the only possibility that future generations may encounter. It is also considered possible that our current civilisation may collapse following, for example, a sudden catastrophe, as the history of the planet has witnessed. Future societies may thus become unaware of the danger of, for example, digging in the location where radioactive substances are buried. Moreover, even though nuclear waste technology is now deemed safe, it is clearly not possible to test beforehand how it will behave in the next 100,000 years. Waste containers may eventually leak, releasing radioactive particles into water supplies and the environment. The challenge of maintaining an intergenerational memory of the site will thus become essential in attempting the task of hindering as much as possible future generations from coming into contact with the poisonous waste, for the timeframe in which this waste will remain dangerous.

2 [https://world-nuclear.org/nuclear-essentials/  
what-is-nuclear-waste-and-what-do-we-do-with-it](https://world-nuclear.org/nuclear-essentials/what-is-nuclear-waste-and-what-do-we-do-with-it)

## 2. What is a Gift that One Cannot Experience?

Pandora and her proverbial box [...] appears as an emblem of misery and destruction. These persistent and widely diffused mythological and iconographic resonances of the assignment to which the Task Force is seeking a resolution lead to the first recommendation, to wit: that information be launched and artificially passed on into the short-term and long-term future with the supplementary aid of folkloristic devices, in particular a combination of an artificially created and nurtured ritual-and-legend. (Sebeok, 1984, pp. 23–24)

The solution of building a deep geological repository for the ultimate burial of radioactive waste underground was proposed already in the '80 for the planned Yucca Mountain site, later dismissed. As a measure to prevent intruders from entering the zone, the U.S. Department of Energy assembled a group of researchers from different disciplines called the 'Human Interference Task Force' (HITF). In this context Thomas Sebeok, linguist and semiotician, produced the first technical report in which the possibility of accessing the waste containers was described as similar to opening the mythical Pandora's box, with the danger of releasing all evils of the world (Sebeok, 1984). To prevent such a catastrophic scenario, Sebeok proposed that a 'combination of an artificially created and nurtured ritual-and-legend' could preserve information about the danger of encountering buried radioactive waste (Sebeok, 1984, p.17).

Myths are considered a powerful tool for conveying meaning. Comparative mythology has shown how the same mythical narratives are often repeated, with some variations, across different cultures worldwide. If ancient Greeks were already sceptical about the veracity of their myths, the criteria of whether the narratives illustrated by myths are true or not shall not be the one used to judge them, as an understanding of myth cannot be based on the sole use

of logical reasoning. As philosopher Johan Degenaar (2007) explains, ‘reason can and should explore myth without assuming that reason can exhaust the meaning of the mythical images’ (Degenaar, 2007, p. 8). A definition of what myth is remains elusive and related to the discipline of its study. However, a useful definition may be based on how myths function. Author Tony Ulyatt (2007) highlights, among others, the function of myth for conveying meaning differently than through logical thinking. The logic of myth may allow for ‘the contemplation of deep-seated dilemmas and issues about the universe and human existence’ (Ulyatt, 2007, p. 23). Symbolic images generated by myths can similarly function to reach an embodied understanding, based on associations and deep resonances that overcome logical understanding.

In the article ‘Social Institutions and Nuclear Energy’ (1972), Alvin Weinberg, one of the nuclear physicists to participate in the Manhattan Project for the construction of the atomic bomb, described the relationship between society and nuclear energy as a ‘Faustian bargain’. The price to be paid for an ‘inexhaustible’ source of energy is the longevity of social institutions: societal order must be permanent to guarantee the needed continuous care of nuclear waste:

We nuclear people have made a Faustian bargain with society. On the one hand, we offer—in the catalytic nuclear burner—an inexhaustible source of energy. [...] But the price that we demand of society for this magical energy source is both a vigilance and a longevity of our social institutions that we are quite unaccustomed to. (Weinberg, 1972, p. 33)

The Faustian legend used in this metaphor draws upon the myth of an evil force that tempts humans to sacrifice spiritual values in favour of pleasures, power, or knowledge. In the case of radioactive

energy, contamination is the “sacrifice” to be paid for betraying the received ‘gift of nature’ to satisfy human greed.

A discourse on the use of myth to convey a message was part of the research of the Human Interference Task Force. One of their tasks was to develop a symbolism of danger, and the term ‘markers’ was used to indicate ‘containers of intentional messages’ (Joyce, 2020, p.146). Between 1982 and 1983, the ‘Zeitschrift für Semiotik’ issued a poll to collect responses on how to transmit a warning message for the next 10,000 years, as this was the contemplated timeframe. The answers proposed several hypothetical ways to convey a message to future generations. The already quoted idea by semiotician Thomas Sebeok to use a ritual-and-legend as a deterrent was based on the proposition that all information about the waste repository must be entrusted to an elite group of scientists: an ‘atomic priesthood’, that would be responsible for knowing the truth about the waste and perpetuate a cult of radioactivity to keep the masses away from the burial site.<sup>3</sup> Through the mentioned poll, philosophers Francoise Bastide and Paolo Fabbri proposed another unconventional idea: ‘ray cats’, or living radiation detectors, was a project to create genetically modified cats that could change their colour when encountering dangerous levels of environmental radioactivity. The proposal also included the use of proverbs and myths to inform future generations about the need to promptly leave an area when the colour of a cat changes. However, as not everyone believes that a black cat can induce bad luck, people may easily dismiss the myth. Another singular proposition was made by science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem, who suggested encoding information

3 The author has published an article on a collaborative work based on Sebeok’s idea of a cult of radioactivity: Naukkarinen, K. Del Rio, A. (2025). Atomic Kinship: Re-Visioning Radioactivity. *Isea Conference proceedings*.

about the danger of radioactive waste in the DNA of living plants, on the basis that the survival of plants through the next millennia was deemed very likely. Remarkably, the technology to realise these solutions was not even remotely available at that time. Ten years later, the Department of Energy convened two new teams to design what was called Passive Institutional Controls (PICs), including once more a marker system for preventing human intrusion, this time from entering the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico. Anthropologist and social archaeologist Rosemary Joyce presents a strong critique of the work of the expert teams, highlighting specifically how, from the point of view of an archaeologist, it is impossible to predict in a reliable manner how future generations may react to any of the planned signs that the current one will leave behind (Joyce, 2020).

Even considering their unavoidable failure to convey a decodable message, such attempts at communicating through generations are still remarkable. Finally, both teams convened for WIPP came to the conclusion that the best way to keep future human intruders away while preserving the site was to develop a sort of ‘anti-site’ (Joyce, 2020, p.147): something that is ‘worth preserving’, recognised as human-made as a criterion, but at the same time this kind of monument had to transmit the message that ‘nothing valued is here’ (Joyce, 2020, p.122). Team B thus proposed to construct an earthwork similar to an archaeological site. Future visitors could possibly recognise this marker as a human monument, like Stonehenge, and preserve it (Joyce, 2020, p.147). At the same time, team A’s proposal, led by architect Michael Brill, was based on environmental design: Brill developed ‘a set of hierarchical “design guidelines” for sacred places’ that might have the potential to carry a universal meaning (Joyce, 2020, p.51). In considering the relationship between sacredness and danger, an interesting parallel is the famous research of

anthropologist Mary Douglas, who highlighted how sacredness is often connected to a taboo or a prescription, of something dirty or dangerous to be avoided (Douglas, 1966–2002). In developing these guidelines, team A's proposal looked at the concept of human archetypes: Brill referred to psychologist C. G. Jung and philosopher Ernst Cassirer's definition of archetypes as symbolic forms as a way to convey embodied meaning. Both Jung and Cassirer were interested in the role of myth in relation to the human mind. Jung's theory of a collective consciousness was based on the assumption that symbols are universally the same across cultures. The idea for this design by Brill was to invoke universal emotions (like awe) and then reverse them. With the aid of the archetypes, for Brill, future human intruders would feel on a visceral level the need to move away, as if the place itself would induce a sense of something superhuman and threatening. The names used for the design: 'Landscape of thorns', 'Forbidding blocks', 'Spike field', (Trauth et al., 1993, appendix F, pp. 61–78) suggest the idea of something threatening to the human body.

On this topic in particular, Joyce dismissed the theory of the archetypes by quoting the 20-year-long debate that went on in the field of analytical psychology over what Jung meant by archetype, and how these archetypes could be scientifically grounded. The author, however, considers that the idea of archetype, intended as a generator of symbolic and mythological production, can still contribute to the ecological discourse in relation to radioactive contamination and the marker system, as a way of conveying a kind of meaning that is overlooked by the current scientific discourse. A specific "archetype of contamination" can be seen as incarnated by the posthumanist concept of material agency, which the following section elaborates on.



Figure 2. Del Rio, A. (2024). *Rituals of Inheritance* [video still]. © Aurora Del Rio.

### 3. Radioactive Agency

Not only the future of humanity, but also the geological future is difficult to predict. Far from being inert, matter is a lively agent of change. In their introduction to 'New Materialism' (2010) Professors Diana Coole and Samantha Frost illustrate how new materialist scholarship proposes an 'ontological reorientation' that 'conceives of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency' Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 7). Philosopher Karen Barad's 'Meeting the Universe Halfway' (2007) is emblematic in this regard. Barad proposes a '*post-humanist performative* approach to understanding technoscientific and other naturalcultural practices that specifically acknowledges and takes account of matter's dynamism' (Barad, 2007, p.135). One of the main criticisms that Barad's research presents is on the notion of a detached observer, upon which modern science is based. For Barad, this philosophical stand dwells upon issues of language and representation. An excessive power granted to language fosters the illusion of modern science that things have clear, determined

boundaries (Barad, 2007, p.132). This is instead a semantic abstraction that does not reflect the reality of bodies and phenomena. Such an illusion entitles the scientist to a false sense of control, based on incomplete knowledge. For what concerns the boundary between observer and observed phenomena, for example, quantum physics has shown how the observer becomes an agent in the apparatus of observation. Barad departs from Niels Bohr's understanding of nuclear physics as a way of approaching the whole conception of reality otherwise: 'For Bohr, things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties, and words do not have inherently determinate meanings' (Barad, 2007, p. 138). A new materialist understanding of matter thus proposes to consider how matter is 'neither fixed nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agential, not a fixed sentence or a property of things' (Barad, 2007, p. 137). Barad holds a doctorate in theoretical physics, and their philosophical theories draw upon an understanding of matter that has emerged along with the discovery of nuclear physics.

Radioactive contamination itself is unruly: it does not remain in the same state as it was left. In 2014 a waste container exploded at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, New Mexico, where intermediate-level radioactive waste was being stored. The reason for the accident was a human error: apparently, organic cat litter was used as storage material in the container in place of a non-organic one, causing the waste to overheat.<sup>4</sup> One could argue that human error can be avoided by following more strict protocols; environmental scientist Braden R. Allenby and Professor of Science and Society Daniel Sarewitz (2011) have, however, proposed that the complexity involved

4 <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/03/26/395615637/official-report-nuclear-waste-accident-caused-by-wrong-kitty-litter>

in nuclear accidents goes beyond the capability of human knowledge. They have identified how nuclear accidents, such as the meltdown of three reactor cores that happened in Fukushima in 2011, present different levels of complexity: level I represents nuclear technology; level II sees this technology as part of a complex network, while level III of complexity escapes human capability of understanding. It is at this level that 'nuclear power intersects with the motion of tectonic plates, as well as with cultural and social forces such as fear of global climate change and demands for rising standards of living'. Level III effects are therefore 'not less real', but they are identified as 'unintended consequences' (Schröder, 2016, p. 28). For Allenby and Sarewitz, therefore, the main issue with nuclear technology is that solutions for level III of complexity are sought at level I or II, where an understanding of cause and consequence is graspable, and thus falls under the narrative of being in control.

Another issue that reaches level III of complexity is the temporal extension of high-level waste decay. The deep temporalities involved in HLW storage exceed the possibility of a determinate and certain prediction of how the waste, the environment and future societies will behave. For this reason, researcher Jantine Schröder (2016) suggests that the technology of geological disposal shall be regarded as a 'social and technical experiment' (Schröder, 2016, p. 687). This is due to the inherent impossibility of testing this technology outside of the laboratory for sufficient time before it becomes operational: i.e. 100,000 years. Far from being an exceptional case, this condition is inherent in the development of new technologies, where nuclear technology becomes the 'textbook case [...]. In light of its hazardous nature, risks are not only the possible results but the given point of departure of innovation: the waste is there, making its management inevitable and the principle desirability of innovation incontestable' (Schröder, 2016, pp. 690–691). If moving beyond an experimental

stage is thus, for the technology concerning HLW geological disposal, simply excluded, the emerging issue of how to handle radioactive waste across different temporalities opens up numerous questions, such as: What is the nature of the 'gift' that this heritage implies? When considering the impossibility of an immediate detection of radioactive poisoning as it can be experienced in the future, and considering that human senses are unable to perceive radioactive pollution without special equipment: how to deal with its inherent invisibility? Furthermore, how to consider the material agency of radioactive processes and what exceeds human capability to predict them?

In 'The Gift and its Paradoxes' (2016), sociologist Olli Pyyhtinen draws a parallel between Mauss' concept of 'hau' and a new materialist understanding of matter. While both positions depart from a conception of matter as capable of agency, Pyyhtinen highlights how, in the case of the 'hau', this agency originates from a spirit, or drive, that is supposedly generated by the giving person. In this case, the 'hau' or spirit that animates the object is a human doing. Material agency is considered, on the other hand, as belonging to matter itself, without any human interference (Pyyhtinen, 2016, pp. 51-52). The concept of material agency in relation to Mauss' description of the 'hau' of the gift and radioactive waste is seen in this research as a way to make sense of the unpredictability of waste-matter. Following new materialist philosophies, human understanding itself can be considered as a form of material agency: driven by unpredictable forces, inherently illogical, unruly. Therefore, when looking for a different approach to complex phenomena, artistic research may be a way of grasping them from a perspective that detaches from simple logical reasoning.

#### 4. Nuclear art

In 2002, the Desert Space Foundation in Nevada promoted an art competition to design a marker system for Yucca Mountain, a site designated for the construction of a nuclear repository in New Mexico. 'Blue Yucca Ridge' was the winning artwork: artist Ashok Sukumaran proposed to plant on the site a genetically modified indigenous plant, a yucca modified to grow cobalt blue leaves, as a living warning sign.<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary artists often produce work that engages with societal issues, and from early on art has been looked at as a reference for developing a marker system. Within the research conducted for the WIPP, for example, the two teams have considered various artworks as possible representatives for their findings, and also planned to call for a specific work of art by a commissioned artist. Two examples presented were from Land artists: James Turrell's 'Roden Crater' is a project that started in 1979 and is still ongoing. The artist acquired a volcano located in Northern Arizona and started shaping its interior into an artwork. Charles Ross' 'Star Axis' is similarly a long-term project started in 1976 in New Mexico, still ongoing, where the artist conceived an earth sculpture aligned with the stars. Both these artworks look at astronomical phenomena that are 'predictable long into the future' (Joyce, 2020, p.129). However, in presenting Land artists as an example of a possible marker, as Joyce noticed, the team has not considered how this art form is often fascinated by entropy, or by how the environment interacts with the artworks. Works of Land Art are, also purposely, subject to continuous changes that are incompatible with the wish to consider them as prototypes for a durable marker system (Joyce, 2020, p.87). As researcher Anna Volkmar

5 <https://users.dma.ucla.edu/~suku/yucca.html>

(2022) points out, 'there is a history of drawing art into the question of how to inform future generations about the radioactive waste they will inherit' (Volkmar, 2022, p. 149). Another example is the French National Agency for Radioactive Waste Management ANDRA which, since 2015, has held regular art competitions on a possible marker system for its site. However, winning artists have criticised the company for not providing a response to the request to develop an artwork further, or to see how the winning projects are used to plan possible markers (Volkmar, 2022, p. 152). Apparently, the case is that art is often used as a justification for the nuclear industry's agenda. Another example is the Dutch nuclear waste facility COVRA: Artist William Verstraeten has been commissioned to design an artwork for a waste storage building named HABOG. The building now shows the familiar formula  $E=Mc^2$  and is painted in orange colour. Every twenty years the building is repainted in a lighter colour until it will finally turn white in 2103. For Volkmar, both the formula and the change of colour suggest a different message that diverts the public's attention from what is actually happening: the message transmitted through the artwork communicates that in 2103 the radioactivity will disappear. However, the decay of high-level radioactive Waste will certainly not end before several million years. In 2103, instead, the heat of the spent fuel will have decreased enough to permit it to be moved to an underground repository (which is still to be built); the artwork, called 'Metamorphosis', thus 'shifts the focus away' from what is actually happening, hiding the many uncertainties involved in the technology to store waste, as well as the costs implied (Volkmar, 2022, p. 153). For Volkmar, among others, therefore, art within the institutional context has served to test or to legitimate institutional policies. The understanding of interdisciplinarity in this context is considered as mere problem-solving across disciplines (Volkmar,

2022, p.138). On the other end, outside of the institutional context, art often takes on a different role: instead of trying to offer a ready-made solution from a different discipline, art can point to overlooked problems and raise new questions that may force an 'ontological opening': this is a prerequisite to any 'responsible (and responsive) relation' (Volkmar, 2022, p.138). The most interesting approaches are thus, for Volkmar, to be found outside of the institutional framework.

A number of independent artists indeed produce artworks that deal with radioactive contamination, nuclear decommissioning, the marker system, or other topics related to the production of nuclear energy and weapons in various ways. An interesting example of an artist and researcher is Grit Ruhland's 'A Marker for Halde Stolzenberg' (Volkmar, 2022, p.170). Ruhland is looking at the history of the massive Soviet uranium mining in the territory of the former East Germany. An unmarked waste pile near the village of Stolzenberg is one of the places that were left behind after the fall of the Soviet Union. The artist highlights that the level of radiation in the area is currently just above the background radiation, however, it can be considered hazardous depending on the use of the site by the local population. It is for example reported that the site is a good place for mushroom picking, and mushrooms are known to accumulate certain radioactive isotopes (Volkmar, 2022, pp. 170–171). The artist thus developed, together with the local community, an artwork in the form of a marker for the site, based on local mythology. Inspired by the mythical figure of Perchta, a Slavic goddess that presents a double incarnation, benign and malignant (Volkmar, 2022, p.171), the developed marker is thus a chosen symmetrical territory to that of the waste pile within the same area. There, Ruhland's project aims to build a cultural centre where knowledge of the area can be shared. Ruhland also researched ancient local



Figure 3. Del Rio, A. (2024). *Rituals of Inheritance* [video still]. © Aurora Del Rio.

knowledge and legends that reported spotting three-legged animals, mutations likely due to high levels of environmental radioactivity that derive from the presence of uranium in the ground. Those legends, dated prior to the mining of the area or around 1870, warned that hunting three-legged animals could result in the sickness and death of the hunter.

Curator and researcher Ele Carpenter has initiated the Nuclear Culture Research Group, a network that brings together academics and artists to discuss nuclear history and other issues.<sup>6</sup> Carpenter also curated the exhibition ‘Perpetual Uncertainty’ held at Bildmuseet in Umea University, Sweden, in 2016 for the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Chernobyl’s disaster. ‘The Nuclear Culture Source Book’ is an edited volume that accompanied the exhibition (Carpenter, 2016). Among the artworks presented in the publication is Pierre Huyghe’s film ‘Untitled (Human Mask)’ from 2014. The film combines drone footage taken in Fukushima in 2011

6 [https://www.umarts.se/working\\_group/nuclear-culture-research-group/](https://www.umarts.se/working_group/nuclear-culture-research-group/)

after the nuclear accident with the uncanny figure of a monkey waitress wearing a human mask and a wig. This human-like being inhabits an empty restaurant that is supposedly inside a nuclear exclusion zone, serving a vision of what remains of life that keeps operating within the ruins of pre-apocalyptic structures (Carpenter, 2016, p.166).

Yoi Kawakubo is also an artist and researcher. Kawakubo has noticed how the recurrence of nuclear disasters that exceed level 5 occurs approximately every 20–25 years, and makes a parallel between this recurrence and the Japanese tradition of ‘Sengu’, the traditional dismantling and rebuilding of Shinto temples. This time frame thus constitutes ‘the period of human oblivion, unless knowledge is effectively passed’ through generations (Carpenter, 2016, p. 98). Kawakubo’s photographic project ‘The new clear age’<sup>7</sup> uses postponed publishing of images, and the use of empty frames in photographic exhibitions as a way to reflect on nuclear accidents, different temporalities, forgetting and transgenerational memory.

Artist Erich Berger and jewellery designer Mari Keto’s ‘Inheritance’ (Carpenter, 2016, p.117) is a necklace and earrings that contain thorite, thorianite and uraninite. The radioactive level of the jewellery is to be measured every time it is inherited, to establish whether it is safe to wear it or not. This technological “ritual” of measurement, to be transmitted along with the objects, can be thought of as analogous to preserving intergenerational memory around the repository sites. Ele Carpenter (2016) writes on the concept of inheritance:

The body as an archive of radiological mutation can pass on reorganised cells to future generations. In this way radiological inheritance

7 <https://www.yoikawakubo.com/the-new-clear-age>

is not simply about monuments or archives, but the layers of complex cultural belief systems that enable rituals of place and health to be enacted and re-enacted. (Carpenter, 2016, p. 98)

Far from wishing to define what constitutes a proper or improper response from art as a discipline to environmental concerns on radioactive contamination, the quoted artworks are presented as an example of how meaning can be conveyed through this kind of research. Meaning itself is here considered as never fixed but subject to changes, to new interpretations and always open to new understandings.

## 5. Rituals of Inheritance

The author's artistic research project 'Rituals of Inheritance' (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4) considers the opening of the first repository in the world for the final storage of high-level radioactive Waste in Finland, and the environmental and societal implications that this technology entails. In the title, the word "inheritance" is used as a conceptual choice, rather than the common definition of radioactive waste as "heritage", to denote a way of understanding nuclear waste as materiality. While the word "heritage", used to define intangible things, properly applies to radioactive waste's intangibility, or concealment from the human senses and from the current generations, "inheritance" highlights the concrete materiality of nuclear waste as it is produced and stored in physical quantities.<sup>8</sup> Inheritance in relation to radioactive waste thus describes the existing physical weight of HLW to be buried and left behind as concrete objects that

8 Apparently, from the beginning of nuclear energy production to the end of 2016 around 390,00 tonnes of spent fuel have been produced worldwide. Source: <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/new-iaea-report-presents-global-overview-of-radioactive-waste-and-spent-fuel-management>

will be inherited, in the same way a material property is inherited; in this case an undesired “gift” that was made through the act of transforming waste into a legacy.

Departing from these reflections, the project ‘Rituals of Inheritance’ was developed in a dialogue with researchers and artists whose interests tackle radioactivity. Considering that the process of knowledge-making, also in the arts, unfolds as a collective outcome, the author systematically engages in different forms of collaboration as a means to explore ways of developing art collectively. The artwork was therefore developed with the engagement of five collaborators coming from the arts and beyond.<sup>9</sup> At the start of the project, three questions were posed to the collaborators, aimed at identifying a symbolic image that would possibly embody radioactive inheritance as a dangerous gift. The questions asked specifically about what such a “dangerous gift” can mean, and whether it was possible to understand it symbolically. One of these questions proposed to imagine a possible myth that future generations would tell as a way to transmit a message about the danger of coming in contact with radioactive waste pollution. Following these questions, a number of speculative stories and visions emerged, some of them already in the form of a possible future myth. From the collected material, the author developed an artwork as an installation that included in its display a video and some symbolic objects. The video was filmed in the uranium prospect of Palmottu, Finland, a place that is naturally radioactive and can, potentially, be used in the future as an uranium mining site.

The artwork that emerged from the conversations thus developed in the form of a “ritual pattern”, a term coined by the author to

9 Collaborators to this project are: Agnes Pockels, Bart Vandeput, Christina Stadlbauer, Erich Berger and Helen Grove-White.

describe performative actions that are loosely based on the traditional religious practice of a ritual, as a collective experiment. In the process of developing this work, the aim of representing a possible future ritual is lost in translation: the action that is shown in the video does not convey a precise meaning, one that is immediately decodable to those who witness it. Instead, the ritual appears as perhaps already caught in the moment where its initial meaning has become lost.

This artwork does not aspire to produce an effective marker system that may function to warn future generations about a radioactive danger, as some examples from the past have attempted. The aim of this speculative project is, instead, to foster reflections on the meaning of the “gift of inheritance” of ever-lasting contaminants that is being handed over and the implications that such a decision may entail for the deep future.



Figure 4. Del Rio, A. (2024). *Rituals of Inheritance* [video still]. © Aurora Del Rio.

## 6. Conclusions

The third art example mentioned in the Sandia report (Trauth et al., 1993, appendix F, p.135) was artist James Acord's 'Monstrance for a Grey Horse', a sculpture of a horse skull on a pedestal. The title refers to a liturgical object used to display sacred relics. To develop it, the artist worked with scientists at the Hanford Site. Acord wished to put a canister of waste material inside the sculpture, considering the waste as a sacred matter.<sup>10</sup> The original plan was that the sculpture be placed at the entrance of a nuclear waste site as a warning sign. Instead, the sculpture is now in the Southwestern University campus in Georgetown, Texas, donated by an alumnus who purchased the work in 2000. Interestingly, the meaning of the artwork has changed from a warning sign to a mythical figure: Students currently leave offerings to the sculpture and ask for its guidance.<sup>11</sup>

In 'When We Have Left the Nuclear Territories', Professor Anna Storm (2020) discusses the various narratives that revolve around nuclear decommissioning, and introduces the role of the nonhuman and the mythological that are now 'in charge of guarding our nuclear heritage' (Storm, 2020, p. 338). For Storm 'The non-human and the mythological both seem to provide a reliable route into ancient pasts as well as into elusive distant futures, and thus may persist even when we have finally left the nuclear territories' (Storm, 2020, p. 340). As a postscript, also Volkmar (2022) recognises the prominent role of myth both in science and art (Volkmar, 2022, p.178):

10 Acord did not obtain nuclear waste to use for the sculpture, but he resolved to place an antique dinnerware containing uranium glaze inside it. Source: <https://www.orau.org/health-physics-museum/articles/james-acord-atomic-age-artist-in-residence.html>

11 <https://placingmemory.southwestern.edu/items/show/49>

In all cases, myth is employed to make the indeterminacy of radiation relatable and narratable by giving it a specific, personified form. [...] Myth can be used to create a space of authority and prestige to support the nuclear enterprise; yet it can also be used, like the artists did, to raise questions (Volkmar, 2022, p. 179).

The author's research considers how *myth* relates to the general concept of *belief* in shaping personal and collective realities. In its wider form, without an explicit value judgment, *myth* is read as a form of interrelation between human symbolic production and the texture of the perceived reality. In considering the close interconnection between *myth* and *ritual*, the author's research method unfolds through the creation of 'ritual patterns', or performative-ritualistic actions that are more or less based on the codified practice of a ritual. The artwork 'Rituals of Inheritance', presented in the previous section, is an example of this method.

This paper has looked at artistic research in relation to the final storage of high-level nuclear waste, looking at the concept of the "dangerous gift". Marcel Mauss has defined gift-giving and receiving as a form of social relation, and his theorisation did not consider nuclear waste, or waste itself as a gift. Nuclear waste is not a social relation, but the politics that revolve around waste disposal are certainly embedded in different forms of social relations. The image of the "dangerous gift" is thus used in this context to read nuclear waste as a form of problematic inheritance. Without the pretence of transmitting a clear message through deep time, or proposing a solution that would act at the visceral level of the recipient 'intruder' to prevent access to a nuclear waste site, the author's research, as well as some of the proposed examples, look at the role of myth and belief in shaping collective realities. Belief in the form of worldviews operates, unnoticed, at every level of reality, dictating what choices

are made by an individual or a collective: what is deemed as possible to pursue or find, and what is left behind. In this sense, paying attention to the sub-level of reasoning that takes place at the mythical level may foster new reflections on radioactive contamination as a heritage. Artistic practices, in particular, may access this kind of knowledge.

As presented in this section, additionally, the role of myth can be that of bringing immaterial aspects into question in ways that are otherwise overlooked. As a way to make sense of the ordinary, as well as to establish human contact with the extraordinary, myth is perhaps the ultimate gift that logical reason needs to finally acknowledge as a constitutive part of its own process.

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# Denise Ann Darvall's Heart

NINA LIEBENBERG

*What follows here is a curatorial piece that weaves together moments from the first heart transplant with stories of fishermen, xenotransplantation, dogs, a steadfast tin soldier, Peter Pan, birds, Pompeii casts, Amelia Earhart, children's letters, moon landings, and a selection of personal artworks and images, some made or captured many years ago, that serve as illustrations to this text, in various ways. As reader, I invite you to move through these moments and allow them to resonate and expand on what 'a heart gifted' might mean.*

On December 2, 1967, 25-year-old Denise Ann Darvall and her mother left their home in Tamboerskloof, Cape Town, to purchase a cake for an afternoon tea party. Parking their new Ford Anglia that Denise had recently bought with money she made as a seamstress, on the opposite side of the road from the bakery, they crossed the busy Main Street. On the way back, a passing truck obstructed their view and, at 15.30, they were hit by a speeding car, driven by a drunk driver.

The Pathology Learning Centre, at the University of Cape Town's Groote Schuur medical campus, consist of 3 interconnecting rooms filled with approximately 3,500 diseased human anatomical parts, contained in formaldehyde, categorised first by organ and then disease type. In 2011, whilst visiting this collection, I stumbled onto two specimens that looked somewhat different to the rest of the collection. Situated in the section dedicated to hearts and manifesting all the diseases that can afflict one (congenital, degenerative,

growth alteration, inflammatory, mechanical, neoplastic, or traumatic) I enquired what they were, from the collection manager, Dr Jane Yeats. Heterotopic (or 'piggyback') hearts was her reply: Two hearts, a strong healthy one grafted onto a weaker one, that function as one. She provided me with some reading material for contextualisation. This is an extract from one of them: "On two occasions in 1977, when a patient's left ventricle failed acutely after routine open-heart surgery and when no human donor organ was available, Barnard transplanted an animal heart heterotopically. On the first occasion, a baboon heart was transplanted, but this failed to support the circulation sufficient , the patient dying some six hours after transplantation. In the second patient, a chimpanzee heart successfully maintained life until irreversible rejection occurred four days later, the recipient's native heart having failed to recover during this period" (Brink & Hassoulas, 2009, p.31).

The guided tour of the Heart of Cape Town Museum in Groote Schuur hospital commemorates the first heart transplant performed by Chris Barnard. Located close to the Pathology Learning Centre, it includes the animal lab where Barnard conducted experiments with over 50 dogs to perfect the technique of heart transplantation.

On February 2, 1903, English physicians William Bayliss and Ernest Starling, gave a lecture on the digestive system to a theatre full of medical students in London. Also in attendance were Lizzy Lind af Hageby and Leisa Schartau, committed feminists and anti-vivisectionists. They had travelled from Sweden to enrol at the London School of Medicine for Women, attend lectures around town, and document the practice of vivisection in British universities. During the lecture, a brown terrier was wheeled in, strapped to a board. Starling had already performed one experiment on the dog two months earlier, shutting off its pancreas. This time, Bayliss cut open the dog's neck and spent half an hour unsuccessfully trying to

Figure 1. National Anti-Vivisection Society. (1906). *Statue created by Joseph Whitehead, erected in Battersea, London, in memory of the Brown Dog* [photograph].© Public Domain. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown\\_Dog\\_affair#/media/File:Brown\\_Dog\\_statue\\_by\\_Joseph\\_Whitehead,\\_Battersea,\\_London.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown_Dog_affair#/media/File:Brown_Dog_statue_by_Joseph_Whitehead,_Battersea,_London.jpg)



stimulate the animal's salivary glands with electrodes. Eventually, he gave up and handed the dog over to a student who stabbed it through the heart, thus ending the lesson.

What followed was a court case filed by Stephen Coleridge, a prominent barrister and secretary of the National Anti-Vivisection Society against Bayliss. After four days of testimony, the judge called the women's account uncorroborated, whilst advising the jury not to be swayed by the arguments presented by Coleridge (Murray, 2025). The jurors conferred for 20 minutes, then found Coleridge guilty of libel. Afterwards, anti-vivisectionists commissioned a bronze statue of the dog as a memorial, unveiled in Battersea in 1906. Its plaque, which read "Men and women of England, how long shall these Things be?" led to it being vandalised on a frequent basis. On December 10, 1907, hundreds of medical students marched through

central London waving effigie of the brown dog on sticks, clashing with suff agettes, trade unionists and 300 police officers—one of a series of battles known as the ‘Brown Dog’ riots.



Figure 2. Liebenberg, N. (2017). *Pompeii casts in the London Natural History Museum* [photograph]. © Nina Liebenberg.

This was a moment of observation I made, during a research trip to the London Natural History Museum, in 2017. The label of this display reads as follows: *When the pyroclastic flow enveloped Pompeii, its inhabitants were buried. Ash solidified around their bodies. These eventually rotted away leaving behind human-shaped holes—found by archaeologists more than 1,000 years later. These casts reveal the final positions people and animals took as they tried to protect themselves.*

In March 1910, tired of the controversy, Battersea Council sent four workers accompanied by 120 police officers to remove

the Brown Dog statue under cover of darkness, after which it was reportedly melted down by the council's blacksmith.

In a story by Hans Christian Anderson (1838), a one-legged steadfast tin soldier (there was not enough of the melted tin to finish him, so he was made to stand firmly on one leg only) falls in love with a beautiful ballerina made of paper, with a dress of clear muslin, and a narrow blue ribbon with a shining tinsel rose, over her shoulders. With her outstretched arms, and leg raised so high the tin soldier could not see it at all, she also looked as if she only had one leg. After a series of unfortunate events (which takes the soldier on a journey outside the confines of his home, and later, somehow, back again), the story ends when the tin soldier is accidentally thrown into the oven into which the ballerina also drifts, after a draught carries her from



Figure 3. Liebenberg, N. (2014). One of the dresses *Denise designed and sewed herself*, as observed in the *Heart of Cape Town Museum* [photograph]. © Nina Liebenberg.

her castle into the fire. The next morning, when the cleaner takes the ashes out of the stove, she finds what is left of him in the shape of a little tin heart. Of the little dancer nothing remains though, save the tinsel rose, which was burnt black as a cinder.

Sustaining a skull fracture and various other severe head injuries, Denise was rushed to Groote Schuur hospital, where it was established that she would not be able to breathe on her own. By 9 pm that evening, she was declared brain dead, which was the first indication of her becoming a viable donor—as a beating heart was not an indication of life.

Dr Chris Barnard, the head surgeon, wrote down some moments observed during the first heart transplant that occurred on December 3, 1967. He writes how, in the heart of Denise, the young car-crash victim whose family had allowed her heart to be gifted, her heart's life fluid returned from the lungs—how many million times had this action happened before in her living body?—but different this time, void of oxygen (Barnard in Young, 2002, p. 79–80). He writes how her heart would react, at first, as if meeting only a small inconvenience. Unaware of what was happening, it would simply pump more excitedly—expecting some relief. Yet this would never come, and it would fall back in the first wave of confusion and fatigue.

Next to her, the body of Louis Washkansky, the receptor of her heart, lay. Barnard describes Washkansky's invalid heart as "rolling in a rhythm of its own, like a separate and angry sea, yellow from the storms of half a century, yet streaked with blue currents from its depth—blue veins drifting across the heaving waste and ruins of a ravaged heart. On the right, the purple atrium slid back and forth with each contraction—struggling as would a monstrous fish tied to the shoreline of the yellow sea. A movement echoed by Denise's heart, now also thrashing for survival—as against strangulation" (Barnard in Young, 2002, p. 80).



Figure 4. Liebenberg, N. (2010). *Orchid* [Fish bones, glue, bell jar]. An orchid made from a collection of fishbones, sou ced from various species, bought from fish markets around Cape Town. Private Collection.

Hemingway once loved. Her name was Agnes von Kurkowsky, a Red Cross nurse, who nurtured him back to health during World War I, after he was injured by an explosion that almost caused his left leg to be amputated. They planned to marry but in March 1919 she became engaged to an Italian officer instead. In 1951 Hemingway wrote of another man, an old fisherman called Santiago, who also loved and lost. The object of Hemingway's rejected affection became the old man's sea—an unpredictable thing ruled by the moon and able to give or withhold great favours.

In this sea, Santiago fought a marlin for three days. On the third day the fish grew tired and Santiago, sleep-deprived, aching and delirious managed to draw it in. Too big for the boat, he fastened it to

the side. On the long journey back, the sharks came. They devoured the marlin's meat, leaving only the skeleton, head, and tail. Santiago docked the boat, went home and slept.

After the first heart transplant, people all over the world sent Barnard letters. There are display cases filled with these letters in the Heart of Cape Town Museum, and one dedicated especially to the letters that children wrote him. Here is one of them:

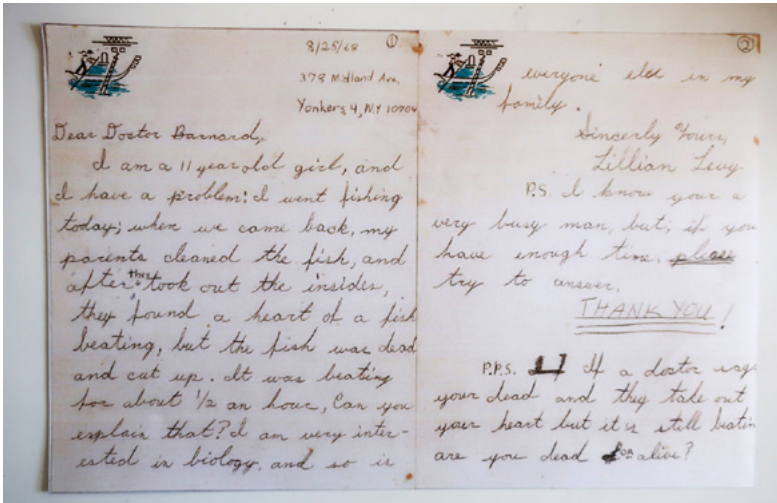


Figure 5. Liebenberg, N. (2014). A letter from the Heart of Cape Town Museum. [photograph]. © Nina Liebenberg.

During the operation, “the ventricular peaks (of Denise’s heart) would shoot up as in wild flight, and their intermediate planes would begin to jumble against one another like the sudden crashing of cars on a freight-train. The heart’s beautiful symmetry would then be reduced to an erratic green line of wild jerks until it entered the final isoelectric phase resembling a sawtooth—jagged lines of the heart seeking to rise like a dying bird, fluttering upward, only to fall once again onto its flat plane of death” (Barnard in Young, 2002, p. 79–80).

In the last pages of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Mr and Mrs Darling adopt the Lost Boys, after they leave Neverland. Before they had attended school a week, the boys realise what goats they had been not to remain on the island. By then it was too late however, and they had to settle down and become as ordinary "as you or me or Jenkins minor" (Barrie, 1989, p.180). Barrie writes how the power to fly gradually left them: "At fi st Nana tied their feet to the bed-posts so that they should not fly way in the night; and one of their diversions by day was to pretend to fall off buses; but by and by they ceased to tug at their bonds in bed, and they found that they hurt themselves when they let go of the bus. In time they could not even fly after their hats. Want of practice, they called it; but what it really meant was they no longer believed" (Barrie, 1989, p.181).

In 1969, two years after the fi st heart transplant, NASA monitored the heartbeats of the three astronauts onboard the Apollo 11 mission:

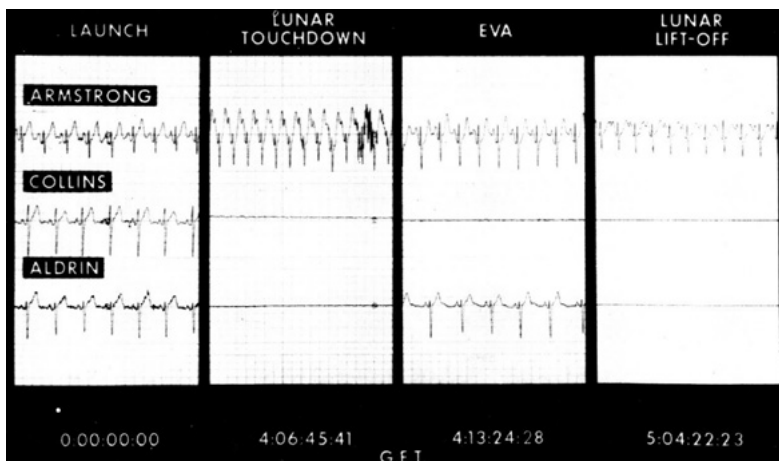


Figure 6. National Aeronautics and Space Administration. (n.d.). *Biomedical Results of Apollo 11*. In Johnston, R.S., Dietlein, L.F., & Berry, C.A., *Biomedical Results of Apollo* (p. 492). Washington, D.C., 1975

“We are on the line 157 337. We will repeat this message. We will repeat this on 6210 kilocycles. Wait.” The last message sent from the Model 10 Electra 1055 piloted by Amelia Earhart with navigator Fred Noonan after they took off from Lae Airfield, New Guinea, on July 2, 1937—before never being seen again. Earhart’s last radio message was estimated to be within 200 miles of her destination Howland Island.

In the chapter he titled, ‘When Wendy Grew Up’, J.M. Barrie recalls how Wendy tried, for Peter’s sake, not to have growing pains—and how she even felt untrue to him when she got the prize for general knowledge. But the years came and went without bringing the careless boy and Wendy eventually grew up and got married. All grown up with a daughter of her own, Peter visits her again one night while she’s sitting in front of the fire, sewing. She hears the crow call and the window blows open as of old, Peter dropping to the floor —looking the same as ever:

“He was a little boy, and she was grown up. She huddled by the fire not daring to move, helpless and guilty, a big woman. ‘Hallo, Wendy,’ he said, not noticing any difference, for he was thinking chiefly of himself; and in the dim light her dress might have been the nightgown in which he had seen her first. ‘Hallo, Peter,’ she replied faintly, squeezing herself as small as possible. Something inside her was crying, ‘Woman, woman, let go of me!’” (Barrie, 1989, p. 185–186).

The operation completed, Barnard and his team stood back: the new heart went into ventricular fibrillation. What was usually a sign of imminent death was here a sign of potential new life. The electric shock, administered to stop the heart so that it had a chance to begin to beat again in rhythm with itself, was strong enough to arch Washkansky’s back. They waited—it seemed forever. Then—the contraction of the atria, and the contraction of the ventricles in

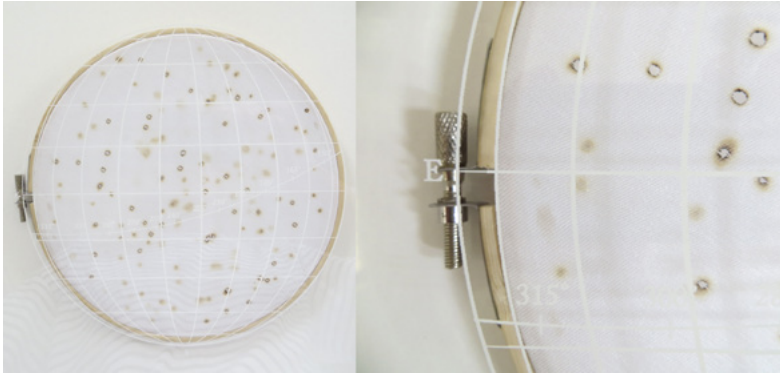


Figure 7. Liebenberg, N. (2013). Amelia [Handkerchief, sewing frame, screen print]. Burn holes made with a magnifying glass on a white handkerchief stretched over a sewing frame, which corresponds to the positioning of the stars as observed from the place, date and time Amelia Earhart sent her last broadcast. Private Collection.

response, and again, and again: “little by little it began to roll with the lovely rhythm of life” (Young, 2002, p. 81).

Denise’s heart continued to beat for eighteen days—then Washkansky died of pneumonia. And their beating heart stopped.

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# What Remains: Translating the Absence-Presence of Waste into Video Art

SONJA LAMPINEN,  
OLLI PYYHTINEN & NIINA UUSITALO

## Introduction

*What remains of that which no longer is? Whose ashes?*

How to make present—literally, *re-present*—in digital form and with audiovisual means, something that is not entirely present in the first place? How to *capture* and *enhance* such absence-presence through sound and moving image, translate it into audiovisual form? This was one of the motifs of our video installation “**What Remains?**” (2024) exhibited in June 2024 at the GIFTS/PRESENTS/PRESENCE exhibition at the Cable Factory in Helsinki. The installation is comprised of nine used tv sets which display three simultaneously running collage videos with scenes from ethnographic or “garbographic” fieldwork on waste, juxtaposed and merged with “digital excess” (see Olsson et al., 2023; Vigren et al., forthcoming) that was discovered online and appropriated by us for artistic use. The videos are accompanied by a poetic voiceover made up entirely of questions and a soundtrack conducted of digitally manipulated trash sounds. The poem also appeared in print in a booklet with covers hand-crafted out of waste materials.

In its indeterminacy (Hird, 2012), volatility and fluidity, waste challenges any simple binarism between present and absent. “Insofar as ontology is concerned with the being of things, it is insufficient to grapple with waste-things” (Doeland, 2020, p. 3), and therefore *hauntology* (see Derrida, 2006; Barad, 2010; Fisher, 2012), it has been suggested (Doeland, 2020), would perhaps be a more fitting term for the engagement with the “whatness” of waste. Haunting describes how that which appears to be not “there” is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, with the figure of the ghost being the sign or the empirical evidence which reveals that a haunting is taking place (Gordon, 2008, p. 8). As for waste, for example biowaste, people usually do not seek to get in touch with it or pursue close and lasting relations with it but wish to distance themselves from it; it is regarded as undesirable to live with and therefore tends to be expelled, discarded and abandoned to avoid contamination (see also Pyyhtinen et al. 2025).<sup>1</sup> This makes waste something that is constantly *under-erasure*. “Under erasure”—*sous rature* in French—is a literary practice of crossing out words. Made famous by Jacques Derrida (1986), who borrowed it from Martin Heidegger’s (1958, pp. 81, 83) manner of writing, in a letter to his friend, the word “Being” (*Sein*) crossed out, with an X through it, under erasure is a typographical means to cross out a word while allowing it to remain in place. However, whereas in Derrida’s work the gesture signifies that a word is “inaccurate yet necessary” (Spivak, 2016, p. xxii), we use it here (and in the title of

1 We acknowledge that this holds largely for the rich Global North. People living in the lower income countries of the Global South are to a disproportionate and unjust extent exposed to waste and to the harms and health risks related to it, since more affluent countries dump their waste there. Because of this necessity to live with and amongst waste, harvesting waste is a key economic activity in the Global South (Gregson & Crang, 2015; Carenzo, 2016).

our video installation) in a deliberately perverted way, to designate how waste is *redundant yet inerasable*.

While waste is constantly under erasure, it does not disappear but persistently remains in an uncanny absence-presence, as a material trace—or ghost—of that which once existed. Let us consider for instance the post-disposal ghostly presence of biowaste and how the rotting smell of mouldy, spoiled food tends to linger in the house after taking it out to the bin (see also Munro, 1995, p. 318). Such haunting makes waste a trace of an anterior presence: it embodies the absence of a past presence now present only as the trace of erasure.<sup>2</sup> Waste is what remains of an object that used-to-be but is-no-more (Pyyhtinen et al., 2023); after a thing has lost its value and is trashed, we have nothing else left of it but rubbish as its “degraded husk” (Scanlan, 2005, p. 16). While being something left behind that should therefore belong to the past, waste haunts us and with its disturbing presence unsettles our sense of order in the present. As erasure or effacement belongs to its very structure, waste is not a presence or entirely in presence. Yet, precisely because it refuses to be eliminated, it haunts, disturbs and even dislocates the present, our experience and any presence.

In this text, we explore two independent yet interrelated questions. The first has to do with *how to translate the absence-presence of waste into video format*. We take the concept of “translation” from philosopher Michel Serres (1982; 2007) and use it to refer to how things travel and are linked with each other. The notion suggests that when something is being transmitted or transported from one domain or point to another (e.g. between different languages), a

2 Traces or remains therefore embody multiple temporalities or *heterochronia*; “[t]he remain is not something neatly placed on the linear scale of old and new” (Parikka, 2018, pp. 6–7).

change is inevitable: what is transmitted or transported becomes different. Any mediation is therefore a process of transformation. In the text, we provide an account of an audiovisual translation of the absence-presence of waste, that is, how we used audiovisual means to explore waste hauntings—its uncanny phenomenality—artistically and provide those hauntings a space to manifest or *give themselves*. Drawing on Jean-Luc Marion’s (2002, p. 5) assertion that “[w]hat *shows itself*, first *gives itself*”, we understand the phenomenality of waste as manifestation and its manifestation as givenness.<sup>3</sup> This, following Marion, ultimately means considering its phenomenality from the perspective of the gift.

The second question is also connected to the gift, but from quite a different angle. The fact that a considerable amount of the raw video footage that we used in the making of the work consists of discovered and appropriated digital excess made the theme of the gift integral to the production process—the process was preconditioned by many kinds of gifts without the question of the gift necessarily surfacing and being always actually present and explicit. Contrary to the individualistic and artist-centred perception of art-making predominant still today, the video piece resulted from a process that was collective by nature. In his famous book *Art Worlds* ([1982] 2008), sociologist Howard Becker suggests that art, like any other human activity, involves cooperation. The artist is hardly ever able to make everything just by themselves, but they have to rely on the activities of several people, and therefore the works become what they are “through a network of coordinated activities carried on by a lot of different people” (Becker, [1982] 2008, p. xii; see also

3 To be precise, we understand that phenomenality not in terms of presence but as a “trace-structure” (see Butler, 2016); it is always haunted by something that is not entirely there.

Pyhtinen, 2012). Here, we explore that collective undertaking from the perspective of the gift, paying attention especially to *how the making of the video installation was preconditioned by different kinds of gifts*. This is also to say that the concept and practice of gift was present in our process throughout, albeit it took several forms during the course of making the work. Thereby, in what follows we are interested not only in what the gift may *mean* in the making of art but also in what it *does*: in what kind of relations, assemblages, and agencies it may foster, enact, and make possible.

### Givenness: from digital excess to gift

The crafting of our installation started with an exploration and hoarding of Internet archives, open access stock footage websites in particular, that contain a true abundance of digital excess of various kinds. We take the notion of excess from philosopher Georges Bataille (1984; 1988) and use it to refer to something that defies utility and exists in unnecessarily and undesirable amounts. On these criteria, we consider the stock footage material on the whole as a form of digital excess (see also Olsson et al., 2023; Vigren et al., forthcoming).

To get at waste in its multiplicity and indeterminacy, we experimented with different search terms that we thought might reflect the many meanings and manifestations of “waste” and also capture the wasteness of things that was left out in the categorising practices of the stock footage. We used words synonymous or close to “waste”, such as “junk”, “trash”, “residue”, “pollution” and “dirt”, verbs that have to do with the processes of something turning into waste, such as “decay” and “rot” as well as words denoting particular waste materials, such as “plastic bag” and “biowaste”. In addition to trying out different search terms, we took advantage of the suggestions presented by the algorithms of the sites. We also

wanted to explore imageries of consumption, commodities and the sleek aesthetics of advertising. This type of imagery has been the meat and bones of stock visuals from its origins: the glossy, formulaic, multipurpose representations of consumer wellbeing and corporate achievement (Frosh, 2001, p. 630). The digital haul for this imagery consisted of using search words such as “consumption”, “shopping center”, “conveyer belt”, “escalator”, “cosmetics”, “advertising”, “cars” and ultimately the colour “pink” which led to perfume, plastic flamingos and nail polish. In our video, the stereotypical imageries of consumption marked the consistent cognitive dissonance of capitalist societies where consumption is illusorily displayed as nonconsequential and disconnected from the production of waste. What is more, if consumer goods are fantasy objects containing the promise of a good and happy life, waste is material stripped of that fantasy. Waste is drained of its potential, an excess no longer serving any purpose.

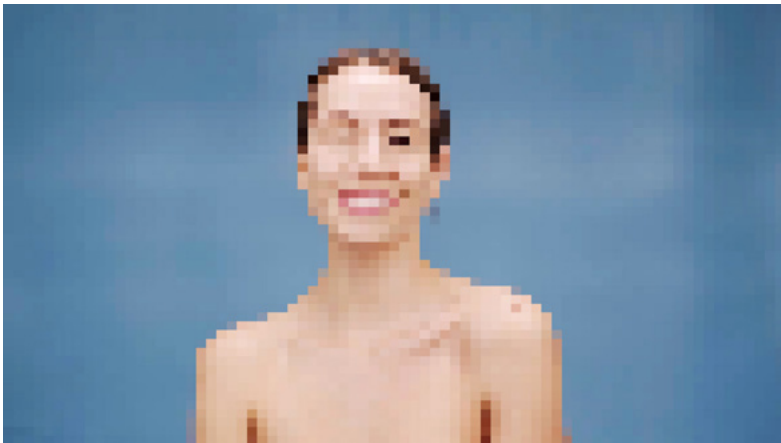


Figure 1-2: Lampinen, S.; Pyyhtinen, O. & Uusitalo, N. (2024). *Glossy stock video imagery of consumption* [screenshots from video piece].

When we were rummaging through the stock footage archives, we quite soon became aware how the imageries of waste were stereotypical much like those of consumption. This assumably stems from the standardisation and systematisation underlying the quasi-industrial production of visuals within the stock image industry (see Frosh, 2001). Word searches like “waste”, “trash” and “garbage” resulted in imageries displaying most typically plastic bottles and bags, whether floating in oceans or laying on beaches; of massive landfills especially in the Global South; and of waste sorting facilities and trash picking (again in the Global South). Curiously, what was almost completely absent from the free stock footage was biowaste: the formless goeey matter that once was something it no longer is. The category-evasive nature of biowaste is unsettling, and it does not seem to fit in the somewhat polished imagery that was dominant in the stock footage archives.



The gooeyness of waste was, however, present in our other digital material displayed in the installation: in the “garbographic” field-work footage consisting of videos shot with an action camera at a waste sorting facility in Pirkanmaa in Southern Finland and of videos shot with a phone at waste incineration plants.<sup>4</sup> The footage that resulted from the field work portrayed waste in a less consciously composed manner than the stock footage did. The field work footage shows both waste in its raw richness and the human involvement in managing it. The first-person perspective of the videos presents the garbographer’s point of view: the videos show practices of sorting and organising: acts of trash shovelling, picking up random objects in the trash piles and moving them into a bin. A close-up displays blue-gloved hands opening biowaste bags and exposing matter degraded beyond recognition. The field work videos also present the heterogeneity of the trash matter: a mixture of dolls and other toys, diapers, rotten food, clothing and unrecognisable items that are presently unidentifiable.

4 The neologism “garbography” is a combination of the terms “garbology” and “ethnography”. The concept of garbology was made famous by archaeologist William Rathje in the context of a project that he developed in the early 1970s to study our contemporary remains—that is, rubbish—to understand the world in which we live (Rathje and Murphy, 1992; Rathje, 1996). However, whereas Rathje and his colleagues focused on the cultural meanings of such residuals, we are equally interested in how they may not necessarily be directly translatable to verbal language, and yet be given to our senses.



Lampinen, S.; Pyyhtinen, O. & Uusitalo, N. (2024). *Footage from garbographic fieldwork* [screenshot from video piece].

The ways in which we appropriated digital content from the Internet to be used in and for our installation bears some resemblance with the practices of the artistic legacy of “found object” (*objet trouvé*). Originally, found objects appeared as part of the Surrealist movement and were exhibited the first time as part of the 1936 *Surrealist Exhibition of Objects*, together with for example readymade objects, Surrealist objects, natural objects and perturbed objects. Of them all, found objects have the most in common with readymade objects, made famous by Marcel Duchamp. By being objects that were not originally created as art but only displayed as such, both challenge accustomed expectations of what makes something “art”. Both also lack “obvious aesthetic quality” and involve only relatively little intervention on the part of the artist beyond putting the object in circulation (Iversen, 2004, p. 48). However, whereas readymades are mundane manufactured objects selected and modified by the artist, the category of found objects may include not only artifacts but also natural objects.

The digital contents we found and appropriated differ from how found objects are perceived in the artistic tradition in that the first did have an aesthetic quality to them, as it was clear that they were stylised and created into aesthetic objects. Their aesthetics was just originally located perhaps in a somewhat different register than the one into which we (dis)placed them. However, what for us makes it fruitful to consider the contents in relation to the tradition of found objects is the fact that they were *found*.

Interestingly, the “foundness” of the contents also connects them to the question of the gift, resonating especially with the philosophical notion of *givenness*. In *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger points out that being (*Sein*) and time (*Zeit*) cannot be observed in the empirical world. Nevertheless, he continues, “there is” or “it gives” (*es gibt*) being and “there is” or “it gives” time. Later, Derrida based his thinking of the gift on this phenomenological notion of givenness. For Derrida (1994), any gift needs to be thought on the basis of the “it gives”. In his approach, the gift is another name for being: just as being is not in beings, that is, in the things that are, the gift is not a being or a thing. And yet “there is” or “it gives” the gift.

Marion’s work might help to further clarify the idea of givenness. In *Being Given* (2002, p. 34), Marion suggests that “Being, insofar as it differs from beings, appears immediately in terms of givenness”. Being is not, only beings are, but being is *given*. And, he adds: “Being withdraws from beings because it gives them” (p. 36). At the heart of Marion’s thinking of the gift lies the question of phenomenality. Unlike Edmund Husserl, who asserted that an intentional object is constituted by intuition, Marion gives the *appearing* of phenomena the initiative; one must let phenomena manifest themselves. Marion thus considers phenomenality in terms of manifestation, which he addresses on the basis of givenness. And, most importantly, Marion’s model of givenness comes from the gift. Like Derrida, he draws the

notion of givenness from Heidegger's *es gibt*, which he translates as *cela donne*, "it gives", rather than as *il y a*, "there is". So, Marion understands the gift on the basis of the phenomenological idea of givenness drawn from the *es gibt*, and considers givenness from the perspective the gift.<sup>5</sup>

We acknowledge that the digital contents we appropriated do not manifest themselves as gifts only within the context of givenness. As the uploaders of the videos are often production companies or amateur videographers seeking to be discovered professionally, the stock footage does not necessarily constitute a free gift that would be without any expectations of exchange or reciprocity. Some expectation of reciprocity is involved, even though the giving of the material may not be characterised by any strict obligation to reciprocate.<sup>6</sup> In any case, insofar as there is no explicit monetary payment required for their use, the videos can be considered as gifts (see Mauss, [1924] 2008; Gouldner, 1960; Caplow, 1984). If a gift is something given by someone to someone else, in this particular case the recipient of the gift remains anonymous and unknown to the donor; the videos can be regarded as gifts given to the larger unspecified community of users. While the footage material is assumably meant to be found, a vast majority of the videos will probably never be received, taken

5 For an informative discussion of the debate around the given and the gift, see Milbank (2006).

6 Here, we have chosen to reciprocate the gift received. We express our gratitude to the following video creators for uploading their material online for free use: ad urpina, aleksey-skatchkov, Andrey Kirievskiy, Anna Shvets, CONR4D R, Cottonbro studios, Coverr, Dan Cristian Pădureț, Engin Akuyrt, Erkan Avanoğlu, FishHuntFloridaOutdoors, Free Stock Footage Archive, HieuNghiaMini, Ivan Samkov, Jill Burrow, Kelly, KoolShooters, Mart Production, Miguel Á. Padriñán, Mikhail Nilov, Monstera Production, Nicky Pe, Nino Souza, Peggy Anke, Pixabay, Pressmaster, Ron Lach, Shiny Diamond, SHVETS production, Taryn Elliot, Thanapat Kamparn, The Marc Knight, Tom Fisk, Werni, Zak Chapman.

up and used by anyone but quite likely end up as digital excess: as nothing but endless ones and zeros in the circuits of hard drives that require mining of precious minerals and enormous flows of electricity to exist.

Despite the fact that the digital contents were given by the people who created them, to us in the process of making the video installation, the contents manifested themselves primarily within the framework of givenness. The materials were simply already there, *in their givenness*, irrespective of us and without our intervention. Not-knowing, uncertainty and the uncontrollability of the gift pertained thereby both to those who had made and shared the materials and to us alike. Whereas the makers could not control and know how and whether anyone would receive and use their stuff,<sup>7</sup> we did not know in advance what we might find, or whether we would find anything usable at all. Both the givenness of the material and that it was given in order to be found was nevertheless the precondition of our work and established the very possibility of making it.

As the appropriated content lacked any intention of giving it *to us*, our practice could to some extent be seen as *parasitic*. According to Serres (2007), the parasite always takes and never gives. While the parasite therefore appears as a reverse of the gift, also interrupting and violating the norm of reciprocity, the free gift could be argued even to be dependent on the act of parasitism; at least for us this was the case in the making of the installation. While the givenness of the digital excess had to do with the *generosity of things* which made the artistic work possible, the givenness simultaneously presupposed another pole beyond that of the object that manifests itself;

7 None of them could therefore be said to have deliberately and intentionally given their accomplishments to us for our artistic use; on the contrary, they had no way of foreseeing that what they were making would later be appropriated by us for our specific purposes

namely, the appropriating artists. In other words, someone had to use the material. Givenness cannot therefore be considered only in terms of the object that manifests and gives itself, but the question of what occurs must be accompanied by the questions of to whom it occurs as well as who acts; the relationship needs a subjective pole (see also Pyyhtinen, 2014; Pyyhtinen & Lehtonen, 2023). What was uploaded to the Internet by the producers of the material needed to be appropriated by us as excess for a gift to appear. Or, more exactly, the action involved in the giftness of the digital content was tripartite: it necessitated at once (1) the makers of the objects *giving them to anonymous, unspecified others* while the objects oftentimes in fact *end up as excess*; (2) the objects *which gave themselves* (so that we were able to appropriate them); and (3) us *who appropriated the objects*. All of these were needed; the giving, givenness and appropriation alike.

Our parasitic practice was thereby also a matter of transforming and translating excess into gifts. The stock footage sites offer platforms for generosity, parasitism and reciprocity in addition to functioning as dumping sites and recycling centres for masses of visual data that can also be considered as excess due to their sheer amount. The way we appropriated this excess transformed them into gifts, whereas in the relations with the people contributing to our piece directly, the gift was present there from the start.

### Leaky videos and collage

The aesthetic decisions we made in the process of editing video footage integrated kinetic, rhythmic, luminous, pictorial, musical, tonal and textural dimensions (see also Vannini, 2014, p. 238). We wanted to explore, present and enhance the feeling of the uncanny absence-presence of waste also acoustically by creating a growing background noise or cacophony to make the increasing presence

of accumulative residuals viscerally felt. Towards the end of the soundtrack, the noise becomes overwhelming and close to unbearable, creating a sense of discomfort. In addition to showing waste that manifests its presence visibly, by engaging with audio the installation also aims to re-present waste materials that do not show themselves in presence as evidently as others, such as radioactive waste and microplastics. In pursuit of making present what is simultaneously both hidden or opaque and physically present in our everyday lives, we harnessed the video and sound design to facilitate these kinds of encounters.

Video enables making the interconnectedness of consumption and waste visible, for instance through sequencing and double exposure. Different elements and, thus, the emotional responses to them are present at the same time. Through editing and cross-illuminations there is also the possibility for estrangement, pointing to fractures in the uniform and glossy surface of the consumer society imagery. We created three videos which enabled us to juxtapose the activities of consuming, wasting and flinging waste matter. The juxtaposition of the videos is indebted to the aesthetic tradition of *collage*, introduced by Cubism in the early 20th century (Davidson, 2007, p. 6). One of the three videos incorporates imagery of waste and excess, images of landfills, waste sorting facilities and other images portraying waste more referentially or symbolically. The second video portrays consumption-related practices and imagery, where waste itself is for the most part absent while the processes leading to it are present. Wasteness is often hiding in plain sight: we let ourselves forget its existence and how our mundane practices produce waste. The consumer society is upheld by accepted hedonism; by closing one's eyes, looking away. The third video portrays material of different kinds of liquids, foams and bubbles moving and floating. The images are not always directly related to waste, but

their restlessness is nevertheless intended to allude to the vibrancy of waste matter (see Bennett, 2010): its spillovers, leakages, flows and mobilities.

There were several reasons for why we found collage as an apt and fruitful technique to represent the leaky realities of waste and its hauntings. First of all, like waste, collage explicitly disrupts and undermines the illusion of unity and order. In our video installation, this manifested for example in how we deliberately left the divergence and heterogeneity of the materials visible instead of hiding, taming or erasing them. The seams and joints are there to be clearly seen. Secondly, as the fragments of which a collage consists refer to a larger whole that is not visible and present, absence is an integral element of the collage technique. This, we feel, also makes it a useful means of artistically working with the absence-presences of waste. The video piece is haunted by what is left out, and what is present retains a reference to what remains absent. Thirdly, embodying polyphony, multiplicity and even anonymity, the collage technique undoes the romantic individualist conception of making art. This connects with the aforesaid collective nature of making art conditioned and made possible by gifts given and received. For us, collage also bore a connection to waste, insofar as searching for, recovering and appropriating the excess stock materials to some extent likened the practice of dumpster diving (see Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2020).

The multiple unruly perspectives offered by the stock videos and field work footage videos is what allowed us to adopt the collage technique in the first place. The perspectives were given to us, chosen by someone else, and a certain element of otherness was inscribed in the stock videos due to their fragmentary situatedness and spatial and temporal disunity. We wanted to include the fragmentariness of the clips in the narrative of the video, meaning that we did not

intentionally try to produce a seamlessly flowing unity. We also used effects to corrupt and pervert the material even further for instance by pixelating video material, distorting the colour balance and adding solarising effects and effects that mimic the decay of film. At the same time, certain internalised storytelling conventions probably had an impact on our editing choices. Whilst the collage technique enabled us to juxtapose disparate elements and footage, we inevitably also created order by organising the fragmentary materials into more or less cohesive sequences. The voiceover also directed us in the editing process to include certain clips and reject others, choices which stemmed from an aesthetic consideration of the expression and flow of the video.

The unruliness and givenness of the video materials worked in our favour: the pre-given discontinuity between the individual video clips and the uncontrollability of their substance allowed us to rearrange the materials so as to reflect the many aspects and sites of the lives of waste and their intertwinement and displacement with acts of consumption. The result would have most likely been quite different had we tailored the materials to fit our purposes from the very beginning. This way, the givenness of materials also had epistemological significance: they enabled us to explore waste from perspectives we had not chosen ourselves in the first place. The givenness of the perspectives and compositions contributed to the otherness of the materials and therefore perhaps enabled us to treat them with curiosity and playfulness that would have not been possible (or the same) had the video clips been products of our own planning and composition. The distance and disconnection to the materials and the limited control over them brought a certain ease to the process. The decision not to shoot any material ourselves for this particular piece liberated us from having to create something from scratch. Making the work therefore became a matter of

rearranging, reframing and recomposing. The materials we had in our use were perhaps “neither best nor the most adequate” (Bann, 1988), as Pablo Picasso has commented on the epistemological possibilities of the otherness that arrives with adopting the collage technique. Nevertheless, they were just right for this piece after all.

We intentionally wanted to let the displayed materials influence and shape the form of the work, meaning that we wanted the videos to reflect the tendency of waste to leak, both spatially and temporally, as well as its capability to dissolve categories (Hird, 2012; Engelmann, 2022). Rendering this leakage visible meant creating synchronicities between the three videos: aligning chosen video clips between the different video pieces. Every now and then, for example, the same video material would flow through all the (or several) monitors, regardless of the borders they establish. With this, we wanted to create an overflow emulating the accumulation of human-made residuals and discards and the incompleteness of ordering and containing their flows.

Ultimately, in our video installation, the “ghost” is embodied by the act of representation itself. First of all, the video format could never fulfil the mimetic aim and succeed in capturing the “wastefulness” of waste as such in its full viscosity; rather, the moving image is merely a *sign* of waste, a translation, if you will, giving it a new event in a different medium.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, there is always an incompleteness to the individual images to be found in the video installation: the spectator can only see—and in some cases hear—the waste, without being able to physically touch it, smell it or taste it. In addition to the sensual relationship with the displayed waste materials being mostly reduced to vision, the audiovisual renderings

8 As the referent, waste itself, is forever absent in the sign, absence and otherness are inscribed in the structure of the sign (see also Derrida, 2016).

or translations of waste in our video piece remain incomplete also due to a temporal gap or distance: the work attests to the reality of the materials only in a past tense. The reality that it presents and makes visible and audible is something that-has-been but is-no-more. Nevertheless, for us, the video format therefore offers itself as a privileged medium to explore the absent-present nature of waste as fluid, leaky and unruly matter.

### Words and trash sounds

The three videos of our installation contain a poetic voiceover read in an ethereal, dispassionate and disillusioned female voice (that belongs to Maija Sura). The text written for the voiceover bears a debt to *The Book of Questions* ([1974] 1991) by Pablo Neruda and *Sunset Debris* (1986; orig. 1978) by avantgarde poet Ron Silliman in that like them, it too consists entirely of questions. For Neruda, the question format meant bracketing what one knows and adopting a childlike wonder so that “what was learned is forgotten” and can therefore “be learned again” (O’Daly, 1991, p. xii). It is also characteristic of the 316 questions composing the 74 poems of Neruda’s book that “no rational answers exist” to them (O’Daly, 1991, p. x). One striking difference between Neruda’s and Silliman’s books is that whereas many Neruda’s poems deal with such natural objects as the moon, clouds, rivers, bread, lemons and sunlight, Silliman’s poetry contains explicit sexual language. Another differentiating factor is that while Neruda’s questions are akin to solitary contemplation, containing an isolated speaker speaking all by and to themselves, Silliman explores with the question format the relationship or social contract between the writer and the reader. Unlike with Neruda, with Silliman the unanswerable questions do not so much “reawaken the imagination to the quiet possibilities of wonder and awe” (O’Daly, 1991, p. xii) but bring to the fore the power asymmetry between the writer and the

reader, “remind[ing] the reader of her or his inability to respond” (Silliman in an interview by Beckett, 1985, p. 45).

Like Neruda’s and Silliman’s questions, the poetic questions posed in the voiceover accompanying the moving image in our installation reside in the unknown. They are already in principle unanswerable. Yet, rather than presenting a plumb line dropped to the depths of human existence, or exploring the relationship between the speaking voice and the spectator, we connect the openness of the question format primarily with the indeterminacy of waste. While a significant part of social scientific work on waste tends to lay emphasis on the management—determination—of waste framed in terms of technological solutions, laws, policies and business models (Gregson and Crang, 2010; Hird, 2012), with the question format we wanted to address the unruliness and indeterminacy of waste. Nothing is inherently and by its essence waste, but things become waste in situated practices, processes, and relations, and thus “anything and everything can become waste” (Hird, 2012, p. 454). Myra Hird (2012) has examined the implications of such indeterminacy for knowing waste. She draws on the work of Karen Barad (2012, p. 16), who suggests that “indeterminacy, in its finite openness, is the condition for the possibility of all structures in their dynamically reconfiguring in/stabilities”.<sup>9</sup> Barad also suggests that “[m]atter is never a settled matter. It is always already radically open. Closure can’t be secured when the conditions of im/possibilities and lived indeterminacies are integral, not supplementary, to what matter is” (Ibid., p. 16; see also Bennett, 2010).

9 For critiques of the indeterminacy of waste, see Gille (2013) and Ekman Burgman (2024).

With the question format, we also wanted to disrupt the definitiveness of conventional academic texts. Whereas scientific argumentation characteristically consists of statements about states of affairs, turning statements into questions, as Silliman (1985) aptly puts it in an interview, “creates a verbal vortex that becomes increasingly explosive as the reader becomes increasingly disoriented”. Questions leave room for openness, gaps, indefiniteness and subjective interpretation. The questions in the voiceover deliberately remain uncontextualised: the spectator for example has no way of knowing who the “I”, “you”, or “we” appearing in the questions is and the specific nature of their mutual relationships. The questions also appear as seemingly unconnected fragments as if they were the remains of conversations, of a time long gone, or of fragments addressed from the future. And sometimes the questions in the voiceover are deceptively parallel. In addition, we deliberately left it open for the viewer to decide whether the voiceover consists of several voices or just one.

Yet, the human voice is not the only sound audible in the three videos; it is accompanied by *noise*.<sup>10</sup> We regard waste and noise isomorphic in the sense that both tend to be perceived as something disturbing to be therefore excluded. The book *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949) by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver famously presents communication as the emission of messages by the sender to the receiver, transmitted via a channel. According to this model, optimal communication is achieved only by excluding noise. It assumes that the basic state of any system of

10 To keep the focus of the two audio tracks on the words spoken, the human voice was nevertheless placed in the front, as we did not want the noise to become too disturbing and distracting. It is, however, fascinating to speculate with the idea of what kind of sound design would have been produced, if noise had been given precedence.

communication is not equilibrium, but communication is constantly met with obstacles disturbing optimal transmission. The noise we inserted into the videos complicates this idea of communication. Following Serres (2007, p. 79), it can be argued that noise is not external to a system of communication but part of the system itself. What is more, Serres puts forth the radical claim that ultimately communication succeeds thanks to noise, not in spite of it. Noise is therefore at once *both* an obstacle to the proper functioning of a system communication *and* necessary for it. No system is perfect; systems work because they don't work (Serres, 2007, p. 72). There is no communication without noise. For example, whilst regional accent, mumbling, stammering and cacophony tend to disturb oral communication—just as writing is liable to the noise of spelling errors, ill-drawn graphs and bad penmanship—speech and writing could get rid of perturbations of this kind for good only at the expense of eliminating voice and graphs that are essential to their own being; there is no speech or writing without them (Serres, 1982: 2007, pp. 66–70). To eliminate all noise, one would have to also eliminate the channel of communication itself (see also Pyyhtinen, 2014).

In our videos, noise was manifested for example in the form of seagulls, different kinds of machinery, people talking and a radio blasting in the background, yet its main manifestation were *trash sounds*: rustling of plastic and other materials that were present in the field work videos of mixed waste piles of the sorting facility and created by researchers shovelling and picking up trash. *Does it have a voice?* We picked and dissected this sonic material to represent trash sounds in general, while acknowledging that not all trash sound like this—some may make no noise at all. The strengthening presence of trash sounds was part of one of the work's two audio tracks; the other one just had the voiceover without any trash sounds (but some digitally created noise as a backdrop). In the

editing process, the trash sounds were subjected to manipulation by digital audio software. We altered their pitch by dropping it several semitones in order to create a dark, menacing and ominous tone for the trash. The sounds were also slightly distorted to achieve a somewhat eerie and otherworldly, *uncanny*, feeling, compatible with the idea of waste hauntings. The sonic trace that resulted from this manipulation was some kind of moist and bodily or fleshy rustling: like someone or something treading, crawling or floundering about in a trash pile.

Another layer of trash sounds present in the sound design of the audio tracks was created by filtering higher frequencies from the trash sound. We used phase distortion to alter the phase relationships between the frequencies which decreased the crispness and harshness of the sound. This effect also creates frequencies that were not present in the recording. What came out of this process was a thunder-like low frequency rumble. We also used the de-noise function to get rid of some of the background noise in order to focus and amplify the actual sounds made by the trash rather than amplifying the sounds of its environment. These altered trash sounds were accompanied by brown noise created with the audio software.

Ultimately, we wanted the continuous background noise in one of the audio tracks and the strengthening trash sounds in the other to reflect the leakage and flow of waste materials. Much like noise, waste is persistently present in our practices, whether visible or not. Serres writes in *Genesis*:

Background noise may well be the ground of our being. It may be that our being is not at rest, it may be that it is not in motion, it may be that our being is disturbed. The background noise never ceases; it is limitless, continuous, unchanging. It has itself no background, no contradictory. (Serres, 1995, p. 13)

Our approach for this sound design was to use materials that were already there, which of course limits the possibilities of listening with trash. The trash sounds in our installation are largely human-mediated since they are a result of physical interaction with the trash. An interesting question lies in what trash might sound like when it is not subjected to human activity (apart from listening and recording) but for example to microbial interventions, a question we also posed in the voiceover: *What sound do decomposing things make?*

## The material installation

Assembling the installation from given materials also meant submitting to their “affordances” (Gibson, 1979). As we discussed earlier, we don’t see this submission and conditioning as a limitation only but also as a possibility. Ultimately, our edited videos became part of a material and analogue installation which was built in the exhibition space. To make the installation possible, we also relied on the efforts of people we know. The support that we received can in itself be regarded as a gift. It underlines not only how the objects given as gifts—such as the used analogous TV sets that we received—do not have to be precious or prestigious to count as gifts,<sup>11</sup> but also that gifts are not restricted to objects; also generous assistance, gestures of support and acts of solidarity can amount to gifts. The voiceover was kindly read by the partner of the second author, the layout for the booklet was done by his brother, and a researcher, artist and poet acquaintance gave advice with the booklet design, materials and printing. The TV sets, monitors and media players were lent to us by the visual jockey collective Random Doctors. We also received

11 Marcel Mauss ([1925] 2008, pp. 6–7) too notes that valuables or economically useful things form only a portion of the things exchanged in the archaic gift exchange.

invaluable dedicated technical support and expertise from several people thanks to which the installation happened regardless to the capricious nature of the chosen technology.

We incorporated as much existing electronic excess as we could find in our homes, and upon meeting up the limitations of these material archives, we turned to other places of deserted things, such as recycling centres. One set of headphones, for example, was bought from a recycling centre and after they had served as part of this installation we took them back as a donation. An audio cord was also bought from a store and then gifted to one of the contributors after the exhibition. The givenness of the materials also meant considering not so much what would be ideal or the best for the installation as what was available at hand. Rather than constituting only a negative restriction for the execution of the work, this also made possible perspectives and liberties that would not have actualised and made their way to the installation had we not chosen to repurpose already existing materials.

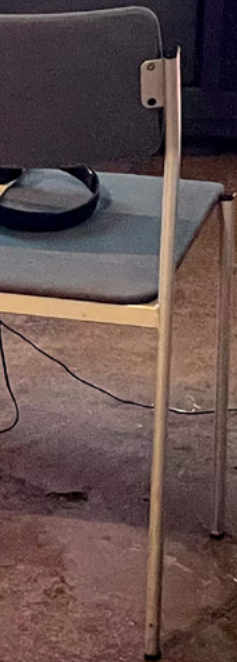
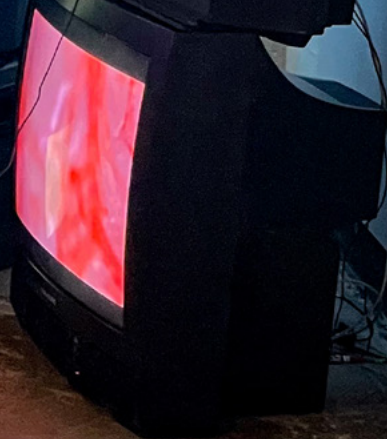
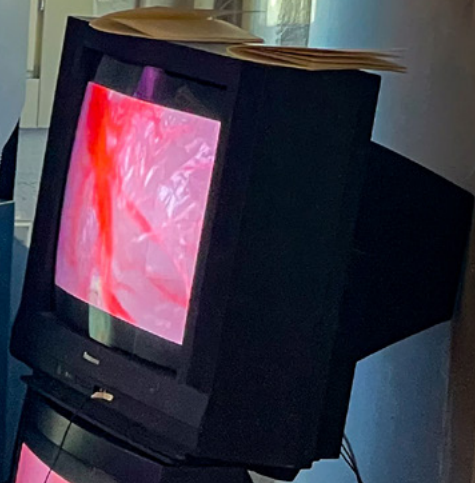
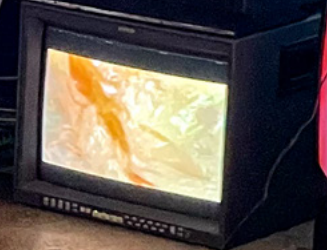
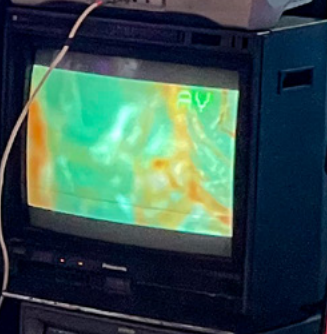
The television sets used in the installation were originally rescued from ending up as waste at a recycling centre some ten years ago and, since then, they have made several appearances in music videos, festivals and installations. We thought that using the picture tube TV sets—remains of a near technological past—would be fitting in our pursuit of exploring the temporal and material leakage of waste. We wanted to create an encounter with “the outdated kind” as well as their entanglements with our presents and futures. Together with the videos and the voiceover, the piled-up TV sets formed a wall of past and present technologies, showing imageries of our present and past, asking questions in the present and from the perspective of an imaginary successor from an imagined future.

The TV sets themselves posed certain limits and possibilities to the installation. With the tube TVs and media players, certain unplanned features arrived in the installation: for example, the high-pitched sounds some of TVs filled the installation space, and some of the equipment had special needs and required specific attention. We quickly found out that the old-timey technology did not always obey us and our requests. Some buttons required “a magic touch”: they needed to be pushed in a very particular way in order to function. In this way, the given materials themselves set a framework for the shape of the installation: we had to calibrate other elements of the installation to obey the limitations posed by the TV sets and media players. The uncertainty and unruliness of the materials was present in the technology used, as well as in the subject matter portrayed in the videos displayed through them.<sup>12</sup>

The installation required ongoing maintenance and care (see e.g. Jackson, 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Denis & Pointille, 2023) also from our colleagues and the gallery attendants: it had to be resurrected every day with methods that were dictated by the whims of the technology at hand. Since the obedience of the technology was not to rely on, the installation also took several forms during the exhibition. Some of the monitors stopped working momentarily and one of them gasped their last breath during the course of the exhibition.

12 Another manifestation of an unexpected outcome from working with different technologies occurred when we combined the three videos into a triptych in editing software: a mysterious digital interference effect appeared. Despite our efforts to erase it, it remained in the final version. You can find the triptych at this link: <https://vimeo.com/1028759522>.





The choice for repurposing and recycling materials that “were already there” to a certain extent artistically reflects the waste-as-a-resource paradigm that dominates circular economy models (Zavos & Pyyhtinen, 2024). In our treatment, the electronic and digital excess was transformed into a resource and then repurposed into the installation. In the context of the stock video footage, though, the material that was recycled and repurposed still remained where we found it. In this sense, the way we used the stock videos did not alter the actual source material itself but left it untouched, and therefore the reuse was not so much an act of recycling as an act of multiplying the existing material.

## Conclusion

Our chapter was structured around two questions which were important to our video installation “*What Remains?*” The first dealt with how one could translate the absence-presences of waste into video format. Waste haunts humans and society despite being constantly under erasure. No matter how hard people work to eliminate waste, it does not disappear but sticks around and disturbs us. The uncanny absence-presence of waste can be felt even in clean, smooth surfaces and ordered spaces, because of the collectively produced vast amounts of waste as their reverse side. The waste is only removed out of sight, thereby generating waste somewhere else, as sardonically described by Italo Calvino (1978) in his story of the city of Leonia. Every night, the street cleaners diligently move outside the city the discards produced by the inhabitants during the day, so that in the morning people can wake up to a world where everything is clean, fresh and new again and keep on discarding. What the inhabitants of Leonia don’t know, however, is that the discards resulting from the daily renewal keep accumulating at the outskirts of the city, as yesterday’s rejectamenta are piled up on those

of the day before yesterday and of all previous days, so that the city is surrounded by large mountains of “indestructible leftovers” and will eventually become buried under them.<sup>13</sup>

In our installation, the imagery of consumption expressed this blissful ethical ignorance, which nevertheless cannot entirely rid itself of the unpleasant, vague feeling of the never-ending and increasing accumulation of waste. Waste keeps haunting us. We also wanted to intensify the feeling of the uncanny absence-presence of waste by audiovisual means, for example by adding growing background noise and displaying different kinds of opaque liquids, foams and bubbles in movement where waste is not exactly visible and present but somehow still haunting the imagery, much like some residuals and abject materials—such as microplastics—are there and affect us even though they cannot be seen by the bare eye. So, in our video installation we aspired to not only artistically explore waste hauntings but also provide those hauntings spaces to manifest and *give themselves*.

The second main question we explored concerned the significance of gift(s) for the making of our installation. While the work was of course a collective undertaking already for the sheer reason that there were three of us,<sup>14</sup> the collectivity and relational dependencies conditioning the making of the work extended far beyond just us three. Along us and with us, we had numerous other contributors whose efforts were indispensable for the work, as we relied on the convergent and interdependent efforts of many people. Our

13 The example of Leonia has also been used in discard studies by Corvellec (2016).

14 What is more, we cannot resist the temptation to add that insofar as each of us are also multiplicities to begin with, “there was already quite a crowd”—as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari famously describe their collaboration in writing the book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987, p. 3).

relationships with them were to a great extent *mediated by gifts*.<sup>15</sup> First of all, we scavenged the visual archives of the Internet for stock videos. The givenness of the video material—and the fact that it was put out there, given for free—in a sense amounted to a primordial gift that made it possible for us to make the work in the first place. Occasionally, our practice of appropriating the found video material was more or less parasitical, as we just took it without giving anything in return (until now, that is, as here we expressed our gratitude to the creators of the materials in the footnote no. 6). This goes to show the gifting as an assemblage or chain where immaterial and ephemeral gifts such as insights, feelings and communication are beaded together with visible and tangible gifts in the form of spaces, technology and materials.

In the case of stock footage archives, we did not personally know the creators of the content whom we were placed in connection with by our appropriation and use. By contrast, when making the work we also relied on the help of people whom we already knew. Partly out of necessity, we reached out to people who we thought might want to give us a hand in making the installation happen. Here, the pre-existing relationships we had with these people facilitated the gifting. The notion of reciprocity did not necessarily need to be established in the moment of asking for help, as it was already there and made the gift relationship possible. It was, however, present for example when one of the contributors, when asked what they would like in return for their efforts, asked us to do something in solidarity with the people of Palestine. Yet, there was no expectation of accountability present apart from appealing to our conscience. The

15 Practices of giving and receiving were present in the working process also among the three of us, from the first phases of formulating and exchanging ideas to receiving critique and ultimately building the actual installation.

potential reciprocity was thereby built on trust: its actualisation was left on our responsibility sometime in the future.

So, there were at least three different types of gifts conditioning the production process: firstly, the *free gifts* given by the creators of the videos to the larger unspecified community of users and that we appropriated; secondly, the *givenness* of the materials as simply there, as a form of excess; and, thirdly, the solidarity-based *aid* that we received as a gift from the people we already knew. This heterogeneity importantly suggests that gifts do not constitute a homogeneous class of objects, but the word 'gift' may involve a number of very different practices and questions; as Marcel Hénaff (2020, p. 17) insists, "there is no such thing as "the gift"; there are only various gift practices". The gift is not one, but multiple (see also Pyyhtinen, 2014; Pyyhtinen & Lehtonen, 2023).

Insofar as the givenness of the stock videos comprised a primordial gift which significantly conditioned the making of the installation, our artistic practice relied to a great extent on excess. Were it not for the existence of footage material in excess in the archive, we would never have been able to complete our work. At the same time, what became evident throughout the process was that our own practices themselves inadvertently ended up creating digital excess unless consciously prevented. The residuals of writing and editing processes easily end up accumulating in hard drives: the notes, images and sounds saved for potential later use (whether it ever comes or not) take up space. This tendency of hoarding information, data or other digital materials often happens as if by default. The ostensible immateriality of digital materials makes the hoarding easy, and to act against it requires conscious choices and "hygiene" practices in the digital environments. Of course, not even such practices can entirely prevent the generation of digital excess; contemporary communication increasingly takes place via digital media, and

the ones and zeros required to facilitate this communication need to be stored somewhere. Our hybrid practices always end up creating digital residuals and traces in need of some kind of management.<sup>16</sup>

the ones and zeros required to facilitate this communication need to be stored somewhere. Our hybrid practices always end up creating digital residuals and traces in need of some kind of management.<sup>16</sup>

What happens in the shadow of the... What the... condense and contain the unruly matter. survival than our (indestructible) leftovers?

(The textual landfill ab ve features excess text accumulated and discarded in the process of writing this chapter.)

- 16 This work was financially supported y the European Union [ERC, WasteMatters, grant number:101043572], the Research Council of Finland [DECAY, grant number: 350191] and the Kone Foundation [GIFT, grant number 202009490]. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author only and not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency or any other funder named. Neither the European Union nor the granting authorities can be held responsible for them.

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# Blankets, Dust and Larch Tree Needles – Reflections on Exchange

DENISE ZIEGLER, NIILLO RINNE

*A conversation between Denise Ziegler and Niilo Rinne, whose works *The Given* (Ziegler, 2024) and *The Present in Process* (Rinne, 2024) were installed next to each other on the floor near the back wall of the exhibition space.<sup>1</sup> The idea of this text is to revisit the works exhibited in the group exhibition in our minds, and to talk about what might happen when works from different starting points are placed next to each other for a short while. The text is an attempt to give voice to the works exhibited in a context, to follow leads of aesthetic attunements, and to exchange our (mis)interpretations.*

**DZ:** The title of your work is: *The Present in Process*. Do you mean “present” as in “gift” or as in “present moment”?

**NR:** The work is open to interpretation and I hope it can be freely experienced as just a beautiful and/or interesting assemblage of

- 1 The conference–exhibition Gift/ Presence/ Presents – Meanings and Materialities was held in June 2024, focusing on how recent changes and challenges in technology, genetics, politics, and bioethics have affected our existing ideas of gift-giving and gift exchange, and how they invite us to rethink the gift.

Figure 1. Ziegler, D. (2024). *The Given* [sculpture]. Rinne, N. (2024). *The Present in Process* [assemblage]. © Denise Ziegler [image].

objects without even knowing the title. But thematically the temporal and situation specific aspects were more in my mind when creating the work. I wanted the work to provoke reflection on what is happening right at the moment when it is being perceived and experienced, and underline the value of the shared moment of the exhibition-conference event we had created together. That's why a round concave mirror that reflects the whole exhibition space Valssaamo was placed in the installation, since it mediates a kind of live footage of everything that happens around the work. Because of the reflection, everyone became part of the work.

In the Finnish language we can't play with the shifting meanings between the words *gift* and *present*, because we only have "*lahja*", and this notion that in the Finnish language we have some challenges in unleashing the potential of gift theory was something new that I learned during this project. That's why the title of my work doesn't translate in its full capacity from English to Finnish; perhaps we should invent new vocabulary in Finnish. I also found it difficult to use the word *gift* in the context of art, so I ended up using *present*, which in my opinion opens more interesting relations and widens horizons for artistic and philosophical exploration.

And *now* as I write this text, and *now* when you read this, we are processing the artwork, so in that sense the title can also be seen as a reference to studies on memory and time, and how the past is present in every moment, and how we are constantly processing and rewriting our past, so that it best and as coherently as possible suits our present needs and future visions. The past is not gone, but lives with us, if we remember it, and this is something I wish from my work, that it would be remembered and thus could continue its life in the future. A kind of a small box of curiosities that would keep on giving. The title can also suggest that the present is yet to come, and that it's in the process of becoming.

**NR:** Your title is *The Given*. What is given and by who to whom?

**DZ:** *The Given* is a small sculpture consisting of wood, plywood, woven fabric, and larch tree needles. It is a reconstruction of a possible situation in urban space, depicting the growth of something organic in a narrow gap between two similar units. *The Given* points to a passer-by's attentive observation of details in the surroundings and to the giving nature of urban situations. Especially non-nourished plants – like weeds and plants that escaped the gardens, growing in cracks and gaps of the city – are to me a source of joy and wonder. For me these situations are at the same time a metaphor of resilience, resistance and relentlessness.

Because of the small size of the work and its location on the industrial, heterogenic floor in the Valssaamo space, the work could easily be overlooked and stepped onto. I decided to add a strip of evenly spread larch tree needles, starting from the location of the work and reaching all the way to the nearest wall of the space. The needle strip has the same width as the small sculpture and clearly defined borders. In the finished work it looked a bit like a yellow shadow or a blanket.

**DZ:** What about the thermo-blanket that is part of your work? The comforting covering potential of a prosthetic skin represents a potential help for survival. What is the blanket to you in this work? It might symbolise safety as well as crisis. It is very light...

**NR:** I processed myriads of different ideas for objects to bring into the box, but only the emergency blanket survived from the beginning until the end. I also had a plan to open the blanket and hang it from the ceiling of Valssaamo, so that it would have been a lot more visible, and air ventilation would have made it mobile, but finally I

ended up leaving it folded in the box to safeguard its full potential as a light and easy to carry lifesaver. In the work, the blanket can also be interpreted as a delicate memento mori, but also as a tiny golden mirror that reflect a blurry image of the spectator. It also looks like a little piece of gold in between two almost similar photos, which creates a link to the cinema, where life (anima) of moving pictures is born in between images.

I also had an idea of buying tens of those blankets and filling a bigger trunk so that it would look like a trunk full of gold bars, like a true treasure chest, and then adding info that the blankets would afterwards be donated to The Red Cross, so that they could be given to the refugees in the Mediterranean or used in the crisis zones in Ukraine or Gaza. I ended up not linking my work to these horrifying parallel realities taking place at the same time as the exhibition, because I'm not sure whether *help* should always be reasoned or counted in terms of gift economy or exchange, but rather as something differently inherent in humankind.

**NR:** Creating the work was a very intuitive process, like abstract expressionism with objects, photos and dust I already possessed (nothing was bought for this purpose). As I was making decisions about the final form of my work, I was also responsible for coordinating the whole conference-exhibition, and I didn't want to have separate processes in my head, so somehow I wanted it all to come together in the end, so that I would feel some inner coherence where the work, the raw exhibition space of Valssaamo and the social setting with the conference would work together.

**DZ:** I can relate to this! Being the organiser and teacher of the course that led to this conference-exhibition I had a similar double role. I wanted the process of *The Given* to be light and intuitive, like the

throwing of a handful of dice. I used the method of “just doing”. Afterwards, now, I have the possibility to return to the work created and verbalise the experiences of working with materials, space and time.

**NR:** How do you find ideas for your works? Do you process the works for a long time?

**DZ:** Usually I start a conversation and I collaborate – but not with people but rather with for example the infrastructure of urban space. I talk to fences and sidewalks, bus stops and bushes or border stones. I wonder what happened here. There might be a border stone of a sidewalk in Finland that has been sculpted in its recent shape by a Chinese stonemason and transported thousands of kilometres to be put next to a manhole cover casted in India and old gobble stones from a nearby quarry, shaped in the last century. Different materials have been worked on in different times by different people and technologies. Now they are assembled to become the infrastructure of a sidewalk and form our presence.

I also wonder about the phenomena of urban nature. For example, last Autumn there was a thin frozen layer of snow in the city of Rovaniemi in the northern Finland. The next day a hefty storm blew the needles of larch trees to the ground in the centre of the city and soon the frozen snow was covered with a yellow blanket. The even coverage of bright yellow needles on top of the thin layer of snow looked like a reversed shadow. The space under and around the trees was full of light! I wondered about this because there is no obvious reason for this to look so beautiful! I felt it was very generous of the trees and the wind to leave this kind of a present for me to be noticed. Rovaniemi was full of generosity! So, I said ‘thank you for this’ and went to collect some of it to remember the event of the yellow shadows.

I took a broom and dustpan and went to “clean” the snow. I spread the larch tree needles again in my studio so they could dry. The smell was strong and soft. Then, I started experimenting with a restaging of the yellow larch tree “shadows” on the floor of my studio. I made imaginary yellow shadows for some of the furniture in the room and experimented with filling certain areas of the floor evenly with the larch tree needles. A little sculpture I made in the process got its own shadow made out of needles and I called the work *The Given*. This all happened more like a conversation with different suggestions and beginnings than the production of a planned work.

**DZ:** I found it very pleasant that your blanket was folded neatly, keeping its potential. It is inspiring for the viewer, it does not overwhelm them but rather suggests to experience the potential that the different items of the assemblage offered. The blanket gives me a clue on how to compose the work and unfold the treasure for myself. The shiny surface of the blanket reminds me of the silver used in the development process of b/w photography. Are you interested in chemical processes in materials? Or what is your connection to materials you use in your work?

**NR:** Nice to hear that the objects inspired you since inspiration is certainly something I wished to deliver in my work. But even if I tried, I can't find a way to narrate my work through chemical processes. It's pretty much just that I intuitively assembled objects that I had intuitively collected over the years. Of course chemical processes are going on in our brains all the time, and the flow of intuition is very much dependent on chemistry, but I think you weren't asking that.

**DZ:** Well, you work with surfaces. There were the blanked, photographic images and the curved surface of the glass object that projects

into the treasure box, the Valssaamo space and its happenings in real live-time. You have been collecting these items among many others I guess and now was the right time for them to be picked. You chose objects from your collection and formed an assemblage. The chosen objects connect to my mind in their way to operate on a thin layer or surface. They work with the tension that the surface can create.

**NR:** Thank you for the notion! I didn't come to think about it, but yes, surfaces are very central. It's not just what the objects of the assemblage are, but how they are and how they feel. Contrast between shiny surfaces, and surfaces with patina and dust were essential for me in order to get the right dynamics to the installation. I left the dust on the box cover, but paid great attention that there was as little dust and dirt as possible on the surfaces of the mirror, the photos, the glass balloon and the blanket.

I think the worn out and the shiny, they sort of give to each other. The shiny shines brighter and the worn out gets more value. Without the dust on the cover, something important would be missed. Somehow this same effect takes place in the Cable Factory where the brand new House of Dance is shining in great contrast with the worn out old parts of the Cable Factory with all its patina and dust. And it works very nicely creating an animated atmosphere where the past is very present in the *genius loci* of the building and the situations it creates.

**NR:** I find it very delightful how you communicate with your surroundings and how you perceive things as something given for you. How would you describe your worldview? If trees are generous, do they then have a will? Or is it more the humans behind the planned urban environments that interest you?



Figure 2. Rinne, N. (2024). *The Present in Process* [assemblage]. © Niilo Rinne.

Figure 3. Ziegler, D. (2024). *The Given* [sculpture]. © Denise Ziegler.

**DZ:** This is important to be clarified! By saying I felt the trees were very generous I project a human emotion into another species. This is actually what I do not like to do. It is not a mistake but rather a not-being-able of putting into words the unknown in this encounter. How should I name the wonderful surprises the urban nature offers? Already in describing Autumn colours, misty landscapes, the smell of first snow in the air as an encounter, I am operating with the experiences and memories and with the presumptions of a human. Sometimes, however, like in the found situation of the yellow shadows, that was the starting point of *The Given*, I get a glimpse of the nature and appearance of, for example, a material or a plant. When this happens, I feel a conversation with something unknown to me has started.

**NR:** When I was creating the work, I didn't prepare myself for writing about it, and wished to liberate myself from the constraints of conceptual thinking, and just think and "write" with the objects I have. But now when writing about it, I understand that the act of asking or the event of being posed a question is a gateway to an exchange that can be very valuable. It really feels like a gift!

## Conclusion

The initial setting of the empty industrial exhibition space brought the exhibited artworks together and enabled different conversions and exchange. Looking at the documentation image of the two works discussed here, it becomes quite obvious that the exhibition space itself was a third party in this exchange. There is the rough, industrial floor and a shiny ventilation tube branching from the even larger main tube on the ceiling and reaching, attached to the wall, all the way down to end about 50 cm above the floor between the two exhibited works. The context of the space contributes to the

works exhibited. Revisiting and reconsidering published research processes opens up the possibility to take into account the things and circumstances around the works. This enabled us recognise and endorse exchange as a form of presence.

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Rinne, N. (2024). *The Present in Process*. Assemblage: wood, glass, paper, emergency blanket.

Ziegler, D. (2024). *The Given*. Sculpture: plywood, wood, fabric, larch tree needles.



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# Lahja yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen maisemassa

HEIDI HÄNNINEN / KAS! KONTULA ART SCHOOL

## Alkusanat:

*"Kuka antaa sinulle erikoisaseman? Onko sinulla mitään, mitä et ole saanut lahjaksi? Jos kerran olet saanut kaiken lahjaksi, miksi ylpeilet niin kuin se olisi omaa ansiotasi?" (1. Kor. 4:7)*

Kaaro, Jani (2017, s.32)

Tätä kirjoitusta ei olisi syntynyt, ellen olisin saanut kollegaltani, taiteilija Hanna Vahvaselältä, lainalahjaksi Jani Kaaron kirjaa *Kauniimpi maailma – Kirjoituksia sielusta, taloudesta ja oikeudenmukaisuudesta*. Kaaron teksti *Raha ja lahjan henki* on inspiroinut minua piirtämällä aiheesta maiseman, johon olen voinut ajatuksineni yhtyä.

## Yhteisöllinen taidetoiminta lahjana (johdanto)

KAS! Kontula Art School on yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen hanke ja jopa anarkistinen taidekoulu, jonka perustin Itä-Helsinkiin vuonna 2019. Hankkeen alusta asti tarkoitukseni oli järjestää matalan

Kuva 1. Hänninen, H. (2024). *Taking Some Space* [seinämaalaus prosessissa].  
Emännänpolun alikulkutunneli, Kontula. KAS:n paikallinen ystävä on suojannut  
liidulla tekemäni luonnoksen vesisateelta. © Heidi Hänninen.

kynnyksen maksutonta taidetoimintaa kaiken ikäisille kontulalaisille ja itähelsinkiläisille. Toiminnan tavoitteena oli luoda Kontulan alueelle julkista taidetta yhteisöllisin keinoin. Taiteellista toimintaa ja katutaidetta yhteisötaiteen menetelmänä tarkastelevan tutkimustyöni aloitin kaksi vuotta myöhemmin (2021–2022) Taideyliopiston Kuvataideakatemian tohtoriopinnoissa.

Toimin KAS-hankkeessa yhteisötaiteilija-tutkijana ja taiteellisena vastuuhenkilönä. Vuosien 2019–2024 aikana olemme maallanneet Itä-Helsinkiin 17 julkista seinämaalausta. Osa teoksista on KAS aikuisten kollektiivin käsialaa, toiset KAS Junioreiden. Molemmat ryhmät ovat tavanneet vuodesta 2019 lähtien viikoittain: aikuiset aluksi Kontulan Symppiksen atk-tukitila Kontupisteessä, sittemmin Mellunmäessä Naapuruuustalo Mellarissa ja tällä hetkellä jälleen Kontulan ostarilla Stadin Yhteisötalolla. Juniorit ovat tavanneet Kontulan kirjastolla ja Kontulan taiteilijatalon ateljeellani. Varsinaista toimistoa hankkeella ei ole, tai ajattelen sen oikeastaan sijaitsevan kadulla.

Kontula Art School on toteuttanut seinämaalauksia yhteistyössä monien eri tahojen kanssa. Teokset ovat luvallisia, mutta haastamme toiminnallamme julkisen tilan käyttöön ja omistajuuteen sekä laajemmin taiteilijuuteen ja julkiseen taiteeseen liittyviä kysymyksiä. Kyseessä on kaupunkisosiologi Pasi Mäenpään ja erikoistutkija Maija Faehnlen kuvaama neljännen sektorin toimintaan lukeutuva yhteistoiminnallinen kansalaistoiminta ja kaupunkiaktiivismin muoto, joka perustuu verkostoihin ja vertaistuotantoon, on luonteeltaan proaktiivista ja organisoituu järjestötoiminnan ulkopuolella, myös internetissä ja sosiaalisessa mediassa (Mäenpää & Faehnle, 2021). Kontula Art Schoolin verkostoja laajentavat osaltaan Facebook ja Instagram -tilit, joiden kautta toimintaamme on helppo seurata myös julkisesti. Sosiaalisen median kanavat toimivat hankkeen visuaalisena päiväkirjana, jonne tallennan muistot yhteisistä hetkistä jaettaviksi laajemman yleisön kanssa.

Mäenpää & Faehnlén mukaan kaupunkiaktivismi tulee lähelle anarkismin ajatusta kiistäessään julkisen vallan yksinoikeuden hallita, esimerkiksi julkista tilaa. Tutkijoiden mukaan aktivistit eivät vaadi kaikenkattavaa vapautta, vaan ”luovat tilaa, jossa asukkuuteen, asiantuntemukseen ja yhteistyöhön pohjaava toiminta noteerataan paikallisesti tai tapauskohtaisesti yleisen edun mukaiseksi.” Kaupunkiaktivismi suuntaa suoran toiminnan kautta edustuksellisen demokratian ulkopuolelle kohti tekemisen demokratiaa ja paikallisuutta. (Mäenpää & Faehnlén, 2021, s.172.)

Ajattelen, että tämä neljännen sektorin toiminta voi olla lahja muille yhteiskunnallisille toimijoille, kuten kolmannen sektorin yhdistyksille, kansalaisjärjestöille ja vapaaehtoisille, toisen sektorin valtion julkisille palveluille ja jopa ensimmäiselle sektorille eli voittoa tuottaville yksityisille yrityksille (esim. Kansalaisyhteiskunta, 2024).

KAS on tehnyt vuosien kuluessa paljon yhteistyötä esimerkiksi päihdeasiakkaille terveys- ja sosiaalineuvontaa tarjoavan matalan kynnyksen päiväkeskus Symppiksen kanssa Kontulan ostarilla. Päiväkeskus Symppi keskittyy huumeiden käytöstä johtuvia haittoja vähentävien palveluiden tuottamiseen, joihin kuuluvat muun muassa puhtaiden käyttövälineiden jakaminen ja sosiaalineuvontasekä terveyspalvelut. Yleensä monenlaista taidetoimintaa on saatavilla ihmisille, jotka ovat päihdekuntoutuksen piirissä, mutta päihdeiden aktiivikäyttäjille harrastustoimintaa on harvemmin ja siitä on haastavaa löytää tutkittua tietoa. Aiheesta on julkaistu ”Taide päihdetyössä – työkirja toiminnan suunnitteluun” (Laaksonen-Sassa, Linnossuo & Tikkaola, 2018), joka valottaa hieman tätä kontekstia. Parhaimmillaan Kontula Art School on voinut tuoda lisäresursseja julkiselle sektorille, paikaten tarvetta taide- ja kulttuuritoiminnalle haittoja vähentävässä päihdetyössä. Symppiksen asiakkaissa on paljon herkkiä ja mielestäni poikkeuksellisen lahjakkaita taiteen tekijöitä, joten on kaikkien yhteinen etu, että näitä lahjakkuuksia

saadaan tuettua ja tuotua esiin. Ihmiset nimittäin haluavat mielellään näyttää, minkälaisia sisäisiä lahjoja (ja maisemia) heillä on.

### Money can buy me love (erilaisista maisemista)

Ranskalaisen katutaiteilija Jean-Renén yhteisöllisestä työskentelystä kertova dokumenttielokuva alkaa ohjaaja Agnes Vardan sanoin: "If we opened people up, we'd find landscapes." (Varda, 2021). Jean-Renén (2021) itsensä mukaan hänen työskentelyssään ei ole kyse vain taiteesta vaan myös ihmisistä. Ajattelen, että Vardan kuvailema, jokaisen ihmisen sisältä löytyvä maisema on yhtä uniikki, kuin henkilö itse. Joidenkin maisemat ovat ehyet, valoisat ja niissä on mukava kulkea maisemia ihailen. Toisten maisemat ovat säröillä ja niin vaikeakulkuiset, että sitä pelkää menevänsä itsekin rikki, jos niihin astuu. Kun ihmiset tulevat yhteen, heidän maisemansa kohtaavat, risteävät, jopa yhdistyvät, menevät limittäin ja lomittain, päällekkäin ja allekkain. Kaupunki-ympäristössä lukuisat ihmiset maisemineen kulkevat toistensa ohi päivittäin. Toisten maisemat saavat kaupungissa enemmän tilaa kuin toisten. Jotkut ostavat maisemilleen näkyvyyttä rahalla ja myyvät niitä eteenpäin muille. Toisten maisemilla ei ole vastaavaa markkina-arvoa, tai maisemien haltiat eivät halua niitä yleiseen jakoon, vaan pitävät ne mieluummin aidattuina yksityisissä tiloissa.

Kirjoituskokoelmassaan *Kauniimpi maailma* tietokirjailija ja toimittaja Jani Kaaro maalaa isolla pensselillä omaa maisemaansa taloudesta ja ihmisyydestä. Hän hahmottelee visiossaan uusia maisemanmuotoja, sellaisia, jotka luulen tunnistavani. Kaarolle rahan arvoitus näyttäytyy loppumattomana ja dynaamisena liikkeenä maailman metropoleissa ja metrojunina, jotka häviävät kaupunkien sykkeen alle ja ylläpitävät muurahaispesämme kuhinaa (Kaaro, 2017, s. 13–14). Myös kaupungeissa muurahaisten lailla hyöriivien ihmisten maisemat ovat sidoksissa rahaan, tai mielestäni

vaihtoehtoisesti lahjoihin, jos niin haluamme. Esseessään *Raha ja lahjan henki* (2017, s. 11–62) Kaaro kirjoittaa auki omaa ymmärrystään lahjan ja rahan luonteesta. Inspiraationlähteitä hänelle ovat olleet lahjateorian ”isä”, sosiologi Marcel Mauss (*Lahja*), Jacques Godbout (*The World of the Gift*) ja Lewis Hyde (*The Gift*). Tässä tekstissäni rinnastan lahjan ajatusta Kontula Art Schoolin kaupunki-aktivistiseen taidetoimintaan ja peilaan Kaaron maisemaa omaani. Kuinka toimintamme asettuu lahjan maastoon, ja mitä yhteistä sillä on lahjan hengen kanssa?

Olen soveltanut lahjateoriaa taidepraktiikkaani siltä osin kuin se on tuntunut inspiroivalta. Osallistujilleen maksuttoman ja vapaaehtoisuuteen perustuvan toiminnan lisäksi lahjan ajatus toteutuu julkisessa tilassa, joka on täyttynyt alueen asukkaiden tekemästä taiteesta. Vaikka olemme saaneet teoksistamme ja taiteestamme valtavasti positiivista palautetta, on varmaa, että nämä ”lahjat” eivät ole jokaisen mieleen. Joskus saammekin lahjoja niitä pyytämättämme, ja voi olla, että lahjat ovat myös epämieluisia. Sosiologian professori Olli Pyyhtisen mukaan lahjojen vaihtoon liittyy mahdollisuus konfliittiin: lahjasta ja siihen vastaamisesta kieltäytymällä kieltäydytään samalla suhteeseen asettumisesta toiseen (Kivelä, 2022). Taiteilija-tutkija Anna Jensenin tavoin olen työni myötä huomannut, kuinka julkisessa tilassa taiteeseen kohdistuu jatkuvaa neuvottelua. Jensen kirjoittaa julkisen tilan taiteesta lahjana sellaiselle yleisölle ja yhteisölle, joka ei omasta aloitteestaan välttämättä hakeudu taiteen äärelle. Kadulla taide sulautuu osaksi ohikulkijoiden arkea ja paikka-kokemusta, halusivat he sitä tai eivät. Jensenin mukaan julkisen tilan taidelahja ei vaadi sitoutumista, mutta se voi tarjoilla ”pysähtymisen hetken, katkoksen normaaliin ja näkökulman muutoksen.” Tällainen lahja voi Jensenin kokemuksen mukaan olla ei-toivottu, mutta silti merkityksellinen, ja sillä on mahdollisuus tuoda ihmisiä yhteen, olipa motiivina yhteinen ihailu tai boikotti. Kuraattorin näkökulmasta

Jensen kokee myös palautteen ja erilaiset reaktiot lahjana, olivatpa ne sitten negatiivisia tai positiivisia. (Jensen, 2022, s. 75.)

Kaupunkiaktivistisesti toteutettu yhteisöllinen julkinen taide haastaa perinteisen julkisen taiteen mallin, jossa teoksilla on yleensä tilaaja ja teoksen toteuttaja etsitään kilpailun kautta, jossa voittaja valitaan etabloituneiden taiteen ammattilaisten kesken. Tällainen julkisen taiteen valintaprosessi edustaa tietynlaisia konventioita, traditiota ja makua. Aktivismissä päätöksenteko tehdään paikallisesti ja paikallisten toimijoiden kesken, heidän ehdoillaan. Prosessi perustuu pitkälti yksilöiden omaan aktiivisuuteen ja toimeliaisuuteen. Luvat teoksille saadaan yhteistyössä seinien omistajien ja kaupungin kanssa. Omistussuhteen mukaan eri toimijoiden roolit vaihtelevat. Yhteisöllisesti toteutetun julkisen taiteen tulokset eivät välttämättä ole kaikkien taidemakujen mukaisia, mutta harvoin julkinen taide miellyttää kaikkia, oli teosten valintaprosessi minkälainen tahansa. Yhtä lailla, kuten perinteisissä kilpailuprosesseissa tai tilaustöissä vain pieni porukka populaatiosta pääsee vaikuttamaan lopputulokseen, samoin yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen kontekstissa lopputulokseen vaikuttava henkilömäärä on rajattu. Yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen prosessissa demokratia toteutuu kulttuurisen demokratian kautta. Kulttuurisen demokratisaation ohella se on sosiaalipedagogi Leena Kurjen mukaan sosiaalipedagogiikan alalta nousevan sosiokulttuurisen innostamisen tavoite, jossa kyse on ihmisten osallistumisesta oman arjen luovaan rakentamiseen. Kulttuurisen toiminnan tarkoituksena on inhimillisten olosuhteiden parantaminen, ja siihen pyritään ottamaan mukaan mahdollisimman monenlaisia kansalaisia, erityisesti heitä, joiden osallistumisessa on eniten esteitä. (Kurki, 2000, s. 55–56.) Ohjaajani taiteilija-tutkija Teemu Mäki (2024) näkeekin praktiikkani taiteellisenä kansalaistoimintana, ”joka pyrkii tuottamaan mielekkyyden kokemuksia, taidetta ja parantamaan sekä osallistujien että yleisön elämänlaatua.”

Pyrkimyksistäni huolimatta en onnistu asettamaan työtäni rahatalouden ulkopuolella, vaan kietoudumme väistämättä osaksi sitä. Siinä kaupunginosassa, jossa toimin, on moni heittänyt toivonsa tulevaisuuden suhteen. Kaaron (2017, s. 14–15) mukaan ihminen hidastuu ja passivoituu, kun hän menettää työnsä – ja rahan. Meillä Kontulassa liikettä kuitenkin riittää. Liikkeen voi saada virtaamaan, vaikka olisi työtön ja käyttäisi kamaa – rahaa nimittäin tarvitaan kaikkeen, ja etenkin päihteisiin. Päihteitä addiktiivisesti käyttävä ihminen elää kädestä suuhun, ja häntä pitävät jatkuvassa liikkeessä päihteet, joita ei saa ilman rahaa. Tilanne on pahimmillaan niin raastava, ettei rahaa pääse pakoon edes uniin: jatkuva pelko rahattomuudesta eli päihteettömyydestä valvottaa ja kuluttaa ihmisen loppuun. Joidenkin maisemat ovat lopulta niin haalistuneita ja kuluneita, että niiden läpi voi nähdä, eikä takana ole enää mitään muuta kuin ahnaasti odottava kuolema, lopullinen pysähtyneisyys ja toisaalta sen myötä myös toinen mahdollisuus: ikuinen vapaus rahasta. Päihteitä ongelmallisesti käyttävät ihmiset voi olla helppo tuomita laiskoiksi ja vastuuntunottomiksi, mutta todellisuus on monimutkaisempi. Suuri osa ihmisistä haluaisi pysyä kiinni Kaaron (2017, s. 16) kuvaamassa rahan mystisessä liikkeessä, mutta jos tämä liike syystä tai toisesta loppuu, tilannetta pyritään kompensoimaan turruttamalla mieli esimerkiksi päihteillä. Yhteiskuntatieteiden tutkija Eetu Virenin (2018, s. 96) mukaan nyky-yhteiskunnassa raha ja rahoitus ovat finanssima kkinoiden ja -pääoman kautta keskeisiä vallan välineitä: ”Money can buy me love, koska rakkaudessakin on kyse ennen kaikkea elämän mahdollisuuksista” (Viren, 2016, s. 67). Jos rakkautta ei saa muualta, niin lähelle samaa filistä voikin päästä myös päihteillä.

Kaaron (2017, s. 18) vision mukaan nykyihmisen ongelmat ovat aiheutuneet vääristellyämme alkuperäistä lahjojen kiertoon perustuvaa järjestelmää rakentamamme rahatalouden muottiin: lahjojen

jatkuva kierto takasi muinaisten yhteisöjen vaurauden. Kaaro kuvailee, kuinka lahjojen luonteeseen kuuluu, että ne haluavat tulla annetuiksi, ja luonnonkansoille lahjojen kierron loppu olisikin tarkoittanut suorastaan ”maailmanloppua”. Kaaro syyttää tämän luonnollisen lahjojen kiertokulun tyrehtyttämistä nykyihmisen kyynisyydestä, välinpitämättömyydestä ja sokeudesta nähdä sitä faktaa, kuinka ”lahjaksi saatu elämämme on riippuvaista kaikista muista lahjoista.” Kaaro muistuttaa, että olemme lahjojen armoilla, emmekä tiedä millaisten lahjojen kanssa synnymme tähän maailmaan. (Kaaro, 2017, s. 19–21.) Toiset syntyvät huolta pitäville vanhemmille, jotka pitävät lastaan ihmeellisenä lahjana, toisille lapset ovat taakka, hidaste ja este. Sellaisilla asuinalueilla, jossa minä asun, moni lapsi saa synnyinlahjakseen köyhyyden ja mahdollisesti siihen päälle vielä periytyvän päihdeongelman, ja sen myötä tarttuvan taudin, stigman. Kuitenkin tämä sama lapsi saattaa syntyä sellaisen herkkyyden ja tarkkanäköisyyden kanssa, joka mahdollistaa esimerkiksi taiteen tekemisen. Tällaisen lapsen maisema koostuu monenlaisesta, siellä on toisaalta syviä varjoja ja vaaran paikkoja, mutta myös ihmeellistä valoa ja toivoa paremmasta.

Sisäiset lahjat (Kaaro, 2017) ohjaavat meitä ja maisemiamme. ”Money can buy me love”, mutta sisäisiä lahjoja se ei voi ostaa.



Kuva 2. Hänninen, H. (2024). KAS! Aikuisten kollektiivi: *Taking Some Space* [yksityiskohta teoksesta]. Emännänpolun alikulkutunneli, Kontula. © Heidi Hänninen.

## Lahjan kierrosta

### (muinaiset Kula-korut ja mahdollisuus hyvään tahtoon)

Kontula Art School on verkostoitunut vuosien kuluessa laajasti paikallisten toimijoiden kanssa ja jokainen uusi yhteistyötaho kantaa myös mukanaan jonkinlaista lahjaa, omaa osaamistaan ja asiantuntijuuttaan, erilaisia ihmisiä omine maisemineen. Jokainen uusi ihminen on aina uusi mahdollisuus. Hieman kuten 1900-luvun alkupuolen Tyynellämerellä, lähellä Papua-Uusi-Guineaa sijaitsevilla Trobriandsaarilla, jonne Kaaro linkittää esseessään visionsa taloudesta ja ihmisyydestä. Ensimmäinen maailmansota jumiutti puolaissyntyisen antropologi Bronislaw Malinowskin Trobriandsaarille missä hän havainnoi saarelaisten vuosisataisia tapoja ja ikivanhaa kulttuuria klassikkoteoksekseen *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. (Kaaro, 2017, s. 16–17.) *Kula*-nimisen, lahjoina annettujen ja kotioloista tehtyjen, kaula- ja rannekorujen kierron järjestelmä muodosti Kaaron mukaan tiheän verkoston, jonka solmukohtia olivat ihmiset, joihin *Kula*-korut pysähtyivät hetkeksi. Kaikkien ihmisten tavoitteena oli laajentaa verkostoaan uusilla kumppaneilla, jotka lisäsivät mahdollisuuksia uusien korujen saamiseksi. ”Jokaisella kierroksella lahjat saivat uusia omistajia, uusia käsiä, jotka koskettelivat niitä, ja uusia tarinoita kerrottavaksi. Näin lahjat saattoivat vain rikastua, *Kula*-korujen maine kasvaa ja verkostot vahvistua.” (Kaaro, 2017, s. 24–25.) Mauss (2006, s. 52–65) analysoi *Lahja*-teoksessaan *Kula*-korujen verkostoja yhtenä selkeänä esimerkkinä muinaisista lahjojen vaihdantajärjestelmistä. Maussin (2006, s. 58) mukaan korujen vaihto toi ihmiset yhteen kuin koirat leikkimään, tuoden näkyviksi kaikki yhteiset tunteet ja hävittäen vihan.

*Kula*-korun tavoin myös Kontula Art School on kiertänyt vuosien varrella eri ihmisten käsissä ja ulottanut lonkeroitaa uusien ihmisten myötä myös uusiin suuntiin ja verkostoaan laajentaen. KAS-toiminnan luonnostaan syklimäinen luonne (talvet uusien

seinämaalausten suunnittelua, kesä toteutusta) on pitänyt yllä kiertokulkua, joka on vienyt toimintaa eteenpäin ja pitänyt sen itseään kehittävässä liikkeessä. Kädet toistensa perään ovat muovanneet toimintaamme ja maalanneet yhteistä maisemaamme näkyväksi aina vain uusille ihmisille. Kontula Art Schoolin yhteisö on lahja myös minulle: minäkin olen saanut sen kautta ystäviä, rakkautta, ymmärrystä ja hyväksyntää sekä mahdollisuuden kasvaa ihmisenä. KAS kasvaa orgaanisesti ja vastavuoroisesti moneen eri suuntaan ja välttelee kliinisiä, pintapuolisia suhteita. Toimintamme lomassa yhteistyötahojen ja toimijoiden motiivit pyrkivät kohti päivänvaloa, paljastaen itsestään aika ajoin myös eettisiä ongelmia ja byrokratian aiheuttamia umpikujia. Näitä tulen avaamaan myöhemmin muissa kirjoituksissani.

Kaaro (2017, s. 125) kuvailee, kuinka *Kula*-järjestelmä toimi kolmen periaatteen varassa. Trobriandsaarelaisten tapaan olemme mekin Kontula Art Schoolissa lahjojemme ”armoilla” (*Kulan* ensimmäinen periaate). Myös saarelaisten lahjat perustuivat täydelliseen vapaaehtoisuuteen. Lahjojen luonnetta, antamista ja vastaanottamista ei Kaaron mukaan voinut pakottaa, ja itsekin koen, että painostaminen myrkyttäisi yhteisöllisen KAS-lahjamme luonteen. Kontula Art Schoolin tarjoama taidetoiminta on osallistujilleen maksutonta, eikä se vaadi sitoutumista. Jokainen voi olla mukana toiminnassa omien voimavarojensa mukaan ja halutessaan ryhmästä on voinut poistua, sitä sen enempää perustelematta tai selittelemättä. Myös yhteistyö muiden alueen toimijoiden kanssa on molemmin puolin vapaaehtoista, ja toimiikin siten mielestäni parhaiten. Taiteellinen vapaus on minulle ja yhteisöllemme tärkeää. Ulkoapäin ohjattu tai ylhäältäpäin pakotettu yhteistyö voisi pahimmillaan synnyttää osapuolille ylimääräistä stressiä ja ulkokohtaisia vaatimuksia.

KAS-taidetoiminnan pyörittäminen on minulta lahja alueelle ja sen ihmisille, ja ihmisten käsissä se annetaan eteenpäin yhä uusille

ihmisille jatkuvasti kehittyvänä ja yhä arvokkaampana, erilaisten monimuotoisuuksien lahjana. Maussin (2006, s. 113) mukaan lahjojen luonteeseen kuuluukin, että niihin vastataan antamalla alkuperäistä arvokkaampi lahja. Tämä on Kaaron (2017, s. 25) mukaan myös *Kulan* toinen periaate. Kontula Art Schoolilaistenkin käsissä heidän saamansa lahjan arvo kasvaa sykli sykliltä. Mitä useampi henkilö on linkittynyt yhteisöllisen lahjamme verkostoon, sitä erilaisempia sisäisiä lahjoja (ja maisemia) toiminnan piirissä myös on. KAS-lahjan moninaisuus viehättää monenlaisia ihmisiä, myös heitä, jotka saavat lahjoja elämässään harvemmin. Kaaron mukaan luonnonkansat eivät edes pyrkineet tasoihin lahjojen suhteen, vaan he jäivät mielellään velkaa: ”heille velka oli imperatiivi, voima, joka piti lahjat liikkeessä” ja ”jos velka maksettaisiin pois, lahjat lakkaisivat kiertämästä ja koko elämä lakkaisi olemasta.” *Kulan* kolmas periaate oli Kaaron mukaan kaikista tärkein: *Kula* oli ympyrä, jossa saatu lahja annettiin aikanaan uusille osapuolille, joita täytyi olla vähintään yksi, ennen kuin lahja sai palata alkuperäiselle omistajalle. Näin vältettiin lahjojen pallottelu kahden ihmisen välillä. (Kaaro, 2017, s. 25–26.)

Myös Kontula Art Schoolin toiminta on jatkuvasti uusien ihmisten käsissä, ja Kaaron (2017, s. 26) sanoin ”tuntemattomalla maaperällä”. *Kulasta* poiketen, toiminta pysyy kuitenkin myös omista käsissäni, ja kaikesta kierrosta ja yhteisomistajuudesta huolimatta se on monin tavoin minun omaani, taiteilijuuteni ja taidepraktiikkani muoto. Kapitalismissa me ihmiset pidämmekin Kaaron (2017, s. 29) mukaan tuoton itsellämme ja annamme sen kasvattaa omaa pääomaamme, kun taas lahjan kulttuurissa tuotto liikkuu lahjan mukana palautuen alkuperäisille omistajille luonnolle, heimolle ja esi-isille, kasvattaen samalla lahjan henkeä, hyvää tahtoa. Vaikka elänkin rahatalouden armoilla, keskellä kapitalistista yhteiskuntaa vuokramaksun kierteessä, voin silti omalta osaltani ruokkia hyvää tahtoa

eli jakaa (taiteilija-tutkijan) valtaa ympärilleni neljännen sektorin kaupunkitaide-toiminnan, yhteisötaiteen ja kanssatutkimuksen<sup>1</sup> keinoin. Alueen kulttuurisen pääoman ja taiteellisten resurssien kasvu voivat eri tavoin rikastuttaa myös ympäristöä ja sen asukkaita.

Se, mitä yhteiskunnassamme tarvitaan, on juurikin Kaaron mainitsema ”hyvä tahto, lahjojen todellinen henki, joka sai ne kulkemaan ja joka ravitsi kaikkia lahjojen verkostossa olijoita.” Meidän tulee hänen mukaansa vain ensin tunnustaa, että kaikki, minkä tarvitsemme elääksemme, olemme saaneet muilta: luonnolta ja toisilta ihmisiltä (Kaaro 2017, s. 29). Sosiaali- ja kulttuuriantropologi Jukka Siikala (2006) tulkitsee Maussin (2006, s. 37–41) käsitettä *lahjan hengestä* (Uuden-Seelannin maorien *hau*) eli lahjan vastavuoroisuudesta ja kiertokulusta, jonka myötä se palautui aina jossakin muodossa antajalleen. Tällaisen sosiaalisen kokonaisuuden, joka toimi maoreilla koko heimon piirissä, Siikala tunnistaa myös perheen sisäisessä työnjaossa, jossa vastasuoritus palveluksesta tapahtuu sosiaalisessa ryhmässä luonnollisesti ennemmin tai myöhemmin. Maoreilla vastavuoroisuuden normit koskivat koko yhteisöä, ei ainoastaan lahjan saajaa ja antajaa, ja anteliaisuus oli keskeinen sosiaalinen arvo. (Siikala, 2006.)

Kaaro maalaa maisemaansa joen, jonka haarautuvissa virroissa lahjat pysyvät jatkuvassa liikkeessä. Pysäytetty virta sen sijaan muodostaa lahjojen kerääntymistä tiettyihin solmukohtiin suuriksi ”tekoaltaiksi”, toisten jokiosuuksien kärsiessä kuivuudesta:

Virtaavan rikkauden tilalle astui yksien yltäkylläisyys ja toisten niukkuus. Niille, jotka saivat nauttia yltäkylläisyydestä, rikkaus oli enää materiaalista. Koska lahjat eivät enää virranneet vapaasti,

1 Tutkimuksessani on kanssatutkimuksellisia piirteitä, kuten pyrkimys tutkimuskumppanuuteen (Kulmala ym., 2023).

myös niiden sosiaaliset, moraaliset ja henkiset ulottuvuudet katosivat. Lahjoista tuli pelkkiä hyödykkeitä, elottomia kappaleita tai palveluita, joiden arvo mitattiin vain rahassa. Samoin kävi niille, joiden osa oli niukkuus. Heille niukkuus oli paitsi henkistä, sosiaalista ja moraalista myös materiaalista. (Kaaro, 2017, s. 30–31.)

Tämä tapahtumaketju on Kaaron mukaan syy siihen, miksi taloustiede määrittelee kaiken suhteessa vallitsevaan niukkuuteen: ”Lahjatalous ravitsi luontoa ja ihmistä, ja niin kauan kuin lahjat virtasivat vapaasti, maailma pysyi rikkaana. Kun lahjojen virta estettiin, tilalle astui niukkuus.” Siinä missä anteliaisuus ja hyvä tahto ovat lahjatalouden ominaispiirteitä, ovat Kaaron mukaan ahneus ja itsekkyyksyys osa sitä kilpailuhenkeä, jota niukkuuden logiikkaan perustuva talousjärjestelmämme edustaa: ”Niukkuuden vallitessa rahaa ei voi koskaan olla liian paljon.” Ja ”kun aika on rahaa”, ajastakin tulee ”niukka luonnonvara”, joka tuo mukanaan jatkuvan kiireen. (Kaaro, 2017, s. 30–31.) Olisiko mahdollista, että voisimme haastaa vallitsevan kilpailun ja toisten kustannuksella luotuun kasvuun perustuvan systeemin yhteisöllisillä lahjoilla, jotka ravitsisivat koko yhteisöä? Riittääkö hyvä tahto edes perheiden sisällä, saati laajemmissa yhteisöissä? Voisiko toisaalta yhteisön menestys lisätä myös pienempien yksiköiden, kuten perheiden, voimavaroja? Kontula Art Schoolin kontekstissa tehdyn yhteisöllisen taidetyön perusteella uskon, että voi. Voimme luopua niukkuuden ajatuksesta ja muistaa Kaaron (2017, s. 31) sanat: ”Jos maapallon lahjat – ja ruoka todella on lahjaa elävältä maapallolta – virtaisivat vapaasti, maapallolla ei olisi yhtään nälkäistä ihmistä.” Yhdessä voisimme ottaa tilaa takaisin eläville yhteisöille ja saada joen taas virtaamaan vähän vapaammin.



Kuva 3. Hänninen, H. (2024). KAS! Aikuisten kollektiivi: *Taking Some Space / Turvallisia paikkoja*. Emännänpolun alikulkutunneli, Kontula. © Heidi Hänninen.

## Yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen yhteismaa (ja hauraat maisemat)

Kaaro kuvailee, kuinka maailman ensimmäiset ihmiset nauttivat erilaisista lahjoista, kuten ilmasta, vedestä, puista ja hedelmistä. Näitä lahjoja ihmisille tarjoi maa. Luonnonkansoilla yhteys maahan näkyi sekä tavoissa että kielessä, eikä satoihin tuhansiin vuosiin kuviteltu, että maan voisi omistaa; se oli lahja ja ”Maa omisti ihmiset”. Kaaro lainaa 300-luvun Milanossa vaikuttanutta, stoalaisen taustan omannutta, kirkkoisä Pyhää Ambrosiusta: ”Miksi te luulette, että maan hedelmät ovat yksityisiä, kun maa on meille kaikille yhteistä?” (Kaaro, 2017, s. 32–33.) Ajatus yhteismaasta<sup>2</sup> on kaunis, mutta osoittautunut kieltämättä kaukaiseksi, jopa mahdottomaksi unelmaksi. Niukkuuden vallitessa kukin yksilö yrittää selviytyä. Tämä yksilöiden jatkuva kamppailu näkyy myös Kontula Art Schoolin yhteisössä. Erilliset tilaustyöt, joista maksetaan palkkioita, ovat erottautuneet Kontula Art Schoolin taidetoiminnassa sitouttavina projekteina, joihin tekijät haluavat kiinnittyä vaikkakin sitten viimeisillä voimillaan. Toimintavuosien aikana olen huomannut, kuinka rahan luonne eroaa lahjasta. Pahimmillaan se pakottaa ja myrkyttää, mutta silti sitä halutaan. Rahan haluamisesta ei voi moittia ketään, ajat ovat kovat ja yhä edullisemmat rikkaille köyhien kärsiessä yhä enemmän. Tällainen järjestelmä meille on luotu, mutta voisimme kai valita myös toisin?

Pyhä Ambrosius ei halunnut Kaaron sanoin kieltää yksityisomaisuutta, mutta hän näki, että Jumalan oma tuli jakaa tasaisesti kaikkien kesken. Myöhemmin valistusajan filosofi John Locke loi

2 Kaaro (2017, s. 38) muistuttaa ”yhteismaan tragediasta”: ”Yhteisesti omistettu laidun johtaisi tragediaan” (Garrett Hardin, Science-lehti, 1968). Hardinin (1968, s. 47) mukaan yhteismaalla karjaansa laiduntavat pyrkivät kasvattamaan rajattomasti karjansa määrää rajallisessa maailmassa ja jokaisen tavoitellessa vain omaa parastaan ”vapaa laiduntaminen yhteismaalla koituu kaikkien tuhoski.”

Kaaron mukaan kansalaisyhteiskunnan perustan ehdotuksellaan, jonka mukaisesti ihmisille voisi syntyä yhdenvertaisesti omistusoikeus työn kautta: ”kuka tahansa voi julistaa kehittämättömän maan itselleen, jos ”työstää” maata tietyn ajan eikä kukaan muu ole ehtinyt julistaa sitä itselleen.” Locken tavoitteena oli vapauttaa tavallinen kansa monarkkien ja aatelisten vallasta maan omistuksen avulla, mutta toisaalta myös ajan kolonialistit hyötyivät ajatuksesta. Englannissa 1500-luvulta alkaen yhteismaan menettäneistä ihmisjoukoista tuli puolestaan kodittomia kiertolaisia, joista muodostui kaupunkeihin Kaaron mukaan ensimmäinen ”urbaani köyhälistö”. Näille pienimmille tilallisille yhteismaa oli merkinnyt aikamme sosiaaliturvaa. Locke lisäsi myöhemmin filosofiaansa ehdon, jonka mukaan ”riittävästi ja yhtä hyvää” tulisi jäädä jaettavaksi kaikille. (Kaaro, 2017, s. 34–35.)

Mitä meillä Kontulassa tapahtuu, kun maalaamme KAS-yhteisömme voimin seinä? Paikallinen ystäväni huomautti, että ”ne teidän maalaamat seinähän on kaupungin omaisuutta”. Totta, fyysisten seinien omistajia ovat esimerkiksi Helsingin kaupunki, Helsingin kaupungin asunnot Oy (Heka) ja Kontulan ostoskeskukseen eri omistajatahot. Meille taiteilijoille syntyy kuitenkin jonkinlainen tekijänoikeus maalaamiimme teoksiin. Lisäksi omistajuutemme paikkoihin, joissa maalaamme, vahvistuu. Kiinnostavaa on, että tämä omistajuus laajenee myös taideyleisöömme, alueen asukkaisiin, jotka kokevat, että teokset ovat jollain tavalla myös heidän omaisuuttaan. Kokemustemme mukaan Kontulan asukkaat pitävät teoksistamme jopa parempaa huolta kuin seinien varsinaiset omistajat, jotka suhtautuvat niihin jokseenkin välinpitämättömästi. Asukkaat ottavat seinien ja teosten kuntoon liittyviin asioihin aktiivisesti kantaa sosiaalisessa mediassa ja pyrkivät estämään mahdollisen teoksiin kohdistuvan ilkeilyn. Saan viestejä ennestään tuntemattomilta ihmisiltä, kun teoksiimme ilmestyy ”töhryjä”.

Emännänpolun tunnelissa 24.11.2024 kohtaamamme mies kertoi minulle ja taiteilija-tutkija Teemu Mäelle, että seinämaalausten ansiosta hän uskaltaa taas kulkea levottomana pitämänsä tunnelin läpi. Sekä mies että hänen mukanaan ollut lapsi olivat löytäneet maalauksista omat suosikkinsa. Seinämaalaukset vaikuttavat välittömästi ohikulkijoiden arkeen lisäämällä viihtyvyyttä ja turvallisuuden tunnetta, teoksia ovat olleet maalaamassa tutut paikalliset taiteilijat ja niissä on mukavasti samaistumispintaa. Ohikulkijat näkevät teoksemme päivittäin, mutta ovatko ne seinien virallisten omistajien arjen kulkureittien varrella? Esimerkiksi Helsingin kaupunki organisaationa on kuin monilonkeroinen mustekala, jonka pää ei sijaitse Kontulassa. Valtaa käyttävät lonkerot tekevät toki parhaansa ja parhaimmillaan mahdollistavatkin meitä kaupunkilaisia osallistavilla projekteillaan, jotka tuovat hyvää paikallisyhteisölle. Kaupungin työntekijät ja päättäjät eivät kuitenkaan omista maalaamiamme seiniä, vaan nämä seinät ovat helsinkiläisten yhteistä omaisuutta – ja koska Kontulan asukkaat ovat näiden seinien lähimmät omistajat ja pääasialliset käyttäjät, olisikin loogista, että heillä olisi eniten sananvaltaa myös niiden ulkoasuun ja käyttöön. Kontulan ostoskeskuksen tilanne on kaiken lisäksi poikkeuksellinen: ostari on odottanut jo vuosia tulevaa uudistustaan. Poikkeustilanteesta johtuen omistajatahojen intressit eivät vaikuta kohdistuvan läsnä olevaan infrastruktuuriin, vaan lähinnä alueen tulevaisuuteen ja tuleviin investointeihin.

Ostoskeskuksen epämääräiset olosuhteet ovatkin mahdollistaneet hämmästyttävän vapaan työskentelymme, jollainen on tämän päivän yhteiskuntarakenteissa lähes mahdotonta. On syntynyt jonkinasteinen taiteellinen yhteisömaa, joka sijaitsee jossakin fyysisen materian (seinät ja maalaukset) ja immateriaalisen yhteistyön välissä. Me paikalliset näemme alueella sen arvon ja olemassa olevan toimintakyvyn. Tämän päivän lapset ja nuoret ovat lapsia ja

nuoria nyt, eivät enää kymmenen vuoden päästä. Tämän päivän ikäihmiset ja terveytensä (mielen ja kehon) kanssa kamppailevat ovat vielä elossa. Meillä ei ole aikaa odottaa tulevaisuuden ostaria, me elämme nyt, ja meillä on nämä seinät, tämä yhteinen maa, joka voi kantaa hedelmää myös näissä olosuhteissa.

Seinien omistajat voivat halutessaan hyötyä maalaamistamme teoksista, mutta paikalliset taiteilijat (lapset, nuoret ja aikuiset) ovat nähneet sen konkreettisen vaivan, jonka ansiosta alue on saanut myös tavanomaisesta negatiivisesta uutisoinnista poikkeavaa medianäkyvyyttä. Taide voikin osaltaan lisätä myös paikkojen arvoa ja houkuttelevuutta. Toisaalta on hyvä pitää mielessä, että taiteilijat ja taide tulevat samalla osallistuneeksi gentrificationin prosessiin<sup>3</sup>, jonka myötä alueet keskiluokkaistetaan ja alkuperäiset, usein vähävaraiset, asukkaat joutuvat muuttamaan pois.<sup>4</sup> Omistajatahot hyötyvät taiteilijoiden ja asukkaiden tuottamasta hyvästä ilman, että tekevät muuta kuin omistavat ja antavat luvan maalaamista varten. Toisaalta olen joutunut jopa maksamaan kaupungille lupamaksuja siitä hyvästä, että olemme lasten ja nuorten kanssa päässeet maalaamaan heille kuuluvan tilan. Muistan lasten ihmetelleen ääneen: ”miksi Kontula Art Schoolin pitää maksaa siitä, että teemme hyvän teon?” Kyseessä oli Kontulan metroradan varrella,

3 ”Monet Mellunmäen asukkaat ovat toiveikkaita, että alueen kasvojenkohotuksen myötä myös peruspalveluihin panostettaisiin, mutta huoli keskiluokkaistumisesta on silti olemassa.” ”Kohta ihmisillä ei ole varaa vuokrata asuntoa edes halvimpina tunnetuilta alueilta, kuten Kontulasta tai Jakomäestä,” sanoo Itä-Helsingissä pitkään asunut Reza Davoudian. (Faye, 2021.)

4 ”Although it often rejects it, street art can definitely serve as a catalyst for gentrification, but it can also fall victim to this process. On many occasions, artists do not participate in the neighborhood upscaling consciously, but they are manipulated by real estate developers. When developers detect a lively borough with colorful shops, street art, and galleries, they immediately see a chance for excellent investment returns.” (Open Walls Gallery, 2018.)

vilkasliikenteisellä kulkuväylällä, sijaitseva väestönsuojan uloskäynti, yksi alueen suosituimmista huumeiden ”käyttöhuoneista”. KAS Junioreiden ryhmä suunnitteli ja toteutti sinne *Fantasiamestä*-teoksensa kesällä 2022. Paikka oli sinne dumpattujen roskien ja käytettyjen huumeruiskujen sekä virtsan sotkema. Keräsin roskat pois, ja Kontula Art Schoolin aikuisten kollektiivin jäsen painepesi omilla välineillään tilan puhtaaksi, jotta lasten oli mahdollista aloittaa taitteen tekeminen. Työskentelyn aikana ohikulkijat kiittelivät meitä vuolaasti, eikä kukaan halunnut häiritä prosessiamme.

Yhteisötaiteellinen työskentelymme tilassa siisti sen erään ohikulkijan mukaan pitkäksi aikaa. Paikassa ei ole kameravalvontaa ja se on ollut suosittu graffitie maalauspaikka. Graffitimaal eilla oli siis syntynyt seinin omistajuutta jo ennen meitä. Pitkään lasten ja nuorten maalaukset saivat olla rauhassa, eikä ihme, sillä myös paikalliset päihteitä aktiivisesti käyttävät ohikulkijat kiittelivät kovasti niiden olemassaoloa ja lupasivat katsoa teosten perään. Itseasiassa en ole koskaan urani aikana saanut missään muussa maalauskohteessa niin paljon kiitoksia, kuin tuossa paikassa. Aukkaat olivat yksinkertaisesti niin onnellisia, että siistimme, vaikkakin omaan laskuumme, turvattomuuden tunteita pitkään herättäneen paikan. Jouduin tekemään paikkaan ensimmäisen korjausmaalauksen vasta syksyllä 2023, talkoovoimin. Päätin jättää testinä seinille ”tyhjää” tilaa myös muille, toisenlaisille tulkinnoille katutaiteesta. Ikävä kyllä hienojen graffitie ja tagien sijaan lasten teosten päälle on ilmestynyt lähinnä töhrymäistä tussijälkeä. Jensenin tavoin (2022, s. 75) kuitenkin ajattelen, että nämäkin toimintamme herättämät reaktiot voidaan kohdata rakentavasti, jolloin ne voivat synnyttää uusia tai deprojekteja ja herätellä jopa uusia tutkimuskysymyksiä.



Kuva 4. Hänninen, H. (2024). KAS! Juniorit: *Fantasiametsä*. Väestönsuojan uloskäynti ennen ja jälkeen maalauksen, Kontula. © Heidi Hänninen.

Aiempien yhteistyökokemusteni perusteella olin positiivisesti yllättynyt, kun keväällä 2024 Helsingin kaupunki pyysi Kontula Art Schoolia mukaan ostarin vieressä sijaitsevan Emännänpolun alkukutunnelin maalausprojektiin. Minulle luvattiin maksaa työstä myös korvaus. Ongelma tilaustöissä on kuitenkin ikävä kyllä aina sama: kuinka maksaa rahaa niille ihmisille, jotka ovat työelämän ulkopuolella ja joita rangaistaan jokaisesta pankkitilille tulevasta ylimääräisestä eurosta.<sup>5</sup>Palkalliset projektit ovatkin aiheuttaneet vähävaraisissa taiteilijoissa ristiriitaisia tunteita: toisaalta iloa ja ylpeyttä omasta työstä, toisaalta ymmärrettävästi myös surua, vihaa ja katkeruutta järjestelmää kohtaan. Tällaiset yhteiskunnan rakenteet eivät tue ihmisten aktiivisuutta.

On suuri voitto, että esimerkiksi pitkään työkyvyttömänä ollut henkilö löytää tavan olla mukana yhteiskunnassa. Kannattaakin muistaa huomio, mistä aloitin: joidenkin ihmisten maisemat ovat niin täynnä jätemaata jo heidän syntyessään, että elämä menee pitkälti sen läpi tarpoessa. Emme siis synny yhdenvertaisiin olosuhteisiin. Hauraassa maisemassa onkin tärkeintä, että ihmiselle löytyisi edes jollakin tavalla siedettävä tapa elää. Jos se pitää sisälleen yhteisen ja yhteisöllisen hyvän tuottamista, miksei siitä palkittaisi avokäsin ja pyrittäisi löytämään keinoa, jonka avulla erilaisissa elämäntilanteissa olevat ihmiset voitaisiin palkita hyvästä työstään? Ja jos vapaaehtoisuuteen perustuvasta yhteisötyöstä on vaikea neuvotella sen tekijöitä rankaisemisen sijaan aidosti hyödyttävää rahapalkkaa, niin ehkä vastaaviin hommiin voisi soveltaa jonkinlaista yhteisötaiteen tai yhteisötyön erityisapurahaa, jota voisi jakaa myös sellaisille henkilöille, jotka eivät täytä ammattitaiteilijan

5 Ks. esim. [https://www.kela.fi/documents/d/guest/alt\\_teksti\\_taulukko\\_1\\_tyottomyysturvan\\_suojaosa\\_poistuu](https://www.kela.fi/documents/d/guest/alt_teksti_taulukko_1_tyottomyysturvan_suojaosa_poistuu)



Kuva 5. Hänninen, H. (2024). KAS! Aikuisten kollektiivi: *Taking Some Space*. Emännänpolun alikulkutunneli, Kontula. © Heidi Hänninen.

kriteerejä? Voisiko apurahan nähdä arvokkaana lahjana, joka mahdollistaa hyväntahtoisuuden ja yllättävät teot? Voisiko ajatus vastavuoroisesti jaetusta lahjasta olla vastaus?

### Kohti pohjaa virtaava Lahjan henki (ja valta)

Kaaro lainaa yhdysvaltalaisista kirjailijasta Lewis Hyden metaforaa, jonka mukaan lahjan hengessä lahjat virtasivat aina kohti pohjaa. Kaaron mukaan vasta niukkuuteen perustuva talousjärjestelmä teki kerjäläisistä ”ei-toivottuja loisia”, kun ”lahjataloudessa he edustivat puolestaan hyvettä ja heidän tyhjä kuppinsa oli kutsu yhteisölle osoittaa hyvää tahtoa.” (Kaaro, 2017, s. 40–41.) Maussin mukaan lahjojen vaihto on yleisinhimillinen ilmiö. Monissa vanhoissa kulttuureissa esiintyneiden lahjatalouden järjestelmien, kuten

*Kula*-vaihdannan, jatkumon hän näkee myös julkisissa ja yksityisissä hyvinvointia lisäävissä teoissa, joissa velvollisuus ja vapaaehtoisuus sekoittuvat. Toisaalta Mauss varoittaa myös hyväntekeväisyyden mahdollisesta haavoittavuudesta. (Mauss 2006, s. 112, 116). Myös antropologi Mary Douglas (2006, s. 7, 12) aloittaa Maussin *Lahja*-teokseen kirjoittamansa esipuheen muistuttamalla hyväntekeväisyyden vaaroista ja tiivistää myöhemmin: ”Lahjan teoria onkin teoria inhimillisestä solidaarisuudesta”. Maussin ajatuksia on helppo seurata ja löytää yhtymäkohtia erilaiseen kansalaistoimintaan ja vapaaehtoistyöhön: niiden puitteissa tarjoillaan yhteisöllisyyttä ja hyvinvointia lisääviä lahjoja, joskus jopa anteliaasti lahjojen antajien omalla kustannuksella, kuten edellä mainitussa KAS Junioreiden *Fantasiamestä*-projektissa (2022). Myös Jensen (2022, s. 75) yhdistää lahjan teorian juuri solidaarisuuden näkökulmasta kollektiiviseen jakamiseen ja resurssien hyödyntämiseen perustuvaan taiteelliseen toimintaan.

Tämän kirjoituksen alussa käytin maisemaa metaforana kuvaamaan niitä ihmisten erilaisia todellisuuksia, joita kohtaan yhteisötaiteilijan työssäni kaupunkitilassa. Myös minulla on oma maisemani, joka koostuu omasta elämänhistoriastani taiteilijana ja ihmisenä. Siinä maisemassa on myös paljon yhtymäkohtia työssäni kohtaanieni erilaisten ihmisyyksien kanssa. En tule korkeasti koulutautuneesta perheestä, ja akateeminen maailma on minulle uusi. Addiktiosairaudet ja mielenterveyden ongelmat ovat minulle tuttuja. Kuvataiteilijana olen toiminut 2010-luvun alusta ja yhtä kauan olen tehnyt myös (katu)taidetta julkisiin tiloihin Suomessa ja ulkomailla. Minua ja muita kontulalaisen yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen maisemassa yhdistää taiteilijuus ja paikallisuus, mutta toisaalta myös kärsimyksen kokemus, mahdollisesti myös skeptisyys auktoriteetteja ja valtaapitäviä kohtaan. Epäoikeudenmukaisuuden tunnen joskus jopa kipuna, jonka ajattelen ohjaavan empatiaani. ”Yliempaattisuus” voi

toki aiheuttaa myös vahinkoa, mutta uskon, että herkkyyteni ansiosta olen päätenyt tekemään tällaista taidepraktiikkaa, jossa voin olla myös tukena muille. Rakastan työtäni ihmisten parissa, jotka ovat kokeneet kovia, ja kadulla toimiminen on minulle luontevaa.

Yhdyn Maussin ja Douglasin ajatuksiin siitä, että epätasa-arvoisissa tilanteissa tapahtuvassa hyväntekeväisyydessä, kuten lahjojen antamisessakin, piilee aina vaaransa. Tämä vaara liittyy vallan käyttöön. Yhteisötaiteilijana myös minulla on valtaa toisiin ihmisiin. Valtaa minulle tuovat esimerkiksi koulutustausta ja erilaiset koulutetuille taiteilijoille suunnatut rahoitukset. Kuten Viren (2016, s. 67) sanoi: ”Money can buy me love”. Tarvitsen rahoitusta, jotta voin toteuttaa itseäni, ja kutsua myös muita mukaan lahjan, solidaarisuuden ja jopa rakkauden virtaan. Kontula Art Schoolin tapauksessa minä olen yksittäinen henkilö, jolle pääomaa kertyy, mutta toisaalta saamani raha on apurahaa, johon pätevät mielestäni jollain tapaa Kaaron (2017, s. 56–57) kuvaileman vaihtoehdoisen talousjärjestelmän lainalaisuudet, jossa pyritään yhdistelemään lahjan henkeä ja rahatalouden ideaa: en voi säästää apurahaani, vaan saksalaisen taloustieteilijä, kansalaisaktivisti ja anarkisti Silvio Gesellin *vapaan rahan* periaatteen mukaisesti menetän sen arvon (joudun palauttamaan apurahan), ellen käytä sitä tarkoituksenmukaisesti yhteisön hyväksi.<sup>6</sup> Näin ollen apurahani kiertää kauttani yhteisön käyttöön ja paikallisille, kun lahjan tapaan investoin sen ympärilläni muihin ihmisiin ja yhteiseen kaupunkitilaamme.

6 Trobriand-saarilla oli väärin pitää arvoesineitä pitkään omassa hallussa. Taloudellis-laillis-moraalisessa *Kulan* kokonaisuudessa väliaikainen omaisuus annettiin sillä ehdolla, että se käytettäisiin toisen henkilön hyväksi tai välitettäisiin kolmannelle osapuolelle. (Mauss, 2006, 56.)

Olen ansainnut apurahat omalla työlläni, mutta kasvuun ja kilpailuun perustuvan talousjärjestelmän keskellä ne tuntuvat lähes armolahjoilta. Kaaron (2017, s. 46–47) mukaan lahja edustikin aikoinaan armoa, jota ilman olisivat vallinneet vain kylmät taloudelliset lait sekä putoamisen ja välinpitämättömyyden pelko. Tässä velan ajamassa ajassamme, jossa Kaaron (2017, s. 50) sanoin ”yhden tappio on toisen hyöty” talousjärjestelmämme syrjäyttämällä köyhille ja vähävaraisille inhimillinen armo poliittisessa maisemassamme on hyvin ohutta. Perussuomalaisten puheenjohtajan, aiemmin moraalialia ja normatiivista teoriaa käsitelleen väitöskirjan tehneen, Riikka Purran mukaan empatia ei sovi ”politiikan ohjenuoraksi” (Vasantola, 2023). Perussuomalaiset ovatkin tulleet tunnetuiksi esimerkiksi maahanmuuton vastaisella linjallaan. Epäluuloinen suhtautuminen muukalaisiin on ikiaikaista perintöä. Varhaisessa kristillisessä perinteessä lahja annettiin Kaaron (2017, s. 42) mukaan vain heimoveljien kesken, kun toisen jumalan ja toisen kulttuurin piiriin kuulavalta vierasmaalaisilta korkojen periminen oli puolestaan suotavaa: ”Jos ihmiset eivät kuulu samaan heimoon, mistä voi tietää, kunnioittavatko he lahjan sääntöjä?”.

Erikoistoimittaja Jouko Juonala kirjoittaa sivilisaation merkityksestä ja sivistyksestä vuoden 2015 pakolaiskriisin jälkeisessä ajassa mukaillen historioitsija sir Keith Thomasin (2018) ajatuksia. Thomasin mukaan sivilisaatio on ollut aina retorinen käsite, jolla on tarkoitettu ihmisyyhteisön tilaa sellaisena, kuin sitä on milloinkin

satuttu pitämään oikeana.<sup>7</sup> Thomasin humanistisen näkemyksen mukaan sivilisaation testi on se, kuinka hyvin yhteiskunta kohtelee heikkoja ja muukalaisia. Juonala kirjoittaa kauniisti: ”Sivistyksen merkitys on opettaa meitä elämään yhteisöissä ja tulemaan toimeen muiden kanssa. Nykyisessä monikulttuurisessa Euroopassa, jossa arvot ovat usein keskenään ristiriidassa, on sivistys se liima, joka pitää meitä kasassa. Maailma ei toimisi ilman sitä.” (Juonala, 2018.) Lahjojen antamiseen liittyvä tunne, lupaus lisäyksestä ja moninkertaisesta kasvusta, on ollut Kaaron mukaan liima, joka on tehnyt yhteisöt ja toisaalta myös uskonnot vahvaksi. Ihmisten omaisuuksien kustannuksella korkoa kasvavan lainan maailmaan tuo tunne lupauksesta ei hänen mukaansa kuulu, eivätkä ihmiset sitoudu sen myötä toisiinsa hyvällä tahdolla. (Kaaro, 2017, s. 42.) Juonalan ja Thomasin kuvaamalla sivistyksellä on paljon yhteistä lahjan kanssa; liiman, joka sitoo meidät toisiimme ja opettaa meitä kasvattamaan hyvää tahtoa toisiamme kohtaan, ja jota ilman luonnonkansoille olisi Kaaron (2017, s. 21) mukaan koittanut ”maailmanloppu”.

Toisilleen vierailta sivilisaatioille näyttää olevan kuitenkin suuri haaste soveltaa sivistyksen ja lahjan logiikkaa toisiaan kohtaan. Minkälaista sivilisaatio-käsitystä me eurooppalaiset rakennamme tässä ajassa? Ylläpitääkö se muukalaisvihaa tai kollektiivista itsekkyyttä vai voisiko se perustua ihmisten väliseen tasa-arvoon ja eurooppalaisen vallan jakamiseen koko ihmiskunnan hyväksi, kuin yhteiseksi lahjaksi? Olen samaa mieltä Kaaron kanssa siitä, että

7 Sivilisaation käsite tarkoitti ”sivistyksen opettamista barbaareille”, kunnes 1700-luvun lopulla sen merkitys muuttui ”oikeaksi järjestykseksi” ja ”lailliseksi yhteiskunnaksi”: Länsimaiden sivistystaso nousi rangaistusten lieventyessä, sodan saadessa lakinsa ja kulttuurin, tieteiden, teknologian ja talouselämän ”kehittyessä”. Sivistyskansojen säännöt eivät kuitenkaan koskeneet ”barbaarikansoja.” ”Siirtomaiden alkuperäisasukkaita oli lupa kohdella kuinka julmasti tahansa, sillä näillä ei ollut ihmisarvoa.” (Juonala, 2018.)

useiden suomalaisten maahanmuuttajavastaiset asenteet tuntuvat nousevan aiemmin mainitusta putoamisen pelosta ja armottomasta niukkuuden kyllästämässä maisemasta, jonka keskellä seisomme toinen toisiamme pahantahtoisesti pälyillen. Lahjalle ei riitä tilaa (Kaaro 2017, s. 61). Tarvitaan siis luottamusta, jotta lahjan kierto voi tapahtua rauhassa, eikä sorru epäluulon alle.

Lahjoihin ja niiden antajiin kannattaa kuitenkin suhtautua varauksella. Maussin (2006, s.122–123, 105.) ja Douglasin (2006, s. 7–10) mukaan ei nimittäin ole olemassa pyyteettömiä lahjoja ja tuottosan liiton lisäksi ne voivat sisältää hyväksikäyttöä, synnyttää vaarallisia riippuvuussuhteita ja sitoa epärehellisillä vaatimuksillaan. Esineessä (ja lahjassa) on myös aina osa sen alkuperäistä omistajaa, jolloin lahjan antajalla on valtaa sen vastaanottajasta: esineen henki (*hau*) seuraa jokaista saajaansa (Mauss, 2006, s. 39–41). Eräs paikallinen kertoi minulle, että Kontula Art Schoolin yhteisön tekemistä seinämaalauksista ”välittyy tekijöiden sielu.” Kontula Art School voi olla lahja, mutta se on myös alkuperäisen antajansa näköinen. Aloittamani lahja on kääritty paperiin, joka kuvastaa omia arvojani ja niiden mukaisia tavoitteita. Lahjani ei ole välttämättä kaikille mieluinen. Tämän vuoksi sen vastaanottamisen täytyykin mielestäni perustua vapaaehtoisuuteen. Toisaalta julkinen tila on yhteistä, eivätkä ohikulkijatkaan voi aina valita reittejään. Tiedostamme ryhmänä hyvin, etteivät maalauksemme miellytä kaikkia, vaikka ne edustavatkin monenlaisia tyyllilajeja ja esteettisiä näkemyksiä. Olemme myös yhteisönä päätyneet käyttämään valtaa yhteisessä kaupunkitilassamme.

Kun perustin Kontula Art Schoolin, halusin kyseenalaistaa hierarkioita ja vältellä omaa valtaa. Taidetoimintaan liittyvien tapahtumien varrella minua kuitenkin pyydettiin käyttämään sitä, ja ryhmäläisten kesken sovimme, että minä teen, etenkin ristiriitatilanteissa, lopulliset päätökset. Minulla on siis valtaa suhteessa Kontula Art

Schoolin ryhmiin ja toimintaan. Voin kuitenkin pyrkiä, parhaani mukaan, käyttämään tätä valtaa oikeudenmukaisesti ja siten, että siitä koituisi enemmän yhteistä hyötyä kuin haittaa. Taiteilija-tutkija Anu Koskinen on tarkastellut valtasuhteita vankilateatterin kontekstissa ja todennut, että empaattisesti toteutettu vallankäyttö voi rakentaa turvallisuudentunnetta. Vankilasta vapautuville ja vapautuneille vangeille suunnatussa Porttiteatterissakin mukana ollut Veli-Matti Lehikoinen ajattelee, että hyvän ohjaajan voi itse asiassa tunnistaa rakentavasta vallankäytöstä. (Koskinen, 2021, s. 80–81). Toivon olevani sellainen, hyvä ohjaaja, tai tulevani sellaiseksi ja oppivani käyttämään valtaa mahdollisimman hyvin.

Pyyhtisen (2022, s. 60) mukaan solidaarisuutta ilmentävät lahjat, joissa anteliaisuus näyttäytyy avun tai tuen antamisena ja myötätunnon osoittamisena, poikkeavat rituaalein ja juhlamenoin annetuista lahjoista (kuten Trobriandaarten *Kula*-korujen vaihdantajärjestelmästä). Maussin (2006, s. 117) mukaan me ”tarvitsemme enemmän hyvää tahtoa, tunnetta ja anteliaisuutta sopimuksiin, jotka koskevat palvelujen ja asuntojen vuokraamista sekä välttämättömien elintarpeiden myyntiä”, ja kaiken kaikkiaan parempaa huolenpitoa yksilöstä. Vaikka Douglasin (2006, s. 19) mukaan Maussin yritys kytkeä lahjateoria sosiaalisen demokratian tukipilariksi jäi lopulta heikoksi, ainakin ajatusta solidaarisuuteen ja hyväntahtoisuuteen perustuvista lahjoista voi mielestäni hyvillä mielin soveltaa Kontula Art Schoolin kaltaisen yhteisöllisen taidetoiminnan kontekstiin. Uskon, että anteliaisuuteen perustuva yhteisö voi selvitä vaikeista ajoista paremmin kuin Riikka Purran kilpailuyhteiskunta.

## Sosiaalisesti kestävämmän kaupungin maisema (yhteenveto)

Kaupunkiaktivismi on saanut osakseen myös kritiikkiä, jonka mukaan kyseessä on hipsterien ja hyvinvoivan keskiluokan

hetkellinen (projektimainen), pinnallinen ja kaupallinen hauskanpito Helsingin kantakaupungin alueella. Kaupunkiaktivistisen toiminnan nähdään myötäilevän valtaa ja välittelevän kriittisyyttä. (Faehnle & Mäenpää, 2021, s. 161–164.) Nämä ovat tärkeitä huomioita. Yhteisötaiteilija-tutkijana olen halunnut itse kehittää Kontula Art Schoolin kaupunkiaktivistista toimintaa nimenomaan yhteiskunnan marginaalissa elävien ihmisten ehdoilla. Minulle on ollut eettisesti tärkeää, että toiminnalla on jatkuvuutta ja että se tuo esille kriittisiä näkökulmia julkiseen tilaan ja sen valtasuhteisiin. Tämä, sekä vahvasti henkilökohtainen ja aktivistinen että ammatillinen sitoumukseni, on vuosien saatossa kasvattanut luottamusta, jonka uskon mahdollistaneen lahjojen antamisen ja vastaanottamisen. Koskisen (2019) mukaan hedelmällisen yhteisötaiteellisen toiminnan mahdollistaakin usein pitkään rakennettu luottamussuhde yhteisön ja taiteilijan välillä. Kontula Art Schoolin tapauksessa kuulun asukkaana, ystävänä ja naapurina Kaaron (2017, s. 42) mainitsemaan ”samaa heimoon” ja paikallisuuteni, tuttuuteni, ansiosta herätän luottamusta.<sup>8</sup>

Kontula Art Schoolin yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen toiminta on mahdollistanut yhteisöllisten lahjojen kierron ja on esimerkiksi näyttänyt, että yhteinen panos voi tuottaa myös kasvua ja arvonnousua: toiminta on jatkuvasti laajentunut, sen kaikille avoimen ja maksuttoman taidetoiminnan piiriin on tullut alusta alkaen eri kulttuureja ja kielimaisemia edustavia ihmisiä ja uusia yhteistyötahoja, taide ja toiminta ovat tuoneet negatiivisen maineen puristamalle Kontulalle uudenlaista medianäkyvyyttä ja yhteiskuntajärjestelmämme syrjäyttämien arvo on noussut muiden ihmisten

8 Esimerkkinä yhteisöllisen lahjan palautumisesta alkuperäiselle lahjan antajalle koen esimerkiksi Kontulan 60 v -juhlavuoden (2024) kunniaksi minulle myönnetyn Kontula-mitalin. Mitaliraatitilaiset olivat Kontulan kulttuurielämään pitkäaikaisesti vaikuttaneita paikallisaktiiveja ja alueen asukkaita.

silmissä. Positiivista huomiota yhteisönä olemme saaneet esimerkiksi Itäkeskuksessa sijaitsevan Easton kauppakeskuksen järjestämän *Sitä itää* -kilpailun (2024) kautta, kun Kontula Art School ehdotettiin mukaan finalistiksi. Kilpailussa etsittiin toimijaa, joka tekee alueella yhteisöllistä hyvää. Lisää näkyvyyttä saimme, kun 17.1.2025 minulle myönnettiin Kulttuuriteko 2024 -palkinto. Palkinto perustuu kaupunkilaisten ehdotuksiin ja se myönnetään vuosittain ”merkittävälle ja uudentlaiselle kulttuuriteolle tai -hankkeelle”, joka vaikuttaa Helsingin kaupunkiin ja helsinkiläisiin muuttamalla tai haastamalla kaupunkitilaa tai vanhoja toimintatapoja, saa näkemään asiat uudella tavalla ja osoittaa rohkeutta luoda jotain uutta ja erilaista. Palkintoperusteluissa mainitaan, että KAS-toiminnalla on kaupunkilaisten mukaan ”erityistä merkitystä sen tekijöille” ja ”sen tuotokset tekevät kaupunkitilasta kivemman kaikille.” (Helsingin kaupunki, 2025.)

Onneksi sivistyneessä yhteiskunnassa on paljon eri sektoreilta kumpuavaa yritystä yhteiseen hyvään. Esimerkiksi sosiaalisesti kestävä kaupunki<sup>9</sup> mallin ytimessä on ihmisten hyvinvointi ja sitä määrittävät tekijät, kuten osallisuuden kokemukset ja demokration toteutuminen. Kuntoutussäätiön (2019) tekemän selvityksen mukaan kaupunkilaisten osallisuutta ei tulisi pelkistää erilliseksi menetelmäksi vaan kestävä kaupunkisuunnittelun lähtökohdaksi. Selvityksen perusteella sosiaalinen kestävyys muodostuu mikrotasolla ja tarvitsee myös vapaaehtoisten, naapureiden ja järjestöjen tarjoaman avun ja tuen sosiaaliseen hyvinvointiin ja terveyteen liittyvien haasteiden ratkaisemiseksi. (Kuitunen, 2019, s. 31–32.)

9 Sosiaalisesti kestävä kaupunki voidaan ymmärtää ”metaforana”, ”kehittämisen viitekehysenä” tai jopa ”ideologiana.” Taloudelliseen ja ekologiseen kestävyYTEEN verrattuna sosiaalinen kestävyys on epämääräisempi käsite ja ilmiö. Sosiaalisen kestävyYDEN parantumista on myös vaikea osoittaa luotettavasti. (Kuitunen, 2019, s. 4–5.)

Kuntoutussäätiön toimitusjohtaja Soile Kuitusen mukaan ”sosiaalisesti kestävä kaupunki on ihmisten ja heidän välisensä vuorovaikutuksen kaupunki.” Olennaista sosiaalisen kestävyuden kannalta onkin arvioida, mahdollistaako kaupunkitila ihmisten luontevaa kohtaamista ja minkälaisia vaikutuksia kohtaamisilla on kaupunkilaisten koettuun hyvinvointiin ja toimintakykyyn. Voidaan myös tarkastella asioita, joista omassa asuinympäristössä ollaan ylpeitä ja mitä halutaan vaalia. (Kuitunen, 2019, 4.)

Kuntoutussäätiön tekemän selvityksessä on muodostettu sosiaalisesti kestävä kaupunkin kehittämisen viitekehys, joka on sovellettavissa myös Kontula Art Schoolin kaltaisen yhteisöllisen taide-toiminnan kontekstiin. Myös KAS:n edustama kaupunkiaktivismi ja kulttuurinen demokratia löytävät paikkansa tästä mallista, jossa ihmisten hyvinvointia kehystävät paikallisen osallistumisen mahdollisuudet, alueen identiteetti, ympäristön laatu ja sen erilaiset vetovoimatekijät. Selvitys kertoo, että etenkin sosioekonomisesti heikommilla alueilla sosiaalinen kestävyys on erottamattomasti yhteydessä tarjolla oleviin palveluihin. (Kuitunen, 2019, s. 31–32) Sosiaalisesti kestävä kaupunkin maisema ei ole kaukana Maussin (2006, s. 118) ajatuksesta, jonka mukaan kansalaisen tulisi ”toimiessaan tiedostaa yhtä lailla itsensä kuin myös yhteiskunnan eri ryhmät ja koko yhteiskunta”, muut ihmiset ja koko sosiaalinen todellisuus. Tällaisessa sosiaalisten todellisuuksien kokonaisuudessa Kontula Art School edustaa neljättä sektoria, joka voi osaltaan tukea julkista, yksityistä sekä kolmannen sektorin toimintaa.

Kontula Art School on onnistunut lisäämään erilaisten ihmisten välisiä kohtaamisia alueella, jonka sosioekonominen kehitys on ollut alavireistä. Toimintamme on lähtenyt meistä asukkaista, ja se on myös palautunut meille. Tekemällä taidetta annamme lahjoja toinen toisillemme, niin että alkuperäisen lahjan (KAS) kokonaisarvo kasvaa ja monimuotoistuu. Toiminnan arvo on näkynyt laajassa

kiinnostuksessa, joka ulottuu myös yhteisömme ja asuinalueemme ulkopuolelle. Meille tulee yhteydenottoja yhteiskunnan eri sektoreilta, oli kyseessä sitten ehdotus tilaustyölle, yhteistyölle tai toiminnan esittelypyyntö. Kontula Art Schoolin toimintaa on myös rinnastettu esimerkilliseen sosiaalipedagogiseen käytännön työhön (Nivala & Ryyänen, 2024, s. 303).

Jatkuvan talouskasvun sijaan toimintamme tuottaa arvon kiertoa paikallisten ja alueen toimijoiden kesken, yhteisöä ja aluetta rikastuen. Asukkaat, sekä teosten tekijät, heidän tuttunsa ja ennestään meille tuntemattomat, ovat ylpeitä uudesta taiteesta alueella ja haluavat vaalia sitä. Toiminta palvelee siis asuinuetta. Se on neljännen sektorin lahja muille yhteiskunnallisille toimijoille ja tukee osaltaan myös kulttuurisen demokratian toteutumista. Muuttuuko praktiikka, mikäli toiminta päättyisi vaikkapa 3. sektorin siipien suojiin osaksi yhdistystoimintaa? Toimintaa on rahoitettu jo vuosien ajan julkisin ja yksityisin apurahoin, enkä näe maksutonta (harrastus)toimintaa osana markkinaehtoista maailmaa. Voidaan kuitenkin kysyä, onko kestävä, että näin tärkeäksi havaittu toiminta on ihmisten hyvän tahdon ja solidaarisen lahjan ajatuksen varassa? Toisaalta juuri tuo hyvä tahto toimii kuin Kaaron kuvailema sosiaalinen liima (2017, s. 42), joka pitää yhteisöllisen lahjamme elossa ja ohjailee sitä uusiin suuntiin.

Kontula Art School on esimerkki yhteiskunnallisesti merkittävästä toiminnasta, joka tuottaa myös taloudellista hyötyä ja on helsinkiläisten edun mukaista olematta kuitenkaan markkinaehtoista. KAS-toimintaa kannattaa tukea ja rahoittaa, sillä se parantaa ihmisten elämänlaatua, lisää alueellista viihtyvyyttä ja turvallisuutta onnistuen jopa purkamaan ihmisryhmien välisiä konflikteja, vähentää syrjäytymistä ja kohentaa monien vähemmistöjen tai erityisryhmien omanarvontuntoa luoden myös osallisuuden tunnetta. On huomattava, että kaikki nämä asiat eivät ainoastaan tuota parempaa

ja merkityksellisempää elämää, vaan lisäksi pienentävät julkisen sektorin menoja ja nostavat vetovoimatekijänä Kontulan kaupallistakin arvoa asuinalueena.

Kontula Art Schoolin eri-ikäisistä ja erilaisista taustoista tulevista jäsenistä rakentuva heterogeeninen yhteisö maalaa talousjärjestelmämme dominoimaan kylmään maisemaan lämmintä valoaan ja rakentaa sosiaalisesti kestävämpää kaupunkia, jossa lahjan henkikin kuiskailee varovasti ohikulkijoiden korviin. Yhteisöllisen julkisen taiteen toiminnallamme olemme tulleet luoneeksi taiteellisen yhteismaan, jonka äärellä voi kokea omistajuutta, vaikka ei olisi lanttiakaan rahaa.

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A black folding chair is shown from a high-angle perspective. On the seat, there is a piece of light-colored wood and a light-colored card. The card has the text "From the Trees, With Love" printed on it. The chair is part of a larger set of similar chairs arranged in rows on a concrete floor. Other chairs in the background also have pieces of wood and cards on their seats.

From the Trees, With Love

# From the Trees, With Love

HANNA VAHVASELKÄ

*"Lahja pitää osata ottaa vastaan."*

(Elsa Björn)

Kun kysyy vaivihkaa lähipiiriltä mitä ajatuksia heille tulee mieleen sanasta "lahja", voi saada vastaukseksi kaikkea mahdollista aina Reino-serkun Lahja-vaimosta joulupukkiin ja joulupukista oman lapsen hymyyn. Monille lahja on mukava asia antaa, mutta aivan yhtä monet kokevat säännöllisesti tuskaa miettiessään joulu-, rippi-, ylioppilas-, hää- tai huomenlahjoja läheisilleen. Usein lahjoja on myös kiva saada, mutta yhtä usein myös vaikea ottaa vastaan, saati säilyttää. Mitä tehdä anopilta saadulle rumalle yöpaidalle tai sadoille kaapeista löytyneille turhille astioille, jotka on annettu lahjaksi rakkaudesta ja hyvästä tahdosta?<sup>1</sup> Vaikka väittäisimme, että ystävyys tai koko elämä on lahja, on silti jouluaattoilta tai juhlien jälkeinen aamu se latautunut hetki, jossa materiaan liittyvät toiveet, odotukset, lupaukset ja pettymykset punnitaan.

1 esim. 20.10. 2024 28-vuotias Vilma Ollila kertoo Helsingin Sanomissa sukulaisilta saamistaan lahjoista, jotka oli kokenut velvollisuudekseen säilyttää. Muun muassa lautasia ja kulhoja oli 110 kappaletta ja mukeja ja laseja 80. Erivärisiä Mariskoolejakin oli 17.

*Lahja*-opintokokonaisuudessa<sup>2</sup> lähestyimme lahjoja englannin kielellä. Sanan *gift* synonyymi *present* toi monille mieleen sanan *presence*, ja lopulta nimesimme kokonaisuuteen liittyvän konferenssin ja näyttelyn nimellä *Gifts/ Presents/ Presence*. Vaikka jo Senecan (4eaa-65 jaa.) mukaan aika on arvokkainta mitä meillä on antaa (Torkki, 2018, s. 11–12; Seneca, 2018, s. 39), ei suomen kielessä lahja taivu läsnä-oloksi oikein millään. Lahjakkuudeksi ja lahjuksiksi sitäkin enemmän. Nykysuomen sanakirjasta (1963, s. 10–11) voimme esimerkiksi lukea, että ”Oppikouluun valittiin yleensä äyllisesti l: kaimmat.” tai leikkisämmin: ”Hän on aika l. [= kova] ryyppymies.” tai ”Mies kuorsasi l: kaasti.” Suomen kieli liittyy lahjaan myös voimakkaasti kristillisiä merkityksiä. Puhumme pyhän hengen lahjoista tai armolahjoista, ja samainen nykysuomen sanakirja kertoo, että ”Rakkaus on taivaan l.” tai ”Katso, lapset ovat Herran l.”

Kun itse pysähdyin lahjan saamisen ja lahjan antamisen monimutkaisen kokemuksen äärelle, tuli ensimmäisenä mieleeni samoilu syksyisessä metsässä ja se, kun metsä avautuu ja ”Maa antaa l: ojaan.” tai ”Luonto tuhlaa l: oja” (Nykysuomen sanakirja, 1963, s. 10–11). Eli se hetki, kun sattumalta jalkojen juuressa on silmäkantamattomiin suppilovahveroita tai matto keltaisia kantarelleja. Tässä tekstissä en kuitenkaan kirjoita sienestyksestä, vaikka tavallaan metsään menenkin. Tarkoitukseni on kirjoittaa puusta kuvataiteen materiaalina, omasta nöyrästä kunnioituksestani puu-materiaalia kohtaan, muutamista puihin ja lahjoihin liittyivistä teoksistani ja siitä, miten näen aivan pienet tai teollisesti käsitellytkin puupalat arvokkaina metsän lahjoina, jotka olisi osattava ottaa arvoisellaan tavalla vastaan.

2 Tampereen-, Aalto- ja Taideyliopiston tohtoriopiskelijoiden yhteinen opintokokonaisuus 2023–2024.

## Puu metsän lahjana

Kun puhumme suomeksi puusta, ei koskaan voi olla varma, puhumeko suurista monivuotisista usein metsässä humisevista kasveista vai materiaalista, josta unelmatalomme on rakennettu. Ehkä tämä kertoo jotain myös erityisestä suhteestamme puuhun. Suomalaisten metsäsuhdetta on pidetty ainutlaatuisena<sup>3</sup> ja suhteemme puuyksilöihin on tutkitusti<sup>4</sup> vahva. Puut ovat monissa merkityksissään kietoutuneet eloomme aina. Sen lisäksi, että ne ovat tarjonneet suojaa ja lämpöä, on niistä tehty tarve-esineitä kotikäyttöön ja kulttiesineitä rituaalisiin tarkoituksiin tuhansia vuosia. Puu on kaadettunakin elävää (Kosonen, 2008, s. 55) ja läheltämme helposti löytyvänä, sekä hitaasti mutta varmasti uusiutuvana materiaalina, se on myös suhteellisen ekologista käyttöä. Ajattelepa joku niinkin, että oikealla metsänhoidolla, jatkuvassa kasvatuksessa puu voisi olla kuin mustikka; luonnonvara ja metsän lahja, jonka metsä tuottaa ihmisestä huolimatta ja ihmisestä riippumatta, ja josta ihminen hakee sadon sen kypsyyssä (esim. Juntti, 2019, s. 46).

Teoksessaan *Kauniimpi maailma*, tiedetoimittaja Jani Kaaro (2017, s. 33) kirjoittaa, että ainakin monet luonnonkansat ovat ymmärtäneet sen, että maa on perimmäinen lahja, josta kaikki elämä maapallolle virtaa ja että luonto kokonaisuudessaan on lahjaa ja säilyttää rikkautensa vain, jos sitä kohdellaan myös kuin lahjaa (Kaaro, 2017, s. 19). Lahjaa ja lahjan paradoksaalista luonnetta tutkineen sosiologi Olli Pyyhtisen (2014, s. 26) mukaan lahjan antamiseen

- 3 Suomalaista metsäsuhdetta koitetaan saada Unescon kansainväliseen aineettoman kulttuuriperinnön luetteloon, Metsäsuhteiden Suomi 2035 hankkeessa. En ota tässä tekstissä kantaa kuumana käyvään polarisoituneeseen metsäkeskusteluun.
- 4 Itä-Suomen yliopiston monitieteisessä Puut Lähellämme -tutkimushankkeessa paljastui puiden kanssa toimimisen rikkaat kytkennät mm. muistoihin arvoihin ja käsityksiin (Lummaa yms. 2023)

täytyy liittyä uhraus ja menetys, jotta lahja olisi lahja. Lahjan antajan on hylättävä ja irrotettava itsensä siitä mikä annetaan. Jos mistään ei luovuta, ei lahjaakaan anneta, ja jotta uhraus voidaan laskea uhraukseksi, on luovuttava jostakin arvokkaasta, halutusta tai rakkaasta (Pyyhtinen, 2014, s. 26, 36). Viimeistään avohakkuun karua maisemaa katsoessa pyrin itse muistamaan, että puut ovat arvokkaita metsän lahjoja, ja monet arjessamme itsestään selvät asiat: kirjat, lehdet, vessapaperit, takkatulet, nuotiokahvit, pahvilaatikat, lahjojen kääreet, joulukuuset, terassit, saunat, talot ja usein lämpökäin on saatu puista ja metsiltä.

Filosofi Susanna Lindbergin (2021) mukaan on eri asia käyttääkö luonnonvaroja riistäen, vai onko käyttö kunnioittavaa ja rakastavaa. Suomalaisessa kuvanveistossa puun käyttö liittyy usein luontokokemukseen (Sajas-Korte, 1987, s. 10), ja puuta materiaalinaan käyttävien taiteilijoiden puheista välittyy yleensä syvä arvostus materiaaliaan kohtaan. Esimerkiksi puukuvanveiston uranuurtajan Kain Tapperin (1930-2004) sanotaan työstäneen puuta ikään kuin luonto itse olisi jättänyt siihen jäljen (Peltola, 1981, s. 35). Omien sanojensa mukaan kertakäyttökulttuuriin kyllästynyt kuvanveistäjä Veikko Hirvimäki taas kertoo työskentelevänsä luonnon puolesta ja kysyvänsä materiaaliltaan: ”Mitä voin tehdä hyväksesi?” Hirvimäen mukaan materiaali kun on itse kutsunut valitsemaan itsensä (Kantokorpi, 2008, s. 91). Myös Joensuussa asuvan kuvataiteilija Jonna Salosen teokset kertovat huolesta ja surusta luonnon monimuotoisuuden katoamisen edessä. Salonen kerää puumateriaalinsa metsistä, hakkuuaukioilta, rannoilta ja kaduilta, ja löydettyihin materiaaleihin sekä luonnon kanssa työskentelyyn kietoutuu Salosella kokonainen elämäntapa (Salonen, 2019).

Nykytaiteessa puuhun materiaalina törmää tämän tästä. Rakennusjätteestä on tehty näyttäviä installaatioita, tanssiesityksessä on tanssittu puunrungon kanssa ja harjanvartta hiomalla on

tuotettu äänimaisemia.<sup>5</sup> Siinä missä esitystaiteilija mietiskelee teoksissaan puissa ja puiden kanssa (Arlander, 2022), voi kuvanveistäjälle puupala olla raaka-aine, taideteos, keskeneräinen työ, malli, hylätty jäännöskappale, istuin tai vain polttopuu (Burger, 2022). Itselleni puu valikoitui materiaaliksi lähes vahingossa; kuin lahjana, voisi tässä yhteydessä sanoa. Muistan jo lapsena askarrelleeni kellarista löytyneistä remonttijätteistä reliefieni esiasteita tai nauttineeni halkojen ja muiden löytöpuiden kuorimisesta omalla linkkuveitselläni. Opiskellessani Oriveden opistossa maalasin opiston halkovarastosta löytyneille puupalasille. Lopullisesti löysin puun kuitenkin vasta 90-luvulla Kuvataideakatemiassa, levittäessäni maalia liimapuulevyille ja huomattessani, miten hienosti syyt kuulsivat ohuen värikerroksen läpi. Sen jälkeen olen liikkunut liimapuun pinnalla pari vuosikymmentä. Viime vuosina ympäristöhuoli on vallannut minutkin, ja olen päivittänyt menetelmiäni ja suhdettani puuhun ja materiaaleihin yleensä. Reliefimäisten maalattujen teosten lisäksi olen alkanut tehdä teoksiani polttoon menevistä roskista ja avohakkuuraiskiolta kerätyistä palasista, kierrättänyt materiaaleja vanhoista teoksista uusiin ja tehnyt myös väliaikaisia teoksia ulkotilaan.

## Puun henki, puun muisti

Materiaalina puu on pehmeää, lämmintä, kaunista ja nöyrää. Puisilla esineillä, ja jokaisella pienellä puupalasellakin, on oma ainutlaatuinen ja rikas tekstuurinsa, tuoksunsa, tuntoisuutensa ja henkensä, jotka herättävät muistikerroksia sekä työstäjässään että vastaanottajassaan (esim. Kosonen, 2008, 7; Valkonen, 2008, s. 55–59; Sajas-Korte, 1987). Tuhansia vuosia vanhat puuesineet museoissa, yhtä

5 Esim. Mika Helin, Aapo Repo ja Jukka Ristolainen, Sara Gurevitsch ja Tom Lönnqvist. Olen kirjoittanut tästä myös tekstissäni *Teacherly Moment* (2024a, s. 164).

lailla kuin vastahakattu koivuhalkopino tai lajittelukeskuksen valtava purkupuukasa koskettavat ainakin minua ja tuntuvat viestittävän jotain vuosien, vuosisatojen ja vuosituhansien takaa. Jotain, jonka käsittän, mutta jonka kuvailemiseen minulla ei ole sanoja.<sup>6</sup>

Yhdysvaltalainen politiikan ja ympäristöetiikan teoreetikko, filosofi Jane Bennett on puhunut olio-voimasta, esineiden ihmisen mitataavaan asettumattomasta aktiivisuudesta. Siitä miten tavallisilla ihmistekoisilla esineillä on outo kyky ylittää asemansa objekteina ja muuttua ”väreileviksi olioiksi, joilla on tietty oma tehoisuutensa.” Bennett kutsuu tätä materiaalin vitaalisuudeksi (Bennett, 2020, s. 18, 27, 29).<sup>7</sup> Myös lahjaa teoretisoinut ranskalainen sosiologi Marcel Mauss havaitsi aikoinaan esineille ominaisen elinvoiman. Maussin mukaan esineissä ja lahjoissa on aina jäljellä osa niiden alkuperäistä omistajaa, ja esineet ovat aktiivisia hengen vuoksi, joka on tullut niihin asumaan (Pyyhtinen, 2014, s. 51–52).

Pyyhtisen (2014, s. 6) mukaan Maussin merkitys on siinä, että hän ottaa lahjaesineen vakavasti. Myös nykyisin pinnalla olevissa uusmaterialismiksi kutsutuissa tutkimussuuntauksissa, joihin Bennettkin lasketaan, ehdotetaan aineen ottamista vakavasti. Erona Maussiin uusmaterialistiset ajattelijat tarkastelevat esineitä aktiivisina niiden materiaalien itsessään perusteella, ei niissä asuvan hengen perusteella. Inhimilliset toimijat nähdään osana materiaalista todellisuutta, jatkuvassa vuorovaikutuksessa erilaisten ei-inhimillisten materiaalisuuksien kanssa; oliot muodostuvat suhteissa ja suhteista, joissa ne saavat merkityksensä ja tehokkuutensa. Mikään ei siis ole olemassa erillään riippumatta muista, vaan kaikki on olemassa suhteessa muihin, ja kaikilla materiaaleilla ja olioilla on

6 Tästä enemmän tekstissäni *Teacherly Moment* (2024a).

7 ks. myös artikkelini *Kukkosuuna, Laivasaari ja muita muistoja* (2024b, s. 13), sekä *Teacherly Moment* (2024a, s. 170–172).

kyky myös kommunikoida jotain itsestään toisilleen (mm. Bennett 2020, s. 15, 113; Iovino, Oppermann 2014; Pyyhtinen 2014, 51–52; Porkola 2022, s. 48–49).

## Lahjan armoilla

Olen viime aikoina aloittanut erilaiset opetustuokioni, työpajani tai seminaariesitykseni antamalla jokaiselle osallistujalle jonkin oman puupalan. Antamani asiat ovat työhuoneeni tai puusepän jätelaatikosta pelastettuja, mökin halkoliiteristä löydettyjä tai ulkoa maasta kerättyjä tikkuja tai muita roskiksi luokiteltavia ylijäämiä. Pääosin palaset ovat sattumanvaraisia ja kategorisoimattomia, kaikki omalla tavallaan uniikkeja ja ainutlaatuisia. Palat annettuani olen toivonut, että niihin tutustuttaisiin huolella ja niitä kuunneltaisiin tarkasti. Olen myös ehdottanut, että pala otettaisiin mukaan arjen askareisiin; että se viedään kotiin, sen kanssa käydään kävelyllä ja vaikka lounaalla. Tai että puupalaa esimerkiksi pestään, haistellaan, kosketellaan ja suojataan.

Palan antaminen on eräänlainen lahjan antamisen ele ja avoin kutsu leikkiin. Puisen ja puiden lahjan kautta olen saatellut ihmisiä dialogiin ja ajattelemaan sekä kulkemaan yhdessä materiaalin kanssa. Jani Kaaron mukaan todellinen lahja annetaan aina spontaanisti, ja se tulee vastaanottajalleen yllätyksenä. Jotta voimme ottaa lahjan vastaan on meidän antauduttava lahjan ”armoille”, lahjan omalle yllätyksellisyydelle (Kaaro, 2017, s. 18–21). Susanna Lindberg taas on sanonut, että kun materiaalin sattumanvaraisuus purskahattaa esiin, taiteilijan oma tahto murtuu (Lindberg, 2021). Puu materiaalina on täynnä tahtoa, voimaa, yllätyksiä ja sattumia. Se paitsi hillitsee, vastustaa ja estää, myös mahdollistaa ja valtuuttaa tekemään asioita. Puisessa eleessäni heittäydytään puupalan armoille. Jotkut menevät lahjasta hämilleen, jotkut huvittuvat, jotkut lähtevät mukaan leikkiin. On aina yllätys mitä syntyy tai mitä tapahtuu.

Joskus antamani palaset hylätään, joskus ne taas toimivat teosten tai niiden aiheiden lähtökohtana tai konkreettisenä materiaalina.

## Lahja on osattava ottaa vastaan

Luovat ideat ovat harvoin luonteeltaan suoraviivaisesti etenevien päättelyketjujen tuloksia (Pallasmaa, 2017, s. 73). Usein tekemisen imuun heittäytyminen synnyttää ideoita ja ideat taas tekemistä. Ensimmäiset ideat rönsyilevät ja työskentelyn jatkuessa voidaan haarautua ihan uusille poluille. Joskus pienikin pala tai idean poikainen voi toimia sysäyksenä ja lähtökohtana pitkälle prosessille. Leikki alkaa leikittää leikkijäänsä (Gadamer, 1989, s. 102–109).

Kevättalvella 2023 opetin puukuvanveistoa tuleville taiteilijoille ammattikorkeakoulussa Lappeenrannassa. Aloitin tämänkin kurssin puupaloja lahjaksi jakaen. Oman palan sai käyttää osana kurssin aikana syntyvää *Muisto*-teemaista teosta. Opiskelija Viola Nygårdin teosideana oli pyytää ystäviltä lahjaksi lisää puisia palasia ja tehdä teos niistä. Harmikseni Viola kuitenkin luopui ideasta. Idea jäi vaivaamaan mieltäni, ja kun täytin saman vuoden loka-kuussa viisikymmentä, toivoin lahjaksi maljakkojen, standaarien ja ilmapuntarien sijaan erilaisia puisia esineitä tai materiaalin palasia taidetarkoituksia varten. Sainkin valtavan määrän erilaisia puuhun liittyviä asioita aina hammastikusta puusuksiin ja kelohongasta runokirjaan.

Syntymäpäivieni jälkeen järjestelin ja dokumentoin lahjoja työhuoneellani ja työstin niistä näyttelyä galleria Katariinaan Helsinkiin.<sup>8</sup> Lähdin liikkeelle lahjojen omasta olemuksesta (heittäydyin niiden armoille) ja kuuntelin tarkasti, mihin suuntaan materiaalit ja esineet lähtivät syntyviä teoksia kuljettamaan. Osan esineistä purin ja pilkoin, osan yhdistelin toisiin uudestaan. Osalle lahjoista

8 *Lahja*, Galleria Katariina 7.2.-2.3.2025

oli vaikea keksiä uutta muotoa. Saamani Tikkuviinan joimme avajaisissa, mutta jouduin pitkään miettimään mitä ihmettä tehdä naapurin lempipuusta pudonneelle merkityksiä sisältävälle oksalle tai ystävän huolella vuolemalle leuhkalle pikku-ukolle. Tai sitä miten ottaa Luonnonperintösäätiölle tehty lahjoitus ja ovensuussa kerrottu puujalkavitsi mukaan näyttelyyn, sillä halusin, että kaikki saamani lahjat ja niistä syntyneet roskatkin, olisi edes jollain tapaa osana näyttelykokonaisuutta. Näyttelyä tehdessäni huomasin, että merkityksiä täynnä olevan lahjan saatuaan syntyi tarve toimia myös merkityksellisesti ja oikein.

## From the Trees with Love

Teokseni ”From the Trees With Love” *Gift/Presents/Presence* -konferenssissa kesäkuussa 2024 oli perinteisen taideobjektin sijaan ennemminkin eräänlainen tutkimuksellinen ele, jossa asettelin jokaiselle konferenssihuoneen tuolille pienen puupalasen lahjaksi osallistujille. Palaset odottivat penkeillä aamulla, kun konferenssivieraat saapuivat konferenssitilaan. En selittänyt palasia mitenkään, mutta jokaisen puupalasen ympärillä oli lappu, jossa kerroin sen olevan lahja ja toivoin, että siihen tutustuttaisiin päivän aikana. Olin järjestänyt konferenssitilaan myös pienen pöydän, jolla oli erilaisia työvälineitä ja materiaaleja. Niillä sai konferenssipäivän aikana halutessaan työstää omaa palastaan.

Marcel Maussin mukaan mikään lahja ei ole vailla velvoitteita, vaan päinvastoin kaikki lahjat, riippumatta siitä, kuinka vapaaehtoisilta ne näyttävät, sisältävät velvollisuuden antaa, vastaanottaa ja palauttaa takaisin (Pyyhtinen, 2014, s. 7, 17). Kun minä annan sinulle jotakin, odotan sinun antavan jotain takaisin; joko varsinaisen vastalahjan tai sen symbolisen vastineen, esimerkiksi kiitollisuutta (Pyyhtinen, 2014, s. 15). Kun jotakin annetaan lahjaksi, tärkeintä ei ole niinkään annettu esine, vaan antajan ja lahjan vastaanottajan

välille muodostunut sidos ja suhde. Lahja muodostaa itsensä suhteissa (Pyyhtinen, 2014, s. 6, 59).

Vaikka omassa teoksessani häivyttiin itseni taka-alalle, ja ajatukseni oli, että puiden lahjoihin sai reagoida tai olla reagoimatta hyväksi katsomallaan tavalla, en voi kieltää, ettenkö olisi hieman pettynyt siihen, miten lahjat otettiin vastaan. Konferenssin aikana puupalasia lojui lattialla, niitä siirreltiin tuoilta toiselle ja kasattiin hylättyinä tyhjille paikoille pinoiksi. Vain hyvin harva kävi työstämässä palastaan tai otti sen mukaansa. Avaamalla Padletillekin tuli vain kourallinen toivomiani dokumentaatioita. Konferenssissa lahjan antamista ja saamista teoretisoitiin monelta suunnalta, mutta metsän lahjan armoille antautumista ja sidosta puun kanssa voin vain arvailla.

Konferenssin jälkeen kaikki ylijääneet puiden puiset lahjat jäivät tilaan osaksi *Gift/Presents/Presence* -näyttelyä. Näyttelyvieraat saivat ottaa niitä halutessaan matkaansa. Maussille lahjoissa on kyse esineistä, jotka kiertävät (Pyyhtinen, 2014, s. 5–6). Lahjat haluavat tulla käytetyiksi. Ne haluavat kasvaa täyteen kukoistukseensa ja antaa itsensä eteenpäin; niiden luonto on olla liikkeessä (Kaaro, 2017, s. 20–21). Teoksessani *From the Trees With Love* puut kiersivät lahjoina metsästä sahalle, sahalta kauppaan, kaupasta puusepälle, puusepän roskalaatikosta taiteilijalle, taiteilijalta yleisölle, yleisöltä dokumentaatioina taiteilijalle, ja nyt sanallistamista etsivinä ajatuksina tähän tekstiin. Näyttelyn päätteeksi kollegani kierrätti loput palaset Ikea-kassilla kotinsa tulipesään, luultavasti lämmöksi läheisilleen.



Kuva 2. Vahvaselkä, H. (2024). Konferenssitila, Kaapelitehdas, Valssaamo, Helsinki. 6.6.2024 aamulla ennen Gift/Presents/Presence -konferenssia. © Hanna Vahvaselkä.



Kuva 3 ja kuva 4. Vahvaselkä, H. (2024). Yksityiskohtia konferenssitilasta seuraavana aamuna, ensimmäisen konferenssipäivän jälkeen. © Hanna Vahvaselkä.

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# Weather as a Gift: From Divine Favour to Resonant Dialogues

JUAN C. DUARTE REGINO

## Introduction

Through my artistic research, I explored ways of translating weather and atmospheric dynamics into sonic experiences. This investigation has led me to question fundamental assumptions about weather: Is it merely a given condition that we passively observe, or something we actively participate in producing? The traditional boundary between observer and atmosphere becomes increasingly blurred when we consider our own presence as an active force. Even in seemingly controlled indoor environments, our bodies influence temperature gradients, air circulation patterns, and local humidity levels. This raises questions about the separation between atmospheric phenomena and human agency - where does one end and the other begin? These questions become even more complex when we consider multiple scales of interaction, from individual bodily experience to collective human impact and the broader dynamics of living systems.

## Weather as a divine Gift

Media scholar John Durham Peters presents a framework for understanding the “sky as a medium” (Durham Peters, 2016), examining the historical evolution of weather observation infrastructure

from ancestral meteorology to contemporary systems. In antiquity, weather observatories served as sacred spaces where observation and spirituality converged. Greeks and Romans used temples as vantage points for auguring celestial and terrestrial signs, creating spaces where observers could discern “tempus” - the complex relationship between weather and time. These observation points, often manifested as temples and towers, evolved into what we might now recognise as remote sensing infrastructures, establishing communication channels between terrestrial observers and celestial phenomena.

Earlier I have put forward how Peters’s understanding of weather observatories compares ancient temples with modern telegraph towers as spaces to mediate with time and as I deem, for listening (Duarte Regino, 2023). Peters explains the connection between meteorological study and spiritual inquiry, revealing how weather became intrinsically linked with divine providence in human consciousness. He argues that weather’s unpredictable patterns of “blessing and bane” mirror the behaviour of gods and parental figures - a connection preserved in the ancient Greek word for fair weather, *Eudia*, meaning “Zeus’s favour.” This historical perspective stands in marked contrast to contemporary meteorological understanding which frames weather as a purely physical phenomenon rather than a stage for divine drama.

As an example of ancient weather observatories, during the pre-Hispanic era in Mexico, a new temple of *Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl*, a patron deity of the merchant class in Aztec mythology (O’Mack, 1991) and associated with the sun’s movement and the dispersal of rain clouds, was recently discovered nearby where I grew up in Mexico City (Matos Moctezuma & Barrera Rodriguez, 2016; Indigo, 2017). This round-shaped structure from the Mesoamerican Postclassic Era (900–1521 AD), adorned with serpentine motifs,

housed various representations of *Ehecatl*, including a sliced conch shell, (Espinosa Pineda, 2018; Matos Moctezuma, 2018; Nicholson, 2020) whose horn was believed to mimic the sound of the wind (this allegory is further explored in the section “Weather’s Resonance” of this article). These temples served as both observation points for monitoring weather changes and as sites for human sacrifices performed to appease the deity and ensure favourable winds and weather conditions (Graulich, 2000).

Sacrifice, defined as an offering to a deity or entity, holds symbolic significance as a prerequisite for the Gift (Pyyhtinen, 2016, p. 29). A notable example of sacrifice in weather mythology is found in Virgil’s poem *Aeneid* (Cowan, 2015; Bandera, 1981; Wildman, 1908). In this narrative, Juno, the queen of the gods, offers her most prized nymph to Aeolus, the keeper of the winds, in exchange for the release of stormy winds that could hinder Aeneas’s quest to reach Troy (Kimbell Art Museum, 2025). This act of sacrifice triggers a divine curse, pointing to the relation between offerings and the control of weather patterns. This allegory prompts us to contemplate the nature of sacrifice in contemporary society and the entities that may be subject to such offerings. In essence, in today’s world, who holds the authority to control the weather, and who might be the potential recipients of such offerings?



Figure 1. Küsel, M. (1668). *Cavern of Aeolus*. [Etching]. Public domain – Open Access. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/700488>

## Weather data as a generosity infrastructure

A gift inherently involves something given, where the given object reveals a bond between human subjects and compels them to act (Pyhtinen, 2016, pp. 50–54). Similarly, understanding weather as an element of control is rooted in the empirical collection of weather data. Before delving into the implications of transforming weather into data, it is important to consider the concept of “data” as it existed prior to the advent of computers and digital technologies. Since the 17th century, “data” referred to simple, incontrovertible bits of information. The term itself, derived from the Latin word *datum* (plural: *data*), originally signified something “given” or “taken for granted” within an argument. While facts are ontological and evidence is epistemological, data occupies a rhetorical space (Rosenberg, 2013, p. 18).

The systematic collection of weather data provides the evidentiary foundation for climate science and enables calculations of the potential impacts of global warming. Early empirical methods, such as weather observation, set the stage for reliable models in modern meteorology. By the late 19th century, statistical collection gained prominence, leading to the formalization of climatology as a distinct scientific discipline. A prominent contribution came from Norwegian scientist Vilhelm Bjerknes<sup>1</sup>, who combined empirical meteorology with physical laws<sup>2</sup>.

Paul Edwards, in *A Vast Machine* (2013), describes this evolution as the establishment of a “Knowledge Infrastructure.” This techno-scientific paradigm operationalises theoretical knowledge through advanced instruments, methodologies, models, and interconnected data networks (Edwards, 2013, p. 17). Such systems have enabled the collection and analysis of climate data across extensive temporal scales, ranging from decades to centuries.

In the modern era, weather data has gained unprecedented visibility and utility through what can be described as a “Vast Machine” - a highly sophisticated socio-technical system. This intricate network of global collaboration brings together advanced technologies, scientific expertise, and institutional frameworks to provide a

- 1 Bjerknes’s method, grounded in thermodynamics, aimed to predict weather by calculating seven critical parameters from the air: velocity, pressure, density, temperature, and humidity. His background in electrodynamics and wireless telegraphy allowed him to collect remote data and to analyse hydrodynamic waves in the atmospheric fluid dynamics (Flemin , 2016, p. 38).
- 2 I have previously elaborated (Duarte Regino, 2023a) how the early 20th century marked a paradigm shift in meteorology, transitioning from empirical observation to an integrated scientific framework. At the time, meteorologists relied heavily on surface observations collected from sparse weather stations linked by telegraph lines, complemented by limited upper-air data gathered using kites and balloons. This systematic observation and integration of weather data laid the foundation for the development of comprehensive meteorological databases.

comprehensive and detailed understanding of planetary conditions. Philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour (2017) has emphasized the immense value of this interconnected web of instruments and human expertise, which functions as a cohesive, solidary community of scientists. This network is not only capable of generating robust, reliable knowledge but also stands resilient against the objections and scepticism posed by climate change deniers. From this perspective, Latour advocates for a collective social learning process to safeguard and strengthen such institutions. He underscores the necessity of fostering public awareness and engagement to ensure the continued protection and evolution of these vital systems, which are essential for addressing the complex challenges of climate change and environmental sustainability (Latour, 2017, p. 33).

Moreover, Latour (2017) astutely observes that the concept of nature has become increasingly unstable, precipitating a profound alteration in our relationship with the world we inhabit. Aligning with his analysis, I argue that understanding the transformation of weather from a passive, God-given phenomenon to a dynamic, interactive system draws attention to the complex interplay between human actors and environmental systems. This paradigm shift reimagines the atmosphere not as a static entity but as a malleable medium influenced by human intervention, highlighting the profound interconnection between humanity and the environment.

The inception of Numerical Weather Prediction (NWP) marked another milestone in this evolution, coinciding with the dawn of modern computing. Spearheaded by John von Neumann, NWP leveraged computational models for forecasting atmospheric phenomena, drawing on parallels between the nonlinear physics of weather systems and nuclear science (Edwards, 2013, p. 113). Bjerknes's pioneering approaches to weather modelling were tested using the ENIAC (1940's), one of the first digital computers. By integrating disparate

weather parameters into a cohesive system, ENIAC demonstrated the feasibility of computational forecasting.

Importantly, the development of weather infrastructures facilitated global collaboration. Institutions such as the International Meteorological Organization (IMO) in 1870 and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) from 1950 onwards became instrumental in enabling the real-time exchange of weather data via telegraph. This exchange of information could be framed as a form of “diplomatic generosity” or infrastructural globalism, wherein wartime technologies, such as satellites, were repurposed to counterbalance military and ideological tensions during the Cold War era (Edwards, 2013, p. 14).

In this context, weather data resonates with the concept of a Gift. It embodies dualities - peace and war, solidarity and strife, alliance and animosity. As Pyyhtinen (2016, pp. 63–64) suggests, gift exchange can be seen as a sublimated form of warfare, a continuation of conflict by other means. This raises critical questions: Can *knowledge infrastructures*, as assemblages of flows, relations, and technologies, serve as actants that embody values of generosity? Moreover, is there potential for artistic research to reimagine weather control as a means of fostering peaceful and productive human–environment interactions?

Media scholar Yuriko Furuhashi, in her book *Climatic Media*, documents the transformation of warfare technologies into cybernetic control systems capable of atmospheric modification, such as artificial snow, fog, and storms for manoeuvring in battlefields during the Cold War (Furuhashi, 2022, p. 18). Contrasting to Mark Hansen’s term *Atmospheric Media* (related to ubiquitous computing), Furuhashi’s concept of *Atmospheric Media*, emphasises the importance of visual topographies that render climate change comprehensible, offering artistic frameworks, e.g. in Architecture, for understanding atmospheric

complexities in both outdoor and indoor environments. This field extends beyond scientific and technological experimentation; artists have become crucial contributors<sup>3</sup>, enhancing our perception through visual representations and immersive media experiences.

Through the synthesis of review observation, cutting-edge data infrastructure, and artistic interpretation, weather transcends its traditional perception as either a natural phenomenon or a divine gift. Instead, it becomes a dynamic medium through which we can explore and deepen our understanding of humanity's relationship with the atmospheric milieu. By integrating practices and critical insights from art, science, and the concept of the Gift, the once-distant domains of weather and data converge, bridging the gap between sensing and making sense of these complex phenomena. Besides, in the following sections I will try to elaborate on how embodiment and resonance can extend our experience concerning weather data.

As media scholar Grazielle Lautenschlaeger argues, the act of sensing is a kind of interplay that uncovers a unique relationship between materials and media - one that only emerges through the dynamic interaction of planetary forces and human agency (Lautenschlaeger, 2020). These interactions, I propose, hold the potential to act as mediators in mitigating global tensions, including the prevention of warfare. Furthermore, they can play a substantial role in addressing the urgent challenges of climate change and advancing strategies for environmental sustainability. By fostering

3 In addition, the monograph *Sensing Art in the Atmosphere* by scholar and artist Sasha Engelmann reviews visual, spatial, and community based artistic practices that challenge traditional notions of weather as a mere given phenomenon. Instead, these practices propose that weather exists within a complex network of human intervention and natural processes, presenting it as a form of ecological activism. Engelmann highlights projects such as Tomás Saraceno's "Aerocene" and "Museo Aerosolar," which explore the intersection of art, science, and environmental consciousness (Engelman, 2021).

a deeper connection between human and planetary systems, such interdisciplinary approaches offer a pathway toward a more environmentally attuned and resilient future.

## Weather embodiment

Before going into detailing my own artistic research on practices of listening to weather through data, there is one more aspect that I would like to present in order to provide a context for how our bodies adapt to atmospheric changes. Two fields of knowledge are the key to understand the influence of weather in living organisms: Biometeorology and Meteropathy.

Our bodies, when considered finely attuned instruments, sense subtle weather variations beyond the visual detection. We feel temperature, humidity, and atmospheric pressure changes haptically. Ancient folk traditions cultivated weather wisdom through observing wildlife's responses to approaching changes (Taub, 2003). Our bodies subtly respond even before extreme changes.

Biometeorology, a byproduct of early 20th-century warfare technologies, studies global warming and the impact of frequent weather changes and increased water vapour. It distinguishes between weather and climate, focusing on immediate weather event influences, while bioclimatology explores global climate changes and their ecological impacts (Katanić, 2013).

The perception of weather changes is significantly influenced by atmospheric ionisation. As wind moves through the atmosphere, it electrically charges air particles, increasing the concentration of positive ions in the troposphere. Inhaling ionised air stimulates serotonin release, which can directly affect mood, well-being, and overall physiological responses. Barometric pressure, a key meteorological factor, also plays a crucial role in human health and stress levels, as organisms continuously adapt to fluctuations in their environment.

Additionally, aerosols - fine particulates suspended in the air - profoundly impact climate processes, including atmospheric glaciation, in ways that are still being explored. These airborne particles can travel vast distances across the globe; for instance, dust from the Sahara Desert fertilises the Amazon rainforest by delivering essential nutrients to its soil (Buck, 2022).

Meteoropathy, or meteorosensitivity, describes a hypersensitivity to weather changes. It manifests in affective symptoms before noticeable weather shifts, such as migraines, imbalance, irritability, and insomnia. These symptoms show the emotional connection between weather and our ability to adapt (Zikic & Rabi-Zikic, 2018).

Exploring the affective aspects of weather's influence on livable conditions, an intriguing possibility emerges: the potential correlation between embodied weather experiences and sound. Could listening anticipate weather changes? Is weather attunement possible through listening? This inquiry suggests an overlap between sensory perception, atmospheric embodiment, and the auditory landscape, offering a deeper understanding of our relationship with ever-changing weather ecosystems (Duarte Regino, 2024).

## Weather's Resonance

The cochlea, a central organ of hearing, has long fascinated both scientists and artists for its crucial role in resonance and sound amplification. Sound artist and composer Julia Bejarano López explores resonance as a physical phenomenon, characterized by the elongation and gradual dissipation of sound. She observes that resonance often manifests as a repercussion or consequence of another sound, resulting in reflections, amplitude changes, and tonal transformations. These acoustic alterations occur in a strikingly similar manner across various spiral-shaped structures, such as caves, conch shells, and the human cochlea. Within a cave, for instance, sound

becomes perceptible at every point due to its numerous reflections and natural amplification. The cave acts as a resonant vessel, capturing and rebounding sound within its confines until the energy ultimately dissipates (Bejarano López, 2024).

Bejarano also highlights how empty conch shells have served as resonant wind instruments for millennia, with some of the oldest known examples found in today's Hohle Fels in Germany dating back 35,000 years. When we press a conch shell to our ear, we hear our sonic environment filtered through the shell's spiral structure. External sounds are scaled and transformed within the shell, creating a "waving effect" reminiscent of the sea. Similarly, the cochlea shares this spiral form but exists as a biological structure composed of three chambers - the tympanic ramp, vestibular ramp, and cochlear duct - filled with endolymph fluid. Spiral structures, whether found in living organisms or natural formations, efficiently preserve energy, including acoustic. Such spirals appear not only in the cochlea and conch shells but also in spider webs, hurricanes, galaxies, and even the arrangement of sunflower seeds (Bejarano López, 2024).

Spiral structures have also inspired speculative instrument designs, particularly during the Renaissance. The polymath Athanasius Kircher, a prolific inventor and field explorer of geological formations, conceptualised the *Tubo Cochleato*, a speculative wind instrument modelled after the cochlea's spiral form. This invention exemplified Kircher's innovative spirit, using biomimicry to explore acoustic amplification. Alongside his well-documented Aeolian harp, the *Tubo Cochleato* represents an intersection of curiosity and sound technology. However, unlike the Aeolian harp, the *Tubo Cochleato* remained purely speculative, confined to the realm of "cabinet of curiosity" instruments rather than functional acoustics (Loughridge & Patteson, 2025).

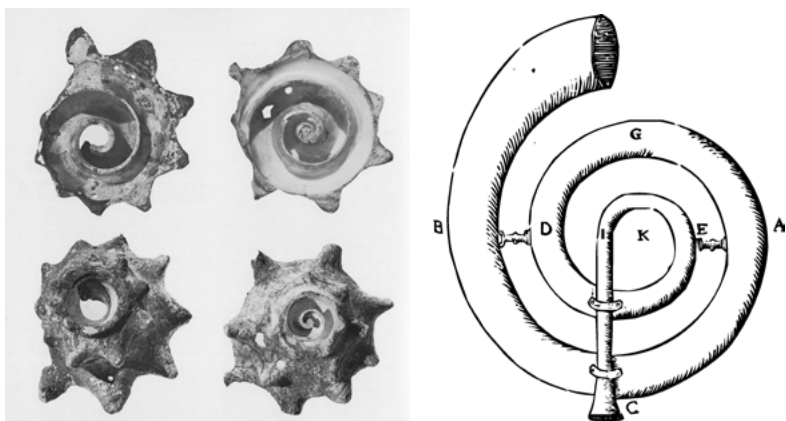


Figure 2. Left) Borhegyi, S. F. De. (1966). *The Wind God's Breastplate*<sup>4</sup> [photograph]. Expedition Magazine. (Right) Athanasius Kircher, (1673). *Tubo Cochleato* [drawing]. *Phonurgia Nova*.

## Resonant frequencies in Valssaamo

During the production process for the exhibition *Gifts/Presents/Presence: Meanings and Materialities* at Valssaamo, Kaapelitehdas (Cable Factory), I collaborated with sound artist and designer Jari Koho. Our shared interest in sound art inquiries fostered a dynamic creative exchange. Aligning with our artistic research background, we explored how listening is shaped by room acoustics and the real-time influence of weather data collected from the exhibition space, and their potential relation to the concept of Gift.

Our collaborative intervention began with sonic improvisation sessions, where we approached the room's resonance as an instrument. Koho engaged with percussive, wind, and various objects, while I employed digital oscillators to activate and uncover the

4 This half-sliced conch shell from Chalco, Mexico, was known as *Ehecacózcoatl* (Wind Jewel), a representation of *Ehecatl*, the Aztec deity of the Wind. <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/the-wine-gods-breastplate/>

unique acoustic features of the empty Valssaamo space. Through repeated individual and collective explorations, we examined the sonic intensities that shaped our presence within the room, focusing on resonance, spatialisation, and timbre. Working alongside other artworks in the space, we aimed to design soundscapes that coexisted amicably without excessive overlap.

Early in the process, we selected a corner of Valssaamo near the electric switch controls. This section, with its thin wooden walls, functioned as a natural resonator when paired with surface transducer speakers. Our experimentation involved feedback techniques, positioning microphones and transducers to identify the room's resonant frequencies. These findings informed the creation of a generative soundscape that evolved over time, interweaving harmonious and dissonant tones. By isolating specific resonant frequencies for playback through individual transducers, we minimised unwanted distortion while accentuating the room's acoustic properties.

We initially considered incorporating *Otoacoustic Emissions* - a technique that reveals internal head distortions and ghost tones generated by specific frequency interactions with the room's resonance (Chechile, 2015; Kirk, 2010). However, we ultimately abandoned this approach due to the necessity of strong amplification and high frequencies, which risked overshadowing the rest of the exhibition. Instead, we investigated the room's resonant frequencies through a feedback process, using microphones positioned against the wooden structure and behind the walls, where a surface transducer speaker would oscillate in response to the room's unique acoustic characteristics. These feedback experiments helped us pinpoint predominant resonant frequencies. Once selected, we used these frequencies as materials for a generative sound composition that unfolded over time, allowing their tonal relationships to emerge dynamically - alternating between harmony and dissonance.

Typically, one or two frequencies played simultaneously through a single surface transducer speaker, preventing unwanted distortion by ensuring a clean distribution of multiple frequencies.

We aimed to provide the audience with a means of subtly activating sound. To achieve this, we designed an interactive interface that would trigger the sound composition when audience members touched a sensor-based surface. As a result, a visual representation of the *Tubo Cochleato* was created to facilitate activation through touch interaction.

This approach builds upon my previous project, *Augury* (Duarte Regino, 2023c), in which copper traces connected to touch sensors triggered digital signals upon contact. By incorporating touch-based interactions, we sought to lower the barrier for audience participation, making the experience more accessible - even for those without prior expertise in digital music instruments.

For the *Tubo Cochleato* interface, I employed a technique based on Computer Assisted Design, in which pieces of adhesive surface are transferred by heat into a textile surface, the adhesive areas are then covered by thin layers of copper. In this case the surface chosen was a painter's canvas. By using an object typically not intended for direct touch in an art exhibition setting (a painter's canvas), we aimed to create an activation method that was even more subtle. The interaction was only hinted at through text placed alongside the information about the piece, inviting curiosity while preserving an element of discovery.

Copper is a fundamental material in modern electronics, widely used in the fabrication of integrated circuits and printed circuit boards for computers, mobile devices, and other digital systems. It possesses exceptionally high thermal and electrical conductivity, facilitating efficient signal transmission. Beyond electronics, copper also plays a crucial biological role, working in tandem with iron and

zinc to support neuronal conductivity. With its high capacitance for transferring electrical signals, copper is not only essential to technological infrastructure but is also omnipresent in human tissues, underscoring its significance in both artificial and biological systems (Howse, 2022, pp. 62–63).

Reflecting on the implications of using materials and speculative approaches in interfaces and sound, one cannot overlook the influence of New Materialist thought and its connection to the notion of the Gift. The inherent vitality and agency of materials become increasingly evident through their interplay with electronics, computational code, and artistic composition. Similar to what scholar Jussi Parikka terms as “media materialism” referring to a geological study media of technologies as something that are irreducible to what we think of them, or even how we use them, since they are convoluted as compound of medianatures (Parikka, 2015).

This dynamic arrangement not only enables new possibilities for interaction but also challenges the Western tradition of perceiving objects as passive, lifeless, and purely mechanical (Pyyhtinen, 2016, p. 52). Instead, materials emerge as active participants in the creative process, shaping and being shaped by their environments.

## Weather-responsive sound design

The importance of using sound to render weather changes inside the room comprehensible was one of our aims in producing an artwork that would give audience “the gift of listening to the weather”. But in order to combine the rendering with the existing resonant soundscape in Valssaamo, we decided to use real time weather data from the room and to modify only the resonant frequencies obtained from our previous explorations with feedback.

Examples of Weather Sonification underline the importance of perceiving atmospheric phenomena which has enabled to hear

structures and patterns which meteorologists were only able to imagine (Polli, 2012). Also as a technique, it enables us to make recognisable differences across seasonal changes within daily and yearly time frames (Flowers & Grafel, 2002). Weather Sonification as a project has proven to make use of low cost technologies that contribute to the community of citizen science weather observatories, and even serve as pedagogical tools in the context of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) (Woo et al., 2023). At the same time it empowers artists to explore aesthetic possibilities obtained from environmental components and hint towards a dismissal of the anthropocentric sound composition (Ng & Lim, 2022).

Sound spatialisation - the controlled distribution of sound in space - further enhances data representation (Bovermann, 2009, p. 72). For our project, we employed a loudspeaker-based spatialisation approach using surface transducer speakers positioned throughout the exhibition space. Previously, I had developed a custom interface for sound spatialisation (*Live Sound Spatialisation: I*, 2022). Building upon this foundation, I sought to refine the system as a core sound distribution unit. This setup enables the playback of multiple resonant frequencies while dynamically integrating real-time indoor weather data to modulate sonic textures. The new iteration of this interface incorporated weather data as an integral element of the distribution system and featured custom-designed circuit boards. These visual components not only contribute to the system's technical functionality but also enhance the aesthetic experience of the artwork.

In our installation, a weather sensor placed on top of the wooden structure where we housed the sound installation provided data points to modify the ongoing soundscape, and a noticeable change in temperature or humidity would thus slightly change the arrangement on the pitch of the frequencies played, creating modulations and

rhythmic variations in the soundscape. Since human auditory perception is highly attuned to time-varying structures such as rhythms and patterns, auditory displays can effectively mediate complex data - such as real-time weather dynamics - through sound representation (Bovermann, 2009, p. 69). In my practice, sonification emerges as the most significant auditory display technique, translating multiple data streams from weather sensors into sound, but apart from this techniques I have reviewed other forms of artistic research with sound to represent atmospheric processes (Duarte Regino, 2023b).

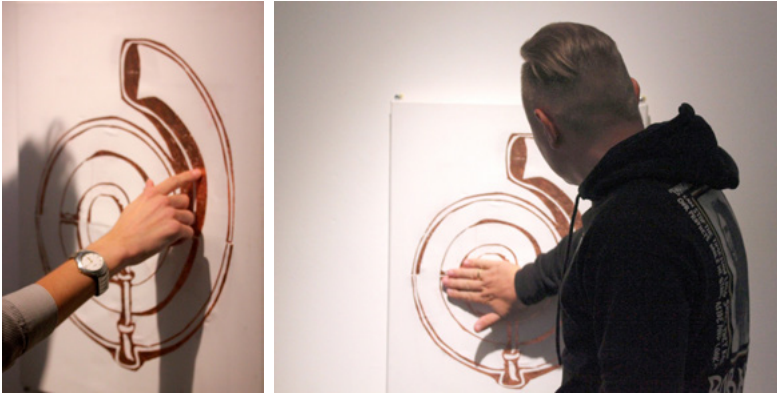


Figure 3. Duarte Regino J. and Koho J. (2024). *Weather's resonance*. [Interactive canvas]. © Juan C. Duarte Regino.

### Sound Gifts - closing performances

As a final contribution to the exhibition, Jari Koho and I organised a free concert to reflect on our sonic explorations and share music that resonated with our experience of creating this artwork. As a gesture of appreciation for Helsinki's sound art community, we invited the live coding musician Joonas Siren as a guest performer to join the program.

My performance revisited a composition inspired by the music of Pauline Oliveros, a pioneering composer and advocate of *Deep Listening*, particularly her 1987 piece *Echoes from the Moon*. In my performance, I employed the instrument to create drone soundscapes, which were layered with harmonica organ recordings processed



Figure 4. Duarte Regino J. (2024) *Sound Gifts*. ©Niilo Rinne.

through a granular synthesiser on a tablet device. Although partially prepared and partially improvised, the music was offered as a gift - to the audience, to our shared deep listening capacities, and to the atmosphere shaped by the interplay between audience, artists, and participants. This closing event marked a celebratory moment, reinforcing the communal and immersive spirit of the exhibition.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the notion of weather as a Gift through the lens of my artistic research, beginning with an examination of the interplay between human agency and weather-natural phenomena. From a divine perspective, human influence over weather appears limited, leading to sacrificial practices as a means of negotiation with natural forces such as the wind. However, such pacts with divinity for weather control often result in complex and sometimes dramatic power dynamics between authorities, recipients, and the sacrificed. At the same time, mythologies like the one about the Cavern of Aeolus are valuable in illustrating the power relations concerning weather control, still existing until today.

Conversely, weather-data infrastructures (a human-machine-nature agency) serve as mediators, transforming the potential hostility of weather through meteorological observation. These infrastructures encourage global well-being and contribute to environmental awareness by fostering an understanding of complex meteorological phenomena. The diplomatic exchange of weather data - an act of infrastructural globalism - embodies a form of generosity that benefits scientific progress and collective preparedness.

Artistic research, particularly within visual and spatial disciplines, has demonstrated its ability to illuminate scientific knowledge related to meteorology. Based on my artistic research, I propose an embodied approach to weather - one that acknowledges

how atmospheric conditions influence our bodies, specially through listening. Such embodiment becomes particularly tangible through auditory experiences. In our sound installation *Weather's Resonance*, we seek to make weather audible by exploring its acoustic and spatial manifestations, informed by in-situ explorations at Valssaamo. This approach has also led to the design of interactive interfaces that reflect historical and cultural artifacts associated with weather and resonance, examined through speculative and new materialist perspectives.

By investigating the weather through sound, *Weather's Resonance* invites us into a space of in-betweenness, where resonance becomes a medium for attuning to environmental conditions. The historical integration of weather instruments into cultural practices has shaped human interactions with nature, not merely as predictive tools but as speculative mediums, through which nature itself communicates. This interrelation remains highly relevant in the face of contemporary challenges such as climate change.

From my artistic research perspective, I advocate for an inclusive exploration of weather - one that emerges from the synthesis of technological advancements, embodied experiences, and collective audience participation. By embracing a multidimensional perspective, we can cultivate a resonant dialogue with the weather, deepening our awareness and attunement to the atmospheric forces that shape our existence.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Jari Koho for his invaluable collaboration, for listening together, and for navigating the challenges of this process with dedication. Gratitude also to Solomon Embafrash from Aalto Fablab for introducing the heat-transfer technique for applying copper onto canvas. The production materials for *Weather's Resonance*

and Sound Gifts were generously supported by the Kone Foundation. The early development of the sound interface used in the installation and performance was made possible by the Art & Tech production grant from Aalto Studios (2023). Lastly, heartfelt appreciation to the members of the RAT research group (Aalto) for their camaraderie and generosity throughout this project.

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# Embrace (of) the Gift

HARRI LAAKSO

This diff active essay explores (and perhaps defines) the photographic image as a poetic act, as love and as a gift. None of these viewpoints is novel as such and scraping the surface of classical photography theory quickly reveals how images' 'givenness' peeks through, as does the idea of images as exposures to the other, or even as escapades into the erotic. However, the recent transformations in how a photographic image – its realm, its expanding force field – could be regarded, merits taking another look. Like a gift given, or love, photographic images have something immemorial about them, yet *at the same time* something particular and singular in the *given* context they appear.

Photographic images and love (and gifting?) all do a number on time, on uniting and separating, and on creation as a poetic act (Agamben, 2019). The premise for this text is the perceived similarity of those moments as events; what is split in the photographic act, what is the encounter in love, how art “restores the dimension of the senses to an encounter” (Badiou & Truong, 2012, p. 78). All these points capture something beyond what is displayed. The suggestion here is that the various rifts or divisions implied have something elemental in common.

## Present

To start, photography<sup>1</sup> – even without resorting to wordplay – has a privileged relation to the present moment, and the given present. Jacques Derrida (2010) suggests that photography is constituted in the present itself, at a specific point in time, but that that present is always already divided, and not ‘present’ in the ordinary sense: “The structure of the present must be divided so that, even as the present is lost, the archive remains and refers to it as a non-reproducible referent, an irreplaceable place” (p. 3). The archive here is the photograph that ‘lives on’ – is passed on, is “giving something to be seen” (Derrida, 2010, p. 3). From this viewpoint, photography is an event where two simultaneous and inseparable acts of invention occur; invention as an act of finding what has been there (a singular circumstance), and invention as an act of *poiesis*, as generation of the new.

In contemporary digital media environments, the inseparability of recording and producing has become even more pronounced, and photographic events have become “photographic performativity”, partaking in “truths to be made” (Derrida, 2010, p. 5). Moreover, in images that are even partly created by artificial intelligence this concoction of inventions (as finding, as production, and as development) has become a place of suggestions where multiple earlier points at found photographic times fuse with prompts *putting forward* proposals for the archived photographic memory. With regard to such images one can no longer say that photography would be the “repetition of what has taken place *only once*” (Derrida, 2010, p. 3,

1 I will use the term ‘photography’ when referring to what is conventionally understood as production of photographs, and ‘the photographic’ when referring more widely to photographic processes and gestures.

italics mine). The ineffaceable reference preserved has become a multitude of references.

Nevertheless, and despite such reservations that seem to put photography under erasure, there still exist events where images are forged (recorded and produced), where the world is confronted one-on-one, and singular moments of the world are given to be seen. This is to say that “there is a point where the photographic act is not an artistic act, a point where it passively records” a “poignant passivity” (Derrida, 2010, p.9). But, because technics affects the photographic event from the onset, the moment can never be purely passive, becoming instead implicated in a form of “acti/passivity” (Derrida, 2010, p.12).

Photography is an event which images another thing in the world. Photography, gifting, and love are all events. In them something happens and seems to involve more than one thing. Describing what happens as ‘pure creation’ is equally difficult as describing it as ‘a transaction’. In some way these events inhibit the formation of a proper relation. Yet something seems to get accomplished, something created.

But to think properly of a gift – or photography – requires thinking the gift before exchange and contractual event, of the ‘earlier giving’ of which it is a trace. It comes down to “letting the thing be in its singularity before any objectivity” (Bennington & Derrida, 1993, p.188), which for the gift would imply it not being an object of exchange. This, in turn, would mean that the gift is paradoxically *not* recognized as a gift – as there can be no gratitude or indebtedness of any sort, that would determine it as an event of exchange. If the gift cannot thus be ‘present’ it is but a trace of a more archaic ‘giving’ – an idea, an underlying condition of possibility – that never took place as such. One could say that the giving of a gift understands itself in the same way as language, which says “yes” even

when one says “no” (Bennington & Derrida, 1993, p. 193), or in the way the existence of an image requires that an earlier division has already taken place (Laakso, 2003, pp. 385–386).

However, the originary gift cannot be merely an enabling condition of possibility (Bennington & Derrida, 1993, p. 198), even if it holds the promise of being repeated in all the (non-)gifts that are to be given. What could that earlier ‘pre-ontological’ gift then be, for photography? The light of the sun perhaps? (Bennington & Derrida, 1993, p. 191). Pure medium, pure light, which burns and allows visibility without properly showing itself?

### Poetic act

When speaking of artworks Giorgio Agamben prefers to use the term ‘poetic act’ instead of the term ‘creation’ to preserve the sense of producing (making from a material) and to distance it from creating out of nothing, as in divine creation (Agamben, 2019, p. 15). Referring to Aristotle, Agamben notes how the poetic act, the ‘artwork,’ can refer to what is produced (the work of art, the *ergon*) or to the operation and activity, the being-at-work (*energeia*). Artistic work can reside in the product or in the agent’s activity (of which Aristotle’s examples were knowing and seeing, activities that do not produce anything besides themselves). And – as is often the case in contemporary art, where art is presented as activity without an artwork as such – the praxis, the performative element, can become privileged over the production of things. (Agamben, 2019, pp. 4–7). Similarly, one can think of a gift as the concrete thing given or as the act of giving.

The consequence of this is that there exists a split within the activity of an artist or artisan. Agamben even suggests that the “work and creative operation, are complementary yet incommunicable notions, which form, with the artist as their middle term, what

I propose to call the ‘artistic machine’ of modernity” (Agamben, 2019, p. 8). Perhaps also gift and giving are incommunicable notions?

Agamben (2019) furthermore suggests (following Deleuze) that “each act of creation resists something” (p. 14) and proceeds to examine the nature of this resistance, beyond the idea of an opposition to external forces. He finds that, like the act of creation must be an internal potential, also the resistance must be internal to the poetic act. The potential includes the capacity to act and importantly also being able not to act, its *impotential* (Agamben, 2019, p. 18).

In an artwork this tension, for Agamben, seems to exist whenever the ‘hand trembles’ – but not as a form of hesitation but as a sign of supreme mastery – to show this inner battle of simultaneous action and suspension. As an example he mentions Titian’s painting *Annunciation*, which is housed in the church of San Salvador in Venice. In the painting “not only in the clouds that stand above the two figures but also on the wings of the angel, color clogs up and, at the same time, is hollowed out in what has for good reason been defined as a crackling magma, where ‘flesh trembles’ and ‘light fights the shadows’” (Agamben, 2019, p. 21). The act of creation “burned on the surface of the canvas without, however, being consumed – a perfect metaphor for a potential that is in flames without exhausting itself” (Agamben, 2019, p. 21).



Figure 1. Laakso, H. (2024). *Titian's Annunciation #2* [photograph]. © Harri Laakso.

Photography, if anything is a medium where “light fights the shadows” and indeed images exist as if burning on the surface without being consumed. Finnish artist Karl Ketamo’s artwork *Of the Air* (from the series *Fire Works*) is a poetic act in several ways: as an artefact, as a conceptual piece, as an installation, and a photograph. Somehow *all* those states (and maybe more) exist in each of them; and yet each state or mode discloses a different battle. The photograph shows a rusty air vent with a damaged grille, bathed in a fiery hue. Everything in the setting suggests a kind of burning: the oxidation of the metal, the imagined movement of air through the vent, and obviously the colour. The vent frames what is behind – although it is slightly difficult to judge distance due to the monocular eye of a photograph. There appear to be ceramic tiles behind the grille, and the figure of a bird on one of them, a stork perhaps, beak poised towards the crack in the lower tile. Between the beak and the crack, a line alludes to a horizon, as does the red and yellow on the upper tile to the “sky” of this suggested landscape. Found old and worn objects taken from whatever situation in the world (or received as gifts?) become frames for the creation of a new world. Yes, it must be a stork, if birth is implied.

## Event of love

*I happened on an image and the image is love.*

The photograph *New Heads* was taken by Finnish photographer Ben Kaila in 1983 in Berlin. Kaila had been cycling around the city when he happened at an old pumping station, just off the river Spree, where the restoration of old statues, damaged in the battles of 1945, was in progress. There, in the pedestal of an unknown sculpture, Kaila notices the small statuettes of a man and a woman embracing, in high relief. Both figures had been refitted new plaster heads to replace the ones the war had removed (Kaila, 2012, cited in Salo,



Figure 2. Ketamo, K. (2025). *Out of this World* (from series *Burning Place*)  
[photograph, archival inkjet print, 85 x 65 cm.]. © Karl Ketamo.

2025). In the image the new white heads shine brightly against the worn greys of their former torsos, the ornaments, and the background. The luminous glow binds them and sets them apart from all else.

Together they are apart. But they are together nevertheless in effigy and as replacement, for the original heads are lost somewhere, lost together. One could see a parallel to this impossibility in the “apart we are together” [*Séparés, on est ensemble*] of Mallarmé’s poem *The White Water Lily*. In that poem a rower approaches a lady along a river, only to turn around, after having heard the only barely perceptible hints of footsteps, which might be hers. He retreats to preserve the sensed proximity as a supreme kind of intimacy, preferring it to an actual encounter. It is a triumph of the imaginary over the real, a split of the material and the figurative, accomplishing opposing aims. We can feel elated by the romantic restraint of the hero and at the same time enjoy the poem as an erotic encounter on a figurative level; the man’s approach to the “humidly impenetrable retreat” [*retrait aussi humidement impénétrable*] in the watery park, and his return with a trophy, the imagined white waterlily, a deflowering of sorts (See Johnson, 1992, pp. 13–21; Rancière, 2009, pp. 51–52). Togetherness requires separation and here the apartness refers also to the way in which language is split (for Mallarmé) between the illusory immediate crudeness of such interpretations on the one hand and essential language on the other, when it is language itself that speaks (Blanchot, 1982, pp. 38–42).

One can also consider the ideal glowing togetherness versus its impossibility in Kaila’s image through another route. Julia Kristeva writes of the adolescent ideal of love and of *Romeo and Juliet* as its paradigm in our culture. The young couple’s love is fuelled by their defiance of their families’ hate for each other – pulled together as much as the families are set apart. It is secretive love and based on

the belief of the Ideal Other. However, Kristeva suggests that this ultimately religious need to believe is fragile and under constant assault from the “latent polymorphous perversity remaining from childhood” (Kristeva, 2007, p. 723). To Kristeva this manifests itself in the play, for example in the sadomasochistic desire of Juliet to break up Romeo’s body: “Come gentle night / come, loving black-brow’d night. / Give me my Romeo; and when he shall die / Take him and cut him in little stars,” (Shakespeare, 1901, p. 88). The love is thus supported by hatred: “But more deeply, what is involved is hatred at the very origin of the amorous surge. A hatred that antedates the veil of amorous idealization” (Kristeva, 1987, p. 221). Kristeva also utilises light metaphors in describing this duel, when calling the idealising love ‘solar’ – it being out of time and out of place – and conversely referring to the love condemned to time and the moment as ‘nocturnal’, as ‘darkness’, ‘blindness’ (Kristeva, 1987, p. 214).

These three brief fragments, the photograph, the elusive poem, and the ideal adolescent love, all attest to something *imaginary*, in the literal sense that it is related to what an image is. One can characterise this understanding of an image as a belief in the shiny surface, blind or blinding, while recognising that this absolute brilliance also harbours an inner fracture and division. It is this interdependent coexistence of fascination and a disjointedness that binds the being of an image to love.

It is not easy to speak of the image or of love, (or of the gift), *in general*. That would require within the singularity of their figures, within the innate certainty that there is something that cannot or should not be shared in common, a kind of “generous reticence” that acknowledges the difficulty of taking an image or love as objects of study and is simultaneously generous towards all their different forms – the different kinds of images and love without

exclusion, hierarchy or reduction to orders that are not becoming to them.

Love is double and divided, not between the one and the other, but being the exposure of one to the otherness of the other, to the other's singularity, from the outside. This would be so even if love appeared to us in guise or as *a double*, even as a replacement for the things we might have imagined lost. Love would then appear to come in their place, to take place – like the new heads had replaced the one's lost in Kaila's photograph (while at the same time love remains a rebel and challenges any of the unifying and shared ideals, which it has been meant to remedy).

Love cannot be contained, is an impossible figure, always something other than we expect. It is at once the opposite of self-love (because it cannot be owned or made into a possession) and then again self-love is at its heart, if to love is to give self as gift (Nancy, 1991, p. 95). Love tests the limits of existence, weighs them, “forms the limit of a thinking that carries itself to the limit of philosophy”, yet as a sort of condition or price paid for this extrication is the resolution that ultimately love cannot be reached, even if it happens constantly, all over (Nancy, 1991, p. 104).



Figure 3. Kaila, B. (1983). *Uudet päät* (*New Heads*) [photograph]. © Ben Kaila.



Figure 4. Ketamo, K. (2025). *Farmhouse piece* (from series *Burnouts*) [cut out scratching surfaces of found matchboxes, recycled frame, signed Ketamo, 24 (1/1), framed 28,5 x 23 cm (paper: 21,5 x 15,5 cm), painting, bubblewrap, signed H.Sippel, not dated, 21,5 x 15,5 cm J. © Karl Ketamo.

## Gift

One day the Finnish artist Karl Ketamo started collecting discarded matchboxes that littered the streets of Helsinki. Another man's trash is another man's find, he thought. From the striking surfaces of the matchboxes Ketamo started arranging the artworks for his series *Burnouts* (2024–2025). The frames he uses are also found – and Ketamo considers them too to be gifts, just like the matchboxes. In the frame the rectangular striking surfaces (with dots of red phosphorus and powdered glass) are aligned as if according to an unseen matrix. The arrangements seem either evenly distributed or top-heavy, with individual striking surfaces appearing (or threatening) to suddenly drop down – like blocks in the 1980s video game Tetris.

The striking surface of a matchbox is truly photographic: strike a match, strike a pose! Its surface is ridden with scratch marks, the remainders of the bright flashes, the many momentary illuminations. Creation burning on the surface without being consumed. Between the rectangular striking patches – and the miniature explosions choreographed on them – the white paper offers only a silent void, and no proper structure. As one puts some distance between oneself and the work, as one retreats from the dotted and scraped surfaces and their pixel-like textures, the rectangles themselves start to resemble pixels.

The wooden frames, at the same time appropriate and clumsy, keep the compositions together, as best they can. At the same time the frames clearly want to be somewhere else, are of another kind. The frames too might be found, like the matchboxes, but belong to a different time and space, a prior bond, that will haunt and taint their every future task. Ketamo has allowed his viewers to see a glimpse of those ghostly apparitions – the images the frames had previously served. Behind a bubble wrap one can make out a landscape painting or a fl very still-life, almost as a suggestion, partly seen, partly imagined.

If Ketamo's unique material artworks perform gestures similar to artificial intelligence – in assembling together various pasts and offering suggestions of future visions – it is as much to pay homage to the oldest traditions of collage as to recognise that our (photographic) seeing is changing.

## Envoi

It is clear that the suggestion entertained in this text – that there are affinities between a photographic image, a creative act, love and gifting – remains desperately unresolved, and riddled with uncertainties and contradictions. As one formulation or avenue opens, another immediately seems to shut down. If, for Jean-Luc Nancy, love “is the gift of the self” (Nancy, 1991, p. 95), for Alain Badiou it “cannot be a gift given on the basis of a complete lack of risk” (Badiou & Truong, 2012, p. 7). Then again, the ultimate photographic gift would be giving a portrait of oneself, with one's look – “something with which I see but which I myself cannot see” (Derrida, 2010, pp. 31–32). “This is an experience of the gift, of what cannot return to me.” (Derrida, 2010, p. 32).

The once revered habit of giving photographs (of oneself) is now replaced by social media practices and sharing images taken with mobile devices. If one gives a portrait of oneself, it usually also holds the look of the person. But, at the same time, one does not give oneself *as oneself*, and risks nothing. (Are they gifts?)

Perhaps, the sought affinities lie in the heterogeneous moments of handing over that which cannot return to oneself, and which nevertheless also remains; therein in the division, the resistance, the split, the risk, the tremble and burn of that ‘event’.

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# Bios

## **Laura Beloff**

Laura Beloff (Ph.D.) is an internationally acclaimed artist and researcher, who functions in-between artistic production and academic research with a core in artistic methods. Beloff's concept- and practice-driven research is located in the cross-section of art, science and technology. The research engages with art, humans, environment in affiliation with science and technology, biology, artificial intelligence, robotics, human enhancement and their theories. In recent years Beloff's interest has focused on investigating the diminishing gap between concepts and disciplines of biology and technology. She is Associate Professor and Vice-Dean for Artistic and Creative Practices at Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture.

## **Cynthia Blanchette**

Cynthia Blanchette is a Canadian artist-researcher based in Finland, working as a Doctoral Researcher in the Department of Art and Media at Aalto University, and a member of the RAT research group led by Laura Beloff. Blanchette's research interests fall into the abject facets of human-microbial-technological evolution. Within her artistic practice she re-evaluates ubiquitous cultural-societal notions of the lived experience through ideation drawing, artifact collecting, bioart, and textile art. Blanchette has a Master of Arts degree in Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art with a minor in Textile Design (Aalto University, FI, 2021), and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (University of Saskatchewan, CA, 2014).

**Aurora Del Rio**

Aurora Del Rio is a professional artist and doctoral researcher at Aalto University, Finland. Her artistic work is transdisciplinary, including video, performance, sound, installation, painting, and bio-art. Her research looks at beliefs to consider the state of tension between 'possible' and 'impossible' in the creation of personal and collective realities. Her current focus is at radioactive contamination in relation to myth and belief, using rituals as a method. Del Rio holds a BA in Painting from the Academy of Fine Arts Bologna, and an MFA in Creative Practice from Transart Institute Berlin/New York.

**Juan C. Duarte Regino**

Juan Duarte Regino is an artist-researcher. Central to his investigation is the relation between the atmosphere, the act of listening, and the concept of attunement. His mission ventures into ecological perspectives on our weather systems, giving voice to the natural agencies at play within the realm of weather.

He has had artist residencies at the Lofoten Sound Art Symposium, Nida Art Colony, and Titanik Gallery. He has also collaborated with artists such as AGF, IC98, Laura Beloff, among others. Duarte's artwork has been displayed in PACT Zollverein, Festival Tsonami, Medialab Matadero, and Goethe Institute Beijing, Klaipeda Culture Communication Center and RIXC.

**Heidi Hänninen**

Heidi Hänninen works as a community artist in her KAS! Kontula Art School project (2019–) based in the East Helsinki suburb Kontula. She is preparing doctoral research related to her socially engaged public art practice for the Academy of Fine Arts, Uniarts Helsinki. Heidi has her background in concrete sculpture (Uniarts, M.F.A

2016) and art education (University of Lapland, M.A 2017). She has studied at the Department of Monumental Painting in St. Petersburg (2008–2009) and after this inspiring year in exchange she has been painting murals both in Finland and abroad. She is experienced in working within different street art assembles.

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### **Harri Laakso**

Dr. Harri Laakso is Associate Professor of Photography Research at Aalto University, and the Head of the Department of Art and Media. Laakso is an artist researcher and curator interested in photographic images and theory, artistic research and images' relations to words and performative actions. Laakso has published many texts in academic contexts and in artists' books, curated and co-curated exhibitions (e.g. Backlight Photography Triennials 2002–2008; "Grey Matters" in Finnish Museum of Photography 2007; "Falling Trees" in Venice Biennale in 2013), and has led and participated in many artistic research projects (e.g. "Figures of Touch" 2009–2012)

### **Sonja Lampinen**

Sonja Lampinen is a Doctoral Researcher in the WasteMatters research project at Tampere University, Finland. She holds a Master's degree in Sociology from Tampere University and a Diploma of Screen and Media from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Her PhD research focuses on the spatiotemporal and sociomaterial dynamics of nuclear waste disposal and their intertwinement with capitalist relations.

**Nina Liebenberg**

Nina Liebenberg is a South African artist-curator, currently conducting her post-doctoral research at the University of the Arts, Helsinki. Before moving to Finland, Nina spent the last 10 years working at the University of Cape Town's Centre for Curating the Archive, convening a selection of courses for its curatorial programme. She regularly draws on disciplinary objects collections to curate shows and make artworks that surface latent histories and extend the meaning of how these materials are understood in their host departments.

**Katri Naukkarinen**

Katri Naukkarinen is an artist working with and around the photographic medium and its theories, and a doctoral researcher at Aalto University. Naukkarinen's research considers the limits of human vision and explores frequencies and scales beyond them, with an ambition to show new layers on what is considered familiar. Operating between art, psychology, technology, and science, Naukkarinen is currently exploring ways of encountering radioactivity through artistic means. Naukkarinen holds an MFA in Photography from Aalto ARTS with BAs in Aesthetics and Photography, and has studied as an exchange student in Tama Art University's Department of Information Design in Tokyo.

**Olli Pyyhtinen**

Olli Pyyhtinen is Professor of Sociology and the founder of the Relational Studies Hub (RS Hub) at Tampere University, Finland. He has published widely on relational sociology, for example the books *The Simmelian Legacy: A Science of Relations* (Palgrave, 2018), *More-than-Human Sociology* (Palgrave, 2015), *The Gift and its Paradoxes* (Routledge, 2014), and

*Simmel and 'the Social'* (Palgrave, 2010). He is currently leading two projects on waste and the circular economy: WasteMatters (ERC CoG, 2022–2027) and DECAY (Research Council of Finland 2022–2026).

### **Niilo Rinne**

Niilo Rinne is a curator, planner, and artist who is working in the fields of arts, architecture and sociology. His transdisciplinary and cross-institutional professional practice is based on theoretical interest in systems theory, memory, and alternative value creation processes in the interplay of digital media, the physical environment, and social events.

### **Niina Uusitalo**

Niina Uusitalo is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University, Finland. She is currently working at the intersection of visual studies and waste studies. Her theoretical interests lie in politics of aesthetics, eco-philosophy and more-than-human viewpoints. In her work she develops visual methodologies and outputs to explore theoretical concepts and empirical findings.

### **Hanna Vahvaselkä**

Hanna Vahvaselkä is a craft-based sculptor, living and working in Mikkeli, Eastern Finland. She holds a master's degree in fine arts (Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki 1999) and in art education (Aalto University, Espoo 2019). Her primary material is wood, with which she has worked for over two decades. In her artwork, wood is the material and the creator of the visual appearance, as well as part of the conceptual content; for example, as intergenerational meanings or as questions arising from forest ecology. At present Vahvaselkä is

a doctoral candidate at the Academy of Fine Arts, Uniarts Helsinki. Working with wood is also the starting point and method of her artistic research, which focuses on memory objects and how the material and memory intertwine. The research explores what kind of memories different memory objects carry. What can be found or read in the materials? What can we learn from them, about them, and through collaborating with them? What stories can materials reveal and bring to light?

### **Mirimari Väyrynen**

Mirimari Väyrynen (Finland) is a painter-researcher, graduated from Turku Art Academy (2001) and Aalto University (2013). She also studied painting at Arts Academy Tejada in Santiago de Cuba (1997–98). After the studies, Väyrynen lived for years in Spain, where she began to explore ecological and social questions of the environment through landscape motifs. Alongside painting, she has been an extensive appreciator of nature, cultures and narratives of world-viewing. Currently, Väyrynen is a PhD student at the Academy of Fine Arts, Uniarts Helsinki, working on her dissertation on how painting is formulated in social processes and in relation to the environment.

### **Denise Ziegler**

Denise Ziegler, DFA, is a Helsinki based visual artist and researcher of public space. In her artistic practice and research, she questions the concepts of urban space and public art. In a post-Beuysian vein, an artist workshop is extended to public space in order to work with its mechanisms and possibilities. Ziegler has made permanent and temporary works in and for public space; her practice includes assemblages of objects, sculpture, drawings, paintings, videos, literary-visual works and writing. Ziegler is currently working as a

university lecturer at Transdisciplinary Art Studies (TAITE) at the Department of Art and Media at Aalto University.

The Presence of Exchange  
GIFT in Artistic Research and Beyond  
Art Theoretical Writings from the Academy of Fine Arts  
(Taideteoreettisia kirjoituksia Kuvataideakatemiasta) 22

Eds. Denise Ziegler, Laura Beloff, Cynthia Blanchette, Hanna Vahvaselkä

**PUBLISHER**

Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki

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**GRAPHIC DESIGN**

Marjo Malin

**COVER IMAGE**

Photo: Laura Beloff

**PRINTING**

Hansaprint, 2025

This publication has been realised as a collaboration between the Academy of Fine Arts at the University of the Arts Helsinki and the Department of Art and Media at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture at Aalto University.

ISBN 978-952-353-490-2 (printed)

ISBN 978-952-353-491-9 (pdf)

ISSN 2343-1008 (printed)

ISSN 3087-839X (pdf)

The publication is available in the University of the Arts publication archive  
Taju. <https://taju.uniarts.fi/>





This publication integrates empirical research, theoretical and fictional texts, art objects and artistic research to a nuanced and diverse understanding of the *gift*. We have brought together academic scholars and artist-researchers to interrogate existing and projected knowledges about the gift-concept.

*The Presence of Exchange* delves into how artist-researchers conceptualise, materialise, and articulate the idea of gift—its role in society and in our lives. Eleven authors and author groups compile thoughts and ideas expressed in and through artistic practices. They speculate from artistic perspectives on gift economy, gift as an invitation, as a bond in relationships, entanglements and love, gift as a test and especially as a form of presence in exchange.

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ISSN 2242-0142

ISBN 978-952-353-490-2



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